

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 3

It was *not* all right, as it turned out.

Nothing was.

Not according to their stepfather, Daniel Bellinger, revered Academy Award–winning movie producer, philanthropist, and competitive yachtsman.

Piper and Hannah had attempted to creep in through the catering entrance of their Bel-Air mansion. They'd moved in when Piper was four and Hannah two, after their mother married Daniel, and neither of them could remember living anywhere else. Every once in a while, when Piper caught a whiff of the ocean, her memory sent up a signal through the fog, reminding her of the Pacific Northwest town where she'd been born, but there was nothing substantial to cling to and it always drifted away before she could grasp on.

Now, her stepfather's wrath? She could fully grasp that.

It was etched into the tanned lines of his famous face, in the disappointed headshakes he gave the sisters as they sat, side by side, on a couch in his home office. Behind him, awards gleamed on shelves, framed movie posters hung on walls, and the phone on his L-shaped desk lit up every two seconds, although he'd silenced it for the upcoming lecture. Their mother was at Pilates, and out of everything? *That* made Piper the most nervous. Maureen tended to have a calming effect on her husband—and he was anything but calm right now.

“Um, Daniel?” Piper chanced brightly, tucking a piece of wilted hair behind her ear. “None of this is Hannah's fault. Is it okay if she heads to bed?”

“She stays.” He pinned Hannah with a stern look. “You were forbidden to bail her out and did it anyway.”

Piper turned her astonishment on her sister. “You did what?”

“What was I supposed to do?” Hannah whipped off her hat and wrung it between her knees. “Leave you there, Pipes?”

“Yeah,” Piper said slowly, facing her stepfather with mounting horror. “What did you want her to do? *Leave* me there?”

Agitated, Daniel shoved his fingers through his hair. “I thought you learned your lesson a long time ago, Piper. Or *lessons*, plural, rather. You were still flitting around to every goddamn party between here and the Valley, but you weren't costing me money or making me look like a fucking idiot in the process.”

“Ouch.” Piper sunk back into the couch cushions. “You don't have to be mean.”

“I don’t have to be—” Daniel made an exasperated sound and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You are twenty-eight years old, Piper, and you have done nothing with your life. *Nothing*. You’ve been afforded every opportunity, given anything your little heart could ask for, and all you have to show for it is a . . . a digital existence. It means *nothing*.”

If that’s true, then I mean nothing, too.

Piper snagged a pillow and held it over her roiling stomach, giving Hannah a grateful look when she reached over to rub her knee. “Daniel, I’m sorry. I had a bad breakup last night and I acted out. I won’t do anything like that ever again.”

Daniel seemed to deflate a little, retreating to his desk to lean on the edge. “No one handed me anything in this business. I started as a page on the Paramount lot. Filling sandwich orders, fetching coffee. I was an errand boy while I worked my way through film school.” Piper nodded, doing her best to appear deeply interested, even though Daniel told this story at every dinner party and charity event. “I stayed ready, armed with knowledge and drive, just waiting for my opportunity, so I could seize it”—he snapped his fist closed—“and never look back.”

“That’s when you were asked to run lines with Corbin Kidder,” Piper recited from memory.

“Yes.” Her stepfather inclined his head, momentarily pleased to find out she’d been paying attention. “As the director looked on, I not only delivered the lines with passion and zeal, but I *improved* the tired text. Added my own flair.”

“And you were brought on as a writer’s assistant.” Hannah sighed, winding her finger for him to wrap up the oft-repeated story. “For Kubrick himself.”

He exhaled through his nose. “That’s right. And it brings me back to my original point.” A finger was wagged. “Piper, you’re too comfortable. At least Hannah earned a degree and is gainfully employed. Even if I called in favors to get her the location scout gig, at least she’s productive.” Hannah hunched her shoulders but said nothing. “Would you even care if opportunity came knocking on your door, Piper? You have no drive to go anywhere. Or do anything. Why would you when this life I’ve provided you is always here, rewarding your lack of ambition with comfort and an excuse to remain blissfully stagnant?”

