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Fire Island

by

Teresa Louise Scholten

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through English Language, Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature and Creative Writing
at the
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*I dedicate this novella and my degree to
my husband
and to
my parents*

*I thank my fellow classmates
and
my committee
for seeing me through*

Table of Contents

Signature Page	II
Dedication Page	III
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	8
Chapter Three	24
Chapter Four	34
Chapter Five	43
Chapter Six	54
Chapter Seven	63
Chapter Eight/Love Sins	70
Chapter Nine	71
Chapter Ten	78
Chapter Eleven	93
Vita Auctoris	95

One

I used to have strange dreams. In them, the island I lived on for fourteen years was always burning, continual forks of lightning lit up the sky, which was an eerie slate gray streaked with ochre. Oddly, though I was always standing directly under the most severe raging bolts, the lightning caused me no fear. I had the feeling it was connected to me.

Martina Bay Island is surrounded on all sides by Martina Bay City. The soil is an odd deep hue of red, and from the mainland, it resembles the great head of a sleeping dragon. Somehow I always felt disconnected from people, even my own family. I didn't know what made me feel disconnected—different. It was like I was in a vortex and I was looking out through the swirling windows from within at all of the people who knew who they were and where they belonged.

Like a lot of kids I grew up, in a family without a dad. He was there for a couple years of my life, and for seven years of my brother Marc's. I have few memories of a father. Some girls with fathers have the sweetest memories of swing sets and sandboxes, but I remember only the last kiss and the back of Daddy's legs disappearing through the back door of our modest house.

My Mom met my father at the diner where she is still a waitress. Dad was a cook there. They became Mr. and Mrs. Chase and Marg Forne two years later. Mom always kept their wedding pictures in an album by her bed, even when he was gone. I have them now. She is beautiful in

her plain white dress and veil with her shiny auburn hair in soft curls to her shoulders, her blue eyes sparkling. She is petite with long arms and a tiny waist. Dad's long black hair frames his happy dark eyes. He never liked to smile in pictures but he has a satisfied smirk on his face. He towers over Mom, with his strong arm around her tiny frame.

When Marc was born, my father started getting restless. Mom said Marc's birth made marriage too real for Dad. He liked cooking for Mom, watching TV with her, and spending time with her, but she was his only interest. He wanted the freedom to stay up all night watching old movies or playing scrabble with Mom. Marc made that impossible—Mom was tired all the time and she had time for no one but Marc. Dad was lonely.

When Marc was nearly two, Dad said that Marc was becoming a person and that he didn't mind sharing Mom with him as much anymore. Marc spent a lot of time in the garage watching Dad work on his rusted out 1972 Camaro. Dad could make any vehicle run, even if it was lying dead in the laneway on blocks for years. Marc insists that there is only one thing our father ever gave him—his mechanical abilities.

Marc was nearly five when Mom became pregnant with me. He told me that he remembered when Mom told Dad. It was hot that day. It stormed outside but the house was still sweltering. Marc played with his dinky cars, weaving the little vehicles through the rough terrain of the living room shag carpet. Sesame Street was on the thirteen-inch

television set and he wore his favourite blue and green striped shorts. He sat at Mom's feet and listened as she told Dad that she was going to have a baby. Marc felt the tension rising up between Mom and Dad, and saw tears in Mom's eyes. On TV, Grover flailed his arms while announcing that he was "Far". Marc put his arms around Mom's legs, while she put her hand on his head. Dad just sat on the old brown cordoroy couch staring at the two of them. Grover announced that he was now "Near".

"Chase, are you okay?" Mom wanted to know.

"Margy, we were just...we were just getting everything together...Marc's growing up. He's...he's just finished his first year of school and he likes cars...we're happy."

"We'll still be happy, sweetie. Marc will have a little friend to—"

"No! It'll be like it was before. You'll be tired and busy all the time!" Dad yelled.

Mom ran both of her hands vigorously through Marc's hair. He felt the nervousness emitting from her like small shocks in his hair. The storm outside was getting worse. Marc felt like it was being drawn toward the house, like all of the lightning was gathering and flashing around the windows as the rain clapped against them. Mom relieved Marc from the little shocks she was giving him when she got up to close some of the windows.

Dad still sat on the couch but he had his head propped in his hands and he wasn't saying anything. Marc remembered wishing that he

had his cowboy hat on—he felt braver when he was a cowboy. He wanted to tell Dad to stop hurting Mom. He wanted to tell Dad that Moms should never cry or feel sad. He wanted to hit Dad in the stomach and make him cry too.

Mom finished with the windows and came back to sit. She put both hands on Dad's knee and told him everything would be okay. He lifted his head, nodded, and moved in to hug her, but he pulled back suddenly. "You're like a freakin' lightning rod, Margy."

Thunder roared over the house making the windows shiver. Suddenly, Grover was no longer on the TV screen—it went blank.

Mom moved her hands to her abdomen. "What do you mean?" She sounded nervous.

"You shocked me when I touched you."

"I feel a little tingly, but it must be the storm. It's really gathering around the island." Mom tried a smile.

Dad shook his head. "It feels like it's gathering around the house, around you."

Mom frowned. "It's just a little static electricity."

Dad smiled, finally. "Whatever it is, Margy, you need to calm down before you electrocute us all. Don't worry about anything."

Mom nodded. She smiled and the storm started to subside. The TV came back to life in time for a song about best friends from Big Bird.

Marc wanted to believe that everything was going to be okay, but he still felt Dad's depression growing as I developed inside Mom. Dad took on more shifts at the diner just to escape home and the thought of babies already existing and babies yet to be. When Mom was working too, Dad barely spoke to her. Marc heard them arguing about it at night. Mom would ask why Dad didn't come out of the kitchen at work to see her anymore and Dad would just say that he was sorry. Sometimes Mom would cry; Marc would hear her sobbing as Dad left the house, slamming the door behind him. Marc would emerge from his bedroom, peek into the livingroom, his cowboy hat in hand, to see her small and shaking furiously as she sat rocking herself on the couch.

The day that Mom gave birth to me, the thirteenth of March in 1989, Marc sat at the kitchen table eating a peanut butter sandwich while Mom did the dishes. Dad was at work. It was raining—pouring actually—with lightning streaking across the sky. The lights kept flickering and thunder clamored. Mom commented on how March really was coming in like a lion this year. Suddenly Mom dropped her sponge in to the dishwasher and told Marc to go next door and get her friend, Amy.

“Why?”

“Marc, the baby is ready to be born. Go tell Amy.”

Marc climbed out of his chair and ran out in the rain.

Before Marc and the neighbour got back, I was born. The thunder quieted. Mom thought she heard the deep hum of the viola descending

from within the caverns of the hidden moon and then, there I was, shining eyes already slashing around the room. She cleaned me up a little so that I could breathe and held me close to her as I cried, messing her white blouse up. She hummed to me, a hymn about the Virgin Mary and her newborn.

I used to imagine what life was like for us before Dad left. I used to imagine that he would push me on the baby swing in the backyard, laughing at my innocent giggle. I used to imagine that he would tuck me in at night, kissing me a million times before he could turn off the light and leave me to sleep. I used to imagine that when he saw me for the first time, he could never imagine a life without his little daughter. I knew that if I told myself the truth, I would realize that he didn't love me at all, that I was the reason he left.

Marc has always despised Camaros, because it was a Camaro that took Dad away. Marc was seven and I was two. He was going through his astronaut phase, standing on the porch, wearing his space helmet and rubber boots covered in tin foil, when Dad load his suitcase into the car. My space-boy brother was wiping his nose on the back of his hand and screaming between sobs for Dad to come back. Mom held onto me, rocking back and forth on the couch, crying.

Sometimes, when we were older, Marc and I would get into fights and Marc would get so angry that he would remind me of that day, "Steph, if it wasn't for you, Dad never would have left!" He didn't

understand how much his words hurt me. I knew Dad left because he couldn't love me, because he wanted things to stay the way they were. I knew he only really loved Mom and that, for her, he had learned to deal with Marc's presence, and I knew that he couldn't learn to deal with me too. I wanted so desperately for him to come back because he missed us. I wanted him to see how pretty I was, how tiny I was, how I was just like Mom. I wanted him to see that Marc looked just like him, so dark eyed and handsome in a strange kind of way. I wanted him to see that I had inherited his mother's blond hair and Mom's vivid blue eyes. I wanted him to realize he never meant to leave us.

I used to imagine what I would have done had I been old enough to understand what was happening. Eventually I tried not to think about it, because I knew what would have happened to Dad if I had been older and aware of the power I possessed.

Two

Since the age of four, I have dreamt about Ava Tucker, a woman who lived on the island not far from our house. Of all the things distant and disconnected to me on the island, she was so familiar. She lived in a Victorian style house; it was big for only one woman, especially a woman who never seemed interested in marrying or in having children. My dreams were oddly real—I knew that the child I was seeing was Ava.

She was eager to watch the flux and flow of the waters at the edge of the earth even though her mother had warned about standing precariously at the edge in the reeds, but Ava liked studying the depths of the water where the minnows and the frogs danced their water ballet. She was impatient to listen as the water lapped up to the edge of the land where her feet dangled, her toes just touching the wetness below. She was eager to amuse herself with the sight of the activities of the wild ducks and the geese. She was anxious to escape the droning of the priest's voice during his Sunday sermon, as the October breeze lifted her dark hair off her neck, with the soft watery smell wandering in through the window and the sound of the goose honking from nearby.

The field framing the local church was golden in the sun. A cow loose from its pasture wandered listlessly in the corn, chewing rhythmically on its cud, its large eyes lazily curious. A dog barked somewhere, possibly in pursuit of a hare. The smell of meat roasting in a

nearby oven, perhaps in the manse, was entertaining her nostrils. The sounds of humming bees and twittering birds flitted in and out of the window, tickling her ears. Outside the world was in motion, while she was still in the stale air of redundant words and flat voices raised in hymn.

The pew with its unforgiving hardness was making her squirm, while her mother elbowed her, warning her to sit still and listen to the priest as he muttered on about sin and corruption. She had heard this sermon before, and she wondered if Father had run out of ideas, after his 50-some-odd years of preaching. Maybe he was distracted by the sounds of small vessels tapping against the docks. Maybe he was tired of the coughing parishioners, as they stared up at him standing tall at the altar, indifferent to his words, but obligated to come to church every Sunday by convention. His thin lips like two flat straight flapping twigs moved slowly, while his thick white eyebrows rose at times, his pale blue eyes once passionate but now apathetic widened here and there, and his curled fist tapped the pulpit with feigned emphasis.

“Our Father, who art...”

“Open to hymn number...”

As the priest wound up the familiar sermon, the little girl, hat in hand, readied herself to jump from her pew, rub her complaining behind (carefully, so her mother would not catch her), and follow the line of dreary blank-eyed people into the merciful sunshine God had provided

for wandering and thinking and watching the world. Her mother with a strict grasp took her hand, leading her slowly out behind the solemnly moving bottoms of the old widows in black and her father ahead. Then, once she was on the church steps, her mother let her go, and she was free to explore for an hour at least. She waved at them as her mother and father strolled off toward home, her father probably contemplating the hole in the chicken coop and her mother probably reflecting on that night's dinner. Ava was thinking about solitude.

The girl found herself at water's edge within ten minutes. The ducks bobbed as usual, the geese continued honking, and the minnows scurried when she dunked a stick into the water. She let it float away while some of the minnows followed it, their miniscule bodies shadowed by its reflection. She leaned over studying her image, her own stern gray eyes, thin nose, and the dark curls framing her skinny face and the serious expression of her mouth. She was careful not to allow mud to stain her Sunday dress, a sensible navy blue cotton garment with a ruffled apron, but she persuaded herself to dip a foot into the cool sinuous water. She drew it back. She realized the water was far from cool—it was hot. She sensed then that the goose was honking more insistently, the duck was shaking its feathers nervously, and the minnows were still scurrying amongst the tadpoles in an erratic manner. The water seemed to be...

“Boiling,” she whispered.

