

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 8

Later that night, Piper stared down at the package of ground beef and tried to gather the courage to touch it with her bare hands. “I can’t believe meat looks like brains before it’s been cooked. Does everyone know about this?”

Hannah came up behind her sister, propping her chin on Piper’s shoulder. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

She thought of Brendan’s smug face. “Oh, yes I do.” She sighed, prodding the red blob with her index finger. “Even if we could find a way to stretch our budget to cover takeout for every night, you should have home-cooked meals.” Shifting side to side, she shook out her wrists, took in a bracing breath. “I’m the big sister, and I’m going to see that you’re properly nourished. Plus, you cleaned the toilet from hell. You’ve earned dinner and sainthood, as far as I’m concerned.”

She sensed her sister’s shiver. “I can’t argue with that. There were stains in there dating back to the Carter administration.”

After her work call, Hannah had tripped over to the hardware store for cleaning supplies. They’d found a broom, dustpan, and a few rags in a supply closet downstairs in the bar, but that was it. Meaning they’d been forced to spend a chunk of their budget on bleach, a mop, a bucket, paper towels, sponges, cleaning fluids, and steel wool to block the mouse holes. All eight of them. When they’d dragged the bunk bed away from the wall, the panel running along the bottom had resembled Swiss cheese.

They’d been cleaning since midafternoon, and the studio, while still irreversibly grungy, looked a whole lot better. And Piper could admit to a certain satisfaction that came along with making her own progress. Being part of a before and after that didn’t involve makeup or working with a

personal trainer.

Not that she wanted to get used to cleaning. But still.

It smelled like lemons now instead of rotting garbage, and the Bellinger sisters of Bel-Air were responsible. Nobody back home would believe it. Not to mention, her manicurist would shit a brick if she could see the chipped polish on Piper’s nails. As soon as they were settled, finding a full-service salon that did hair, nails, and waxing was top of the agenda.

But first. Bolognese.

Looking at the lined-up ingredients forced her to recall her impromptu morning shopping trip with Brendan. God, he’d been smug. Right up until she’d brought up his deceased

wife. He hadn't been smug then. More like distraught. How long had the woman been gone?

If Brendan was still wearing his wedding ring, the death had to be recent. If so, he had a thundercloud attitude for a good reason.

Despite her dislike of the burly, bearded fisherman, she couldn't stave off a rush of sympathy for him. Maybe they could learn to wave and smile at each other on the street for the next three months. If growing up in Los Angeles had taught her anything, it was how to make a frenemy. Next time they crossed paths, she also wouldn't mind telling him she'd mastered Bolognese and had moved on to soufflés and coq au vin.

Who knew? Maybe cooking was her undiscovered calling.

Piper turned the stove burner on, holding her breath as it clicked. Clicked some more.

Flames shot out of the black wrought iron, and she yelped, stumbling backward into her sister, who thankfully steadied her.

"Maybe you should tie your hair back?" Hannah suggested. "Fingers might be sacrificed tonight, but let's not lose those effortless beach waves."

"Oh my God, you're so right." Piper exhaled, whipping the black band off her wrist and securing a neat ponytail. "Good looking out, Hanns."

"No problem."

"Okay, I'm just going to do it," Piper said, holding her spread fingers above the beef. "He said to cook it on the pan until it turned brown. That doesn't sound too hard."

"Who said?"

"Oh." She made a dismissive sound. "Brendan was in the supermarket this morning being a one-man asshole parade." Closing her eyes, she picked up the meat and dropped the whole thing into the pan, a little alarmed by the

loud sizzle that followed. "He's a widower."

Hannah came around the side of the stove, propping an elbow on the wall that was much cleaner than it had been this morning. "How did you find that out?"

"We were arguing. I said I felt sorry for his wife." "D'oh."