Piper stared up at the man she thought of as a father, stunned to find out he’d been seeing her in such a negative light. She’d grown up in Bel-Air. Vacationing and throwing pool parties and rubbing elbows with famous actors. This was the only life she knew. None of her friends worked. Only a handful of them had bothered with college. What was the point of a degree? To make money? They already had tons of it.

If Daniel or her mother had ever encouraged her to do something else, she couldn't remember any such conversation. Was motivation a thing that other people were simply born with? And when the time came to make their way in the world, they simply acted? Should she have been looking for a purpose this whole time?

Weirdly, none of the inspirational quotes she'd posted in the past held the answer.

"I love your mother very much," Daniel continued, as if reading her mind. "Or I don't think I would have been this patient for so long. But, Piper . . . you went too far this time."

Her eyes shot to his, her knees beginning to tremble. Had he ever used that resigned tone with her before? If so, she didn't recall. "I did?" she whispered.

Beside her, Hannah shifted, a sign she was picking up on the gravity of the moment, too.

Daniel bobbed his head. "The owner of the Mondrian is financing my next film." That news landed like a grenade in the center of the office. "He's not happy about last night, to put it quite mildly. You made his hotel seem like it lacks security. You made it a laughingstock. And worse, you could have burned the goddamn place down." He stared at her with hard eyes, letting it all sink in. "He's threatened to pull the budget, Piper. It's a very considerable amount. The movie will not get made without his contribution. At least not

until I find another backer—and it could take me years in this economy." "I'm sorry," Piper breathed, the magnitude of what she'd done sinking her

even farther into the couch cushions. Had she really blown a business deal for Daniel in the name of posting a revenge snap that would make her triumphant in a breakup? Was she that frivolous and stupid?

Had Adrian been right?

"I didn't know. I . . . I had no idea who owned the hotel."

"No, of course not. Who cares who your actions affect, right, Piper?"

"All right." Hannah sat forward with a frown. "You don't have to be so hard on her. She obviously realizes she made a mistake."

Daniel remained unfazed. "Well, it's a mistake she's going to answer for."

Piper and Hannah traded a glance. "What do you mean by"—Piper wiggled her fingers in the shape of air quotes—"answer for?"

Their stepfather took his time rounding his desk and opening the bottom filing drawer, hesitating only a moment before removing a manila folder. He tapped it steadily on his desk calendar, considering the nervous sisters through narrowed eyes. “We don’t talk a lot about your past. The time before I married your mother. I’ll admit that’s mostly because I’m selfish and I didn’t want reminders that she loved someone before me.”

“Awww,” Piper said automatically.

He ignored her. “As you know, your father was a fisherman. He lived in Westport, Washington, the same town where your mother was born. Quaint little place.”

Piper started at the mention of her birth father. A king crab fisherman named Henry who’d died a young man, sucked down into the icy depths of the Bering Sea. Her eyes drifted to the window, to the world beyond, trying to remember what came *before* this swanky life to which she’d grown so accustomed. The landscape and color of the first four years of her life were elusive, but she could remember the outline of her father’s head. Could remember his cracking laugh, the smell of salt water on his skin.

Could remember her mother’s laughter echoing in kind, warm and sweet.

There was no way to wrap her head around that other time and place—how different it was from her current situation—and she’d tried many times. If Maureen hadn’t moved to Los Angeles as a grieving widow, armed with nothing more than good looks and being a dab hand at sewing, she never would have landed a job working in wardrobe on Daniel’s first film. He wouldn’t have fallen in love with her, and this lavish lifestyle of theirs would

be nothing more than a dream, while Maureen existed in some other, unimaginable timeline.

“Westport,” Hannah repeated, as if testing the word on her tongue. “Mom never told us the name.”

