

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 22 -

They pulled into Grays Harbor that evening. Brendan had planned to be back earlier, but Piper had fallen asleep on his chest, and a bulldozer couldn't have moved him.

There she went again, changing his plans. Taking a red pen to his routines.

As he parked his truck in front of No Name and glanced across the console at Piper, he thought back to the conversation on the boat. They'd managed to clarify a lot of unspoken issues between them. His marriage, her fears about his profession, and most important, the way she viewed herself. All that talk, all that clearing the air, led to her staying in Westport, whether she was willing to discuss it yet or not. What would it take for her to consider it?

He was asking for a lot of sacrifice on Piper's part. She would have to leave her home, her friends, and everything she'd ever known.

Hannah, too, eventually, when she went back to LA.

Simply breaking free of his patterns didn't even come close to what he was asking of Piper. Compared to what—to *whom*—he would get in return, that was nothing.

And that bothered him. A lot.

Made him feel like a selfish bastard.

"Hey." Piper leaned across to the driver's seat and kissed his shoulder. "What's with the scary frown?"

He shook his head, debating whether or not to be honest. There had been a lot of honesty between them on the boat, and it had cleared their most pressing obstacles. Made the apprehension of what was to come feel mitigated. Manageable. But he couldn't bring himself to remind her of the unbalanced scales. Didn't want her thinking about it or considering the issue

too closely. Not yet, when he hadn't been given enough time to find a solution.

Was there a fucking solution?

"I was just thinking about not having you in my bed tonight," Brendan said finally, glad he didn't need to lie. Not completely. "I want you there."

"Me too." She had the nerve to blush and avert her eyes after what they'd done on the boat? Goddamn. This woman. He wanted to spend decade upon decade deciphering all

the little components that made her up. "But it's not fair to Hannah. She's in Westport because of me and I can't keep leaving her alone."

"I know," he grumbled.

"I'll text you," she coaxed. "And don't forget about your shiny new nudes."

"Piper, even when I'm dead I won't forget them."

She shimmied her shoulders, pleased. "Okay, well. Good. So, I guess this is where we do the big, dramatic boyfriend-girlfriend kiss and act like we won't see each other for a year."

Brendan sighed. "I always thought it was ridiculous, the way the guys can't peel themselves off their wives and girlfriends at the dock. Pissed they're making us late." He regarded his beautiful girlfriend stonily. "I'll be surprised if I don't try and carry you over my shoulder onto the boat next time. Take you with me."

"Really?" She sat up straighter. "Would you?"

"*Hell* no. What if there was a storm or you got hurt?" Why was he suddenly sweating? His pulse wasn't functioning the way it was supposed to, speeding up and tripping all over itself. "I'd lose my shit, Piper."

"Hannah would call this a double standard."

"She can call it whatever she wants," he said gruffly. "You stay on land unless it's a short trip like today. And *I'm* with you. Please."

Piper was battling a smile. "Well, since you said please, I guess I'll turn down all of my fishing boat invitations."

Even though she was being sarcastic, Brendan grunted, satisfied. "You said something about a big dramatic kiss," he reminded her, reaching over to unbuckle her seat belt, brushing a knuckle over her nipples, one at a time, as he took his hand back. They puckered under his gaze, her hips shifting on the seat. She cut off his miserable groan by leaning over, tugging his beard until he met her halfway, and kissing him. Lightly at first, then they surged

together and sank into a long, wet sampling of lips and tongues, their breaths shuddering out between them.

They broke apart with reluctant sighs. "Mmmm." She blinked up at him, slid back into her seat, and pushed open the door. "Bye, Captain."

Brendan watched her disappear into the building and dragged a hand down his face.

If Piper Bellinger was going to kill him, he'd die a happy man.

He started to drive home but found himself turning toward Fox's place instead. His best friend lived in an apartment near the harbor, a stone's throw from the water, and where Brendan's house had an air of stability, Fox's was as temporary as it got. cursory paint job, basic furniture, and a huge-ass television. In other words, a single man's dwelling. Brendan didn't tend to visit Fox at home very often, since they saw each other for days—often weeks—at a time on the boat. Not to mention, Brendan had his routines, and they didn't involve going to bars or meeting women or any of the things Fox did with his spare time.

