

THREE SISTERS ISLAND

1

On a Summer Tide

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER



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Cast of Characters

Paul Grayson (age 59)—retired sports announcer, father of Cam, Maddie, Blaine, grandfather of Cooper

Camden Grayson (age 28)—VP of a renewable energy start-up company, eldest daughter of Paul, adoptive mother of Cooper

Madison Grayson (age 24)—working on getting certified as a Marriage & Family Therapist, middle daughter of Paul

Blaine Grayson (age 19)—college student who can't decide on a major, youngest daughter of Paul

Cooper Grayson (age 7½)—third grader, son of Cam

Tre (age 25)—Maddie's longtime boyfriend

Artie (age 20)—college friend of Blaine

Peg Legg (won't reveal her age)—runs the Lunch Counter and General Store on Three Sisters Island

Seth Walker (age 28)—schoolteacher on Three Sisters Island

Baxtor Phinney (55-ish)—self-appointed mayor of Three Sisters Island, even though it is too small for a mayor

Porter and Peter Phinney (in their twenties)—sons of Baxtor Phinney

Captain Ed (ageless)—runs the Never Late Ferry between Mount Desert and Three Sisters Island

One

CAMDEN GRAYSON TOOK THE TURN into her dad's driveway a little fast. She was never late to anything—except when it came to family events. Like this one. She threw the car into park, grabbed the key, and instead of jumping out, she leaned back against the headrest, squeezed her eyes shut, and took in a deep breath. Just one minute. Give me just one minute of peace.

Instead, her cell phone chirped a text. She groaned, then glanced at it.

Blaine

WHERE ARE YOU?

Her sister always texted in full caps, her version of acceptable shouting.

Cam blew out an angry breath as she pushed open the car door. From the yard across the street came the happy shrieks of children playing and a dog barking, but she focused on her dad's front door, the landscaping, the new trim on the windows, anything but that house across the street. Three years later and she still couldn't bring herself to look at it, with its floodgate of pain.

The front door was unlocked. She hurried inside to the living

room, where her dad and sisters were waiting. “Sorry! I know I’m late, and I can’t stay long. I left Cooper with my neighbor.”

Dad dispelled her frenetic arrival with a friendly wave. “Not a problem,” he said in his scratchy voice. “I haven’t gotten started yet.”

Cam exchanged a puzzled look with Maddie, then they both turned to Blaine. Their youngest sister’s chin was tucked to her chest as she texted rapidly on her phone with both thumbs. Typical Blaine. *Was I like that when I was nineteen?* No, Cam decided. She had no time to be.

A week ago, Dad had asked all three girls to come to the house on Sunday afternoon. He gave no explanation, only that he’d tell them everything then. As Cam sat down on the edge of the sofa, she glanced at her dad, wondering what to expect. He seemed more rested than he had on her last visit home—was it in January?—his face wasn’t as lined or careworn. In fact, she realized, he wasn’t bad looking for a man of his age, fit and trim, with graying hair.

“Girls, I have an announcement.”

Cam leaned forward, bracing herself for serious news. Her dad had seen one specialist after the other, trying to get his voice back in working order. Over Christmas, he’d had a severe case of laryngitis and his vocal cords had never recovered. His normal speaking voice wasn’t much more than a hoarse whisper. Maddie had already given them a list of dreaded possibilities: nodules, tumors, cancer.

“Blaine, put away your phone. On silent, please.”

They all watched and waited as she finished her text, sent it, and put her phone in her purse.

Dad’s eyebrows lifted as he inhaled a deep breath and let it out. “I sold the house.”

Cam, Maddie, and Blaine looked at each other, then back at their father. That was the last thing Cam had expected. This house? Their childhood home, filled with sentiment. And stuff. And memories of Mom.

He wasn’t finished. “And . . . I bought an island.”

Cam exchanged panicked looks with Maddie and Blaine.

No. He didn't. Dad sat there beaming.

He did.

"Dad," Maddie said, "do you think you had a seizure? Or maybe a stroke?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Hold it," Blaine said, now fully attentive. "You did *what*?"

"I bought an island. A little one. Part of one, actually. Not the whole thing. It's off the coast of Maine."

"You bought an island," Cam said in a flat tone.

"I did."

Blaine grinned. "He's pulling our leg." She laughed. "Just one? Why not a bunch of islands? I think there's over three thousand off the coast of Maine."

"Just one. It's the place where your mother and I met as camp counselors, back in the day. Camp Kicking Moose."

He wasn't kidding. Cam glanced at Blaine and watched her smile fade. "Why, Dad? Why?"

