

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 21 -

Homey sounds came from somewhere. Drawers opening and thudding softly, bare feet on a floor, the sputtering of a coffee maker. Piper cracked an eye open but didn't move. She couldn't, because she'd lose the sweet spot of warmth and fluffy bedclothes and the scent of Brendan. Best sleep of her life, hands down. She'd woken up at some point during the night having to pee and found herself locked into the recharging station, Brendan's soft breaths against the back of her neck. And she'd decided to hold it.

What did she say last night? Something about potpies.

She also remembered trying to seduce him and failing. Womp. Some shouting on the ride home.

No sex.

She'd just have to gauge his mood to find out if she'd said or done anything irredeemably embarrassing. There was a good chance she had, because otherwise he would still be in bed, right? Like, hello. Horny lady. *Right* here.

Piper's bladder screamed at her, and she sat up, grateful the Bellingher Method had worked, and padded to the bathroom. She ignored the gooey, melting sensation in her belly when she found her toothbrush from the morning before waiting beside Brendan's in the medicine cabinet. Where else was he supposed to put it?

With the toothbrush in her mouth, she picked up an unused bottle of cologne and sniffed. But it wasn't him at all, and she couldn't imagine him using it. Other than that, there was only his razor, some shaving cream, and deodorant. Her medicine cabinet at home would probably make him break

out in a rash, it was so jam-packed.

She finished brushing her teeth, splashed some water on her face, finger-combed her hair, and headed downstairs . . . and . . . and jackpot.

Brendan was standing in the kitchen in nothing but black boxer briefs.

Piper crowded against the wall so she could observe him without being discovered. He was hunched over the kitchen counter reading a newspaper, and good gravy, the thick, masculine ropes of back muscles were all she wanted for breakfast. How dare he with those thighs? Did he use them to anchor the boat? They were generous and ripped and—

"You want coffee?" he asked without looking up.

"*Aherm?*" Piper blurted loudly, coming the rest of the way down the stairs, very aware that he was in underwear while she wore nothing but his T-shirt and a thong. And then he pushed up from the counter and scratched his happy trail, and yes, she was very aware of that, too. "Um, yes? Coffee, sure. Sure."

He half grinned. "Okay."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "What is this extra cockiness you have going on?"

Brendan poured her a cup of coffee, preparing it exactly how she liked it. "You might have told me last night in the bar that I was the best, best, best sex of your life."

Heat climbed her cheeks. "I said 'best' three times, hmm?"

After handing her the coffee, he leaned back against the counter and crossed his ankles. "You sure did."

She hid her wan smile in a sip of coffee. "I think I might have also become a professional beauty consultant last night. One who gets paid in drinks." More and more memories knitted together. "And, oh God, I volunteered to throw a party on Labor Day at the bar."

"Whoops."

"I can't wait to tell Hannah." She cupped her hands around the mug, enjoying the warmth. Not just from the drink itself, but from Brendan's kitchen. The way he looked at her with affection, not a rush in the world to move or hurry. When had she started liking those things? The silence between them didn't need to be filled, but she was thinking too much, so she did it anyway. "Who would buy you cologne?"

His brow arched. "You mean the one in my cabinet? Birthday gift from Sanders. His wife picked it out. Obviously. He didn't even know what it was until I opened it—and the guys, they ragged on him for months. I probably

just keep it because it makes me laugh." "You're so close with them. Your crew."

"Have to be. Our lives—" He cut himself off, taking an abrupt sip of coffee.

"Are in one another's hands?" When she said it, the memory of her crying in his bed last night came rolling back in on a tide. This was probably it, then. No more smoke screens or hiding or flirting her way to safety with this man. Even if she couldn't recall every single second of last night, she could feel that the layers had been stripped away. By his hands. His words. His presence.

"Anyway, it's not the scent I would pick for you." Interest lit his expression. "What would you pick?"

“Nothing. You already have the ocean on your skin. And it’s not like you to embellish what’s already working.” Something heated in his eyes at her words. At the proof she’d been cataloguing his finer details? “But if I had to pick a scent . . . something, like, rainy and mossy. To remind me of your garden. How earthy you are. How substantial.” Her attention meandered down the line of black hair disappearing into his briefs. “How male.”

