

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 27 -

The rest of their time in Seattle was a dream.

Hannah and Fox met them in the hotel lobby at the designated time, loaded down with secondhand records. And while Piper still wanted Brendan to speak to Fox about Hannah being off-limits, her fears were temporarily put to rest by the genuine friendship that seemed to have sprouted between the two. One afternoon together and they were finishing each other's sentences. They had inside jokes and everything. Not that it surprised Piper. Her sister was a goddess with a pure, romantic spirit, and it was about time people flocked to her.

As long as certain appendages remained in their pants.

At dinner, Brendan and Fox told them about life on the boat. Piper's favorite story was about a crab claw getting fastened to Deke's nipple, requiring Brendan to give him stitches. She made them tell it twice while she laughed herself into a wine-aided stupor. Halfway through the meal, Fox brought up last week's storm, and Piper watched Brendan stiffen, his gaze flying to hers, gauging if she could handle it. She was surprised to find that while her nerves bubbled up ominously, she was able to calm them with a few deep breaths. Apparently Brendan was so happy about Piper encouraging Fox to finish the story, he pulled her over onto his lap, and that's where she happily remained for the rest of the evening.

They slept in their assigned rooms that night, although some naughty texts had been exchanged between herself and Brendan, and the next morning they piled into the truck to head back to Westport.

With her hand clasped tightly in Brendan's on the console and Hannah's road-trip mix drifting from the speakers, Piper found herself . . . looking

forward to going home. She'd called Abe this morning to let him know she would be late for their walk, followed by a quick call to Opal to arrange coffee later in the week.

There were over a hundred text messages and countless emails on her phone from LA acquaintances, club owners, and Kirby, but she was ignoring them for now, not wanting anything to steal the lingering beauty of the Seattle trip.

Apart from those increasingly urgent messages about September 7, Piper was delighted to have two texts from girls she'd met in Blow the Man Down. They wanted to meet up and help plan the Labor Day party. And how would she feel about a group makeup tutorial?

Good. She felt . . . *really* good about it. With her growing number of friends and the grand opening on the horizon, Piper suddenly had a packed schedule.

What if she could actually belong in Westport?

Yes, Brendan made her feel like she already did. But he had his livelihood here. A community he'd known since birth. The last thing she wanted was to be dependent on him. If she stayed in Westport, she needed to make her own way. To be a person independent of their relationship, as well as a member of it. And for the first time, that didn't seem like a far-fetched possibility.

When they arrived in Westport, Brendan dropped Fox off at his apartment first, then completed the five-minute drive to Piper and Hannah's. His expression could only be described as surly as he shoved the truck into park, visibly reluctant to say good-bye to her. She could relate. But there was no way she'd make it a habit to leave Hannah alone.

Her sister leaned over the front seat now, chin propped on her hands. "All right, Brendan," she said drily. "Piper was singing 'Natural Woman' at the top of her lungs in the shower this morning—"

"Hannah!" Piper sputtered.

"And since I like seeing her happy, I'm going to do you a solid." Brendan turned his head slightly, his interest piqued. "What's that?" "Okay. I'm assuming you have a guest room at your place," Hannah said. Piper's boyfriend grunted in the affirmative.

"Well . . ." Hannah drew out. "I could come stay in it. That would alleviate Piper's sister guilt and she could stay in the captain's quarters."

"Go pack," Brendan responded, no hesitation. "I'll wait."

"Hold on. What?" Piper turned on the seat, splitting an incredulous look

between these two crazy people she loved. "I'm not—we're not—just going to move into your house, Brendan. That requires a-a . . . at the very least, a serious conversation."

"I'll let you chat," Hannah said merrily, hopping out of the truck. "Brendan . . ." Piper started.

"Piper." He reached over the console, brushed his thumb along her cheekbone. "You belong in my bed. There's nothing to discuss."

She puffed a laugh. "How can you say that? I've never lived with anyone, but I'm pretty sure a significant portion of time is spent with no makeup and . . . laundry! Have you taken dirty clothes into consideration? Where will I put mine? I've managed to maintain a certain air of mystique—"

"Mystique," he repeated, lips twitching.

“Yes, that’s right.” She batted away his touch. “What’s going to happen when there is no more . . . mystery left?”

“I don’t want any mysteries when it comes to you. And we have to leave on a fishing trip on Saturday. Two nights away.” *Just a few days from now.* “I want every second I can get with you until I pull out of the harbor.”

