

It Happened One Summer Novel – Chapter 28 -

Things were too good to be true.

On the water, that usually meant Brendan was missing something. That he'd forgotten to flush out a fuel line or replace a rusting winch. There was no such thing as smooth sailing on a boat, not for long. And since he'd long lived his life in the same manner he captained the *Della Ray*, he couldn't help but anticipate a time bomb going off.

He had this woman. This once-in-a-hundred-lifetimes woman who could walk into a room and rob him of fucking breath. She was courageous, sweet, clever, seductive, adventurous, kind, guileless one moment, mischievous the next. So beautiful that a smile from her could make him whisper a prayer. And she loved him. Showed him exactly how much in new ways every day— like when he'd caught her spraying his cologne onto her nighttime shirt, holding it to her nose like it could heal all ills. She whispered her love into his ear every morning and every night. She asked him about fishing and googled questions to fill in the blanks, which Brendan knew because she was always leaving her laptop browser open on the kitchen counter.

Too good to be true.

He was missing something. A line was going to snap.

It was hard to imagine anything bad happening at the moment, however, while cooking in the kitchen with Piper. With her hair over her shoulder in a loose braid, she was barefoot in yoga pants and a clingy sweater, humming between him and the stove, absently stirring pasta sauce with one hand. They'd cooked it three nights in a row, and he didn't have the heart to tell her he was sick of Italian, because she was so proud of herself for learning to

make sauce. He'd eat it for a decade straight as long as she held her breath for the first bite and clapped when he gave her a thumbs-up.

Brendan had his chin on top of Piper's head, arms looped around her waist, swaying side to side to the music drifting from Hannah's room. In these quiet moments, he continually had to stop himself from asking for a decision. Was she going back to LA for the party? Or at all?

This party in her honor made him nervous for a lot of reasons. What if she went home and was reminded of all the reasons she loved it there? What if she decided that being celebrated and revered by millions was preferable to being with a fisherman who left her on a weekly basis? Because, Jesus, that wouldn't be such a fucking stretch. If she would just tell him Westport was her home, he'd believe her. He'd let the fear drop. But every day came and went with them dancing around the elephant in the room.

Despite his refusal to pressure her, the unknown, the lack of a plan, was getting to him.

He'd never compare his relationship with Piper to his marriage, but after the typhoon and Piper's subsequent race to the hospital—not to mention the tears she'd shed in his bed afterward—a new anxiety had taken root.

Bad things happen when I leave. When I'm not here to do anything about them.

He'd returned home once to find himself a widower.

It felt like just yesterday that he'd scared the hell out of Piper. Sent her running through a dangerous storm and driving to reach him in a state of panic.

What if he came home next time to find her gone? Without an answer in regard to the future, the upcoming trip loomed ominously, impatience scraping at him.

"Who cooks when you're on the *Della Ray*?" she asked, leaning her head back against his chest.

Brendan shook off his unwanted thoughts, trying his best to be present. To take the perfection she was giving him and be grateful for every second. "We take turns, but it's usually Deke, since he likes doing it."

She sighed. "I'm sorry you'll never be able to enjoy anything as much as my sauce."

"You're right." He kissed her neck. "Nothing will ever compare." "I'll have some ready when you get home. *Two servings.*"

"Just have yourself ready," he rumbled, running a finger along the waistband of her pants.

Piper tipped her head back, and their mouths met in a slow kiss that made him anxious for later, when they could be alone in bed together. Anxious to hear those sobs of urgency in his ears. Anxious to memorize them so he could bring them on the boat tomorrow. "Brendan?"

"Yeah?"

She bit off a laugh. "How long are you going to eat this sauce before you admit you're sick of it? I'm going to lose my bet with Hannah."

He laughed so hard she dropped the spoon into the sauce.

"Oh!" Piper tried to fish the utensil out of the bubbling sauce with her fingers, but yanked them out with a yelp. "Oh crap! Ouch!"

His laughter died immediately, and he turned her around, swiftly using a kitchen towel to clean off her burned fingers and kissing them. “You okay, baby?”

“Yes,” she gasped, her petite frame starting to shake with laughter against him. “I guess losing a couple of fingers is the price of winning the bet.”