His chest rose and fell on a shudder. “You’re really messing up my plans for the morning, Piper.”

“What were your plans?”

“To take you out on the *Della Ray*.”

The smile blasted across her face. “*What?* Are you serious?” “Uh-huh. Being out on the water is good for talking.”

“Oh, right.” She rocked back on her heels, her initial excitement tempered by the reminder that the reckoning had arrived. “Talking points.”

“That’s right.” He raked her with a blistering look that turned her nipples to tingling peaks. “Now I just want to take you back to bed, though.”

Her breathing went shallow. “Can’t we do both?”

His regret was obvious when he shook his head. “Next time I fuck you, I want to be sure you’re not going to pull away from me afterward.”

“And I can’t escape on a boat?” “That might have crossed my mind.”

She huffed a laugh. He was really serious about her. And she’d gone home with him last night knowing it. As natural as could be, like she did it all the time. That’s how it felt being collected by Brendan and sleeping in his arms. Expected. Inevitable.

Damn him.

There was a chance she might be serious about Brendan, too. How had this happened?

“Just so we’re clear,” she said, setting down her coffee mug. “You are withholding sex.”

“No, I’m not.” His jaw flexed. “I’ll fuck you facedown over that counter, Piper. If sex is all you want, I’ll give it to you. But I want more.” His voice brooked no nonsense. “You do, too, or you wouldn’t have come here in the middle of a storm and slept in my bed. Don’t *ever* do that again, by the way. I need to know you’ll be safe when I’m not here.”

“I’m a strong runner!” He gave a dubious grunt.

“Fine,” she said, voice irregular. “We’ll talk!” “Good. Whenever you’re ready.”

Lost in a sea of emotional vulnerability, she utilized her best physical weapon, stripping off his shirt and tossing it to him. Then she marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs in nothing but her thong, knowing full well he’d watch her the whole way. If he was going to demand she let him in completely, shed all of her defenses, she’d make sure it was a long day for them both.

\* \* \*

As the *Della Ray* backed out of its slip into the mouth of the harbor, it became obvious to Piper that the boat was an extension of Brendan himself. And the time he spent on land was just filler. He sat in the captain’s chair with easy command, confident in every movement, the wheel sliding through his ready hands, his eyes vigilant. Framed in the hazy sunlight, he could have been from past or present. A man and the ocean. Timeless.

Piper watched him from the relief skipper’s seat, her cheek pressed to the wood paneling of the wheelhouse, never having felt safer in her life. Physically, anyway. The hum of the engine beneath posed an ominous warning to the trembling organ in her chest.

“How far out are we going to go?”

“Five or six miles,” he said. “I’ll drop the anchors and give you a tour.

Sound good?”

She nodded, finding herself looking forward to it. Watching this man move

in his natural habitat. It had the makings of capability porn all over it. And maybe if she asked enough questions, they could avoid having the talk of all talks.

Yeah, right. There was no getting out of this. The set of his jaw said a resolution was imminent, and he had way less of a hangover than she did. Also, he was in a sexy boat captain mode. It did not bode well.

“Hey,” Brendan said, his bearded chin giving a persuasive jerk. “Come steer this thing.”

“Me?” She stood slowly. “Are you sure? Based on my track record, I will find the one parking meter in the middle of the ocean and back into it.”

Laugh lines appeared around his eyes—and then he patted his big, sturdy thigh. Oh yeah, like she was going to pass that up. “Get over here.”

She feigned one more moment of indecision, then climbed onto his left thigh, mentally praising Hannah for packing her a skirt so she could feel the denim of Brendan's jeans against the backs of her legs. The shift of muscle.

Brendan took an old captain's hat off a peg on the wall and dropped it onto her head. Then he wrapped his left arm around her middle and tugged her back more securely against his chest. "See this dial? Just keep the arrow right about here. Northwest." He took her hands and placed them on the wheel, making sure they were steady before letting go. "How's that?"

"Cool." She laughed breathily, fascinated by the vibrations that started in her palms and traveled up to her elbows. "Really cool."

