

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 30 -

Brendan stood on the deck of the *Della Ray*, staring off in the direction of Westport. The direction they were headed now. He saw none of the seemingly endless water in front of him. Saw none of the men pulling lines and fixing lures around him, the low blare of Black Sabbath coming from the wheelhouse speakers. He'd been locked in a sedated state since Saturday morning when they'd left the harbor.

*She didn't show up.*

He'd given Piper time to think, and she'd realized that being with him required too much sacrifice, and she'd made her decision. He'd known it was too good to be real. That she would give up everything, her whole life, just for him. His jugular ached from supporting his heart. That's where it sat now, every minute of the day; having Piper in his life had been so painfully sweet. So much better than he knew life could be.

It just hadn't gone both ways.

Over a decade as a fisherman and he'd never once been seasick, but his stomach roiled now ominously. He'd been able to distract himself from the devastating blow, the memory of the empty dock, for the last two days, pushing the men and himself hard, poring over digital maps, and even working in the engine room while Fox manned the wheelhouse. If he stopped moving or thinking, there she was, and Jesus, he'd fucking lost her.

No. He'd never earned the right to her in the first place. That was the problem.

It was Monday afternoon. Labor Day. Piper would be getting ready to open the bar. Did she still expect him there? Or would she assume he'd stay away now that she'd decided to move on? To leverage the new bar into a trip

home. If he showed up at Cross and Daughters, he might be in her way. She may not want him there.

Brendan dug the knuckles of his index fingers into both eyes, images of Piper slaughtering him. Mussed-up, grumpy morning Piper. Confused in the grocery store Piper. Holding a flaming frying pan, crying over him in the hospital, moaning into his pillow Piper. Each and every incarnation of her was a stab to the chest, until he swore going overboard and sinking to the bottom of the icy fucking ocean sounded preferable to living with the memories . . . and not having the actual woman.

But she'd done the right thing for herself. Hadn't she? Didn't he have to respect that?

Respect that this woman he wanted for his wife was leaving? Jesus Christ. He might never hold her again.

A drizzle started, but he made no move to go inside to grab his slicker. Getting soaked and dying from pneumonia sounded like a pretty good plan at present. A moment later, though, Sanders passed by and handed the rain jacket to Brendan. Simply to have something to do with his hands, he put it on and slid both hands into the pockets.

Something glossy slipped between his fingers.

He drew it out—and there was Piper smiling back at him. A picture of them. One he hadn't been aware of her taking.

She'd taken a selfie behind his back while he held her in the recharging station. And her eyes were sex-drowsed and blissful. Happy. In love.

With an ax splitting his jugular in half, Brendan turned over the picture and saw she'd written a loopy, feminine message.

*For your bunk, Captain.*

*Come back to me safely.*

*I love you so much, Piper.*

The wind had been knocked out of him.

A wave rocked the boat, and he could barely make his legs compensate. All functioning power had deserted his body, because his heart required all of it to pound so furiously. He closed his eyes and clutched the picture to his chest, his mind picking through a million memories of Piper to find the one of her standing in his doorway. The last time he'd seen her.

*Please . . . don't doubt me, Brendan. Not you. Have faith in me. Okay?*

But hadn't he done exactly that by leaving?

He'd left her. After demanding over and over again she take a leap of faith, he'd walked out and ruined her tenuous trust. For God's sake, she'd only been in town for what? Five weeks? What did he want from her?

Everything, that's what. He'd asked for everything—and that hadn't been fair.

So she'd kept a few safety nets. *Good.* As the man who loved her, that's exactly what he should have been encouraging. Piper's safety. What the hell had he done instead?

Punished her for it.

No wonder she hadn't shown up at the dock. He hadn't deserved to see her there, much less stand there praying for her to show up, begging God to make her appear, when he now realized full well . . . that she *shouldn't* have come.

And now, when it was too late, the obvious solution to keeping her, to deserving her, bore down on him like a meteor. She didn't have to give up everything. He loved her enough to find solutions. That's what he did. There was no inconvenience or obstacle he wouldn't face if it meant having her in his life, so he'd fucking face them. He'd adapt, like Piper had.

"I made a mistake," he rasped, razor wire wrapping around his heart and pulling taut. "Jesus, I made a fucking mistake."

But if there was a chance he could fix it, he'd cling to that hope. Otherwise he'd go insane.

Brendan whipped around on a heel and ran for the wheelhouse, only to find Fox looking concerned while he spoke to the coast guard over the radio.

"What is it?"

Fox ended the transmission and put the radio back in place. "Nothing too bad. They're just advising us to adjust our route south. Drilling rig caught fire about six miles ahead and there's some bad visibility, but it should only set us back about two hours."

Two hours.

Brendan checked the time. It was four o'clock. Originally, they were scheduled to make it back at six thirty. By the time the boat was unloaded and they'd taken the fish to market, he was looking at goddamn ten or eleven o'clock before he'd make it to Cross and Daughters.

