

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 31 -

Oh, she'd made a huge mistake.

Huge.

Piper sat astride a mechanical unicorn, preparing to be elevated through a trapdoor onto a stage. Kirby shoved a puffy princess wand into her hand, and Piper stared at the object, lamenting the fact that she couldn't magically wish herself out of this situation.

Her name was being chanted by hundreds of people overhead.

Their feet stomped on the floor of the club, shaking the ceiling. Behind the scenes, people kept coming over to her, snapping selfies without permission, and Piper imagined she looked shell-shocked in every single one of them.

This was exactly what she'd always wanted. Fame, recognition, parties thrown in her honor.

And all she wanted now was to go home.

Not to Bel-Air. No, she wanted to be in the recharging station. That was home.

Brendan was home.

The chanting grew louder along with the stomping, and Kirby danced in a circle around Piper, squealing. "Savor the anticipation, bitch! As soon as they start playing your song, the hydraulics are going to bring you up slowly. When you wave the wand, the lighting guy is going to make it look like you're sprinkling fairy dust. It looks so real. People are going to shit."

Okay, fine, that part was pretty cool. "What song is it?"

"'Girls Just Want to Have Fun' remixed with 'Sexy and I Know It.' Obviously."

"Oh yeah. Obviously."

Kirby fanned her armpits. "Try and time your fairy flicks with the beat, you know?"

Piper swallowed, looking down at her Lhuillier dress, her black garters peeking out beneath the hem on either side of the unicorn. Getting dressed had been a fun distraction, as had primping and getting her hair professionally styled, but . . . now that the time had come to make her "triumphant" return, she felt kind of . . . counterfeit.

Her heart was in smithereens.

She didn't *want* to enter a club on a hydraulic unicorn.

She didn't want to have her picture taken and plastered all over social media. There would never be anything wrong with having a good time. Or dancing and dressing how she chose to dress. But when she'd gone to Westport and not one of these people had called or texted or been interested in the aftermath of the party they'd enjoyed, she'd gotten a glimpse at how phony it all was. How quickly the fanfare went away.

When the time came for her to rise up through the stage, none of the applause would be for Piper. For the real Piper. It would be a celebration of her building a successful image. And that image didn't mean anything. It didn't count. She thought slipping back into this scene would be easy, that she'd just sink into it and revel, be numb for a little while. But all she could think about was . . . who would have coffee with Opal tomorrow? Who would walk Abe to the museum?

Those visits made her feel a million times better than the momentary bursts of internet stardom. Because it was just her, living in real moments, not fabricating them for the entertainment of others.

Making over the bar with her sister, standing on the deck of a boat with the love of her life's arms around her, running through the harbor mist, making friends who seemed interested in her and not what she could do for them. Those things counted.

This was all for show, and participating in it made Piper feel less true to herself. Like she was selling herself short.

This fame she'd always reached for was finally reaching back, and she wasn't interested.

Piper, Piper, Piper.

The chants were deafening now, but she only wanted to hear one voice saying her name. Why didn't she stay and fight for him? What was he doing

now?

"Brendan," she whispered, the yearning for him so intense she almost doubled over. "I'm sorry, I miss you. I'm sorry."

"What?" Kirby shouted over the noise. "Okay, you're going up. Hold on, bitch!"

"No, wait." Piper swiped at her damp eyes. "I want to get off. Let me off."

Kirby looked at her like she was insane. "It's too late. You're already moving."

And she was. So much faster than she'd expected. This unicorn really had some get-up-and-go.

Piper clung to the synthetic mane and held her breath, looking up to watch the stage doors slide open above her. *Dammit. Dammit.* There was no turning back. She could jump, but she'd almost certainly break an ankle in these shoes. She'd break these beautiful Tom Ford heels, too, and that went against her very religion.

Her head was about to clear the stage.

With a deep breath, Piper sat up straighter and smiled, waving at the crowd of people who were going wild. For her. It was an out-of-body experience, being suspended above their heads, and she didn't like it. Didn't want to be there, sitting like a jackass on this unicorn while hundreds of people captured her image on their phones.

I want to go home. I just want to go home.