"Yeah. It is."

Feeling almost giddily light and kind of . . . unrestrained, she pointed out at the horizon. "Mermaid off the port bow!" He snorted in her ear. "Phew. I've gotten the *Little Mermaid* reference out of my system. I was going to explode."

"I don't know how I feel about my boat making you think of a Disney movie."

"Aw, don't be jealous of Prince Eric, we—" She turned her head and found him a breath away, those vivid green eyes trained on her mouth. Not on the water, where she expected them to be. The arm around her belly flexed, his palm molding to her rib cage. Heat slicked up the insides of her thighs, her skin sensitizing all over. "Don't you dare look at me like that," she said choppily. "You're the one who wanted to talk first."

He exhaled hard. "And then you ran up my stairs in a purple string. It had an impact."

"You live, you learn," she chirped.

A growl kindled in his throat. "You're going to punish me all day, aren't you?"

"Count on it. I bet you're second-guessing wanting a high-maintenance girlfri—" She cut herself off just in time. "I'm holding your livelihood in my hands, Brendan. Let me focus."

They drove the boat for another fifteen minutes before Brendan eased the throttle into an upright position. He pressed a series of buttons, and a steady rumble followed, which he explained was the anchors going down. And then it was quiet. Just the lapping of water against the side of the boat, and the gentle groans of the ship compensating for the rise and fall of the ocean. They sat in the captain's chair with her head leaned back against his shoulder, his fingers trailing up and down her bare arm.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "I'll bring you out on deck."

Nodding, she followed Brendan down the stairs of the wheelhouse and out onto the wide floating platform that made up the deck. The vessel bobbed beneath them, but he moved like it was stationary, his legs easily compensating for the dips and lifts. She tried to copy his effortlessnes and thought she looked only slightly drunk.

“Last week, there were seventy steel traps stacked on this end.” He gestured to the end of the deck nearest the wheelhouse, then stooped down to show her a covered portal. “When we’re on the crab, this is where we put the keepers. Males over a certain weight. We send them below to processing, then on to the freezer hold.”

“What if you’re fishing?”

“Same hold. But we pack it full of ice. No water.”

She squinted up at the large cranes overhead, the spotlights and antennas secured to the top, and a chill caught her off guard. “Those lights are to help you see in the dark? Or see if there’s a wave coming?”

Brendan came to stand beside her, dropped a kiss onto her shoulder. “Yeah. I can see when they’re coming, baby.”

“Did you know . . . that’s how Henry died?” Why was she whispering? “A rogue wave just knocked him right overboard. Mick told me.”

“Yeah, I knew.” He didn’t say anything for a moment. “I’m not going to pretend things like that don’t still happen, Piper, but it happens a hell of a lot less these days. Training to be on deck is more comprehensive, the machinery we have leaves less room for human error. Boats are better designed for

safety now, and with all of the recent updates, mine is one of the safest.”

Piper looked up at him. “Is this why you brought me out here?” she asked quietly. “To show me why I don’t have to worry when you’re gone?”

“It’s one of the reasons. I don’t like you crying.”

She swallowed a sharp object in her throat. “When I heard there was an accident, I just kept thinking of the boat flipping over. Can that happen?”

“Rarely. Very rarely. Especially for one this large.” Brendan studied her face for a beat, then moved behind her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. “Close your eyes.”

She forced herself to relax. “Okay.”

“Just feel the way the boat moves like it’s part of the water. That’s how it’s designed, to compensate for waves. Like an airplane going over turbulence. There are bumps, but

they never stop you from moving.” His hand snuck around the front to lift her chin. “You see how low the railings are on this boat? And those openings at the base? That’s so the water can just pass right over and through. It can’t hold water from a wave or make the weight uneven.”

“But . . . because they’re so low, isn’t it easy for a man to go over the side?”

“It hasn’t happened yet to anyone on my team.” He let go of her chin and pulled her closer. “I can tell you when I worked on the crew, before I was a captain, my legs became part of the boat. You learn to balance. You learn to read the water, to brace, to loosen. I’m in the wheelhouse, so it’s near impossible for me to go overboard, but I’m responsible for five men, not just myself anymore.”

