

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 23 -

Piper had butterflies in her stomach.

Good ones.

She was going out of town today with her boyfriend. It didn't matter if she was a little suspicious of the circumstances. Nor did it matter that, by agreeing to be his girlfriend and traveling together, she was sinking deeper into a relationship. One that might not stand the test of time, depending on whether she went back to Los Angeles sooner or later. But none of that was happening today. Or tomorrow. So she was going to kick back, relax, and enjoy the ride. And Brendan would be enjoying a few rides himself.

Piper zipped her toothbrush into her overnight bag and snickered at her own innuendo, but she shut it down when Hannah gave her a questioning look. *Rein it in, horny toad.*

Seriously. It was damn near uncomfortable how sexually charged she'd become over the last couple of days. Vaginal orgasms were ruining her for regular life. Even the most casual mention of Brendan and her pussy started pumping out a slow jam.

Speaking of which. "I think I'll get waxed while we're in civilization," Piper said, trying to decide if she'd forgotten to pack anything. "You want to come with me?"

"Sure." Hannah slung her stuffed backpack over one shoulder. "Just in case we go to the hotel pool or something."

"As soon as I find out where we're staying, I'll schedule us." Piper clapped her hands together. "Sisters wax date!"

"It's all so thrilling," Hannah deadpanned, leaning a hip against the side of the bunk bed. "Hey, Fox isn't coming along to, like . . . babysit me. Right?"

Piper's nose wrinkled. "Brendan said he was already going."

"Yeah, except he didn't know the difference between a forty-five and a seventy-eight that day at the record shop." She narrowed her eyes. "I smell something fishy."

"Welcome to Westport. It's the official town aroma." Piper braced her hands on Hannah's shoulders. "He's not coming to babysit you. You're twenty-six. Anyway, why would you need a babysitter? Me and Brendan will be with you the whole time."

Hannah's mouth fell open. "Piper, you can't be this naive." "What do you mean?"

"When I asked if Fox was coming to babysit me, I meant, is he coming to distract me so Brendan can have time alone with you and your freshly waxed box?" Now it was Piper's

mouth's turn to fall open. "Because I definitely don't mind that. At all. I will be among my people, and I can browse records until the cows come home. But I don't want Fox to feel obligated to entertain me. That would kind of ruin the experience, you know?"

"I get what you're saying." Piper squeezed Hannah's shoulders. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

"Good. If one of us gets the sense they're trying to divide and conquer, we'll split. Okay? If both of us aren't having a good time, it's not worth it."

Hannah nodded, gave a small smile. "Deal."

"Sealed." Piper wet her lips. "Hey, before they get here, I have something to ask you." She blew out a slow breath. "How do you feel about having the grand opening of the new-and-improved bar on Labor Day?"

Her sister's lips moved, counting silently. "That's eight days from now! A week!"

Piper laughed prettily. "Doable, though?"

"You volunteered to throw a party, didn't you?"

Piper groaned, dropping her hands away from her sister's shoulders. "How did you know that?"

"I know *you*. Planning parties is what you do."

"I can't help it." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "They're so fun."

Hannah fought a smile and won. "Pipes, we haven't even invited Daniel yet." She studied Piper. "Are you even planning on inviting him anymore? Or do you want to stay the full three months?"

"Of course I plan on inviting him!" Piper said automatically. Something

sharp twisted in her middle the moment she said those words. But she couldn't take them back.

It didn't hurt to have a fail-safe, though, right? Daniel could always agree to let Piper come home early, and she could turn down the offer. Even if their stepfather was lenient, she didn't have to get on a plane the same day. Her options just needed to stay open.

The more time she spent with Brendan, though, the less inclined she was going to be to give herself an out. And she was not even *close* to ready to make the decision to stay in

Westport. How could she be? She might have made friends at Blow the Man Down. Might have started forging connections with people like Abe and Opal and the girls at the Red Buoy. And the hardware store owners and some of the locals who milled around all day at the harbor. So what if she liked stopping to chat with them? So what if she didn't feel as out of place now as she had upon arriving? That didn't spell forever.

