

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 16 -

Piper watched Brendan take a seat on the opposite side of the table and frowned.

The boat captain didn't appear to be easily seduced. When she'd picked this dress out, she hadn't even expected them to make it through the front door, but here they were, sitting in his charmingly masculine dining room, preparing to eat food *he made himself*.

And he'd bought her champagne.

Men had bought her jewelry, taken her to nice restaurants—one eager beaver had even bought her a Rolls for her twenty-second birthday. She'd made no bones about liking nice things. But none of those gifts had ever made her feel as special as this homemade meal.

She didn't want to feel special around Brendan, though. Did she?

Since arriving in Westport, she'd had more frank conversations with Brendan than anyone in her life, save Hannah. She wanted to know more about him, to reveal more of herself in return, and *that* was intensely scary.

Because what could come of this?

She was only in Westport for three months, almost two weeks down already. Tomorrow *he'd* leave for two weeks. Then back in and out to sea, three days at a time. This had all the makings of a temporary hookup. But his refusal to put a label on this thing between them left the door of possibilities swinging wide open.

She actually didn't even know how to *be* more than a temporary hookup.

That impossible-to-ignore white tan line around his ring finger and the fact that she was his first date since taking it off? It was overwhelming for someone whose longest relationship had only been three weeks and had

ended with her confidence shot full of holes. Whatever he expected to happen between them . . . she couldn't deliver on that.

And maybe that was the real problem.

The burly sea captain waited in silence for her to take the first bite, his elbows on the table, totally unpracticed at being on a date. A muscle ticced in his cheek, telling her Brendan was nervous about her reaction to his cooking. But every thought in her head must have been showing on her face, because he raised an eyebrow at her. She rolled the tension out of her shoulders and dug her fork into the flaky white fish, adding a potato, too, and pushing it between her lips. Chewing. "Oh. Wow, this is great."

“Yeah?”

“Totally.” She took another bite, and he finally started eating his own meal. “Do you cook for yourself a lot?”

“Yes.” He ate the way he did everything else. No pussyfooting around. Insert fork, put food in mouth, repeat. No pausing. “Except for Monday nights.”

“Oh, the Red Buoy is a scheduled weekly event. I should have known.” She laughed. “I make fun of you for your routines, but they’re probably what make you a good captain.”

He made a sound. “Haven’t been in my routines this week, have I?”

“No.” She considered him. Even warned herself against delving too deeply into why he’d changed things up. But her curiosity got the best of her. “Why is that? I mean, what made you decide to”—*take off your ring?*—“rearrange your schedule?”

Brendan seemed to choose his words. “I’ll never be impulsive. Consistency equals safety on the water, and I got comfortable abiding by rules at all times. It makes me worthy to have lives in my hands, you know? Or that was my reasoning in the beginning, and it just stuck. For a long time. But recently, here on land . . . someone kept throwing wrenches in my routines, and the world didn’t end.” He studied her, as if to judge her reaction and whether or not to continue. “It was kind of like I’d been waiting for a shoe to drop. Then it dropped, and instead of chaos, I just, uh . . .” A beat passed. “Saw the potential for a new course.”

Piper swallowed hard. “The shoe dropped, but it was a peep-toe stiletto?” “Something like that.”

“I *can* harness my chaos for good. I might need you as a character witness at a future trial.” Her words didn’t quite convey the levity she was hoping for,

mostly because she sounded breathless over his admission. Piper Bellinger had had a positive effect on someone. He’d admitted it out loud. “But it’s not just me that forced the change,” she said, and laughed, desperate to dull the throb in her chest. “There had to be other factors.”

Brendan started to say something and stopped.

Since meeting this man, she’d suspected he never said anything without a reason. If he was holding back, she could only imagine how important it must be. She found herself setting down her fork, wanting to give him her undivided attention. “What is it?”

He cleared his throat. “I’m purchasing a second boat for next season. It’s being built now. I’m going to check on the progress while I’m in Dutch Harbor—that’s the port in Alaska where we’ll wait a week after setting our traps.”

"That's exciting." Her brow wrinkled. "How are you going to captain two ships?"

