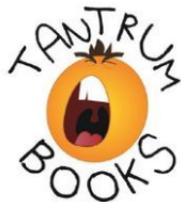


JOSHUA
AND THE
LIGHTNING
ROAD

Donna Galanti



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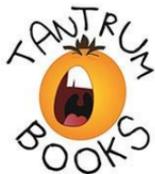
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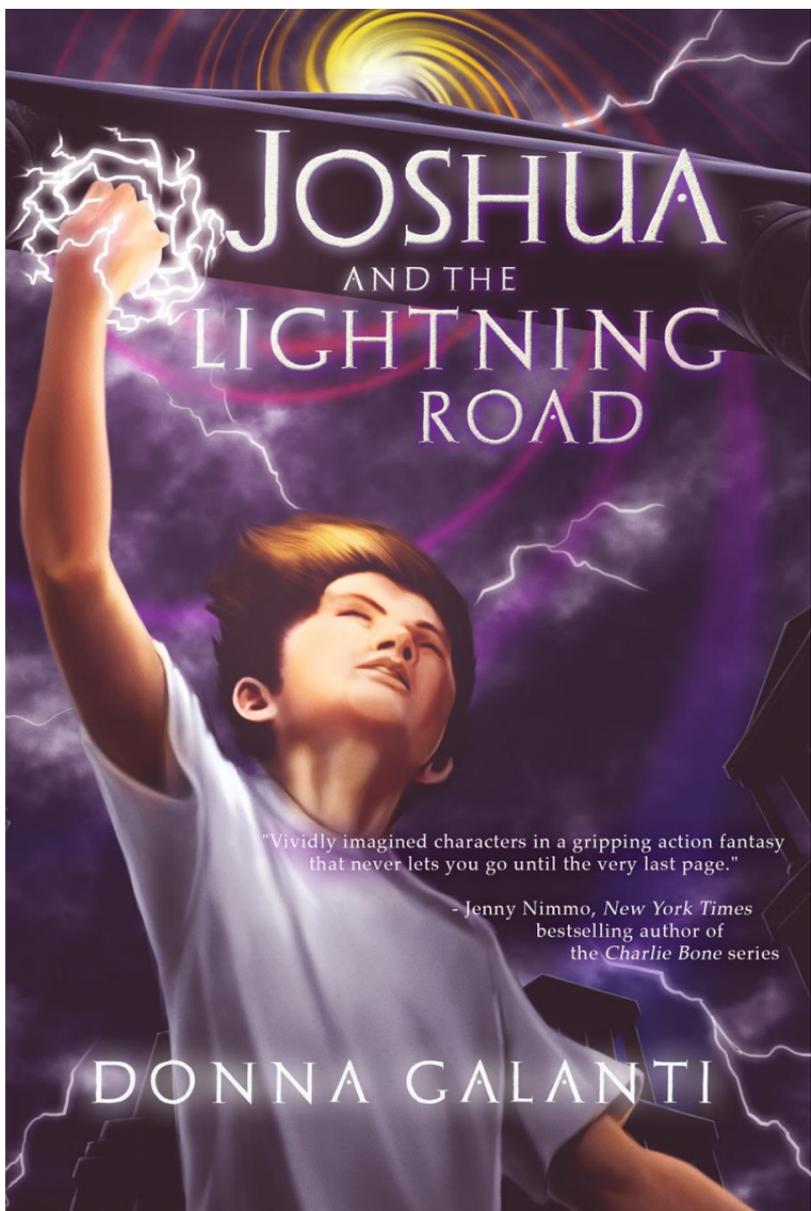
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JOSHUA AND THE LIGHTNING ROAD

"Vividly imagined characters in a gripping action fantasy that never lets you go until the very last page."

- Jenny Nimmo, *New York Times*
bestselling author of
the *Charlie Bone* series

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*...and when the Olympian heirs at long last act with
goodness in their hearts, an Oracle will arise to
restore their full power and shut down the Lightning
Road forevermore...*

Chapter One

I never knew lightning could zap you without burning you to a crisp. If it hadn't been storming something wicked that August day I never would have found out.