She thought of Brendan stroking her hair while they napped in his bunk on the *Della Ray*. Thought of the gentle rocking of the water and the sound of his even breathing. And she had to force out her next words.

"I'll call and invite Daniel right now."

Just to be safe.

Hannah arched a brow. "Really?"

"Yeah." Piper reached for her phone, ignoring the weird stab of foreboding in her tummy, and dialed. Her stepfather answered on the second ring. "Hey, Daniel!"

"Piper." He sounded nervous. "Everything okay?"

She giggled, trying to dispel the coldness in her chest. "Why does everyone answer my calls this way? Am I that much of a disaster?"

"No." Liar. "No, it's just that you haven't called in a while. I expected you to be begging to come back to LA long before now."

Yeah, well. Who could have predicted a big bruiser of a sea captain who gave vaginal orgasms and made her forget how to breathe?

"Uh . . ." She tucked some hair behind her ear and gave Hannah a reassuring look. "We've been a little distracted, actually. That's what I'm calling to talk to you about. Me and Hannah decided to give the bar a little face-lift."

Silence. "Really."

She couldn't tell if he was impressed or skeptical. "Really. And we're having the grand opening on Labor Day. Do you think . . . ? Would you come? Please?"

After a moment, Daniel sighed. "Piper, I'm busy as hell with this new project."

Was that relief she was feeling? God, if so, it was unnerving. "Oh.

Well . . ."

“Labor Day, you said?” She heard him clicking a few buttons on his computer. Probably opening up his calendar. “I have to admit I’m a little curious to see what you call a face-lift.” He sounded a little dry, but she tried not to get offended. She hadn’t exactly given him a reason to suspect she would be DIY-gifted, unless she counted that bong she’d made out of an eggplant during her senior year of high school. “I could probably swing it. How far away is Seattle?”

A weight sunk low in her stomach. He was coming.

Piper forced a smile. This was a good thing. This was what she and Hannah needed.

Options. Just in case.

“Two hours, give or take. I’m sure I can find you a hotel near Westport—” Daniel snorted. “No, thanks. I’ll have my assistant find me something in Seattle.” He sighed. “Well, it’s on the calendar. I guess I’ll see you girls

soon.”

“Great!” Piper’s smile faltered. “What about Mom?”

He started to say something and changed track. “She isn’t interested in going back. But I’ll represent us both. Sound good?” More key punching. “I have to go now. Good talking to you. Hugs to you and Hannah.”

“Okay, bye, Daniel.” Piper hung up and fused her features with optimism, staunchly ignoring the bonfire taking place in her stomach. God, why did she feel so guilty? Having her stepfather come to Westport in the hopes of cutting their sabbatical short had been the plan all along. “All set!”

Hannah nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Okay! And he said to give you a hug.” Piper crushed her sister to her chest, rocking her maniacally. “There you go.” She picked up her bag. “Shall we?”

When the sisters walked outside, Brendan and Fox were leaning against the running truck wearing identical scowls, as if they’d been arguing. Upon seeing Piper, Brendan’s face cleared, heat flaring in his eyes. “Good morning, Piper,” he greeted her gruffly.

“Good morning, Brendan.”

Piper couldn’t help but notice that Fox looked almost . . . nervous when he saw Hannah, his rangy frame pushing off the truck to reach for her backpack.

“Morning,” he said. “Take that for you?”

“No, thanks,” Hannah said, skirting past him and throwing it through the open window of the truck’s backseat. “I’ll hang on to it.”

Piper laughed. “My sister doesn’t part with her headphones.” She let Brendan take her bag and caught the lapel of his flannel, tugging him down for a kiss. He came eagerly, slanting their lips together and giving her the faint taste of his morning coffee. And in a move she found old school and endearing, he tugged off his beanie and used it to shield their faces from view. “Missed you,” she whispered, pulling away and giving him a meaningful look.

