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Lightning Striking

Glenda Day

I USED TO WATCH THE LIGHTNING STORMS with my Uncle Jake. He and I would sit on the steps of the house, eat popcorn, and watch the parade of blacks and blues and silvers above us. My uncle has the uncanny ability to predict lightning. He would look up at the sky and announce, “Now, Young Skywalker. You will die!” The heavens would obligingly take the role of the Emperor in Lucas’s films and scream down in white talons. Then it would be my turn. I do a pretty good imitation of Mark Hamill.

“Father! Please!”

More lightning.

Jedi, the only cat on the planet who isn’t petrified of the daunting electricity, would curl up on my lap and purr in feline contentment.

“Lightning never strikes twice,” he told me.

Those were the good times.

Before the dark days.

Before my mother returned.

• • • •

“I can’t believe you let her get a tattoo!” Uncle Jake shouts at my mother. He never shouts. He’s the most even-tempered man I know. “Dammit, Kim! You’ve only been back three months and you let her get a tattoo?”

My mother shrugs, bouncing the black curls around her face and shoulders. “I think it’s very tasteful. Are you sure you’re my younger brother? You’re overreacting just like Dad used to.”

“What? You think I’m overreacting? Like the time you stole the grocery money from Mom to pay for that rotten little Chevy you call a car?” Uncle Jake whirls on her. “No, wait. Let me guess, Kim. Like the time you left Bonnie with Mom and Dad, saying you’d be back in an hour or two, and left her there for a day and a half. Without diapers. Without food.”

Mom waves an airy hand. “She was fine, Jake. They could take care of her.”

“She was two years old, Kim! You did the same thing when she was six. You’ve never picked her up from school on time. Not once!”

“JAKE’S ALWAYS

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BAR, BUT THERE

ISN’T MUCH ELSE

TO DO.”

“And she turned out just fine, didn’t she? Geez, Jake. You’d think the kid would be permanently warped because she had to wait a few minutes.” Mom reaches over to pat Uncle Jake’s shoulder. I can see her through the crack in the door. I’m not supposed to be eavesdropping, but I can’t help myself. I knew Jake would go ballistic when Mom told him. I begged her not to. The tattoo was on my hip and no one would see it. But Mom thought it was cool, and one of her joys in life is teasing her baby brother. She’s good at it. She speaks again. “You’ve done a good job with her, Jake. She’s a good kid.”

“She’s not a kid anymore, Kim. She’s seventeen. And she’s been raised in the bar most of her life. When you left last time, I had a hard enough time convincing Burt Coakley to let Bonnie stay with me. They wanted to put her in foster care.”

“What are you saying, Jake?” Mom’s tone sounds vaguely familiar, but the last time I heard it was five years ago. “Are you blaming me? Is that what you’re doing? You’re blaming me because that fat, stupid sheriff can’t keep his nose out of family business?”

Don’t say anything, Jake, I plead with him silently. Last time you said things like that, she left. You don’t know how to handle Mom. Just let her be.

He ignores me and opens his mouth. I walk into the bar from the back room before they can argue further.

“Hi. I got you the extra grenadine. And we’re running low on limes.”

Mom grins. It is my grin. I recognize it from countless appearances in my mirror. “Quite a hand at this, aren’t you, Bonnie Blue?”

"Mom, please don't call me that. Bonnie is fine."

Mom frowns. "What? I think it's cute. Why is everyone in such a bad mood? Your Uncle Jake thinks you're too young to decide to get a tattoo."

"It's not that so much, as that you didn't talk to me about it, Bonnie." Jake is only eight years older than me. When Mom took off the last time, he became my *de facto* guardian. Poor guy. He didn't want the job. Now, he has to be the surrogate father to a girl a few short years his junior. Sometimes he tries too hard.

"I knew you'd say no. So I didn't ask." I start to polish the wine glasses that hang above the bar with a clean white dishcloth. Mom hoots and takes another sip of her iced tea, extra lemon.