I looked for Finn out the window of my new room. We were supposed to work on our fort this morning, but the backyard was a muddy wasteland. The creek raced along like a roaring monster. We could go outside anyway, but that would never happen if my grandfather had a say. Bo Chez made me stay inside when it stormed like this. But even if we had to play indoors, Finn would save me from this boring day.

Thunder crashed overhead and lightning scorched the sky. My heartbeat ping-ponged in my ears, and my chest hurt. Dizziness overpowered me. I closed my eyes to make it go away. It always did.

When I opened my eyes, Finn was stomping in mud puddles as he made his way down the creek

Donna Galanti

path. He looked like a giant bug with his backpack on underneath his black poncho. He was brave enough to wear a poncho. Not me. I worried about stuff like that. Like my gigantic clown feet. My stomach that poked out. The way my hair stuck up in back. Why Bo Chez had a magical crystal ball.

But Finn wasn't a worrier. He always made me feel better about stuff, especially when I freaked out over lightning like a baby. He didn't make fun of me. He just told me to think of it as nature's big movie, like my favorite tornado tracker show on the National Geographic channel. If I could choose a brother, he'd be it. We were like my favorite sandwich when we hung out: ham and cheese.

I ran out of my room, tripping over boxes still packed after two months. Why bother unpacking? It was just another new town and new school with new friends to be made. Maybe if I didn't unpack, we'd stay here forever. That was my other wish: to stop moving around.

I soon found out that was the wrong wish to make.

I raced downstairs just as Bo Chez yelled up "lunch!" and banged right into Finn sliding into the dining room. We laughed and sat down to eat. Traces of yummy warm toast filled the air, and my stomach

Joshua and the Lightning Road

rumbled as I dug into a Bo Chez lunch special: ham and cheese with a layer of sliced apples between two thick pieces of bread that oozed with mustard. It squished in my hands. The best crunchy sweetness ever, and I mumbled thanks to Bo Chez as he hovered over us.

“Tell us a story, Mr. Cooper?” Finn said through a mouthful.

“Yeah, a really good one, Bo Chez.” I nodded.

“You’re so lucky. He tells the best stories,” Finn whispered to me. “And you get to live with him. My dad’s just an accountant.”

Bo Chez pulled his rocking chair closer to us and sank into it. The chair seemed to disappear as he took it over, which fit my name for him: Bo Chez. The Big Cheese. He even smelled a little like cheddar cheese mixed with peanut butter.

“What do you want to hear today, Finn?” Bo Chez tapped his thick fingers on the chair.

“Tell us about the Lost Storm Master,” Finn said. Bo Chez nodded and spread out his hands, battling the air. Lightning splashed across his face and his gray hair stood up like tiny swords glittering under the chandelier light.

“The Lost Storm Master was a big barrel of a man with wild hair. He could create the fiercest of all lightning, tornadoes, and hail to defeat any creature or man.” The room grew darker. Despite having heard this tale a dozen times, I shivered. “The Lost Storm Master was trained as part of an elite group of soldiers handpicked by the almighty Zeus, king of the Greek

Donna Galanti

gods. These soldiers carried ancient magic in their blood.”

Bo Chez paused for effect. The thunder outside sounded like it would split the roof open. Finn leaned in and the screen door banged with the wind as Bo Chez continued.

“When Zeus discovered the Storm Master’s fondness for a young girl, Asteria, he banished him at once, for his soldiers were not allowed to love. Zeus didn’t miss this Storm Master until the day a giant killer eagle descended upon the gods, terrorizing its citizens. It attacked with such speed and fury that no one could defeat it—not Zeus, not the other gods, and not even the entire army of Storm Masters. Zeus sent messengers to all corners of their world to find the Lost Storm Master and bring him back to save them. And he did.”

As Bo Chez went on with the story, his special crystal glinted at me from the shelf above the fireplace. It was locked in a wood and glass case and the size of a giant jawbreaker, but a mix of clear and cloudy like a glass marble. Bo Chez had told me never to take it out. Light quivered across the crystal ball now, and it seemed to spin as if it contained a storm of its own.

Bo Chez got to the part when the evil eagle attacked again. “The Lost Storm Master flung his lightning orb so fast that the winged beast caught on fire mid-air. *Whoosh!* The murderous, flying devil perished in a fiery blast. Then the Lost Storm Master dragged the beast back to Zeus and cast it on a bonfire. All of the

Joshua and the Lightning Road

gods rejoiced, for they were saved.”

