

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 29 -

Piper went to sleep pissed and woke up even pissier.

She rocketed out of bed toward the dresser drawers Brendan had designated for her, snatching out a black sports bra and red (the color of anger) running pants, along with some ankle socks.

As soon as she completed a quick run and walked Abe over to the museum, she was going to strut down that dock like it was a fashion week runway and kiss the captain's stupid mouth. She'd leave him hard and panting and feeling like a massive jerk, then she'd sashay home.

Home. To Brendan's house.

She stomped down the stairs, bringing a sleepy-eyed Hannah out of her room. "Are you ready to talk yet?"

Piper shoved an AirPods into her ear. "No."

Hannah propped a hip against the couch and waited.

"I am laser-focused on burying him in regrets right now." "Sounds like the start to a healthy relationship."

"He left." Piper fell onto her butt and started to lace up her running shoes. "He's not supposed to leave! He's supposed to be the patient and reasonable one!"

"You're the only one who is allowed to be irrational?"

"Yes!" Something got stuck in her throat. "And he's obviously already sick of my shit. It's all downhill from here. I don't even know why I'm bothering with going to the dock."

"Because you love him."

"Exactly. Look at what I've opened myself up to." She yanked her laces taut. "I would relive being dumped by Adrian a thousand times to avoid

Brendan walking out *once*. The way he did last night. It *hurts*."

Hannah sat down cross-legged in front of her. "I think that means the good times are worth a little struggling, don't you?" She ducked her head to meet Piper's eyes. "Come on. Put yourself in his shoes. What if he walked out last night without the intention of ever coming back? That's what he's afraid you're going to do."

“If he’d just listened—”

“Yeah, I know. You’re telling us you’re going to stay. But, Pipes. He’s a hard-proof guy. And you left the loopholes.”

Piper fell back flat onto the hardwood floor. “I would have closed them.

He’s supposed to be understanding with me.”

“Yeah, but you have to be understanding with him, too.” Hannah chuckled, laid down beside her sister. “Piper, the man looks at you like . . . he’s full of cracks and you’re the glue. He just wanted to give you some space, you know? It’s a big decision you’re making.” She turned on her side. “And also, let’s account for the fact that he’s a man and there are balls and pride and testosterone in the mix. It’s a deadly concoction.”

“Truth.” Piper took in a deep breath and let it out. “Even if I forgive him, can I still march down there like a righteous bitch and make him rue?”

“I would be disappointed if you didn’t.”

“Okay.” Piper sat up and climbed to her feet, helping Hannah up after. “Thanks for the talk, O wise one. Promise I can call you on the phone anytime I want for your sage advice?”

“Anytime.”

Piper left for her run with more than enough time to squire Abe to the museum and make it down to the dock to wish Brendan bon voyage. Still, she was anxious to see Brendan and reassure both of them they were solid, so she set a quick pace. Abe was waiting in his usual spot outside the hardware store when she arrived, newspaper rolled up under his arm.

He waved warmly as she approached. “Morning, Miss Piper.”

“Morning, Abe,” she said, slowing to a stop beside him. “How are you today?”

“Well as can be expected.”

They fell into an easy pace, and Piper lifted her face to the sky, grateful for the calm weather, the lack of storm clouds. “I’ve been meaning to tell you, we’re throwing a grand opening party at Cross and Daughters on Labor Day.” He quirked a white brow. “Cross and Daughters? Is that what you decided

to call it?”

"Yeah." She cut him a look. "What do you think?" "I think it's perfect. A nod to the new and the old."

"That's what I thought—" Abe's toe caught on an uneven crack in the sidewalk, and he went down. Hard. Piper grabbed for him, but it was too late, and his temple landed on the pavement with an ominous thud. "Oh my God! Abe!" The sudden rapid fire of Piper's pulse buckled her knees, and she dropped to the ground beside him, hands fluttering over his prone form, no idea what to do. "Oh Jesus. *Jesus*. Are you okay?" She was already pulling out her phone with trembling hands. "I'm going to call an ambulance, and then I'll call your sons. It's going to be all right."

His hand came up and stopped her from dialing. "No ambulance," he said weakly. "It's not as bad as all that."

She leaned over and saw the blood trickling from his temple. Was it a lot?