"That's my girl! Easier to ask forgiveness than permission, I always say." Then she catches sight of my uncle's face and gives him another wicked grin. "Jake, you are so stuffy! It's so much fun to play with your head. You should have 'Made by Mattel' stamped across here." She draws an arc over his brow with her finger.

I see the color rising in Jake's cheeks. It is a lovely burgundy. I have a sweater that shade. I know that if I don't defuse this bomb, he will say something and Mom will take off again. She doesn't take criticism well, and Uncle Jake can only handle so much. "C'mon Jake! I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. Don't you even want to see it? It's really cool," I say in my best too-cute-to-resist tone.

"No, Bonnie. I don't. Tomorrow, we're going right to the dermatologist and see if he can remove it."

"Like hell! You can't tell me what to do!"

"You so sure about that, sweetheart? Watch me!"

"Bite me!" I am just as angry as he is, and we stand toe to toe, glaring at each other like rival wolverines. I'm about five foot nothing, so it's hard to be intimidating. Uncle Jake tops six feet with three inches to spare. What I lack in height, I make up for in brass, though. At least, that's what Jake tells me when he's in a better mood.

Mom interrupts this witty repartee. "Children, children," she chides. "Do I have to send you both to your rooms?"

Jake turns away, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. It sounds like "tattoos" and "stupid kid."

"What was that?" Mom asks sweetly.

"Nothing."

"Good. I'm going up to my room to rest my voice. I've got a set to do tonight. Can I leave you two children to play nice, or do I have to send you both to bed without any supper?"

Jake snorts. I end up feeling the kind of stupid that you only feel when someone talks to you like you're six years old. "I'll play nice if he will." It comes out a lot more pettishly than I mean it.

He looks over at me and his eyes twinkle. "Promise you won't take my teddy bear?"

"If you promise not to piddle in the sandbox."

"I promise." He crosses his heart solemnly.

Mother smiles like a grown-up Little Miss Marker. She brushes her palms together. "My work here is done. See you this evening. Bonnie, stay and help your uncle fix my equipment, OK?"

Briefly, I resent this. She doesn't have to tell me that. Out loud, I only say, "OK, Mom."

"That's my girl. See you tonight."

She leaves, and I am left alone with Jake in the bar, my home away from home for the past five years. When I was younger, the regulars would pinch my cheeks and tell me I looked just like my mother had as a child. They don't do that anymore. Once, this guy I'd never seen before came in. He was looking down my blouse and patting my rear end. My uncle and his other bartender, Tommy, who looks like a tank with a head, were all over this guy. They threatened him, told him what body parts they would remove if he laid a hand on me again, and tossed him out on his keister.

Jake's always been nervous about me working in the bar, but there isn't much else to do. I finally nagged him into letting me clean and polish and stuff like that. I can serve drinks, because Sheriff Coakley tends to look the other way. As long as I stay on the Honor Roll.

I love the place. It's all wood inside with a little dance floor and booths that are rough slabs of tree. The bar has a brass rail and several stools with red cushions. I've tried every one of them out and discovered which ones spin the fastest.

Jake keeps the drinks out of my reach. I'm surprised, actually, that he thinks I would be tempted. I've seen too many drunks being poured into taxis or falling on their faces in pools of their own slobber. Not my idea of fun.

I start to run the rag over the bar stools, cleaning them up for tonight. Jake is mixing up a big pitcher of strawberry daiquiri. He isn't looking at me as he speaks.

"Bonnie, I'm sorry for shouting at you."

I shrug. "No big deal, Jake. I guess I should have told you. But it's a cool tattoo and no one is ever going to see it."

"Bonnie, I'm not worried about embarrassment. I'm worried about dirty needles, infections. Things like that. And you're going to

have this on your body for a long time. Why would you do something so risky?"

"Because no one is going to see it. Because I like it. Because it looks cool."

