the SWEET LIFE

SUZANNE WOODS FISHER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ON A SUMMER TIDE*

"Suzanne Woods Fisher has written another winner! Filled with her signature heart, *The Sweet Life* is an uplifting reminder of the joy of restored relationships, the importance of bravery, and the hope of second chances. Grab a scoop of your favorite ice cream and dive into this inspiring treat."

Liz Johnson, bestselling author of *The Red Door Inn* and *Beyond the Tides*

"An oft-used meme states, 'I followed my heart and it led to ice cream.' Now Suzanne Woods Fisher has gifted us with an inspiring, irresistible story in which following the ice cream leads to a whole bunch of heart. Fisher is a winsome storyteller who never disappoints, and that's certainly true here as she celebrates variety as the spice of life, love, and ice cream flavors. *The Sweet Life* is an effortless charmer!"

Bethany Turner, award-winning author of *The Do-Over*

Praise for *At Lighthouse Point*

"*At Lighthouse Point* rounds out Fisher's charming modern-day Three Sisters Island trilogy. . . . Christian faith and prayer are central to the book's message, and themes of trusting God's steadfast plan and empathy toward others are grounding beacons amidst the tumult of the unexpected."

Booklist

"*At Lighthouse Point* is a charming read, with gentle truths and great characters. I'm glad I got to revisit their little island."

Interviews and Reviews

"All three books of this series were fun reads where each sister learns something about themselves."

Write-Read-Life

Praise for *On a Coastal Breeze*

"Christy Award–winner Fisher delivers a delightful second installment to her Three Sisters Island trilogy. . . . This winsome tale will hit the spot for fans of contemporary inspirationals."

Publishers Weekly

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"A lively, witty, and charmingly entertaining read from cover to cover."

Midwest Book Review

"This book was such a delightful read, and so is the author who wrote it. I love anything she writes!"

Interviews & Reviews

"Everything I wanted in a book. . . . I cried, I laughed, and I fell head over heels in love."

Urban Lit Magazine

Praise for *On a Summer Tide*

"Fans of Suzanne Woods Fisher will love this story of three sisters coming together on a rugged Maine island to refurbish a camp. *On a Summer Tide* is an enduring tale of love and restoration."

Denise Hunter, bestselling author of *On Magnolia Lane*

"*On a Summer Tide* is filled with memorable characters, gorgeous Maine scenery, and plenty of family drama. I can't wait to visit Three Sisters Island again!"

Irene Hannon, bestselling author of the beloved Hope Harbor series

"Fisher creates a vibrant cast of charming, plucky characters set on redefining themselves."

Publishers Weekly

"Suzanne Woods Fisher offers a contemporary novel of a family rebuilding their connection, adding a touch of suspense and just enough spirituality to make this a heartwarming read."

New York Journal of Books

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Novels by Suzanne Woods Fisher

Lancaster County Secrets

The Choice
The Waiting
The Search

Seasons of Stoney Ridge

The Keeper
The Haven
The Lesson

The Inn at Eagle Hill

The Letters
The Calling
The Revealing

Amish Beginnings

Anna's Crossing
The Newcomer
The Return

The Bishop's Family

The Imposter
The Quieting
The Devoted

Nantucket Legacy

Phoebe's Light
Minding the Light
The Light Before Day

The Deacon's Family

Mending Fences
Stitches in Time
Two Steps Forward

Three Sisters Island

On a Summer Tide
On a Coastal Breeze
At Lighthouse Point

The Moonlight School
A Season on the Wind

Cape Cod Creamery

The Sweet Life

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CAPE COD CREAMERY · 1

the SWEET LIFE

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WOODS FISHER

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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People have an emotional response to ice cream; it's more than just food. So I think when you combine caring and eating wonderful food, it's a very powerful combination.

—Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream

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Cast of Characters

Dawn Dixon (age 27), CPA at a Boston firm, known for being an exceptional planner. Her favorite quote: "I adore spontaneity, providing it is carefully planned."

Marnie Dixon (age 58), mother of Dawn, recently widowed, breast cancer survivor, known for being spontaneous, creative . . . and maybe a skosh too impulsive.

Kevin Collins (age 27), architect at a Boston firm, former fiancé to Dawn. Broke her heart into a million pieces.

Lincoln Hayes (age sixtysomething), Chatham resident, permanent volunteer to charitable causes, lover of ice cream, friend to all.

Brynn (age 27), childhood friend of Dawn's. Has a tendency to worry.