Some of the minnows were floating belly up and the ducks were flying to shore. She could hear the vessel still knocking against a dock somewhere, but the wind was picking up, and it hurriedly tapped its message of a pending storm. The girl raised her head to the sky; which seemed to turn, twist, suddenly from sun to and starless blackness while the wind picked up, whistling around her ears. She backed away from the boiling water, its bubbles clamoring and stirring persistently. Lightning in continuous flight spread across the sky in blinding glaring whiteness. She could hear her mother calling, demanding her to hurry home before the rain hit. But she perceived just then from within the scorching waters an expanse of fiery red earth rising. She was shaken from her feet by the intensity of the quakes caused by the rising island, and she watched from within the reeds and the puddles there, unable to move or speak or respond to her mother's voice. The reeds and grass swayed, brushing her bare legs, while the stretch of earth rose, red and vivid.

As rapidly as it had begun, it ended. The sky returned to its luminous mood, the earth was tranquil, and the lightning diminished. The ducks ceased shaking their feathers, the geese stopped honking, and presumably, the minnows continued their course, while the girl sat, tentative and in awe. Her mother's voice stopped calling. Ava sitting, her dress dampening with mud, in the reeds, was considering the sight she was sure she must have imagined.

At night, as she battled for sleep, Ava lay in bed, thinking about her mother's stark grey eyes staring pointlessly, and her father's burly brown arms flexing as he hammered at the chicken coop, trying to fox-proof it. She thought of her mother's pockmarked hands pressing the rolling pin down on the dough of countless apple pies, apple pies created from the fruit Ava picked from the tree at the back of the house near the chicken coop. She considered her father's rough voice humming a hymn as he hammered, wiping his broad forehead with the back of his arm as he worked. She pondered her mother's grey hair, pulled back tight enough to tilt her eyes into slits, and her father's bare feet on the dewy lawn, the breeze making the grass stick to his massive flat toes. She mulled over herself, the adolescent with the starched gray dress, rocking back and forth on the back porch, day after day, reading the bible, memorizing God's words.

She sometimes drew pictures of the island. She could see it from her backyard, red and curious jutting out from above the ambling waves. She heard the sounds of its trees growing, creaking and groaning, spit up slowly from the earth, shivering in the cool wind of October. The sun glimpsed down on the island, on its red soil. Her father let out a low whistle, as the men often did, when he looked out at the obstruction in the water, but her mother seemed to ignore the odd red dragon. In time, the curious came and they rowed their families out to the island to raise homes and live there.

Ava laid in the dark, hearing her mother speak of the goings-on of the people on the island. She recalled the hushed, awed tone of her mother's voice.

"To be sure, our Ava will never see that island—what with the sinful festivals, George, and the lack of a priest. People say they...drink all hours of the night... and, George, they don't always take their own wives home again!" To this, Ava's mother received a low whistle and a grunt. "The townspeople say that they set foot on that nasty red thing and let their pasts fall behind them. They forgot the civilized world and now they spend all day hunting and killing their own pigs—the ones they brought over on that atrocious ferry they built! Can you believe chasing after and murdering your own pigs, George? Not even to eat, but for fun!"

"Now, who has been there to bring back this news?"

"George! Are you saying the townspeople, my friends, our friends, are lying?"

"No, no. Just asking. Who went?"

"Why, no one, but you've heard the noises yourselves of the poor pigs squealing."

"I've heard the same coming from Boris's farm next door, now, Aggie. The mainland surrounds the island. Of course you're going to hear them and see them. Maybe you're overreacting. Boris's pigs scream too."

"George, it's not the same. Those pigs are screaming. You hear me? Screaming!"

“Just sayin’...”

“Well, I am just saying that I can hear those creatures night after night...and I don’t mean the pigs. You can see the lights, the fires they have, from the water’s edge.”

“People have fires to keep warm, Aggie.”

Ava snuck out of her bedroom and saw the dark figure of her mother, her silhouette tinged orange by the fire, wiry fingers grasping her father’s armchair, leaning over him as he sat beside the fireplace, his face half hidden in the darkness of the room, the two of them in a semi-circle of light surrounded by the black of the night. Ava could hear the howl of an animal somewhere and the screech of a gull from the hills behind the house. She scurried back to her bed. Her wild dark eyes travelled over the moonlit room, seeing nothing.

That night Ava swore that she would see the island, that she would live there. She saw the boiling water give birth to the red soil of the sleeping dragon that invaded her dreams. She wanted to be part of the island, whether or not her mother constructed lies about its people, and whether or not she was forbidden to live there.

When I started school, I was more connected to Ava than I ever had been before. Previously, I had seen her only around the island, at the grocery store, walking in the park, or at church every Sunday. At school, I spotted her daily, because she was the Religion teacher. She always

wore long dresses with strange prints on them—elephants with intertwined trunks danced across Ava's middle, sometimes monkeys climbed trees that grew up the sides of her dress, sometimes snakes wrestled at the hem, and sometimes panthers lazed on her pockets. She was always there, never off sick. She was usually quiet, keeping to herself, but I heard that when she taught, she taught with spirit, her students awed by her voice.

I watched Ava every day while I ate lunch with my best friend, Hermes. The odd old teacher was generally the playground monitor for the kindergarten children. I was too shy to actually speak to her, though she stood by herself, watching over us, day after day. Once I knew a person, I was more talkative, but I was always afraid of being rejected should I approach anyone. It was Hermes who approached me the first day of school.

Hermes was wearing his favourite engineer style overalls with a red t-shirt and a green baseball cap. I would always remember what the four-year-old Hermes looked like in that outfit, because his mother washed it each night and he wore it every day, refusing to wear anything else. He had curly brown hair with hints of copper and brown eyes flecked with green.

He looked straight at me saying, "Hi. My name is Hermes. Wanna be my friend?"

I looked back at him, looked down at my feet, and then nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Steph."

"Hi Steph. I wanna call you Steffy."

"Okay." I remember winding my long, blond hair around my finger.

"What do I call you?"

"Hermes."

"That's a funny name."

"Yeah. My mom and dad said he's a god in somewhere called Greece."

"What's a Greece?"

"Some place."

We didn't figure out that year what a "Greece" was, but I thought it was pretty amazing that my friend was a god, like the all powerful invisible man we learned about in church and at Sunday school. Hermes and I were never apart, as long as we could manage it. He became my voice, introducing me to other kids on the playground. I never had to worry about rejection because Hermes was my protector against all things unsafe. If I thought someone wouldn't like me, Hermes spoke with them and found out whether or not they were friendly before he let them come near me. The only person I never asked him to speak to for me was Ava. I just continued to watch her without the exchange of words for my entire junior year of kindergarten.

This was not only the year I spent watching Ava, but it was also the year I spent mooning over Billy Masters. He was in Senior Kindergarten, but I saw him on the playground at recess and at school assemblies. Morning recess was the first time I saw him, and I saw my four-year-old conception of perfection—a head of curly hair, a crooked smile, big blue eyes. I asked Hermes who he was. Hermes delivered the information to me by lunch hour recess.

“He’s Billy Masters. He’s a senior kindergartener. Girls *love* him.” Hermes made a disgusted face.

I nodded. “I see why.”

Hermes shook his head. “No, not ‘cause he’s cute. He’s smart *all* about dinosaurs.”

“Dinosaurs. Who cares?” He was so cute. I was afraid that if I even looked at him, he would reject me. “Is he nice?”

“I think so.”

I nodded.

Hermes laughed. “Wanna meet him?”

“I can’t!”

“Why?”

“I dunno.”

Hermes laughed again, stepping backward, and covering his mouth. “You looove him!”

“Do not.”

"Do too."

"Shut up."

Hermes laughed some more and then put his arm around me.

"He's old."

"Yeah."

"Old as dinosaurs."

I giggled. "He is not!"

"Is so!"

Hermes could tease me as much as he pleased. I would love Billy Masters forever.

I was almost in Senior Kindergarten and I was excited about getting older, being *grown up*. I thought maybe if I were grown up, Billy Masters would notice me and fall in love with me. I felt like a baby again when I started dreaming odd, confusing dreams. I kept dreaming over and over that I was born to Ava and then buried by her. I was inside my mother, but it wasn't my mother—it was Ava. From within my fetal sac, I could hear her heart like a rhythmic, underwater muted drumbeat reverberating. I was scared, because it *felt* like she was my mother, but she didn't want me. The red satin bed was pulsating. I felt myself being pushed forward and I wanted to scream, but the water and slime filled my mouth. I was sliding, sliding forward—the crimson snaky walls melted behind me. I came out of Ava's womb, and she gave me up to the

grave she had dug for me, hurling me into the earth to suffocate. Mom woke me telling me that I was flailing my arms and crying in my sleep.

I mentioned my dreams to Hermes, relaying them to him as best a five-year-old could, and even he, the great god of speech that he was, had a fear of Ava after. He watched her on the playground as closely as I did. Once he turned to me suddenly and told me that she was looking at us, at me. "Maybe she knows," he whispered.

I snuck a peek at her, too. She *was* looking at us, at me. "Hermes, she's smiling."

He leaned close and said, "Smile back."

After returning the smile I looked down at my filthy white running shoes.

Sometimes, Hermes and I would hide behind the bushes that decorated the entrance to the kindergarten playground so that we could watch Ava without being seen. Of course Ava could see us, as she was the playground supervisor and was expected to watch all children at all times, but we were sure we were being sly. We were hiding behind the bush the first time Ava Tucker actually spoke to us.

We were sharing a chocolate bar that Hermes' mother had packed in his lunch. Hermes was sucking on his, and getting melted chocolate all over his hands. While we were distracted Ava spoke to us. We both jolted, dropped our candy, and she had simply asked Hermes if he would like a napkin. Hermes started to cry, either because he had dropped his

candy or because Ava was talking to him. I never did ask him which it was. He picked up his chocolate, looked up at Ava, and nodded. She pulled a napkin out of her pocket with the panther lazing on it.

She was friendly looking. Just like a grandmother, she had wrinkles around her mouth and her kind pale, blue eyes when she smiled. She handed Hermes the napkin and I noticed how small her hands were. They reminded me of my own. I put my hands in the pouch of my sweatshirt, afraid she would make the connection too, but it seemed I was too late, because she smiled at me like she knew what I was thinking. She cocked her head and asked, "Are you okay, Stephanie?"

I didn't know what to say. How did she know my name?

"Stephanie?"

Hermes touched my arm, getting chocolate on my sweatshirt.

"She's fine, Miss Tucker."

"Okay. Have a good recess."

When she was gone, Hermes let go of my arm. I leaned my head on his shoulder. "That was weird, Hermes."

"Yeah."

"You got chocolate on my sweater."

"Sorry."

"That's okay."

My dreams about Ava became more graphic as I got older. When I was ten, I began to understand why Ava buried the baby in my dream, the baby that seemed to be me. I began to understand why I felt disconnected from the other people around me, especially my own family.

I was sitting in Ava's religion class, watching her closely, wondering if every time she looked at me, she knew I was seeing her, seeing the younger Ava...

I saw Ava walking alone through the island park at night. She was dressed in black, barely noticeable except for the orange print of a dragon up the side of her dress. She was humming to herself. It sounded like a church hymn. She turned her head—she sensed the man, with whiskey-breathing tobacco-stained teeth, surface from behind the building—and saw a flash of unclosed zipper in the moonlight. She walked faster to reach a more habitated area. His feet stuttered and flopped, but he apprehended her as she wove through the cracks on the walkway, and she felt the greasy fingers black with oil clutch her collar. She struggled with her voice, unable to loosen it from its box as the tightening at her neck became taut. Panic struck her chest, and her eyes were frantically circling the buildings but from the windows came no faces, from the streets came no voices, and from the ground came no boots clumping, no boots attached to no feet attached to no voices attached to no faces attached to no persons pulling him off her. He hit

her with something. The stars spun and blurred light faded black, colours swirling to nothing. When she came to, she was alone.

