

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 9

Brendan went through the motions of looking over the chalkboard menu at the Red Buoy, even though he already knew damn well he'd be ordering the fish and chips. Every Monday night, he met Fox at the small Westport restaurant. An institution that had been standing since their grandfathers worked the fishing boats. Brendan had never failed to get the same thing. No sense in fixing something that wasn't broken, and the Red Buoy had the best damn fish in town.

Locals came and went, calling hellos to each other, most of them picking up takeout to bring home to their families, greasy bags tucked under their arms. Tonight, Brendan and Fox were making use of one of three tables in the place, waiting for their orders to be called. And if Fox noticed Brendan glancing too many times at No Name across the street, he hadn't mentioned it.

"You're even more quiet than usual," Fox remarked, leaning back so far in his chair, it was a wonder he didn't topple over. He wouldn't, though, Brendan knew. His best friend and relief skipper of the *Della Ray* rarely made a misstep. In that way, he lived up to his name. "You got crabs on the brain, Cap?"

Brendan grunted, looking across the street again.

If he didn't have crabs on the brain, he sure as shit needed to put them there. In a couple of weeks, they would be making the journey to the Bering Sea for the season. For two weeks after that, they'd be hunting in those frigid yet familiar waters, doing their best to fill the belly of the boat with enough crab to support their team of six until next year.

Every crew member and deckhand of the *Della Ray* had year-round fishing

jobs working out of Westport Harbor in addition to participating in the season, but king crab was their payday, and Brendan's men counted on him to deliver.

"Been studying the maps," Brendan said finally, forcing himself to focus on the conversation and not the building across the way. "Got a feeling the Russians are going to set their pots where we dropped ours last year, figuring it's tried and true. But the season is earlier than ever this year, and the tides are more volatile. Nothing is surefire."

Fox considered that. "You're thinking of heading farther west?"

"North." They traded a knowing look, both of them aware of the rougher waters that lay in that direction. "Can't think of a crew that's had much luck up toward St. Lawrence Island in several years. But I've got a hunch."

“Hey. Your hunches have always made my bank account happy.” He dropped forward, clinked his bottle of Bud against Brendan’s. “Let’s do the damn thing.”

Brendan nodded, content to let the silence settle.

But he noticed that Fox seemed to be battling a smile. “You got something to say?” Brendan finally asked.

Fox’s mouth spread into the smile that made him popular with women. In fact, he hadn’t been at No Name on Sunday night because he’d taken a trip to Seattle to see a woman he’d met online. Seeing as he’d spent two nights there, Brendan had to assume the date had been . . . successful, though he’d cut his tongue out before asking for details. That kind of thing was better off left private.

For some reason, the fact that his best friend was popular with women was annoying him today more than usual. He couldn’t fathom why.

“I might have something to say,” Fox answered, in a way that presumed he did. “Took a walk up to the harbor this morning. Heard we’ve got some LA transplants in old Westport. Word is you had a little battle of wills with one of them.”

“Who said?”

His friend shrugged. “Don’t worry about it.” “Someone on the crew, then. Sanders.”

Fox was visibly enjoying himself. “You’re staring a hole through the window of No Name, Cap.” There was a stupid dimple in his relief skipper’s cheek. Had it always been there? Did women like shit like that? “Heard she didn’t back down from your death stare.”

Brendan was disgusted. Mostly because he was right. Piper hadn’t backed down from it. Not last night and not this morning. “You sound like a teenage girl gossiping at her first sleepover.”

That got a laugh out of Fox. But his friend went back to drinking his beer for a moment, his smile losing some of its enthusiasm. “It’s okay, you know,” he said, keeping his voice low in deference to the other customers waiting for their orders. “It’s been seven years, man.”

“I know how long it’s been.”

“Okay.” Fox relented, knowing him well enough to drop the subject. Not the subject of his wife. But the subject of . . . moving on. At some point, near or far. Even the glimmer of that conversation made him nervous. Like everything else in his life, he’d remained married in his mind since she’d passed, because it had become a habit. A routine. A comfort of sorts. So he wasn’t welcoming the possibility.

Still, when they both rose to collect their orders a minute later and sat back down at the table, Brendan didn't start eating right away. Instead, he found his hand fisted on the table, to the right of his plate. Fox saw it, too, and waited.