The unicorn finally settled in on the stage. Great. She was already searching for the closest exit. But when she climbed off, she'd flash the entire club. There was no other way to stay modest than to block her crotch with the unicorn hair and awkwardly slide off, which she did now, people pressing in against the stage. She didn't just feel like a trapped animal. She was one. There was no way out.

Piper turned, searching for an avenue of escape—and there he was.

Brendan? No, it couldn't be. Her sea captain didn't belong in LA. They were two entities that didn't make sense in the same space.

She held up a hand to block the flashing strobe light, and God. *My God.* He really was there, standing a foot taller than everyone in the crowd, bearded and beautiful and steady and salt of the earth. They locked eyes, and he slowly pulled the beanie off his head, holding it to the center of his chest, almost a deferential move—and his expression was a terrible mixture of sadness and wonder. No. She had to get to him. Being this close and not

being in his arms was positively torture. He was there. He was there. "Brendan!" Piper screamed, her voice swallowed up by the noise. But she saw his lips move. Knew he called her name back.

Unable to be parted from him any longer, she dropped to her butt and scooted off the stage, pushing through the tightly packed crowd, praying she was moving in the right direction, because she couldn't see him anymore. Not with the flashing lights and the phones in her face.

"Brendan!"

Hands grabbed at her, making it impossible for her to move. The arms of strangers slung around her neck, pulling her into selfies, hot breath glanced across her neck, her shoulders. No, no, no. She only wanted one touch. One perfect man's touch.

"Piper!"

She heard his deep, panicked voice and spun around in the kaleidoscope of color, flashes going off, disorienting her. Tears were rolling down her face, but she left them there in favor of trying to push through the crowd. "Brendan!"

Adrian appeared in front of her, momentarily distracting Piper from her maze run, because it was all so absurd. She was trying to get to the most wonderfully real human on earth, and this fake, hurtful man-child was blocking her path. Who did he think he was?

"Hey, Piper. I was hoping I'd run into you!" Adrian shouted over the music. "You look fucking amazing. We should get a drink—"

Brendan loomed behind her ex-boyfriend and, without hesitation, flicked him aside like a pesky ant, sending him flying, and Piper wasted no time in launching herself into the recharging station. A sense of rightness took hold in a split second, bringing her back to herself. Back to earth. Brendan lifted her up, locking his arms around her as tight as they would go, and she melted into the embrace like butter. Her legs wrapped around his hips, she buried her face in his neck and sobbed like a baby. "Brendan. Brendan."

"I've got you. I'm right here." Fiercely, he kissed the side of her face, her hair, her temple. "Stay or go, baby? What do you need?"

"Go, please. Please. Get me out of here."

Piper felt Brendan's surprise register—surprise that she wanted to leave?—followed by a tightening of his muscles. One hand cupped the back of her head protectively, and then he was moving through the crowd, ordering people out of his way, and she was positive she'd never, ever been safer in

her entire life. She breathed in the scent of his cologne and clung to his shoulders, secure in her absolute trust of this man. He'd come. After everything, he'd come.

A moment later, they were out on the street, but Brendan didn't stop moving. He carried Piper past the line of gaping onlookers, kept going until the pumping bass faded and relative quiet fell around them. And only then did he stop walking, but he didn't let her go. He walked her into the doorway of a bank and rocked her side to side, his arms like a vise.

"I'm sorry, baby," he grated against her forehead. "I'm so fucking sorry. I shouldn't have left. I should *never* have left or made you cry. Please forgive me."

Piper hiccupped into his neck and nodded; she would forgive him for anything in that moment if he just stayed. But before she could say anything, he continued.

“I *do* have faith in you, Piper. I will never doubt you again. You deserve so much better than what I gave, and it was wrong of me, so wrong, to get angry at you for protecting yourself. You were giving so much already. You give so much to everyone and everything you touch, you incredible fucking girl, and I love you. More than any goddamn ocean, do you hear me? I love you, and I’m falling deeper by the minute, so, baby, please stop crying. You looked so beautiful up there. God, you looked so beautiful and I couldn’t *reach* you.”

His words made her feel like she was floating. They were pure Brendan in their honesty and depth and gruffness and humility. And they were for her.

How wholly he gave himself, this man.

How wholly she wanted to give herself in return.