“Yes, well. I can imagine everything that happened was painful for her.” He sniffed, tapping the edge of the folder again. “Obviously she’s fine now. Better than fine.” A beat passed. “The men in Westport . . . they head to the Bering Sea during king crab season, in search of their annual payday. But it’s not always reliable. Sometimes they catch very little and have to split a minor sum among a large crew. Because of this, your father also owned a small bar.”

Piper’s lips edged up into a smile. This was the most anyone had ever spoken to her about their birth father, and the details . . . they were like coins dropping into an empty jar inside of her, slowly filling it up. She wanted more. She wanted to know everything about this man whom she could only remember for his boisterous laugh.

Hannah cleared her throat, her thigh pressing against Piper's. "Why are you telling us all of this now?" She chewed her lip. "What's in the folder?"

"The deed to the bar. He left the building to you girls in his will." He set the folder down on his desk and flipped it open. "A long time ago, I put a custodian in place, to make sure it didn't fall into disrepair, but truthfully, I'd forgotten all about it until now."

"Oh my God . . ." Hannah said under her breath, obviously predicting some outcome to this conversation that Piper was not yet grasping. "A-are you . . . ?"

Daniel sighed in the wake of Hannah's trailed-off question. "My investor is demanding a show of contrition for what you did, Piper. He's a self-made man like me and would like nothing more than to stick it to me over my spoiled, rich-kid daughter." Piper flinched, but he didn't see it because he was scanning the contents of the file. "Normally I would tell anyone who demanded something from me to fuck off . . . but I can't ignore my gut feeling that you need to learn to fend for yourself for a while."

"What do you mean by"—Piper did air quotes again—"fend'?"

"I *mean* you're getting out of your comfort zone. I *mean* you're going to Westport."

Hannah's mouth dropped open.

Piper shot forward. "Wait. What? For how long? What am I supposed to do there?" She turned her panicked gaze on Hannah. "Does Mom know about this?"

"Yes," Maureen said from the office doorway. "She knows." Piper whimpered into her wrist.

"Three months, Pipes. You can make it that long. And I hope you would do it without hesitation, considering I'll maintain my film budget by making these amends." Daniel came around the desk and dropped the manila folder into Piper's lap. She stared at it like one might a scuttling cockroach. "There is a small apartment above the bar. I've called ahead to make sure it's cleaned. I'm setting up a debit account to get you started, but after that . . ." Oh, he looked way too pleased. "You're on your own."

Mentally listing all of the galas and fashion shows that would happen over the course of three whole months, Piper got to her feet and sent her mother a pleading look. "Mom, you're really going to let him send me away?" She was reeling. "What am I supposed to do? Like, fish for a living? I don't even know how to make toast."

"I'm confident you'll figure it out," Maureen said softly, her expression sympathetic but firm. "This will be good for you. You'll see. You might even learn something about yourself."

“No.” Piper shook her head. Didn’t last night yield the revelation that she was good for nothing but partying and looking hot? She didn’t have the survival skills for a life outside of these gates. But she could cope with that as long as everything stayed familiar. Out there, her ineptitude, her uselessness, would be *glaring*. “I—I’m not going.”

“Then I’m not paying your legal fees,” Daniel said reluctantly.

“I’m shaking,” Piper whispered, holding up a flat, quaking hand. “Look at me.”

Hannah threw an arm around her sister. “I’m going with her.”

Daniel did a double take. “What about your job? I pulled strings with Sergei to get you a coveted spot with the production company.”

At the mention of Sergei, Hannah’s long-standing crush, Piper felt her sister’s split second of indecision. For the last year, the youngest Bellinger had been pining for the broody Hollywood upstart whose debut film, *Nobody’s Baby*, had taken the Palme d’Or at Cannes. Most of the ballads constantly blaring from Hannah’s room could be attributed to her deep infatuation.