"Because it's time for a change."

Maddie's mouth dropped open in an O. "I knew it." She looked at her sisters and covered her face with her hands. "Dad is dying."

"Whoa! Not dying! Not even close."

Cam squeezed her hands together, trying to stay calm. "Dad, what did the specialist say? What's wrong with your voice?"

"He had nothing new to say. Just like all the others. There's nothing he could figure out and nothing he could do to help. I promise. That's all." He slapped his hands on his knees. "But it was a fortuitous meeting. That specialist was the very one who told me about this island. The village—and that's a pretty nice word for it, more like a hodgepodge of buildings, plus the campground—well, the village is nearly bankrupt."

Blaine peered at him. "Were you under anesthesia when this doctor sold you the island? That might be grounds for malpractice."

“I was fully cognizant when I bought the island. And just to be clear, I bought the island from the camp owners, not from the doctor, who had no personal interest in the island. It only came up in conversation because I recognized a picture in his office. He went to camp there as a kid. When he told me it was up for sale, I couldn’t resist calling the owners to find out more. When I heard the price they were asking, I snatched it up.” He snapped his fingers. “Bargain-basement price.”

Maddie gave a woeful shake of her head. “This is all about turning sixty, isn’t it? You missed your midlife crisis in your forties, so you’re having it now.”

Cam wanted to scream. Her sister Maddie had just completed graduate work for a master’s degree in marriage and family therapy, and although she had never been married nor had children, she considered herself adept at diagnosing others.

Oblivious, Maddie carried on. “It’s a textbook case. Human beings can’t miss stages of development. They’ll circle back until it’s dealt with.” She paused, as if watching the effect of her words on everyone.

Dad’s hands were clasped together on his lap. Cam saw them tighten involuntarily with Maddie’s assessment. “I’m only fifty-nine. And no, this is not a delayed midlife crisis. This is something your mother and I had always wanted to do. Planned to do. Until . . .”

Mom died.

Blaine lifted her palms in disbelief. “You and Mom wanted to own an island? That’s news to me.”

“The camp part, that we had talked about. You know how much we loved that camp. Everybody loves summer camp.”

“Not me,” Blaine said. “I hated it.”

No surprise there. Blaine hated everything.

Maddie looked at each one of them. “I think we should talk about Mom. We never do. You all pretend like it was a blip on the radar. Like it was no big deal. And now look what’s happened.”

Cam actually flinched. Maddie was wrong. It *was* a big deal, but talking wasn't going to help.

Maddie steepled her fingers together. "So then, Dad, this is some kind of unfulfilled obligation for Mom. A fulfillment issue."

Dad wagged a finger in the air. "Not an issue, Maddie. No issues here."

Acting all counselor-y, Maddie leaned forward and looked gravely at each one of them. "Talking about it, just saying a few words, is often enough to help."

Oh boy. Here we go. Cam checked her watch. Cooper had warned her not to be late. Ever since he'd received a wristwatch for his seventh birthday, he'd become a taskmaster of time. "For now, let's stay focused on Dad's crisis."

"Not a crisis," Dad said.

Cam carried on. "So let's review the facts. You bought an island to run a summer camp."

He clapped his hands. "Yes! I want to breathe new life into this island."

"Delusional," Maddie said, resting her cheek in her hand. "Or perhaps premature dementia."

"Facts. Let's stay with the facts. Dad, you're a smart fellow. You've always drilled due diligence into us. So, what is the reason this island is bankrupt?"

"Thank you, Cam, for your vote of confidence."

"Confidence?" He sat there looking pleased as punch with himself. Did he not understand how serious this was? "I'm not giving you a vote of confidence, Dad. I'm right there with Maddie. I'm worried you're losing it."

Dad frowned. "Not losing anything." He tapped his forehead. "It's all still here. As for why this island needs our help. It has a declining population. All the young people have left for greener pastures."

"There might be a good reason for that." Cam tried to keep her voice calm and reasonable.

“Yes, but that’s going to change.”

“How?”

“I have big plans for this island. Big plans. And girls, you’re part of this project.”

All three girls jumped out of their seats, interrupting each other with objections. “No way!” “Not a chance.” “I’m not moving to a deserted island!”

“Girls, calm down! Calm down and sit down.”

Slowly, they eased back into their chairs, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I told you that I have big plans. Good plans. This will be a great thing for each one of you, I promise. All good.”

Cam folded her arms across her chest. “You can’t expect us to uproot our lives to help you run a summer camp.”