"I'm not. I'm going to put Fox in the wheelhouse of the *Della Ray*." Piper smiled into a sip of champagne. "Does he know yet?"

"No. I can't give him time to talk himself out of it." "Would he? He seems . . . confident."

"That's a nice way of saying he's a cocky asshole. And he is. But he's smarter than he thinks." Brendan paused, looking down with a knitted brow. "Maybe handing over the *Della Ray* is a good way to distance myself from the past."

Piper stayed very still. "Why do you want to distance yourself?"

"Apart from it being time? I think . . . a part of me feels obligated to remain in the past as long as I'm captaining Mick's boat." He scrubbed a hand down his face, laughing without humor. "I can't believe I'm saying it out loud when normally I'd just bury it. Maybe I *should* bury it."

"Don't." Her mouth was dry over this man opening up to her. Looking at her across the table with rare male vulnerability, as if he truly valued her response. "You don't have to feel guilty about wanting some space after seven years, Brendan," she said quietly.

"That's a lot more than most people would give. The fact that you feel guilty at all just proves you're a quality human. Even if you wear a beanie at the dinner table."

The green of his eyes warmed. "Thank you. For not judging me."

Sensing his need to move on from the subject, Piper looked around the dining room.

"Who am I to judge anyone? Especially someone who has a

cool house his parents don't own. Two boats and a life plan. It's intimidating, actually."

He frowned. "You're intimidated by *me*?"

"Not so much you. More like your work ethic. I don't even know if I'm pronouncing that right. That's how *not* often I've said 'work ethic' out loud." She felt the need to even the playing field, to reward his honesty with some of her own. His confessions made it easy to confess her own sins. "My friend Kirby and I started a lipstick line called Pucker Up, maybe three years back. Once the launch party was over and we realized how much work we had to do, we gave away our inventory to friends and went to Saint-Tropez. Because we were tired."

"Maybe it wasn't the right career path."

"Yeah, well." Her lips twitched. "Professional napper was my fallback, and I nailed that. That's partially why I'm here. But *also* because my friend Kirby ratted me out to the cops."

"She didn't," he said, his expression darkening.

"She did! Fingering me as the ringleader from the shallow end of the pool. Appropriately." Piper waved a hand around. "It's fine, though. We're still friends. I just can't trust her or tell her anything important."

He seemed to be concentrating hard on what she was saying. "Do you have a lot of friends like that?"

"Yes." She drew a circle on the side of the champagne flute. "It's more for image than anything, I guess. Influence. Being seen. But it's weird, you know. I've only been out of Los Angeles for two weeks, and it's like I was never there. None of my friends have texted or messaged me. They're on to bigger and better things." She shook her head. "Meanwhile people still leave flowers at Henry's memorial after twenty-four years. So . . . how real or substantial is an image if everything it earns someone can all go away in two weeks?"

"You haven't gone away, though. You're sitting right there."

"I am. I'm here. At this table. In Westport." She swallowed. "Trying to figure out what to do when no one is watching. And wondering if maybe that's the stuff that actually matters." Her laugh came out a little unsteady. "That probably sounds amateurish to someone who would build a freaking *boat* and not tell a soul about it."

"No, it doesn't." He waited until she met his eyes. "It sounds like you've been uprooted and dropped somewhere unfamiliar. Do you think I'd cope as

well if I was shipped off someplace where I knew no one, had no trade?" She gasped. "How would you get your fish and chips on Monday nights?" A corner of his lips jumped. "You're doing just fine, honey."

It was the gruff *honey* that did it. Her legs snuck together under the table and squeezed, her toes flexing in her shoes. She wanted Brendan's hands on her. All over. But she was also scared of going to him, because once again, the sexy smoke screen she'd been hiding behind had dissipated, leaving only her. Brendan was looking at her with a combination of heat and tenderness, and she needed to turn up the dial on the former.

This was all going too far, too fast, and she was starting to like him too much.