Her sister’s solidarity made Piper’s throat feel tight, but there was no way

she’d allow her sins to banish her favorite person to Westport, too. Piper herself wasn’t even resigned to going yet. “Daniel will change his mind,” she whispered out of the side of her mouth to Hannah. “It’ll be fine.”

“I will not,” Daniel boomed, looking offended. “You leave at the end of July.”

Piper did a mental count. “That’s, like, only a few weeks from now!”

“I’d tell you to use the time to tie up your affairs, but you don’t have any.”

Maureen made a sound. “I think that’s enough, Daniel.” With a face full of censure, she corralled the stunned sisters out of the room. “Come on. Let’s take some time to process.”

The three Bellinger women ascended the stairs together, climbing up to the third floor where Hannah’s and Piper’s bedrooms waited on opposite sides of the carpeted hall. They drifted into Piper’s room, settling her on the edge of the bed, and then stepped back to observe her as if they were medical students being asked to make a diagnosis.

Hands on knees, Hannah analyzed her face. “How are you doing, Piper?” “Can you really not get him to change his mind, Mom?” Piper croaked.

Maureen shook her head. “I’m sorry, sweetie.” Her mother fell onto the bed beside her, taking her limp hand. For long moments, she was quiet, clearly gearing up for

something. "I think part of the reason I didn't fight Daniel very hard on sending you to Westport is . . . well, I have a lot of guilt for keeping so much of your real father to myself. I was in so much pain for a long time. Bitter, too. And I bottled it all up, neglecting his memory in the process. That wasn't right of me." Her eyelids drifted down. "To go to Westport . . . is to meet your father, Piper. He *is* Westport. There's so much more history . . . still living in that town than you know. That's why I couldn't stay after he died. He was surrounding me . . . and I was just so angry over the unfairness of it all. Not even my parents could get through to me."

"How long did they stay in Westport after you left?" Hannah asked, referring to the grandparents who visited them on occasion, though the visits had grown few and far between as the sisters got older. When Daniel officially adopted Piper and Hannah, their grandparents hadn't seemed comfortable with the whole process, and the contact between them and Maureen had faded in degrees, even if they still spoke on holidays and birthdays.

"Not long. They bought the ranch in Utah shortly after. Far from the water." Maureen looked down at her hands. "The magic had gone out of the town for all of us, I think."

Piper could understand her mother's reasoning. Could sympathize with the guilt. But her entire life was being uprooted for a man she didn't know. Twenty-four years had gone by without a single word about Henry Cross. Her mother couldn't expect her to jump all over the opportunity now because she'd decided it was time to dump the guilt.

"This isn't fair," Piper groaned, falling backward on her bed, upsetting her ecru Millesimo bedsheets. Hannah sprawled out beside her, throwing an arm over Piper's stomach.

"It's only three months," Maureen said, rising and floating from the room. Just before she walked out, she turned back, hand poised on the doorframe. "Word to the wise, Piper. The men in Westport . . . they're not what you're used to. They're unpolished and direct. Capable in a way the men of your acquaintance . . . aren't." Her gaze grew distant. "Their job is dangerous and they don't care how much it scares you, they go back to the sea every time. They'll always choose it over a woman. And they'd rather die doing what they love than be safe at home."

The uncharacteristic gravity in Maureen's tone glued Piper to the bed. "Why are you telling me this?"

Her mother lifted a delicate shoulder. "That danger in a man can be exciting to a woman. Until it's not anymore. Then it's shattering. Just keep that in mind if you feel . . . drawn in."

Maureen seemed like she wanted to say more, but she tapped the doorframe twice and went, leaving the two sisters staring after her.

Piper reached back for a pillow and handed it to Hannah. "Smother me with this. Please. It's the humane thing to do."

"I'm coming with you to Westport."

"No. What about your job? And Sergei?" Piper exhaled. "You have good things happening here, Hanns. I'll find a way to cope." She gave Hannah a mock serious face. "They must have sugar daddies in Westport, right?"

"I'm definitely going with you."