

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 10

Piper was stuck in a nightmare in which giant mice with twitchy little noses chased her through a maze while she wielded a flaming frying pan. So when she heard the knock on the door the following morning, her waking thought was *The mouse king has come for me*. She pinwheeled into a sitting position and soundly smacked her head on the top bunk.

“Ow,” she complained, pushing her eye mask up to her forehead and testing the collision spot with a finger. Already sore.

A yawn came from above. “Did you hit your head again?”

“Yes,” she grumbled, trying to piece together why she’d woken up in the first place. It wasn’t like much sunlight *could* filter in through their window and the building next door. Not when a scant inch separated them and the neighboring wall. The apartment was all but black. It couldn’t even be sunrise yet.

A fist rapped twice on the door, and she screamed, her hand flying to the center of her chest. “Mouse king,” she gasped.

Hannah giggled. “What?”

“Nothing.” Piper shook off the mental cobwebs and eyed the door warily. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Brendan.”

“Oh.” She glanced up and knew she was trading a frown with Hannah, even though they couldn’t see each other. What did the grumpy boat captain need from her that couldn’t wait until normal-people hours? Every time she thought they’d seen the last of each other, he seemed to be right there, front and center. Confusing her.

She hadn’t been lying about not knowing how to act in his presence. It was

usually easy to charm, flirt, flatter, and wrap men around her pinky. Until they got bored and moved on, which they seemed to do faster and faster these days. But that was beside the point. Brendan had robbed her deck of the pretty-girl trump card, and she couldn’t get it back. He’d had too many peeks behind the curtain now. The first time they’d met, she’d been a drowned rat and offended his beloved Westport. Meeting two, she’d blasphemed his dead wife. Three, she’d almost burned this relic of a building down . . .

Although eating with him had been kind of . . . nice. Maybe that wasn’t the right word.

*Different.* Definitely different. She'd engaged in conversation with a man without constantly trying to present her best angle and laugh in just the right way. He'd *seemed* interested in what she had to say. Could he have been?

Obviously, he hadn't been instantly enraptured with her appearance. Her practiced come-hither glances only made him grumpier. So maybe he wanted to be friends! Like, based on her personality. Wouldn't that be something?

"Huh," she murmured through a yawn. "Friends."

Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, she slipped her feet into her black velvet Dolce & Gabbana slippers and padded to the door. Before she opened it, she gave in to vanity and scrubbed away the sleep crusties in the corners of her eyes. She opened the door and craned her neck in order to look up into the face of the surly boat captain.

Piper started to say good morning, but Brendan cleared his throat hard and did a quarter turn, staring at the doorjamb. "I'll wait until you're dressed."

"Sorry . . . ?" Nose wrinkled, she looked down at her tank top and panties. "Oh."

"Here," Hannah called sleepily, tossing Piper a pillow.

"Thanks." She caught it, held it in front of herself like a puffy shield.

Hold on. Was this man she'd judged as little more than a bully . . . blushing?

"Oh, come on, Brendan," she chuckled. "There's a lot worse on my Instagram. Anyone's Instagram, really."

"Not mine," Hannah said, voice muffled. A second later, she was snoring softly.

For the first time, Piper noticed the tool kit at Brendan's feet. "What's all that for?"

Finally, Brendan allowed his attention to drift back to her, and a muscle wormed in his jaw. The pillow covered Piper from neck to upper thigh, but

the curve of her panty-clad backside was still visible. Brendan's eyes traveled over that swell now, continuing up the line of her back, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "I changed the lock on the door downstairs," he said hoarsely, his gaze ticking to hers. "Came to change this one, too. It'll only take a few minutes."

"Oh." Piper straightened. "Why?"

"We leave this morning for three nights. Last fishing trip before crab season. I just . . ." He crouched down and started rooting through his box, metal clanging so she could barely hear him when he said, "Wanted to make sure this place was secure."

Piper's fingers tightened on the pillow. "That was really nice of you." "Well." Tools in hand, he straightened once again to his full height. "I saw

you hadn't done it. Even though you've had two days."

She shook her head. "You had to go and ruin the nice gesture, didn't you?" Brendan grunted and set to work, apparently having decided to ignore her. Fine. Just to spite him, she let the pillow drop and went to make coffee. On her sister's trip to the record store with Fox, Hannah had found a mom-and-pop electronics shop, purchasing the kind of one-cup brewer you'd normally find in a hotel room. They'd been selling it for *ten dollars*. Who sold anything for ten dollars? They'd rejoiced over Hannah's bargain hunting the way Piper used to celebrate finding a four-thousand-dollar Balmain dress at a

sample sale.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Piper asked Brendan. "No, thanks. Already had one."

"Let me guess." After adding a mug of water, she lowered the lid on the maker and switched it on. "You never have more than a single cup."

Grunt. "Two on Sundays." His brows angled down and together. "What's that red mark on your head?"

"Oh." Her fingers lifted to prod the sore patch. "I'm not used to sleeping with another bed three feet above mine. I keep whacking my head on the top bunk."

