

Sacred Thunder

by

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—twenty-four years old—

Mark bent over the stove melting cheese on tortillas. Kate sat at a wooden table next to a fire and mashed avocados to which she added lime juice, cilantro, and salt.

"It's ready." She brought the guacamole over to him, then reached up and grabbed a bag of tortilla chips from the top of the refrigerator.

"Thanks," he said, grabbing a handful of chips and dropping them on the counter. He picked up one, dipped it in the guacamole, and popped it in his mouth. He was a big man: tall—six feet two inches, heavy—weighing close to one hundred and ninety pounds, and very strong. There was nothing light or airy about him. He was as stable, dense, and immovable as a mound of earth.

Kate jumped up on the counter. She stuck her pinky into the guacamole. "I'd really like to live in Santa Fe, look for a good job, get into climbing, paint, but I'd need a place to stay until I got my feet on the ground."

"You could stay here."

"Are you sure?"

"For a while, at least."

Mark piled the quesadillas onto two plates.

Kate sat down across the table from him.

It was snowing outside. Inside, firelight flickered on the white-washed walls, the wooden beams, the brick floor. The snow and fire made the kitchen feel cozy — Kate felt as if she were safe in a cocoon. The house was adobe. Its colors were soft, the lines contoured. Dried herbs and red chili peppers hung from the ceiling. Through the kitchen windows, she watched the falling snow cloak pine trees. Mark had built this house by hand—adobe brick by adobe brick. The house stood alone surrounded by National Forest. It was two stories high with a slanting metal roof. The dining room and living room still had dirt floors. Upstairs were three bedrooms. The master bedroom faced south, its southern wall all glass, overlooking the mountains. A stream ran close by, bordered by aspen trees and cottonwoods.

"What kind of work do you think you want to do?" he asked her.

"I'm looking for a job in graphic design, you know, use some of my artistic talent."

"That'll be hard to find. You can imagine how many starving artists there are here."

"I'd like to try."

She lit a cigarette and moved next to the fireplace, leaning her back against the wall, and blew the smoke up the chimney. She felt it then, the way he was looking at her — he wanted her. She imagined the firelight flickering on her face.

"Would you like a brandy?"

"I'd love one."

He came back with two mugs filled a quarter full.

"So tell me about yourself. How long have you been in Santa Fe?" Kate asked.

"It's been ten years," he began. "Before I moved here, I lived in a commune in Colorado. I'd declared myself a conscientious objector during the Vietnam war. Eight of us lived in a shack up in the mountains, raising vegetables, cutting firewood; in autumn I hunted deer. But like most of those experiments, it fell apart after five years. We squabbled; people grew discontented—I was one of the last to leave—and I came down to Santa Fe. It was a lot smaller then and less well known. I lived in a teepee for several years, then in a little place in town. Then I met the doctor who owns this land. There was a one room adobe shack here—the room that's the garage now. He told me I could build a house here. So I began building. I was living with a woman. I was madly in love. We built the place together. She suddenly moved out. My life fell apart."

Kate realized he was warning her off. Or maybe he was asking her to try to be the one to make him love again. She looked at him. She could probably do that—break his obsession with this old girlfriend, open him to love, but she was positive she could never fall in love with him. There was a heaviness about him that bothered her. Still, for awhile it might be fun, and there was the house—she needed a place to stay.

"I just recently broke up with someone," she said, "two months ago. It had been an off and on relationship since I was nineteen. He treated me badly, but I was obsessed with him"

"What happened?"

"I followed him to Ecuador after we both finished college. He had a job there. And then I fell in love with a mountaineering guide. It brought me to my senses."

The room was silent except for the sound of the fire popping. Dark clung to the windows like a spider. She took another sip of brandy and leaned her head back against the adobe wall, closing her eyes. She felt tired. I should make love to him, she thought; the timing is right; he knows where I stand. Behind closed eyes, she saw the jungle. A figure, standing upright, plied a canoe beneath hanging vines. It was silhouetted by the sun. She heard birds call and smelled wet earth and leaves. The Dark Man again. Then she saw him climbing a volcano, leading the way. He laid her sleeping bag out next to his in the hut. He loved her. You'd better go away, she warned. He was the only man she'd ever love.