Too much? "I— Are you sure? I really think I should."

"Help me sit up." She did, carefully, swallowing a spike when the blood traveled down to his neck. "Just call my sons. No ambulance, kiddo. Please. I don't want to give everyone a scare by being taken to the hospital. My phone is in my pocket. Call Todd."

"Okay," she managed, scrolling through his phone. "Okay."

By the time Piper pulled up the contact and hit dial, a woman had rushed out of the deli with a wadded-up fistful of paper towels for Abe to press to his wound. He was still speaking in complete sentences and his eyes were clear, which had to be a good thing, right? *Oh God, please don't let anything happen to this sweet man.*

Todd answered on the fourth ring, but he was at school dropping off his kids and couldn't be there for fifteen minutes, and that . . . that was when Piper realized she was going to miss the *Della Ray* leaving. It was scheduled to leave two minutes ago. Her heartbeat slammed in her eardrums, and her movements turned sluggish. Brendan wouldn't leave, though. He would wait for her. He would know she was coming. And if she didn't show up, she had to believe he would come find her. But she couldn't leave Abe. She couldn't. She had to make sure he was going to be all right.

She called Brendan, but it went straight to voicemail. Twice. The third time she called, the line disconnected. Fingers unsteady, she pounded out a text message, her panic increasing when he didn't answer immediately. God, this couldn't be happening. She'd found out early on how terrible cell

reception was in certain parts of Westport, especially the harbor, but technology couldn't be failing her so completely right now. Not when it was this crucial.

Todd didn't make it there in fifteen minutes. It took him twenty.

By that time, they'd gotten Abe to his feet and moved him to a bench. He seemed tired and slightly embarrassed about the fall, so she told him about the time she'd tried to slide down a stripper pole after six shots of tequila and ended up with a sprained wrist. That made him laugh at least. Todd arrived in his truck looking concerned, and Piper helped Abe into the passenger side, wads of balled-up paper towels pressed to her chest. She made him promise to give her a call later, and off they went, disappearing around the corner of the block.

Piper was almost scared to look at her phone, but she gathered her courage and checked the time. Oh God. Half an hour. Half an hour late.

She started running.

She ran as fast as her feet would carry her toward the harbor, trying to hold on to the faith. Trying to ignore the voice whispering in the back of her head that Brendan kept a tight schedule. Or that he'd given up on her. *Please, please, don't let that be the case.*

At Westhaven Drive, she whipped a right and almost knocked over a restaurant's specials board set out on the sidewalk. But she kept running. Kept going until she saw the *Della Ray* in the distance, traveling out to sea, leaving a trail of white, sloshing wake, and she stopped like she'd hit an invisible wall.

A deafening buzz started in her ears. He'd left.

He was gone.

She'd missed him and now . . . Brendan thought she'd chosen LA.

A great hiccupping sob rose up in her chest. Her feet carried her toward the docks, even though going there was useless now. She just wanted to make it there. Making it was all she had, even if she would have nothing to show for it. No kiss. No reassurance. No Brendan.

Her eyes were overflowing with tears by the time she reached the slip of the *Della Ray*, her surroundings so blurry, she almost didn't notice the other women standing around, obviously fresh from waving off the boat. She vaguely recognized Sanders's wife from the first night she and Hannah had

walked into No Name. Another woman's age hinted at her being the mother of one of the crew members, rather than a significant other.

Piper wanted to greet them in some way, but her hands were heavy at her sides, her vocal cords atrophied.

"It's Piper, right?" Sanders's wife approached but recoiled a little when she spotted the tears coursing down Piper's numb face. "Oh. Honey, no. You're going to have to be a lot tougher than that."

The older woman laughed. "It's a good thing you didn't show up here with that face, making your man feel guilty." She stepped over a rope and headed toward the street. "Distracted men make mistakes."

"She's right," Sanders's wife said, still looking uncomfortable around Piper's steady waterfall of tears. The boat was just a dot now. "Especially if you're going to be with the captain. You need to be reliable. Hardy. They don't like to admit it, but a lot of their confidence comes from us. Sending them off isn't an easy thing to do, week after week, but we do what's necessary, yeah?"