Mrs. Nickerson-Eldredge (age seventysomething), Chatham resident born and bred, chairman of the Historical Commission. Considers herself to be the guardian of Chatham.

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Nanette (age seventysomething), Chatham resident, runs a T-shirt shop, known for being on the nosy side of nosy.

Leo the Cowboy (age 5), lover of any and all ice cream, smitten with Dawn.

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Glossary of Ice Cream Making

add-ins—premade food products that are mixed into ice cream base

artisanal—produced by a skilled worker in a trade that involves making things by hand

base—the egg-dairy-sugar mixture that is the main ingredient in all ice cream products

curing—usually a twenty-four-hour period to allow the flavors in the ice cream base to blend and mature

custard—the base for ice cream products if it includes eggs

dasher—churning tool of the ice cream machine, also known as beater

frozen custard—has more egg and less air than regular ice cream, making it both rich and dense. Popular on the East Coast and in the Midwest.

frozen yogurt or Froyo—contains less fat than regular ice cream. Popular on the West Coast. Perceived as a healthier option, though sugary toppings are usually piled on it

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gelato—Italian style ice cream

overrun—air pumped into each batch of ice cream (varies dramatically)

pasteurization—the process of involving heat to sterilize a product, destroying microorganisms, to make it safe for consumption

prepackaged base—ice cream base from a dairy that is premade and prepasteurized

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Chapter ONE

> Never ask a woman who is eating ice cream straight from the carton how she's doing.
>
> —Anonymous

Needham, Massachusetts
Thursday, February 6

Dawn parked in front of her childhood home in Needham but couldn't make herself get out of the car. For this brief moment, the terrible news belonged only to her. As soon as she told someone, especially her mom, it would make it somehow more real. More true.

Maybe it wasn't real. She reviewed the conversation she'd had with Kevin last night. Was it possible that he'd suffered from premarital jitters? Just a case of cold feet. Cold, cold feet.

Tears flooded Dawn's eyes again. It wasn't just cold feet. Kevin said he wasn't sure he was in love with Dawn, not the way he thought he should be. Or the way he used to be. She looked around the car for a clean tissue, but all she could find were scrunched-up soggy ones. How in the world did she end

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up in a mess like this? Dawn Dixon was known as a level-headed, objective, logical woman. Her nickname was Teflon Dawn. She could handle anything. Prepared for any crisis. Yet she'd missed Kevin's growing vacillation about getting married.

The front door opened and Mom stood at the threshold, the obvious question on her face. Why had Dawn come home, to Needham, on a weekday when she should've been at work in Boston? Dawn dreaded this conversation. Calling off the wedding, after all her mom had done to make it unique and one-of-a-kind, would devastate her too. Dawn thought of the hours her mother had spent making origami doves that would hang from the enormous and expensive rented tent.

Another image of Kevin popped into her head—one from just a few weeks ago. They were at the wedding venue to finalize some details. Dawn and her mom were talking to the wedding event planner. Like always, her mom had some new ideas, and the wedding event planner was listening with rapt, wide-eyed interest—Marnie Dixon had that effect on creative types. It was like opening a shaken can of soda pop and the fizz spilled everywhere. Dawn turned to ask Kevin a question, but he had slipped away. She found him close to the bay, facing the water. As she approached, he turned to her, his sunglasses hiding his eyes.

Something was off, she thought. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. Just thinking about things."

Things. Like canceling their wedding. Their marriage. Their happily ever after. Those kinds of things.

Gag. Dawn felt queasy, thinking of what a cliché she'd become. Jilted. Just two months before the wedding. Maybe not left at the altar, but pretty darn close.

Mom stood on the threshold, arms folded against her chest. Dawn slowly got out of the car and closed the door. Steeling herself, she walked up the brick-lined path. "Mom," she said, her voice breaking. "There's something we have to talk about."

"She told you, didn't she?"

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Dawn jerked her head up.

"I told her not to tell anyone. Blabbermouth. That's what she is. That's what I'm going to call her from now on. Maeve the Blabbermouth."

"Aunt Maeve?" Dawn scrunched up her face. "Maeve told me—"

"I didn't want anyone to know. At least not until after the wedding. I just wanted to get this surgery taken care of. I don't want you to worry, honey. It was caught early. I promise. That's the thing about breast cancer. Catch it quick and take care of it. So I did. And I have plenty of time before the wedding for treatment. The doctor promised. Come April twelfth, I'll be just fine. I hope Maeve didn't get it wrong and make it sound like something worse than it was. I'm sure she meant well, but she's in big trouble."