“Saturday.” This was news to her, although she’d known at some point he would be going back out on the water. Usually the turnaround was even tighter, but they’d taken a full week off after crab season. “Do you think you’ll be back for the grand opening on Labor Day?”

“Damn right I will. I wouldn’t miss it.” He raised a casual eyebrow, as if he hadn’t just made her pulse thrum with undiluted joy. “Will separate laundry baskets sway you?”

“Maybe.” She chewed her lip. “There would have to be a no-kissing-until- I’ve-brushed-my-teeth rule.”

“Nah, fuck that.” His gaze dropped to the hem of her skirt. “I want to push right into sleepy Piper and make her legs shake first thing in the morning.”

“Fine,” she blurted. “I’ll go pack, then.”

His expression became a mixture of triumph and affection. “Good.”

Frowning at her boyfriend, even though her heart was tap-dancing, she pushed open the door of the truck. Before she could close it behind her, she remembered her promise to meet Abe and walk him to the museum. “How about we come over around dinnertime?” she said to Brendan. “We’ll get groceries on the way. Maybe you can give me a cooking lesson.”

“I’ll have my extinguisher handy.”

“Har-har.” Was it normal for one’s face to actually ache from smiling?

“I’ll see you tonight, Captain.”

His silver-green eyes smoked with promise. “Tonight.”

* * *

Piper jogged to the hardware store and walked Abe to the maritime museum, chatting with him for a while before continuing her run to Opal’s house for coffee. Walking back to No Name, she tapped out replies to her new friends, Patty and Val, arranging a time to plan for Labor Day. She and Hannah would have to kick their productivity into

hyperdrive to have the bar ready in time—they didn't even have a new sign yet—but with some determination, they could do it.

That evening, the sisters packed enough clothes for a couple of nights and walked to the market with their backpacks, buying ingredients identical to the ones Brendan dropped into her handcart that first morning in Westport.

Butterfly wings swept her stomach when she knocked on his door, but the strokes turned languid and comforting the moment his extra-large frame appeared in the entrance . . . in gray sweatpants and a T-shirt.

And *o-kay*. Just like that, the advantages of this living arrangement were already making themselves known.

“Don't look at my boyfriend's dick print,” Piper whispered to Hannah as they followed him into the house, sending her sister into doubled-over laughter.

Brendan cocked—ha—an eyebrow at them over his shoulder, but continued on until they reached the guest bedroom, carrying the groceries they'd brought in one hand. The room he led them to was small and just off the kitchen, but it had a nice view of the garden and the bed looked infinitely more comfortable than the bunk back at No Name.

“Thanks, this is perfect,” Hannah said, dropping her backpack on the floor. She turned in a circle to observe the rest of the room and sucked in a breath, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. “What is . . . what is that?”

Puzzled by her sister's change in demeanor, Piper's gaze traveled from Brendan's sweatpants to the object that had elicited the reaction. There on the desk was a record player. Dusty and heavy-looking. “I remembered my parents gave me theirs before they moved,” Brendan said, crossing his arms, nodding at it. “Went and got it out of the basement.”

“This is a vintage Pioneer,” Hannah breathed, running her finger along the glass top. She turned wide eyes on Brendan. “I can use it?”

He nodded once. “That's why I brought it up.” As if he hadn't just made Hannah's life, he jerked his chin at the closet. “Put whatever records I could find in there. Might be nothing.”

“Anything will sound like something on this.” Hannah's knees dipped, and she leapt up, doing an excited dance. “I don't even care if you unearthed this specifically to drown out the sex noises. *Thank you.*”

Brendan's ears deepened slightly in color, and Piper somehow fell further in love with him. Doing something nice for her sister had earned her everlasting devotion. And when

he said, in his gruff, reserved way, “No. Thanks for, uh . . . letting me have Piper here,” she almost fainted dead away. “I’ll take that.”

He eased the backpack off Piper’s shoulders, kissed her forehead, and abruptly left the room. They observed his departure like seagulls watching a full slice of bread sailing through the air—and thanks to her harbor jogs, Piper knew what that looked like now. Reverent.

You have to marry him, Hannah mouthed.

I know, Piper mouthed back. *What the fuck?*

Still no actual sound came out of Hannah’s mouth. *Ask him first. Do it now.*

I might. Oh God. I might.

