

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 13

Brendan watched through his binoculars as Westport formed, reassuring and familiar, on the horizon.

His love for the ocean always made returning home bittersweet. There was nowhere he was more at ease than the wheelhouse, the engine humming under his feet. A radio within reach so he could give orders. His certainty that those commands would always be carried out, no questions asked. The *Della Ray* was a second layer of skin, and he slipped into it as often as possible, anxious for the rise and fall of the water, the slap of waves on the hull, the smell of salt and fish and possibilities.

But this homecoming didn't have the same feel as it usually did. He wasn't calculating the hours until he could get back out on the water. Or trying to ignore the emotions that clung to the inside of his throat when he got his crew home safe. There were only nerves this time. Jumpy, anxious, sweaty nerves.

His mind hadn't been focused for the last three days. Oh, they'd filled the belly of the ship with fish, done their damn job, as always. But a girl from Los Angeles had been occupying way too much headspace for his comfort.

God only knew, tonight was *not* the night for exploring that headspace, either.

As soon as they moored the boat and loaded the catches to bring to market, he was expected at the annual memorial dinner for Desiree. Every year, like clockwork, Mick organized the get-together at Blow the Man Down, and Brendan never failed to work his fishing schedule around it. Hell, he usually helped organize. This time, though . . . he wondered how he'd make it through the night knowing he'd been thinking of Piper nonstop for three days.

Didn't matter how many times he lamented her glamorous internet presence. Didn't matter how many times he reminded himself they were from two different worlds and she didn't plan to be a part of his for long. Still, he thought of her. Worried about her well-being while he was on the water. Worried she wasn't eating the right items off the menus he'd left. Hoped the hardware store had gotten his note and she was no longer bumping her head.

He thought of her body.

Thought of it to the point of distraction.

How soft she'd be beneath him, how high maintenance she'd probably be in the sack and how he'd deliver. Again and again, until she wrecked his back with her fingernails.

A lot of the men on board started checking their phones for reception as soon as the harbor was in sight, and Brendan normally rolled his eyes at them. But he had his phone in hand now, kept swiping and entering his password, wanting a look at her fucking Instagram. He'd barely been aware of the damn app a few days ago; now he had his thumb hovering over the icon, ready to get his fill of her image. He'd never been so hard up for relief that he beat off while on the boat, but it had been necessary the first damn night. And the second.

Three bars popped into the upper left-hand corner of his screen, and he tapped, holding his breath. The first thing he saw was the white outline of a head. Pressed it.

Piper had followed him back?

He grunted and looked over his shoulder before smiling.

There was one new picture in her feed, and he enlarged it, the damn organ in his chest picking up speed. She'd taken his suggestion and gone to the winery, and Jesus, she looked beautiful.

Making grape decisions.

He was chuckling over that caption when a text message popped up from Mick.

Call me was all it said.

Brendan's smile dropped, and he pushed to his feet, pulse missing a few beats as the call to his father-in-law connected. Dammit, Piper had gotten herself in trouble again, hadn't she? She'd probably started another fire or broken her neck falling down the stairs while trying to escape a mouse. Or—

"Yeah, hey, Brendan."

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "What happened?"

"Whoa, there." Mick laughed, music playing in the background. "Nothing happened. I just wanted to remind you about tonight."

Guilt twisted like a corkscrew in his gut. Here was this man preparing for a party to memorialize seven years without his daughter, and Brendan was worried about Piper. Could think of nothing *but* her. That wasn't right. Wasn't he a better man than that?

Brendan looked down at the wedding band around his finger and swallowed. Seven years. He could barely remember Desiree's voice, her face, or her laugh anymore. He wasn't the type to make a vow and easily move on from it, however. When a promise came out of his mouth, it was kept to the letter. She'd been woven into the fabric of his

life in Westport so thoroughly, it was almost like she'd never really died. Which might account for him getting stuck on the *till death* part of his promise.

Remnants of her surrounded him here. Her parents, her annual memorial, people who'd come to their wedding. Taking the ring off had struck him as disrespectful, but now . . . now it was starting to feel even more wrong to keep it on.

Tonight was not the night to make big decisions, though.

He had a duty to be at the memorial and be mentally present, so he would be.

"I'll be there," Brendan said. "Of course I will."

\* \* \*

The first few years after Desiree passed, the memorial potlucks had been reenactments of her funeral. No one smiling, everyone speaking in hushed tones. Hard not to feel disrespectful being anything but grief-stricken when Mick and Della plastered pictures of their daughter everywhere, brought a cake with her name in bright blue frosting. But as the years went on, the mood had lightened somewhat. Not completely, but at least nobody was crying tonight.