She might be having an existential crisis, but she still wanted Los Angeles back and all the glittery trappings that came with it. Didn't she? Sure, after weeks with no contact from her friends, the call of LA had quieted slightly. She'd actually started to enjoy not checking her notifications every ten seconds. But fame waxing and waning was part of the deal, right? That rush of recognition and adoration she'd stopped craving of late would come back. It always did. There was no other option but going home, and if

anything, her time in Westport would make her appreciate her privilege this time around. Wasn't that the lesson she'd been sent to learn?

Yes.

Bottom line, she'd spent twenty-eight years building this image and couldn't just start over from scratch.

Could she have Brendan tonight and still keep her eye on that reality? Of course she could.

Ignoring the notch in her throat, Piper pushed back from the table and stood, champagne in hand. She rounded the piece of furniture slowly, gratified when his throat worked in a heavy swallow. His eyes and chin were stubborn, though.

Well, if he was going to be obstinate, she'd have to play to win.

Piper slipped between Brendan and the table, scooting it back a little so she could stand comfortably in the V of his thighs. His eyes were all but black with hunger, lighting on her cleavage, her thighs and hips, her mouth. As soon as she raked the fingers of her free hand into his hair, that big chest started to heave, his eyelids drifting shut. "Piper," he said hoarsely. "This isn't why I invited you to dinner."

She took her hand back, set down the champagne being held in the other,

and tucked her fingers under the straps of her dress. "Maybe it's not the only reason," she murmured, peeling down the green velvet bodice, leaving her breasts bare mere inches from his mouth. "But it's one of them, isn't it?"

Brendan opened his eyes, and a shudder racked him, his hands flying up to grip her hips. "Oh Jesus fucking Christ, they're so pretty, baby." He leaned in, pressing his open mouth to the smooth path of skin between her breasts, breathing heavily, using his hold on her hips to pull her closer, like he couldn't help it. "This is where you put that perfume, isn't it? Right here between your sexy little tits."

The desperation in his hands, the chafe of velvet on flesh, turned her nipples to points. "I put it there for you tonight," she whispered into his hair. "All for you."

He moaned, turned his head slightly so he could breathe against her nipple. "I know what you're doing. You want to make this about fucking."

Her pulse skittered in her ears. "Stop overthinking it and touch me." Still, he hesitated, that jaw about to shatter.

Piper reached back and picked up the champagne flute, taking a slow sip. She swallowed most of the bubbly liquid, but left a trace of it on her tongue, bringing it to

Brendan's lips. Licking the champagne into his mouth. "Told you I'd get you to try it," she murmured, teasing the tip of his tongue with her own. "Want more?"

That big body swayed closer, lines of strain appearing around his mouth. "Please . . ."

"You don't have to beg," Piper said, bringing the champagne flute to her breasts, tipping the glass and letting the champagne trickle out over one nipple, then the next, and Brendan started to pant. "Not for something we both want. Touch me, Brendan. Taste me. Please?"

"Christ, I have to." He traced his mouth to her left nipple, pressed his bared teeth against it, before rubbing his tongue against the stiff bud, yanking her hips forward, the move arching her back so she had to use his hair for balance, taking two big handfuls. Her mouth was in an O, watching him savor her, manhandle her body. No games. Just need.

His mouth raced down to her belly button, licking that hollow where some of the dripping champagne had ended up, before rising again to the opposite breast, suckling harder now. Devouring. She'd intended to be in control here, but his mouth was delivering the most incredible texture and suction, and her ass bumped back against the table clumsily, a sob ripping from her throat.

"Brendan," she gasped. "*Brendan.*"

"I know, baby. Can I put my hands up your dress?" he rasped, his palms already kneading the backs of her thighs, his beard stroking back and forth over her distended nipple, and sending a rush of wet to the apex of her thighs. "*Piper.*"

"What?" she breathed, head spinning. "Whatever you said. Yes. Yes."

Those busy hands moved faster than lightning, clutching her ass so roughly, the air evacuated her lungs. He drew her forward so he could pant directly against her belly, his hands never ceasing to massage, squeeze, and lift the flesh of her bottom, his calloused fingers tangling in her thong in his haste to touch, to mold.

"Y-you're an ass man, I guess," she stammered.