Later, with child, she bade her time. She was wildly collecting supplies and dragging them behind her in a rusty brown wagon to her looming old home. She hid away. She no longer taught religion at the school and no longer left the Victorian monster that swallowed her and kept her within, hidden from prying eyes. In her bedroom, she sewed a red satchel. It was a last gift for the child, for its emergence on an earth whose unmerciful claws would clasp it and leave it concealed.

Time crept up on her. She had her shovel ready beside her as her baby was heaved out of her. She dragged her sorrowful body across the hardwood floors and crawled, maroon blood dripping behind her torn aging body, down the porch steps into the backyard, the silent baby in the gathers of her skirt, the shovel clenched in her raw, grasping white hand, a bible seized between her chapped, cracking grey lips. She reached the end of the yard, under the gnarled oak with its branches spun into distorted grappling arms, and stuffed the baby into the red satchel. The sky began to shed itself of rainwater, spreading lightning across itself and tossing down roars of thunder from above. The forks of lightning seemed to be dropping, swooping down to the ground as Ava dropped mound after mound of red earth over her child. Never allowed to take in breath, never with open eyes, the bloody child was buried with red earth, sea green weeds, and forks of lightning.

"Someone else will love you," Ava eulogized to her child.

"This child is to be born to another." Ava knew that the child was buried but wasn't gone—it was waiting. Ava could feel power surging from the ground when she walked over it. This was no average baby.

Sometimes, Ava couldn't sleep. Some nights, when she was attempting sleep, Ava heard the howl of animals and the screech of gulls from the hills beyond the house. Her wild dark eyes traveled over the moonlit room, seeing nothing. She could sense the spirit of her baby sitting, waiting, biding its time. She pulled the covers off her, and silent, approached the window. Looking down, she saw, under the oak tree, an unearthed grave with the bloody baby atop the muddy mound with its blank white eyes, mud and old blood caked on its underdeveloped white body, lying unmoving. Ava waited for the moon to fall, standing frozen at her window, all night watching the eyes of her unbreathing infant shining under the full, angry moon.

With the day, they both found their way back to bed.

I wanted to be reborn. I was lying under the earth and did not want to die. But my mother buried me.

"Stephanie?"

I found myself staring at Ava. She stood at the front of the classroom, staring back at me, calling my name. I looked down at my hands and she warned me that if I didn't pay attention, I would find myself in detention. I nodded and she continued the lesson.

Three

Creeping up the walls of my innocent mind was a black, rotting creature with eyes red and dripping with all that frightened me—when I was alone in my room, when mother was sleeping but not there beside me, it came. It looked like the face of evil when it oozed into my vision, the sound of frantic drumbeat following. When I was left to remember and comprehend and wrangle with it, I understood that it was me. I was creeping and crawling, trying to become.

I first learned that I was dangerous when Mom sat me down to warn me about anger. I was in the living room watching TV when Mom came into the room and sat beside me looking worried. “Mom?” I said finally at commercial break.

“Steph, I want to tell you something.”

“Yeah?”

“Steph, you’re a special girl. I want you to be careful.”

“Why?” I looked down at my faded jeans.

“You can’t let your anger...make you hurt people.”

I looked up at her. “Mom, what are you talking about?”

She was fiddling with the hem of her black skirt. She always wore a black skirt or black pants to work. “Steph, you know that you...you’re able to really hurt someone when the weather is bad.”

“Mom, I didn’t mean to hurt Marc! I swear!”

"I know you didn't mean to. You couldn't, uh, control it then, but you're older now."

"Yeah, and I can control it mostly."

"Just, please, don't hurt anyone."

I nodded. "I won't, Mom."

"You're almost a teenager now. Your hormones are all out of whack. You have to be careful."

I was studying the lines in my hands. "It only happens when there's lightning, Mom."

"I know. You could kill someone, though, and you have to be careful. I used to feel the power coming from you when I was pregnant."

"Wow. You never told me that."

Mom nodded and smiled. "I know you're a good girl, Steffie. Just be careful. You don't want to burn anyone."

"Except maybe my math teacher," I joked.

"Not funny, young lady." Mom was stern.

I laughed. "I wouldn't. I swear. It would have to be storming anyway and we're having a dry season."

"Steph!"

"Just kidding. Don't worry."

Mom kissed my forehead as she stood up. "I have to go to work. Can you warm up supper for Marc when he gets home?"

"Yeah. See ya later."

When she was gone, I couldn't stop thinking about Marc. I really hadn't meant to hurt him. I was young and angry with him. He had taken my favourite My Little Pony and used his airplane model paint on it. It looked like Army Pony by the time he was done camouflaging it. I found him outside using it as a mule for G.I. Joe and I kicked him as hard as I could. He screamed and rubbed the section of his back where I had kicked him. "What the hell, Steph?"

"That's mine, Marc."

It started to rain and lightning began to streak across the sky. I had never been angry before during a storm, so I hadn't discovered my power before then. Marc shrugged. "So what? Finders keepers."

I kicked him again. This time I connected with his shoulder. He stood up and kicked me back. I grabbed my knee and started to scream at Marc—until I felt the lightning surging around me. It was like I was drawing it to me somehow. It was making the hair on my arms and legs stand up and it was sending currents of tingling sensations up and down my body. I felt like I was floating in a spiral of electricity among waves of intense heat. I realized, though, that I could push the power of the lightning away from me toward Marc. When he fell on my My Little Pony and his hair started to smoke, I pulled all of the electric heat and the strength of the lightning back to myself and pushed it back up to the sky.

Mom came running toward us just then. I heard her yelling, "Steph, are you deaf? I told you to stop!" The only thing I could think about was that she had forgotten her shoes. She picked Marc up and carried him inside, his legs flopping against her side.

"Is he dead?"

"No, Steph. Thank goodness."

"How did I...do that?"

Mom laid Marc down on the couch, sat down beside him, and looked up at me. She put her finger on Marc's wrist, looking for a pulse. I remember she said, "Somehow you draw the lightning to you and you push it out to other things or people. I have only seen you do it once before. You were three and you burned the old oak out back to a crisp."

"Marc...could have been...crisp?"

"Yes." Mom was crying.

"I didn't mean to..."

"I know." Mom put one arm out toward me and hugged me with it. The other she kept on Marc's wrist. "His pulse is coming back to normal. Steph, we were lucky this time. Next time, he could be killed."

"There won't be a next time, Mom."

Mom didn't say anything. Marc opened his eyes and I started to cry.

For some time after I would get angry with people around me and wish that a storm would brew up. Sometimes, I knew that if a storm

began, it would hail the end for anyone standing at the edge of my tunnel of anger. The problem was that I didn't feel guilty for my anger or for wishing death on anyone. The only people I tried to keep secure from my anger were Hermes, Mom, and Marc. The only reason I controlled my anger was because of Hermes, Mom, and Marc.

However, my anger and my power were threatening to drive me mad.

My obsessions with Ava and with Billy were deep. I was in grade seven, and Billy was a year ahead. He was the best athlete in the school—his legs were beautiful, climbing down from his hips in stunning muscular form, and he had grown his hair so that it hung in splendid white-blond curls just past his ears. He had noticed me—Hermes testified to that. He told me that Billy spent time “checking me out” in the hallways every day at school, and outside at recess. Hermes described my stature as willowy; he said that with my long hair, my long torso, long skinny arms and legs, and that I was kind of tall, so I was willowy. I thought I looked gawky, but I tried to *look* like I believed I was willowy. I wore skirts low on my hips that hung just past my knees with feminine sweaters or tank tops with matching jewelry and flat shoes.

Billy was aware of me, but still he didn't approach me. I tried wearing lip-gloss. Nothing. I tried wearing my hair up. I tried wearing it down with a hint of curls. I tried wearing it straight. Nothing.

Hermes thought about it. He took a couple of days to ponder the situation. "I know," he said after two days.

"What?"

"Maybe you should try to talk to him."

"What would I say? I've been waiting for him to talk to me."

Hermes shrugged. "What else is there?"

"Maybe he's shy."

I moaned. "What am I going to do, Hermes? I can't stop thinking about him. I feel like I'm going to explode."

"I'll see what I can do."

That always meant Hermes was going to make friends with the person in question. How the artistic, non-athletically inclined Hermes was going to make friends with the biggest jock in school, I wasn't sure. However, I realized that Hermes was *everyone's* friend. Hermes was an amazing people person. He would find something in common with Billy.

It turned out that Hermes' only goal was to find *me* in common with Billy. I was just as artistic and non-athletic as Hermes, though. What if Billy was only interested in girls who played sports, and not in girls who painted and put on art shows with her best friend in the library basement?

I was sitting on one of the benches in the schoolyard during recess, watching Ava as she did her rounds in the kindergarten playground, when Hermes came toward me. That would have been more than

usual—Hermes approaching me—but he had *Billy* with him. I tried to look unconcerned and...willowy—I am not sure *how* I tried to look willowy, but I did my best, and because I was concentrating so hard on how I looked, I didn't even hear Billy say "hi".

Hermes nudged me. "Hey, Steffy."

I started. "Hermes, I...Billy, hello."

"Hi."

Hello? Who says hello? "What's up?" That's better.

Billy put his hands in his pocket. He shrugged. "Nothin'."

Hermes rolled his eyes. "I told Billy he should meet my best friend."

Billy nodded. I stood up and clasped my hands behind my back.

"Well, I'm Steph."

Billy shrugged. "Yeah, Hermes told me. He, uh, said you're into mountain biking. Well, we don't have any mountains, but Hermes said you like to speed through town and through all the trails."

"Yeah, I do. Do you do that too?" I generally rode my bike during storms as hard as I could to ward off anger and bad thoughts, but the thought of riding with Billy was alluring too.

Billy nodded. "Yeah."

Hermes smiled. He sat down on the bench and put his chin on his fist. "Hmmm..."

I rolled my eyes at him.

"Let me think," he continued.

I smiled. He smiled back and then said, "I know!"

Billy looked surprised. He had apparently been in space while Hermes was pretending to think deeply. "Hey, what do you know?"

"Weeeelll...the two of you could—oh, I don't know—go bike riding together!"

Once again, my god of voice had spoken.

I happened to turn my head. Ava was at the edge of the kindergarten playground leaning on the fence, and she was staring at me. She realized that I had noticed her and she backed away from the fence. I tried to look away, but the look on her face was unbelievable—she was so pale and she looked horrified. I wasn't doing anything shocking—what was it about my conversing with a boy that horrified her? I wasn't going to...did she know? Did she know what my anger could do to a boy? Or to anyone?

I realized that Billy was speaking to me, and I turned away from Ava. "What did you say?"

Billy shrugged and looked at his feet. Hermes sighed and said, "He asked if you wanted to go bike riding on Saturday."

"Oh! Sure! That would be great, Billy."

Billy smiled. "I'll come by your house around 11:30. Hey, where do you live?"

I took out my notebook and a pen to write down my address for him. I could still sense that Ava was looking at me. I had to cross out my

street name twice because I couldn't concentrate enough to remember what it was. Finally, I got it right and handed it to Billy. "I can't wait!"

The bell rang and the three of us headed back to our classes.

Hermes was smiling uncontrollably. He was so proud of his matchmaking abilities. As we always managed to sit together when we were placed in the same classroom, I turned to him after we were seated and asked, "Was I willowy enough?"

He laughed at me and nodded. He became serious, though, and asked me why I was so distracted when Billy was talking to me. I told him about Ava's odd behaviour, and he understood no better than I why Ava would react strangely to my interest in a boy. "Why would she care if you wanted to flirt with a boy?"

"Flirt! I was flirting?"

"Yeah, putting your hands behind your back and smiling and fluttering your eyelashes."

"I didn't know I was doing that! I always put my hands behind my back, though. How is that flirting?"

"Well, it's not *normally*. But when you're smiling and fluttering, it is."

"Fluttering? Anyway, I don't know why Ava would care about my interest in a boy. Maybe she thinks it's dangerous for me to date."

"Hmmm...or maybe she really is your mother from a previous life and she doesn't want you dating. In your dream, she was raped. Maybe men scare her."

"That would certainly explain why she has never been married or shown any interest in men, but she's not my mother. Marg Forne is my mother."

"I said, in a previous life."