The venue probably didn't do much to cultivate an easy atmosphere. The basement of Blow the Man Down hadn't seen renovations like the upstairs. It was a throwback to the days of wood paneling and low, frosted lighting, and it reminded Brendan of the hull of his ship, so much so that he could almost feel the swell and dip of the ocean beneath his feet.

A collapsible table and chairs had been set up against the far wall, laden

with covered dishes and a candlelit shrine to Desiree, right there next to the pasta salad. High tops and stools filled out the rest of the space, along with a small bar used only for parties, which was where Brendan stood with his relief skipper, trying to avoid small talk.

Brendan felt Fox studying him from the corner of his eye and ignored him, instead signaling the bartender for another beer. It was no secret how Fox viewed the yearly event. "I know what you're going to say," Brendan sighed. "I don't need to hear it again."

"Too bad. You're going to hear it." Apparently Fox had taken enough orders over the last three days and was good and finished. "This isn't fair to you. Dragging you back through this . . . loss every goddamn year. You deserve to move on."

"Nobody is dragging anyone."

“Sure.” Fox twisted his bottle of beer in a circle on the bar. “She wouldn’t want this for you. She wouldn’t want to be shackling you like this.”

“Drop it, Fox.” He massaged the bridge of his nose. “It’s just one night.” “It’s not just one night.” He kept his voice low, his gaze averted, so no one

would pick up on their argument. “See, I know you. I know how you think. It’s a yearly nudge to stay the course. Stay steady. To do what you think is honorable. When the hell is it enough?”

Goddammit, there was a part of him that agreed with Fox. As long as this memorial had remained on the calendar, Brendan kept thinking, *I owe her one more year. I owe her one more.* Until that refrain had turned into *I owe it one more year.* Or *I owe Mick one more.* For everything his father-in-law had done for Brendan. Making him captain of the *Della Ray*. Would that faith and trust go away if Brendan moved on?

Whatever the reason, at some point the grieving had stopped being about his actual marriage, but he had no idea when. Life was a series of days on land, followed by days at sea, then repeat. There wasn’t time to think about himself or how he “felt.” And he wasn’t some selfish, fickle bastard.

“Look,” Fox tried again, after a long pull of his beer. “You know I love Mick, but as far as he’s concerned, you’re still married to his daughter and that’s a lot of pressure on y—”

“Hey, everyone!”

Brendan’s drink paused halfway to his mouth. That was Piper’s voice. Piper was here?

He gripped his pint carefully and looked over his shoulder at the door.

There she was. In sequins, obviously. Loud pink ones. And he couldn’t deny that the first emotion to hit him was pleasure. To see her. Then relief that she hadn’t gone back to LA already. Eagerness to talk to her, be near her.

Right on the heels of that reaction, though, the blood drained from his face. No. This wasn’t right. She shouldn’t be there.

On one arm, she had that ridiculous lipstick-shaped purse. And cradled in her other arm was a tray of shots she’d obviously brought from the bar upstairs. She clicked through a sea of dumbfounded and spellbound guests, offering them what looked like tequila.

“Why the long faces?” She flipped her hair and laughed, taking a shot of her own. Jesus. This was all happening in slow motion. “Turn the music up! Let’s get this party started, right?”

“Oh fuck,” Fox muttered.

Brendan saw the exact moment Piper realized she'd just crashed a memorial for a dead woman. Her runway strut slowed, those huge blue eyes widening at the makeshift shrine next to the pasta salad, the giant poster-board picture of Desiree's senior photo, her name in script at the bottom. *Desiree Taggart*. Her mouth opened on a choked sound, and she fumbled the tray of shots, recovering just in time to keep them from crashing onto the floor. "Oh," she breathed. "I—I didn't . . . I didn't know."

She dropped the shots onto the closest table like they offended her—and that was when her eyes locked on Brendan, and his stomach plummeted at the utter humiliation there. "Piper."

"Sorry. I'm . . . Wow." She backed toward the exit, her hip ramming into a chair and sending it several inches across the floor, making her wince. "I'm so sorry."

As quickly as she'd arrived, she was gone, like someone had muted all sound and color in the room. Before and after Piper. And Brendan didn't think, he just dropped his beer onto the bar with a slosh and went after her. When he started up the stairs, she'd already cleared the top, so he picked up his pace, weaving in and out of the Friday-night crowd, grateful for his height so he could look for pink sequins.

Why did he feel like he'd been socked in the stomach?

*She didn't need to see that*, he kept thinking. *She didn't need to see that*.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of pink crossing the street. There was Piper, in what appeared to be ice-pick heels, heading toward the harbor instead of back home. Someone called his name from the bar, but he

ignored them, pushing outside and following in her wake. "Piper."