“Which is harder?” “Responsibility.”

Absently, she reached up and stroked his beard. “They’re right to trust you.”

She felt him swallow against the back of her head. “Do you . . . feel any better?”

“A little. Standing on the boat makes it seem more substantial.”

*It’s a clear day, though. Not a rain cloud in sight. Storms are a different story.*

He was making such a sweet effort to allay her fears that she kept silent. “What else do you worry about?” Brendan asked against her ear.

Piper shrugged but didn’t answer. One wrong move, and they could veer into dangerous territory. Maybe she should make another *Little Mermaid* reference— “Piper.”

“Oh yes?”

“What else do you worry about?”

Her sigh allowed the truth to sneak up her throat, but she played it off like her concern was minor. When it was definitely not. In fact, she was starting to think it was the kernel center of the whole piece of popcorn. “I’m not, um . . . built for this whole worrying business, Brendan. Keeping the home fires burning. Wrapping a cardigan around my shoulders and pacing the docks, clutching a locket or something? Does that sound like me? No. You *know* I’m too high maintenance for that. I’m . . .”

He stayed quiet, just held her.

Which was bad, because she started to ramble.

“You know. Just hypothetically speaking. Once a year, you go out to catch crab, sure. But all the time? Going to bed thinking you might not come back, night after night? Uh-uh. I’m not . . .” She squeezed her eyes closed. “I’m not strong enough for that.”

“Yes, you are. I know it asks a lot, but yes, you are.”

“No. I’m not. Not every woman can do this. She—” Ugh. Piper rolled her eyes at herself. How truly pathetic she was being, bringing up another woman. But as soon as the words started to flow, a pressure in her chest started to lessen, like a brick had been sitting on top of it. “You had a fisherman’s wife. She was born here, and this was normal to her. You can’t really expect *me* to live up to that. I will . . .” *Disappoint you. Disappoint myself. Disappoint Henry.* “A little less than a month ago, I had no responsibilities. No worries. And now, now . . . this huge one. It’s huge. This guy I care about a lot, like, *a lot*, has the most dangerous job in the universe. And I don’t have a job *at all*. I don’t even live here. Not permanently. Like, we are *not* a fit, Brendan. It won’t work, so stop—”

“Stop what, Piper? Thinking about you every second of the day? Missing you so much I climb the fucking walls? Stop being hungry for you? I can’t turn any of that off and I don’t want to.” When he turned Piper around, she saw he was visibly concerned by what she’d revealed. *Well, welcome to the party, bucko.* “Okay, let’s start from the beginning. We’re going to talk about my marriage. Not how she died, but what it was like.”

She took a breath. “I don’t know if I want to.”

“Can you trust me, honey? I’m just trying to get to the light. Get to *you*.” He waited for her nod, then did that wide-stance, settling-in thing and crossed his arms. As if letting her know he was immovable. “I knew Desiree my whole life, but not well. She was a girl a year above me in school. Quiet. I didn’t really get to know her until I started working for Mick. Right around the time my parents moved out of town, he took me under his wing and became kind of a . . . guide. He showed me this thing I love. Fishing. How to do it well. And over time, I guess she became family, too. I never felt . . .” He lowered his voice. “There wasn’t an attraction like I have for you. I’m not just talking about sex. We were friends, in a way. She was always trying to meet her father’s expectations, and so was I, after he gave me the *Della Ray*. He obviously thought we’d make a good match, so I asked her out, and I think . . . both of us just wanted to make Mick happy. That’s what we had in common. So we just went through the motions, even when it didn’t feel right. When she died, I kept the ring on, kept my vows, to keep him healed as much as possible. Then you showed up, Piper. Then you. And it felt wrong having *ever* given those vows to anyone else.

“Was she strong? Was she comfortable waving off me and Mick every time we left the harbor? Yeah. I guess she was. But she had decades to get there. It’s been a month for you, Piper. Less, if you count the time we spent pretending we didn’t want each other. So that comparison is unfair. You’re unfair to yourself.”



