

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 25 -

Piper sniffed Brendan's neck and pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Nope, it's not the right one yet. Too citrusy."

Brendan leaned an elbow on the glass counter, half amused, half impatient. "Piper, you're going to run out of places to spray me."

It was getting later in the afternoon, and after lunch downtown—during which Brendan tried his first tiramisu and *liked* it!—they were back at the hotel. Her boyfriend had seemed quite inclined to get her upstairs as fast as possible, but she'd dragged him into a men's shop just off the lobby to see if they could find him a signature scent.

Was she stalling? Maybe a little.

For some reason, her nerves were popping.

Which was crazy. So they were going upstairs to get it on. They'd done that twice before, right? There was no reason for the extra race of bubbles in her bloodstream. Except a new torrent of them was set loose every time Brendan kissed her knuckles or put an arm around her shoulder. And even in the air conditioning, the skin of her neck flamed, and she found herself taking deep, deep breaths, attempting to still her sprinting heart.

If she could just focus on finding him the perfect cologne, that would give her enough time to relax. Or at least figure out why she couldn't.

She leaned across the glass to pluck up a square, sage-colored bottle, and Brendan splayed a hand on the small of her back. Casually. But her pulse spiked like she was taking a lie detector test and being questioned about her past spending habits. Mentally shaking herself, she lifted the bottle and took a sniff. "Oh," she whispered, smelling it again to be sure. "This is it. This is your scent."

And maybe it was the craziest thing, but finding that elusive essence of Brendan, holding it right there in her hand and having it flood her senses . . . it dropped that final veil that had been obscuring her feelings. She was hopelessly, irrevocably in love with this man.

The change in their surroundings made it impossible not to acknowledge every little reason she gravitated toward him. His honor, his patience, his dependability and steadfast nature. How he could lead and be respected without being power hungry. His love of nature and tradition and *home*. The way he so delicately handled his father-in-law's feelings even got to her.

As soon as she acknowledged the depth of her feelings, those three little words threatened to trip out of her mouth. *That* was the source of her nerves. Because where would that leave her? In a relationship. A permanent one. Not *only* with this man but with Westport.

“Piper,” Brendan said urgently. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am,” she responded, far too brightly. “I—I found it. It’s perfect.”

His eyebrow raise was skeptical as he turned the bottle around. “Splendid Wood?”

“See? You were made for each other.” She stared into his eyes like a lovesick puppy for several too-long seconds, before breaking the spell. “Um, we have to smell it on you, though.”

Brendan was regarding her with a puckered brow, practically confirming that her behavior was off. “You’ve already sprayed my wrists and both sides of my neck,” he said. “There’s nothing left.”

“Your chest?” She looked around the small men’s shop. The clerk was busy on the other side with another customer. “Just a quick sniff test. So we don’t waste money.” She beamed. “Oh, listen to me, Brendan! I’m practically cutting coupons here.”

Affection flashed in his face. “Be quick,” he growled, unbuttoning the top three buttons of his flannel. “I’m going to need three showers to get this stuff off.”

Piper danced in place, excited by the imminent breakthrough. This was going to be perfect. She just knew it. With an effort, she held back her squeal and released a puff of mist into Brendan’s chest hair while he held open the flannel. She leaned in, burying her nose there, inhaling the combination of the earthiness and Brendan’s salt water . . . and oh Lord, yes, she was in love all right. Her brain sighed with total contentment and joy at having captured

him, found a way to breathe him in anytime she wanted. She must have stayed there in a dreamlike state, exhaling gustily, for long moments, because Brendan finally chuckled, and she opened her eyes.

“What are you thinking about down there?”

That if I’m not careful, there are going to be little sea captain babies scampering around.

And how bad did that sound, anyway? Not bad at all. Kind of amazing, actually.

“I was thinking that I’m proud of you,” she finally answered, rebuttoning his shirt. “You tried tiramisu today. And . . . and you just plan trips to Seattle now. On a whim. You’re like a new man. And I was thinking . . .”