Finn was right. My grandfather was definitely more interesting than an accountant.

Bo Chez stood and filled our view. “Boys, I have to run to the convenience store quick to get batteries and candles in case the power goes out. Will you be okay alone for twenty minutes?”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a kid anymore?” I said. You would think turning twelve last week would have changed the way he treated me.

He raised an eyebrow. “Fine. I’m only a phone call away, and stay inside and don’t touch anything you shouldn’t.”

“We won’t,” I said.

“Promise,” Finn agreed.

“And stay away from the windows if it starts lightning again.”

“Okay. We get it,” I said.

Bo Chez backed his car out and reached the end of the driveway before reality sunk in. Finn and I were alone in a house full of things we weren’t supposed to touch. The anxiety was almost too much, but we had the whole house to ourselves!

“Hey, Joshua, want to play hide-n-seek?” Finn said.

“Sure.” He loved our big house for just this reason. Even if it was a kid’s game, I went along with it for Finn’s sake. “We’ll pretend the house is haunted. Find me or the ghost gets you and turns you into one!”

“I’ll count. You hide.”

“Ham,” I said.

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“And cheese.”

Finn grinned and his freckles got bigger. He punched me twice on the arm, and I punched him back. Our thing. Then he bolted upstairs.

I pretended to count on the way to my bedroom as Finn stomped up to the attic. “Seventy-five!”

Light flashed across my room, and then the power went out. I grabbed a flashlight from my dresser and headed out. Long shadows flickered around me, and lightning lit up the hallway. The wooden floor creaked beneath my feet as I tiptoed toward the attic door, sliding my fingers along the cool walls.

“One hundred. Ready or not here I come!” I said with more courage than I felt, pushing the attic door open.

Inky black swallowed me up. I darted my flashlight about, but its small, round light didn’t reveal much. The mustiness of old things hidden away filled my nose. *Bo Chez, hurry home.* The hair prickled on my forearms as the stairs screeched with each step and the landing loomed in front of me. Could a ghost with an axe be waiting to chop off my head? I took a deep breath, waiting for a blade to fall, but the only thing lying in wait was a dusty bookshelf.

“Finn-man, I know you’re up here.” I flicked the flashlight around the room, its cold metal warming in my sweaty palm. Thunder crashed over my head and my ears popped.

One more step forward.

“Got ya!” Finn jumped up, his shadow against the

Joshua and the Lightning Road

window. I tripped and landed hard on my butt. My flashlight twirled across the floor.

Then a blue arc of light struck the window. Glass exploded. Finn's mouth froze in a wide 'O'. I yelled and reached out to pull him down, but another zap of light blinded me. Finn screamed. Rain splattered my face, stinging with each drop. White dots floated in the air. Something gray billowed past me carrying a familiar, rotten stench that made me gag. A knobby hand grabbed me. I bit it and shoved it away, gagging again, and the hand dropped me back on the floor with the taste of salty dirt on my tongue. An angry howl blasted the air.

Zap. Zap.

Daggers of light shot everywhere as sharp glass cut into me.

"Finn!"

He floated in the shadows. Light erupted all around him, his eyes round with fear. The sky boomed overhead, and a deep laugh bellowed out as if the thunder itself were taunting me.

"Next time it's you, boy," a raspy voice said.

Wind shrieked around me in a ferocious wail, pulling me with it. I flattened myself on the floor and clung on tightly to the foot of a chair. The angry wind finally stopped. Rain pelted me through the broken window. All was quiet. I lifted my head.

Finn was gone.

Chapter Two

The rain continued to blow in. I stumbled to the window, crunching on broken glass, my legs weak. What if he was lying on the ground with a broken leg? Or worse. But a soft flash of lightning revealed nothing below.

I fumbled around until I found my flashlight and shined it about, searching for the owner of the hand that had grabbed me. Again, nothing—or no one—was here. Who *was* that man? Where had he taken Finn?

I had to do something, but what? I rushed back down the stairs to the living room. It was still dark in the house and my flashlight was dying. The thunder and lightning had stopped, but the steady rain continued to pound the roof. It grew louder in its attack as if trying to get in. Wind raced around me from the open window, and I shivered despite the muggy air that

Joshua and the Lightning Road

blew across me with the scent of fresh cut grass.