Now, on top of his inexcusable fuckup, he was going to break his promise to be at the grand opening.

Helplessness clawed at the inside of Brendan's throat. He looked down at the picture of Piper he still held, as if trying to communicate with her.

*I'm sorry I failed you, baby. Just give me one more chance.*

\* \* \*

The text message popped up on his phone the second they pulled into the harbor.

*I'm coming. I had an emergency. Wait for me. I love you.*

Those words almost dropped Brendan to his knees. She'd tried to come? She'd wanted to see him off?

Oh God. What emergency? Had she hurt herself or needed him?

If so, if he'd left when she was in trouble, he would never recover.

After that, his ears roared and he saw nothing but his feet pounding the pavement.

When Brendan and Fox stormed into Cross and Daughters at eleven o'clock, it was packed to the gills. "Summer in the City" was playing at an earsplitting decibel, a tray of cupcakes crowd-surfed toward Brendan, and everyone had a drink in their hands. Momentarily, pride in Piper and Hannah, at what they'd accomplished, eclipsed everything else. But an intense urgency to see his girlfriend swarmed back in quickly.

She wasn't behind the bar.

It was just Hannah, uncapping beers as fast as she could, clearly flustered. She was shoving cash into her pockets and trying to make change, tossing bills across the bar and running to help the next customer.

"Christ. I'll go help her out," Fox said, already pushing his way through the crowd.

Where was Piper?

With a frown, Brendan moved in his friend's wake, nodding absently at the locals who called—or slurred, rather—his name. He went to the dance floor first, knowing it was a likely place to find Piper, although . . . that didn't track. She wouldn't leave her sister in the lurch behind the bar. And anyway, she was supposed to be bartending. Hannah was the DJ.

A hole started to open in his gut, acid gurgling out, but he tried to stay calm.

Maybe she was just in the bathroom.

No. Not there. A lady on the way out confirmed the stalls were empty.

Panic climbed Brendan's spine as he pushed his way to the bar. Fox's expression stopped him dead in his tracks before he could even get there.

"Where is she?" Brendan shouted over the noise. Hannah's gaze danced over to him, then away just as fast.

She served another customer, and he could see her hands were unsteady, and that terrified him. He was going to explode. He was going to rip this place down with his bare hands if someone didn't produce his girlfriend right the hell now.

*"Hannah. Where is your sister?"*

The younger Bellinger stilled, took a breath. "She went back to LA. For Kirby's party. And maybe . . . to stay." She shook her head. "She's not coming back."

The world blurred around him, the music warping, slowing down. His chest caved in on itself, taking his heart down in the collapse. No. No, she couldn't be gone. She couldn't have left. But even as denial pounded the insides of his skull, he knew it was true. He couldn't feel her.

She was gone.

"I'm sorry," Hannah said, pulling out her phone and lowering the music with a few thumb strokes. People behind him protested, but shut up and quieted immediately, distracted by the man at the bar keeping himself upright with a stool and dying a slow, torturous death. "Look. There was no one here. *No one*. Until maybe half an hour ago. We thought it was a huge fail. And before that, our stepdad canceled, and you—well, you know what you did." Moisture leapt to Hannah's eyes. She swiped at her tears while Fox hesitantly began rubbing circles on her back. "She'd lost her Piper sparkle. It scared me. I thought if she went home, she'd get it back. But now she'll never know that everyone loves this place."

*She'd lost her Piper sparkle.*

It was girl language, and yet, he so thoroughly understood what Hannah meant, because Piper did have a singular sparkle. Whether they were arguing or laughing or fucking, it was always there, pulling him into her universe, making everything perfect. That sparkle was positivity and life and promise of better things, and she always, always had it, glowing within the blue of her irises, lighting up the room. The fact that it had gone out, and that he'd had something to do with it, gutted him where he stood.

"I should have gone and found her," Brendan said, more to himself than anyone else. "When she didn't show up at the dock. I should have gone to find her. What the hell did I leave for?"

"She did show up," a woman's voice said behind him. Sanders's wife

approached, a half-drunk beer in her hand. "She was there, just late. Blubbering all over the place."

Brendan had to rely on the stool to hold his weight.

"Told her to toughen up," his crew member's wife said, but her tone changed when people around her started to mutter. "In a nice way," she added defensively. "I think."

Jesus. He could barely breathe for thinking of her crying while he sailed away.

He couldn't fucking stand it.

Brendan was still reeling from the news that Piper had come to see him off, that she'd shed tears over missing him, when an older man ambled toward the front of the crowd with a white bandage taped to his head.

Abe? The man who owned the hardware store in town with his sons?

"It was my fault Piper was late to the dock, Captain. She's been walking me to the museum every morning so I could read my paper. Can't get up the stairs alone these days." He fussed with his bandage. "Fell and smacked my noggin off the sidewalk. Piper had to stay with me until Todd came. It took a while because he was dropping my grandbaby off at school."