How she'd changed a lot, too, since coming to Westport. Since meeting Brendan. What she'd thought before was living life to the fullest had actually been living life for other people to watch. To gawk at. She wouldn't lie to herself and pretend one month had completely cured her of her deeply rooted yen for attention. For praise. For what she'd once interpreted as love. Now, though? She was participating in her own life. Not just posing and pretending. The world was so much bigger than her, and she was really seeing it now. She was really looking.

In the dressing room while trying on jeans, it didn't even occur to her to snap a selfie in the mirror. She just wanted to be there, in the moment, with this man. Because the way he made her feel was three million times better than the way three million strangers made her feel.

Holy God. Was she going to tell Brendan she loved him? Yeah.

Yeah, she was.

If she thought breaking into a rooftop pool and summoning the police department was crazy, this felt a million times riskier. This was like rappelling down the side of that LA hotel with sticks of dynamite poking out of her ears. Because she was new at this, and the road to finding out exactly where she fit into her new place was a long one.

What if, ultimately, she didn't fit at all?

The way she'd felt when Adrian cut her loose would be laughable compared to disappointing Brendan. He knew exactly who he was (commander of a vessel), what he wanted (a fleet of boats), and how to get it (apparently make millions of dollars and just have boats built??). Meanwhile, she'd spent a week trying to find a chandelier with the right vibe.

This could be a disaster.

But she looked into his eyes now and heard his words echo back from the deck of the *Della Ray*. *You have perseverance, character, and a huge heart.*

And she chose to believe him. She chose to believe in herself. "Brendan, I—"

Her phone went nuts in her purse. Loud, scattered notes that she didn't immediately place because it had been so long since hearing them.

"Oh." She reared back a little. "That's Kirby's ringtone."

"Kirby." His brows snuck together. "The girl who turned you in to the police?"

“The one and only. She hasn’t called me since I left.” Something told her not to, but she unzipped her purse and took out the phone anyway, weighing it in her hand. “I wonder if something is wrong. Maybe I should answer.”

Brendan said nothing, just studied her face.

Her indecision lasted too long, and the phone stopped screaming.

She blew out a breath of relief, glad the decision had been taken out of her hands—and then the phone started blowing up. It wasn’t just Kirby calling again; it was text messages from names she vaguely recognized, email pings .

. . and now another number with an LA area code was calling on the other line. What was going on?

“I guess I should take this,” she muttered, frowning. “Can I meet you by the elevators?”

“Yeah,” Brendan said after a moment, seeming like he wanted to say more. “It’s just a phone call.”

When that statement came out sounding like she was trying to reassure herself, too, she cut her losses and left the shop. Was it just a phone call, though? Her finger hovered over the green answer button. This was the first time her LA life had touched her since coming to Washington. She hadn’t even answered yet, but it felt like someone was shaking her in bed, trying to wake her up from a dream.

“You’re being ridiculous,” she scolded herself quietly, hitting talk. “Hey, Kirby. Really stretched that apology window, didn’t you, babe?”

Piper frowned at her reflection in the steel elevator bank. Was it her imagination or did she sound completely different talking to her LA friends?

“Piper! I did apologize! Didn’t I? Oh my God, if not, I am, like, down on my knees. Seriously. I was such a terrible friend. I just couldn’t afford for my dad to cut me off.”

Why, oh, why did she answer the call? “Yeah, neither could I.” It might have something to do with the endless dings and vibrations happening against her ear. “Look, it’s fine, Kirby. I don’t hold it against you. What’s up?”

“What’s *up*? Are you serious?” A few honks fired off in the background, the sound of a bus motoring past. “Have you seen the cover of *LA Weekly*?”

“No,” she said slowly.

“You are on it—and looking like a smoke show, bitch. Oh my God, *the headline*, Piper. ‘A Party Princess’s Vanishing Act.’ Everyone is freaking out.”

Her temples started to pound. “I don’t understand.”

“Go look at their Instagram. The post is blowing up.” She squealed. “The gist of the article is that you threw the party of the decade and then disappeared. It’s like a giant mystery, Piper. You’re like, fucking *Banksy* or something. Everyone wants to know why you went from Wilshire Boulevard to some random harbor. You didn’t even tag your location! People are dying for details.”

“Really?” She found a bench and fell onto it, trying to puzzle through the unexpected news. “No one cared yesterday.”