But this whole business of Piper sacrificing everything while he gave very little? It was pushing up under his skin like tree roots. Turning the problem over and over in his mind wasn't solving it. Maybe he needed to address his worries out loud, just in case he was missing something. An easy solution. Hell, it was worth a shot. Better than going home and stewing about it alone.

Fox opened the door in sweatpants and bare feet, a bottle of beer in his hand. The sounds of a baseball game drifted into the breezeway from behind his skipper. "Cap." His brow was knitted. "What's up? Something wrong?"

"No. Move." He pushed past Fox into the apartment, tipping his head at the beer. "You got another one of those?"

"Got a dozen or so. Help yourself. Fridge."

Brendan grunted. He took a beer from the fridge and twisted the cap off with his hand, joining Fox in front of the baseball game, putting the men on opposite sides of the couch. He tried to focus on what was happening on the screen, but his problem-solver brain wasn't having it. Five or so minutes passed before Fox said anything.

"You going to tell me why you're chewing nails over there?" Fox held up a hand. "I mean, chewing nails is kind of your default, but you don't usually do it on my couch."

"You have company coming over or something?"

"Jesus, no." His friend snorted. "You know I don't date local."

"Yeah," Brendan said. "Speaking of which, you usually head to Seattle after a payday like the one we just had. What are you doing here?"

Fox shrugged, stared at the TV. "Don't know. Just wasn't feeling the trip this time."

Brendan waited for his friend to elaborate. When he didn't seem inclined to, Brendan guessed there was no point in putting off the reason for his visit anymore. "These women you meet in Seattle. You've never been . . . serious about any of them, right?"

"I think you're missing the point of leaving Westport to meet women." He saluted with his beer bottle. "Sorry, sweetheart. Just in town for the night. Take it or leave it." He tipped the drink to his mouth. "They always take it, in case that wasn't obvious."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." Fox laughed. "Anyway, why are you asking me about—" He cut himself off with an expression of dawning comprehension. "Did you come here for advice on women?"

Brendan scoffed. "That's a stretch."

"You did, didn't you? Son of a bitch." Fox grinned. "Piper still giving you a problem?"

"Who ever said she was a problem?" Brendan shouted.

"Relax, Cap. I meant . . ." Fox searched the ceiling for the correct wording. "Have you gotten her out of your system?"

As though such a thing was possible? "No." "You haven't slept with her?"

Fuck. He didn't like talking about this. What happened between him and Piper should be private. "I'm not answering that," he growled.

Fox looked impressed. "You have, then. So what is the problem?"

Brendan stared. "I think the problem might be that I came to you for advice."

His friend waved off the insult. "Just ask me what you want to know. I'm actually pretty fucking flattered that you came to me. I know two things: fishing and women. And those two things have a lot of similarities. When you're fishing, you use bait, right?" He pointed at his smile. "I've got your woman bait right here."

"Jesus Christ."

"Next you've got the hook. That's your opening line."

A hole opened in the center of Brendan's stomach. "My opening line to

Piper was basically telling her to go home."

"Yeah, I'm pretty surprised that worked myself." He rubbed at the line between his brows. "Where was I with my analogy?"

"You were done."

“No, I wasn’t. Once she’s hooked, you just have to reel her in.” He leaned forward and braced his forearms on his knees. “Sounds like you’ve already done all that, though. Unless . . . Wait, the goal was just sex, right?”

“I didn’t have a fucking goal. Not at the beginning. Or I probably wouldn’t have shouted at her, called her purse ugly, and strongly suggested she go home.” Suddenly sick to his stomach, Brendan slapped down the beer bottle and pushed to his feet. “God, I’m lucky she’s giving me the time of day *at all*. Now I have the nerve to try and make her stay here for me? Am I insane?”

Fox gave a low whistle. “Okay, things have progressed a lot since the last time we talked.” His friend’s bemusement was alarming. “You want *that* girl to stay in *this* town?”

Brendan massaged the pressure in his chest. “Don’t say it like that.”

A beat of silence passed. “I’m out of my depth on this one, Cap. I don’t have any advice on how to actually keep the fish *in* the boat. I usually just let them swim off again.”

“Fuck sake. Stop with the analogy.” “It’s a good one and you know it.”