"She's been walking you to the museum every day?" Brendan asked, voice unnatural on account of the wrench twisting a permanent bolt into his throat. She hadn't said anything about Abe. She'd just picked up another best friend and made him important. It was what she did.

"Yes, sir. She's the sweetest girl you ever want to meet." His eyes flooded with humor. "If my sons weren't married and she hadn't gone and fallen in love with the captain here, I'd be playing matchmaker."

*Stop*, he almost shouted. Might have, if his vocal cords had been working. He was going to die.

He was dying.

"Sweet doesn't even cover it," piped up Opal, where she stood near the back of the crowd. "I hadn't left my apartment in an age, since my son passed. Not for more than grocery shopping or a quick walk. Not until Piper fixed me right up, and Hannah showed me how to use iTunes. My granddaughters brought me back to the living." A few murmurings went up at the impassioned speech. "What is this nonsense about Piper going back to LA?"

"Yeah!" A girl Piper's age appeared at Opal's side. "We're supposed to have a makeup tutorial. She gave me a smoky eye last week, and two

customers at work asked for my number." She slumped. "I love Piper. She's not really gone, is she?"

"Uh, yeah," Hannah shouted. "She is. Maybe try showing up on time, Westport."

"Sorry about that," Abe said, looking guilty along with everyone around him. "There was an oil rig fire off the coast. A young man from town works there, drilling. I reckon

everyone was waiting for news, to make sure one of our own was all right, before heading to the party.”

“We really need to get a television,” Hannah muttered.

Brendan sat there bereft as more and more proof mounted that Piper had been putting down roots. Quietly, carefully, probably just to see if she could. Probably scared she wouldn't succeed. It had been his job to comfort her—and he'd blown it.

He'd lost the best thing that ever happened to him.

He could still hear her that night when they'd sat on a bench overlooking the harbor, moments after she'd waltzed into the memorial dinner with a tray of tequila shots.

*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?*

And with those insecurities in tow, she'd proceeded to touch everyone in this room, in one way or another. Carving her way into everyone's hearts. Making herself indispensable. Did she even know how thoroughly she'd succeeded? Piper had once said Brendan was Westport, but now it was the other way around. This place was her.

*Please . . . don't doubt me, Brendan. Not you. Have faith in me. Okay?*

There was no way, no way in *hell*, he could let that be the last thing she said to him. Might as well lie down and die right there, because he wouldn't be able to live with it. And no way her last memory of him would be leaving his house, leaving her *crying*, for God sakes.

Brendan steadied himself, distributing his weight in a way that would allow him to move, to walk, without further rupturing the shredded heart in his chest. “It's my fault she's gone. The responsibility is mine. *She is mine.*” He swallowed glass. “And I'm going to get her.”

Well aware he could fail, Brendan ignored the loud cheer that went up.

He started to turn from the bar, but Hannah waved a hand to catch his attention. She dug her phone out of her pocket, punched the screen, and slid it

toward him across the wood Piper had spent a week sanding to perfection, applying the lacquer with careful concentration.

Brendan looked down at the screen and swallowed. There was Piper. Blowing a kiss beneath the words “The Party Princess's Triumphant Return,” followed by an address for a club in Los Angeles. Tomorrow night at nine

P.M.

Five-hundred-dollar cover.

People were going to pay five hundred dollars just to be in the same room with his girlfriend, and he couldn't fault them. He'd have given his life savings to be standing in front of her at that moment. Jesus, he missed her so much.

"Technically, she's not supposed to be back in LA yet or I'd tell you to try our house first. She's probably staying with Kirby, but I don't have her contact info." Hannah nodded at the phone. "You'll have to catch her at the club."

"Thanks," he managed, grateful she wasn't punishing him like he deserved. "I'd go anywhere."

"I know." Hannah squeezed his hand on the bar. "Go make it right."

Brendan paced toward the door, pulse ticking in his ears, but Mick stepped into his path before he could walk back out into the cold. "Brendan, I . . ." He bowed his head. "When you track her down, will you apologize for me? I wasn't too kind to her earlier tonight."

A dagger twisted between Brendan's eyes. Christ, how much heartache had his Piper been forced to deal with since he boarded the boat on Saturday? First he'd left, then her stepfather had canceled. No one showed up to her grand opening—or so she thought. And now he was finding out Mick had potentially hurt her feelings?

His hands formed fists at his sides, battling the fierce urge to break something. "I'm afraid to ask what you said, Mick," he whispered, closing his eyes.

"I might have implied that she couldn't replace my daughter," Mick said in a low voice, regret lacing every word.

Brendan exhaled roughly, his misery complete. Ravaging him where he stood. "Mick," he responded with forced calm. "Your daughter will always have a place in my heart. But Piper owns that heart. She came here and robbed me blind of it."

"I see that now."

"Good. Get right with it."

Unable to say another word, unable to do anything but get to her, get to her *by any means necessary*, Brendan strode to his truck and burned rubber out of Westport.