

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 17 -

The storm started thirteen days later.

Piper had fallen into a daily routine by then. Run along the harbor just after sunrise. Walk Abe to the maritime museum in the morning, visit Opal on her way home, often with Hannah in tow. Work on the bar until dinnertime, then collapse. They'd made a ton of progress on No Name and were going to start decorating next week, as soon as they installed the crisp white cornice and gave the concrete another coat of industrial paint.

They'd taken an Uber to the fishing supply store last week, thanks to Brendan's suggestion, and gotten most of what they needed to achieve the nautical theme, then ordered more accoutrements for cheap online. And to their utter astonishment, Abe's sons had shown up last week to drop off some handcrafted bar stools and chairs as a thank-you for walking their father to the museum every morning. Piper told them it wasn't necessary, but they'd refused to take no for an answer, thank God, because they had actual furniture now!

Piper and Hannah were applying slow strokes of lacquer to the antique bar when a boom of thunder outside made them both jump.

"Whoa," Hannah said, using the back of her wrist to wipe her forehead. "That sounded like cannon fire."

"Yeah." Piper tucked a stray piece of hair into her ponytail and crossed the bar to look out the window. A shudder went down her spine when she saw the Red Buoy closing early. Same with the bait shop two doors down. Was there going to be a really bad storm or something?

Brendan.

No, Westport was far enough from the Bering Sea that he wouldn't get hit

with the same storm, right? She had no earthly idea. She was from Southern freaking California, where the sun shined and, other than fog, weather was just a vague entity people in other states had to worry about.

He'd be okay.

Piper pressed a hand to the center of her chest to find her heart racing. "Hey, can you call the record store and ask if they're closing early?"

Over the last two weeks, Hannah had become a regular fixture at the shop. Once she'd revealed her expertise in all things music related, they'd asked her to help give the place an update. While it had cut into Hannah's time working on the bar, Piper hadn't

been able to deny her sister this most epic opportunity to flaunt her music snobbery. Hannah was now an unofficial employee of Disc N Dat and had even made some local friends who went and drank coffee together after hours.

“Yeah, sure,” Hannah said, whipping her cell out of her back pocket. “I’ll text Shauna.”

“Kay.”

Piper took a deep breath, but the pressure in her chest wouldn’t abate. Brendan was supposed to return the day after tomorrow, and she’d been mentally coaching herself to keep things between them strings-free. But with a storm darkening the sky, she couldn’t seem to think straight, much less remember why her relationship with Brendan had to remain casual. She needed to, though, right? No Name was almost finished, and they were super close to nailing down a grand reopening date, at which time they would call Daniel and invite him. Providing this plan to impress Daniel worked, they could be in the homestretch. LA bound. She couldn’t afford to get caught up with the boat captain, even if she missed him. Even if she looked for him around every street corner in Westport, just in case he’d gotten home earlier.

“I’m going to run over to the Red Buoy and see if they know what’s going on.”

Hannah saluted Piper on her way out the door. As soon as she stepped out onto the street, the wind knocked her sideways two steps, her hair blowing free of its ponytail and whipping around her face in a cloud, obscuring her vision. Quickly, she gathered the mane in a fist and looked up at the sky, finding big gray billowing clouds staring back at her. Her stomach dropped, and a wave of fear rolled through her belly.

This seemed like a big deal.

Unable to swallow, she jogged across the street, catching the girl who

worked the register on her way out, her head buried in the hood of a rain slicker.

“Hey, um . . . is there going to be a pretty bad storm . . . or something?” Piper asked, clearly the most California girl who ever California’d.

The girl laughed like Piper was joking, sobered when she realized she wasn’t. “We’ve got a typhoon closing in.”

What the hell was a typhoon? She resisted the urge to get her phone out and google it.

“Oh, but it’s, like, contained to the Washington coast, right? Or is it bigger?”

“No, it’s coming toward us from Alaska, actually. That’s how we know it’s going to be a bad motherfucker, excuse my language.”

“Alaska,” Piper croaked, her fingers turning numb. “Okay, thanks.”

The girl scurried off, climbing into a waiting truck right as the first raindrops started to fall. Piper barely remembered walking back across the street and taking shelter in the doorway of No Name. She got her phone out and searched “typhoon” with trembling fingers.

The first two words that came up were “tropical cyclone.”

Then, “a rotating, organized system of clouds and thunderstorms that originates over tropical or subtropical waters.”

“Oh my God.”