"That's true, but my dreams, or visions, or whatever, are just dreams."

"Sometimes dreams are real."

"Would you want to believe that you were buried and reborn?"

"No, but reality bites, Steffy."

I didn't want to believe that she was my mother. I didn't want to believe that she didn't love me or want me. I hated to think about it, but when I allowed myself to, at night when I was trying to sleep, I began to wonder why I felt so disconnected from my own family, and why Ava seemed so familiar. Why did I feel nervous in constricted areas, like I was claustrophobic? Why did I feel like I didn't belong in my own life? Why was it so hard for me to accept that my father had left me?

Four

It was dizzying, like being in a haze of happiness. Billy was riding his bike next to mine, talking to me occasionally and smiling a lot. He seemed truly pleased to be spending time with me, and, of course, I was thrilled to be anywhere near him. We were gliding along the streets of Martina Bay Island, basking in the warm air. We liked taking in the sight of children clamouring around their yards, the sweet smell of cut grass on many a street, the sound of dogs barking as we biked past their gates, and the feel of being together on an Indian Summer day.

Around two o'clock, we stopped at the diner for a late lunch. Mom was working the eleven a.m. to eight p.m. shift, so when we sat down, she raised her eyebrows and smiled at me. I had mentioned my biking date with Billy to her, but she was still excited to actually see us together. She brought us menus and asked us how we were.

"Mom, this is Billy Masters."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "Hi, Billy. I'm Marg Forne, Steph's mom."

Billy smiled shyly. "Hey. Nice to meet you. Steph and me are just, uh, riding bikes and now we're kinda hungry."

Mom laughed. "Well, what would you like? Do you need a minute to look at the menu?"

Billy shook his head. "I'd like a cheeseburger deluxe with gravy."

I smiled at Mom. "I'll have the usual, Mom." I always had onion rings with a clubhouse sandwich.

"Sure. Anything to drink?"

We both ordered Cokes and water. We'd been riding around the island for two hours and were thirsty. Mom went off to fill our order and we were suddenly unsure of what to say to each other. It was difficult being alone, facing one another, and not knowing how to behave. There are always questions on the mind when one is left alone with someone who is nearly a stranger. *What do I say? How do I act? Do I speak first?* The brain is completely irrational—one can speak freely and easily for hours with those who are familiar, but if faced with a half-stranger for a few minutes, one is lost and unable to speak at all. We are drawn to people, and want nothing but to be in their company, but once left alone with them, we are speechless and want nothing but for the unease they cause in us to disappear.

Billy sighed and played with his fork. I watched Mom draw our Cokes from the pop dispenser. When she came back, she gave us each a beverage, and then asked how our ride was going. I nodded and said, "It's been fun. There are all kinds of people out today."

Billy nodded. "Did you see the lady in her front yard wearing a bikini?"

I laughed. "Yeah! Who told her that bending over in your garden with your butt hanging out was attractive?"

Mom smiled, nodded and walked away. We were no longer speechless, merely because we had mutually noticed something. Familiarity is commonality.

After we ate and Mom smiled at us some more, revelling in my first date, we went walking through the downtown area of the island where the diner is located. The shops downtown were all situated in pinkish coloured brick buildings with white window frames and flower boxes. The sidewalks should have been cobblestone; that was how quaint it all looked. There were wagon wheels hanging on the walls of buildings here and there, and the sounds of gulls and feet clomping across the nearby docks travelling into our ears. Because we were leading our bikes as we walked, it was hard to hold hands, but I wished Billy would find a way to hold my hand anyway.

I found myself worrying that because he didn't lead his bike with one hand, he didn't like me. Was I not willowy enough in my short shorts and tank top? Was my hair not as pretty pulled back in a ponytail? Was I boring him? I felt wildly angry that Billy wasn't finding a way to touch me or stand closer to me. He wasn't dedicated enough! He was thinking about someone else! I was glaring at him, but I didn't know it until he gave me a strange look. I forced myself to smile at him and I attempted to calm my anger. *He has done nothing wrong. I have to be calm. Why am I so angry?*

Billy stopped walking, so I stopped too. He was looked up at the clouds. "It looks like rain, Steph."

I made myself look up. The sky was waxing dark over the water and was moving fairly rapidly toward the island. I nodded. "We better go home."

I knew I needed to ride the anger out. It was strange to be angry with a boy because he wasn't attempting to touch me. I knew that, but I was still torturing myself with rage. On the way home, after parting ways with Billy, I let it rain on me and I let the thunder and the lightning gather all around me, lifting my head up to greet them. The rain pelted my face and pelted my angry thoughts. Finally, I went home.

As thunder clattered outside my bedroom window, I wandered through my peculiar dream world. Ava, with a horrified visage, followed me as I relived my date with Billy. She haunted us from street to street, into the diner, through the downtown area, and into the rainstorm where I found myself standing under the oak tree in her backyard. She was there with me, wearing her dress with the monkeys swinging along the hem, and we were standing on a mound of dirt. It was a grave—my grave. Ava started to speak as she gazed down at the grave.

"I cannot love you the way another mother can. You'll find her. You'll have a father too. Everyone will love you. I will love you from afar."

I woke up, thinking, if you could love me at all, you wouldn't let me go. You wouldn't be able to let me go, Mother. You wouldn't be able to leave me, Father. You would touch me, Billy. Love isn't real. Love can't exist. If love was real, I wouldn't feel so alone in this world. I would know who I was. I wouldn't want to kill anyone.

That year, Hermes, Billy and I hung out all the time, together or in separate pairs. Billy was just as great as I'd always suspected he was. We watched all of his baseball, hockey, and football games, and he came to our art shows, or the three of us just hung out at the diner or at the docks. I never thought I could have the kind of friendships that I did with Billy and Hermes; even when Billy graduated into grade nine, he still hung out with his old eighth grader friends. The only good thing about Billy making the transition into high school was that he didn't witness seeing my developing obsession with Ava's prodding gaze.

I wanted to know what made Ava and me connect both in our waking states and in visions. I continued throughout grade eight to meet with Ava in my dreams. We walked over the grave that she insisted was mine. We sat in the kindergarten playground on the ground behind the bush where Hermes and I used to hide. We wore dresses with animal prints and sat on the docks watching the ferries come in and unload cars and people onto the island.

City people are the most obvious newcomers to the island. Martina Bay City culture is completely opposite to Martina Bay Island, even

though they are so intimately related to one another in proximity. Even though the city surrounds the island, and they are separated only by a channel not narrow enough to cross by boat, there are such differences. There is no semblance of quaintness in the city; there is a struggle to create an appearance of sophistication, indifference, and stylishness. On the island, there is more of a feeling of community and individuality. People are concerned with developing who they are and how they are important or special. That is why I remembered Norma Sue in the waking world.

In my dream world, she stepped off the ferry wearing pitch-black sunglasses with rhinestones on the edges of them, a black knitted dress with a hood, and knee high black, heeled boots. She had a skinny, red belt slung around her hips. She was pulling leopard print luggage behind her. She had her dark hair styled in a pixie cut. Ava approached this girl, leaving me behind, sitting alone in my monkey print dress.

She did turn around to look at me after she hugged Norma Sue. She came back to where I was standing and she said, "Don't let them tell you that your dreams are delusions."

A few weeks later, I was sitting at the dock with Hermes and Billy when the ferry landed. We were talking about Billy's last baseball game. A storm was approaching. Hermes and Billy were arguing over whether Billy had pitched a curveball or not to the last guy he got out, and I was trying to tell them that it didn't matter. Billy insisted that it was a

curveball, but Hermes was sure it wasn't; he was hurting Billy's pride, because Billy dreamt of playing in the major leagues—he thought that baseball was his best chance for a career in sports. I lost track of their argument when a girl with dark hair styled in a pixie with rhinestone edged sunglasses dragging leopard print luggage behind her got off the ferry. She was dressed all in black except for a thin red belt slung around her hips. She looked sad. It took me a moment to remember why she was so familiar to me.

When Ava appeared from somewhere and greeted this girl, I felt my stomach heave. She embraced the girl and they headed away, talking spiritedly.

It started to rain. The sky was threatening lightning. I stood up and started to run. I could hear Billy calling my name, but I couldn't stay.

Mom and Marc weren't home. I was alone with the TV on and a magazine open on my lap, but I was restless. I was depressed, sitting on the couch in front of the television. Hours passed. I was still thinking about the girl at the dock. She had entered my dream world and my waking world, but she had done it in a way no one else had before. I had never dreamt someone up before meeting them while awake.

I thought about when I was little. I used to climb into bed with Mom whenever I was afraid of the things concealed in the darkness. She

would lay me down on her huge pillows and hold me until I fell asleep. I headed for Mom's bed.

Once I was lying down, I leaned over to turn off the lamp. I thought about waking up beside Mom. She would be lying next to me with her head cocked, pen and diary in hand, and she would give me a little smile when she noticed that I was awake. I saw my name on those pages, but my name was one of the only words I recognized at the time. I wondered where Mom kept her diary now—was it still in the bedside table? I reached out my hand and felt around until I found the lamp. I switched it on and opened the drawer. There was a pile of diaries. I grabbed the top one.

I just want to see how Mom is. I just want to know if she's okay, I told myself.

I flipped until I saw my name.

I just want to see how she perceives me. That's all.

I read:

If Stephanie becomes any more delusional, I don't know what I will have to do. She is constantly telling me strange stories. She is afraid that she is going to kill someone. I don't know what to do. She's getting older. It's getting more serious. She's angry so often.

I flipped forward, becoming confused and angry. Why was Mom writing these lies?

*Steffy told me today that she is scared to be alone with her brother.
She says she almost killed him. I remember the day she's talking about.
All she did was kick him in the back and then he was hit by lightning.
Nothing a trip to the emergency room couldn't fix.*

I closed Mom's diary. This can't be real. Why is Mom writing these things? I know I almost killed Marc. I didn't mean to, but I know I didn't imagine it.

Five

A lot of people were talking about the “city girl” who was living with Ava. Mom kept hearing stories at the diner about her—she was in trouble with the Martina Bay City Police; she was a runaway whose parents finally stuck her on an island with her old aunt to keep her from running away easily; she was a drug addict who needed to be separated from her drug dealer; or she was pregnant and her parents sent her away to have the baby. Everyone was speculating, but no one actually knew the truth. When I finally met Norma Sue, I was almost convinced that she was a pregnant-drug-addicted-runaway and that Ava would have her arms full taking care of her.

It was Ava who introduced Hermes, Billy, and me to Norma Sue. Hermes and I had just started grade nine, and Billy was in grade ten, so we were at our new high school, sitting on the front steps eating lunch, when Ava and Norma Sue came out of the school and stopped in front of us. They were quite a pair; Ava was wearing a blue dress with green cacti along the neckline and red flowers along the hem, and Norma Sue was dressed in a sleeveless red hooded dress and platform Mary Janes. Ava said hello to us—I felt like I was dreaming. I rarely spoke with Ava outside of my dreams. Billy and Hermes were responding to her, but I was staring at her, wondering if she had dreams like mine. Hermes elbowed me, I said hello, and Norma Sue gave me a strange look.

"This is Norma Sue," Ava told us. "She'll be starting school here tomorrow. I thought maybe the three of you might show her around."

Hermes nodded. "Sure. Nice to meet you, Norma Sue."

Norma Sue still hadn't spoken. She smiled, but said nothing. She was pretty; she had a soft heart shaped face, full, red lips, jade green eyes, and a pert nose without a bump like my own had in it.

Ava went on, "Maybe you can all pick her up on your way to school tomorrow. You all walk together from Stephanie's house, don't you? It's on the way."

Hermes answered again, "Yeah, we'd love to. We always pass your house."

Billy agreed, but I couldn't find any words. Why did it bother me so much that Norma Sue lived with Ava? I felt like I was jealous. If my dreams were true, and Ava was my mother, I felt I should be living with her and being cared for by her.

How could she let me go? How could Dad leave me? Could no one love me?

I tried to push away my anger. Hermes was holding my arm. He must have sensed that I was feeling tense. Ava was staring at me. Actually, everyone was staring at me. I took a deep breath and smiled. Finally, I said, "We'd be glad to come by tomorrow morning."