Kirby ignored that. “More importantly, they want to know when you’ll come back and reclaim your throne! Which brings me to the main point of my phone call.” She exhaled sharply. “Let me throw you a welcome back party. I’ve already got the venue lined up. Exclusive invites only. The Party Princess Returns. I might have leaked the idea to a few designers, some beverage companies, and they are offering to pay you, Piper. A whole lot of money to walk out in their dress, drink their shit on camera. I’m talking about six figures. Let’s do this. Let’s make you a fucking legend.”

A prickle climbed Piper’s arm, and she looked up to find Brendan standing a few yards away, holding her bag of jeans and a smaller one, which she assumed contained the cologne. He wasn’t close enough to hear the conversation, but his expression told her he sensed the gravity of the phone call.

Was the phone call that important, though? This rise in popularity would be fleeting, fast. She’d have to ride the wave as far as possible, then immediately start trying to find a fresh way to be relevant. Compared to the man she loved being out on a boat in a storm . . . or a wave coming out of nowhere and snatching someone off the deck . . . a trip back into the limelight

didn’t seem that significant.

A month ago, this unexpected windfall of notoriety would have been the greatest thing that ever happened in her life.

Now it mostly left her hollow.

Was there a nagging part of Piper that wanted to fall back into this lifestyle she was guaranteed to be good at? Yes, she’d be lying if she said there wasn’t. It would be second nature to strut into a dark club to the perfect song and be applauded for accomplishing absolutely nothing but being pretty and rich and photogenic.

“Piper. Are you there?”

“Yeah,” she croaked, her eyes still locked with Brendan’s. “I can’t commit.”

“Yes, you can,” Kirby said, exasperated. “Look, I heard Daniel slashed your funds, but if you do this party, you’ll have enough cash to move out, do your own thing. Maybe we could even revamp Pucker Up now that you have some extra clout! I’ll buy you the plane ticket back to LA, all right? You can stay in my guest room. Done and done. I booked the venue for September seventh. Everywhere was already taken for Labor Day.”

“September seventh?” Piper massaged the center of her forehead. “Isn’t that a Tuesday?”

“So? What are you, forty?”

God. This was her best friend? “Kirby, I have to go. I’ll think about it.” “Are you insane? There is nothing to think about. Paris is on my short list

to DJ this thing—and she’s at the *bottom*. This is the one we’ll be talking about for the rest of our lives.”

Brendan was coming closer, his gaze laser-focused on her face.

I can’t tell him.

She didn’t want to tell him about any of this. *LA Weekly*. The party being planned in her honor. Her splashy new title. Any of it.

If she made a pro/con list of LA versus Westport, *Piper loves Brendan* would be in the pro-Westport column and that outweighed *any* con. They couldn’t discuss a potential return to LA without Piper revealing her feelings, and then . . . how could she do anything but turn the opportunity down after telling him those three words? But she wasn’t one hundred percent ready to say no to Kirby. Not just yet. If she said no to this triumphant return to the scene she’d lived for the last decade, she’d be saying yes to Westport. Yes to being with this man who endangered himself as a matter of course. Yes to

starting over from scratch.

Kirby was rambling in her ear about a Burberry-inspired color scheme and a signature drink called the Horny Heiress.

“Okay, thanks, Kirby. I miss you, too. Have to go. Bye.” “Don’t you dare hang—”

Piper hung up quickly and powered down her phone, hopping to her feet. “Hey.” She directed her most winning and hopefully distracting smile at Brendan. “You bought the cologne? I wanted to get it for you as a gift.”

“If it makes you want to smell me in public, I’ll consider it an investment.” He paused, nodding at her phone. “Everything okay?”

“What? Yes.” *Stop fluttering your hands.* “Just some gossip that Kirby thought was urgent. Spoiler: it’s not. Let’s go upstairs, right?”

Piper sprung forward and hit the call button, praising the saints when an empty car to their immediate left opened. She took Brendan’s thick wrist, grateful when he allowed himself to be dragged inside. And then she pushed him up against the elevator wall and utilized two of her favorite skills— avoidance and distraction—to keep him from asking any more questions.

Questions she didn’t want to ask herself, either.