He made a sound. Kept frowning.

His visible grumpiness made the corner of Piper's mouth edge up. "What are you going fishing for this time?"

"Halibut. Rockfish."

She rolled her eyes at his abrupt answer, leaned back against the chipped kitchen counter. "Well, Hannah and I talked it over and we're running with

your suggestion." She picked up her finished coffee, stirring it with her finger and sipping. "We want to enjoy our time in Westport. Tell me where to go. What to do."

Brendan took another minute to finish up the lock. He tested it out and replaced his tools in the box before approaching her, digging something out of his back pocket. She caught a tingle on the soft inner flesh of her thighs and knew he was checking her out, but she pretended not to notice. Mostly because she didn't know how to feel about it. That familiar burn of a man's regard wasn't giving her the obligatory thrum of success. Brendan's attention made her kind of . . . fidgety. He'd have to be dead not to look. But

actual interest was something else. She wasn't even sure what she would do if Brendan showed more than a passing notice of her hotness.

And he was still wearing his wedding ring. Meaning, he was still hung up on his deceased wife.

So she and Brendan would be friends. Definitely *only* friends.

Brendan cleared his throat. "You're a five-minute walk to the lighthouse. And it's still warm enough for the beach. There's a small winery in town, too. My men are always complaining about having to go there on date nights. They have something called a selfie spot. So you should love it."

"That tracks."

"I also brought you some takeout menus," he said in a low voice, slapping them down on the counter, and with him standing so close, it was impossible not to register their major size difference. Or catch a whiff of his saltwater- and-no-nonsense deodorant.

*Friends*, she reminded herself.

A grieving widower was not fling material.

Swallowing, Piper looked down at the menus. He'd brought three of them. She pursed her lips. "I guess it's too early to be insulted."

"This isn't me telling you not to cook. These are fallbacks." He opened the first folded menu, for a Chinese restaurant. "In each of them, I went ahead and circled what I order every time, so you'd know the best dish."

She hip-bumped him, although thanks to him being a foot taller, her hip landed somewhere near the top of his thigh. "You mean, the only one you've ever tried?"

A smile threatened to appear on his face. "They're one and the same." "Bah."

"You have your phone handy?" Brendan asked.

Nodding, she turned on a heel, took two steps, and picked up the discarded pillow, holding it over her butt to end his suffering—and to let him know she'd gotten the friends-only message. She collected her cell from its place of honor beneath her pillow, then pivoted, transferring the pillow once again to block her front. When she turned around, Brendan was watching her curiously, but didn't comment on her sudden modesty.

"If you and your sister have any problems while I'm gone, call Mick." He dipped his chin. "That's my . . . my father-in-law."

“We met him yesterday,” Piper said, smiling through the odd tension at the mention of Brendan having a father-in-law. “He’s a sweetie.”

Brendan seemed momentarily caught off guard. “Ah. Right. Well, he’s not too far from here. Let me give you his contact info in case you need something.”

“Yes, Captain.” She clicked her bare heels together. “And after that, I’ll swab the deck.”

He snorted. “She uses a mop once . . .”

Piper beamed. “Oh, you noticed our spruce job, did you?”

“Yeah. Not bad,” he commented, glancing around the apartment. “Ready?”

Piper humored him by programming Mick’s number into her phone as he rattled it off. “Thanks—”

“Take mine, too,” he said abruptly, suddenly fascinated by one of the menus. “I won’t have reception on the water, but . . .”

“Take it in case I need cooking advice when you get back?” He made an affirmative sound in his throat.

Piper pressed her lips together to hide a smile. She’d seen Brendan with his friend Fox. How they needled each other like brothers as a means of communication. It really shouldn’t come as a surprise that making new friends didn’t come naturally to him. “All right. Give me those digits, Captain.”

He seemed relieved by her encouragement, reciting the number as she punched it into her phone. When she hit dial on his number, his head came up as if trying to figure out where the sound was coming from.

“That’s your phone,” she said, and laughed. “I’m calling you so you’ll have my number, too.”

“Oh.” He nodded, the corner of his mouth tugging a little. “Right.”

She cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered, “Should I be expecting nudes?”

“Jesus Christ, Piper,” he grumped, straightening the takeout menus and signaling an end to the discussion. But he hesitated a second before striding for the door. “Now that I’m in your phone, does this mean next time you break into a rooftop pool, I’ll be on the mass invite?”

Brendan winked to let her know he was joking. But she couldn't help grinning at the mental image of this earthy giant of a man walking through a sea of polished LA social climbers. "Oh yeah. You're in."

"Great."

After one more almost imperceptible sweep of her legs, Brendan coughed into his fist and turned again. He picked up his toolbox and started down the stairs. Just like that. His work was done and formalities were stupid. Piper followed, looking down at him from the top of the stairs. "Are we friends, Brendan?"

"No," he called back, without missing a beat.

Her mouth hung open, a laugh huffing out of her as she closed the door. Hannah sat up and asked, "What the hell is going on there?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "I have no freaking idea."