"You have . . . breast cancer?" Dawn's voice shook and broke and then stopped.

"Had. It's gone. I'm fine, honey. I promise."

For one dreadful, disorienting second, Dawn's mind emptied, stilled. Then denial roared in—loud and large. *No! No way. Not my mom.*

"Caught early. Taken care of. Gone." She snapped her fingers, like it was no big deal.

But it *was* a big deal. "When did you find out?"

"A month or so ago, I had a routine mammogram—and you know how much I hate going to doctors—but I went. And they called me back in." She shrugged. "That happens. I wasn't concerned. Not until they wanted the ultrasound. Then the biopsy."

"Biopsy?"

"Yes. On the day you were getting your makeup done for the wedding. You didn't want me there, remember? You said I would get in the way."

"I said you would turn me into someone I didn't recognize."

"Well, it all worked out, because that was the day of the

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biopsy. And then things happened fast, honey. Surgeon, oncologist, boom. Surgery. They move fast when they find cancer."

"When?"

"A week ago."

"Mom . . ."

"I know, I know. Maybe I should have told you, but I just want this wedding to be perfect. I was going to tell you after you got back from the honeymoon. I promise. I'm not trying to hide anything from you."

"You had surgery and didn't tell me?"

"I left a letter for you that Maeve was supposed to give you . . . just in case something went wrong."

"But . . . how are you feeling?"

"Not bad. A little sore. Like I don't want anyone to accidentally bump into me kind of sore. But relieved. And grateful. I had good doctors who helped me make decisions."

"All alone? You didn't talk to anyone else?"

"I told Maeve about the surgery. And she took me to and from the hospital. She's brought me food and checked on me. I suppose I will forgive her, eventually. But I really didn't want you to know about any of this yet. I was so clear with her about that. What is the point of having a best friend if they go behind your back and tell your daughter that kind of news . . . right before her wedding?"

"Mom. Stop talking and listen to me. Kevin doesn't want to marry me. There isn't going to be a wedding."

Mom finally stopped talking.

There wasn't going to be a wedding. And her mom had cancer. Dawn and her mom stared at each other in a mixture of shock and disbelief.

• • •

There wasn't much in life that could knock Marnie Dixon down, but seeing her daughter sit at the kitchen table, head

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in hands, weeping, did the job. Her friend Maeve always said that mothers felt whatever pain their child felt, only magnified. Marnie jumped up, got a box of tissues to set on the table between them, and pulled out one for Dawn and another for her.

Dawn rarely cried, even as a little girl. When she was learning to walk, she would fall, pick herself up, and try again. That was Dawn. Philip used to say that their daughter was born accepting the fact that life would require grit and determination.

Dazed, Marnie dabbed her eyes, rose again, and went to get two cups of coffee. She filled them, then remembered they'd run out of coffee creamer. A brilliant idea struck. She opened the freezer and rummaged for a container of vanilla ice cream. She dropped a big spoonful of it into each mug and handed one to Dawn, who peered vaguely at the melting lumps.

"Everything's better with ice cream," Marnie said. She slipped into the chair next to her. "Start at the beginning. Tell me what happened." The timer on her phone went off and she jumped up to take her pain pills. Dawn sat at the kitchen table, watching her with worried eyes. "I'm fine, honey. I really am. This is just a little blip on the radar."

"Mom, please sit down."

Right. Marnie needed to settle. She sat in the chair opposite Dawn and put both hands around the warm coffee mug. "Let's talk about your wedding."

"I keep trying to tell you. There is no wedding."

"But . . . what are the chances that Kevin just has a bad case of pre-wedding jitters?" Dawn's eyes filled with tears again. That should have told Marnie, right there, all she needed to know. Those beautiful blue eyes of Dawn's, they were bottomless pools of sadness.

"Last night, Kevin came over to help me address wedding invitations. I was showing him how to put the stamp on just so." Dawn took a shaky breath, closing her eyes for a minute.

Marnie sighed. "Gorgeous stamps," she muttered. She'd

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designed them herself—two Eastern Bluebirds, building a nest—to complement the avian-themed wedding. Marnie loved birds.

"When I handed him the stamps, he held them in his hand and said he just couldn't do it. I didn't know what he was talking about, so I just showed him how to do it again. Then he said that he knew how to put a stamp on. What he couldn't do—" Her voice choked up. She reached for another tissue and dabbed at her eyes. "He said he couldn't marry me."

"Why? What reason did he give?"

"He said he didn't think he loved me. Not the way he thought he should."

