

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 5

Who the fuck. *Even.* Was this douche?

Piper forced her chin up and followed the beast to the back of the bar—the bar which was essentially the size of her closet back in Bel-Air—and up a narrow staircase, Hannah in tow. God, he was freakishly big. Just to make it up the stairs, he had to bend down slightly, so his beanie-covered head wouldn't hit the ceiling.

For a split second, she'd found the silver-green eyes under the band of that beanie kind of captivating. His black beard was decently groomed. Full and close cropped. Those shoulders would have been seriously valuable in the chicken-fight competition a couple of weeks ago, to say nothing of the rest of him. He was *large* all around, and not even his beat-up sweatshirt could conceal the beefy musculature of his chest, arms.

He'd been staring at her, so she'd done what she did best when a man seemed interested. She did a little stationary flossing.

It was as natural as breathing, the subtle hip shift. Finding the light with her cheekbones, drawing attention to her mouth and sucking his soul out with her eyes. It was a maneuver she normally performed with a high success rate. Instead, he'd only looked pissed off.

How was she supposed to know he was married? They'd walked into a crowd of two dozen people. Into her father's bar, which had apparently been commandeered by a group of townies. There'd been a lot to take in at once, or she might have noticed the gold band. He'd seemed to purposefully flash it at her, and as she was definitely not the type to go after someone who was taken, she'd shut down her come-hither glance immediately.

Piper rolled her shoulders back one by one and decided to try being

friendly to the beast, at least one more time. It was kind of admirable of him, wasn't it? To be aggressively faithful to his wife? If she ever got married someday, she hoped her husband would do the same. Once he realized she wasn't trying to catch his eye, maybe he'd chill. She and Hannah would be living in Westport for ninety days. Making enemies right off the bat would suck.

"Don't we need to get an apartment key from Tanner?" Piper called up the stairs.

"Nope," he responded shortly. "No locks." "Oh."

"The bar entrance has a lock," he said, kicking open the apartment door and disappearing inside. "But almost everyone downstairs has a copy."

Piper chewed her lip. “That doesn’t seem very secure . . .”

His derision was palpable. “Are you worried someone is going to break in and steal your lipstick purse?”

Hannah sucked in a sharp breath. “He went there.”

Tenaciously, Piper held on to her poise and joined him in the apartment. The light hadn’t been turned on yet, so she stepped aside to let Hannah in and waited, more grateful than ever that her sister was stubborn and refused to let her be banished to Westport alone. “I think we might have gotten off on the wrong foot,” Piper said to the man. Wherever he’d gone. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t,” came that mocking baritone from the dark. “It’s Brendan.” “Brendan—”

The light flipped on.

Piper gripped Hannah’s arm to keep from collapsing. Oh no.

No no no.

“Ohhhh fuuuuuck,” Hannah whispered beside her. There had to be some mistake.

She’d googled Westport and done some nosing around, if minimally. Everywhere else was simply *not* Los Angeles, so what did it matter? Her search told her Westport was quaint and eclectic, located right on the cusp of the Pacific Ocean. A surfing destination. A cute village. She’d imagined an ocean view in a rustic but livable apartment, with lots of photo ops of her roughing it, with the hashtag #PNWBarbie.

This was not that.

Everything was in *one room*. There was a paper-thin partition blocking off the bathroom, but if she went three steps to the left, she’d be in the miniature kitchen. Three to the right, and she’d ram into the bunk bed.

Bunk. Bed.

Had she ever even seen one of those in real life?

Brendan’s boots scuffed to a stop in front of the sisters. He crossed his arms over his wide chest and surveyed the apartment, his disposition suddenly jovial. “Second thoughts?”

Piper’s eyes tracked along the ceiling, and she lost count of the cobwebs. There had to be an inch of grime on every surface—and she hadn’t even seen the bathroom yet. The

one window looked directly at the brick wall of the building next door, so the musky odor couldn't even be aired out.