Brendan’s chest rumbled in response, and he damn near ripped the passenger-side door off the hinges, stepping back to help her inside. Fox and Hannah climbed into the rear cab, sitting as far apart as possible. Hannah’s backpack rested on the seat between them, making Piper wonder if there was some tension there her sister hadn’t told her about. Had she been so wrapped up in her own love life that she’d missed something important happening with Hannah? She vowed to remedy that at the earliest opportunity.

They were driving for five minutes before Piper noticed the address on the navigation screen. It included the name of a very upscale hotel. “Wait. That’s not where we’re staying, is it?”

Brendan grunted, turned onto the highway.

Marble bathtubs, Egyptian cotton, white fluffy robes, and flattering mood lighting danced in her head. “It is?” she breathed.

“Uh-oh. Someone is breaking out the big guns.” Hannah chuckled in the backseat. “Well played, Brendan.” Her voice changed. “Wait, but . . . how many rooms did you book?”

“I’m staying with Hannah,” Piper said preemptively, passing her sister an I-got-you-bitch look over the cab divider.

“Of course you are,” Brendan said easily. “I got three rooms. Fox and I will have our own. He gets enough of my snoring on the boat.”

Three rooms? A month ago, she wouldn’t even have considered the cost of staying the night at a luxury hotel. But she mentally calculated the price of *everything* now, right down to a cup of afternoon coffee. Three rooms at this hotel would be pricey. Well into the thousands. How much money did

fishermen make, anyway? That hadn’t been part of her research.

She’d worry about it later. Right now, she was too busy being turned on by the thought of a room service cheese plate and complimentary slippers.

The captain really did have her figured out, didn't he?

"I made a road-trip playlist," Hannah said, leaning forward and handing Piper her phone. "I named it 'Seattle Bound.' Just hit shuffle, Pipes."

"Yes, ma'am." She plugged it into Brendan's outlet. "I never question the DJ."

"The Passenger" by Iggy Pop came on first. "That's Bowie's voice joining in on the chorus," Hannah called over the music. "This song is about their friendship. Driving around together, taking journeys." She sighed wistfully. "Can you imagine them pulling up next to you at a stoplight?"

"Is that what you'll be shopping for at the expo?" Fox asked her. "Bowie?" "Maybe. The beauty of record shopping is never knowing what you'll leave with." Animated by her favorite topic, Hannah sat forward, turning in the seat to face Fox. "They have to speak to you. More importantly, you have

to listen."

From behind her sunglasses, Piper watched the conversation with interest via the rearview mirror.

"Records are kind of like fine wine. Some studios had better production years than others. It's not just the band, it's the pressing. You can be as sentimental as you want about an album, but there's a quality aspect, too." She grinned. "And if you get a perfect pressing of an album you love, there's nothing like that first note when the needle touches down."

"Have you had that?" Fox asked quietly after a moment.

Hannah nodded solemnly. "'A Case of You' by Joni Mitchell. It was the first song I played on her *Blue* album. I've never been the same."

"Fast Car" by Tracy Chapman came up next on the playlist.

Piper's sister hummed a few bars. "Mood is also a factor. If I'm happy, I might shop for Weezer. If I'm homesick, I'll look for Tom Petty . . ."

Fox's lips twitched. "Do you listen to anything from your own generation?"

"Sometimes. Mostly no."

"My Hannah is an old soul," Piper called back.

Brendan's friend nodded, regarding Hannah. "So you have songs for every mood."

“I have *hundreds* of songs for every mood,” Hannah breathed, unzipping her backpack and yanking out her headphones and jam-packed iPod, pressing them to her chest. “What kind of mood are you in right now?”

“I don’t know. Uh . . .” Fox exhaled up at the ceiling, that smile still playing around the edges of his lips. “Glad.”

Glad, Hannah mouthed. “Why?”

Fox didn’t respond right away. “Because I don’t have to share a room with Brendan. Obviously.” He nodded at Hannah’s headphones. “What do you got for that?”

Looking superior, Hannah handed him the headset. Fox put them on.