Piper didn't know how long she stood and stared out at the water, watching a buoy bob on the roll of waves, the wind drying the tears on her face and making it stiff. Fishermen wove their way around her, guiding tourists to their boats, but she couldn't bring her feet to move. There was a hollow ache in her stomach that felt like a living thing, the pain spreading until she worried it would swallow her whole.

But it wasn't the end of the world, right?

"It's not," she whispered to herself. "He'll be back. You'll explain."

Piper filled her lungs slowly and ambled off the dock on stiff legs, ignoring the questioning looks of the people she passed. Okay, fine. She'd missed the boat. That sucked. Really, really bad. It made her sick to think he'd be under the assumption that their relationship was over for two days. It wasn't, though. And if she had to scream and beg when Brendan got home, she would. He'd listen. He'd understand, wouldn't he?

She ended up outside of Cross and Daughters but didn't remember any part of the walk. It hurt to be there when so much of Brendan filled the space. His pergola. The chandelier he'd hung. His scent. It was still there from the day before.

Pressure crowded her throat again, but she swallowed it determinedly.

She had to call distributors and confirm deliveries for Monday's grand opening. She didn't even have an outfit yet, and then there was the meeting

this afternoon with Patty and Val. To help plan the party. She was up for exactly none of it, but she'd soldier on. She could make it through the next two days. Her heart would just have to deal.

That afternoon, Piper and Hannah met Patty and Val in Blow the Man Down, and they divvied up responsibilities. Hannah was, of course, the DJ and already had an end-of-summer soundtrack ready to fire up. Patty offered to bring firework cupcakes and Val

suggested raffling off prizes from local vendors. Mostly they day drank and talked about makeup, and that helped numb some of Piper's heaviest anxieties that Brendan was lost to her. That he'd already given up.

Have faith. Have faith.

* * *

It was noon on Labor Day when Daniel called to cancel.

Piper was busy stocking the bins behind the bar with ice, so Hannah answered the phone—and one look at her sister's face told Piper everything she needed to know. Hannah put the call on speaker, and Piper listened with her hands unmoving in the ice.

"Girls, I can't make it. I'm so sorry. We're having some last-minute casting issues, and I have to fly to New York for a face-to-face with a talent rep and his client."

Piper should have been used to this. Should have been prepared for their stepfather to flake at the last possible second. In his line of work, there were always flights to New York or Miami or London at the eleventh hour. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how badly she was looking forward to showing Daniel what they'd accomplished with Cross and Daughters. For better or worse, Daniel was the man who'd raised her, given her everything. She'd just wanted to show him it hadn't been for nothing. That she could create something worthwhile if given the opportunity. But she wouldn't get that chance now.

After Brendan left without a good-bye, her stepfather's cancellation was another blow to the midsection. Neither one of them believed in her. Or had any faith.

She had faith in herself, though. Didn't she? Even if it was beginning to fray around the edges and unravel the closer it came to grand-opening time.

But Brendan would be back tonight and the certainty of that calmed her. Maybe he'd return angry with her or disappointed, but he'd be back on solid ground and she'd fight to make him listen. She'd keep fighting until his belief in her returned.

That plan helped center Piper, and she worked, stocking beer and setting out coasters, napkins, straws, pint glasses, orange wedges for the wheat beer. She and Hannah did some last-minute cleaning and hung the GRAND OPENING banner they'd painted the previous night outside. And then they stood in the center of the bar and surveyed what they'd done, both of them kind of dumbstruck at the transformation. When they'd arrived over a month ago, the place had been nothing but dust bunnies and barrels. It was still kind of a dive, but hell if it wasn't chic and a lot more welcoming.

At least to them.

But by six thirty, no one had darkened the door of Cross and Daughters.

Hannah sat in the DJ booth shuffling through her summer mix, and Piper stood behind the bar wringing her hands and obsessively checking the time on her phone. She had nine new messages from Kirby, all since this morning, demanding she get her ass on a plane back to Los Angeles. Piper had let the invitation hang for way too long, and now she didn't know how to turn down the party. And *under duress*, she could admit . . . she'd peeked at some of Kirby's emails detailing the guest list and the designer dress options.

If she was going, she'd pick the black Monique Lhuillier with the plunging neckline.