Norma Sue tilted her head at me and said, "Great. I'll be waiting." She sounded shy for a pregnant drug addict runaway.

When Ava and Norma Sue were gone, Hermes let go of my arm.

"Steffy, what's the matter?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Ava makes me...strange."

"Norma Sue probably thinks you're crazy."

"Maybe I think she's crazy!"

Billy snorted. "What?"

"I don't know...I just thought she was kinda weird too."

"How?" asked Hermes.

I shrugged again. "She just seems weird."

Hermes laughed. "She's different than most kids around here, but I don't think she's weird."

Billy grabbed my hand. "Hey, don't worry. You're still the prettiest girl at school."

I was sure I was blushing, showing how much I was attracted to Billy, though we had never been anything but friends. "I'm not worried about that. Why would you say that? Do you think she's pretty?"

"Sure, but like I said, you're prettier."

I glared at him. "But she's pretty?"

"Hmmm..." Hermes laughed. "Steffy, settle down. She's pretty, you're pretty. Who cares?"

I nodded. "Fine."

I didn't want this city girl waltzing into our lives with her sophistication and her beauty. What if Billy fell for her?

I would kill her.

Hermes put his hand on my knee. "We're just picking the girl up. We will always love you. You are our girlfriend. You are our best friend."

I put my head on Hermes' shoulder. "Hermes, I know that. I just..."

Hermes nodded. "You just...are a silly girl."

Billy laughed. "Forget her. If you don't like her, Steffy, we won't hang out with her. Hey, she'll find friends on her own."

I lifted my head. "Really?"

"Yeah. You don't like her, she's on her own."

Norma Sue was waiting on Ava's front porch. She was standing there holding a notebook with a pen clipped onto the spiral spine. She came down the steps to meet us. No one seemed to know what to say. Of course, Hermes was the first to speak. "Hi, Norma Sue. Can I call you Norma?"

"Sure. You all can."

We started walking. Billy was stumbling a lot—he couldn't seem to determine what straight was—never mind walk it—before the lunch bell rang. Norma was laughing at him. It seemed to break the ice. Hermes asked her why she had moved to Martina Bay Island.

"My mom died."

We didn't know how to respond to this. We hung our heads, unable to look at her. She broke the silence.

"It's okay. I love talking about her. She was my best friend, but she was sick all the time. She told me she would feel better in heaven."

"Where's your dad?"

She shrugged at this. "He didn't want to deal with Mom's sickness, so he left us when I was four."

I shook my head.

"Ava is my dad's sister. She doesn't know where he is, though. She wouldn't speak to him after he left us and she hasn't heard from him since."

Hermes stopped walking. We almost tripped over him, since he was walking in front of us. "Hey!" he said, "Why don't we skip school? Let's go down to the docks and hang out."

Billy frowned. "Don't you think they'll notice when Norma doesn't show up for her first day?"

"No. They might think she thought she had to start tomorrow."

I nodded. "They won't notice."

"Hey, Ava might."

"Billy, you wanna stop being such a chicken?"

"Shut up, Hermes. I'm not a chicken."

"Baww, baww, baww."

Billy punched Hermes lightly on the shoulder. Norma looked at me. I told her they were just kidding around. She smiled. "You know, I'm up for skipping school."

I nodded. "Me too."

Norma and I started walking away from the guys. They were still hitting each other and trying to make chicken sounds. Eventually, they realized we were leaving them behind and they followed along. At the docks, we dangled our feet and talked about ourselves.

Hermes was sitting next to me. I was next to Norma who was next to Billy. Hermes leaned over and asked Norma what living with Ava was like. She shrugged. "I've only been there for a week. She's nice. She tries really hard. She's really interested in making me happy."

"What's her house like?"

"Big and full of old furniture. I think she got it all from her parents' house when they died. They used to live right across the water. You could see the island from their house."

I felt dizzy. Through a haze, the memory of seeing Ava as a little girl watching the island rise from the water flashed in my mind.

"My mom told me that Ava's parents didn't want her living on the island. Her mother was convinced that evil people lived here."

I nodded, but I felt like I was detached from the conversation, like the inside of my head was spinning furiously. I was hardly listening, but Norma Sue's voice was floating in to my head from outside of myself.

"How come she never got married?" I found myself blurting. I surprised myself. Usually I waited for Hermes to ask all of the questions. I had to know. I had to know about Ava's past, to understand her past,

so that I might understand myself. I was unable to restrain myself, to force myself into quietude. I wanted to. I didn't want to seem eager, but my tongue wouldn't hold.

Norma shook her head. "I don't know. I guess after she had..."

"Had what?" Billy asked.

Norma glanced up at the sky and then faced Billy again. "Ava had a baby," she said quietly.

I felt like something with tentacles was winding itself through my brain, squeezing the nerves and grasping at my thoughts so that everything in my mind seemed misty. I thought I might pass out. I thought I might throw up. Hermes was looking at me with his eyes wide open. He took my hand in his as he asked her, "What happened to the baby?"

"I think she lost it or it died." It seemed to make Norma sad to talk about Ava's baby. "She was really depressed. I remember my dad used to stomp around the house viciously saying Aunt Ava was a murderer and my mom would tell him he was being crazy. He would scream at her that if Ava wasn't a murderer, then why did she feel so guilty about her dead baby? Mom would start to cry and I would be crouched somewhere in the house, under a chair or someplace, crying too. I was pretty young, four or something, but I remember my father's red face and glaring eyes as he screamed about his stupid sister and her dead baby. Even when

we visited her, she seemed so sad and Dad would yell at her, blaming her and she really seemed to think it was her fault.”

Hermes squeezed my hand. “Do you think it was?” he asked.

Norma glared at him. “How could it be her fault? Aunt Ava wouldn’t—”

Hermes shook his head. “I didn’t mean anything. I’m sorry.”

“Well, I think the baby was sick or something. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, except the bastard who...” Her words faded away.

Billy put his hand on Norma’s shoulder. “Hey, let’s lighten up, guys.”

Hermes nodded. “Yeah. Is anyone hungry? The chip wagon down by the ferry dock is open. I’m starving.”

I calmed myself as much as I could, focusing on this new topic. I nodded. “What time is it? We haven’t even had breakfast. At least, I haven’t.”

Norma rolled her eyes. “Aunt Ava makes me eat every morning—a carrot muffin and a banana.”

Hermes laughed. “How nutritious.”

“I had to call my doctor and get him to tell her that I was lactose intolerant before she would stop trying to force feed me milk!”

We all laughed. We laughed and talked like fourteen-year-old kids should on the way to the chip wagon. We all had a lot in common with Norma. She was a pitcher and she had a lot of background in art

history. We hung out at the chip wagon, eating fries drenched in vinegar and salt, and wandered around all day by the water. We headed for home around suppertime, sure that our parents had received calls from the school announcing our truancy.

We passed the garage where Marc worked on the way back through town. I knew he was just getting off work, so we waited for him. He was still in his coveralls and his hair was mussed up in the back from lying under cars and running his greasy hands through it, but I noticed the interest Norma took in him anyway. I thought it was cute that she might develop a crush on my nineteen-year-old brother until I noticed Marc smiling at her and scrunching up his nose like it was itchy, something he always did when he was nervous. Wasn't she a little young for him? His interest made me nervous. I didn't want my brother to love anyone but me and Mom. I always dreaded the thought of Marc leaving us to get married and have children.

I knew it wasn't Norma's fault that she was pretty. She had on a little white tank top and low-rise jeans with black heeled boots and a silver necklace with a black amulet hanging off of it. She looked more sophisticated than the girls Marc was used to. I blamed her for Marc's interest and I wanted to scream at her, slap her. Above all, I wished the sky would blacken and pour forth rain. I wanted lightning. I wanted to remove her from Marc's sight, make her nonexistent. Images of her arms around Ava at the dock surfaced in my mind. Images of Billy's hand on

her arm attacked my memory. Images of her arms around Marc ravished my imagination.

I thought of Raven Mathers, the last girl who had showed interest in Marc and received mutual interest. I had become so wildly jealous that I had cornered the girl outside the diner one night. I looked her up and down while pinning her to the wall with my hands on her shoulders. She was wearing a short green cargo skirt with a camouflage tank top. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail with a green scarf tied around it. I hated her fearful brown eyes and her quivering lip. I took hold of the scarf in her hair and pulled her head back; I was taller than she was so I was forcing her to look me in the eye. I pushed my left elbow in to her ribs and growled, "If you so much as look at my brother, I will murder you. I will come after you and you will not survive my wrath. Leave Marc alone. Don't even talk to him to ask him for a pencil in class."

She was whimpering and I wondered how a girl two years older than I was could be so weak. She wasn't even struggling to get away. I let go of her hair and shoved my right elbow into her ribs. Then I let her go.

She did not dare speak with Marc herself. She told her friends to tell him she didn't like him.

How could I threaten Norma, though? She was our friend. We liked her.

After we dropped the others off at their houses, Marc and I went home. I spent some time sitting on Mom's wicker chair on the porch, watching the shadows on the moon and the bats flittering above the trees. Stars stretched across the black sky in a menagerie of wild movement, streaking across the tips of our willow tree, its knotted branches like dreadlocks dipping and dropping in the wind that stirred from above. The hum of harmonious spinning planets sank to my ears from the edges of the universe. I thought of how intense and irrational my hatred was, and how dangerous it could be. I didn't want anyone to die.

I decided that if Marc was going to leave us, then I had to replace his love for me.

Six

Ava was standing above me, staring at me with blank eyes.

"Remember that love isn't real, little one. No one really loves anyone.

They want to hurt each other more than anything."

She kissed my forehead. I saw the full, angry moon above her head.

Then I was enveloped in red. I was set down. I felt the first clump of dirt plunk down on my nose and I panicked.

"You killed your baby. She died by your hands," I heard myself say before Mom turned on my light.

Billy was standing out front of my house. I looked at him through the window in his black t-shirt and jeans before putting on my knee-length jean skirt and a black tank top. I wanted to match him, to be like him, so that he would see how similar we were and how much we belonged together. I went outside, my backpack in one hand and my brown-bag lunch, which Mom had just handed to me, in the other. "Hi, Billy."

"Hey, Steffy, you look nice."

"Thanks." I took off my backpack, put my lunch inside, and put my arm through Billy's. "Let's go."

We found Hermes outside Norma's house. He shrugged at us.

"She's not here."

"Are you sure? Did you knock?"

Hermes made a face at me. "Of course. No one is there."

"Maybe she's sick. Should we try to get in?" Billy asked.

I shook my head. "I have a feeling I know who walked her to school today."

Billy smiled. "Who?"

I shrugged.

"Who, Steffy?"

Hermes frowned. "Her brother."

Billy let go of my arm and stepped back to look at me. "Now, listen, Steffy, there is nothing wrong with—"

"I know, Billy." He had heard about what I did to Raven.

Sometimes I wished Hermes didn't have such a big mouth.

"I mean it. Your brother has a right to be with—"

"I know! Billy, I know that. Besides, I'm not interested in him." I smiled at him, looking him directly in the eye. He seemed surprised. I hooked arms with him again and we walked to school that way, with Hermes at our side.

My interest in Billy had lasted since kindergarten—it was time to take it further.

We met up with Norma on the front steps of the school. She was sitting on the bottom step, eating her banana. "Hi. Sorry I didn't wait for you."

Billy smiled. "Hey, did you walk here alone? Needed to be alone? Did you enjoy your solitary walk?" he teased.

She laughed. "Billy!"

"Well, did you?" I wanted to know.

"No." She seemed nervous. "I wasn't alone."

"No?"

"Is something the matter, Steph?"

I smiled at her. "No, I'm just curious."

She nodded. "Okay."

"So?"

"So *what?*"

"Come on, Norma. Who did you walk with?" Billy asked.

"I think you know. It was Steph's brother."

I nodded. "I knew it was. I just wanted to hear it from you."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to. I don't know."