Brendan sat back down, clasped his hands between his knees. “If she went back to LA, I’d have no choice but to let her. My job is here. A crew who depends on me.”

“Not to mention, you’d go crazy there. It’s not you. You . . . *are* Westport.”

“So that leaves Piper to give up everything.” His voice sounded bleak. “How can I ask her to do that?”

Fox shook his head. “I don’t know. But she’d be gaining you.” He shrugged. “It’s probably not a *total* shit trade.”

“Thanks,” Brendan said drily, before sobering. “If she’s happy, she won’t leave. That stands to reason, right? But what do women like? What makes them happy?”

Fox pointed to his crotch.

Brendan shook his head slowly. “You’re an idiot.”

The man chuckled. “What do women *like*?” This time, he seemed to

actually consider the question. “I don’t think there’s any one thing. It depends on the woman.” He jerked a shoulder, went back to looking at the ball game. “Take Piper’s sister, for example. Hannah. She likes records, right? If I wanted to make her happy, I’d bring her to Seattle tomorrow. There’s a vinyl expo happening at the convention center.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“It just popped up on the internet. I don’t know,” Fox explained, a little too quickly. “The point is, you have to think about the specific woman. They don’t all like flowers and chocolate.”

“Right.”

Fox started to say something else, but a series of notes filled the room. It took Brendan a moment to realize his phone was ringing. He shifted on the couch and tugged it out of his back pocket. “Piper,” he said, hitting the answer button immediately, trying not to be obvious that just the promise of hearing her voice sent his pulse into chaos. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. The building is still intact.” She sounded breezy, relaxed, totally unaware that he was across town trying to unlock whatever magic would give them a chance for a future. “Um, would it be a lot to ask to borrow your truck tomorrow? There is this amazing, artsy chick on Marketplace selling a shabby chic chandelier that we need, like, absolutely need, for the bar. For *forty bucks*. But we have to pick it up. She’s located between here and Seattle.”

“About an hour drive,” he heard Hannah call in the background.

“About an hour drive,” Piper repeated. “We were trying to figure out the cost of an Uber, but then I remembered I have a hot boyfriend with a truck.” She paused. “This wouldn’t mess with any of your routines, would it?”

His gut kicked. Routines.

Asking Piper to remain in Westport would require her to have a lot of faith in him. To take a major leap. Showing Piper how far he’d come in terms of bucking his habits might make a difference when it came time for her to decide whether or not to return to LA. If he could give her some of what she was missing in LA, he’d close the gap on that leap he’d eventually ask for.

Brendan could be spontaneous.

He could surprise her. Make her happy. Provide her with what she loved. Couldn’t he?

Yeah. He could. Actually, he was looking forward to it.

“Why don’t we pick up your chandelier and keep driving to Seattle? We could stay the night and head back to Westport on Monday.”

Brendan lifted an eyebrow at Fox. Fox nodded, impressed. “Really?” Piper breathed a laugh. “What would we do in Seattle?”

No hesitation. "There's a vinyl expo at the convention center. Hannah might like it."

"A vinyl expo?" Hannah yelled in the background, followed by the sound of feet pounding closer on the wood floor. "Oh, um . . . yeah, safe to say she's interested." A beat passed. "How did you even know this expo was taking place?"

Piper's question must have been loud enough to hear through the receiver, because Fox was already shaking his head. "Fox mentioned it." Brendan gave him the finger. "He's going."

The look of betrayal on his friend's face was almost enough to shame Brendan. Almost. The chance to spend more time with his girlfriend trumped his own dishonor. God knew Piper was a distraction, and he didn't want Hannah to be unsafe in a strange city. Piper wouldn't, either.

"So we'd all go together?" Piper asked, sounding amused and excited all at once.

"Yeah."

She laughed. "Okay. It sounds fun! We'll see you tomorrow." Her voice dropped a few octaves, emerged sounding a little hesitant. "Brendan . . . I miss you."

His heart climbed up into his throat. "I miss you, too." They hung up.

Fox jabbed the air with a finger. "You owe me. Big time."

"You're right. I do." Brendan headed for the door, ready for a night of planning. "How about I give you the *Della Ray*?"

He closed the door on his friend's stupefied expression.