

PART ONE

Nothing is Free Summer 1975

On a hot sunny afternoon in 1975, I sat cross-legged next to my younger sister Kathleen in our backyard, listening to the transistor radio. We sang along to Lighthouse's "Sunny Days", even though I didn't agree *with nothin' better than lyin' in the sun listenin' to rock 'n roll*. The listening to the music part was okay, but not the hot sun.

Kathleen stretched out flat on a towel, her body covered with baby oil. She wanted her skin golden brown like the movie stars in magazines.

I didn't care about darkening my skin, especially since it meant being greased up like a turkey ready for the oven.

"I'm *so* bored. There's nothing to do," I said, after the song ended and I waited for the DJ to stop talking and play more music.

At the time, I had no idea how much that restlessness and the need for excitement would not only impact that summer but would follow me the rest of my life.

I needed escape. Something more. Something to keep me from thinking about my boyfriend Will and the summers gone by, when we'd been together, and how I would probably never see him again. "What are we going to do all summer?" I asked.

"Don't know." Kathleen rolled over, untying her bikini top. "This, I guess."

"Don't think so," I said, standing to leave. "There's gotta be something better."

School had only been out for a few days and already I missed my friends. Friends were the best part of school; that, and the part about getting away from our mother. She would not let us come and go as we pleased, not like our friends could. Our mother expected us to be happy staying at home forever, like her.

This lack of freedom pissed me off. I was sixteen, but my parents still treated me like a baby. I was of age to drop out of school, old enough to drive a car—not like my parents would let me do either.

I could hardly wait to get older. Maybe I'd be free at eighteen when able to vote, or possibly nineteen, of legal age to drink, and surely by the time I turned twenty-one and became a legal adult, I'd be free to do whatever I wanted. *God! I just hoped not to suffer that long!* Twenty-one seemed like forever away.

And then I thought of Dorothy, who lived with us and still, at the age of twenty-nine could not go out on her own or do anything she wanted. Determined not to have the same happen to me, I searched for a way out.

Kathleen got out of the house more than I did. Her way out was church activities. She didn't seem to mind that stuff, but I thought it all bullshit and boring. My sister and I didn't

share a lot in common other than our hard-to-deal-with mother. Kathleen loved wearing make-up. I preferred the natural look. She put peroxide in her light brown hair to turn it blonde. After a period of dying my hair, the novelty soon wore off and I went back to keeping it my dark natural brown. I had womanly curves, with full, bouncing breasts. Kathleen remained skinny and flat-chested.

Every Saturday afternoon she attended confirmation classes at St John's Lutheran church in Mahone Bay. Through the summer months, the minister took them to activities such as bowling, movies, and camping trips. Our mother had no problem letting Kathleen go because it involved the church, and anything to do with the church couldn't be wrong or harmful in any way, as Mother often reminded us. I resented my sister getting out and having a good time while I sat home and brooded, receiving no sympathy from my mother. "You'd be going out and having fun too if you hadn't quit confirmation classes."

In our church it took three years of study before being confirmed, from the age of thirteen to sixteen. I'd quit at the end of my second year so I wouldn't become a member of our church—a decision my mother didn't like. But I wanted no part of a group of people I thought of as nothing more than self-righteous hypocrites. If they were so accepting, then why complain about my wearing blue jeans to church, and act shocked when I permed my hair and dyed it red?

My mother and I had battled about my dropping out of confirmation classes. She told me I'd end up in hell. I told her I didn't care, that it couldn't be any worse than living at home with her. No matter how many times she called the minister or tried to convince or scare me into going, I held firm and refused to go.

I loved that she couldn't physically drag me there, like when I had first started school, terrified to leave home. Back then, she dragged me down the road and shoved me up the bus steps. But as soon as the bus made its next stop and the door folded open, I'd run off and go back home. I did this until she threatened me with something even worse than going to school. She terrified me with the belief that if I didn't go to school someone would come and take me away. I had no idea who that someone might be, but the possibility of being taken from my family scared me into going to school. In the end, I learned how to cope and survive my fear and how to force myself to sit in school all day. But as a teen, my mother was losing more and more control and could no longer make me do all she wanted me to do.

Yet, for whatever reason, I couldn't bring myself to entirely disobey her; I did my breaking away in baby steps. Maybe deep inside I still held some fear that I'd be taken away, and I would no longer have a family. The unknown was so much scarier than my reality.

Though I did enjoy how my quitting confirmation class infuriated my mother. She screamed at me, "How can you do such a thing? I've tried to raise you right. God knows, I've tried. Your turning out this way isn't from my lack of trying. I just don't know what gets into that crazy head of yours."

Blah, blah, blah... her screaming had little effect on me. She stomped and raved on, and sometimes I yelled and fought back, but most times I just walked away. No matter what I did or how hard I tried, she just didn't understand me at all.