He shook his head. "No, Piper. I'm a *this*-ass man." "Oh," she simpered.

That was oddly romantic. And possessive. And she liked both of those qualities too much. She needed to regain control somehow, because she'd severely miscalculated how quickly Brendan could pull her under. This attraction was even more dangerous than she'd originally thought. "Brendan," she managed, taking hold of his broad shoulders and using every ounce of her strength to push him back into his chair. "W-wait, I . . ."

"I'm sorry," he said between breaths. "It's not just that it's been so long for me, it's that you had to be the sexiest woman on the fucking planet."

Had Piper heard him right? She shook her head to clear it, though most of the lust fog remained in place. "Wait, I know you wore the ring, but . . . no sex? At all? Knowing you, I should have assumed that, but . . ." Her gaze traveled down the front of his body, stopping when she reached the outline of his painful-looking erection. It protruded against the fly of his jeans, large and heavy. His own hand crept toward it, his sexual frustration obvious in every harsh line of his face.

There was a way to wrestle back control of this push and pull between them *and* make him feel good—and she suddenly couldn't help herself. "Oh, Brendan." She went down on her knees and pressed a kiss to the thick bulge. "We need to take care of this, don't we?"

His head fell back, chest lifting and plummeting. "Piper, you don't need to."

She cupped his big arousal, massaged him through his jeans, and he moaned through his teeth. "I want to," she whispered. "I want to make you

feel so good."

She flicked open the button at the top of his fly and lowered the zipper carefully, sucking in a breath when his shaft grew impossibly larger inside his briefs in the absence of confinement. Brendan's knuckles were white on the arms of the chair, but he stopped breathing altogether as she drew down the waistband of his briefs and saw his erection up close. *Male*. There was no other way to describe the unapologetic weight and steel of him, the thick black hair at the base, the heavy sac. He was long and smooth and broad, veins wrapped around him like lines on a road map, and wow. Yes. She'd been telling the truth. She really did want to make him feel good. So badly, her inner thighs were turning slick with her own need. *Wanted* to be on her knees, giving pleasure to this man who'd been celibate so long. This man who'd treated her with care and respect and got nervous about her tasting his cooking.

Furthermore, she could establish up front that this was just sex. Just sex.

"Look at you, Piper," Brendan said hoarsely. "Christ, I didn't stand a chance, did I?"

With a sympathetic pout, she gave his shaft a tight pump. And another one. Waited until his eyes started to glaze over, then she dragged her tongue up the meaty underside of him, closed her mouth over the velvet helmet on top. Making her tongue flat and stiff, she teased the salty slit, the sensitive ridges, before tunneling him in deep, deep, right up to the point where tears pricked her eyelids. God, he pulsed on her tongue, great, quick surges of life that her femininity started to echo, making her groan around his hard flesh.

“Goddamn, baby, that mouth,” he groaned, one of his hands fisting her hair, urging her faster, even as he barked, “Stop. *Stop*. I’m going to come.”

Piper let him slide from her mouth with a swirl of her tongue, her right hand working him, thickening him with every stroke of her fist. Yeah, he wasn’t going to last much longer, and there was something so hot about it. How much he’d needed the relief. “Where do you want to give it to me?” she whispered, taking his sac in her hand and juggling him gently, leaning in to curl her tongue around the purpling tip. “Anywhere you want, Captain.”

“*Fuck*,” he gritted out, his thighs starting to vibrate. Instead of answering her pretty, pressing question, he closed his eyes, nostrils flaring as he took in a drag of air. “No.”

Then the unexpected happened.

Right on the verge of his well-deserved orgasm, Brendan surged forward, wrapping his hands around her waist and lifting her up onto the dining room table. She teetered, dizzy from the rapid ascent, but she snapped back to reality when Brendan dropped to his own knees and stripped off his shirt. “Ohhh,” she said in slow motion. “Heyyy, loook aaaat thaaaat.”

Dude was *yoked*.