"Oh no. No no no." She reached the opposite sidewalk and turned, waving her hands at him, palms out. "Please, you have to go back. You cannot leave your wife's memorial to come after the idiot who ruined it."

Even if he wanted to, he couldn't go back. His body physically wouldn't allow it. Because as much as he hated her obvious embarrassment, he would rather be out there chasing her in the street than in that basement. It was no contest. And yeah, he couldn't deny anymore that his priorities were shifting. As a creature of habit, that scared him, but he refused to simply let her walk away. "You didn't ruin anything."

She scoffed and kept walking.

He followed. "You're not going to outrun me in those heels." "Brendan, *please*. Let me cringe to death in peace."

"No."

Still facing away from him, she slowed to a stop, arms lifting to hug her middle. “Pretty shortsighted of me to leave those shots behind. I could use about six of them right now.”

He heard her snuffle, and bolts tightened in his chest. Crying women didn’t necessarily scare him. That would make him kind of a pansy ass, wouldn’t it? But he’d encountered very few of them in his lifetime, so he took a moment to consider the best course of action. She was hugging herself. So maybe . . . maybe one from him, too, wouldn’t be a bad move?

Brendan came up behind Piper and cupped her smooth shoulders with his hands, making sure she wasn’t going to run if he touched her. Lord, they were so soft. What if he scratched her with his calluses? Her head turned slightly to look at his resting right hand, and he was pretty sure neither one of them breathed as he tugged her back against his chest, circling his arms around her slight frame. When she didn’t tell him to fuck off, he took one more chance and propped his chin on top of her head.

A sound puffed out of her. “You really don’t hate me?” “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I really didn’t know. I’m so sorry.” “That’s enough apologizing.”

“They all must hate me, even if you don’t. They have to.” He started to tell her *that* assumption was silly, too, but she spoke over him, sounding so forlorn he had to tighten his hold. “God, I *am* an airhead, aren’t I?”

He didn’t like anything about that question. Not the question itself. And

not the way it was phrased, as if someone had used that bullshit term to describe her. Brendan turned her in his arms and promptly forgot the process of breathing. She was gorgeous as hell with her damp eyes and cheeks pink with lingering embarrassment, all of her bathed in moonlight. He had to call on every iota of willpower not to lower his mouth to hers, but it wasn’t the right time. There was a ghost between them and a ring on his finger, and all of it needed resolving first.

“Come on, let’s sit down,” Brendan said gruffly, taking her elbow and guiding her to one of the stone benches overlooking the nighttime harbor. She sat and crossed her legs in one fluid move, her expression bordering on lost. Lowering himself down beside her, Brendan took up the rest of the space on the bench, but she didn’t seem to mind their hips and outer thighs together. “You aren’t an airhead. Who said that to you?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s true.” “It is *not* true,” he barked.

“Oh yes, it is. I have left an endless trail of proof. I’m like a super-hot snail.” She smacked her hands over her eyes. “Did I really say ‘Why the long faces’ at a memorial dinner? Oh my *God*.”

Unbelievably, Brendan felt a rumble of laughter building in his sternum. “You did say that. Right before you took a shot.”

She punched him in the thigh. “Don’t you dare laugh.”

“Sorry.” He forced his lips to stop twitching. “If it makes you feel better . . . that dinner needed a little levity. You did everyone a favor.”

Brendan felt her studying his profile. “Tonight must have been hard for you.”

“It was hard seven years ago. Six. Even five. Now it’s just . . .” He searched for the right word. “It’s respect. It’s duty.”

Piper was silent so long, he had to glance over, finding her with an expression of wonder. “Seven years?” She held up the appropriate number of fingers. “That many?”

He nodded.

She faced the harbor, letting out a rush of breath, but not before he saw her attention dip to his ring. “Wow. I thought it might have been a year. Maybe even less. She must have been really special.”

Of course that was true. Brendan didn’t know how to explain the convenience and . . . the practicality of his past marriage without it sounding disrespectful to a woman who could no longer speak for herself. Today,

especially, he wouldn’t do that. But he couldn’t deny an urge to expose himself somewhat. It only seemed fair when she was sitting there, so vulnerable. He didn’t want her to go it alone.

“I was away fishing when it happened. An aneurysm. She’d been out for a walk on the beach. Alone.” He let out a slow breath. “She always went alone, even when I was home. I wasn’t, uh . . . the best at being married. I didn’t mold myself to fit new routines or different patterns—I’m sure you’re shocked.” She stayed quiet. “They say even if I’d been there, I couldn’t have done anything, but I could have tried. I never tried. So this . . . year after year, this is me trying, I guess. After the fact.”

