



Illustration: SCOT INNES

STORM WARNING

By Betty Jane Hegerat

Jesse pulls Brian's jacket tight across her chest. Though the bay is as sleek as a satin sheet, the breeze crackles with the wicked promise of a storm. A murky ridge of cloud rolls high on the horizon, turning noon to midnight blue. She scans the landscape, sniffs the salty air for a trace of her husband.

This morning, in his parents' spare bedroom, Brian leaned on his elbow, the other hand playing Jesse's thick black hair across the pillow. "I'm taking the boat out. I don't suppose you'd come along?"

She snuggled into the puffy eiderdown, turning so that his hand cupped her face, the sharp ridge of her cheekbone nestled into his palm.

"You're hoping that in the night I've been reborn a sailor?"

He grinned. "Nah, just giving you one last chance to dip your toes in New Brunswick water."

"I'll live. I can catch the waves at West Edmonton Mall if I'm desperate."

His fingers followed the curve of her throat. She caught his hand. "Brian...do you mind that it'll be a whole year before you can come home again?"

"If I minded I would never have gone west, and I never would have met you." The other hand bent her elbow to work her arm free of the sleeve. "Mom always told everyone I was smarter than I looked."

But later, at the kitchen table, his mother couldn't hide the quiver of puzzlement in her eyes that after so many years still precedes her recognition of her daughter-in-law.

The women in Brian's family are fair and round with a placid good nature, a fecundity in keeping with his father's herd of Guernseys. Jesse has a storm cloud of black hair and eyes like lightning bolts. Long ago, a social worker described Jesse and her brother, Louis, as "wild little animals." Jesse has never been able to pull that sliver from the thin skin of her childhood memory.

After breakfast, Brian left for the bay, tossing away Jesse's "be careful" with a laughing "trust me!" Jesse leaned on the rail fence watching the cows graze. Her father-in-law raised a hand in greeting, but kept to the other end of the pasture. Brian warned her eight years ago, when he brought her to New Brunswick for the first time, that Charlie spends his words with the economy of

a Trappist monk. But in spite of, or maybe because of his reserve, he is the one with whom Jesse feels easiest.

Now, the smell of storm has drawn her to the bay, where her eyes track gulls pitching like sailboats on the black ceiling of cloud. A dog runs pell mell along the beach, yelping at the waves. They say that, before a tornado, animals go wild.

In the only tornado Jesse has known—the day she met Brian—she was too mesmerized by the bulging, jaundiced clouds to scan the fields for animals gone wild. She was driving cab on the south side of Edmonton, and found him at the side of the road braced against a mileage sign, his hair, his jacket, the legs of his jeans plastered to him. When she pulled onto the shoulder and opened the passenger door, it was almost ripped away by the wind.

They were silent, except for Brian's ragged breath, until a tight black funnel came spiralling out of the clouds.

"Jaysus! Is that what I think it is?" His voice was muffled in the dense heat of the car.

Brian's family loves to tell the story of how Jesse saved him, but it's the story of his defection that she's heard a million times. His mother and sister blame Priscilla, his childhood sweetheart, for his leaving. Even nine years later, with Priscilla trailing three babies in her wake, they say she scared him off, pulled too hard when what he needed was a little slack.

When Brian went west to look for work, he promised Priscilla he'd be back in six months. She called his bluff and married his cousin. On the day Priscilla, veiled in white, lifted her face to Ralph's broad, freckled smile, a tornado cut a swath through Edmonton and, but for Jesse, would have sucked Brian into its eye and blown him clear back home to Moncton.

To Jesse, all of this is ancient history. She dumped her own past when she turned 18 and was given an indifferent farewell from her last foster home. Brian's mother still presses her for memories of her family, her "real" family, she calls them.

"I don't remember." Jesse cannot control the flatness in her voice when she's forced to talk about her family.

"But surely you remember something, darlin'. You were eight years old when they took you away."

"I don't remember."

Jesse can't blame Marie for being curious. Her grandchildren, after all, will be heir to the mystery. This summer, though, the conversation stays deliberately away from babies, at least in Marie's kitchen.

On their first day back, when Jesse and Brian met Priscilla on the street with her new baby in a sling, Brianna flushed and sleepy in her stroller, and Ralphine skipping ahead, the first thing she said: "Well, hey, you two. Still no babies?"

Brian's hand reached out to stroke the baby's cheek, but he kept the other linked with Jesse's. "Aw, Priscilla, you and Ralph are making up for all the rest of us. Keeps you too busy to get in trouble, I bet." He gave Jesse's hand a squeeze. "Can you believe this girl? She's landlocked. She used to sneak away from helping her mom and sail with anyone who'd take her out."