She looked at the sky and bit her bottom lip. "I just don't want a lot of people to know when I like someone, in case he doesn't like me. Then I'll be embarrassed."

"We're *not* a lot of people," I told her. "And Marc is my brother. He isn't like that. He wouldn't walk you if he didn't like you."

"Really?" She seemed excited.

"Really." I tried not to look upset or sound angry. I could tell I was worrying her.

"Well, does it bother you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but it's okay."

Hermes had been sitting next to Norma, listening but saying nothing. He was looking at me, trying to figure out what I was thinking. He must have decided that I was really okay, because he smiled at me. I didn't smile back. I was thinking about my father. I don't know why, but I remembered Mom telling me about the first time Dad walked her home from work. She was nervous and excited. Boys didn't generally pay attention to Marg Green. She was shy and serious. The girls she worked with were loud and outgoing. They always stood around and talked about their dates and parties they'd been to while she cleaned and served customers. She just wanted to get her work done and go home. Dad wanted someone like her; he wanted to get married and spend quiet time at home with her. What did Marc want? Marc was like Dad in so many ways. He was the kind of guy who watched TV and ate popcorn with his Mom and sister. He rarely went anywhere but to work.

"Norma?"

"Yeah, Steph?"

"Don't get too attached to my brother too fast, okay?"

"Why?"

"I just...he's...I know him. He might not want the same things you do."

"Like what?"

Hermes was watching me intently. I shrugged. "He might not be a commitment type of guy. You'll have to ask him to be sure, but my dad left us. Marc reminds me of him."

Now I was afraid Marc would hurt Norma, and I was feeling angry with Marc.

Norma nodded. "Okay."

Hermes stood up. "There goes the bell."

"We better go to class," Billy said. "Hey, today's your first day, Norma."

Norma bit her bottom lip. "I'm nervous. Do any of you have Math class in Room 184 first?"

Hermes nodded. "I do."

Norma grabbed his arm. "Oh, good."

They went to Math and Billy and I headed for our English class. I took Billy's hand on the way there and he didn't stop me. He didn't look at me, but he didn't seem angry with me for doing it.

That night, I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, and I was thinking about Billy. It was getting late, but I couldn't sleep. I was scared. I worried that he wasn't feeling the same as I was, but that he didn't know how to tell me. He was so quiet sometimes that it was hard to tell what he was thinking. He would look at me and I would smile but he would just look at me, doing nothing, showing no emotion. I wanted

to find a way to ensure his commitment to me. I wanted to find a way to draw him to me and keep him close.

Mom couldn't do it. Dad didn't stay. I wasn't enough to keep Dad home. Neither was Marc. What can I do to keep Billy close? I am nothing. I am not meant to be loved. I don't matter. I will keep Billy close to me. I promise I will. I don't care what it takes. I want to be loved so much. I want to make someone love me. I am worthy of his love. No, I'm not.

While I was agonizing over Billy, I fell asleep. My brain didn't want to think anymore. It wanted images, and it wanted rest from thought.

Ava was above me peeking out of her window. I was lying above the ground, staring at her from where I lay. I could feel the light of the moon illuminating me. It was cool and warm at the same time. I felt so cold and dead, but I imagined the moon was rejuvenating me, giving me new life.

I looked out across the yard. My mother was out there somewhere, waiting for me. I looked upwards, at the window. My mother is in the window, wishing I would disappear underground and stay there. I closed my little eyes. My mother can't love me. Does that mean that I will wait here forever on top of my grave for her? Will she come and pick me up and hold me and tell me how sorry she is? She promised me that someone would love me, that someone would want me more than she did—or could.

I tried to move. Maybe I can crawl to her. Maybe she will change her mind and everything will be okay. I can't move, though. I am dead. I can't move. I can unearth my grave and sit atop it, but I can go no further.

She won't come down to me, either.

If I let go of her, if I try to move beyond her sight, I will be able to leave this garden. If I can't let her go, if I can't forget her, I will never escape this grave.

I woke up crying.

I knew that Ava and Norma weren't home the next morning, because they would both be at school. I climbed over the fence that enclosed their backyard and looked around. There was the stone walkway that weaved all around the garden, wandering in and out of rows of flowers and under tree branches. I followed it to the end of the yard where the oak tree stood, its body thick and sturdy, its branches outstretched like arms strong and reaching. I searched around it for some hint of a grave. Very, very close to the trunk of the tree, there was a slight hill. Growing out of the hill was a sapling. I knew that the sapling was rising up from my grave and I also knew that when its roots grew too far, it was going to die. The bigger tree was going to strangle it out. It looked weak already—there were weeds attempting to stifle it.

I sat next to the hill and prayed that it was just a hill.

I noticed that carved into the tree was the word BABY.

I left.

I was jostled from my silent, blank sleep. I wasn't in my grave. I was surrounded by a glorious sound. It was the sound of my mother's heart. I was coming to be again. I was going to be born. Who was my mother, though? Had my death all been a dream? Was I going to see my mother, live in a nursery with a window overlooking the backyard with the stone walkway that wove around the garden? Was I going to have a home?

I felt my mother tense up. She was upset. Was she angry with me? Did she want to kill me? I felt like her anger was directed outside of herself, though. Someone was angering my mother; I felt fury rip through me. I began to draw electric anger in toward my mother. I felt the tingle of it inside of her, and I revelled in the electric currents passing through her and me. What was I drawing in to us? Where was I drawing the power? I kicked my feet and raised my arms. It was exciting to feel such a charge entering us. I was sharing the outside world with my mother. She wanted to share it with me; as long as she could share everything with me, she would. This mother wasn't going to let me go.

If only I had known that my father was going to abandon us. I would never have escaped my grave. I would never have let Ava get away with burying me. I would have haunted her night after night, crawling out of my grave to stare at her with my rotting eyes. She left me to a cruel future.

For the rest of the night, I dreamt of wandering through Ava's garden in the summertime when the flowers were in full bloom. They crawled all over the ground, creeping in and out of the grass to lift their lovely heads to the sun. I dreamt that I danced through the tree branches, bowing to my knotted partners. I ran over the stone path, skipping over ladybugs and butterflies that happened to land on the walkway.

I dreamt Billy was there. He held my hand for a moment and then walked away into the trees somewhere. The sun was so warm on my head and I wasn't lonely so I let him disappear.

It was Ava I was looking for anyway. I wanted to know if she had seen me.

Seven

Norma and I spent time alone by the docks when Hermes and Billy were off on their bikes. She told me about missing her mother. "Love is missing the absent object of affection. It is knowing that she is still with me. As long as I remember her, she is with me."

I couldn't help but blurt, "My mother will never be with me."

"What?"

I bit my lip. "Never mind. That came out wrong."

"You live with your mother."

"Yeah."

Norma gave me the strangest look. She seemed unsure of what to say to me.

"I just meant to say that I hope my mother never dies."

She nodded, unconvinced.

"Norma, don't ever forget your mother."

"I won't. She was the most beautiful person in the world to me.

She had honey blond hair and midnight blue eyes. She was always singing. Her singing woke me up every morning. Except all week before she died. I knew it was serious when she stopped singing. She couldn't. Her voice would just croak."

Norma's mom was like a fox in a snare labouring to chew off its bloodied leg, leaving only a clump of maroon blood fur, because she was trying to rise from her bed and she couldn't. Norma's cat, Mercy,

slapped her master awake with her paw, and mewed until she followed her into Mother's attic room where the dust writhed in the morning light being birthed outside the window, and Norma's mother, in her bed, struggled with herself, willing her weak body to turn over and roll out of bed. Norma put her arm around her mother and helped her to the bathroom before taking her back to bed where she spread the sheets aside when Mother's uncooperative legs became intertwined with them. She wrapped the knitted blue and kelly green blanket around the shivering pale figure. She soothed her mother with her voice quietly, and Mom went back to sleep.

She didn't sleep very long. Mom's voice croaking out her daughter's name brought Norma's hands to the stairway railing, her body upward to Mother's side. Norma was crying, tears gems mined from the bleak depths of her eyes. She kneeled beside her mother's bed and taking the rough hand paused in the air at the side of her laying place, she thought she could hear her mother's heart halting its activity, her blood slowing, her breath ceasing. Now Norma heard nothing but her own faint breath. She tasted bile rising from within her stomach, her sorrow emerging. She touched her mother's colourless cheek and said goodbye.

"I kept asking myself what there was left for me. I wanted to know why I should care about my future when my mother is not here to share it with me. I didn't care about school, friends, clothes, anything without my mom."

Love might bring her mother's memory back to her, love might mean her mother's presence, but love is a lonely activity when one does not have the physical object of love with her on earth.

"But," she said firmly, "Sometimes we gain people too. We don't always just lose them. I gained Aunt Ava and you and Billy and Hermes when I came here."

"And Marc," I said quietly.

"And Marc."

"Do you think love is reserved for special people, Norma?"

"No. Why would anyone be more worthy of it than anyone else?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's reserved for certain people. People God loves best or something."

"I don't think so, Steph. I think everyone gets to have love."

I smiled. "You think so?"

"Yeah. Why should anyone be left out?"

Maybe because I'm not a real person. I'm like a hologram, reincarnated somehow. Maybe I don't have a soul.

"Steph?"

"Yeah?"

"Who do you think has to love you for you to feel better about love?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think a boy has to love you?"

"No. Not really."

"Do you think your dad has to come back?"

I turned my head sharply to look at her.

"Is that it? I used to think that too, Steffy, but it's not our fault that our dads left. They were stupid to leave. We can't blame ourselves."

"There's more to it than you know, Norma."

"Tell me. I bet it's not as bad as you think."

"I can't tell you, but I can tell you that my father did leave because of me, because I was born."

"Those were his own issues. It wasn't you. He had problems that he should have dealt with. Steffy, you should never blame yourself."

"How can I not? He left because he couldn't stand sharing Mom with me. He despised me. He thought I was ruining his life. He got more and more tense before I was born. He loved Mom enough to try but he couldn't stand me. He tried for two years and then he left. He left because he couldn't handle me!" I was crying.

"He had problems. Steph, it wasn't because of you. It was because he needed help. He was selfish."

"I would murder him if he came here."

"I feel the same way."

"You do?"

"Of course. We want to get revenge on our dads. They left us behind like garbage because they were losers. They made us feel bad about ourselves even though it wasn't our fault."

I dug a Kleenex out of my pocket and blew my nose. "I wish I could tell you the rest but I can't. I still have to figure it out."

"That's okay. Just remember, it wasn't your fault. No matter what you think you did, you are not at fault. You were just a baby! How could it be your fault?"

I was born unlovable. Men couldn't love me.

Hermes came back by himself. He said Billy had to go home. I could hear the lies in Hermes' voice. I gripped his arm in my hand.

"Hermes."

"What?"

"Hermes."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Steffy, Billy doesn't feel the same as you do."

"Why?"

"You just aren't what he's looking for. Didn't you know? If he had been interested, he would have shown it a long time ago. You've been obsessing over him since kindergarten. He's just not interested in you as anything more than a friend."

"Then why did he ask me to go biking that day?"

"That was years ago! He decided to just be your friend!"

"But he spends so much time with me."

"He spends time with *us*."

"But he seemed to like me."

"Steffy, he does. As a *friend*. He loves you as his friend. One of his best friends."

Norma was sitting quietly. She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. Hermes was staring directly at me, but he was playing with one of the curls on his head. He continued, "Listen, he loves us and he wants to stay being friends with you, but that's all."

"Is this why you went off together today? So that he could tell you how to let me down?"

"No, we wanted to ride our bikes, but, yes, he wanted to talk about you. He doesn't want to let things go any further."

"He likes me. I know he does. He's just being shy."

"He's not shy. He just..."

"Is it Norma? Does he want to be with Norma?"

"No. He just wants to be friends with all three of us. Just friends."

I was shocked. I didn't know what to think. In fact, I couldn't think. I was void of all thought and emotion. Hermes was so blunt. Norma's shoulders drooped. She sat with her mouth hanging open. She didn't know what to say either—especially after our conversation.

"Steffy, say something," Hermes said.