There was no doubt Brendan believed everything he was saying. And it was hard not to believe him, too, when he stood a foot above her, a sea captain in his domain with a voice full of conviction. He was huge in that moment. So intense she had to remind herself to breathe. Was she happy his marriage hadn't been full of passion? No. This man deserved that. So had Desiree. But that part of his life had been a shadowy corner, and it helped to have the mysterious aspects of it gone. "Thank you for telling me."

"I'm not done."

"Wow. Once you get going, there's no slowing you down."

Brendan stepped closer, seized her by the elbows. "Last night, you said a couple of things that bothered me, and now we're going to work through those." He leaned down and kissed her forehead, her nose, her mouth. "Don't ever tell me again there are a thousand others like you, because that's the biggest pile of bullshit I've ever heard. And someday, trust me, I hope I meet the person who told you that. A person doesn't rebuild a legacy for a dead

man unless they have character and can accept responsibilities." He kissed her temple hard. "Last night, I watched you in the bar, how you immediately made everyone your best friend. Made them count. And do you know what it meant to me having you show up at the hospital?" He didn't speak for a moment. "You have perseverance, character, and a huge heart. I think you might still be finding your way, but so am I. Me and my stupid routines. I thought I had it all figured out until you made me start breaking them. I want to keep breaking them with you."

As he'd been speaking, Piper had turned into a limp linguini noodle in his arms. The tip of her nose was red, and she had to blink up at the sky to keep from tearing up. Warmth and a sense of belonging reached all the way down to her toes, curling them in her ballet flats. "This is a lot to process," she whispered.

"I understand—"

"I mean, we're boyfriend and girlfriend now. I guess you got what you wanted."

A rush of his breath passed over the crown of her head. His arms were crushing her to that burly chest now. "Damn right I did." A beat passed. "About you going back to LA . . ."

"Can we put that one part off?" She pressed her nose to the collar of his shirt and inhaled his centering scent. "Just for now?"

He sighed, but she felt him nod. "Yeah. For now."

They stayed like that for a little while, Piper locked in the safety of his embrace while the boat carried high and low on the ocean, sunbeams warming her back.

He'd given her a lot to think about. Maybe it was time to examine herself. Or, more importantly, how she viewed herself. But one thing she didn't have to overthink was making these moments with Brendan count.

She kissed his chin and eased back, lacing their fingers together and enjoying the way his gaze meandered down the front of her body. "Do I get the rest of the tour?"

"Yeah." He cleared his throat and pulled her back in the direction of the wheelhouse. "Come on."

Piper tilted her head while staring at Brendan's rippling back, wondering if he realized how hard he was about to get laid.

He'd woken up with a plan to try to slay her dragons . . . and he'd executed it. Nothing stood in his way. He'd even passed on sex so they could dig to the

root of their issues, and God, that wasn't just commendable. It was hot.

Captain Brendan Taggart was a man. A real one. Her first.

And she could admit now that staying with him would mean giving up Los Angeles and the life she knew. But there was one root he hadn't found despite all his digging: Who the hell would Piper Bellinger be if she stayed in Westport?

That was a problem for another time, though.

Hold her calls. Right now, she was one hundred percent sex brained.

First, Brendan showed her the engine room, and she nodded prettily while he explained what a thruster was for, commending herself for not giggling once. Then they went back upstairs to the crew room, the galley where they ate while on the water, and finally the bunk room. "Wow," she murmured, observing the narrow beds tucked in tight against the walls. "Close quarters." There were nine total, the majority of them stacked two beds high. Kind of like the bunk she shared with Hannah, but the boat's beds were attached to the wall. Most of them had snapshots taped up beside them. Kids, women, smiling men holding giant fish in their hands. One had a slightly inappropriate calendar that made her snort.

"Sorry about that," Brendan grumbled, rubbing at the back of his neck. "It's not mine."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Duh." She tapped her lips with a finger and did a revolution around the small room, stopping in front of a bunk along the far wall, as separate from the others as one could get in such tight quarters. It was the only one that didn't have a bed above it. "No, yours is this one. The bed without any pictures, isn't it?"

He grunted in the affirmative.

“Do you . . . want a picture of m—” “Yes.”

“Oh.” Was she blushing? “Okay. That can be arranged.” “Thank you.”