She really did need to let Kirby know she couldn't make it tomorrow night, but for some reason, Piper couldn't bring herself to send the text. To sever that final tie when she was still so shaken up from Brendan walking out. From having that steady, dependable presence ripped away when she needed it most. And the thing about LA parties was, if she didn't show up, no one would *really* care. There would be five minutes of speculation and some fleeting disappointment before everyone went back to doing lines and guzzling vodka.

Still, she'd send the text soon.

Piper had worn one of the pairs of jeans Brendan bought her. The more time dragged on without a single customer, the more Piper felt like an imposter in the soft denim, so unlike her usual dresses or skirts. Seven o'clock came and went. Seven thirty. Patty and Val still weren't there. No Abe or Opal.

No Brendan.

She ignored the worried looks Hannah kept sending her from the DJ booth, her stomach starting to sink. The locals had liked No Name. They didn't want this place prettied up by two outsiders. This was their way of letting the sisters know it.

Finally, just before eight o'clock, the door creaked open. Mick walked in with a hesitant smile on his face.

Piper's palms started to sweat at the appearance of Desiree's father. The last time she'd seen him was in the hospital, right after she'd been with Brendan for the first time. Before that, she'd crashed his daughter's memorial dinner. They might have gotten off on the right foot, but that footing wasn't so solid anymore. There was something about the way he looked at her, even now, that measured her up and found her lacking. Or, if not lacking, she was not his daughter. With Mick sauntering toward her to take a seat at the bar, Piper's stomach started to churn. Brendan had obliterated her insecurities over Desiree, but right now, standing in the painfully empty bar, they crept back in, making the back of her neck feel hot. The lack of customers was a judgment. Mick's gaze was a judgment. And she wasn't passing.

“Hi there,” Mick muttered, shifting on his stool. “Guess I’m early.”

It was a lie for her benefit, and the generosity of it made Piper relax a little bit.

Momentarily, anyway.

“Would you like a beer, Mick?” “Sure would. Bud should do it.”

“Oh, we have some local IPAs.” She nodded at the chalkboard mounted overhead. “There’s the list. If you’re a Bud drinker, I recommend the—”

He laughed nervously, as if overwhelmed by the list of five beers, their descriptions painstakingly hand-lettered by Hannah. “Oh. I . . . I’ll just sit awhile, then.” He turned in his stool, surveyed the bar. “Not a lot of interest in flashy changes around here, looks like.”

A weight sunk in Piper’s belly.

He wasn’t just talking about Cross and Daughters, that much was clear.

His daughter was the old. She was the new. The sorely lacking replacement.

Westport was small. By now, Mick had probably heard about Piper crying like a baby on the docks, watching the *Della Ray* blur into the horizon. And now this. Now no one had arrived at the grand opening, and she was standing

there like a certified idiot. She’d been an *idiot*. Not only to believe she could win over everyone in this close-knit place by making over the bar, but by believing her stepfather would give a shit. She’d been an idiot to keep important things from Brendan, whether or not the omissions had been intentional, and he’d lost faith in her. Lost trust.

I don’t belong here. I never did.

Brendan wasn’t coming tonight. Nobody was. Cross and Daughters was empty and hollow, and she felt the same way, standing there on two shaky legs, just wanting to disappear.

The universe was sending her a loud-and-clear message.

Piper jolted when Mick laid a hand on top of hers, patting it. “Now, Piper . . .” He sighed, seeming genuinely sympathetic. “Don’t you go feeling bad or anything. It’s a tough place to crack. You have to be strong to stay afloat.”

Words from Sanders’s wife came drifting back.

Oh. Honey, no. You’re going to have to be a lot tougher than that.

Then her first conversation with Mick.

Wives of fishermen come from tough stock. They have nerves of steel. My wife has them, passed them on to my daughter, Desiree.

She thought of running into Brendan in the market on her first morning in Westport.

You wouldn't understand the character it takes to make this place run. The persistence.

In her heart, she knew his mind had changed since then, but maybe he'd been right.

Maybe she didn't understand how to make anything last. Not a relationship, not a bar, nothing. Henry Cross's legacy didn't belong to her, it belonged to this town. How ridiculous of her to swoop in and try to claim it.

Mick patted her hand again, seeming a little worried by whatever he saw in her expression. "I better get on," he said quickly. "Best of luck, Piper."

