

## It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 6

Brendan locked the door of his house and double-checked his watch. Eight fifteen, on the dot. As was a captain's habit, he took a moment to judge the sky, the temperature, and the fog density. Smelled like the sun would burn the mist off by ten o'clock, keeping the early August heat minimal until he could finish his errands. He pulled on his beanie and took a left on foot toward West Ocean Avenue, traveling the same route he always did. Timing could make all the difference to a fisherman, and he liked to stay in practice, even on his off days.

The shops were just opening, the squawking calls of hungry seagulls blending with bells tinkling as employees propped open doors. The drag of a chalkboard sign being hauled out to the curb advertising fresh catches, some of which Brendan's crew had caught themselves on their last outing. Shopkeepers called lazy good mornings to each other. A couple of young kids lit cigarettes in a huddle outside the brewery, already dressed for the beach.

Since they were nearing the end of tourist season, there were markdowns advertised everywhere. On fishing hats and postcards and lunch specials. He appreciated the cycle of things. Tradition. The reliability of weather changing, and the shifting seasons setting people about a routine. It was the consistency of this place. Enduring, just like the ocean he loved. He'd been born in Westport, and he never intended to leave.

A ripple of aggravation fanned out beneath his skin when he recalled the night before. The stone tossed into the calm waters of how things were done. Outsiders didn't simply show up and claim ownership of things here. In Westport, people worked for everything they had. Nothing was handed over

without blood, sweat, and tears. The two girls didn't strike him as people who had an appreciation for the place, the people, the past it was built on. The hard work it took to sustain a community on the whims of a volatile ocean— and do it well.

Good thing they wouldn't be sticking around for long. He'd be shocked if Piper made it through the night without checking in to the closest five-star hotel.

*I can be in a room full of people that I know and still not feel like I belong.*

Why did his mind refuse to let that drop?

He'd gnawed it over for far too long last night, then again this morning. It didn't fit. And he didn't like things that didn't fit. A beautiful girl—with admittedly sharp humor—like Piper could belong anywhere she chose, couldn't she?

Just not here.

Brendan waited at a stoplight before crossing Montesano, breezing through the automatic door of the Shop'n Kart, the wrinkle of irritation smoothing itself out when he saw that everything was in its place. He waved at Carol, the usual register attendant. Paper gulls hung from the ceiling and blew around in the breeze he'd allowed inside. Not many people were in the store yet, which was why he liked to come early. No conversations or questions about the upcoming crab season. If he expected a big haul, the course he'd charted. If the crew of the *Della Ray* would beat out the Russians. Talking about his plans would only jinx them.

As a seaman, Brendan was all about luck. He knew he could only control so much. He could construct a tight schedule, guide the boat in a direction of his choosing. But it was up to the ocean how and when she gave up her treasures. With crab season quickly approaching, he could only hope fortune would favor them once again, as it had the last eight years since he'd taken over from his father-in-law as captain.

Brendan picked up a handcart and headed west, to the freezer aisle. He didn't have a list and didn't need one, since he got the same groceries every time. First things he'd grab were some frozen burger patties and then—

"Siri, what should I make for dinner?"

That voice, drifting over from the next aisle, made Brendan stop in his tracks.

"Here's what I found on the Web," came the electronic reply. A whine followed. "Siri, what is an easy dinner?"

He ground a fist into his forehead, listening to Piper speak to her phone as if it were a living, breathing human being.

There was some frustrated muttering. "Siri, what is *tarragon*?"

Brendan dragged a hand down his face. Who had let this girl child out into the world on her own without supervision? Frankly, he was kind of shocked to find her in a supermarket at all. Not to mention this early in the morning. But he wasn't going to question her. He didn't *care* about her explanation. There was a schedule to adhere to.

He trudged on, ripping the burger patties out of the freezer and throwing them into the handcart. He turned to the other side of the lane and picked out his usual bread. No-frills wheat. He hesitated before turning down the next aisle, where Piper was still yacking at her phone . . . and couldn't help but draw up short, a frown gathering his brows together. Who the fuck wore a sequined jumpsuit to the grocery store?

At least, he thought it might be called a jumpsuit. It was one of those deals women wore in the summertime with the top attached to the bottom. Except this one had shorts that ended right below her tight ass and made her look like a goddamn disco ball.

“Siri . . .” Her shoulders sagged, her handcart dangling from limp fingers. “What is a meal with *two* ingredients?”

Brendan let out an inadvertent sigh, and with a toss of hair, she glanced up, blinking.

He ignored the stab of awe in his chest. She’d gotten prettier overnight, damn her.

With a roll of his shoulders, he tried to ease the tension bracketed by his rib cage. This girl probably inspired the same reaction in every man she ever came across. Even in the harsh supermarket lighting, he couldn’t pick out a single flaw. Didn’t want to *look* that closely. But he’d have to be dead not to. Might as well admit it. Piper’s body reminded him, for the first time in a long, long time, that he had needs that couldn’t be satisfied forever by his own hand.