She’d known, on some level, that Brendan was built like a motherfucker. His arms always tested the seams of his sweatshirts, his chest ridged with muscle, but she’d been unaware of the definition. The chiseled planes of his pecs ended in a tight drop-off; then it was a mountain range of abs. But not the obnoxious kind. They had meat on them. And hair. All of him did. He looked like a real man who worked in the wild, because that’s exactly what he was. And not a single tattoo, which was so Brendan, it made her throat feel weird. Of course he wouldn’t want to deal with the fuss of all that or waste his time getting one done.

Come back to earth, Piper.

“Wait, I was . . .” She pointed at his erection. “You were—”

“Don’t worry about me,” he rasped, dragging her to the edge of the table. “Open your thighs and let me see it, Piper.”

Her inner walls clenched, delighting in his bluntness. “But—”

“You think I’m going to get sucked off and leave town for two weeks? Not going to happen. You’re getting off, baby, or nobody is getting off.”

As if on autopilot, her thighs squeaked wide on the table. Oh, this wasn’t good. She didn’t even know which part of her was in command. Her head, her heart, her lady

business. Or maybe they all were, three bitches hitting the switches of her control panel. She only knew Brendan needed to stop revealing positive sides of himself.

Now they were adding *generous* to the mix?

The hem of her delicate dress in his boat captain's hands made her whimper. He lifted it, and God only knew what he was seeing. Her thong was sheer to begin with, but she'd never been this wet in her ever-loving life. Not to mention, his impatient hands on her butt had tugged it askew.

He stared hard at her juncture, the grip on her knees flexing, a curse issuing unsteadily from his mouth. "Yeah, I have to be an idiot leaving you without my attention for two weeks."

She panted. "Are you calling me high maintenance?"

"Are you denying it?" He tugged aside the strip of material shielding her

core, which thankfully she'd waxed clean as a whistle right before leaving LA. "Fuck me. You can be as high maintenance as you want, honey. But I'm the only one who does the maintenance." He ran his thumb down the seam of her sex. "Understood?"

Piper nodded, as if in a trance.

What was the use of saying no? At least this one verbal agreement was about sex. Nothing emotional. And she wasn't going to pretend like someone in this town might come along and interest her even a fraction of the amount that Brendan did. She might have to travel pretty far to find that, come to think of it.

His lips ghosted up her inner thigh, blunt fingers hooking in the sides of her panties. "Lift up," he rumbled, nipping at her sensitive skin with his teeth. "Want them off."

Oh great. His voice could get even deeper? It resonated all the way up to her clit, and she fell back on her elbows, inching her hips up enough for Brendan to peel the thong down her legs. She watched this man, who grew more exciting by the moment, expecting him to drop the underwear on the floor. He wrapped the thin black material around his shaft instead, pressing his mouth and nose up against her wetness, groaning as he choked himself up and down in a tight fist.

"Holy . . ." Piper breathed, momentarily blacking out.

"See this, baby?" He rubbed his mouth side to side, parting the damp folds of her femininity, that hand jerking roughly between his thighs. "You're still getting me off, too."

When had her back hit the table?

One second she was looking down at Brendan's head, the next she was staring wide-eyed up at the ceiling. Brendan's tongue snaked down slowly through the valley of her sex, and her fingers clawed their way into his hair, the move involuntary, but if he stopped, if he *stopped*, she was going to die.

"Good, Piper. Pull me in tight. Show me how bad you want my tongue."

No no no. His voice was like sandpaper now. Could she come from that baritone alone?

"Brendan." She lifted her legs, hooked them over his shoulders, earning a growl, another rough jerk of her hips to the edge of the table. "Please, please. *Please*."

She'd never begged for anything sexual in her life. Especially not oral. Men always made it seem like they were doing a woman a favor. Or maybe

she'd just been detached and projecting an explanation that would keep her that way. She couldn't remain detached now, and this . . . oh, it was definitely not a hardship for Brendan—and he let her know it. His forearm came down on her hips, pinning them to the table, and he growled into that second lick, dragging the tip over her clit, teasing it, the rippling flex of his shoulder telling Piper that his hand was moving feverishly just out of sight. With the use of her panties.