"That's not possible! Kevin's loved you since the first time he laid eyes on you." Could there be another woman? Marnie didn't want to ask, didn't want to think it. After all, this was Kevin—nearly a son to her. He even spoke at Philip's memorial service—he was that much a part of their family tapestry. There was hardly a picture in the family albums that he wasn't in.

They'd known Kevin since he was fourteen years old, when his father accepted the call to be the senior pastor at their local church and moved his family to Needham. Kevin and Dawn met in youth group and shared a common circle of church friends. They started to date in their junior year of high school, went to the same college, dating steadily throughout all four years. They were the perfect couple, both immensely sensible and well suited. No drama, not ever. As Dawn and Kevin graduated from college, everyone expected they'd get engaged. Ever reasonable, they decided to wait a few years, to get work experience, live with friends in Boston, and not miss out on any young adult experience. That's exactly what they did. Two years passed, three, then five. Getting engaged was always the plan . . . someday.

But then Philip died, suddenly and unexpectedly, and every-

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thing changed. Everything. Kevin proposed, Dawn accepted, and elaborate wedding plans got underway.

Dawn picked up her mug and crossed the kitchen to the coffee-maker. She refilled her coffee and spooned more ice cream into the mug, then took a spoonful straight from the carton and ate it. Marnie noticed how Dawn's shoulders slumped in that way they had after Philip died, and her heart ached for her daughter. Dawn brooded, internalized every blessed thing, whereas Marnie shared every thought and feeling. Even now, Marnie had a dozen questions she wanted to ask but prudence kept her quiet. She needed to let Dawn reveal what she wanted to, and when. A lifetime of experience had taught her that if she asked too much, Dawn shut down.

"Looking back, I can see now that there were signs." Dawn returned to sit at the table, hands gripped tightly around the mug. "He never had any opinions about the wedding. I tried to get him interested, but he just kept deferring. He would say, 'You and your mom can make that call.'" She took a sip of coffee. "I thought he was just accommodating us, but now I realize he didn't want to be a part of it."

"So you think it was the choices of the wedding that caused this?" And if that were true, Marnie felt furious with him. He was a grown man, after all. He could have spoken up at any time.

On the heels of anger came guilt. The wedding, she admitted, was teetering toward over-the-top. Perhaps a tiny bit more than Dawn had asked for, definitely more than Kevin wanted. When they first got engaged, he said he'd always wanted a wedding on the beach with only family attending. Ridiculous! Imagine Dawn's wedding dress train dragged along the sand. For goodness' sakes, Dawn was an only child who had recently lost her father. Why shouldn't she have the wedding of her dreams?

Dawn stared into her mug. "I don't know. I just know that

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things haven't been easy between us, not like they used to be, ever since . . ."

"Since when?"

She sighed and looked up. "That's what I don't know." She covered her face. "It's so humiliating. We have all the same friends. I will forever be known as the girl who was left at the altar."

"True friends aren't like that."

Dawn ran a hand through her hair. On a typical workday, her long red hair would be tightly pulled back and pinned, out of the way. She tried to look older than her years. Marnie thought that was silly. Dawn oozed such confidence and self-assurance that people had always thought she was a decade older than she was.

Today, though, wasn't a typical day. Dawn's thick tangled hair looked like it hadn't been combed recently. Dark circles rimmed her eyes. "This morning he sent a text asking to talk again tonight."

"Maybe—"

"No, Mom. No maybes. The wedding is off. That much, I'm sure of. I gave him the ring back."

Marnie's eyes slipped to Dawn's left hand. The ring—one that had belonged to Kevin's grandmother—was gone.

"We're only going to talk about how to divide up the cancelations. In his text, he said he would help call vendors. He'd make as many calls as needed."

Marnie sat back in her chair. "So he's really serious about this."

Dawn nodded. Another tear escaped and she wiped it off her cheek. "Dead serious."

Okay. Okay, then. Marnie jumped up and grabbed the wedding notebook. "I can handle everything, Dawn. You don't have to do a thing. Maeve can help. We'll take care of everything, sweetheart."

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Dawn looked a little bewildered. "Hold it. Slow down. I know you can pivot on a dime, but I can't move quite that fast. Besides, Kevin is the one who is calling this wedding off. He offered to make the cancelations and I think we should let him." She leaned on her elbows. "Mom, you have cancer. We haven't even talked about that yet."

"Had cancer. It's gone." Marnie turned to a new page in the wedding binder. "I think you're right about letting Kevin make as many cancelation calls as possible. He shouldn't get off scot-free here."

"You're not going to talk about it?"

Marnie looked up. "It?"

