



The
SUMMER
of

**BROKEN
RULES**

K. L. WALTHER
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Also by K. L. Walther

If We Were Us

The
SUMMER
of
BROKEN
RULES

K. L. WALTHER

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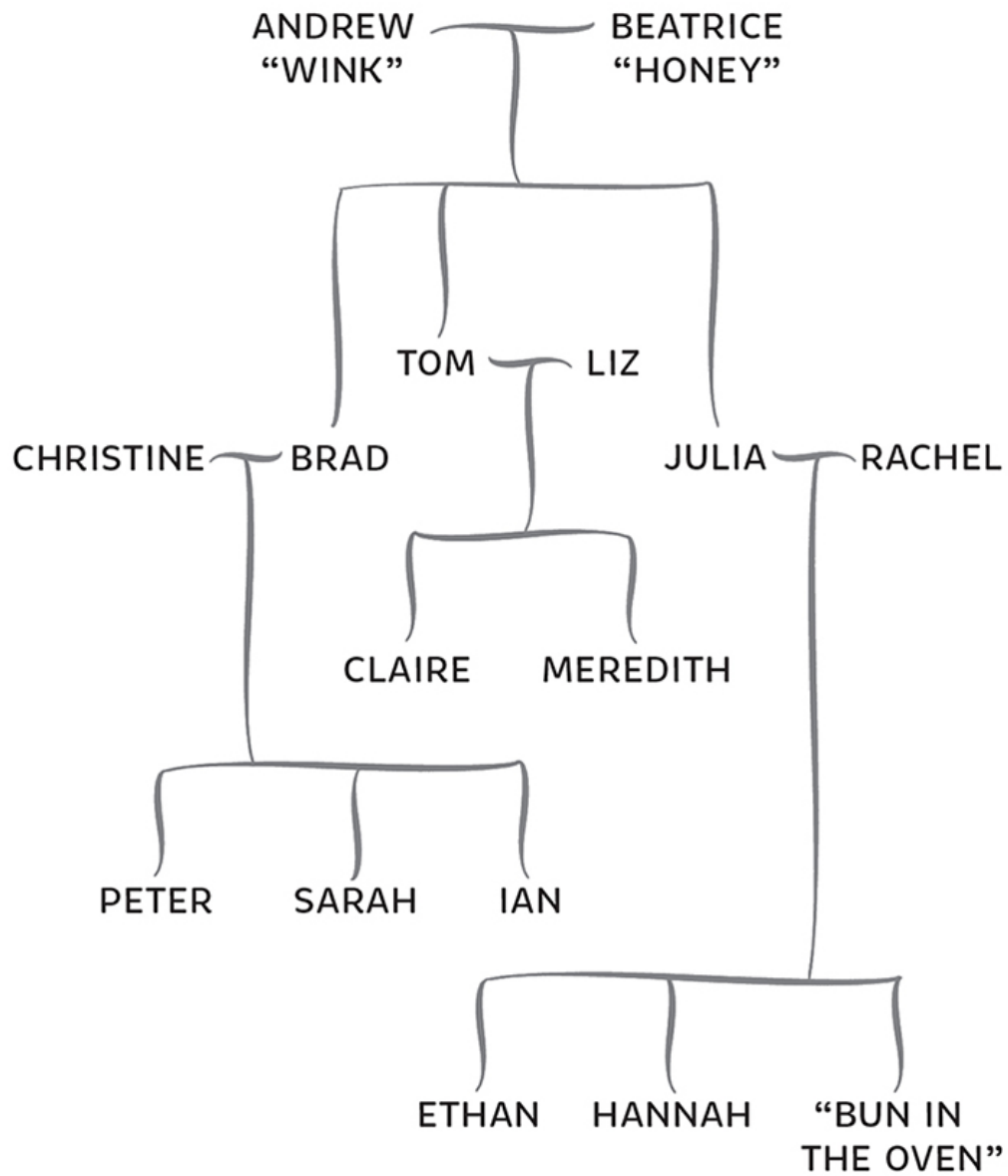
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*Always, for Dad. Thank you for the Dave Matthews–fueled drives, cups of chowder,
and introducing us to the most wondrous place on the planet.*

*And to Trip, for the twilight tractor rides, tubing wipeouts, nine o'clock steak dinners,
and for being his best friend.*

THE FOX FAMILY



Sunday

One

Nobody ordered the fries. Three cups of creamy clam chowder, but no basket of the most addictive fries on Cape Cod. “Anything else?” our server asked, as if he knew something was missing. Maybe he did. Maybe he somehow recognized us—it was tradition for our family to grab lunch at Quicks Hole before boarding the ferry to celebrate the last leg of our journey. Only one more hour, and then we’d finally be on Martha’s Vineyard.

I caught my parents exchanging a glance. *Anything else?* After so many summers, everything was second nature—we didn’t need menus. Our orders were ingrained in the deep depths of our minds, and none of them included fries for the table.

