

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 20 -

Brendan leaned against the wall of Blow the Man Down, arms crossed, a quiet smile on his face as he watched Piper weave her magic over everyone in her vicinity.

She was shit-faced—and adorable.

Everyone who spoke to Piper got her undivided attention and walked away like she'd just imparted the secrets of the universe. She forged connections to people, damn near instantaneously, and they loved her. Did she realize she was doing it?

Someone shouted at the bartender to play Beyoncé, and tables were shoved even farther out of the way, transforming the space from Piper's personal runway to a dance floor, and all he could do was stand there and watch her, his pulse thickening—along with another part of his anatomy—at the way she worked her hips, arms loose and careless over her head, eyes dreamy. She was drawing attention from a lot of men at the bar, and frankly, he didn't like it, but Piper was the girl he'd fallen for. Being jealous came with the territory. Piper went still on the dance floor, a frown marring her forehead, and, as if she'd finally sensed his presence, turned to look directly at him. And when her face transformed with pure joy and she waved enthusiastically, Brendan

knew he loved her.

God knew, it had happened fast, but he'd been incapable of putting the brakes on.

Not when she was the destination.

His mouth turned dry, but he managed to wave back.

This wasn't any emotion he'd experienced before. Not like the simple companionship of his marriage. Not like the love/hate bond he had with the

ocean. What he felt for Piper turned him into a young man in the throes of his first infatuation, while also calling on the deepest roots of his maturity. In other words, to keep this woman, he'd step up and do whatever it took, but his fucking heart would be racing the whole time.

He could put every ounce of his effort into keeping Piper, and she still might leave. Could dance off into the sunset at a moment's notice and go back to her extravagant life, leaving him reeling. And that terrified him the most.

But Brendan determinedly set aside those dark thoughts. Because she was coming toward him now, all flushed from liquor and dancing, and he simply opened his arms, trusting she'd walk straight into them. His eyes closed automatically when she did, his

mouth tracing her hairline, planting kisses. Christ, she fit against him in a way that made him feel protective, ready to act as her shield, while also making him hard, hungry.

"You're here," she murmured happily, going up on her toes to sniff his neck.

"Of course I'm here, baby."

"Sanders is okay? The crew made it back?"

"Sanders is home," he burred against her ear, warmed by her worry for his men. "The rest of them, too. They reached the harbor just a little while ago."

"I'm so glad." She sent an accusatory look over her shoulder. "These unscrupulous local women made me drunk."

"I can see that." His lips twitched, his hand rubbing circles in the center of her back. "You want to dance some more, or can I bring you home?"

"Where is home?" "With me."

"Mmmm." She looked up at him through one eye. "I don't have my wits about me, Brendan. You can't use anything I say tonight against me. It's all a wash."

"Okay, I promise."

"Good, because I missed you. Again." She kissed his chin, worked her way around to his ear, whined against it in a way that made his cock stiffen. "This morning with you was the best, best, best sex of my life."

She said it right as the music cut out.

Everyone at the bar heard it.

A couple of men saluted Brendan with their pints, but thankfully drunk Piper was none the wiser about her public confession. And hell, having Piper

effectively tell everyone in Westport they were sleeping together—and that so far he'd been great at it—was one way to appease his jealousy.

The music started again, but she didn't seem compelled to do anything but stand there and hug him, which suited him down to the ground. "Here I am, once again, in the *recharging station!*" Piper sang, giggling to herself. "I like it here. It's so warm. You're a big hard teddy bear from the sea. Like tuna from the sea, but with a bear."

Brendan's laugh turned heads. "I like drunk Piper."

“You should. I have zero inhibitions right now.” She smelled his neck again, kissed it once, twice. “Or whatever number is less than zero.”

He ran a hand down her hair. “All I’m doing to you tonight is putting you in bed.”

“Ooh, do I get to sleep in the recharging station?”

His heart was living in his throat. “Yeah, honey. You can sleep in it every night.”

She sighed contentedly.

“On my way over, I saw Hannah walking home and stopped off to grab you an overnight bag.”

“That was nice of you.” In an instant, her expression went from swoony to worried. “But Brendan, what if I’m potpie?”

“What?”

“You took a bite of me, and even if you decide you don’t really like me, you’re going to be noble and eat the whole thing. You can’t do anything halfway. It’s all or nothing. If I’m potpie, you have to tell me. You can’t just keep eating and eating and . . . I’m drunker than I thought.”

Yeah, she might be drunk, but her worry was genuine. Her forlorn tone of voice made that obvious, and it troubled him. Not because there was even a chance it might be valid—she was a woman, not a fucking pie. Her worry bothered him because she didn’t feel secure. Yet. And he needed to find a way to fix it.

“Let’s go home,” he said.

“Okay. Let me just make sure Opal has a ride.”

Piper trotted off to confer with a group of woman, hugging each of them multiple times before making her way back to his side. Brendan wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her out of the bar. He’d parked his truck near the entrance, and he unlocked it now, boosting Piper into the passenger side and buckling her in. When he climbed into the driver’s side, her head

was lolling on the seat, and she was studying him. “We’re going to talk about what you said. In the morning. When you’re clearheaded and you’ll remember what I say back.”

“That’s probably a good idea. I’m feeling very share-y right now.”

“I’m tempted to let you share, so I know what I’m up against. But I don’t want you telling me things and regretting it tomorrow.”

She was silent as he pulled onto the road and took the first right. "You talk about being with me like it's a battle."

"It is, in a way. But I'm grateful I'm the one fighting it."

He could feel her studying his profile. "You're worth fighting for, too. If you got banished to LA for three months, I would pull out all the stops to keep you there." She paused. "Nothing would work, though. It's not real enough for you. You'd hate it."