“I love the sauce.” Curious, he shifted. “How long did Hannah think it would take to . . .”

“Admit you were sick of my sauce? Eternity.”

“That’s how long it should have taken,” Brendan growled, pissed at himself. “You should have lost. And you should have assumed it would take an eternity, too.”

Her lips twitched. “I’m not mad.” She laid her cheek against the center of his chest. “I got to hear that big, beautiful laugh. I’m a double winner.”

“I love the damn sauce,” he grumbled into the crown of her head, deciding to give voice to another one of the worries that had been needling him. “Are you going to be all right when I leave tomorrow?”

“Yes.” She looked up at him with a furrow between her brows. “Don’t worry about me when you’re out there, please. I need to know you’re focused and safe.”

“I am, Piper.” He brushed her cheek with his knuckles. “I will be.”

Her body relaxed a little more against him. “Brendan . . .” With his name lingering in the air, she seemed to come out of a trance, starting to turn away from him. “We should order pizza—”

He kept her from turning. “What were you going to say?”

Based on the way she squared her shoulders, she was remembering her promise not to keep anything locked in her head. Away from him. A mixture

of dread and curiosity rippled in his stomach, but he stayed silent. This was good. The openness between them was coming easier and easier, because of trust. “I was going to ask if you wanted kids someday. And I realize that sounds like . . . like I’m asking if you want them with *me*, which . . .” Color suffused her cheeks. “Anyway. It’s just that we never talked about it, and kids seem like something you’d have a firm plan on—”

Her phone started vibrating on the kitchen counter. “Leave it.”

Piper nodded. Her phone had been unusually active since they returned from Seattle, which was another reason he’d been on edge. But just like when they’d been in the hotel lobby shopping for cologne, the phone wouldn’t quiet, dancing and jangling on the counter. “Let me just silence it,” she murmured, reaching for the device. Pausing. “Oh.

It's Daniel." Her eyes widened a little, as if maybe she'd just remembered something. "I—I'll call him back later."

Brendan wanted nothing more than to get back to the conversation at hand, but when he told her that yes, he wanted kids, he didn't need her distracted. "It's fine. Answer it."

She shook her head vigorously and put the phone on silent, but the unsteadiness of her hands caused it to slip. When she caught it, the pad of her finger hit the answer button by mistake. "Piper?" came a man's voice over the speakerphone.

"Daniel," she choked out, holding the phone awkwardly between her chest and Brendan's. "Hey. Hi!"

"Hi, Piper," he said formally. "Before I book this flight, I just want to make sure the grand opening is still on. You're not exactly famous for your reliability."

Brendan stiffened, alarm and betrayal turning his blood cold. Here it was. The other shoe dropping.

Piper closed her eyes. "Yes," she said quietly. "It's still on. Six o'clock." "That'll do fine, then," her stepfather responded briskly. "There's a flight

that gets in a few hours before. Is there anything I can bring you from home?"

"Just yourself," she said with false brightness.

Daniel hummed. "Very well. Have to run. Your mother sends her love." "Same to her. Bye."

When she hung up the phone, she wouldn't look at him. And maybe that was a good thing, because he was too winded to hide any of the dread and

anxiety that had taken hold of his system. "Daniel is coming." He swallowed the nails in his throat. "You're still planning on impressing him with the bar. So he'll let you come back to LA early."

"Well . . ." She threaded unsteady fingers through her hair. "That was the original plan, yes. And then everything started moving so fast with us . . . and I forgot. I just forgot."

"You forgot?" Brendan's voice was flat, anger flickering to life in his chest. Anger and fear, the fear of her slipping away. Goddammit. Just when he thought they were being honest with each other. "We've been doing nothing but work on Cross and Daughters for the last week, and the reason you started renovating it in the first place slipped your mind? Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Yes," she whispered, extending a hand toward him.

Brendan moved out of her reach, immediately regretting the action when she flinched and dropped her hand. But he was too fucking worried and shot through with holes to apologize and reach for her. His arms were leaden anyway. Impossible to lift. “You didn’t keep Daniel’s visit as a safety net?”

Her color deepened, speaking volumes. “Well, I d-did, but that was—”

His laughter was humorless. “And your friend Kirby? Have you told her you’re not planning on flying to LA for the party?”