Bo Chez—I needed my grandfather. My trembling fingers punched in the number for his cell phone, but the phone line was dead. If only he had let me have a cell phone. I ran to the front window. The driveway was empty.

I ran to the kitchen and looked out back. The creek was a wall of mud and water, the path now washed away. I could push through the thick brush to Finn's house or take the long way around on the road to get his family's help, but how could I explain the weird thing that had happened in the attic? And what could they do? It struck me then how lucky Finn was. He had a whole family who would miss him. Only Bo Chez would miss me, and if I had a brother I would protect him, no matter what.

A lingering toast smell filled me up, reminding me of my aloneness. *Think!*

There was no time to wait for Bo Chez's help. What if the road had been washed out, too, and Bo Chez wasn't coming back soon? What if Finn was dead? Time ticked faster as my head reeled with so many questions.

My one terrifying choice: to try and get Finn back by myself. I took off to my room and, with no idea what could come in handy, snatched up mini chocolate bars and a pen flashlight, and crammed them in my pockets along with my favorite drawing pencil. Would the lightning come back and take me? It's not supposed to strike in the same place twice. But that scary voice told

Donna Galanti

me it would, and it hadn't sounded like it was kidding.

Bo Chez's crystal! He said it had the power to command the very heavens. I just thought it was part of the stories he made up. He told me that I would know what the crystal's abilities were in time, but who knew when that would be? I needed power—needed to *believe* it had power—and I needed it now. I ran downstairs, pried open the case with scissors, and with shaking hands took the crystal. It pulsed through my fingers, then glowed blue and grew warm.

I gasped and almost dropped it when a shiny square of paper tucked inside the corner of the case in its seam caught my eye. I tugged it out to turn over a laminated photo and sucked in my breath. I had never seen a picture of my mother, but Bo Chez had described her so often it was like staring at the exact image I created in my head. I ran my fingers across the smooth surface of her face.

Bo Chez told me we lost all our photos in a fire when I was a baby. Why would he have kept this from me? My mom smiled at me with big, blue eyes and wavy hair, the same colored eyes and dirty blond hair as mine. Diana. Her name was Diana. She died just after I was born. I bugged Bo Chez for more stories about her, but he gave me only vague details, except one: my mother never told anyone who my father was, not even him.

I'd lived my life without a mother, but I needed her now. I shoved the photo and crystal into my pockets and ran back up to the attic.

Joshua and the Lightning Road

Sweat ran down my back as the warm August air washed over me and the scent of earthworms filled my nose. Thunder rumbled far in the distance. I pushed aside the broken glass and knelt where Finn had stood. Water bled into my jeans from the rain pooled on the floor. It seemed like forever ago that I wished Finn would hurry up and get here.

Lightning flashed. I welcomed and feared it. My chest tightened, but there was no time for panic. The crystal warmed my fingers through the deep pocket of my jeans. Bo Chez had to be right—the crystal had powers. What would they be?

Thunder crackled.

“Yeah, just come and get me!” I yelled into the storm, and a bolt of light took the tree across the creek. The top exploded in a fiery ball, then sizzled black. Thunder broke loud over my head like a giant clapping his hands together, and blue light exploded through the broken window. Two rough hands yanked me up.

Light blazed everywhere and heavy, scratchy material bound me tight as I was pulled upward into a swirling wind tunnel.

Anger felt better than fear, so I kicked my kidnapper. “Where’s Finn?”

“You’ll find out soon, Reeker.”

Daring a peek, I saw a wide gray hat slung low over one green eye that blazed at me. Where the other eye should have been was a crater. One side of his face oozed red, melted mush! The man from my nightmares!

Donna Galanti

“Finn!”

The man held me tighter, choking off my words. His stink made me want to throw up. I strained to see over his cloak, wondering where his smell had struck me before. It hurt to breathe, and dizziness engulfed me, knowing the monster in my dreams was real.

Yellow and white ribbons of fire snaked before us in a black tunnel, and I froze in absolute terror. Lights ricocheted through the darkness on either side of me like shooting stars. We moved faster and faster. Wind roared everywhere.

“Stop looking around!” The man in gray knocked me hard upside the head.

I sank into darkness.

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