Piper didn’t respond right away. “I don’t know a lot about marriage, but I think people mature and get better at it over time. You would have. You just didn’t get a chance.” She sighed into the night breeze. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

He nodded, hoping she would change the subject. Maybe Fox was right and he’d been serving a penance long enough, because dwelling on the past now just made him restless.

“My longest relationship was three weeks.” She held up the right number of fingers. “This many. But in weeks.”

Brendan hid a smile. Why did he kind of love knowing that there wasn't a single man in Los Angeles who could lock Piper down? And . . . what *would* it take? “Is he the one who called you an airhead?”

“You're hyperfocused on this.” She pulled her shoulders back. “Yes, he was the one who said it. And I proved him right in the next breath by assuming he was ending things because I'd discussed the compatibility of our astrological signs with my therapist. I couldn't have sounded more like an LA bimbo if I tried.”

“It pisses me off when you call yourself names.”

She gasped. “Pissed off? That's a real switch for you.” The corner of Brendan's lips tugged. “I deserve that.”

“No, you don't,” she said, and sighed, falling silent for a few moments. “Since we got here, it has never been more obvious that I don't know what I'm doing. I'm really good at going to parties and taking pictures, and there's nothing wrong with that. But what if that's it? What if that's just *it*?” She looked at him, seeming to piece her thoughts together. “And you keep witnessing these huge fails of mine, but I can't hide behind a drink and a flirty smile here. It's just me.”

He couldn't hide his confusion. “*Just you?*”

Once again, he was seeing flashes of insecurity beneath the seemingly perfect outer layer of Piper Bellinger, and they roused his protective instincts. He'd ridiculed her at the outset. Now he wanted to fight off anything that made her sad. Fucking hell, it was confusing.

Piper hadn't responded, quietly dabbing at her damp eyes—and he'd been okay with the crying for a while, but he should have been able to dry her tears by now. What was he doing wrong here? Remembering how the hug had at least gotten her to stop running away, he put his left arm around her shoulders and tucked her into his side. Maybe a distraction was the way to go. “What did you do while I was gone?”

“You mean, besides enjoying harbor tours from all the local fishermen?” Despite her teasing tone, something hot poked him in the jugular. “Funny.”

Her lips twitched, but over the course of a few seconds, she sobered. “A lot has happened since you left, actually. I met my grandmother, Opal.”

Brendan started a little. “You didn't know her at all before this trip? No phone calls, or—”



“No.” Her cheeks colored slightly. “I *never* would have known about her, either, if we hadn’t come here. She’s just been sitting in her apartment all this time, grieving my father. Knowing that kind of makes my life in LA feel like make-believe. Blissful ignorance.” A beat passed. “She had some differences of opinion with my mother. We didn’t get into it too deeply, but I’m guessing my mother wanted to put it all behind her, and Opal wanted to . . .”

“Live in the fallout.”

“‘Fallout’ is a nice way of saying ‘the real world,’ but you’re right.” She looked down at her lap. “Me and Hannah went to see the memorial for Henry, and I didn’t know what I was supposed to feel, but I didn’t think it would be just *nothing*. It stayed that way right up until today when we found a whole collage of pictures in the bar. Behind some plywood. He was laughing in one of the photos, and that’s when . . . there was finally recognition.”

Brendan studied her. This girl he’d pegged as a silly flirt on day one. And he found himself pulling her closer, needing to offer comfort. Wanting her to lean on him for it. “What does the recognition feel like?”

“Scary,” she said on an exhale. “But I have some guilt over ignoring this place, the past, even if it’s not entirely my fault. It’s causing me to lean into the scary, I guess. In my own way. So I gave Opal a faux hawk, and we’re

giving Henry’s bar a makeover, starting tomorrow. If there are two things I know, it’s hair and partying.”

When had his thumb started tracing the line of her shoulder? He ordered himself to quit it. Even if it felt so fucking good.

“You’re dealing with a whole lot of new information in your own way,” he said gruffly. “Nothing wrong with that. You’re adjusting. I wish I had more of that mentality.”

Piper looked up at him, her eyes soft and a little grateful, turning his pulse up to a higher setting. They stared at each other three beats too long, before both of them diverted their gaze quickly. Sensing they were in need of a distraction from the building tension between them, Brendan coughed. “Hey, remember that time you were the only one I followed on Instagram?”

She burst out laughing, such a bright, beautiful thing, that he could only marvel. “What were you thinking?”

“I was just hitting buttons, honey.”