“It’s going to storm eventually, Hermes. I feel a storm coming,” I warned and then I got up and walked away. They followed me but I wouldn’t speak anymore. I was dashing home. Norma was yelling about not giving up on love as she ran behind me. Hermes was hollering for me to talk to him about it. He was yelling that he would stay up all night and talk if I wanted. I went into my house, into my bedroom, to my bed, and stayed there until the wrath took me over.

Eight

Love Sins

It is wrong to love. Love is a curse, a disease no one deserves. Love hurts everyone. It inhabits the body like a germ, chewing away at the health of a person physically and spiritually. It infests every corner of a person's brain until they are no longer able to rationalize and no longer able to make sense of right and wrong. All that matters in love is the object, the idol, the thing that is loved. All that matters is this person.

I imagined if I drew the lightning down to him, burning him so badly that his body burst into flames, I imagined seeing his eyes as he struggled against the searing, the enraged fire within his body, the impatient flames licking up and through his oesophagus, charring his tongue—disabling his words—

I could picture his hands grasping at his stomach where the bile churned and boiled, rising up his already crisp oesophagus and escaping his tongueless mouth in ashes.

Nine

Halloween. In spurts of red, green, orange, black, all colours, the children emerged, as did the storm clouds. Light flooded porches and bowls of candy put out to appease and keep demons at bay caused the children to scurry like pack rats dragging loaded pillowcases, shopping bags, or hollow plastic pumpkins behind them with raw, scarlet, weary hands. Among them was Billy Masters, strolling, blending in, standing out. Somewhere, weaving in and out of groups of children, adolescent couples, monsters, demons, and heathens, was also myself. I was thinking about where I was going, who I was meeting, what I was doing. I was considering turning back and going home. My mother's tired eyes were there, eyeing the street from the dimly lit sunken porch. I was feeling the rain dripping on my bare shoulders. I was waiting for the lightning. My mother's hands were there, on the porch, holding the edge of a dishevelled wicker chair. My mother's voice was there, happily calling out my name should I come home now. I was walking too fast to turn back. I was sprinting because Hermes would find out I was gone when he called to see if I was going to the Halloween dance at school. If he knew I was gone, he would look for me. He would see what I was about to do.

I neared the street where Billy strolled, thinking. I neared the street where Billy strolled, thinking. I neared the street and I stopped.

You can never have him.

Billy stopped. I saw him stop when he saw me.

A picture of my mother graced my muddled mind.

The storm hit that unfortunate street and hit that unfortunate boy.

He clutched his stomach and—a sudden fire billowing, burrowing from without, the fiery sound of a squealing violin harassing the ears, heart beating intense to its end, death sizzling from inside, bile churning from torrid stomach, eyes stunningly red, hair aflame—twisting serpents afire. A gasping breath taken—left charred to the carcass, I breathing hard at his side, my fingers hot with his mercilessly blistered remnants—

Mother, Father, if you hadn't left me, would this be happening?

I waited in the rain, watching Billy char, and when the police came, they asked me what happened to Billy and I couldn't remember. They asked me for my address. I couldn't remember. There were police everywhere and they were swearing and turning their heads away from the sight of Billy. Hermes was looking for me and when he couldn't find me, he sensed there was trouble. He came to get me.

He found the Chief and approached him. I could hear him talking, even though he was trying to be quiet. "I can walk Steph home."

He got a snort from the man. "She can't go. I need to question her."

"I don't want to be disrespectful, but do you think it is best for her to sit here and stare at her charred boyfriend, sir?"

He nodded. "I suppose you're right. Take her home. We'll be by later to question her."

Hermes walked me home. I didn't say anything and neither did he. He seemed disappointed and for a while, I couldn't remember why. What had I done to upset my best friend? Had I been rude to him? We were almost to my house when I finally spoke, "Hermes, what's the matter?"

"What do you mean, what's the matter?"

"Why are you upset?"

"Billy is dead, Steffy! Dead!"

I gasped. "He is dead."

"Steffy, we were just standing near his body."

"He is dead." I was shocked, but I didn't feel bad about it. I was enjoying Billy's death. I was happy that he was dead. I would miss him, but he had to be punished.

"Yes, he is. Our friend is dead." Hermes grabbed my arm and stopped me. "Look at me." I looked at him. "He is gone and you don't seem to care. The thought of seeing his body lying there burned is going to haunt me forever and you don't seem to care."

"Sure I do. I'll miss him," I said, but I could hear how unemotional my voice was.

"Steffy? What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Steffy. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"NO! My friend is dead, Steffy. Dead! And my best friend doesn't even care."

"I care."

"You don't sound like it." Hermes was drenched. It was still raining hard and he was standing there holding my shoulders and staring into my eyes.

"Hermes, you're soaked. You better get me home and come in to dry off."

Hermes let me go. "Let's go, Steffy."

"I care, Hermes."

"Okay." He held my hand and walked me the rest of the way in silence.

When we got to my house, I had Hermes take off what he was wearing, gave him a robe, and put his clothes in the dryer. While I was in the laundry room, Hermes explained what had happened to my mom. I could hear him telling her how unemotional I was acting. I stayed in the laundry room, taking off my clothes, changing into something dry, and listening.

"Mrs. Forne, she doesn't seem to care. She doesn't seem interested at all that Billy is dead."

"Hermes, I think she is probably just in shock."

"I don't know. She seems *uninterested*."

"Maybe she doesn't want to think about it."

"I think we should get help for her. I don't think she's upset. I don't think she's in shock. I think, for some reason, she just doesn't care."

I came out of the laundry room and announced that Hermes' clothes were drying. "I'm going to watch TV."

I saw the look that Hermes gave my mom, like he was illustrating his point that I didn't care. *Just because I'm watching TV, I don't care?*

Do I care?

I am not sure.

I care. One of my best friends is dead. I killed him.

I kept the volume on the TV low, because Hermes was still talking to my mom. "Mrs. Forne, we have to do something. Steffy is getting more and more obsessed with her dad."

I moved closer to the kitchen where they were standing, because I was having trouble hearing.

"What do you mean?"

"She seems convinced that it was her fault he left."

"He left because he was..."

"I understand why he left, but she doesn't."

"Hermes, I can't afford to get a psychologist for her. I can't pay for it."

"I know, but there are public places where you can get help in the city."

"And do you really think she will go?"

Hermes was silent, so he must have gestured to her or shrugged.

He must know I'm listening. Why is he talking about me like I can't hear? Why am I standing here silently?

I went in to the kitchen and stood in the doorway, staring at my mother and Hermes. They were sitting at the kitchen table, looking confused and depressed. I didn't know what to say so I just stared at them. They looked horrified to see me. I wondered what I looked like, dressed in an old housedress with a torn hem and a ripped collar. My hair was still uncombed and mussed up from the rain, but I stood there watching them, waiting for someone to speak. They looked back at me, their brows creased.

Mom stood up. "You both look hungry."

I went back in to the living room and turned up the volume on the TV. Hermes came in to sit next to me. He held my hand but he seemed like he wasn't there next to me. Mom brought us tuna sandwiches and we ate them, and when Hermes' clothes were dry, he went home. I decided to go to bed.

Ava was laughing at me. She was wearing her dress with the monkeys on it and they were laughing too. She pointed at me and said, "You're a murderer. No one can ever love a murderer."

I was crying and shaking my head. I felt so alone.

"No wonder I abandoned you."

I was sitting on the ground with my arms wrapped around my legs, rocking back and forth. I was in Ava's garden, under the oak tree. She wouldn't stop laughing at me.

"You're the murderer," I screamed.

I woke up to Mom calling my name. I opened my eyes and could see her from the light in the hallway. She was sitting on the edge of my bed, just saying my name. "Wake up, honey. You're crying in your sleep."

I stretched out my arms and she held me. "I killed him, Mom. I killed him and I don't care."

I'm just like Ava—a murderer.

Mom pushed me away and holding my shoulders, she looked at me. "You didn't kill him and I do think you care."

"I killed him. I called down the lightning and I killed him among all of the children in their costumes and among all the people on their porches handing out candy."

I enjoyed killing him.

Mom hugged me again. "You'll be fine. We'll get through this. I'll find someone to help you."

"Okay." I agreed.

Ten

I glared at Norma and Marc. They were sitting in the kitchen at the table holding hands and talking quietly. They were wearing black, because we'd been to Billy's funeral. I was getting a Coke and trying to listen to what they were talking about. I couldn't hear them, though. Their hands were bothering me. I didn't like watching them hold hands and talk so intimately.

I thought about Billy. Why didn't he look at me the way Marc was looking at Norma? What was wrong with me? Why did people abandon me?

Norma was looking at me. She smiled. "Hey, Steffy. How are you doin'?"

I shrugged. "I'm okay."

"It was a nice service, wasn't it?"

Marc took his hand away and pushed the chair next to him away from the table. "Come and sit down, Steph."

I sat down and tapped my finger against my glass. "I thought the picture they had in front of the casket was nice."

"Yeah, it was." Norma smiled.

I nodded. Marc smiled at me and said, "So, where's Hermes?"

I shook my head.

"He'll be here. He had to stay a while since he was one of the pallbearers." Norma looked at her hands. "He's really taking this hard. He's not talking."

"He needs to talk it out," I said, because I thought he did. I didn't think he needed to talk to me, though. He was so distant. I wondered if he was scared I would kill him. "I wouldn't."

"What did you say, Steph?" Marc wanted to know.

I was surprised I had said that. Why didn't I know I was about to speak my thoughts sometimes? "I said I wouldn't know what to say to him."

"It's okay. He just needs us to be his friends," Norma told me.

I nodded again and Marc took my hand. "Hey, kiddo, do you want anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can I do anything for you?" He was scrunching his nose.

"No. I'm okay."

"You don't look okay, kiddo."

"I'm fine, Marc. Really. Just help Norma look after Hermes."

"He needs you too."

"He doesn't need me." I stood up. "I'm going to bed."

Marc still had my hand in his. He wouldn't let go. "Steffy, you come and wake me up tonight or call me at work tomorrow if you need anything. I don't care when it is or what it is."

"Thanks, Marc. 'Night guys."

I went to my room and put on my pyjamas. I could hear Mom in her room, moving around. I wanted to go in and lay down with her, but I wanted to be alone, too. I didn't know exactly what I wanted. I didn't even know what I was feeling. I missed Billy. I missed Hermes more. He was barely speaking to me. He was making me feel guilty, but I didn't think I had anything to feel guilty about. Billy deserved it.

Who deserves happiness? Did he? Love is consuming. I wanted to show him how consuming it is. The ability to love isn't real. Not for me. Love is a farce. I couldn't love him and he couldn't love me. We can't love. I am inept at love. I am loveless.

I pulled back my covers and got into bed. The light was still on, but I thought if I left it on, Ava wouldn't haunt my dreams.

Marc and Norma would be happy together. A part of me wanted happiness for them but the part that enjoyed killing Billy wanted nothing but revenge. I wanted to kill my own brother. I didn't want him to have love. Why was he special? Why was I so sad and lonely?

When I woke up, it was six a.m. The light in my room was dim in the morning light. I sat up. I wanted to get up and leave this house, leave before anyone saw me. I found my favourite red skirt and a long sleeved top and put them on. I grabbed an apple from the kitchen and went out the back door. I wanted to find Ava. She usually went to

church on Sunday mornings and I wanted to go there and sit next to her. I wanted to finally talk to her about my dreams.

When I got to her house, I climbed the steps to the front porch and sat on a porch swing to wait for her.

When she came out, she was wearing the monkey dress. She usually wore a plain blue dress to church. Why was she wearing the monkey dress? I tried to smile at her, but I couldn't. She had a smirk on her face. I looked away from her. She came closer to me and sat to my left. "I've been waiting for you, Stephanie."

"Why?"

"I knew you'd come sometime. You've been in my garden."

"I climbed over the fence."

"It's okay. I don't mind. I planted the garden for people to look at. I have the annual teacher's party there, you know."

"You do?"

"Yes. Everyone drinks tea and sits around looking at the flowers. We sit in the shade of the oak tree at the back of the yard."