"Don't go sniffing around the older one. Piper," Brendan muttered. "And don't ask me to explain why, either."

Fox dipped his chin, his mouth in a serious line but his eyes merry as fuck. "Not a single sniff. You've got my word . . ." Brendan's friend dropped the fork he'd just picked up, his attention riveted on something happening out in the street. "What in the sweet hell?"

Brendan's head jerked around and pieced the situation together in the space of a second, his captain's mind immediately searching for a solution. His life might run on schedules and routine, but that organized mentality was what made it easier for him to manage chaos. Problems arose, solutions presented themselves. Just another type of order.

But this . . .

He didn't feel like his usual self watching Piper barrel into the street wielding fire.

His body moved for him, though. He shot from the table and shouted to the visor-wearing register girl, "Fire extinguisher. Now."

She turned as pale as a ghost, and dammit, he'd have to apologize for scaring her later, but right then, he was moving across the street at a fast clip, pulling the pin out of the fire extinguisher. For a few hellish seconds, he

watched Piper turn in circles, looking for somewhere safe to set down the enflamed pan, before she had no choice but to throw it into the street.

"Move," Brendan ordered, aiming and dousing the flames in sodium bicarbonate. Left behind was a charred pan from the nineteenth century, by the look of it. He took a breath, realized his heart was sprinting in his chest. Without stopping to think, he dropped the extinguisher and grabbed Piper's wrists, turning her hands over to look for burn marks. "Did you get yourself?"

"No," she breathed, blinking up at him. "Thanks. Um . . . thanks for putting it out."

He dropped her hands, not sure he wanted to acknowledge the free fall of relief he felt over her being unharmed. Stepping back, he whipped off his beanie, letting a welcome rush of irritation snake its way into his belly. "Really, Piper?" Brendan shouted. "I was only joking about having the fire department on speed dial."

Until Hannah stepped between them, Brendan wasn't even aware the little sister had followed Piper out of the building. Oh, but she was there, she was pissed, and her anger was directed squarely at him. "Don't yell at her, you fucking bully."

Inwardly, he flinched. *Bully?*

Fox made a choking sound. Brendan turned to tell his friend to keep his mouth shut and realized they were drawing a crowd. A curious one.

"Hannah, it's fine." Piper sighed, moving out from behind her sister. Face red from embarrassment, she used the hem of her shirt to pick up the frying pan. The move left almost her entire trim stomach exposed, and Brendan ground his molars together. If he couldn't help noticing the little mole to the right of her belly button, nobody else could, either. She wasn't wearing the sequined thing anymore, but in bike shorts, with loose hair and a dirt smudge on her nose, she wasn't any less beautiful. "Ignore him," Piper said, dismissing him with a flick of her hand. "Do you see a place I can throw this away?"

"*Ignore him, the lady says,*" Fox said, amused.

"What are you, his pretty-boy sidekick?" Hannah waved off a stunned Fox with a suck of her teeth and refocused her wrath on Brendan. "The last thing she needs is another dude making her feel like garbage. Leave her alone."

"*Hannah,*" Piper hissed sharply, walking past. "It's not worth getting upset over. Come help me."

But her sister wasn't finished. "And it was *my* fault. I left the cleaning rag on the kitchen counter, all soaked in chemicals. She's the one that saved the building from burning down." Hannah poked him in the middle of his chest. "Leave. Her. Alone."

Brendan was feeling shittier by the second. Something funny was stuck in his throat, and the appetite he'd left the house with had deserted him. He'd still been reeling over Hannah calling him a *bully* when she'd said, *The last thing she needs is another dude making her feel like garbage*, and now something hot and dangerous was simmering in his belly.

None of this was familiar. Women, especially ones half his size, didn't yell at him in the street. Or scare the shit out of him by nearly catching on fire. Part of him wanted to swipe a hand across the chessboard of the day and start over tomorrow, hoping and praying everything would be back to normal. But instead he found he wanted to . . . fix this situation with Piper more than he wanted to cling to the status quo. Maybe he was coming down with the goddamn flu or something, because when Piper tossed the pan into a trash can and sailed back toward her building, it was clear she intended to go home without saying another word to him. And for some reason, he just couldn't allow that to happen.