"If you weren't family, Brian Maguire, I'd punch you for that. What a thing to say! Jesse will think I was some kind of tramp."

The scope of Brian's kinship astounds Jesse. Cousins, aunts, uncles orbit the farm in an infinite galaxy. She and her brothers and sisters were like a meteor shower, almost all of them burning out before they fell to earth in adulthood. But in the same way that Brian's family were taught to be blind to uneasy truth, Jesse learned long ago to avoid trouble by refusing to look it in the eye.

Every day while Brian and Jesse are home at the farm, someone drops in to visit and share a meal. Last night, when Jesse brought the cups from the living room, she caught Priscilla and Brian's sister, Louanne, gossiping at the kitchen sink, their backs to the door. Priscilla, as always, was wearing the azure green that matches her eyes; a soft sweater hugging her abundant breasts and a green satin ribbon securing the plait of blonde hair.

"I've heard that sometimes," she said in a low murmur, "the partners aren't compatible. It's like the woman's egg is hostile to the man's sperm. But when people like that split up and find new partners, they'll both be fertile."

Jesse stepped back into the hallway, eased the door closed with her foot, leaned against the wall, her cheek hot on the plaster. In the living room, the men were haranguing about bringing back capital punishment. A local girl had been murdered that spring. Brian tried to change the subject and his dad hid behind the paper. Jesse suspects that Brian has told Charlie about her brother. Brian's mom and sister know that Jesse is one of nine kids divided out to half a dozen foster homes, but they don't know that Louis, the brother just a year older than she, the one with whom she moved from home to home, is serving a life sentence for killing his best friend.

Caught there between infertility and punishment by death, Jesse chose, finally, the third door and tiptoed into the bedroom where Priscilla and Louanne had nested their babies among coats and pillows on the bed. She settled on a corner of the chenille spread, her finger reaching out all of its own to stroke a buttery little cheek with a dark fan of eyelash whispered across its creamy perfection.

He looks like Brian, this wee nephew. Jesse's seen the baby pictures, the school pictures, the graduation and wedding pictures. Marie's albums are a chronicle of family life.

Jesse's chronicle is a plastic folder of wallet-sized school pictures that starts when she was nine and finishes with one high school photo. Neither she nor Brian are camera buffs, but that, everyone smugly assures them, will change with kids.

Suddenly, Jesse's eyes snag on a triangle of white. She fumbles in the jacket pocket for Brian's binoculars, but behind the lenses, she loses the boat. Magnified, the towering wall of cloud sends a shudder through her body.

On their first summer home to Moncton, Jesse was game to share Brian's love of sailing. He patiently walked her through the "rigging," the "launching," the jargon as light on her tongue as salt spray. They'd been sailing clear for almost an hour before she gave thought to the ocean floor.

"How deep is the water here, do you think?"

"Well, if you're considering diving over and going down for a look you'll need to pack a lunch for the trip."

"Seriously, Brian, how deep?"

"Seriously, Jess, it's so deep it's irrelevant."

She'd peered into opaque green glass, then up into endless sky and was overcome with a whirling panic. Dizzy beyond reason, she jerked back, the boat tipped and she was dumped, flailing in the icy water, paralysed with the fear that she would either sink like stone through the unfathomable space below or whirl off into the infinite expanse above.

When they were finally back on land again, she sprawled in the wet sand with Brian's arms anchoring her in place. "Oh God, I've never been so scared in all my life. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I never wanted to sleep with a sailor. And I've been waiting for my turn to rescue you."

The day Jesse saved Brian, they'd hardly spoken as she steered the cab through wildly buffeting wind. When the windshield wipers surrendered to the deluge, she parked and let the car idle. "Guess we'd better wait it out." For the first time, she looked closely at the man beside her. His wet hair had dried into a deep wave across his forehead, his cheeks had lost their pallor and gleamed with the sun-burnished health of a young labourer, and he sat loose and easy. But his eyes were Jesse's undoing, intensely blue with circles of turquoise around the iris that sent a jolt of electricity straight through her like lightning to the base of a tree. She turned away to hide the flush in her cheeks and peered into the rain. "That was a pretty stupid place to be hitching, you know."

"Yeah? Well, picking up hitchhikers is pretty stupid too."

"Yeah? Well, would you rather I'd left you there? We can go back if you want."

"Nah, I'd rather go to your place."

She'd held his gaze for a full minute, found what she was looking for in the calm face, and when the rain slowed enough so that the houses around them were visible, she drove the few blocks to her basement apartment.

They went back the next day to the spot where Brian had been standing. There was no sign of the mileage post, and a mountain of rubble stood on the other side of the highway where there'd been a warehouse.