“I love you, too,” she whispered tremulously, kissing his neck, his mouth, pulling deeply on his firm, welcoming lips. “I love you, too. I love you. I didn’t want to be there tonight. I only wanted to be with you, Brendan. I just wanted to hear your voice so badly.”

“Then I’ll talk until my voice gives out,” he rasped, slanting his lips over the top of hers, breathing into her mouth. Accepting her breath in return. “I’ll love you until my heart gives out. I’ll be your man for a thousand years. Longer if I’m allowed.” With a miserable sound, he kissed the tears off her cheeks. “I messed up so bad, Piper. I let my fear of losing you get between us. It blinded me.” He drew back, waited until she looked at him. Up into all that intensity. “If you need Los Angeles to be happy, then we’ll make it work. I can go up north for crab season and dock the new boat closer to LA the rest

of the year. If you’ll have me back, we’ll make it happen. I won’t let us fail. Just let me love you forever.”

“If I’ll have you back . . .” She exhaled her disbelief, his words taking a moment to actually sink in. Oh wow. Wow. Her knees started to tremble around his hips, love surging up inside of her and filling every part of her that had cracked over the last three days. “You would do that, wouldn’t you? You would change your whole life for me.”

“I’d be honored to. Just say the word.”

“B-Brendan.” Her chest ached almost too much to speak. “When I was falling in love with you, I was falling in love with Westport at the same time. That is my home. Our home. And I don’t want to be anywhere else. I knew it as soon as I got here tonight. Nothing was right. Nothing was right without you.”

“Piper,” he rasped, their mouths heating, seeking. “Say you’re mine again. Be clear. I need you to be clear. I’ve been fucking miserable thinking I lost you forever.”

“I’m yours. Of course I’m yours. I’m sorry I ran. I’m sorry I doubted—” He hushed her with a hard press of lips, his frame heaving with relief.

“Thank Christ,” he said hoarsely. “And no. You did nothing wrong. Nothing.” His thumb brushed against the base of her spine, his body still rocking her side to side. “Everything is going to be okay now. We found our way back. I’ve got you back and I’m not letting you go ever again.”

She clung to him. “Promise?”

“I’ll make the promise every single day.”

A blissful smile bloomed across her face. “I’ll try again with Cross and Daughters. I’ll be stronger next time at the docks. I can be—”

“Oh God, no. Piper.” He ducked his head to make eye contact, his dark brows pulled together. “First of all, you don’t have to be tough. Not all the time. I don’t know who decided my perfect, kind, sweet, incredible girlfriend needed to fit some goddamn mold, but you don’t. You just be Piper, okay? She’s who I’m in love with. She’s the only woman who was made for me. Cry if you want to cry. Dance if you want to dance. Hell, scream at me, if you need to. No one gets to tell you how to act or feel when I leave. *No one*. And, baby . . .” He puffed a laugh. “When I got to the bar, it was packed. Everyone *loves* it. People just move at a different pace in Westport. They’re not all on a strict schedule like me.”

“Wait. Really? It was packed?” She gasped. “Oh no. Hannah—”

“Is fine. Fox jumped in to help. And she helped me find you tonight.”

“Oh! Oh. I’m so glad.” Happiness bubbled up inside of her chest, and she gave a watery laugh. “We better get home, then. I guess I have a bar to run.”

Brendan brought their mouths together and kissed her with painstaking affection that quickly started to burn. Her throaty moan met his urgent growl, their tongues winding deep, his hand scraping down to palm her backside. “We could go home tonight,” he rumbled, tilting his hips so she could feel the firm rise of his need. “Or we could walk across the street to my hotel room and worry about getting home in the morning.”

A sigh shuddered out. “Why aren’t we already there?”

“Give me a minute.” He jolted into a stride across the quiet avenue that turned into a jog, jostling her all over the place, sending her laughter ringing down the night-draped street, then a euphoric squeal when he threw her over his wide fisherman’s shoulder.

“So . . .” he said when they were halfway through the hotel lobby, scandalizing everyone in their wake. “Are we just *not* going to talk about the mechanical unicorn?”

“I love you,” she gasped through mirthful tears. “So much.” “Ah, Piper.” His voice shook with emotion. “I love you, too.”