A moment later, he let out a crack of laughter.

Piper turned in the seat. “What song did you play him?” ““No Scrubs.””

Even Brendan laughed at that, his rusted-motor laugh making Piper want to crawl up into his lap and nuzzle his beard. Probably best to wait until they weren’t driving for that.

Over the course of the two-hour trip, Fox and Hannah inched closer together in the backseat until they were eventually sharing the set of headphones, taking turns choosing songs to play each other and arguing over whose picks were better. And while Piper hadn’t liked the tension between Fox and her sister, she wasn’t sure she liked *this* any better. She’d gone on enough dates with players to spot one a mile away—and unless she was wildly mistaken, Fox had playboy royalty written all over him.

After a quick stop to pick up the chandelier and cover it with a tarp in the back of Brendan’s truck, they arrived at the hotel before lunchtime. Piper was given precious few minutes to enjoy the lobby waterfall and soothing piano music before they were headed for the elevators.

“I asked them to put us as close as possible, so we’re all on the sixteenth floor,” Brendan said, passing out room keys, so casually in charge, Piper had to bite down on her lip. “The expo starts at noon. You want to meet in the lobby then and walk over?”

“Sounds good,” said both sisters.

Although *I want to jump you* is what Piper was thinking.

They reached the sixteenth floor and headed in different directions—and Piper was grateful to have half an hour alone with her sister. “Hey, getting a little cozy with Fox there, eh?” she whispered, tapping the room key against the sensor, releasing the lock.

Hannah snorted. “What? No. We were just listening to music.”

“Yeah, except music is like sex for you—” Piper broke off on a gasp, running the rest of the way into the room. It was magnificent. Muted sunlight. A view of the water. A white fluffy comforter on the king-sized bed, complete with mirrored headboard and mood lighting. Elegant creams and golds and marble. A seating area with a plush ottoman and tasseled throw pillows. Vintage *Vogue* covers even served as the artwork. “Oh, Hannah.” Piper turned in a circle, arms outstretched. “I’m home.”

“The captain done good.”

“He done real good.” Piper trailed her fingertips along a cloudlike pillow. “But we’re still talking about Fox. What’s going on there?”

Hannah plopped onto the love seat, backpack in her lap. “It’s dumb.” “What is dumb?”

Her sister grumbled. “That day we walked to the record shop, I might have thought he was cute. We were having a good conversation—deeper than I expected, actually. And then . . . his phone just starts pinging nonstop. Multiple girl names coming up on the screen. Tina. Josie. Mika. It made me feel kind of stupid for looking at him that way. Like there was even . . . potential.” She set aside her backpack with a shudder. “I think maybe the cleaning products we’d set on fire went to my head or something. But it was a momentary lapse. I’m all about Sergei. *All* about him. Even if he treats me like a kid sister.”

“So . . . no gooey feelings for Fox?”

“No, actually.” Hannah seemed pleased with herself. “I think I like him as a friend, though. He’s fun. Smart. It was natural for me to notice he’s good-looking. I mean, who wouldn’t? But it’s all aboard the platonic train. Toot, toot. Friends only.”

“You’re sure, Hanns?” Piper eyeballed her sister. “Pretty obvious he’s a lady’s man. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt or—”

“Pipes. I’m not interested.” Hannah appeared to be telling the truth. “Swear to God.”

“Okay.”

“In fact, I’m cool hanging out with him today. There’s no babysitting vibe.” She made a shooing motion with her hand. “You and Brendan can go do couple-y things.”

“What? No way! I want to browse vinyls, too.” “No, you don’t. But you’re cute for pretending.”

Piper pouted, then brightened. “We will have our sisters wax date!” She gasped. “You know what? I booked it at a place closer to the convention center, because I assumed

that's where we'd be staying. But I'm going to cancel it. I bet they have in-room waxing here. Let's splurge."

"Location doesn't matter to me. Hair is getting ripped out either way." Piper lunged for the phone. "That's the spirit!"