It had been a long drive. She felt

Mark's hand on her shoulder. "Are

you tired? I'll show you the guest room."

She opened her eyes, stood up, and followed Mark from the warm kitchen. Forget about that man, she told herself, he's gone. He's back in Australia or in Nepal or in South America. He doesn't remember you. He's not like you—he knows how to take care of himself. She felt afraid

Mark showed her the guest room.

"Come here," she said.

He walked toward her. She pulled him to her and kissed him. "Make love to me. Make love to me," she whispered, wanting to forget.

Getting up afterwards she leaned her head against the window and listened to snowflakes hitting it.

"Come back to bed," he said.

This is my life, she thought. This is my life. It made her sick.

The next morning she walked down by the stream. The snow was soft. Wind whistled through tree branches. The stream was frozen in patches, but open in others and here water bubbled and rushed. She squatted staring at black water, thinking of nothing at all. The sun was hot against her face and she felt her skin tanning. What do you want? she asked herself. Really want deep within? Not money, material things, an easy life, not that sort of thing; what do you really want? At first, no answer came—she heard merely the wind and water. Then she heard a voice rising in the mountains, a lone voice—a coyote howling. The sound raced down the mountainside reverberating. Her hands clenched shut and she swallowed hard. It seemed like a spirit voice let loose just for her, an answer from nature, and she knew then that what she really wanted more than anything was to no longer be afraid.

Caged behind metal wire, the Siberian husky was black and white with blue eyes. A female, eighteen months old. She cowered in the back of the cage, unwilling to approach Kate's proffered hand, ice blue eyes staring.

"They said their landlord wouldn't let them keep her. I wouldn't take her if I was you," the woman at the Humane Society warned, "I think she might bite."

"She won't bite," Kate said, disgusted. "Aren't you supposed to be trying to place these dogs?"

"She seems skittish to me," the woman answered.

"Wouldn't you be skittish if you'd been dumped somewhere and kept locked up?"

The woman didn't reply. Kate paid a twenty five dollar fee and received a certificate to get the dog spayed at a vet. "Come on, sweetheart, get in the car." The dog slunk into the back seat. Skinny and timid, she had obviously been ill-treated. "Don't you worry," she said to the dog, "we'll have you healthy and friendly in no time. I'm not going to hurt you." She reached her hand into the back seat and tried to touch her; the dog stiffened and pulled away. Kate kept her voice soothing and low. "Now, Blue Eyes, shhh, Pretty One, I'll take care of you. It's going to be all right now." The dog stared at her with distrust. "It's just going to take a little time," she told her. "I've a way with animals. You're going to like me."

"Unlike everything else in Santa Fe it's affordable," Margaux explained over the telephone. "It's so tacky that I rather like it; I found an old lava lamp, which is perfect—people will think we have truly horrendous taste." She laughed. "It came partially furnished, that is, it has beds in the bedrooms and a dining room table. Aside from that it's empty, and I haven't any furniture, do you?"

"No, none at all."

"Well, we can pull the dining room chairs up and sit around the fireplace in the evening. I rather like an empty house—nothing to dust."

Kate liked the place right away. Margaux's house was a hideous pink ranch house located in a development, but it had a large backyard and was only two blocks from the Pecos foothills. Furthermore, Margaux liked dogs — she had a coon hound herself.

His name is Gabriel." Margaux called over her big dog. "This is Gabriel," she said. "My big lug." Gabriel sniffed noses with Sasha. "Isn't she pretty," Margaux asked him. "She's your girlfriend with pretty blue eyes."

That night the living room was dark but for a shallow, flickering circle of firelight. Kate and Margaux had become friends in a matter of hours. It was as if they had always known each other. "Pass the Jack Daniels," Margaux said. Kate handed her the half full bottle. Margaux dropped two ice cubes in her glass, then poured the amber liquid on top. "We're getting trashed," she informed Kate, eyeing the bottle.

"Fine," Kate answered. The whiskey glowed inside her, orange-red, warm as fire. They rested their feet on the raised fireplace. Kate reached for the Marlboros next to her feet. "Want one?" she asked, shaking them halfway from the packet. She held a match out to Margaux.

