

AFTER THE STORM**Excerpt**

The clatter of conveyor belts was music to Terry. The women looked stout in their rubber aprons and boots, their heads swathed in bandanas. The platform trembled under Terry's bare feet as he walked through. At the concession stand, where workers could buy snacks, a thick-chested proprietor laved mustard on wieners and ladled onions over that – the smell was intoxicating.

“You remember me?” Terry yelled at the cook.

“I remember.”

He hadn't looked.

“My daddy managed Camp Osceola,” Terry said.

“What you want?”

“I'm looking for Bucky Dallas,” Terry said. “He worked at the icehouse.”

“Get out of the way, boy. You're blocking my window.”

“Bucky had a crossed eye,” Terry persisted.

“Boy – move!”

The zing of crates in a chute passed overhead, spiraling down from a loft where the boxes were constructed, going to the conveying lines to be loaded with vegetables. They were working on celery tonight.

He didn't see anyone he knew, except the surly cook. He'd been to the icehouse and they'd chased him away twice. He'd finally grabbed a chunk of crystal clear ice, sucking it as he strolled the familiar area, wary for guards put here to intercept trespassers.

Loaded crates moved the length of the building, passing into washing machines that gave the vegetables a final rinse before emerging on the far side. Two men were there, tacks in their mouths, hammering lids on the crates and shoving them onto another belt for transport to the loading dock.

Finally, the parcels went into the yawning door of a boxcar – these laborers had no humor, working in silence and poor light to pack the wares from floor to ceiling. Terry watched them for a few moments, and then darted between dollies, over a mound of burlap sacks, and out the other side.

At the end of the packing platform the icehouse served the boxcars, blowing man-made snow into a fruit car to keep the contents chilled. The scream of the shredder was deafening, huge blocks of ice chewed to shards and expelled into cars as the engine of the train idled, waiting to position loaded carriers for dispatch later tonight.

Frustrated, Terry left the brightly lighted arena, walking toward the Silver Dollar Café where he and Bucky used to go, four years back. He could hear a jukebox, the laughter of men and women. Terry slipped inside, his bare feet sliding in sawdust thrown on the hardwood floor.

He stood at the bar, his eyes just above the counter, watching the waitresses put together their orders on little metal trays that advertised Coca-Cola.

The jukebox was a beautiful thing to behold. The pulsing lights beckoned the eyes, colors changing constantly. In tiny tubes that stretched from floor to top, bubbles arose hypnotically as if the music were boiling within. The volume was so high, Terry could feel the throb of recorded sounds. People talked to one another in shouts. Cigarette smoke hung in a veil under dim light bulbs positioned over each booth along a wall.

Terry saw the woman he sought and called, “Miss Renée!”

A man touched her rear end as she passed carrying a foaming pitcher of beer to a table.

“Miss Renée!”

He’d drawn the attention of the owner sitting on a high stool behind the bar. The man shifted a cigar over yellow teeth and blue lips, disturbed, but still indolent.

Terry waited for the waitress to come his way again. Men in a booth said something to her and her reply made them erupt in laughter. She stopped at the jukebox, put in a coin, and punched a button to make a selection.

“Miss Renée, do you remember me ? I’m Terry Calder.”

She glanced at him, spoke to the owner, “Another round for table four. Two burgers all the way.”

“Miss Renée, I’m looking for Bucky Dallas. You know Bucky.”

Now she looked at him.

“He had crossed eyes,” Terry said.

“Ain’t you the red-on-the-head that always played hookey?”

“Yes, ma’am. Do you know where Bucky is?”

She tossed her head slightly, saying to the owner, “Wisconsin, I’d guess.” The man’s belly jiggled up and down in muted laughter.

“Where you been, Redhead?” Renée inquired. She put beer bottles under the counter as she spoke.

“We moved to Birmingham, but we’re back now. Can you tell me where Bucky is?”

She was squatting behind the bar. Terry could see up her skirt. She looked at him with such a strange expression he felt a tingle of alarm.

“Bucky ain’t here anymore,” she said hoarsely.

“He moved away?”

Renée shot a glance at the owner. He lifted shaggy eyebrows, turned away.

“Bucky had a accident,” the woman said.

“Accident?”

“He fell in the ice shredder. You know what the ice shredder is?”

Terry stepped back a pace.

Renée grabbed him with one hand, her chin dimpling as if she might cry. “He was your friend, wasn’t he?”

“Did he die?”

“A cuter little bastard never was,” Renée said softly. “I thought I’d never get over it.”

“He’s dead?”

“Yes,” she said tenderly. “He’s dead.”

The man on the stool pulled the cap off a large orange drink and handed it down to Terry. He took it, but stood there staring at Renee. A tear rolled out of her eye and carried mascara down her cheek.

“This ain’t no way to learn something like this,” she said. “I’m awful sorry, Red.”

He imagined Bucky, reduced to icy particles, being shipped to Wisconsin in a boxcar.

“I don’t have a nickel,” Terry whispered. He gave her the drink, turned and ran.