

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 19 -

Piper dragged herself up the steps to the apartment and unlocked the door. Out of concern for her growling stomach, she'd stopped for coffee and breakfast on the ride home, making it close to noon. She'd already texted Hannah to let her know Brendan and the crew were fine, then promptly ignored all the follow-up questions about how things went at the hospital. Because . . . how *did* things go at the hospital?

Still not in possession of concrete answers, she trudged into the apartment carrying a cinnamon dolce latte for Hannah, half expecting her sister to be working at the record shop, but Hannah was lying on the top bunk, obligatory headphones over her ears, wailing about a simple twist of fate.

Piper knocked on the frame of the bunk bed, and Hannah yelped, shooting up into a sitting position and knocking the headphones onto the cradle of her neck. Her startled expression turned quickly to delight. "Oooh. For me?"

Piper handed her sister the cup. "Hmm."

Hannah raised an eyebrow while taking a sip. "You look . . . different today."

"I took a shower last night and slept with wet hair," Piper murmured absently, sitting down on the bottom bunk. She stared at the far wall of the apartment—which was actually quite *near*—and tried to process the last few hours.

Her sister hopped down from the top bunk. "Piper." She snuggled close, nudging Piper in the ribs with an elbow. "You're too quiet. Talk to me."

Piper pressed her lips together and said nothing. "Oh, come on."

Silence.

"Start small. Something innocuous. How was the drive?"

"I don't remember." Unable to keep a certain piece of news to herself any longer, though she would probably regret sharing at a later date, Piper reached over and clutched Hannah's knee. "Hannah, he . . . he gave me a vaginal orgasm."

Her sister almost dropped her coffee. "What? Like . . . you climaxed just from penetration?"

"Yes," Piper whispered, fanning her face. "It was like, I thought . . . maybe? And then . . . no way. But then, yes. Yes, yes, fucking yes. Against a wall. *A wall*, Hanns." She closed her eyes and added, "It was the most wonderful sex of my life. And he didn't even break a sweat."

“Oh, Piper.” Hannah shook her head. “You are so fucked.”

“No.” Piper threw her shoulders back. “No, I escaped without too much damage. He got me to admit we’re more than friends, but there was minimal cuddling and we have no plans to see each other again. I’ll just avoid him for a while.”

Hannah lunged to her feet and turned on Piper. “What are you scared of?” Piper snorted. “I’m not scared.”

And she wasn’t. Was she? This constant weight in her belly was totally normal. As was the certainty that Brendan would eventually realize there were a thousand other girls just like Piper Bellinger; she was definitely not the kind of girl for whom a man kept a ring on for seven years, that’s for sure!

She was just an exotic bird in this small, uneventful town, and he’d realize that eventually.

Or he wouldn’t.

That was even *more* terrifying.

What if his feelings for her were actually genuine? She couldn’t fight her own much longer. They were getting worse by the day. She’d driven like a bat out of hell to the hospital, already half in mourning. Sick with it. And the *joy* when he’d arrived, hale and hearty. My God, she was almost exhausted thinking about the gymnastics her heart had done.

If these feelings got deeper and deeper on both sides . . . then what? She stayed in Westport?

“Ha!”

Hannah uncapped her coffee and took a long swig, swallowing. “You realize you’re having a conversation inside your own head, right? I can’t hear

it.”

“I’m not staying here,” Piper breathed, her heart feathering in her throat. “He can’t make me.” She yanked her phone out of her pocket, tapping until she arrived at Instagram, scanning her colorful feed. These pictures and the effortless lifestyle they represented seemed almost foreign now—trite—and that was scary. Did it mean she was actually considering a *new* path? One she didn’t document for the sake of adoration, albeit phony? Her daily life in Westport was fulfilling in a way she never expected, but she was still an outsider here. In LA, her fit was seamless, at least outwardly. She was good at being Piper Bellinger, socialite. Whether Piper could be a fixture in Westport remained to be seen.

She held up her phone, facing the stream of pictures toward Hannah. “For better or worse, this girl is who I am, right? I’m getting so far away from this Piper. So fast.”

“Okay,” Hannah said slowly. “Does Brendan make you feel like you need to change?”

Piper thought about it. “No. He even called my pussy high maintenance, like in a good way. I think he *likes* me like this. It’s horrible.”

“Yeah, it sounds like the worst. What is the real problem, Piper?” Piper exploded. “Hannah, I was scared shitless last night!”

Her sister nodded, sobering. “I know.” “And he’s not even my boyfriend.” “Yet.”

“Rude.” She brandished her phone. “This girl is not . . . strong enough. To worry like this all the time. To love someone and lose them, like Mom and Opal lost Henry. I’m not cut from that cloth, Hannah. I go to fucking parties and push bathing suit brands. I don’t know who I *am* in Westport.”