"Thanks."

"Mark's not that bright. He'll never understand," Kate said. "Let's face it, he's a nice guy, but that's where it stops. I can't get through to him. And he's still obsessed with his old girlfriend. He can't break the hold she has over him. When he asked me to leave — "You've been here long enough," he said. "You have a job now." — I could have killed him. We were happy enough together in a complacent, boring way. I wanted a respite from the cold, cruel world, but he booted me."

"They're all afraid of women," Margaux mused.

"I guess. What do I care? I wasn't in love with him. It's just that I know I'll never be able to have the only man I love, so it would be nice if one man would just behave—then I'd marry him. He could support me, and I could paint. If I'd been born with money, I wouldn't have this damn problem. I'd have married the man I loved—my mountain guide—and, mind you, he probably would have married me if I'd been rich. Or else I'd just stay single. But no money and wanting to be an artist—what a lousy combination! Shit, hand me the Jack Daniels."

"Here you go."

Kate filled her glass half full. "Ice cubes, please."

Margaux dropped three ice cubes in the glass.

She took a sip; the drink tasted smooth as water. "I'm at the stage where I can't even taste it. It's going to be hell getting up and going to work in the morning."

"Take a bunch of B vitamins and 4 aspirin tonight. I swear it helps."

"You never have any trouble getting up?"

"No, I'm so neurotic I can't ever get to sleep," Margaux answered.

"I could sleep forever and ever and ever and never wake up."

Kate heard Sasha scratching at the front door. "Got to let my dog in," she said, rising unsteadily to her feet and weaving across the unfurnished living room to the front door. "Come in, Pup." She bent over and hugged the dog. Sasha followed her back to her chair and settled beneath her raised legs. "You're going to boil," Kate warned her, taking a sip of her drink. Within minutes, the dog had moved several feet from the hot fire. She rested her head on her paws, blue arctic ice eyes—open, staring. Sasha's presence always soothed Kate. When the dog was around, she felt as though everything was going to be all right. Kate laid her cheek against the dog's soft fur. Sasha shut her eyes and fell asleep, breathing quietly.

"Taking a nap?" Margaux asked.

"Saying hi to my dog." Kate wrapped her arms tighter around Sasha's neck. She felt tears squeeze from behind her eyes. The booze is leaking. It didn't matter. Sasha was there and Margaux and the fire. She would deal with her life in the morning.

After Margaux had the abortion, she started talking about killing herself. She said her mouth tasted of dried bones, that it tasted like chalk. She claimed she could smell it too — a smell like cracked earth in need of rain. And in her mind she was continually snapping bones, especially wishbones, then being flooded by childhood memories. She'd stopped eating meat and poultry and even had difficulty with fish. She'd lost twenty pounds.

"Couldn't you try to eat something," Kate coaxed. "I've made noodles with pesto sauce. No meat. No fish. No bones."

Margaux ate two bites, then put her fork down. "That's all I can eat, but I'm fine, really. You can never be too rich or too thin." She poured herself a tall bourbon and water, smiled, "I can still get whiskey down."

"Great," said Kate. "Let's go for a walk with the dogs." Gabriel and Sasha followed them through the development into the hills. It was warm. Wildflowers were springing up. The dogs raced off chasing jack rabbits. They walked for half an hour.

Finally Kate said, "Margaux, you're going to starve to death."

"I want to die," she answered. "Do you think the sort of life I'm living is worth living for?"

"As much as anyone else's is. You're bright. You've got a good job, even if you do hate it."

"I'm alone. I've always been alone. If I can maintain my sense of humor, life might just be bearable. We're so fucked up," she announced, bursting into laughter.

Kate giggled.

"Think how 'successful' everyone else is. Here I am running around like a crazy secretary and you're pasting cut-outs onto paper—both of us with college educations."

"To be successful," Kate reminded her, "you have to actually believe that making a lot of money is all there is to happiness, which is probably the truth. But if

you spend all your time making it, you never get to enjoy it. I think I could only be happy if I were born rich."