With her face pulled deep into the collar of the blue nylon windbreaker, Brian's musky smell ripples around her. She takes careful note of the white sail that seems sharper, closer than before, and lifts the glasses one more time. Her long scrutiny of the rise and fall of the boat leaves her queasy, and she welcomes the intrusion of Charlie's voice as he tramps across the sand toward her.

"Did you find him?"

She points, but for a moment a swirl of mist obliterates all but the shoreline. "He's out there. I think...I hope it's him."

Charlie is breathing hard and fumbles in his pocket for cigarettes. The corners of his mouth turn up at her stern expression. "Oh, now don't you be giving me grief about the weeds. I get enough from the rest of them." His forehead wrinkles. "Don't look so worried, Jesse, he's coming in. The boy's had lots of practice with storms."

"But he pushes his luck. I know he makes a joke of it, and I know someone else would have picked him up, but when I met him he was standing smack dab in the path of a tornado." The splash of white is visible again and she raises the glasses to her eyes and lowers them quickly. "It's him. I can see the red stripes on his shirt sleeves." She tries to blink away the unmistakable second image of an emerald sweater, and glances at Charlie who's watching the progress of the boat impassively, smoke curling around the brim of his sweat stained cap. "Do you ever sail, Charlie?"

He purses his lips, the cigarette clamped and bobbing in one corner. "Nah."

"You don't fish either, do you?"

"Nope."

"Or swim?"

"Christ, no."

"Why? You've lived a stone's throw from the bay all your life."

"I'm a farmer. Don't like the water. Like you, I guess."

"Me?" She begins to methodically snap the metal buttons on the jacket. "I'm scared to death of the ocean."

"That's because you're not used to it. Guess we're all scared of what we don't know." He grinds the cigarette butt into the coarse sand with the heel of his boot.

She takes a deep breath, tastes the salt in her lungs. "Did you know my brother killed someone?" He nods. "Did Brian tell anyone else?"

"Nope."

"Charlie?" She feels a stinging on the backs of her eyes where the tangy breeze cannot have touched. "Do you think I'll ever really fit into this family?"

He takes a quick step toward her and, in an awkward stiff-armed motion, circles her shoulder to pull her face against the coarse flannel of his shirt. Then, as abruptly, he releases her. "Aw, Jesse, you're ours, just like Brian and Louanne."

With the memory of the old man's chest still warm on her face, she squints at the horizon and then reaches for his hand. Between her own smooth palms, it feels as coarse and dry as the ridges of sand under her feet. "Louis's all I've got for family. I haven't seen the rest of them in almost 20 years. And what Brian has here just blows me away. Sometimes I feel like I'm from another planet."

"Well, I guess family is like ocean. If you're not used to it, it scares you." He holds out his hand for the binoculars. She hesitates, tracing a circle in the sand with her toe before she relinquishes the glasses. While he scans the sea,

**Now, the smell of storm has drawn her to the bay,
where her eyes track gulls pitching like sailboats
on the black ceiling of cloud.**

focuses and watches the bobbing sail, she rams her hands into the deep pockets, fingers the handful of change Brian always carries and bites her lip.

When Charlie lowers the binoculars, he loops the strap around his neck and lets them dangle against his suspenders. He hands her a ring of keys. "Here now, it's a long walk back and the rain's coming any minute. I drove down. You take my car, and I'll wait and come back with Brian in the truck."

"I can handle a bit of rain. I'll wait." She sets her jaw and fixes her eyes on the sea.

"Serves no purpose. You pulled him out of one storm, but he wouldn't want you doing it twice. Now you go on and tell Marie we'll be wet and wanting tea."

"Could you see him?"

"Yup." He looks away from her, his eyes intent on the boat. Even without the glasses she can see that the ocean has begun to roll, whitecaps foaming around the pitching sail. The wind plasters Charlie's wide khaki pants to his legs. "It's picking up. Are you sure he's coming in?"

"Yup."

"Well, then I guess I'll let you bring him safely home."

She catches her writhing hair and tucks it into the collar of the jacket. "Charlie," she says, "you don't have to tell him I was here." When he nods, she turns to leave.

"Jesse?" She stops a few feet away. "That brother of yours, the one who made the bad choice. Do you love him less now than you did before?"

He's like a rock, his solid presence standing between her and the sea. "No," she says, "I have to love him more."

On the walk back to the car, the wind flattens Brian's jacket to Jesse like a second skin.

Betty Jane Hegerat's short fiction has been published in the *NeWest Review*, *Storyteller* and the *Toronto Star*. She has recently completed a novel. A social worker by profession, she teaches creative writing at the Alexandra Writers' Centre in Calgary.