He was the most consistent man she'd ever met, and she thanked God for that now because he sealed his upper lip to the very top of her slit, his tongue never quitting or changing pace. It was perfect, perfect, lavishing her swelling clit with friction and pressure, and she was actually going to get there because of it. Oh my God, she was going to have an orgasm. Like a real, authentic orgasm. She wasn't going to fake it to stroke his ego. This was happening.

"Please don't stop, Brendan. It's perfect. It's . . . oh God, oh Jesus."

Her thighs started to tremor uncontrollably, and she could see nothing but sparks dancing in front of her eyes. The fingers she'd plowed into his hair drew him closer, legs wrapping around his head, her hips lifting, seeking, lower body twisting. And she still didn't dislodge him from that magical spot, and maybe he was Jesus. She didn't know. Knew nothing but the intense pleasure bearing down on her. But then he took his forearm off her hips and pressed the heel of his hand to her weeping entrance and rotated it—hard—and she screamed. She fucking screamed. And she didn't stop when he slid a thick finger inside of her, searched and found her G-spot, adding firm pressure.

She climaxed. Which was a pitiful word for traveling to a distant plane where fairies danced and gumdrops rained from the sky. When her back protested, she realized it had arched off the table involuntarily. She stared at her elevated hips in a daze, the endless relief coursing through her, tightening her muscles and letting them go. Wow. Oh wow.

Brendan moved over her slumped body, and his face, it was almost unrecognizable for the lust bracketing his mouth, the fever making his eyes bright. That huge part of him was still hard, his hand twisting up and down the length, one side of her panties wrapped around his shaft, the other around his fist. "Can I rub it here, baby?" Brendan rasped the question, his bare chest heaving, a fine sheen of sweat on those work-honed muscles. "Just want to rub it where I made you come."

"Yes."

He all but fell on her, his face landing in the crook of her neck, his fist positioning his stiffness between her thighs, right over that uber-sensitive flesh. "One day soon, Piper, I'm going to fuck you so goddamn hard." He alternated between dragging his swollen tip through her saturated folds and stroking himself. "Going to fuck the word 'friend' right out of your beautiful mouth. You'll forget how to say anything but my name. Real quick, honey."

Her clit hummed again, unbelievably, and that buzz of connection, of more promised pleasure had to be the reason she turned her head slightly, whispering in his ear, "Promise?"

With a strangled growl of her name, he hit his peak, shooting moisture onto her belly, his hand moving in a blur, his teeth bared against the side of her throat. "Piper. *Piper.*"

The power, the exhilaration of Brendan saying her name as he orgasmed was so incredible, she couldn't hold still. She raked her tongue up and down his straining neck, rubbed the insides of her thighs up and down his heaving rib cage, scraped her fingernails over his shoulders and down his back. When his heavy body collapsed on her, she kept going, some instinct she'd never had before urging her to soothe, to whisper words of praise that she actually, literally meant. She could have laid there straight through to tomorrow, just existing under the reassuring weight of him—and that complacency brought back her senses.

Okay, they gave good sex. Or . . . *almost* sex, anyway.

Better than any actual intercourse she'd ever had, though. By leaps and bounds.

Because you like him. A lot. For who he is, not what he can do for you.

That realization smacked her hard in the face. *God.* She'd never thought of her past actions in those terms before, but they fit. Shallow. So shallow. Who was she to accept the sweet gestures this man offered? He should have waited to take his wedding ring off for some selfless local girl who would be content waving him off to sea for the rest of her life.

A pang caught Piper in the chest, and she tried to sit up but couldn't move because Brendan had her pinned to the table. His head lifted, eyes narrowing like he could already sense her building tension. "Piper."

"What?" she whispered, winded from her thoughts. "Get out of your head."

With a sardonic smile, she rolled her eyes. "Aye, aye, Captain." With some effort, she tried to do as he asked. Tried to set aside her worries for later. He was leaving for two weeks tomorrow morning, after all. That would be plenty of time to pull her stupid head out of the clouds. "That was . . . wow." *Keep it light. Sexy.* "Really, really good."

