

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 15 -

Brendan adjusted the silverware on his dining room table, trying to remember the last time he'd had reason to use more than one set. If Fox or some of the crew came over, they ate with their hands or plastic forks. Piper would be used to better, but that couldn't be helped. Instead of dipping his toe back into dating after a seven-year hiatus from all things female, he'd plunged right into the deep end with a woman who might be impossible to impress.

Sure, he was intimidated by the level of luxury Piper was used to, but he couldn't let making an effort scare him.

Trying was the least he could do, because . . . Piper Bellinger got to him. He'd soaked up every second watching her work in No Name all week—

and he'd come to find the high-maintenance-socialite aspect of her personality . . . well, adorable. She owned it. Wasn't apologetic about hating manual labor or her love of overpriced shoes and selfies. And fuck, every time she cringed about the dirt under her fingernails, he wanted to lay her on a silk pillow and do all the work for her, so she wouldn't have to. *He* wanted to do the spoiling. Badly.

It was obvious that she hated construction, yet she showed up every day with a brave smile and got it done. Furthermore, she made time in the afternoons to bring Hannah to see Opal, and he witnessed her growing comfort, day in and day out, with the fact that she had a grandparent. Noticed the way she'd begun weaving Opal into conversations without sounding stilted or awkward. She was trying new things and succeeding.

If she could do it, so could he.

Brendan opened the fridge and checked the champagne again, hoping the

high price meant it was halfway decent. He'd tasted her unbelievable mouth yesterday evening, and his pride demanded only the best on her tongue. He'd have to stretch beyond his normal capabilities for this woman. She wasn't going to be happy with beer and burgers and a ball game at Blow the Man Down. Not always. She'd make him work to keep her content, and he *wanted* that challenge.

It hadn't been like this the first and only other time he'd dated a woman. There'd been no urgency or anticipation or raw hunger that never let up. There had been acceptance, understanding. All of it quiet.

But the thump of his heart as he climbed into his truck was not quiet.

No Name was within walking distance, but Piper would probably be wearing some ridiculous shoes, so he'd drive her to and from his house. Leaving home at this hour

was not part of his usual routine, and everyone who saw his truck raised their eyebrows, waving hesitantly. They knew he'd be leaving tomorrow morning for crab season and probably wondered why he wasn't heading to bed early with two weeks of treacherous sea in his future.

There was a woman to see to first. That was why.

Brendan parked at the curb outside of No Name. He tried the front entrance and found it unlocked, so he went in and climbed the stairs to her door. It wasn't the first time he'd seen her dressed to kill a man, so he shouldn't have been surprised when she answered with a flirty smile and smelling exotic, like smoke. In a dress so short, he'd see everything if he went down two steps.

He almost swallowed his fucking tongue. "Hey there, sailor."

"Piper." Brendan exhaled hard, doing everything he could to prevent his instant hard-on from growing unmanageable. Jesus, the date hadn't even started yet, and he needed to adjust himself. "You know we're just going to my house, right?"

"Mmm-hmm." She pouted at him. "You don't like my dress?"

And in that moment, Brendan saw right through her. Saw what she was doing. Making tonight about sex. Trying to keep things casual. Categorizing him as a friend with benefits. With a less determined man, she would have succeeded, too. Easily. She was paradise on legs, and probably a lot of weak-willed bastards wouldn't be able to stop themselves from taking *anything* she was willing to give.

But he remembered their kiss. Would likely remember it for the rest of his

life. She'd hidden nothing while their mouths were touching. She'd been scared, surprised, turned on, and scared again. He could relate. And while he had no idea if he could offer this woman enough to make her happy, he wasn't letting Piper classify him as a casual hookup. Because what she made him feel wasn't casual. Not one bit.

"You know I love it, Piper. You look beautiful."

Her cheeks flushed at the compliment. "And you're not wearing your beanie." She reached out and ran her fingers through his hair, her nails lightly grazing his scalp. "I can't believe you've been hiding all of this from me."

Christ. He was in danger of swallowing his tongue again.

It wasn't just that he hadn't been touched by a woman in seven years. It was that *this* woman was the one doing the touching. "There's a chill in the air. Do you have a jacket or do you want to borrow mine?"

Hannah appeared behind her sister in the doorway, headphones looped around her neck. She dropped a black sweater over Piper's shoulders and sniffed. "Have her home at a reasonable hour, please."

Brendan shook his head at the younger one and offered his hand to Piper. "Not much choice. We leave for Alaska in the morning."