Piper approached her new boyfriend slowly, letting him see the intent in her eyes, and the green of his own deepened drastically, a muscle sliding vertically in his strong throat. She let just the tips of her breasts meet his chest. “Do you ever get alone time on the boat?”

“If I need time alone, I make it,” he rasped. “I’ve needed a lot of it lately.” Which was as good as an admission that he’d masturbated on board while

thinking of her. Feminine pleasure turned to slickness between her thighs. “Then, what about private pictures? Just for you.” She rubbed her breasts side to side, and his breath stuttered. “Would you like some of those?”

His eyelids went to half-mast. “God, yes.”

She bit her lip, stepped back. “Take out your phone.”

Brendan reached back and removed his cell from his back pocket, not taking his eyes off Piper once while opening his camera. Then he nodded once to let her know he was ready.

She’d always liked being the center of attention, but having this man’s undivided focus was thrilling in an entirely new way. Because her heart was involved.

Heavily, apparently.

It knocked impatiently against her ribs, echoing in her ears as she shrugged off the jacket she’d worn and hung it neatly on one corner of Brendan’s bed. The boat groaned and sighed beneath their feet as she skimmed her palms up the front of her body, over her breasts, squeezing, then coasting back down to collect the hem, slowly easing the garment up and off, leaving her clad in just a red denim skirt and ballet flats. She stacked her hands behind her head, dropped a hip, dragged her lower lip through her teeth. Let it go with a pop.

He exhaled a pained laugh, shook his head. “*Fuck.*” “We’ll get to that.”

Brendan’s nostrils flared as he lifted the phone and set off the electronic shutter.

*Click.*

She unbuttoned her skirt next, turning around while lowering the zipper. With a flirty look over her shoulder, she let the red bottoms drop. Hannah had been pretty hilarious, not packing Piper underwear or a bra, but Brendan’s reaction to her bare backside was

definitely worth any chafing that had occurred. Yeah, it was all forgiven when he took an involuntary step forward, his chest heaving. *Click. Click. Click.*

She braced a hand on the wall and leaned forward slightly, arching her back and swinging her hips to pop that booty out—*CLICK*—and that was all she wrote.

Brendan dropped the phone and crossed to her in one lunge.

He stooped down and picked her up, tossing her with a bounce onto his bed, covering her naked body with his fully clothed one, and slamming his mouth down on top of hers. And oh Lord, oh Lord, that contrast fired off

flamethrowers in her blood. She was vulnerable and coveted and lusted after, and it was everything. Everything.

“This bed isn’t strong enough to survive what I’m going to do to you,” Brendan growled against her mouth, capturing her lips again in a kiss fraught with male sexual frustration. It let her know in no uncertain terms that she was the source and he’d be exacting revenge.

*Take it. Take it.*

Without breaking contact with her mouth, Brendan’s hand wedged down between them and wrestled his zipper down, the desperation of his jerky movements exciting her like nothing else, dampening the folds between her legs. “Hurry,” she begged, biting at his lips. “Hurry.”

“Goddammit, Piper, you make me so fucking hard.” They both pushed down the waistband of his boxer briefs, hands colliding, tongues stroking into each other’s mouths, Piper teasing, Brendan aggressing. Finally, his shaft was free, and he winced, sucked in a breath, wrapping a fist around the thickness of it. “Tell me you’re wet. Tell me to put it in.”

“I’m so wet,” she moaned, lifting her hips, running the insides of her knees up and down his heaving rib cage. “I’m ready. I need you. Rough as you can.”

That full, smooth dome pressed up against her entrance, and she braced, one hand flying to his shoulder, the other to the wooden bunk rail. And still she wasn’t prepared for the savagery of that first thrust. With a hoarse roar, his hips drove Piper up the narrow bed, his thickness invading all available space within her, and without allowing her time to acclimate, he was already pumping feverishly, rocking the bed with staccato squeaks.

Piper’s mouth was permanently wide open against his shoulder, her eyes watering with the force of pleasure. Pleasure from having his hard sex smacking through her wetness like it owned the joint, his calloused hands shoving her knees down, opening her wider

for his convenience. Pleasure from having brought this vital man to his proverbial knees with need. God help her, she loved that. Knew he loved being challenged. Knew he loved that she loved challenging him. Perfect, perfect, perfect.