More laughter. This time she actually pressed her forehead into his shoulder. "It makes me feel better about the world that someone out there isn't playing games." She drummed her fingers on her bare knee. "So which pictures did you look at?"

He blew out a long breath. "A lot of them." She bit her bottom lip and ducked her head.

They sat in silence for a few moments. "Which girl are you? The girl in the pictures or the one sitting next to me?"

"Both, I think," she said after a pause. "I like dressing to the nines and being admired. And I like shopping and dancing and being pampered and complimented. Does that make me a bad person?"

He'd never met anyone like her. These luxuries weren't part of his world. He'd never had to think about anything but fishing, working hard, and meeting quotas, but he wanted to get the answer right because it was important to her. "I've been on a lot of boats with a lot of men that do too much talking about women. And it seems to me that most people like being admired and complimented, they're just not as honest about it. That doesn't make you a bad person, it makes you truthful."

She blinked up at him. "Huh."

"Let me finish." He palmed her head and tucked it back against his shoulder. "I didn't think you'd survive one night in that apartment. Piper, I wouldn't even have stayed there, and I've slept in bunks with unwashed men

for weeks on end. But you stuck it out. And you smiled at me when I was being a bastard. You're a good sister, too. I figure all of that has to balance out your carrying around that ugly purse."

Piper sat straight up and sputtered through a laugh, "Do you have any idea how much this ugly purse cost?"

"Probably less than I'd pay to have it burned," he drawled. "But I love it."

He sighed, pushed a hand through his hair. "I guess I wouldn't burn it, then."

She was looking at him with soft eyes and a lush mouth, and if it were any other night, if the timing was better, he'd have kissed her and done his best to bring her home. To his bed. But he couldn't yet. So even though it pained him, he stood and helped Piper to her feet. "Come on, I'll make sure you get home all right."

"Yes. Oh my gosh, yes." She let him help her up. "You should get back.

And Hannah will be wondering where I am." "Why didn't she come tonight?"

“My sister is not a party person. All those genes landed on me. Plus, she’s still a little scarred from her winery hangover.”

“Ah.”

Side by side, they started back, taking a different side street to avoid Blow the Man Down. When she rubbed her arms, he cursed the fact that he didn’t take the time to grab his jacket when coming after her, because he would have given anything to wrap her in it at that very moment. Collect it tomorrow with her scent on the collar.

“You did it,” she murmured, after they’d been walking for two blocks. “I’m still embarrassed about crashing the party. But I feel . . . better.” She squinted an eye up at him. “Brendan, I think this means we’re friends.”

They arrived at her door and he waited for her to unlock it. “Piper, I don’t just go putting my arms around girls.”

She paused in the doorway. Looked back. “What does that mean?”

He gave in to just a touch of temptation, tucking a wind-tangled strand of hair behind her ear. *Soft.* “It means I’ll be around.”

Knowing if he stood there a second longer, he’d try to taste her mouth, Brendan backed away a couple of steps, then turned, the image of her stunned

—and definitely wary—expression burned into his mind the whole way back to Blow the Man Down.

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Later that night, Brendan stood in front of his dresser, twisting the gold band around his finger. Wearing it had always felt right and good. Honorable. Once something was a part of him, once he made promises, they stuck. He stuck. A fisherman’s life was rooted in tradition and he’d always taken comfort in that. Protocols might change, but the rhythm of the ocean didn’t. The songs remained the same, sunsets were reliable and eternal, the tides would always shift and pull.

He’d given no thought to where his life would go next. Or if it *could* go in a different direction. There was only routine, maintaining an even keel, working, moving, keeping the customs he’d been taught alive. Ironically, it had been those same qualities that made him a distracted husband. An absent one. He’d never learned to shift. To allow for new things. New possibilities.

Now, though. For the first time since he could remember, Brendan felt a pull to deviate from his habits. He’d sat on the harbor tonight with his arm around Piper, and it wasn’t where he was *supposed* to be.

But he hadn't wanted to be anywhere else. Not serving penance for being a shit husband. Not paying respect to his in-laws, who still lived as if their daughter had died yesterday. Not even plotting courses or hauling pots onto his boat.

No, he'd wanted to be sitting there with the girl from Los Angeles.

With that truth admitted to himself, wearing the ring was no longer right. It made him fraudulent, and he couldn't allow that. Not for another day.

The tide had changed, and he wouldn't make the same mistakes twice. He wouldn't stay so firmly rooted in his practices and routines that a good thing would come along and slip away.

As he slid off the gold band and tucked it into a safe place in his sock drawer, he said good-bye and apologized a final time. Then he turned off the light.