Jake adds a few more strawberries, scalping their mossy green heads. "If no one is going to see it, Bonnie, then why are you certain that it looks cool?"

"Lots of people have tattoos. Like Cher, or Dennis Rodman . . ."

"Ah. And these are people you want to emulate, I take it. Good thinking, Bonnie." He puts the pitcher back under the bar in the fridge while I try to come up with a suitably caustic comment. All I can manage is this:

"Mom took me to the place. She showed me hers. I liked it, and she said I could get one. I didn't think you would be so mad."

"Great. Kim takes you to a tattoo parlor." He doesn't seem to be talking to me. "Another sterling example for you to follow."

"What's that supposed to mean? Mom has done a lot of great stuff. She's traveled all over the world. She's met different people. She's done everything. Why do you always try to get down on her?"

"Bonnie, don't shout at me."

I ignore him. "Mom's right. She told me she left because there was nothing for her in this stupid little town. That and you and everyone else were just trying to keep her down. Wanting her to be barefoot and pregnant. That's not what she wants, and it's not what I want!"

Uncle Jake looks at me for a long time. He isn't angry, but his face is a little pale. "What exactly do you want, Bonnie?"

I take a deep breath. I hadn't wanted to tell him so soon, but I think I will never have another opportunity. "I want to go with Mom."

He nods. It's not at all what I expected. Where's the screaming? Where's the lecture? But all he says is, "Are you sure?"

"Mom asked me."

We're both quiet, and then Jake says, "When are you leaving?"

"As soon as Mom gets enough money together for us both. That's why she's singing in the bar. But she won't have enough for awhile." I say this last because Jake's shoulders are slumping. He looks like a tired old bear at twenty-five. "I'll be here for long enough to say goodbye."

MY MOTHER IS
FLOATING INTO
THE ROOM.
HEADS DON'T
JUST TURN, THEY
WHIPLASH WITH
AUDIBLE SNAPS."

“Right.”

I keep on talking, trying to convince him that I’m not going to do anything stupid. “Just don’t yell at her anymore. Or she’ll make me leave early. You know she doesn’t like being yelled at.” The next words shoot out before I can stop them. “That’s why she left before.”

He is looking at me strangely. “Is that why she left, Bonnie? Because she didn’t like us shouting at her?”

I don’t say anything. Neither one of us says anything until that night.

Once the bar opens, I take my tray and my pad and begin to write down orders. If any cops besides Sheriff Coakley come in, I hand my tray to Jake and pick up a mop. We never get raided. Jake checks ID’s and is imposing enough that teens looking for a cheap beer need to try the local liquor store.

“JAKE, SHE’S MY

DAUGHTER. I’LL

DO WHAT I

WANT WITH

HER.”

I have the Sheriff’s Dr. Pepper ready for him. You would think that a big guy like Sheriff Coakley would drink whiskey or beer or something. But I’ve never seen him drink anything but Dr. Pepper with lemon.

“Hey, Bonnie. Thanks. Your pretty mama going to sing tonight?”

“Yup. Oh, brought you some peanuts too.”

He nods approvingly. “Good girl. Any trouble around here?”

“In our place? You’re kidding.”

Sheriff Coakley chuckles. “Good point.”

I smile and duck my head. “Can I get you something else, Sheriff?”

“No thanks, Bonnie Blue.” He winks, and I head back to the bar.

Most of the town knows my middle name. How I was named after Scarlet O’Hara and Rhett Butler’s beloved child in *Gone With the Wind*. Mom has always loved Scarlet O’Hara. When I was younger, I heard people talking, whispering about my mother. They didn’t understand that my mother is a free spirit. She can’t be caged for long. She’s sent me postcards from around the world. My room is papered with scenes from Italy, Sweden, and Spain. She loves Paris. It’s one of the first places she promised to take me to. She told me that she’d sing for her supper along the Seine. She’s done it before, taking a day job waitressing or doing janitorial work. She doesn’t mind, as long as she can sing at night and earn enough to travel on.