Piper stared down into the luminous wood of the bar, swiping the rag over it again and again in a pretense of cleaning, but she stopped when Hannah circled a hand around her wrist.

"You okay, Pipes? People probably just got the time wrong." "They didn't get it wrong."

Her sister frowned, leaned across the bar to study Piper's face. "Hey . . .

you're *not* okay." "I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Hannah argued. "Your Piper sparkle is gone." She laughed without humor. "My what?"

"Your Piper sparkle," her sister repeated, looking increasingly worried. "You always have it, no matter what. Even when you've been arrested or Daniel is being a jerk, you always have this, like, optimism lighting you up. Brightness. But it's gone now, and I don't like it. What did Mick say to you?"

Piper closed her eyes. "Who cares?"

Hannah huffed a sound at Piper's uncharacteristic response. "What is going to make you feel better right now? Tell me what it is and we'll do it. I don't like seeing you like this."

Brendan walking through the door and pulling her into the recharging station would cure a lot of ills, but that wasn't going to happen. She could feel it. How badly she'd messed up by keeping safety nets in place without telling Brendan. How badly she'd hurt him by doing so. Badly enough that even the most steadfast man on earth had reached the end

of his patience with her. "I don't know. God, I just want to blink and be a million miles away."

More than that, she wanted to feel like her old self again.

The old Piper might have been lacking in direction, but she'd been happy, right? When people judged the old Piper, it was from the other side of an iPhone screen, not to her face. She didn't *have* to try and fail, because she'd never tried in the first place, and God, it had been easy. Just then, she wanted to slip back into that identity and drop out, so she wouldn't have to feel this uncomfortable disappointment in herself. Wouldn't have to acknowledge the proof that she wasn't tough. Wasn't capable. Didn't belong.

Her phone buzzed on the bar. Another message from Kirby.

Piper opened the text and sighed over the Tom Ford peep-toe pumps on her screen. White with gold chains to serve as the ankle strap. Kirby was playing hardball now. Putting on those shoes and a killer dress and walking into a sea of photo-snapping strangers would be like taking a painkiller right now. She wouldn't have to feel a thing.

"Go home, Pipes."

She looked up sharply. "What?"

Hannah seemed to be wrestling with something. "You know I think your LA friends are phonies and you're way too good for them, right?" She sighed. "But maybe you need to go to Kirby's party. I can see you want to."

Piper set down her phone firmly. "No. After all this work? No." "You can always come back."

Would she, though? Once she walked back into that fog of dancing and selfies and sleeping until noon, was it realistic that she would return to Westport and face her shortcomings? Especially if she made enough money on endorsements tomorrow night to get her out of Daniel's pocket? "I can't. I can't just . . ."

But why couldn't she?

Look around. What was stopping her?

"Well . . ." A tremble of excitement coursed up her fingertips. "You'll come with me, right, Hanns? If I'm not here, you don't have to be either."

Her sister shook her head. "Shauna has me opening the record shop tomorrow and Wednesday. I can ask her to find a replacement, but until then, I have to stick around." Hannah reached out and took the sides of Piper's face in her hands. "I'll only be a couple of days behind you. Go. It's like you've flatlined and I hate it."

“Go right *now*? But . . .” She gestured weakly. “The bar. We did this for Henry.”

Hannah shrugged. “Henry Cross belongs to this place. Maybe turning it back over to them is what he would have wanted. It was the spirit behind it that counted, Piper. I’m proud of us no matter what.” She surveyed the line of empty stools. “And I think I can handle the rest of this shift alone. Text Kirby. Tell her you’re coming.”

“Hannah, are you sure? I really don’t like leaving you here.”

Her sister snorted. “Stop it. I’m fine. I’ll go crash at Shauna’s if it makes you feel better.”

Piper’s breath started to come faster. “Am I really doing this?”

“Go,” Hannah ordered, pointing at the staircase. “I’ll get you an Uber.” Oh wow, this was really happening. She was leaving Westport.

Returning to something she could do and do well. Easy. Just easy.

Avoid this despair and disappointment. Just sink back in and never look back. Forget about this place that didn’t want her and the man who didn’t trust her.

Ignoring Brendan’s clear, beloved image in her head, his deep voice telling her to stay, Piper ran up the stairs and started shoving her belongings into suitcases.