I felt nauseous. They sat over my grave?

"I make sandwiches and we go over business and socialize."

I grimaced. They talked business over my grave? "Why did your baby die, Ava?"

She glanced over at me and then she stared out into nothingness.

"It wasn't meant to be."

"Why not?"

"It's God's way."

I stood up. "I don't believe you."

"Stephanie, what do you mean?"

"I don't believe you. It wasn't God's way to kill me."

"What?"

"It's not God's way to abandon your baby to the earth."

"I had to bury her. She was dead."

"How did you know I'd been in your garden?"

"My neighbour told me."

I nodded. "I won't be back."

"You can come back, Stephanie. I don't mind."

I shook my head. "You let me go. I don't want to come back here."

"Stephanie, I don't understand."

I felt so bold.

I walked away and down the steps. It was still early. Maybe that was why she had on the monkey dress. She hadn't changed for church yet. She was calling my name. I didn't look back. I put my hand up in a semi-wave. I heard her screen door close.

I sat down at the docks for quite a while. I thought about how meaningful it was to hold lives in my hands. I could kill someone. I was a god, like Hermes. I wasn't the messenger god, though. I was the god of death. I imagined myself sitting in Hades watching the dead file by me. I

imagined myself torturing the people I once knew on earth. I watched them writhe in pain as I set fire to their hands. I could see Norma and Marc and most of all, I saw Billy screaming as he shook his hands and searched for something to put out the fire with. He looked like he did before I killed him; he had his blond hair and his vivid eyes. He was tall and muscular. I thought it was good to see him again, especially since he was suffering.

"Now you know what it feels like, Billy. You made me suffer and now I'm taking revenge." I looked around me, realizing I had spoken aloud. No one was near.

I imagined Marc and Norma hugging and myself setting fire to their hair. They let go of each other and rolled around on the ground, struggling to put out the flames.

I imagined Ava strolling into my underworld. She was wearing her monkey dress but she had all of her other animal dresses folded over her arm. She glowered at me and started to yell, "Stay out of my garden. I buried you there once already and *you* left."

I set fire to her hands. She simply stood there. She acted like nothing was happening.

"Stay out of my garden. I never wanted you. Why would I want you now?"

I woke up to the sound of a dirt bike racing through the path behind me.

Mom was waiting for me on the porch when I got home. She patted the seat next to her and I sat down with my head on her shoulder.

"What did you do today, Steph?"

I shrugged.

"Did you go anywhere special?"

"No."

"I see."

"Why?"

"Norma was looking for you. She said you were at her house."

"I was. I didn't go there to see her, though."

"Oh?"

"I went to see her aunt."

"Why?"

"Just because."

"Steph, why would you go to see Ava?"

I shrugged again. "I needed to talk to her."

"About what?"

"Nothing, Mom." I stomped my foot on the porch floor.

She put her hand on my knee. "Steffy, I called the Mental Health Association in the city."

"Why?"

"I made us an appointment for Wednesday night. We'll have someone to sort through our problems with."

"What *problems*?"

"You agreed to this the other night."

"I changed my mind."

"Steph, we need help. Marc says he'll go too. He has problems he needs help with too."

"Like what? He's got Norma! He has no problems."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing."

"Steph."

"Mom."

"Marc is just as messed up about Dad leaving as you are."

"I am not *messed* up."

"You know what I mean. He needs to work through it too."

I shook my head. "He has Norma. He'll work through it with her."

"Having a girlfriend won't fix anything."

"At least he has someone."

"You have me and Hermes and Marc and Norma."

"That's not what I mean."

"Just go with me on Wednesday. They'll help us there."

"I thought you said Marc was going too?"

"Fine, go with me and Marc."

"Fine."

"Now go to bed and get some rest."

I stood up. I went inside but how could I rest? Mom thought I needed help. Hermes thought I needed help. They thought I was crazy.

I'm not crazy. I killed Billy because he deserved it.

I stopped outside Marc's bedroom door. He was in there. I could hear his stereo. I pounded my fist once against his door and realized that I was crying. "I hate you," I whispered. "Why do you get to be happy?" I went to my room and closed the door.

Marc knocked on my door, hollering, "Why did you bang on my freakin' door, Steph? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I hollered back, "I slipped and landed against your door."

He went away.

I fell asleep in my clothes with the light on listening to the music flowing from Marc's room.

I slept a lot. I dreamt a lot. I dreamt about the island burning. I dreamt about all the people screaming and jumping into the water, but it was boiling. It was stirring and rising in massive waves to swallow the people in its boiling red jaws. People kept jumping in, though, and soon the entire island was crumbling. The flames were ripping at it, destroying the buildings, the trees, all life. I watched from across the water. I looked behind me and little girl Ava was watching, too, horrified. I pushed her into the water when she came closer and let her boil to death.

I woke up and I was in Ava's garden lying on my grave. *How did I get here?* I looked around me and saw Ava coming out of the house. She came toward me and held out her hand. "Stephanie, come inside. We'll get you a blanket."

I took her hand and followed her inside. "I don't know how I got here."

She shook her head. "I don't know either."

Once we were inside, she took me into the living room and sat me down on her couch with a blanket. I cuddled inside of it. "Why am I here?"

"You must have been sleep-walking." She was sitting on the armchair next to the lime-green couch.

"No, I mean I should have remained dead. Why did I come back?"

"Stephanie, you're not making sense."

"You know what I'm talking about! I see you in my dreams all the time. We always talk about everything. I still don't understand why you killed me, though."

Ava squirmed in her chair. "I didn't kill you, Stephanie. You must have had a strange dream and you're not quite awake. Why don't you go back to sleep and I'll call your mother in the morning to let her know you're here?"

"No! You can't go on pretending. I have to know why you abandoned me."

Ava was quiet for a moment. "Stephanie, I think I've changed my mind. I think I might call your mother now."

"Why?" I was screaming.

"Stephanie, keep quiet. Norma's sleeping."

"She is? Where is she?" I threw off my covers and rushed out of the room. Ava followed me as I climbed the stairs to where I assumed the bedrooms were. I found a closed door and opened it. Norma was in there.

"Norma. Norma. I want to tell you something."

She stirred and opened one eye. "Steph?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Steph, what time is it?"

"I really don't care."

"Steffy, why are you here in the middle of the night?"

"I came to visit my mother."

"What?"

Ava came in behind me. "Norma, I'm sorry. I found her sleeping in the garden."

"What?"

"Under the oak tree where she buried me."

"What?"

"Ava buried me there. I came back to visit."

Norma sat up. She rubbed her eyes. "I don't understand. Why would Aunt Ava bury you in our backyard?"

"She didn't want me."

Ava put her hand on my shoulder.

"Don't touch me! You never wanted me." I pushed her hand off of my shoulder.

"Stephanie, let's—"

"There's no need to call my mother. She's here. You know that. You know that."

Ava and Norma were standing together now, looking at me. I smiled. "You didn't love me, Mother. No one will. That's the secret, Norma. That's what I couldn't tell you. Ava abandoned me. She buried me and left me to suffocate."

"Stephanie, I didn't bury you!"

"When you gave birth to me, you buried me under the oak tree."

"I did not."

"And now you have garden parties on top of my grave."

"Steph, you are alive," Norma said. "You aren't dead."

"I was once. Aren't you listening? What Ava didn't realize when she buried me and promised me a new family was that I would come back angry and deadly. I killed Billy. I called the lightning down to me and burned him to death with it. I could hear the gurgling as the heat

licked up his oesophagus from inside his bowels. He didn't stand a chance against me."

Norma put her hand up. "Stop, now, Steph. You're upset. Billy's gone, but you didn't kill him. I promise you."

"If there was a storm, you'd know the truth."

"Steph."

"Norma, this woman left me for dead. No one loves me. She abandoned me. My father abandoned me. Billy abandoned me. You said love wasn't reserved for special people, Norma! Even Hermes is abandoning me."

"He came to your house, Steph. He wanted to see you. You were sleeping."

"I didn't want to see him. He doesn't understand. How can I let Billy hurt me like that? Ava hurt me when I was just a baby. So did my father. I couldn't let Billy do it too."

Ava sat down on the bed. "I didn't kill my baby, Stephanie. She died naturally. She was sick. She wasn't you. I named her Angel."

"I'm no angel. I'm back for revenge."

"I can show you her grave. She's behind the church."

"I know you're lying. You can give it up. I know you buried me in the backyard."

"I am not lying. Stephanie, I swear to you."

"I'm going to kill my brother, Norma. The next storm that comes, I'm taking him away from you."

Norma looked pale in the moonlight coming in through the window. I looked outside. I could see the baby, myself, sitting on top of the grave, hollow eyes watching us. "Look at me. I'm so sad. How could you leave me?"

Ava came up behind me. She looked out the window too. "What do you mean?"

"Right there. On top of my grave, waiting for you to save me."

Ava put her arm around me. "There's nothing in that grave but my old cat."

I pushed her away. "Can't you see me? I'm so little and muddy. You left me there."

"Stephanie, you have a mother. At home."

"She's not the one who abandoned me. You are."

Ava was crying. "Stephanie, I don't know what you want."

I turned to her, looking at her fiercely. "I want it to storm outside so I can kill you."

Ava stepped away from me. Norma was backing away too. They were heading for the stairs. "Where are you going?"

"We're going downstairs. We're going to go outside and look for the baby," Ava said.

"You are not."

"We are. We want to believe you."

"You want to kill me again and bury me." I ran past them and left their house. I was desperately scared. Again, Ava wanted to be rid of me.

I didn't know where I was running. I wanted to hide. When the telling lights of the police car were at my back, I stopped. I had to tell them that Ava wanted to murder me. They got out of their cars and I ran to them. I pleaded with them to protect me. They took me to their car and we headed away.

"You're going the wrong way. I don't live this way."

"We're taking you somewhere else, Steph."

"Are you taking me to see my father? I want to see him and let him see me. I want to kill him. Do you think it's going to storm?"

Eleven

This place is nothing like home. I have been living here for six months. I have been waiting to meet my father. I thought he was going to be here. When we pulled up to the building, I got out willingly and came inside, thinking that he lived here. They have yet to introduce him to me, and there have been countless stormy nights. I could have met him and murdered him many times.

There are a lot of strange people living here. I have recently come to realize that perhaps one of them is my father, but I don't remember him enough to pick him out. No one visits me. Mom isn't allowed to come and see me; they told me I have to understand who I am and that she is my mother before I can see her. I just want to see her; I don't care if I understand myself or if she is my mother or not. I miss her.

I never would have killed Marc. I told them I would not have hurt him. I didn't mean it. I killed Billy. I know I did, but he deserved it. I still believe that, no matter what they try to tell me. They might think I am lying, but I know that during the next storm, they will see the truth.

I do not plan on killing anyone here unless my father shows up. I am going to kill myself. I'm going to draw the lightning in and let myself be fried by it. Then I will meet the real Hades. I will let him torture me.

I wish Hermes would visit me. They say he's working on himself and then he'll be in to see me.

I know Ava won't visit me. She's forgotten me. She never cared about me. I miss her garden. I want to look at my grave and then kill myself, but they won't let me out of here. If I escaped, I would take the ferry to the island and hide until a storm came. Then I would draw all of the lightning in the sky into myself and Ava would find me lying on top of my grave, again.

The island appeared from the depths of Martina Bay. It is a great fire-breathing dragon. I saw what Ava saw; I saw it come to be. It came from the boiling water, from the underworld I crawled out of after Ava buried me. I believe now that the island was spit up from Hades to create a home for people who are different, people who control fire in the same way as the dragon can.

I know this is a mental hospital. I know I'm supposed to be insane, but there's been a mistake. I am not insane. I am quite aware of myself and of who I am. I am Ava's daughter, no one will ever love me, I am completely alone in this world. I don't want to be a part of it anymore.

It's starting to rain.

Vita Auctoris

I grew up in Watford, Ontario, Canada. I received my Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in English Language and Literature from The University of Western Ontario and my Master of Arts in English Literature and Creative Writing from The University of Windsor. Writing has always been a part of my life and it will always be.