Leave her alone, the sister had said, and his apology got stuck in his throat. Like he was a prize asshole who went around hurting women's feelings.

No. Just this one. Why just this one?

Brendan cleared his throat hard. "Piper."

The woman in question paused with her hand on the door, gave an impatient hair toss that was way too sexy for a Monday night in Westport. Her expression said, *You again?*

Meanwhile, Hannah frowned up at him. "I said to leave my sister—" "Listen up," Brendan said to the younger one. "I heard what you said. I

respect you for saying it. You've got a nice, solid backbone for someone from Los Angeles. But I don't follow orders, I give them." He let that sink in. "I yelled at her because that's what people do when there's a close call." Over the top of Hannah's head, he met Piper's gaze. "I won't do it again."

A wrinkle appeared between Piper's brows, and damn, he was relieved. At least she no longer seemed indifferent about him. "It's okay, Hannah," Piper said, her hand dropping away from the door. "If you want to head back upstairs, I can go grab some takeout for dinner."

Hannah still wasn't budging. Neither was the crowd surrounding them. Brendan couldn't really blame the locals for being curious, either. These two girls were totally out of place in their small-fishing-town surroundings. Like two explosions of color.

Piper came forward and laid her head on her sister's shoulder. "I appreciate you defending me, Hanns, but you're a lover, not a fighter." She dropped a kiss on her cheek. "Go decompress. Your Radiohead albums are hiding in the secret pocket of my red quilted Chanel suitcase."

The younger sister gasped, whirling on Piper. "They wouldn't fit in any of my suitcases. You snuck them for me?"

"I was saving them for a rainy day." She bumped her hip to Hannah's. "Go. Fire up the turntable and listen as loud as you want."

"You a vinyl fan?" Fox piped up, reminding Brendan he was standing there in the first place. Hannah looked at Brendan's friend dubiously, but it only served to deepen that stupid dimple. He jerked a thumb in the direction of the harbor. "You know, there's a record store within walking distance. I could show you."

The younger Bellinger's eyes had gone wide as saucers. "Fox," Brendan warned, taking his arm and pulling him aside.

“Oh, come on,” Fox threw back, before he could say anything. “She’s a kid.”

“I’m not a kid,” Hannah called. “I’m twenty-six!”

Fox dropped his voice another octave, moved in closer. “Jesus, she’s cute, but she couldn’t be further from my type. I’m just trying to buy you some alone time with Piper.” He raised an eyebrow. “And who wouldn’t want alone time with Piper. Good Christ, man. Sanders didn’t do her justice.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

His friend laughed. “You really know how to make up for lost time, don’t you?”

“I said, don’t make me explain,” Brendan gritted out.

“All right. All right. Just vouch for me,” Fox muttered. “I’ll have her back in twenty minutes, and I might even say some nice things about your grouchy ass. Wouldn’t hurt.”

Brendan hated admitting that Fox had a point. This was his third encounter with Piper, and he’d been a dick all three times. At first because she’d judged his town. Then he’d landed on the conclusion that she was an overindulged rich girl. After that, he could only blame being painfully rusty with the

opposite sex. And this . . . being alone with a woman. It was a huge step. He could give her a simple apology now, go home, try to stop thinking about her. Yeah, he *could* do that. Just avoid this part of town for three months and stay the course of his routine.

She glanced up at him through her eyelashes. Not in a flirtatious way. More . . . inquisitive. As if she was wondering about him. And he found himself regretting the bad impressions he’d made. “He’s my relief skipper. If he doesn’t have her back in twenty minutes, I could drown him and make it look like an accident.”

A smile teased her lips, and he wondered—couldn’t help himself—what kind of man would get a kiss from a woman like that. “Take a picture of his ID, Hanns,” Piper said, still looking at Brendan like he was a puzzle she wasn’t sure she wanted to solve. “Text it to me first.”

Sliding his wallet from his back pocket, Fox nodded. “I guess they grow them smart as well as beautiful in LA.”

“Wow.” Piper smiled at Fox. “A compliment. I was starting to think those were against the law in Westport.”

Brendan turned a death glare on Fox. “What’d I say?”

Fox slid his ID to Hannah. “Sorry, Captain. The charm comes naturally.”