Piper groaned while poking the meat with a rusty spatula. Was she, like, supposed to turn it over at some point? "I know. He kind of let me get away with sticking my foot in it,

though. Which was surprising. He could have really laid on the guilt.” Piper chewed on her lip a moment. “Do I come across really spoiled?”

Her sister reached up under her red ball cap to scratch her temple. “We’re both spoiled, Pipes, in the sense that we’ve been given everything we could want. But I don’t like that word, because it implies you’re . . . ruined. Like you have no good qualities. And you do.” She frowned. “Did he call you spoiled?”

“It has been heavily implied.” Hannah sniffed. “I don’t like him.”

“Me either. Especially his muscles. Yuck.”

“There were definitely muscles,” Hannah agreed reluctantly. Then she hugged her middle and sighed, letting Piper know exactly whom she was thinking about. “He can’t compete with Sergei, though. Nobody can.”

Realizing her hands were greasy from the meat, Piper reached over to the sink, which was right there, thanks to the kitchen being all of four feet wide, and rinsed her hands. She dried them on a cloth and set it down, then went back to prodding the meat. It was getting pretty brown, so she tossed in the onion slices, congratulating herself on being the next Giada. “You’ve always gone for the starving-artist boys,” she murmured to Hannah. “You like them tortured.”

“Won’t deny it.” Hannah slipped off her hat and ran her fingers through her medium-length hair. Hair just as nice as Piper’s, but worn down far less often. A crime, to Piper’s way of thinking, but she’d realized a long time ago that Hannah was going to be Hannah—and she didn’t want to change a single thing about her sister. “Sergei is different, though. He’s not just pretending to be edgy, like the other directors I’ve worked with. His art is so bittersweet and moving and stark. Like an early Dylan song.”

“Have you talked to him since we got here?”

“Only through the group Zoom meetings.” Hannah went to the narrow refrigerator and took out a Diet Coke, twisting off the cap. “He was so understanding about the trip. I get to keep my job . . . and he gets to keep my heart,” she said wistfully.

They traded a snort.

But the sound died in Piper’s throat when flames leapt up from the counter. The counter?

No, wait. The rag . . . the one she’d used to dry her hands. It was on fire.

“Shit! Hannah!”

“Oh my God! *What the fuck?*”

"I don't know!" Operating on pure reflex, Piper threw the spatula at the fire. Not surprisingly, that did nothing to subdue the flames. The flaring orange fingers were only growing larger, and the counter's laminate was basically nonexistent. Could the counters themselves catch on fire, too? They were nothing more than brittle wood. "Is that the rag we used to clean?"

"Maybe . . . yeah, I think so. It was soaked in that lemon stuff." In Piper's periphery, Hannah danced on the balls of her feet. "I'm going to run downstairs and look for a fire extinguisher."

"I don't think there's time," Piper screeched—and it galled her that in this moment of certain death, she could almost hear Brendan laughing at her funeral. "Okay, okay. Water. We need water?"

"No, I think water makes it worse," Hannah returned anxiously.

The meat was now engulfed in flames, just like her short-lived cooking career. "Well, Jesus. I don't know what to do!" She spied a pair of tongs on the edge of the sink, grabbed them, hesitated a split second before pinching a corner of the flaming rag and dragging the whole burning mess into the pan, on top of the meat.

"What are you doing?" Hannah screamed.

"I don't know! We've established that! I'm just going to get it outside of this building before we burn the place down."

And then Piper was running down the stairs with a pan. A pan that held an inferno of meat and Pine-Sol-soaked cotton. She could hear Hannah sprinting down the stairs behind her but didn't catch a word of what her sister said, because she was one hundred percent focused on getting out of the building.

On her way through the bar, she found herself thinking of Mick Forrester's words from earlier that day. *Boy, your dad had a great laugh. Sometimes I*

swear I still hear it shaking the rafters of this place. The remembrance slowed her step momentarily, had her glancing up at the ceiling, before she kicked open the front door and ran out onto the busy Westport street with a flaming frying pan, shouting for help.