Hannah hummed for a second, singing a song under her breath about the bottom of the deep blue sea, but he didn't recognize it. Seemingly caught up in the words, Hannah patted her sister on the shoulder and closed the door.

Sliding her hand into Brendan's, Piper made an amused sound. "She's probably already making you a sailing-themed playlist for the trip. She can't help herself."

"If we're not setting traps or pulling them up, we're trying to get a few hours of sleep. Not a lot of time for listening to music." He cleared his throat. "I won't tell her that, though."

He opened the front door, and Piper smiled at him as she passed through. There were a few customers waiting outside the Red Buoy across the street. When they saw him helping Piper into his truck—and sure enough, she was wearing those ice-pick heels again—they elbowed each other, one of them even running inside to relay the gossip. He'd been prepared for a reaction. Didn't mind it at all, especially with him going out of town for two weeks. Right or wrong, it would ease his mind if the town knew she was spoken for.

Even if Piper wasn't aware of it yet.

They drove the three minutes to Brendan's house, and he pulled into the driveway, coming around the front bumper to help her out. He didn't have a

hope in hell of keeping his eyes off her legs when she turned all ladylike in the seat, using his shoulders for balance as she descended from the passenger side of his truck.

"Thank you," she whispered, running a finger down the center of his chest. "Such a gentleman."

"That's right." He tipped her chin up. "That's exactly what I'm going to be, Piper."

Her bravado slipped a little. "I guess we'll see about that." "I guess we will."

She took her chin out of his hand and strutted up the walkway, which was just playing dirty. The clingy green material of her dress stretched and shifted over her ass, immediately making him question whether being a gentleman was overrated.

Yeah, he wanted to take her to bed more than he could remember wanting anything. Every muscle in his body was strung tight at the sight of her gorgeous legs in the

darkness outside his front door. But he couldn't shake the intuition that going too fast with Piper would be a mistake. Maybe she even wanted him to give in, just so she could put him in a box labeled *Fling*.

Worst part of it was . . . maybe he *was* only fling material for her. Tonight, she looked more suited to gliding around a Hollywood mansion than eating a homemade meal at his bachelor pad. He might be delusional trying to shoot his shot. If she was determined to go back to LA, there was no way he could stop her. But something inside him, some intuition, wouldn't allow him to give Piper anything but his best effort.

Brendan unlocked the door, flipped on the lights, and turned to watch her reaction. She'd be able to see most of it at first glance. The downstairs was an open concept, with the living room on the right, kitchen and dining room on the left. It wasn't full of knickknacks or cluttered with pictures. Everything was simple, modern, but what furniture he did have was handmade locally with driftwood—and he liked that. Liked that his home was a representation of what the people of his town could do with wood from the ocean.

“Oh.” She let out a rush of breath, a dimple popping up in her cheek. “Brendan . . . you set the table already.”

“Yeah.” Remembering his manners, he went to the kitchen and took the bottle of champagne out of the fridge. She came to stand by the dining table, seeming a little dumbfounded as she watched him pop the cork and pour. “You'll have to tell me if this is any good. They only had two kinds at the

liquor store, and the other one came in a can.”

She laughed, set her purse down, and removed the sweater in a slow, sensual movement that nearly caused his composure to falter. “Why don't you have some with me?”

“I drink beer. No champagne.”

Piper edged a hip up onto the table, and he almost overflowed the glass. “I bet I'll convince you to have some by the end of the night.”

Jesus, she probably could convince him to do a lot of things if she put her mind to it, but he reckoned he should keep that to himself. He handed her the champagne flute he'd purchased that very afternoon, watched her take a sip, and the memory of their kiss rolled through him hard.

“It's fantastic,” she said with a sigh.

Relief settled in next to need. He ignored the latter. For now. “Just going to put the fish in the oven, then I want to show you something.”

“Okay.”

Brendan opened the fridge and took out the foil-covered baking dish. He'd already prepared the sole, drizzled it with lemon juice, salt, and pepper. In Westport, you learned young how to make a fish dinner, even if you never honed another skill in the kitchen. It was necessary, and he thanked God for that knowledge now. As he turned on the oven and slid in the dish, he decided his kitchen would forever look boring without Piper standing in it. She was something out of another world, posed to seduce with her killer body angled just right, elbow on hip, wrist lazily swirling her champagne.