The younger Bellinger snapped a picture of Fox's driver's license. A moment later, there was a *bing*, and Piper confirmed that she had the man's vital information. Fox gestured for Hannah to precede him down the sidewalk, and she did, arms crossed. But not before she mouthed a warning to Brendan.

Good Lord, what happened to him being well respected in this town?

If these two girls had had the proper tools, he was pretty damn sure he'd be tarred and feathered right about now. Maybe hanging from his toes in the harbor like a prize catch.

Brendan closed the distance between them, feeling like he was walking a plank. But he needn't have worried about being alone with Piper, because he swore half the damn town was still standing around, leaning in to see how he'd get out of the doghouse. "That fire ruin your dinner?"

She nodded, playing with the hem of her shirt. "I guess the universe just couldn't allow something so perfect. You should have seen it. The meat barely looked like brains anymore."

He was caught off guard by the urge to smile. "I, uh . . ." He replaced his beanie, tried to scare off a few locals with a loud sniff, gratified when they

scattered in all directions. "It was rude to shout before. I apologize." Lord, she was even prettier with the sunset in her eyes. That was probably why he added, "For this time and the other times."

Piper's mouth twisted and she ducked her head somewhat, like she was trying to camouflage her own smile. "Thank you. I accept."

Brendan grunted, dipped his chin toward the Red Buoy. "They called my number right before you ran out on fire. Go in there and eat it." When she blinked, he played back his demand and realized that's exactly what it had been. A demand. "If you'd like," he tacked on.

She hummed and slipped past him, her perfume reaching up and apparently doing something to his brain, because he followed in her wake without sending the order to his feet. Everyone turned and stared when they walked inside and sat down at the same table. Hell, the customers waiting for their orders didn't even attempt to disguise their interest.

He didn't want any of them to overhear their conversation. It was none of their business. That was the only reason he took the seat next to Piper and tugged her chair a little closer.

Brendan pushed the plate of fish and chips in front of her, then picked up the fork and put it in her hand.

“So . . .” She forked the smallest fry on the plate, and he frowned. “Your friend is your relief skipper. That makes you . . . the captain?”

Thank Christ. Something he could talk about. “That’s right. I captain the *Della Ray*.”

“Oh.” She tilted her head. “Where does that name come from?”

“I took the wheel from my father-in-law, Mick. It’s named after his wife.”

“How romantic.” If bringing up his in-laws made for awkward

conversation, she didn’t let it show. Instead, her interest seemed piqued. “Me and Hannah walked up to the harbor this afternoon. So many boats are named after women. Is there a reason for that?”

He thought of Piper strutting along his harbor and wondered how many car accidents she’d caused. “Women are protective. Nurturing. A boat is given the name of a woman in the hopes that she’ll protect the crew. And hopefully put a good word in with the other important woman in our lives, the ocean.”

She took a bite of fish, chewing around a smile. “Have you ever had a woman on your crew?”

“Jesus Christ, no.” There went the smile. “I’m trying *not* to sink.” Amusement danced across her face. “So the idea of women is comforting,

but their actual presence would be a disaster.” “Yes.”

“Well, that makes perfect sense.” Her sarcasm was delivered with a wink. “My stepfather told us a little bit about king crab fishing. It’s only a few weeks out of the year?”

“Changes every season, depending on the supply, the overall haul from the prior year.”

Piper nodded. “What do you do the rest of the year? Besides yell at harmless women in the street.”

“You planning on holding that over me for long?” “I haven’t decided.”

“Fair enough.” He sighed, noticed she’d stopped eating, and nudged her fork hand into action. When she’d put a decent-sized bite into her mouth, he continued. “In the summer, we fish for tuna. Those are the longer jobs. Four, five days out. In between those long hauls, we do overnight trips to bring in salmon, trout, cod.”

Her eyebrows went up, and she angled her fork toward the plate. “Did you catch this?”

“Maybe.”

She covered her mouth. “That’s so weird.”

Was it? He kind of liked sitting there while she ate something he’d brought back on his boat. He liked knowing most of the town either made money off his catches or fed them to their families, but it had never quite felt like the masculine pride hardening his chest right now. “You want me to put in an order for your sister? Or they can box up Fox’s dinner, and he can fend for himself.”