Hannah closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around Piper. “Wow. A vaginal orgasm and a psychological breakthrough in the same day. You must be tapped.”

“I am. I’m exhausted.” She returned Hannah’s hug, dropping her forehead unceremoniously into her sister’s neck. She thought of Mick’s face when he saw her holding Brendan’s hand and cringed inwardly. Honestly, she wasn’t even ready to tell Hannah about that moment. How low she’d felt. Not necessarily a home-wrecker, but . . . an interloper. An outsider. *Who does this LA party girl think she is, coming in here and trying to fill the shoes of a born-and-bred fisherman’s wife?*

Piper’s phone dinged. Who was that?

It couldn’t be Brendan. He’d left his phone on the boat. And none of her friends had reached out with so much as a hello since she’d left the Bel-Air zip code.

She held up the screen, and a smile bloomed across her face. “Oh, this is excellent news.”

Hannah dropped her arms away from Piper’s neck. “What is it?” “It’s Friday night and our grandmother is finally ready to party.”

* * *

Never one to take partying lightly, Piper wasted no time.

She showered, coiffed until her hair looked presentable, carefully applied her makeup, and ventured purposefully toward the harbor with a garment bag containing a selection

of dresses, including one for herself. Opal was petite, and with a little last-minute stitching, Piper would have her looking like a boss bitch in no time.

The second Opal opened the door—wearing a seriously cute lavender shortie robe—Piper could tell she was having second thoughts. “Nope.” Piper cut her off with a kiss, right on the mouth. “Everyone gets pre-party jitters, Opal. You hear me? Everyone. But we don’t let that stop us, do we? No. We persevere. And we get drunk until we feel nothing.”

Visibly bolstered, Opal nodded, then went straight to shaking her head. “I’m a lightweight. I’ve been drinking nothing but coffee since the nineties.”

“Sad. But that’s why we use the Bellinger method. One glass of water between each alcoholic drink. Then a piece of toast and two Advil before bedtime. Soaks it right up. You’ll be able to run a marathon tomorrow morning.”

“I can’t run one now.”

“I know. That’s how well it works.”

Opal guffawed. “Since you started visiting me, Piper, I’ve laughed more than I have in decades. Hannah wasn’t able to make it?”

“No, she had a shift at the record shop. But she sends a kiss.”

Her grandmother nodded and transferred her attention to the garment bag, missing the unexpected moisture that danced in Piper’s eyes. “Well, darling. Let’s see what you got.”

It only took three hours to transform Opal from grieving semi-hermit to a lady about town. After Piper added some styling mousse to the older woman’s hair and did her makeup, Opal chose her dress.

Clearly, she had taste, because she went straight for the puff-sleeved Versace.

“The student has become the master, Grandma.”

Opal started a little at the title, and Piper held her breath, too. It had slipped out unplanned, but felt oddly natural. Finally, Opal surged forward and wrapped Piper in a hug, holding tight a few moments before stepping back to study her. “Thank you.”

Piper could only nod, thanks to the log jammed in her throat, watching Opal as she swept off to the bedroom to change. Surprised to find her fingers trembling, Piper sloughed off the leggings and sweater she’d worn for the trip over, zipping herself into a green-and-black zebra-striped minidress from Balmain. Muscle memory kicked in, and

she lifted her phone to take a selfie, noticing with a start that she had a text from Brendan.

Want to see you tonight.

Wave after wave of flutters coursed through her midsection. God, she loved how he got right to the point. No games. No beating around the bush. Just *This is what I want, baby. Now it's your turn.*

Did she want to see Brendan? Yes. Undeniably yes. More than that, she wanted to be seen by him looking like this. Wanted to watch male appreciation draw his features tight and know with absolute conviction he was thinking about having sex with her. And it would be so much easier to play it cool in her battle armor, surrounded by witnesses in a bar. Westport's nightlife might not be *exactly* what Piper was used to, but it was closer to her environment than a bar under construction or a hospital with bad lighting.

She needed to feel like herself. Needed a reminder of her old life. The life she was going back to. Sooner rather than later.

Too often lately she'd been thrown off-kilter by her feelings. Or the situation she found herself in, over a thousand miles from home. Friendless, a fish out of water.

Brendan, since she'd met him, had made it impossible for her to keep up a pretense. She'd never been able to be anything but honest with him. Scarily honest. But he wasn't standing in front of her now, brimming with all that intensity, was he? And LA Piper was rattling her hinges, demanding to be appeased. *That* Piper wouldn't text back that she wanted to see him tonight,

too. Uh-uh. She'd leave a bread crumb and dance off in a flash of strobe lights.

Heading out for the night. Maybe catch you later in Blow the Man Down. xo

Three little dots popped up, letting her know Brendan was writing back. Then they went away.