Those gossiping old hags. They don’t know that it was talk like that that drove Mom out of my life. Why can’t people just mind their own business now that she’s back? Mom and Jake and I will be fine if

people would just leave us alone. I'll travel with Mom and come back and visit Jake, and help him with the bar when I get old enough.

"Hey, Bonnie. How 'bout a refill, sweetie?" Harry's demand snaps me back to the present. I go over to his table and I take an unobtrusive sniff. By the end of the night, Jake and I will filch his keys.

"Sure, Harry. Just give me a minute."

Jake puts the beer on my tray, and then he checks his watch.

"Your mom's a little late."

"Yeah. She's got a real flair for the dramatic."

I shrug, not quite knowing what else to say. He continues staring down at the bar and swiping a towel over its polished surface. "About today, I didn't mean to make you mad. I'm sorry. I just want to get the thing checked. Make sure it won't get infected." He has big brown cartoony hound-dog eyes, and I can't stay distant for long.

"Okay. We'll go tomorrow." I reach out to pat his cheek. "You're a very nice uncle."

"Yeah. Right."

Something in his tone sets off warning bells in my head, so I change the subject quickly. "You're just making nice so that I'll send you a French babe when Mom and I leave."

"Bonnie, about your . . . travel plans—" Before he can finish his thought, Mom strolls in.

"See? I told you she'd be here."

My mother is floating into the room. Heads don't just turn, they whiplash with audible snaps. She is wearing her blue dress, the one that is just a little too short and just a little too tight. I guess that it's part of my mother's charm that when people see her in that dress, she can give them one look with those Liz Taylor eyes, and they think she doesn't know the effect she's causing. I know better. She adores the effect she's causing.

She mounts the stage and gives a bold wink to some clown sitting up front. He leers at her from under a John Deere cap. What a loser.

The black curls around her head are sending showers of blue sparks when the lights strike them. I wonder if my hair will do that when I'm older.

She's so beautiful. And she begins to sing bluesy stuff. Some Sinatra, maybe a verse or two of a Billie Holiday, but I like the Ella Fitzgerald best. She does several Gershwin numbers. When she does "Fever," John Deere practically has a stroke. I want to pour his beer into his lap.

Uncle Jake hurrumphs once behind me. I turn around to see him looking at my mother. His face is half scowl, half admiration.

"You look like a thundercloud," I tell him.

"She really is something, isn't she?"

I agree as Mom does her last number. She used to sing it to me when I was a baby. I was ten before I knew that she wasn't the only one who sang "Stormy Weather."

After the last notes hang in the air like silver coins, the bar is quiet. Then people begin to applaud. She laughs, bows, and trips lightly from the stage. They are still applauding when she gets to the bar. Jake silently pushes the iced tea he has ready to her.

"Thanks. I needed that." She downs it thirstily, and this close I can see the little beads of sweat that bubble under her makeup and blot her mascara. "So, Baby Girl, what did you think?"

"I thought you were fantastic. As always." She gives me a hug.

"What about you, Jake?"

Sheriff Coakley has come over to get another Dr. Pepper. He tips his hat to my mother and waits for Jake to answer.

"You were shining like a Roman candle, Kim."

I smile at this. Finally, Jake knows exactly what to say to Mom. She is preening under his compliment.

"Hello, Burt," Mom says to the sheriff.

His smile is camouflaged by his thick yellow mustache. "Hello, Kim. It was a real treat watching you sing tonight."

"Thanks."

"At this rate," I say, "we can have enough money to get to Paris in a couple of months."

The sheriff pats my shoulder. "No foolin', Bonnie Blue? You going to Paris?"

It's not exactly a secret, so I can tell him. "Yup. Mom is taking me."