“She’ll be happy with the other half of yours.” She pushed Fox’s plate toward him. “You should eat his, though. I don’t know what it is, but it looks good.”

Brendan grunted. “It’s a potpie.”

“Ohh.” She waited, but he made no move to pick up his fork. “You don’t like potpie?”

“It’s not fish and chips.” “And that’s bad.”

“It’s not bad, it’s just not what I order.” He shifted in his chair, wondering if the seats had always been so uncomfortable. “I always order the fish and chips.”

Piper studied him in that way again, from beneath her long eyelashes—and he wished she wouldn’t. Every time she did that, the zipper of his jeans felt tight. “You’ve never eaten anything else on the menu?”

“Nope. I like what I like.” “That’s so boring, though.” “I call it safe.”

“Oh no.” A serious expression dawned on her face. “Do you think there is a female fisherman hiding in this pie, Brendan?”

His bark of laughter made her jump. Hell, it made *him* jump. Had anyone ever caught him off guard like that? No, he didn’t think so. He turned slightly to find the employees of the Red Buoy and a half-dozen customers staring at him. When he turned back, Piper was holding out the fork. “Try the pie. I dare you.”

“I won’t like it.” “So?”

So? “I don’t *try* things. If I make the decision to eat the pie, I’ll have to eat the whole thing. I don’t just go around sampling shit and moving on. That’s indecisive.”

“If Hannah was here, she’d tell you your problem is psychological.”

Brendan sighed up at the ceiling. “Well, I didn’t seem to have any damn problems until you two showed up and started pointing them out.”

A beat passed. “Brendan.”

He dropped his chin. "What?"

She held out the fork. "Try the pie. It's not going to kill you."

"Christ. If it's that important to you." Brendan snatched the fork out of her hand, careful not to graze her with the tines. As he held the fork above the pastry shell, she pressed her knuckles to her mouth and squealed a little. He shook his head, but some part of him was relieved she didn't seem to be having a terrible time. Even if her entertainment came at his expense. He reckoned he kind of owed her after the scene in the street, though, didn't he?

Yeah.

He stabbed the fork into the pie, pulled it out with some chicken, vegetables, and gravy attached. Put it in his mouth and chewed. "I hate it." Someone behind the counter gasped. "No offense," he called without turning around. "It's just not fish and chips."

Piper's hands dropped away from her face. "Well, that was disappointing." He kept eating, even though the runniness of the gravy curled his upper lip.

"You're really going to eat the whole thing," she murmured, "aren't you?" Another large bite went in. "Said I would."

They ate in silence for a couple of minutes until he noticed her attention drifting to the window, and he could see she was thinking about the frying pan incident. Another stab of guilt caught him in his middle for yelling at her. "You planning on trying to cook again?"

She considered her plate of food, which she'd hardly made a dent in. "I don't know. The goal was to make it through one night and go from there." She squinted an eye at him. "Maybe I'll have better luck if I give our stove a woman's name."

Brendan thought for a second. "Eris." She gave him an inquisitive head tilt. "The goddess of chaos."

"Ha-ha."

Piper laid her fork down, signaling she'd finished eating, and Brendan felt a kick of urgency. They'd been sitting there a good ten minutes, and he still didn't know anything about her. Nothing important, anyway. And he wouldn't mind making sense of her, this girl who came across pampered one minute and vulnerable the next. Hell, there was something fascinating about how she glimmered in one direction, then the other, delivering hints of something deeper, before dancing away. Had he really talked about fishing for most of dinner?

He *wanted* to ask what Hannah had meant when she said men treat Piper like garbage. That statement had been stuck in his craw since he'd heard it. "You never answered me this morning. Why exactly are you in Westport?" was what he asked instead. She'd been running fingers through her hair, but paused when she heard his question. "You said three months," he continued. "That's a pretty specific amount of time."

Beneath the table, her leg started to jiggle. "It's kind of an awkward story." "Do you need a beer before telling it?"

Her lips twitched. "No." She closed her eyes and shivered. "It's more than awkward, actually. It's humiliating. I don't know if I should give you that ammunition."

Man, he'd really been a bastard. "I won't use it against you, Piper."