She pressed a hand to her stomach to counteract a kick of excitement. Opal walked out of the bathroom looking like a certified snack. "Well?"

"Well?" Piper gave a low whistle. "Look out, Westport. There's a stone-cold fox on the loose."

* * *

Piper's one and only experience in Blow the Man Down had been less than stellar and walking through the door again was nerve-racking. But tonight wasn't just about

reminding herself of old Piper; it was about bringing this woman she'd really come to like out of her shell.

Opal had her arm linked through Piper's as they entered the noisy bar. Fishermen occupied the long row of stools near the entrance, toasting another week completed out on the water. And the survival of last night's storm seemed to give the atmosphere an added buoyancy. Bartenders dropped pints in front of mostly older men, their friends and wives. No one was smoking, but the scent of cigarettes drifted in from outside and clung to clothes. Neil Young's voice wove through the conversations and laughter.

Opal balked as soon as they stepped over the threshold, but Piper patted her arm, guiding her through the more boisterous section of the bar, toward the seating area in the back. Last time, she'd only stood at the bar long enough to order that fateful tray of shots, but it had been enough time to get the lay of the land. And she was relieved to see the tables in the rear of Blow the Man Down were occupied by women again tonight. Some of them were Opal's age, others were closer to Piper's, and they were all talking at once.

A couple of the older women nudged each other at Opal's appearance. One by one, the dozen or so ladies started to notice her. For long moments, they stared at her with mouths agape—and then they all ambushed her at once.

"Opal," said a kind-looking woman with a red bob, rising to her feet. "You're out!"

"And looking like hot shit!" inserted another.

Laughter rippled over the tables, and Piper could sense Opal's pleasure.

"Well, I have a fancy stylist now," Opal told them, squeezing Piper's arm. "My granddaughter."

Westport was a small town, and it was obvious some of the women already knew the Bellinger sisters had taken up residence, as well as their familial connection to Opal, while others were visibly connecting the dots and marveling. Either way, the group as a whole seemed surprised to see them out together and looking so close.

"Is there . . . room for two more?" Opal asked.

Everyone shuffled at once, dragging chairs over from other tables. Opal's eyes held a suspicious luster when she looked up at Piper and let out a breath. "It's like I never left."

Piper leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Why don't you go sit down. I'll go grab us some drinks. Tequila for you, right?"

"Oh, stop." Opal tapped her arm playfully. "Stoli and Seven with two limes, please."

“Damn,” Piper muttered with a smile, as Opal walked off. The older woman claimed a chair and was immediately heaped with well-deserved attention. “I have a feeling you’ll be just fine.”

Piper bought a round of drinks for her and Opal, taking a seat beside her. After half an hour of easy conversation, the evening appeared to be shaping up as a low-key lady hangout. Until one of the twentysomething girls bought Piper a drink in exchange for a beauty consultation. Really, the drink hadn’t been necessary. She was happy to dole out advice based on the girl’s skin tone and oval face shape . . . but then another girl slapped down a shot in front of Piper, wanting to know her beauty regimen. Another traded a lemon drop for tips on dressing sexy when it was always “balls-ass cold and raining” in the winter.

And then it all went downhill from there.

* * *

“It’s all about swagger,” Piper shouted over the music an hour later, an eye squinted so she would only see one set of people, instead of two.

Unless there were two sets? When did they get there?

She tried to remember what she’d been saying in the first place. Had all of it been a slurred mess? But no, the girls who’d pushed tables to the side to create a runway down the back of Blow the Man Down were listening to her

with rapt focus. *Deliver, Piper.* “You, me, all of us, ladies. We wield the power.” She threw out a finger aimed at the bar full of men. “They know it. They know we know it. The secret is to show them we know that they know that we know. Does that make sense?”

A chorus of yeses went up, followed by the clinking of glasses.

“Watch me walk,” Piper said, pushing her hair back over her shoulders and strutting along the floorboards, turning on a dime at the end of her makeshift runway. Not her best work, but pretty decent after four, maybe eight drinks. “Look at my face. It’s like, I don’t have time for *your* shit. I’m busy. I’m living!”

“Is this going to get me laid?” one girl asked.

Piper grabbed the girl’s face and stared into her soul. “Yes.” “I believe you.”

“Hey, Piper.” Another girl stumbled into view. Or was she twins? “Labor Day is coming up. We should have a party and try out the makeup tips.”

“Oh my gosh,” Piper breathed, the best/worst idea breaking through her delightful drunkenness. “I should throw the party. I own a *bar*.”

“Hey, everyone! Piper is throwing a Labor Day party!” The cheers were deafening.

“Show us the walk again!”

Piper took a shot someone offered her. “Screw that! Let’s dance!”