Brendan grunted. He dropped his head and smiled into the valley between her breasts, making her heart flutter. "Good?" he snorted, kissing her breasts in turn and standing, visibly reluctant to leave her. After zipping his still semi-hard erection back into his jeans, he took some napkins out of the holder on the table and cleaned Piper of his spend, wiping efficiently like he did everything else, shaking his head slowly at her appearance. "I'm going to starve to death without the taste of you."

Despite the languidness of her muscles, she managed to sit up and fix her dress, blinking at the panties sitting in a wet heap on the floor, memories of the last half hour flooding in. Wow. She'd been so . . . present. Inside every second with him. When she'd been intimate in the past, she spent the whole time obsessing about her appearance, what the guy was thinking, if she was meeting expectations. None of those anxieties had taken hold with Brendan. None. Because . . . he liked *her*. Not her image. Her actual personality and opinions. With Brendan's hands on her, she'd had no walls, no boundaries. Tonight had been all *about* boundaries, but instead of setting them, the line kept getting pushed further and further out.

She hopped off the table, landing on the heels she still wore, and gave him a flirty hip-check. "Maybe I'll give you another taste when you get back."

"Maybe, huh?" He caught her arm and spun her around, backing her up against the refrigerator, pinning her there with his rugged frame. Piper's traitorous body melted immediately, eager to be supported by his superior strength, her head lolling back. Brendan's hard mouth found hers with lips already opening, his tongue delving deep, carrying the light flavor of her climax, giving it to her with thorough strokes, a low growl of satisfaction simmering in his throat. When he pulled back, his silver-green eyes searched her face, one hand cradling her jaw. "Does that taste like 'maybe' to you?"

In other words, she'd be back for more. "Somebody's cocky all of a sudden," Piper huffed.

"Not cocky, honey." He kissed her mouth again, softly this time. "Determined."

She sputtered. Determined to do what?

Oh man, she needed to get out of there.

“I have an early morning,” she blurted. “And so do you, right? So.”

“So.” He seemed to be fighting a smile, and it was galling. Still not wearing a shirt, he gathered Piper’s cardigan and helped her put it on, before handing over her purse. At the very last second, he threw on his own shirt and picked up his car keys. “I’m going to have mercy on you this time, Piper, and drive you home.” He threaded their fingers together and tugged her toward the door. “This just had to be the year crab season gets slotted early, didn’t it? Otherwise I’d spend about a week getting inside your head—”

“It would take longer than that.”

“But dammit.” He jerked open the front door. “It’ll have to wait until I’m back.”

Ha. No way. There would be no getting in anyone’s head. Two weeks was like, a million years. They wouldn’t even remember each other’s names by then. They’d pass each other on the street and vaguely recall a fish dinner and an oral-sex fest.

You’re lying to yourself.

And she kept right on doing it the whole ride home. Kept lying to reassure herself when Brendan walked her up the stairs to her apartment. But the pretense shattered at her feet when he kissed her like he’d never see her again, his mouth moving over hers with such tenderness, her knees turned to rubber and she had to hold on to his collar to stay upright.

“Here,” he said, exhaling shakily and pulling the keys out of his pocket. “I’m giving you a spare key to my place, all right? Just in case you and your sister need somewhere to go while I’m out of town.”

Piper stared at the object with dawning horror. “A key?”

“It’s going to get cooler in the next couple of weeks, and the heat in this place probably isn’t great.” He folded her hand around it, kissed her forehead. “Stop freaking out.”

She uttered a string of gibberish.

Did he think she would actually use this thing? Because she wouldn’t.

He chuckled at her expression and turned to go—and she panicked. A different kind of panic than the variety she felt at being handed the key. She thought of the brass statue on the harbor and Opal emptying the contents of an envelope onto the table.

“Brendan!”

Slowing, he turned with a raised eyebrow. "Please be careful," she whispered.

Warmth fused into his eyes, and he checked her out, head to toe, before continuing on his way, the door downstairs closing behind him, followed by silence.

Much later, she realized what Brendan was really doing when he catalogued her features, her hands, her cocked hip.

Memorizing the sight of her. Just in case?