"'Hate' is a strong word, honey. You would be there."

"Eh." She waved a hand. "There are thousands of me there." Brendan snorted at her joke. And then he realized she was serious. "Piper, there is *nobody* like you."

She smiled like she was humoring him. "*Piper*."

She looked startled by his tone. "Whoa. What?"

He pulled the car onto the side of the road, slammed on the brakes, and threw it into park. "Did you hear me?" He reached over to tilt up her chin. "There is nobody like you."

"Why are you getting so worked up?"

"Because I . . ." He raked a hand through his hair. "I thought I was an intuitive man. A smart man. But I keep finding out new ways I'm flying blind when it comes to something so important. You. *You* are important. And I thought you were just scared of commitment. Or didn't think you could belong in Westport. But it's more than that, isn't it? You think I have some kind of passing interest in you? Like it could just change like the wind?"

"Everyone else does!" Her eyes flashed. With pain, with irritation. "Not just guys. My friends, my stepfather. I'm this season's color, in demand today, on the sales rack in Marshalls tomorrow. I'm just . . . momentary."

"Not to me." God, he wanted to shake her, kiss her, shake her some more. "Not to me."

She jerked her chin out of his grip, flounced back against the seat. "Can we just talk about this tomorrow, like you said?"

Brendan slammed the car back into drive. "Oh, we're going to talk about it."

"Good! Maybe I'll put together some talking points." "Me too, baby."

They drove past No Name, and she made a small sound. Sniffed. "What?" he asked, softening his tone.

"I was remembering the time you sent Abe to nail the memory foam to the top bunk. You're actually really thoughtful and wonderful, and I don't want to argue with you."

He almost blurted out *I love you*, right then and there, but buttoned it up at the last second. The moment was too volatile to throw that confession into the mix, but he didn't think he'd be able to keep it inside much longer. "I don't want to argue with you either, Piper. All I want to do is bring you home, put you in one of my shirts, and find out if you snore."

She gasped, some of the humor returning to her eyes. "I don't." "We'll see."

"Do you have toast and Advil?" "Yes."

They pulled into his driveway a moment later. Brendan got out and rounded the front bumper to Piper's side, smiling when she melted out into his arms. He held her and swayed for a few beats in the darkness, in what he thought might be a silent, mutual apology for shouting at each other on the drive home. And he wanted to do this for the rest of his life. Collect her from a night out with the girls, have her soft and pliant against him, be her man.

"You're not even going to make out with me tonight, are you?" Piper said, her voice muffled by his shoulder. "You probably think you'd be taking advantage of me."

Brendan sighed. "You've got it right."

She pouted up at him. "That's romantic and I hate it." "How about I promise to make up for it tomorrow?" "Can we negotiate a kiss good night?"

"I think I can manage that."

Appeased, she let him bring her inside. While he made her toast, she sat perched on his kitchen counter with a glass of water, looking so beautiful, he had to keep glancing over his shoulder, checking to see if she was real. That he hadn't dreamed her up.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked after swallowing a bite.

"That I like you being here." He braced his hands on the counter, dropped his mouth to her bare knees, and kissed them, in turn. "That I liked going into my bedroom today and finding a Piper-sized indent on my comforter." A thought occurred to him. "When did you come over?"

She gulped. Didn't answer.

"Not with that storm going on." His right eye was beginning to tic. "Right?"

Piper set down her toast, laid the back of her hand against her forehead.

Wobbled dramatically. “I feel kind of faint, Brendan. I think I’m fading.”

With a growl, he drew her off the counter. And with her legs hooked around his waist, he left the kitchen and carried her up the stairs. “I’ll add it to my list of talking points for tomorrow.”

She groaned, her fingers playing with the ends of his hair. “Tomorrow sounds like it’s going to be a super-sexy good time.”

“We’ll get to that after.” “Before.”

“After.”

“Before *and* after.”

Brendan set Piper down on the end of his bed, rocked by the rightness of having her there. Emotion crammed into his chest, but he turned away before she could see it. “Take off that dress.” He opened his drawer, took out one of his favorites—a white, worn-in T-shirt with GRAYS HARBOR written in script in the middle. “Speaking of which, do you even own a pair of jeans—” He turned back around to find Piper sprawled out on his bed in a neon-purple thong. And nothing else. “That can’t be comfortable to sleep in,” he said hoarsely, already regretting his vow to give her a good-night kiss and nothing more.

She raised her knees. “I guess you have to come over here and take it off.” “Christ.” The flesh in his jeans swelled, curving against his zipper, and he

blew out an uneven breath. “If the ocean doesn’t kill me, you will.”

Just like that, her knees dropped back down, her arms coming up to cross over her breasts. And maybe he shouldn’t have been shocked when tears rushed into her eyes, but he was. They made his throat constrict.

“God,” he said thickly. “That was a stupid thing to say.” “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” He lifted her up and pulled the T-shirt down over her head, holding her tight to his chest. “It’s not okay. I’m sorry.”

“We can add it to the talking points for tomorrow,” she said, looking him in the eye long enough to make his heart beat triple time, then tugging him down into the pillows. “Want my kiss,” she murmured against his lips, pulling him under with a slow, wet complication of tongues, her smooth, bare legs winding through his, her fingers pulling him closer by the waistband of his jeans until their lower bodies were locked together, soft against hard, man against woman. “Maybe we’re a little more than more than friends,” she whispered, tucking her head under his chin. “Good night, Brendan.”

His eyelids fell like shutters, his arms pulling her closer.

I love you, he mouthed over her head. He didn't fall asleep for hours.