Hannah carefully draped herself over the record player. “You can go on double dates with me and my record player. Piper, *look* at it.” She slumped into the desk chair. “At the expo, I had my eye on this perfect, perfect Fleetwood Mac forty-five. It was too expensive. But if I’d known I had this Pioneer to play it on, I would have splurged.”

“Oh no. It spoke to you?”

“Loud and clear.” Hannah sighed, waving off her sadness. “It’s fine. If it was meant to be, I’ll run into it again one day.” She pushed to her feet. “Let’s go make dinner. I’m starved.”

* * *

The three of them fell into a happy pattern.

In the mornings, Brendan woke Piper up with fingertips trailing up and down her belly, which led to her backside teasing his lap. Sometimes he rolled her over facedown and yanked her up onto her knees, taking her fast

and furiously, her hands clinging to the headboard for purchase. Other times, he tossed her knees up over his muscular shoulders and rocked into her slowly, whispering gruff praise into the crook of her neck, the thick push and pull of his shaft between her legs as reliable as the tide, never failing to leave her limp and trembling, her cries lingering in the cool, dim air of his bedroom.

After she’d floated back down to earth from their intense lovemaking, she dressed for her jog and went to meet Abe, helping him up the stairs of the museum before continuing on her way. She’d return home and shower, then have breakfast with Brendan and Hannah before heading to No Name for work in his truck. Apart from the sign, the bar just needed décor and a few final touches. Brendan hung the chandelier,

laughing at the way Piper squealed in victory, declaring it perfect. They arranged high top tables and stools, hung strings of lights on the back patio, and cleaned sawdust off everything.

"I've been thinking about the name," Piper said one afternoon, waiting until her sister looked at her. "Um . . . how do you feel about Cross and Daughters?"

A sound rushed out of Hannah, her eyes taking on a sheen. "I love it, Pipes."

Brendan came up behind her, planting a hard kiss on her shoulder. "It's perfect."

"I wish we had a little more time," Hannah said. "That name deserves a great sign."

"It does. But I think . . . maybe what's perfect about this place is that it's not. It's personal, not flawless. Right?" Piper laughed. "Let's paint it ourselves. It'll mean more that way."

Hannah's phone rang, and she left the room to answer, leaving Piper and Brendan alone. She turned to find him scrutinizing her in this way he'd been doing often lately. With love. Attentiveness. But there was more happening behind those eyes, too. He said he wouldn't pressure her for a decision, but the longer she left him hanging, the more anxious he grew.

They painted the sign on Thursday with big, sloppy buckets of sky-blue paint. Brendan had spent the morning sanding down a long piece of plywood and trimming the edges into an oval shape with his table saw. Once Piper made a rough outline of the letters with a pencil, they were off to the races, applying the blue paint with playful curves and tilting lines. Some might've

said it looked unprofessional, but all she saw was character. An addition to Westport that fit like an acorn in a squirrel's cheek. After the paint dried, Brendan stood by anxiously, prepared to catch them if they fell off the ladders they'd been loaned from the hardware store. Now they affixed it over the faded original sign with his nail gun, Brendan instructing them patiently from the ground. When the sign was nailed on all sides, the two sisters climbed down and hugged in the street.

She couldn't say for certain how Hannah felt about having the bar completed, but in that moment, something clicked into place inside Piper. Something that hadn't even existed before she landed in this northwest corner of the map. It was the welcome home Henry Cross had deserved but never got. It was a proper burial, an apology for deserting him, and it soothed the jagged edges that had appeared on her heart the more she'd learned about her father.

"Now all we need is beer," Hannah said, stepping back and wiping her eyes. "And ice."

"Yeah, time to call the wholesaler, I guess. Wow. That was fast." She peered up at the sign, warmed by the curlicue at the end of "Daughters." "If we want to serve spirits eventually, we'll need a liquor license."

"If *you* want to, Pipes," Hannah said softly, putting an arm around her shoulder. "Leaving you is going to suck, but I can't be here forever. I've got my job with Sergei waiting. If you decide to stay . . ."

"I know," Piper managed, the sign blurring. "Are you? Staying for sure?"

Through the window, they watched Brendan inside the bar where he screwed a light bulb into the chandelier. So capable and reassuring and familiar now, her heart drew up tight, lodging in her throat. "Yeah. I'm staying."

"Shit," Hannah breathed. "I'm torn between happy and sad."

Piper swiped at her eyes, probably smearing blue paint all over her face but not caring one bit. "I swear to God, you better visit."

Her sister snorted. "Who else is going to bail you out when all this goes south?"