"Cancer."

"No." She looked back down at the binder. "I'm not giving it any more space in my life."

Dawn sighed. "I'd better get to work." She rose.

Marnie's mouth went as round as an *O*. "Work? After such a traumatic event?"

"I'm in the middle of a big project. Don't worry. It's a good distraction." She paused. "Mom, are you really, really okay?"

"Well, I'm furious with Kevin."

"Not that. I meant . . . having cancer."

"*Had* cancer," Marnie said. "It's gone."

"Well, we're going to talk more about it. I'm glad you're recovering well from the surgery. Not so glad that you didn't tell me." She bent down and kissed Marnie on the top of her head. "Get some rest. I'll call you later."

"Promise?" There was a pleading note in her voice.

Dawn gave her a thumbs-up as she headed to the door. Marnie went and watched her leave. She felt as if her heart was breaking for Dawn. She wished she could take the pain away for her daughter, or take it on herself. But she couldn't. No mother could.

She knew she drove Dawn crazy some of the time. Most of

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the time. To be honest, Dawn drove Marnie a little crazy too. In a nutshell, Dawn thought Marnie was too dramatic, and Marnie thought Dawn wasn't dramatic enough.

She supposed her uncharacteristically calm reaction to a diagnosis of cancer could be a shock in itself to Dawn. Frankly, Marnie was still in shock over it. She was careful about food. She exercised every single day. She did yoga. She had a deep and abiding faith in God that helped her cope with stress, with the tragedy of losing her husband. How in the world did Marnie Dixon have cancer? Scratch that. Had.

Having cancer was like having an unexpected and unwanted houseguest. Literally. Marnie didn't invite it, she didn't want it to stay, and she wanted it out as soon as she could evict it. It wasn't that she ignored the diagnosis—she faced it head on, underwent all the pre-op tests required before surgery (so many machines and needles! her poor little breast). She begged her surgeon for the earliest date for surgery that she could possibly give to her. *Get it out of me!* That's all Marnie could think about. *I have a wedding to put on! I have a life to live!* She could hardly wait to get on the other side of surgery, to wake up in the morning and soak in the awareness that the cancer was gone.

But like a clueless houseguest, cancer didn't get the hint. It left its mark, like a lingering odor. Whenever Marnie used to fry fish, the house would stink of it for days. That's what cancer did. It just stunk.

She knew that Dawn was upset she hadn't been told, but Marnie was still glad she'd listened to her gut instinct. They were so different that way. Dawn's guide in life was her black-and-white principles and Marnie respected that quality about her daughter. There was no one she'd rather trust with money, and she could see why Dawn had excelled in her chosen field of public accounting—which sounded astonishingly dull to Marnie. Dawn's work was all about reacting to what others

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had done. Looking for problems, checking for errors, bringing mistakes to light.

Marnie was led by intuition, by prayer. Things that were invisible, while principles were made of concrete. Philip was like Dawn in that way. Philip and Marnie's marriage had been a good one, but it wasn't without its bumps now and then. And whenever they had those inevitable rocky patches, those strong disagreements, it always boiled down to how they viewed the world. Philip's principles vs. Marnie's intuition. After thirty-two years of marriage, they had never quite solved that quagmire. And then he was gone.

She felt badly Dawn was upset that she hadn't told her about the surgery, but she kept quiet so the wedding could proceed without a hitch. And she had to admit that she did it for her own benefit. Getting a diagnosis of cancer thrust her into a world that she had always preferred to ignore. She had so much to learn about, so many decisions to make quickly, and then came the healing part. She needed the quiet. Even Maeve, dear Maeve, kept telling her stories of friends with cancer, and frankly, she just didn't want to hear them. Every single person was a distinct being and their medical situation was as unique as their fingerprints. That's why she stayed away from cancer stories. *No thank you.*

Marnie had thought once this health glitch was behind her, it would be smooth sailing. She plopped into Philip's favorite armchair with a sigh. No wedding? No Kevin in their lives?

Marnie's thoughts bounced to wondering how difficult it would be to cancel everything as quickly as possible. The wedding venue, the caterer, the florist. Could a wedding dress get returned? Doubtful. It would seem like a bad luck dress.

She closed her eyes, breathed in and out, a deep cleansing breath. In and out, in and out. *Everything will be okay. The Lord is sovereign. All things work together for good for those*

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who love God. Her mind clutched on every comforting Bible verse she could think of. *Breathe in and out, in and out. It will all turn out okay.*

She opened her eyes.

She wanted to kill Kevin.

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