All of a sudden, things get very quiet. There is something going on above my head, little darts of looks being fired among the grown-ups. Jake is looking at Mom. Mom is looking at Jake. Sheriff Coakley is looking at both of them. I feel like everyone is speaking, and I'm deaf. Finally, I have to ask, "What?"

"So you're taking Bonnie with you this time, Kim?" Sheriff Coakley ignores me.

"Yes. What's wrong with that? Bonnie can take care of herself."

"I thought the whole point of the trip was for you to take care of her," Jake says.

"It's not like the girl needs a babysitter. When I was her age, I would have killed to travel like this." Mom swigs more iced tea, watching Uncle Jake with wary eyes.

"Just because you ran away from home at fifteen doesn't mean Bonnie will."

"Jake, she's my daughter. I'll do what I want with her."

"Kim, she's not a doll," Sheriff Coakley says quietly. "You don't do what you want; you do what she needs."

Mom slams the glass back on the bar. Iced tea sloshes out and over. "What if she *needs* to get away from narrow-minded, right-thinking, small-town pigs like you? What if she *needs* to be with her mother instead of in some two-bit saloon? What if she *needs* to see the world, not end up married to some clod who uses her for babies until she's worn out? What if she needs that, huh, Sheriff? What then, Jake?"

The men are silent, looking at her with sad eyes. She's furious. I have to calm her down.

"Mom, don't yell at them. They're just worried about me, that's all."

"Oh, I suppose I'm not? I'm just your mother!"

She is attacking now, her eyes blazing purple.

I stammer, "That's not what I meant. I didn't want you to get upset, that's all."

"I don't need your help, Bonnie! And I sure as hell don't need your protection."

"I wasn't trying to protect you, Mom. Why are you screaming at me?"

"I am *not* screaming!"

"My mistake! Next time my eardrums bleed, I'll chalk it up to a sonic boom!"

"Don't get smart with me, young lady! You watch your mouth!"

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"The hell I can't! I have more right to tell you than either one of these creeps!" She jerks her thumb at the sheriff and Uncle Jake.

"What are you talking about? Uncle Jake has practically raised me from a pup!"

Uncle Jake tries to step between the two of us. "Take it easy, Kim."

"You take it easy!" Mom shatters the glass against the floor. Iced tea and glass skitter across the wood. Jake swears. A couple of people in the bar look our way. Then they look away again, double-quick.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Now, see what you made me do, Bonnie? He's probably got glass in his legs." Mom bends over to see.

Jake pushes her hands away. "Don't touch me. Bonnie, you look."

Mom leans against the bar and folds her arms over her chest.

"Oh. I see how things are now. My own brother and my own daughter against me."

"Kim," Sheriff Coakley says, "it's not like that."

"Keep out of this!"

“Why should he? He’s been around for the past five years. He took care of the date who was all hands at the prom. And Jake’s held my hand for every flu shot.” I hate needles. “What about you, Mom? When I was getting the tattoo, you were scamming on the guy with the ponytail.” I straighten up to look my mom in the eye.

That’s when she slaps me. It doesn’t hurt. Not really. It just stings. I hold my cheek and stare at her. She is breathing heavily.

“If you are so sure that I’ll neglect you, I’ll just leave you behind. Nice and safe from my evil influence.”

“But Mom—!”

“Don’t bother, Bonnie. I’ll just be on my way.” She’s not

shouting anymore as she tosses a dollar on the bar and storms out. She pauses at the door to sneer back at me.

“HE STARES AT MY HIP FOR A LONG TIME, THEN TIMIDLY TOUCHES THE SILVER-BLUE LIGHTNING BOLT THAT SEARS MY SKIN.”

“After all, these big, strong men are here to protect you from your wicked mother. Take heart, Snow White. And stay in the forest with the rest of the dwarves.” She grins once, very tightly, as if the expression is strained across her face. “Later.” Then she’s gone. Her cheshire-cat grin, so much like mine, is left behind. Just like me. Again.