She had to breathe in and out slowly so she wouldn’t throw up.

Brendan was very good at his job. Smart. The most capable, confident man she’d ever met. There was no way something could happen to him. Or Fox and Deke and Sanders. They were big, strong, God-fearing fishermen. There was no way, right?

Henry’s laughing face sprung to her mind. Right on its heels, Mick’s voice filtered through her thoughts. *And that Bering Sea water is so damn frigid, there’s only a minute’s window before it sucks the breath right out of a man’s lungs.*

Not Brendan. It wouldn’t happen to Brendan.

Getting her legs to carry her into No Name required effort, but she made it, leaning back weakly against the wall. It took her a moment to realize Hannah was throwing on a sweatshirt. “Hey, Shauna asked if I could pop down really fast and help close up the shop. I should be back in ten minutes.” She stopped short when she saw Piper’s face. “Are you okay?”

“It’s a typhoon. Coming in from Alaska.”

Hannah laughed as she threw her messenger bag across her chest. “You sound like a meteorologist. What even is a typhoon?”

“A tropical cyclone,” Piper said robotically. “A rotating, organized system of clouds and thunderstorms that originates over tropical or subtropical waters.”

“Oh shit.” Understanding dawned in Hannah’s eyes. “Ohhh. Shit.” “He’s going to be fine. They’re going to be fine.”

“Of course they will.” Hannah hesitated, then started to take off her bag. “I’m going to stay here with you—”

“No. Go go go.” Her laugh was high-pitched. “I think I can handle ten minutes.”

Her sister was dubious. "Are you sure?" "Totally."

Neither one of them had any idea how bad a storm could get in ten minutes.

Rain lashed the window so hard, Piper moved to the center of the bar for her own safety. The wind sounded like it was inside with her. With a growing sense of dread, she watched more and more people run for cover in the street, eventually clearing it completely. Thunder rocked the ground, followed closely by jagged twists of lightning in the sky.

Piper fumbled her phone in her hands, finding Hannah in her favorites and dialing. "Hey," she said as soon as her sister picked up. "I think you should stay where you are, okay?"

"Shauna says the same. How'd it pick up so fast?"

"I don't know." She closed her eyes. Brendan had been in this same storm. Fast. Furious. "I'm fine here. Just stay in a safe place and don't move until it lightens up. All right, Hanns?"

"Okay."

Piper hung up and paced a moment, her stride hitching when the electricity went out.

She stood there in near darkness and acted on one of the most foolish instincts in her life—and Jesus *Christ*, that was saying something. But she couldn't stand there and think and worry and speculate. She had to move . . . and she wanted to be near Brendan the only way she could. So she locked the door of No Name behind her and started running in the direction of his house. It was only a three-minute drive. She'd be there in five if she sprinted. And then she'd be safe. And maybe being close to him would keep *him* safe, too, which was a ridiculous notion, but she clung to it hard and pounded the

pavement.

Thunder boomed at her back, propelling her on, her sneakers sodden after only two blocks thanks to the rain coming down in torrents now. She turned two corners and ran down a narrow street that seemed semi-familiar? On the night of their date, she'd been too preoccupied to notice any of the street names. But then, there it was. Brendan's truck, parked in front of his house, looking as sturdy and dependable as its owner.

Relief swamped her, and she kicked into a fast sprint, the teeth of his house key biting into her palm. She ran up the path and unlocked the door with pale fingers, her teeth chattering, and fell over the threshold in a heap, kicking the door closed behind her. And then the storm was nothing more than muffled rumblings, her own harsh pants drowning it out.

“Hello?” Piper sat up and called out, because it seemed like the thing to do. Maybe he’d gotten back early and just hadn’t come to see her yet. “Brendan?”

There was no answer.

She used the hem of her shirt to dry the rain from her face and stood, moving through the still, warm house while wind whipped against the windowpanes, rattling them. Was this a stalker move? That worry had her chewing her lip, but he’d given her a key, right? Plus, there was something so inviting about the house, almost as if it had been expecting her. His scent lingered in the air of the living room, saltwater and man.

Piper kicked off her shoes and walked barefoot to the kitchen and turned on his coffee machine, desperate to get rid of the chill. When a mug had been prepared, she opened the refrigerator to take out the milk—and an unopened bottle of champagne rolled toward her in the crisper drawer. Her half-drunk one was still wedged in the door, but . . . he’d bought two? Just in case she stopped over while he was gone?

