

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 11

Brendan sat in the wheelhouse of the *Della Ray* stabbing at the screen of his phone.

He should have been helping the crew load groceries and the ice they would need to keep the fish fresh in the hold. But they'd be pushing off in ten minutes, and he needed to take advantage of the last remaining minutes of internet access, spotty though it was in the harbor.

He'd downloaded Instagram; now they were asking him for personal information. Did he have to be a member of this stupid thing to look at pictures? Chrissakes. He shouldn't be doing this. Even if Piper had volunteered the information that she was apparently half-naked on this fucking app, he shouldn't be looking. In fact, if he expected to concentrate worth a damn on this trip, he absolutely should not be adding to the treasure trove of Piper imagery already floating around in his head.

First and foremost was the memory of Piper answering the door in those little white panties. White. He wouldn't have figured on that. Maybe sparkly pink or peacock blue. But hell if the white cotton cupping her pussy, a contrast of innocent and sexy, had him sporting a semi an hour later and downloading apps like a goddamn teenager. He'd been grinding his back teeth since he walked out of No Name, bereft over his palms not sliding down the supple curve of her ass—and God, he had no business thinking about that.

Why had she covered herself with the pillow the second time? Had he been so obviously turned on it made her uncomfortable?

Considering that, he frowned. He didn't like the idea of her being nervous. Not around him. Not at all.

"All loaded. Ready to go," Fox said, swinging into the wheelhouse, his

Mariners cap pulled down low over his eyes. But not low enough that Brendan could miss them lighting up. "You downloading Instagram, Cap?"

"Who's downloading Instagram?" Sanders asked, ducking his red curly head under the doorframe. "Who doesn't already have Instagram?"

"People who have better shit to do," Brendan growled, snapping both of their mouths shut. "They're asking me to make a username."

In came a third member of the crew, Deke, his dark brown fingers wrapped around a bottle of Coke as he took a sip. "Username for what?"

Brendan tipped his head back. "Jesus Christ." "Instagram," Sanders said, filling in Deke.

“You’re doing a little Piper recon, aren’t you?” Fox asked, his expression one of pure, everlasting enjoyment. “Downloading a few pictures to keep you warm on the trip?”

“You can do that?” Brendan half shouted. “Anyone can just download pictures of her?”

“Or me, or you, or anyone,” Deke said. “It’s the internet, man.”

Brendan stared at his phone with renewed disgust. As far as he was concerned, this was even more reason to get on this dumb app and see what’s what. “It won’t let me just use my own name as my username.”

“Yeah, probably because about nine hundred Brendan Taggarts joined before you.”

“So what should I use?” “CaptainCutie69,” Fox spat out. “IGotCrabs4U,” Deke supplied. “SlipperyWhenWet.”

Brendan stared. “You’re all fired. Go home.”

“All right, all right, we’ll be serious,” Fox said, holding up his hands. “Did you try CaptainBrendanTaggart?”

He grunted, punched it in with one blunt digit. It took him forever, because his finger was so big, he kept hitting erroneous characters. “Accepted,” he grumbled finally, shifting in the captain’s chair. “Now what?”

Deke settled in next to Sanders, like they were in the middle of goddamn gossip hour. “Search her name,” he said, pulling out his own phone.

Brendan pointed at him. “You better not be looking.” The man pocketed his phone again without another word.

“The captain is a little sensitive about Piper,” Fox explained, still wearing that shit-eating grin. “He doesn’t know what to do with his confusing man

feelings.”

Brendan ignored his friend in favor of typing Piper’s name into the search bar, sighing when a whole list of options came up. “Does the blue check mark mean it’s her?”

“Ooh.” Sanders perked up. “She’s got a check mark?” “Is that good or bad?”

Deke polished off his Coke, letting out a belch that no one reacted to. It was merely a component of the fishing-boat soundtrack. “It means she’s got a big following. Means she’s internet famous, boss.”

Making a low sound in his throat, Brendan punched the check mark . . . and Piper exploded across the screen of his phone. And Christ, he didn't know where the hell to look first. One little square had a picture of her kneeling in the surf at the beach, her back on display, wearing nothing but a thong bikini bottom. He could have stared at her gorgeous ass all day—and he'd definitely be coming back to it later when he was alone—but there was more. So much more. *Thousands* of pictures of Piper.

In another one, she had on a red dress, with lips to match, a martini in her hand, her foot kicking up playfully. More beautiful than anyone had the right to be. He zeroed in on a recent one, from a few weeks ago, and found his mouth dropping open at the spectacle. When she'd told him that story about how she'd gotten arrested and sent to Westport, he'd assumed she'd embellished a little.

Nope.

There she was, among the rowdy crowd, wreathed in smoke and fireworks, arms thrown up. Happy and alive. And was that the number of people who'd clicked the heart?

Over three million?

Brendan dragged a hand down his face.

Piper Bellinger was from a different, flashier planet.

She's out of your league.

Way out.

Remembering how he'd fed her fish and chips last night when she was obviously used to caviar and champagne, he was embarrassed. If he could go back in time and not bring her those stupid takeout menus, he would do it in a heartbeat. God, she must have been laughing at him.

"Well?" Fox prompted.

Brendan cleared his throat hard. "What does 'follow' mean?"

"Don't," Deke rushed to say. "Don't press it."

His thumb was already on the way back up. "Too late."

All three of his crew members surged to their feet. "No. Brendan, don't tell me you just tapped the blue button," Sanders groaned, hands on his mop of red hair. "She's going to see you followed her. She's going to know you internet stalked her."

"Can't I just unfollow now?" Brendan started to tap again.

Fox lunged forward. "No! No, that's even worse. If she already noticed you followed her, she's just going to think you're playing games."

"Jesus. I'm deleting the whole thing," Brendan said, throwing the offending device onto the dashboard, where it bashed up against the windshield. His crew stared back expectantly, waiting for him to put his money where his mouth was. "Later," he growled, firing up the motor. "Get to work."

As soon as the three men were out of sight, he picked the phone back up slowly. Weighing it in his hand for a moment, he opened the app again and scrolled through Piper's feed until one image stopped him. She was sitting beside Hannah on a diving board, both of them wrapped in the same towel, water droplets all over her face. This looked like the Piper he'd had dinner with last night. Was she *that* girl? Or the daring jet-setter?

The sheer number of photos of her glittering at parties, balls, even awards shows suggested she loved the spotlight, the wealth and luxury. Shit he knew nothing about. More than that, she clearly liked polished, manicured men, probably with bank accounts that matched her own. And that meant his interest in her wasn't only annoying, it was laughable. He was a set-in-his-ways fisherman. She was a rich, adventurous socialite. He couldn't even order something new at a restaurant, and she dined with celebrities. *Dated* them.

He'd just have to spend the next few months keeping his admiration of her to himself, lest he make himself look like a fucking fool.

With one last glance at the picture of her smiling on the diving board, he determinedly shoved his phone into the front pocket of his jeans and focused on what he knew.

Fishing.