Kate whistled for the dogs. They came scrambling down a hill. The sun was going down. They turned and walked back home.

That night Margaux dreamt again of bones: She breaks a bone in half. It snaps. She smells desert and is thirsty. She remembers being born: the hunt, the cave, fire. She draws upon bark with a blackened stick. Mirrors. The taste of dried bone in her mouth. She sits in a circle of rock, holding a rattle made of bone. She is alone. The man is gone. She misses his warm body and the food he provides. She is frightened of the night.

The next morning she tried to eat a piece of toast. Her throat closed. She coughed, choking, went to the cabinet next to the stove and took out a bottle of vodka.

"What are you doing, you can't drink that shit in the morning." Kate grabbed the bottle from her. "This has got to stop."

"Give it to me." She grabbed the bottle back.

"Be my guest." I'm going to die before she does, Kate thought.

It was a lovely spring day. The wind was crisp. Sasha loped up the mountain path. She had filled out after being well-cared for and was Kate's best friend now, always at her side, though she was still fearful of men. (Wise dog, Kate thought.) The backpack was heavy and Kate was out of shape. She'd been smoking and drinking and hadn't been getting enough exercise—no wonder she'd been depressed! Mark was soon out ahead of her tearing up the mountain with his long strides. She hated him suddenly for his maleness, for his strength. No matter if she were smarter or more clever, his brute force made him inherently dominant. How she wished she'd been born a man! To be a man and to have no fear must be wonderful. She turned her mind inward, ignoring Mark's looming figure. The ground was springy beneath her step. Sasha ran back and trailed at her heels, panting. "How many men have you known to die for their country?" she asked the dog. "Mmm hmm, and how many men have you known to die for a woman?" The sun went in. Grey clouds swept across the sky. The wind picked up. Pine trees whistled and sighed, bending low to the ground like African dancers in mourning. A curtain of rain reached across the sky to the north, approaching rapidly, a solid wall of water. Sasha whined. Thunder rolled in the distance. Ahead Mark stopped to wait for them.

"Do you want to set up camp here or go on in the rain?" he asked.

"Go on. I want to get up higher."

Fat drops splattered on the ground, giving way to fine needles of rain. They put on their rain jackets and pants. Sasha shook unhappily. Her fur was impermeable to snow and cold, but not to rain. The air was electric and smelled of ions. They walked until they reached an open meadow, then stayed there in the woods at its edge.

Sasha crawled into a protective thicket. The lightning was red and jagged. Kate watched—she watched rain smear the sky with red lightning-blood. Margaux was slashing her wrists. Kate prayed to the thunder as it wrapped itself like cotton dressing around lightning. Thunder drummed in answer. Blood coagulated.

Almost laughing now, the jagged lightning headed southward, flashing

jack o'lantern smiles. It stopped raining. A curtain of water hung over the far mountains. Sasha crawled out of the thicket. Birds began to sing. They walked into the meadow and set up camp.

On Sunday, Kate arrived home early, having risen before dawn to hike out of the mountains. Margaux lay in bed with bandages around her wrists, watching television and eating a hamburger.

"What happened?" Kate asked.

"I did it again — tried to kill myself. Here have a bite—I really bungled it. It was just the only way I could quit work—I mean I had to call an ambulance myself. You can imagine how embarrassing that was. Sorry, about the mess, there's blood all over the quilt."

"You quit work?"

"It really pissed them off."

"Okay, hand over a french fry." Margaux passed her two. "You're sure you're going to be all right? You going to go see a shrink? It might be wise."

"Yes, I'm going to go once a week, like a good girl. They never help though: 'And what do you think, Margaux?' As if what I thought made any fucking difference."

"You know I had a feeling—during the storm—never mind."

"I shouldn't expect it comes as a big surprise."

"Actually, yes—I didn't imagine you'd lose your sense of humor."

It was strange how well she looked, propped up in bed with the pillows plumped out behind her. Her face had lost its sallow color. The bandages about her wrists restricted the motion of her hands which fluttered now like butterflies. She raised her hands, palms facing upward. "Just remember one thing," she said, "never, never look back."

Kate remembered, but it didn't help—she was still afraid.

— The End —