I run after her, and Uncle Jake tries to hold me back but I’m sobbing and I fight my way free. Just in time to hear her peel out of the parking lot in her little Chevy. I call to her over and over, screaming, “Mom! Mom!” I am crying so hard that I start to hiccough and it hurts my chest.

She doesn’t come back. Instead, I feel something strong and solid against me. I turn, and I’m getting the front of Jake’s shirt wet. He puts his arms around me and says things I can’t understand. I’m tired, and I shut my eyes.

• • • •

SKIN.”

Jedi thinks that I’m playing a game, and he wants to play too. As I rip down the postcards and toss them on the floor, he pounces on them and growls, ripping the paper to shreds. He rolls on his back and bats at the pictures that drift down, rapidly turning them into confetti.

Stockholm is destroyed. So is Rome. I toss him Venice and Madrid. He purrs and gnaws on the edges. I’m his best friend for today. I scratch his belly and he wriggles and captures my hand in his paws. He gives me little cat-kisses on my fingers. Weird. He thinks he’s a dog.

There’s a knock on the door.

"Bonnie, you in there?"

"Nobody here but America's Most Unwanted." Did I just say that? Ugh. How whiney can one person sound?

Jake comes in and sees the tiny ticker-tape parade that Jedi has thrown me. Jedi flops back over to say hello in his rusty meow.

"Your cat's a quart low."

I don't answer. Instead, I climb up on my bed to start ripping down the poster I couldn't reach.

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No." So long, Dublin. Adios, Mexico City.

He leans against the doorframe. "Bonnie, I know you're angry right now."

Fine. He wants angry? I'll give him angry. "I hate her. I hope she falls off the Carnival Cruise line and gets eaten by penguins."

He smiles a little. "They don't have penguins on Carnival. They have Kathie Lee Gifford."

"Even better. I hope she gets perky-d to death." Sayonara, Tokyo. See ya, New York.

"Bonnie, this won't help."

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Yes I do. She's done it before."

I stop and look down at him. Feels strange to look down at my uncle. "She did this before? She picked a fight and then just blew?"

He sticks his hands in his jeans pockets. "I was hoping she wouldn't do that to you. I really hoped Kim had changed."

"She never cared about me at all, did she?"

Jake considers this. "In her own way, I think she did. She knew you would be better off with me. She tried to show some kind of affection."

"Affection? Jake, she left skid marks. What am I supposed to do, frame them? I suppose that slap was just her way of saying 'Ciao, baby.'"

"No, Bonnie." He sits down on the bed and pats the side. "Come here."

I bounce down.

"She got you the tattoo, Bonnie. In her own way, I think she may have wanted to leave you with something to remember her by. Something that you would associate with her, like a rose, or a bird . . ."

I laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"You haven't seen it yet. My tattoo. It's something like her, all right." I pull down the waistband of my jeans.

He stares at my hip for a long time, then timidly touches the silver-blue lightning bolt that sears my skin. “Does it hurt? We can have it removed if you want.”

“No. It doesn’t hurt. It’s just a little tender is all. No, I want to keep it.” We both are looking at the painting beneath my skin. Then I stand up to continue with my plot to destroy the world.

There’s only one left. It was the pride of my collection, the big full-color print of spring in Paris. I have to stand on tiptoe to reach the top of it.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Jake asks me.

I look at the Seine, the lights gleaming gold in the green.

“You’ll get there someday, Bonnie. And on your own power.”

I think about what he says, rehearsing in my mind all the things I want to tell my mom the next time I see her. When I’m an adult, and rich, and I’ve been to Paris.

“Hey,” my uncle says.

“What?” I turn and I get a face full of confetti. I shake my head.

“Gross! Jake, you got cat-slobber all over me!”

“Oh, yeah?” He tackles me and rolls me around in the paper storm. We’re tossing shredded hail at each other, and Jedi curls up between us to sleep in the eye of the tornado.