Her throat ached as she carried the mug of coffee up the stairs, trying not to acknowledge how natural it felt to set her coffee on the sink in his bathroom and strip off her soaked clothes, hanging them over the towel rack. She brought the coffee into the shower and drank it while the water stole the chill from her bones. She lathered herself in his body wash, and his scent carried up to her on the wafting steam, making her nipples stiffen. Making her close her eyes, press her forehead to the tile wall, and ask God, very politely, to bring the stubborn man home safely.

Wrapped in a towel minutes later, she walked into Brendan’s bedroom,

turned on a lamp on his bedside table, and sighed. So practical. Navy blue and beiges everywhere, no-nonsense white walls, creaky floorboards that reminded her of the decks of ships she’d seen in the harbor. A window directly in front of his bed faced the harbor. The ocean beyond. The love of his life. As if he needed to see it first thing in the morning.

She sent a text to Hannah to make sure her sister was all right, then slumped sideways in the center of the bed, Brendan’s pillow hugged to her chest, praying that when she woke up everything would be fine. That he’d walk through the door.

God must have been busy answering someone else’s prayers.

* * *

Brendan tuned out the endless chatter coming in through the radio from the coast guard, his single-minded focus where it needed to be. Pulling pots. This wasn’t their first typhoon, and it wouldn’t be the last. They were par for the course this time of year in the Bering Sea and the neighboring Pacific. This job was dangerous for a reason, and they had no choice but to ride it out, finish retrieving this string, and make it back to Dutch.

So he trained his eyes on the water ahead, searching for out-of-the-ordinary swells while keeping tabs on the busy deck below.

His crew moved like a well-oiled machine, although after a week of hauling pots, they were showing signs of fatigue. The next buoy appeared alongside the ship, and in a practiced movement, Sanders threw out his hook, dragging in the line and attaching it to the winch. Deke joined him on the other side to engage the hydraulic system, raising the pot. An exultant cheer went up from the men on the deck, though it was muffled by the storm raging around the boat, the burr of the engine below.

Half-full. If this pot didn't put them at their quota, it would bring them close, providing the crabs were male and they wouldn't be required to throw the lot of them back. It was against regulation to take females from the sea, as they kept the population growing.

He waited for Fox to signal a number through the window of the wheelhouse.

Seventy.

Brendan made a note of the number in his log, his mouth moving as he did the math. Their quota issued by the wildlife commission was eighty thousand

pounds of crab for the season. They were at 99 percent with five pots left to collect. But with the storm howling outside and the men growing weary, it wasn't worth continuing. Especially not if he could beat the Russians to market and get a stronger price for what they'd caught.

He signaled Fox to wrap up the operation, secure the gear on deck, and get everyone below. They were heading back to Dutch early. And the fucking relief that gripped him around the throat was so much stronger than usual, he had to take several bracing breaths, his fingers flexing around the wheel as he waited for a break in the swells to start executing the turn.

Had this storm made landfall yet back home? Where was she?

Would she be waiting for him?

Brendan braced his body against the side of the wheelhouse as the *Della Ray* carried over a three-story swell and slapped back down into a black pit of churning seawater. Goddamn this storm. It wasn't any fiercer than the ones they'd worked through in the past, but this time . . . the boat didn't seem quite as substantial under his feet. Was the wheel vibrating with too much force in his hands?

His life felt too easily snatched away.

These were worries he hadn't acknowledged since being a greenhorn, and it was because he'd never wanted to get home so badly. Not once in his fucking life.

A crew crabbing not too far from them had lost a member yesterday when his foot had gotten tangled in a rope, dragging him straight down to the bottom of the drink. Another boat had gone missing entirely, seven men on board. A bad season. More loss than usual. So easily, it could have been one of his crew. Could have been him.

Whitewater, high and downward-sloping, broke out of the corner of Brendan's eye, and he grabbed the radio, shouting down to the deck to brace for impact. *Rogue wave*. And for once, Brendan resented the wild rush he got from the danger. From taking on nature and winning. At that moment, it was just the thing keeping him from Piper.

The wave hit, and the boat groaned, tilting sideways. For long moments, the violent wave rained down on the wheelhouse and obscured his view of the deck. And with his world on its side, all he could hear was Piper's voice telling him to be careful.

The coast guard shouted through the radio, interspersed with static, and he prayed.

He prayed like he never had before.

Just let me go home and see her.

But the Bering Sea chose that moment to remind him exactly who was in control.