She speared him with those baby blues and seemed satisfied with whatever she saw. "Okay. Just keep an open mind." She blew out a breath. "I had a bad breakup. A public one. And I didn't want to be labeled social media pathetic, right? So I mass texted hundreds of people and broke us into the rooftop pool

at the Mondrian. It got out of control. Like, police helicopters and fireworks and nudity out of control. So I got arrested and almost cost my stepfather the production money for his next film. He sent me here with barely any money to teach me a lesson . . . and force me into being self-sufficient. Hannah wouldn't let me come alone."

Brendan's fork had been suspended in the air for a good minute. He tried to piece it all together, but everything about this world she'd described was so far from his, it almost sounded like make-believe. "When was this?"

"A few weeks ago," she said on an exhale. "Wow, it sounds a lot worse when it's all strung together like that." Chewing her bottom lip, she searched his face. "What are you thinking? That you were right and I'm just some rich, spoiled brat?"

"Don't put words in my mouth. You're already making me eat this goddamn pie."

"No, I'm not!"

He shoveled in another bite of crap, his mind circling back to the bad breakup she'd mentioned. Why did his spine feel like it was getting ready to snap? "I'm thinking a lot of things," he said. "Mostly, I can't imagine you in jail."

"It wasn't so bad. The guard, Lina, was a doll. She let me use the regular bathroom."

"How'd you pull that off?"

"People like me." She looked down her adorable nose at him. "Most of the time."

He snorted. "Yeah, I can see that. Flirt."

She gasped. Then shrugged. "Yeah." A couple of seconds ticked past. "You didn't let me flirt with you. And then I thought you were married. My whole pattern got thrown off, and now I don't know how to act. Trying to flirt again seems pointless."

The hell it was. "Try it."

"No. I can't!" she sputtered. "The third wall is already down."

Was he sweating under his clothes? What the hell was wrong with him? "What is the next stage after flirting? Once you've settled in?"

"*Settled in?* Ew." She shrugged. "Also, I don't know. I've never gotten that far." She crossed her legs, drawing his gaze to the slide of her shorts along that smooth underside of her thigh. And there went his zipper again, confining things. "We've gotten way off the topic of my whole sordid story."

"No, we haven't," he responded. "I'm still digesting it all. Along with—" "Don't you dare bring up the pie again." They each offered up half a smile.

"Anyway, unless I can finagle a way back to Los Angeles, me and Hannah will be here until Halloween. I think my best bet is to spend less time cooking, more time figuring out how to finagle." She tapped a fingernail on the table. "Maybe if there was a way to prove I've learned how to be responsible, Daniel would let me come home."

Brendan was brooding over Piper being at a party that involved nudity—in what capacity, exactly? Had *she* been naked?—so he spoke more harshly than intended. "Here's an idea. Why don't you try and actually enjoy your time outside the ninth circle of hell that is Los Angeles?"

"Who said I'm not enjoying myself? Look at me, getting snipped at over fish and chips. If this isn't living it up, I've been doing it wrong." Smirking, she popped a fry into her mouth, and he tried not to watch her chew. "But you're right. I could try harder. Maybe I'll charm one of those cute fishermen up on the harbor into taking me fishing."

Something acidic burbled in his windpipe at the prospect of her on another man's boat. "You could. If you wanted a subpar experience."

"Are you saying you could deliver a better one?" "Damn right."

Were they still talking about fishing? Brendan didn't know. But he was turned on . . . and she appeared to be waiting for something. For him to ask her out on his boat?

A breeze of panic kept his mouth shut a moment too long. Piper gave him an assessing look and visibly moved on, rising to her feet when her sister and Fox appeared outside

the restaurant. “There they are. I’ll grab a to-go box for the rest of this.” She leaned down and kissed both of his cheeks, like they were in goddamn Paris or something. “Thanks for dinner, Captain. I promise to stay out of your hair.”

As she dumped the remaining fish and chips into a container and bounced off to join her sister, Brendan wasn’t sure if he wanted Piper out of his hair. If he didn’t, he’d just missed a clear opening to ask her out. In the morning, he’d be leaving for a three-day fishing trip, so—assuming he *wanted* the opportunity to see more of the girl from Los Angeles—he’d have to wait for another one. And it might never come.

Fox dropped into the chair beside him, grinning ear to ear. “How’d it go, Cap?”

“Shut up.”