“Hold on. I understand that. You’ve each got your own interests. Cam, you’ve got your career on track.”

“More than just on track, Dad. Did you not read that *Wall Street Journal* article I forwarded you? Everyone wants our technology. You can’t believe the buyout offers the CEO is getting.” She lifted a finger in the air. “Not to worry! Evan’s promised everyone the company won’t be sold. He says he can’t be bought.”

Dad shifted in his seat. “And Maddie is trying to find an internship.”

Maddie nodded vigorously. “Lots of options brewing.”

“Anything nailed down yet?” Cam said.

“Not quite yet.” Maddie stiffened her back at Cam’s question. “Close, though. And of course there’s Tre to consider.”

As if on cue, everyone groaned. “You’re still with Tre?” Blaine said.

Maddie frowned. “Of course we’re still together. What’s wrong with Tre?”

“Oh, where to start?” Blaine said. “Maybe . . . his name.”

“There’s nothing wrong with his name. Thompson Robinson Smith the Third. I think it’s dignified.”

“When I first met him,” Blaine said, “I figured Tre was a nick-

name for a guy who regretted getting stuck with three last names. But oh no! It's for the Third."

This time Dad reined in the conversation from departing farther down a bunny trail. "Blaine, you've got a college major to settle on."

"Narrowing it down, Dad."

"To what?"

"Art history or women's studies. Maybe ornithology."

That stopped the conversation, right there. Dad sighed. His voice was fading to a whisper. "What happened to majoring in business? A good, solid foundation."

Cam let out a hoot. "That was eight majors ago. Maybe ten."

Blaine scowled at her, then turned to their father. "I've crossed off a business major from the list. I can't support capitalism."

Dad's eyebrows shot up. "You can't *support* capitalism? But you'll let me pay for your college tuition, room and board?"

Cam raised a hand. "Let's hold that conversation for another day. I have to pick up Cooper soon and you know how he gets when I'm late."

"About Cooper," Maddie said. "Cam, we need to talk."

"Nope. Nope." She waved her hand impatiently. "Nothing to talk about." She turned her attention to Dad before Maddie could launch more psychobabble. "Your point is an excellent one. We all have our own lives. We can't drop everything and rush to this island. This is your venture. Not ours."

"Unless you *are* dying," Maddie said, brow furrowed with concern.

"Not dying! I just want to make an offer to each one of you that might entice you to move to the island."

"Entice away," Blaine said. "I'm all ears."

Dad pointed at her. "You, young lady, will have to graduate from college before any incentives are offered."

Blaine's mouth dropped. "So I'm exempt from this . . . this . . . venture?"

"Partially. For now."

“Like always! I’m never treated like an adult!”

Cam patted Blaine on her shoulder. “That’s because you’re not one.”

“Fine,” Blaine mumbled, sulky. She picked up her purse and stood. “Then can I leave?”

“No,” Dad said. “I want you all to be a part of this story.”

Blaine let out a moan and collapsed against the sofa like a rag doll. Everyone ignored her.

“The island needs some new businesses. Cam, that’s where you come in with business plans.”

“Nope. Not happening.”

“And Maddie, I’m sure the island church is desperate for a counselor. You can get your hours in to get certified.”

Maddie hesitated, just long enough for Cam to look at her with suspicion. “What about all those brewing opportunities?”

Dad kept going. “Blaine, here’s where you come in. Short term, that is. Come summer, I want your help running the camp.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like kids.”

Dad let that pass. “And here’s the best part. Because I own the island—well, actually, 51 percent of the island—I get to call it what I want.”

Now everyone’s curiosity was piqued. Blaine tipped her head. “What’s wrong with the name it has?”

“Too hard to pronounce, so most don’t bother. Its official name is Niswi Nummissis.”

“Dad!” Blaine said. “You can’t march in, throw your money around, and steal the heritage of an island. That’s such typical white male entitlement. Everyone will despise you.”

“I’ve thought of that, Blaine,” Dad said in a rasp. His voice was grinding down so that all three girls had to lean forward to hear him. “But I’m keeping the meaning of the name, just translating it to English. Part of its new beginning.”

“So wrong,” Blaine said sadly. “So, so wrong.”

“Aren’t you even interested in knowing what it means?” He had a smile on his face like a cat that swallowed the canary.

Maddie took the bait. “What does it mean?”

“Niswi Nummissis is Algonquian for Three Sisters.” His grin spread from ear to ear. “I’m calling it Three Sisters Island.” Then, scarcely audible now, he said, “Because someday, my dear daughters, it’ll all be yours.”