She started to tell Hannah they were leaving. They would take the pittance Daniel put in their debit accounts and use it to rent a car and drive back to Los Angeles. Depending on how much it cost to rent a car, that was. It could be a thousand dollars or fifty. She had no clue. Other people usually arranged these kinds of things for her.

Maybe if they called Daniel and told him his custodian had been cashing a check and doing none of the work, he would relent and allow her and Hannah to return home. How could he say no? This place was unlivable. At least until it was scoured clean—and who was going to do that for them?

Brendan's unwavering gaze remained on her, waiting for her to crack. She was going to crack, right?

Multiple voices drifted back to her, tightening the nape of her neck.

You play dress-up and spend your daddy's money. You don't have a reason to learn anything.

There's just nothing to you, okay?

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?

Brendan's smugness was suddenly cloying, like glue drying in her windpipe. How original. Another man who thought she was worthless? How positively breathtaking.

He didn't matter. His opinion was moot.

Everyone's low expectations of her were beginning to wear kind of thin, though.

One look at her and this prick had become as dismissive of her abilities as

her stepfather and her ex-boyfriend. What was it about her that courted such harsh judgment?

Piper wasn't sure, but after being dumped and banished to this murder hostel, she didn't really feel like taking another lump, especially when it wasn't warranted.

One night. She could do one night. Couldn't she?

"We're good, aren't we, Hanns?" Piper said brightly. "We never got to do the whole summer-camp thing. It'll be fun."

Piper glanced over at Hannah, relieved when her face warmed into a smile. “We’re good.” She sashayed across the space like she was surveying a million-dollar penthouse. “Very versatile. Cozy. Just needs a splash of paint.” “Mmmm,” Piper hummed in agreement, nodding and tapping a finger against her chin.

“Form *and* function. That abandoned pallet in the corner

will make a lovely display shelf for my shoe collection.”

When she risked a look at Brendan, it stressed her out to find his superior smile hadn’t slipped an iota. Which was when she heard the scratching. It reminded her of a newspaper being crumpled in a fist. “What is that?” she asked.

“Your other roommate.” Brendan tucked his tongue into his cheek, sauntered toward the exit. “One of several, I’m guessing.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a rodent scurried across the floor, darting one way, then the other, his itty-bitty nose twitching. What was it? A mouse? Weren’t they supposed to be cute? Piper scrambled onto the top bunk with a yip, Hannah hot on her heels. They met in the middle and clung to each other, Piper trying not to gag.

“Enjoy your night, ladies.” Brendan’s arrogant chuckle followed him out the door, his boots making the stairs groan on his way back down to the bar. “See you around. Maybe.”

“Wait!” Gingerly, Piper climbed down off the bunk and shuddered her way out onto the landing where Brendan had paused, keeping her voice low. “You wouldn’t happen to know a good, um . . . exterminator slash housekeeper in the area, would you?”

His derision was palpable. “No. We clean our own houses and catch our own vermin here.”

“Catchy.” She checked around her ankles for hungry critters. “Put that on the town welcome sign and watch real estate prices soar.”

“Real estate prices,” he echoed. “That kind of talk belongs in LA. Not here.”

Piper rolled her eyes. “What is it like having such an accurate sense of where things belong? And who belongs where?” Still scouting for critters, she said absently, “I can be in a room full of people that I *know* and still not feel like I belong.”

As she played that statement back to herself, Piper’s eyes snapped up to find Brendan frowning down at her. She started to smooth her blurted truth over with something light and diverting, but her exhaustion made it too much of an effort.

“Anyway, thanks for the warm welcome, Mayor Doom and Gloom.” She retreated a step back into the apartment. “You’ve sure put me in my place.”

He squinted an eye. “Hold on.” Weirdly, Piper held her breath, because it seemed like he was going to say something important. In fact, she kind of got the feeling he didn’t say much *unless* it was significant. But at the last second, he seemed to change his mind, dropping the thoughtful expression. “You’re not here to film a reality show or some shit, are you?”

She slammed the door in his face.