Because it was Claire who always took care of them for us. *In the biggest basket you have, she’d say. We’re starving!*

Now I realized it was my responsibility to take over the duty. “Actually, yeah,” I said, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Some fries, please. Truffle fries.”

“Great choice.” Our server nodded and turned toward the kitchen. My parents and I sat at our high-top in silence, all trying not to stare at the table’s fourth chair. Consciously or unconsciously, my mom had slung her purse over the back so it would look less empty. Like the person sitting there had gotten up to go to the bathroom and would be right back.

Quicks Hole Tavern was aptly named. It only took fifteen minutes for us to get our food: three steaming cups of New England’s magical concoction and a seemingly bottomless bowl of French fries dusted with parmesan cheese and parsley. Dad raised his beer as I shook the requisite five dashes of Tabasco into my soup. “To Sarah and Michael,” he said. “May this week be one to remember.”

“To Sarah and Michael,” Mom and I echoed, raising our own glasses.

We clinked.

“And to our grand return,” he added, kissing Mom on the cheek. “It’s been too long.”

Two years to be exact. My family had been vacationing on the Vineyard since before I was born—over eighteen years—but we’d spent last summer hidden away at home in upstate New York. I stole a glance at the empty chair again.

Yes, I thought. *It’s been too long.*

And then I stirred my spoon around in my soup, watching the red hot sauce swirl until it disappeared, and wondered if anything had changed while we’d been gone.

* * *

One thing that definitely hadn’t changed was Falmouth’s Steamship Authority. As the sun shone high in the blue July sky, it was like people were waiting in line for the biggest concert of the century. Cars, cars, and even *more* cars had their tickets confirmed and parked in numbered lanes to wait for their respective boats. I pulled my honey-colored hair into a loose braid as my parents and I weaved our way through them. There were a colorful assortment of Jeep Wranglers, mostly roofless and a few also doorless, with music pulsing through their speakers. Then we had the Volvos with kayaks strapped on top and the sleek silver Range Rovers. Bike racks made the giant SUVs look even more massive. I overheard one toddler having a meltdown. “No, Jeffrey, you cannot have more chips!” his exasperated mother said. The walk-on line was a motley mix of college students, families, dogs, bikes, rolling luggage, and well-traveled older couples calmly absorbing all the chaos.

Loki was panting heavily with his head out the window when we made it back to our Ford Raptor truck. “You want to give him some water, Meredith?” Mom asked after we’d settled in our seats. I didn’t answer, grabbing my water bottle and squeezing it so our Jack Russell terrier could drink. He gulped it down like a human, a trick Claire had taught him when he was a puppy. “It’ll be useful,” she’d said. “We won’t have to bring a water bowl when we take him on walks.”

It wasn’t much longer before the Steamship Authority began loading the hulking 2:00 p.m. ferry, *The Island Home*. “Wait, open the sunroof!” I blurted as the attendant waved our car onto the boat and Dad eased on the gas. My pulse pounded. It was another one of Claire’s and my traditions, one I wanted to keep alive: popping up through the sunroof and cheering like we were riding around in a limo. Most years, people cheered back, especially the guys in the Wranglers. “You’re so hot!” a few of them had shouted on our last trip. Claire seventeen, me sixteen.

“Too bad she’s taken!” my sister had shouted back, assuming he meant me and not her. She subtly put herself down a lot, and I’d never understood why. Claire was beautiful, tall and athletic with auburn curls, not to mention the coolest collection of eyeglasses. She couldn’t wear contacts, so she had amassed an eclectic array of specs, everything from retro to modern. She’d been wearing the square-shaped ones with the clear frames that day.

The only thing that made us look like sisters was our green eyes, since I had light hair and dark eyebrows (“striking,” according to most people) and was a good five inches shorter than Claire. “Monkey Meredith,” she’d called me after catching me scaling our pantry shelves when we were younger.

Now, as we drove up the ferry ramp, I didn’t cheer (the Jeep guys still did). Instead, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The sea air—I loved that smell. I’d *missed* that smell. It was everything. My family used to joke that we should bottle the scent to give us hope during New York’s bitter-cold winters.

My parents unbuckled their seat belts once Dad put the car in park. Loki barked and sprang over the center console onto Mom’s lap. She laughed and clipped his leash onto his green collar. “Well, that’s the signal,” she said. “Let’s head up.”

“Up” meant the ferry’s top deck. Of course you could stay in your car, and there was also plenty of indoor seating. But just like the sea air, there was nothing like the wind whipping through your hair as the island came into view.

“Sounds good…” I trailed off when something caught my eye. My phone, suddenly beaming and buzzing obnoxiously in the back seat’s cup holder. The name on the screen was obnoxious too: Ben Fletcher.

My stomach twisted into knots. Ben had texted me.

“Um, you go ahead,” I heard myself say, staring at his name. It blurred a little, my eyes pooling. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

I didn’t read Ben’s message until Dad handed me the keys and he, Mom, and Loki disappeared into the stairwell. Then I swiped into my phone to see: How’s the drive going?

That was it. Not a hello or an apology or a change of heart.

Not that I wanted one, but still.

How’s the drive going?