Add it to the list of reasons her stay in Westport couldn’t be over fast enough.

“Still here?” Jaw bunched, Brendan tore his eyes away from her long, aching smooth-looking legs and moved down the aisle, dropping pasta and a jar of sauce into his basket. “Thought you’d be long gone by now.”

“Nope.” He could sense how pleased she was with herself as she fell into step beside him. “Looks like you’re stuck with me at least one more day.”

He lobbed a box of rice into his basket. “Did you make peace with the mice horde?”

“Yes. They’re making me a dress for the ball right now.” She paused, seeming to study him to see if he got the *Cinderella* reference. But he gave away nothing. “Um . . .”

Did he just slow his step so she could keep up with him? Why? “Um, what?”

To her credit, she didn’t bat an eyelash at his shitty tone. Her smile might have been a little brittle, but she kept it in place, chin up. “Look, I sense you’re in a hurry, but . . .”

“I am.”

That fire he’d seen in her eyes last night was back, flickering behind the baby blue. “Well, if you’re late for an appointment to go roll around in fish . . .” She leaned forward and sniffed. “Might as well cancel. You’re already nailing it.”

“Welcome to Westport, honey. Everything smells like fish.” “Not me,” she said, cocking a hip.

“Give it time.” He reached for a can of peas. “Matter of fact, don’t.”

She threw the hand holding her phone, let it slap down against the outside of her thigh. “Wow. What is your problem with me?”

“Bet you’re used to men falling all over themselves to make you happy, huh?” He tossed the can up in the air, caught it. “Sorry, I’m not going to be one of them.”

For some reason, his statement had Piper’s head tipping back on a semi-hysterical laugh. “Yes. Men *salivate* to do my bidding.” She used her phone to gesture between them. “Is that all this is? You’re being rude to me because I’m spoiled?”

Brendan leaned close. Close enough to watch her incredible lips part, to catch the scent of something blatantly feminine—not flowers. Smoky and sensual, yet somehow light. The fact that he wanted to get closer and inhale more pissed him off further. “I saw your judgment of this place before anyone else last night. The way you looked up at the building and laughed, like it was some cruel joke being played on you.” He paused. “It’s like this. On my boat, I have a crew, and each member has a family. A history. Those roots run all through the town. They’ve lived a lot of it inside No Name. And on the deck of my boat. Remembering the importance of each member of my

crew and the people waiting on shore for them is my job. That makes this town my job. You wouldn’t understand the character it takes to make this place run. The persistence.”

“No, I don’t,” she sputtered, losing some steam. “I’ve been here less than one day.”

When sympathy—and a little regret over being so harsh—needed him in his middle, he knew it was time to move on. But when he turned the corner into the next aisle, she followed, trying to look like she knew what she was doing by putting apple cider vinegar and lima beans in her cart.

“Jesus Christ.” He set his cart down and crossed his arms. “Just what the hell are you planning on making with that combination?”

“Something to poison you with would be nice.” She gave him one last disgruntled look and stomped off, that work-of-art backside twitching all the way to the end of the aisle. “Thank you for being so neighborly. You know, you obviously love this place. Maybe you should try being a better representation of it.”

All right. That got him.

Brendan had been raised by a community. A village. By the time he was ten years old, he’d seen the inside of every house in Westport. Each and every resident was a friend of his parents. They babysat him, his parents returned the favor, and so on. His mother always brought a dish to celebrations when the men came back from sea, did the same for acquaintances who were sick. Kindness and generosity could be counted on. It had been a damn long while since he’d wondered what his mother would think of his behavior, but he thought of it now and grimaced.

“Fuck,” he muttered, snatching up his basket and following Piper. Spoiled rich girl or not, she’d been right. About this *one* thing. As a resident of Westport, he wasn’t doing this place justice. But just like the rare times he got off course on the water, he could easily correct the path—and get the hell on with his day. “All right,” he said, coming up behind Piper in the baking aisle and watching her shoulder blades stiffen. “Based on the conversation you were having with your phone, it sounds like you’re looking for a quick meal. That right?”

“Yes,” she mumbled without turning around.

He waited for Piper to look at him, but she didn’t. And he definitely wasn’t impatient to see her face. Or anything like that. This close, he judged that the top of her head just about reached his shoulder, and felt another minor pang

of regret for being a dick. “Italian’s easiest, if you don’t need it to be fancy.”

Finally, she faced him, mid-eye roll. “I don’t need fancy. Anyway, it’s mostly . . .” She shook her head. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“It’s mostly for Hannah.” She fluttered her fingers to indicate the lined shelves. “The cooking. To thank her for coming with me. She didn’t have to. You’re not the only one with important people and roots. I have people who I want to look out for, too.”