“Come on.” Before he could give in to temptation and lift her onto the table, forget about dinner altogether, he snagged her free hand, guiding her through the living room toward the back of the house. He slapped on the light leading to his back patio and opened the door, gesturing for her to precede him. “Thought I'd show you what's possible with the outdoor space at the bar, if you wanted to add some greenery.” It occurred to him then that maybe gardening wasn't exactly a sexy trait for a man to have. “I just needed something to do on my days off—”

Her gasp cut him off. “Wow. Oh my God, Brendan. It's magical out here.” She walked through the roughly cut stone pathway, somehow not tripping in her heels. The ferns, which he really needed to get around to trimming, grazed her hips as she passed. The trickling sound from the stone water feature seemed to be calling her, and she stopped in front of it, trailing a finger along the surface. There was a single wrought-iron chair angled in the

corner where he sat sometimes with a beer after a long trip, trying to get his equilibrium back. “I wouldn't have pegged you for a gardener, but now I can see it. You love your roots.” She glanced back at him over her shoulder. “You've got everything carved out just the way you like it.”

*Do I?*

He would have thought so until recently.

His going through the motions, doing the same thing over and over again, had become less . . . satisfying. No denying it.

“I do love this place,” he said slowly. “Westport.”

“You'd never think of leaving.” A statement, not a question.

“No,” he answered anyway, resisting the urge to qualify that definite *no* somehow.

She leaned down to smell one of the blooms on his purple aster bush. “What about a vacation? Do you ever take them?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. “When I was a kid, my parents used to bring me camping on Whidbey Island. They moved down to Eugene, Oregon, a while back to be closer to my mother’s family.”

“No leisure trips since childhood? Nothing at all?”

Brendan shook his head, chuckling when Piper gave him a scandalized look. “People take trips to see the ocean. I don’t need to go anywhere for that. She’s right here in my backyard.”

Piper came closer, amusement dancing in her eyes. “My mother warned me all about you king crab fishermen and your love affairs with the sea. I thought she was being dramatic, but you really can’t resist the pull of the water, can you?” She searched his face. “You’re in a serious relationship.”

Something shifted in his stomach. “What do you mean, she warned you?”

Her shoulder lifted and dropped. “She loves her husband, Daniel. But . . . I think there was some unprocessed grief talking. Because of what happened to Henry.” She stared off into the distance, as if trying to recall the conversation. “She told me and Hannah that fishermen always choose the sea. They go back over and over again, even if it scares their loved ones. Based on that, I’m guessing she wanted Henry to quit and . . . you know the rest.”

This wasn’t a conversation he’d planned on. Would he ever give up the more dangerous aspects of his job? No. No, battling the tides, the current, the waves was his life’s work. There was salt water running through his veins. Making it clear that he would always choose the ocean, no matter what, put him at a deficit with Piper already—and they hadn’t even eaten yet.

But when she turned her face up to the moonlight, and he saw only honest curiosity there, he felt compelled to make her understand.

“Every year, I get a couple of greenhorns on the boat. First-time crabbers. Most of them are young kids trying to make some quick cash, and they never make it longer than the first season. But once in a while, there’s one . . . I can see it from the wheelhouse. The bond he’s forming with the sea. And I know he’ll never get away from her.”

She smiled. “Like you.”

A voice whispered in the back of his head, *You’re screwing yourself*. He was an honest man, though, often to a fault. “Yeah. Like me.” He searched her hairline. “That bruise on your head is finally gone.”

She reached up and rubbed the spot. "It is. Did I ever thank you properly for sending Abe to pad the upper bunk?"

"No thanks necessary."

Piper eliminated the remaining distance between them, stopping just shy of her tits touching his chest. She was soft, graceful, feminine. So much smaller than him. With her this close, he felt like a tamed giant, holding his breath and waiting, waiting to see what the beautiful girl would do next. "You could have just kissed it and made it all better."

His exhale came out hard, thanks to all the blood in his body rushing south to his cock. "You told me your flirt was broken with me. It doesn't seem like that's the case tonight."

Her lips curved. "Maybe because I came dressed in body armor."

Brendan tilted his head and let his gaze sweep across her bare shoulders, legs, and back to her low, tight neckline. "That armor couldn't protect you from anything."

Something flickered in her eyes. "Couldn't it?"

She sailed into the house, leaving her seductive scent in her wake.

Brendan had always thought battling the ocean would forever be his biggest challenge. But that was before he met Piper. Maybe he didn't know the how or the what of this thing between them yet, but his gut never lied. He'd never lost a battle with the water when listening to his instincts, and he hoped like hell those same instincts wouldn't fail him now.