“Scream for it, baby,” he panted, raking her ear with his open mouth. “Whine for my cock. No one can hear us.”

A lid came off inside of her, whatever was left of her inhibitions hopping out and running wild on tiny legs. She choked on her first attempts to call his name, because the force he was exerting on top of her was so intense, his

huge body surging between her legs without cease—and still fully clothed while she remained bare. Why was that so sinfully hot?

“Brendan,” she gasped. Then louder, “Brendan. You’re so good. It’s *so good*.”

“I’ll never lie in this bed again without having to jerk off.” His hand came up to frame her jaw, applying just enough pressure while looking her square in the eye that another rush of wetness coated her sex, aiding him in his destruction of her senses. “You love knowing that, don’t you? You love making me fucking crazy.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “Sure you want to be my boyfriend?”

“Yes,” he growled, and slammed into her, holding still, deep, his pained face dropping into the crook of her neck. “And don’t call me that right now or I’m going to come.”

*Oh. Jesus.* That confession sent a contracting ripple through Piper’s core, and she let out a strangled sob, her hands flying to Brendan’s ass inside his loosened jeans, fingernails sinking in and yanking him, scraping pathways into his flesh. “Oh my God. Now. Now.”

“*Fuck*,” he ground out, picking up his blistering pace again, the sound of wet slaps echoing in the tiny room. “Fuck it. I can’t stop.” She milked him with her intimate muscles, and he moaned, pumped harder, rattling the bed beneath them. “That make you hot, baby? Hearing how being your man is going to get me off? Get your boyfriend off? Say it again.”

She ran her nails down his hard, flexing butt and dug them in, whispering, “My boyfriend fucks me so right, I let him come inside me whenever he wants.” A smile, dazed and wicked, curved her lips when she snuck her middle finger down the split of his backside and cinched it inside the puckered entrance. “He knows just how to earn it.”

Piper had been hovering right on the edge of her own orgasm when she purred those last three words, but Brendan’s reaction pushed her even closer to oblivion. She watched through an opaque cloud of gathering bliss as he barked a shocked curse, his hips punching forward and back in desperation, neck tendons looking ready to snap.

“Christ, I’m done. I’m done. And you better fucking come with me, Piper,” he rasped, reaching down and fondling her clit with his thumb. “I satisfy my girlfriend’s pussy every time.”

And, oh God—*boom*—she fired out of the cannon. Her knees shot up and hugged his body, back arching as she screamed, shook, slapped at his shoulders, all while tears rolled down her temples. It wouldn’t end. The hot,

grinding pulsations wouldn’t end, especially when Brendan drove deep, deep inside of her, stilled and then shuddered violently, his hips moving in disjointed patterns, the volume of his moans rivaling her scream that still lingered in the air. She writhed underneath him, trying to find the bottom of the pleasure well, but until his mouth landed on hers, anchoring her, she didn’t realize . . . didn’t realize the bottom of the well wasn’t physical. She needed their emotional connection to calm herself down. Needed him, his heart, his Brendan-ness. As soon as their lips met, her heart sighed happily and rolled over, languidness traveling through her limbs and making her go boneless.

“Shhh, honey.” He breathed hard, his fingers shaking as they stroked the side of her face. “I’ve got you. I’ve always got you.”

She didn’t look away. “I know.”

Satisfaction filtered into his silver-green eyes. “Good.”

Brendan eased off of Piper and disappeared into the bathroom, coming back with zipped jeans and paper towels, wiping off the insides of her thighs and kissing sensitive spots as he cleaned. Then he joined her in the bed, both of them turning onto their sides, her back up against his chest, a possessive arm wrapped around her waist.

Piper was slipping into a drowsy slumber when Brendan rumbled the question in her ear. “So are we going to just *not* talk about the finger thing?”

The boat rocked steadily in the sunshine as they laughed and laughed some more. And five miles from land, it was easy to pretend no hard decisions would have to be made.

Sooner rather than later.