Really? Just that?

Don’t respond, the voice in the back of my head said, but I ignored it, typing back: The drive’s over. We’re on the ferry now.

Ah, gotcha, he wrote. How long is the ride?

“An hour,” I mumbled to myself. I’d mentioned it a hundred times, so excited after receiving the invitation back in April. MISS MEREDITH FOX written in silver script on a light blue envelope. “The RSVP card asks if I’m bringing a date,” I’d told Ben later, cocooned in his arms while we watched Netflix. “Will you be my plus-one?”

“Your plus-one?” he’d asked, breaking into a grin. “Of course!” We kissed.

I didn’t blink away my tears when they fell. If only months-ago Meredith could see me now—on my way to Sarah’s wedding not only *dateless* but more generally *boyfriendless*. Because after four years together, Ben and I had broken up.

Well, *he* had broken up with *me*. Last month, out of nowhere at his graduation party. One second, we were dancing to his dad’s hilarious Woodstock playlist, and the next, he tugged me off the floor and started saying stuff like, “It’s been a good run...but being friends might be better...from what they say about long distance...”

“But we agreed,” I cut him off. “We talked about it, remember?” I latched on to his strong arm, suddenly dizzy. “And we said that we’re going to *try*.” Ben was going to the University of South Carolina in the fall, while I was staying in town, only moving up Clinton’s big hill to Hamilton College. My dad was their soccer coach, and I wanted to be close to home. “Remember?”

Ben didn’t say anything.

My grip tightened. “Don’t, Ben.” I couldn’t keep my voice from wavering. “Please, I need you. You know how much I need you. After everything...”

“I know, I know.” Ben pulled me into a hug, headfirst into his chest. Which was usually comforting, but now it felt like he was trying to shush me. “Look, I do love you, Mer,” he whispered, letting me collapse against him and cry. His heartbeat muffled most of his words and made me dissolve into more sobs. It was only the last part that gave me the strength to stand. “I’ll still come to the wedding, though,” he said. “If you want.”

“What?” I stepped back, shivering in the chilly night air. “As my date?”

“Yeah.” He reached out to squeeze my shoulder. “This doesn’t change anything.” He half smiled and recited the old-fashioned-sounding line he knew I loved: “You’re still my favorite girl to have on my arm.”

Now, I couldn’t remember how I’d responded, but it definitely had ended with me making a run for it in my sky-high wedges. And okay, maybe it had also involved me getting stopped by the police on the way home. For speeding? Or swerving? I’d barely been able to talk through my tears, so Officer Woodley had let me off with a warning (and followed me home).

A beeping noise came over the ferry's intercom. *Time to go*, I thought, but I felt another buzz in my hand—a third text from Ben: Mer, I really would've come with you this week.

Before I knew it, my cheeks had flared and I'd dialed his number.

He answered on the first ring. "Hey—"

"I didn't *want* you to come," I cut in, on the verge of crying. "I wanted my boyfriend—my *boyfriend*—to come, not my shithead ex!"

Silence.

Ben sighed. "Mer..."

I hung up and wiped away my tears, needing to get out of the car and into the fresh air. The ferry horn sounded as I reached for my door handle, but by now, the boat's huge hold was completely full, cars packed so tightly together that it was impossible to open the door without slamming it into the car next to me. *The sunroof*, I realized. It was still open; I tried not to think about how many people had overheard me yelling at Ben. My face was blotchy from crying, so I dug around in my backpack for my sunglasses and slipped them on along with one of my dad's baseball caps before shimmying up and out of the truck. I smiled a little.

No problem.

Then disaster struck.

Instead of jumping to the ground, I grabbed for one of the roof rack's rungs...but didn't double-check the narrow aisle between the cars to make sure it was clear. I just swung myself down jungle-style, shock waves going through me when my foot collided with something.

And by *something*, I meant *someone*.

"Oh, whoa," the guy said, caught off guard. His shoulders hunched, and I watched him press a hand to where I'd kicked him. His face, somewhere near his nose. "Ouch!"

"Sorry!" I blurted. "I'm so sorry. Really, really sorry!"

"No," he replied. "It's, uh, fine."

But before he could straighten up and properly look at the person who'd assaulted him, I was gone. Sprinting away toward the stairs and taking them two at a time to the top deck.

* * *

My mom put her arm around me when the island came into view. It truly was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. No fog surrounded the East Chop lighthouse or

the boats bobbing along in Vineyard Haven's harbor. "What a welcome!" Dad remarked, and suddenly I was misty-eyed, thinking of Claire. Half of me was so happy to be back, but the other half wanted the ferry to turn around and take me home. It didn't feel right being on the Vineyard without my sister. She'd loved it most of all. *It's been too long*, my dad had said at lunch, but now I also couldn't help asking myself, *Has it been long enough?*

"I wish Claire were here," I whispered to my mom.

"She is," Mom whispered back, giving my shoulders a warm squeeze. Then she gestured to the sky. "She's making the sun shine."

"For Sarah," I said.

"No." She shook her head. "For everyone."