Piper’s mouth snapped into a straight line.

“No, I didn’t think so,” he rasped, a sharp object lancing through his ribs. “You’ve got all kinds of safety nets, don’t you, Piper?”

“I wasn’t going to go,” she wheezed, hugging her middle. “Brendan, stop being like this.”

But he was past hearing her. Past anything but weathering the battering waves. Trying to keep the whole ship from getting sucked down into the eddy. This was it. This was the storm he’d felt coming. Felt in his fucking bones. Had he ever really had a chance with Piper, or had he been a delusional idiot? “Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me?” he said, turning and leaving the kitchen. “You were never going to stay, were you?”

Piper jogged after him. “Oh my God. Would you just stop and *listen* to me?”

Brendan’s legs took the stairs two at a time, seeing nothing in front of him. Just moving on autopilot. “I was right here, ready to listen this whole time, Piper.”

She followed. “You’re not being fair! Everything is new to me. This town.

Being in a relationship. I’m . . . I’m sorry it took me longer than it should have to let it all go, but letting everything go is a lot to ask.”

“I know that, goddammit. I do. But if you weren’t even considering this, *us*, you shouldn’t have kept stringing me along like one of your followers when you were just plotting your exit behind my back.”

Reaching the bedroom, he glanced back over his shoulder to find her looking stricken. And his stomach bottomed out, his heart protesting anything and everything but making her happy. Soothing her. Keeping her in his arms at all times.

What the hell was wrong with him? He hated himself for the tears in her eyes, for the insecurity in her posture. God, he *loathed* himself. But the fear of losing her was winning out over common sense. Over his instinct to comfort Piper, tell her he loved her a thousand times. Making him want to rage, to protect himself from being gutted like a fish.

“Look, Piper,” he said unevenly, pulling his packed gym bag out from beneath the bed. “You just need to think about what you actually want. Maybe you can’t do that when I’m constantly in your face.”

“Brendan.” She sounded panicked. “Stop! You’re being ridiculous. I wasn’t going to leave. Put the bag away. Put it away.”

His hands shook with the need to do as she pleaded. “You never told me you were staying. You wanted an out. A fail-safe. Whether you think so or not.”

“It’s a big decision,” she breathed. “But I was—”

“You’re right. It is a big decision.” He swallowed the urge to rage some more. To rage against her potentially leaving. To rage at the awful possibility of coming home from the trip and finding her unhappy. Or gone. Or regretful. But all he could do was face it head-on and hope he’d done enough to make her stay. All he could do was hope his love was sufficient. “I’m going to spend the night on the boat,” he managed, though his throat was closing. “Think about what you want to do. Really think. I can’t handle this will-she- or-won’t-she bullshit anymore, Piper. I can’t handle it.”

She stayed frozen as he went down the stairs, past a wide-eyed Hannah. “I’ll be at the dock in the morning,” Piper shouted, coming down the stairs,

her expression now determined—and he loved her so goddamn hard in that moment. Loved every layer, every facet, every mood, every complication. “I already know what I want, Brendan. I want you. And I’ll be at the dock to kiss you good-bye in the morning. Okay? You want to storm out? Fine. Go.

I’ll be the strong one this time.”

He couldn’t speak for a moment. “And if you’re not there in the morning?” Piper threw out a belligerent hand. “Then I’m falling back on my safety nets. Is that what you want me to say? You have to have it in black and

white?”

“That’s who I am.”

“I know and I love who you are.” Temper crackled in her beautiful eyes. “Fine, if I’m not there tomorrow morning, I guess you’ll know my decision. But I *will* be there.” She blinked several times against the moisture in her eyes. “Please . . . don’t doubt me, Brendan. Not you. Have faith in me. Okay?”

With his heart in his mouth, he turned to go. Before he reached for Piper and forgot the argument and lost himself in her. But the same problems would exist in the morning, and he needed them solved once and for all. He needed the mystery gone. Needed to

know if he'd have a lifetime with her or a lifetime of emptiness. The suspense was eating him alive.

He took one last look at her through the windshield of his truck before backing out of the driveway—and he almost shut off the ignition and climbed out. Almost.