The three sisters exchanged a look. They rarely agreed on anything, but on this topic, they shared the same thought. At the exact same moment, in such perfect unison it seemed they had rehearsed it, they shouted, “Count me out!”



That went well, Paul Grayson thought cheerily to himself as he watched his three daughters drive off. Better than expected, anyway. He sat in his too-quiet home and sipped some tea with honey. Fifteen minutes of talking was about all he could muster. His voice was scoured down to a scratch.

Aside from his weary voice, he felt pretty darn good. In fact, he hadn’t felt this interested in the future since long before his wife, Corinna, had passed away. It was terrifying, what he was doing, and that might be why it felt so right. It was good to feel alive again.

Maddie thought he was having a delayed midlife crisis, but what she didn’t realize was that *this*—retiring and doing something entirely out of the box—was what he and Corinna had dreamed of doing their entire lives. She also didn’t realize that he was doing it much later than he should have. He’d always thought they’d have plenty of time for this, for being together. But he’d discovered the hard way that time ran out.

This loss of his normal speaking voice, as frustrating as it was, had brought him a gift. Ironic for a man who spent his life on radio as a sports announcer. The spoken word had always come easily for him. He’d been blessed with a memorable voice, a deep

baritone that emerged in adolescence and quickly gained him a foothold with the popular crowd in high school. Sounding like somebody's father, he would call in to the school's attendance office to excuse one friend or another from classes. The school receptionist never caught on. Paul was a very popular guy.

During college, he worked summers at Camp Kicking Moose. Part of his job was to make announcements over the loud speaker. During his last summer there, a cute college girl named Corinna Kent came on kitchen staff, and by summer's end, Paul knew she was the one for him. Years later, Corinna told him that she'd fallen in love with his voice, booming out the day's activities in that rich deep baritone, before she ever laid eyes on him.

That voice got him his first job out of college as a radio sports announcer, working for minor league baseball teams. One job led to another, then to the majors, and suddenly he was at the point where he needed an agent to negotiate his annual contracts. In a way, he stumbled into a successful career. And in the same way, he stumbled right out of it. He was now a radio man without a voice. Not much of one, anyway.

He'd loved his career, much too much. He was on the road more than he was home. Corinna half teased that he loved radio more than he loved her and the girls. It wasn't true, but radio came in a close second. Today, the way Cam's eyes lit up as she told him about her company, it reminded him of himself. Cam had always been the daughter most like him. Focused, driven, competitive. It worried him in a vague way.

Why was that?

Maybe it was because when a career ended, like his did—like they all do, sooner or later—and you'd given up so much for it, what were you left with?

He looked around the living room. An empty, quiet house.

These last few months, losing his voice . . . it was kind of a silent life he'd been forced to live. The funny thing was that he was seeing and hearing much more than he ever had.

Cam was now a single mother, juggling a demanding career with a needy little boy. Maddie, a middle child in every way, seemed to be heading toward something serious with that Tre guy—another worry hovered overhead, though it too was vague and nameless. And Blaine, his youngest? She was all over the place, easily influenced by everyone except her father and sisters.

Sisters.

That's what worried him the most. The wedges that divided his daughters. The girls were growing increasingly distant from each other. From him too. He had thought Cooper's arrival would draw them all together. Maddie, the one who made efforts to keep the sisters together, had even declared a family mantra: raising Cooper would take a village . . . and they would all be his village.

It worked for a while, but the girls rarely spent time with each other. When they were together, they spent more time on their phones than talking to each other. One day he overheard them in the kitchen arguing about which one of them should stay home at Christmas to mind Dad—*mind Dad*, like he was a family dog—and it stunned him. They'd rather be with their friends than at home or with each other.

Corinna had been the glue that held them together. Without her, they were fast becoming strangers. A family of strangers. Yes, his children were alienated.

It was time for a radical change. For him, for his daughters. When he heard that Camp Kicking Moose was up for sale, the idea seized hold of him, wouldn't let him go.

Funny, the things one remembered. All these years later, the memory of that sleepy little island was still fresh. He could practically smell the sun-warmed pine trees, the salt spray of the ocean as it hit the rocks. Every view was a picture postcard of pine trees and seawater.

Maybe, just maybe, Camp Kicking Moose could bring them together. On an impulse, he had offered a ridiculously low amount

to the previous owners. Embarrassingly low. To his shock, the owners accepted without a counter, as long as he bought it *as is*. What could be so bad about that? Suddenly it was his. He had bought an island off the coast of Maine.

Terrifying. Crazy. *Thrilling*.