Kathleen's new friend, Rachel, moved to town earlier in the school year, in Kathleen's grade. Rachel also attended confirmation classes with Kathleen. They talked on the phone whenever Mom was not using it. My mother approved of their friendship. "Rachel is a

good Christian,” as my mother liked to say. Then she’d look at me and say, “Unlike you.” I’d snarl back at my mother and say, “You mean, like you?”

A week into summer, Rachel invited my sister over to her house.

“I wish I could go,” Kathleen said to me one afternoon while we were sitting on the lawn chairs in our front yard.

“Why don’t you ask to go?”

“I know she’ll only say *no*.”

“There must be a way to get Mom to let you,” I said, chewing on the inside of my cheek, thinking hard. “Hey, if I help you by talking Mom into letting you go, will you promise to take me?”

Even though I thought hanging out with Kathleen and her friend would probably be boring as old shit, it would beat remaining home all summer, bored out of my mind and pining away for Will.

“Let’s go in the house,” I said. “Ask her if you can go. I’ll come with and back you up.” And it went just as Kathleen had expected it would.

“You can’t go,” Mother automatically said, like some pre-recorded machine.

“But I want to,” Kathleen said. “Please, please, can I?”

“No!” Mom answered. “And even if I said yes, you’ve no way there.”

“I can walk,” Kathleen said, “it’s not that far.”

“You might just as well get that crazy idea out of your head right now!”

“Why?”

“You can’t walk all the way to town.”

“Sure, I can.”

“No! You can’t go walking off to town all by yourself.”

And that was the opening I’d planned for, my chance to step in and hopefully change my mother’s mind. “What about if I went with her?” I suggested, as innocently as possible.

Mother shot me a look like I’d suddenly grown an extra head. She hesitated and sputtered, “Oh, so, now instead of just worrying about one of you walking to town, I’ll worry about the two of you.”

“We’ll be fine.” I brushed away her concerns. “We’ll walk straight there and call when we arrive. We’ll be at her house all day. What can go wrong?”

Our mother hesitated. A good sign. Meant she might be considering it. I crossed my fingers behind my back and hoped with all my might.

“I don’t know,” Mom let out a long sigh, then frowned and turned to walk away.

“Come on,” I called out. “We promise we’ll be good. We’ll call. Everything will be fine.”

“Yeah,” Kathleen said. “We’ll be okay.”

Our mother hesitated once again.

Kathleen and I continued our plea. Back and forth it went. Every concern our mother came up with we worked on wearing her down, like filing our nails into the desired shape. Finally, we convinced her to let us walk the mile-and-a-half to Rachel’s house.

“Call me as soon as you get there,” Mom said from the open doorway.

“We will,” we answered.

At the bottom of our driveway, I turned and faced Kathleen and said, “Told you so!”

Before long, we were going to Rachel's house several days a week. The walk took about forty-five minutes, time better spent than stretched out on a blanket roasting under the hot sun.

Most people driving by recognized us. They'd toot their horns and wave. We'd smile and wave back. The ocean breeze kept us cool while we walked along the winding road by the shore. I welcomed the familiar and comforting salty air.

Sometimes cars stopped and asked if we wanted a ride. The first few weeks we'd said no; then we changed our minds.

We'd always lived in Oakland, across the harbour from the town of Mahone Bay. We knew most of our neighbours. The community further from town, Indian Point, came to a dead-end, so people had to drive through Oakland to get to the main road, or take another road to Martin's River, which made the trip to town even longer. This all meant lots of good possibility for rides while we walked to town.

Always, as in school, whenever someone asked about where I lived and I told them Oakland, they seemed clueless. But if I said, "Before you get to Indian Point," they'd answer with, "Oh yeah, I know where that is." It amazed me that people could pass through a place and not know the name of it.

Soon, my sister and I figured out the best times of day for catching rides there and back.

I sure could have thought of much better things to do than hang out with Kathleen and Rachel, but my options were limited. After all, it had been a rough year for me. The loss of my boyfriend, Will, and the part my mother had played in it by hiding his letters. The pain and my search for relief that had led me to such dark inner places. The nervous breakdown in the spring left me so unsure of myself. And waiting once again for him to write me back brought on the fear that he'd moved on. I wanted to take life slowly, yet I longed for something to break the weariness and monotony of my life. Still on antidepressants, I felt unemotional; no tears, but no real smiles either... just plain dull and boring, like a gray day.

Being two years younger, most things Kathleen and Rachel talked about were dumb in my eyes. I didn't know a lot of their friends from school. Couldn't relate to the church stuff or the people they knew there. Thought the boys they thought were cute were ugly. But still, I kept telling myself that this was still much better than sitting at home waiting for the neighbourhood kids to visit, to play a game of baseball or go swimming in the ocean across the road from our house.