Brendan told himself he didn’t want to know anything about Piper. Why exactly she’d come, what she planned to do here. None of it. But his mouth was already moving.

“Why are you in Westport, anyway? To sell the building?”

She wrinkled her nose, considered his question. “I guess that’s an option.

We haven’t really thought that far ahead.” “Think of all the giant hats you could buy.”

“You know what, assho—” She turned on a heel and started to bail, but he caught her elbow to halt her progress. When she ripped out of his hold immediately and backed away with a censorious expression, it caught him off guard. At least until he noticed she was looking pointedly at his wedding ring.

The temptation to put her misconception to rest was sudden and . . . alarming.

“I’m not interested,” she said flatly.

“I’m not, either.” *Liar*, accused the tripping of his pulse. “What you said before, about your sister being your roots. I get that.” He cleared his throat. “You’ve got other ones, too. Here in Westport. If you feel like bothering.”

Her disapproval cleared slightly. "You mean my father."

"For a start, yes. I didn't know him, but he's part of this place. That means he's part of us all. We don't forget."

"There are barely any memories for me to forget," she said. "I was four when we left, and after that . . . it wasn't spoken about. Not because I wasn't curious, but because it hurt our mother." Her eyes flickered. "I remember his laugh, though. I . . . can hear it."

Brendan grunted, really beginning to wish he'd stepped back and considered her from more than one angle before going on the defensive. "There's a memorial for him. Across from the museum, up on the harbor."

She blinked. "There is?"

He nodded, surprised by the invitation to bring her there that nearly snuck out.

"I'm almost scared to go look at it," she said slowly to herself. "I've gotten so comfortable with what little memories I have. What if it triggers more?"

The more minutes ticked past in Piper's presence, the more he started to question his first impression of her. Was she actually an overindulged brat from the land of make-believe? He couldn't help but catalogue everything else he knew about her. Such as, she wouldn't pursue an unavailable man. Thought she couldn't belong in a room full of people she knew. And she was in the store at eight thirty in the morning to buy ingredients to make a meal for her sister. So. Maybe not as selfish as he'd originally thought.

Honestly, though. What the hell did his impression of her matter? She'd be gone soon. He wasn't interested. End of.

"Then I guess you'll have to call your therapist. I'm sure you've got one." "Two, if you count my backup," she responded, chin raised.

Brendan staved off his interest in inspecting the line of her throat by rooting around in his basket. "Look. Make your sister an easy Bolognese sauce." He transferred his jar of marinara into her basket, along with the flute of pasta. "Come on."

He turned to make sure she was following on the way to the meat aisle, where he picked up a pound of ground beef and wedged it in along with her other purchases, which still included the lima beans and apple cider vinegar. He was kind of curious if she'd buy those two items just to be stubborn.

Piper looked between him and the meat. "What do I do with that?"

“Put a little olive oil on the pan, brown it up. Add some onions, mushrooms if you want. When it’s all cooked, add the sauce. Put it over pasta.”

She stared at him like he’d just called a football play.

“So like . . . everything stays in layers?” Piper murmured slowly, as if envisioning the actions in her head and finding it mind-blowingly stressful. “Or do I mix it all up?”

Brendan took the sauce back out of her basket. “Here’s a better idea. Walk up to West Ocean and grab some takeout menus.”

“No, wait!” They started a tug-of-war with the sauce jar. “I can do it.”

“Be honest, you’ve never used a stove, honey,” he reminded her wryly. “And you can’t sell the building if you burn it down.”

“I won’t.” She gave a closed-mouth scream. “*God*, I feel sorry for your wife.”

His grip loosened automatically on the jar, and he snatched his hand back like he’d been burned. He started to respond, but there was something caught in his throat. “You should,” he said finally, his smile stiff. “She put up with a lot.”

Piper paled, her eyes ticking to the center of his chest. “I didn’t mean . . . Is she . . . ?”

“Yeah.” His tone was flat. “Gone.”

“I’m sorry.” She closed her eyes, rocking back on her heels. “I want to curl up and die right now, if it makes you feel any better.”

“Don’t. It’s fine.” Brendan coughed into his fist and stepped around her, intending to grab a few more things and check out. But he stopped before he could get too far. For some stupid reason, he didn’t want to leave her feeling guilty. There was no way she could have known. “Listen.” He nodded at her basket. “Don’t forget to have the fire department on speed dial.”

After the briefest hesitation, Piper huffed at him. “Don’t forget to buy soap,” she said, waving a hand in front of her face. But he didn’t miss the gratitude in those baby blues. “See you around. Maybe.”

“Probably not.”

She shrugged. “We’ll see.” “Guess we will.”

Fine. Done.

Nothing more to say.

It took him another handful of seconds to get moving.

And hell if he didn't smile on his way back up West Ocean.