

SUMMER LIGHTNING

Chapter 1

A GENTLE BREEZE gave breath to the palms; fronds sighed, whispering, promising a good day at Lake Okeechobee. An aroma of overripe dates in the palms, and a buzz of sweat bees suckling nectar from spoiled fruit, reminded Terry that wild bananas would be a bitter-sweet reward if he bolted and ran.

“Eat your breakfast, Terrell.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Migratory workers were already in the fields. Voices of their children came to his ears – going to school in Belle Glade, half a mile distant. A scent of guava mingled with the perfume of poinciana and citrus trees planted throughout Camp Osceola.

“I want you to go to school today, Terrell.”

“Y es ma’am.”

Through the kitchen window, he saw long lines of yellow boxcars on railroad tracks above and behind the house. He heard the clink of couplings, the hiss-chug of engines as United Fruit cars were shifted according to a mysterious system that would ultimately see them filled, iced and on their way north.

“There’s been enough playing hooky,” Mama said.

“Mickey, the boy says he’s going,” Daddy answered.

“He said that last week, too.”

“He said he’s going,” more sternly. Daddy gazed at Terry. “Didn’t you, Terrell?”

“Yessir.”

A huge black bee with pollen-laden legs thumped the screen, bump, bump, and then swerved away. A warning whistle from the tracks, two shorts. That meant the train was going to move. A brakeman had taught this to Terry.

“Hurry now,” Mama reached over, wiped Terry’s mouth, both corners, flicked at a crumb, brushed hand over hair. “Time to go,” she said. Daddy folded his newspaper to another page.

“I don’t know what this country is coming to,” Daddy commented. “Now Roosevelt wants to arm merchant ships.”

“Terrell, I said it’s time to go.”

“Yes ma’am.”

He stood on incredibly thin legs, knees knobbed, exposed by short trousers, which he detested.

“Wash your face and hands.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You know what that means,” Daddy said. “The Germans will have a legitimate reason to sink our ships. If that happens, we’re that much nearer war.”

“Terrell!”

He had been standing in the hallway, listening to Daddy. He hurried to the bathroom, turned on the water, gingerly lifted the soap with two fingers, wet it and placed it back in the dish unused. He wiped his face and hands on a towel. He went into the bedroom to get his books, carefully bound with a belt like the other children carried theirs.

“Terrell!” Vexation in her tone now. Aside to Daddy, “Lord that child is slow.”

“Mickey, don’t shout. You’re always shouting at that boy.”

“How do you suggest I get his attention? Whisper?”

“Terrell!” Daddy’s voice.

“Yessir.”

Mama gave him a brown paper sack: two potted meat sandwiches with mayonnaise mixed with a sweet relish. An apple. A nickel for a drink.

“Milk,” Mama stated.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Go to school.”

“Yes ma’am.”

He eased the screen door closed behind him. He was aware of Mama’s eyes as he crossed the backyard, climbed a cinder-strewn incline to the maze of tracks and disappeared from her sight. The musty smell of disuse and former cargoes seeped from opened boxcars as he passed. He ducked between two stationary fruit cars, past a coupling and out the other side. He walked along the tracks, deliberately taking a path that would carry him beside the steaming locomotive. He liked coal-burners better than diesels. They had a roaring fire, activity of the coal car and a fireman shoveling black nuggets into flames.

“Can I have a ride?”

The engineer grinned. He nodded and the fireman reached down with one hand to bodily lift Terry aboard. Terry went directly to a thin, hard, padded seat opposite the engineer. The engine reverberated beneath his feet and he wished he were barefoot.

“Going to school?”

It was obvious: clean, shoes, books. Terry nodded.

Far down the track a man leaned out into view, holding a low rung of a ladder on the side of a car, waving to the engineer.

The vehicle groaned, wheezed, as the throttle was eased forward, the mighty engine creaked, wheels squealing as sand dropped on the rails for traction. Ruff-ruff-ruff, pistons spun the wheels, boxcars moved and a rhythmic clack of cars rippled down the track as the engine pushed what it had formerly pulled. They didn’t move far. The flagman waved again, jumped off, threw a switch and waved anew. The couplings responded to the pull, clickity-clickity-clickity-clack, and they backed up, drawing a snaking curve of cars off a siding for distribution.

“You’re going to be late for school, little buddy.”

“Yessir.”

“Let me help you.” The fireman lifted him over the side and down onto the cinder bed. Hot fumes blew Terry’s red hair as he passed the length of the engine between tracks.

He crossed a bridge connecting Camp Osceola with the main town road. He cut between the packinghouses. There was no point walking on blistering hot pavement with the wide eave and cool platform of the packinghouse so available. The building was a hive of activity, the vegetable smell of celery and foliage pungent and pleasing. Voices, machinery and water sounds formed a cadence that could hold him spellbound by the hour.

He climbed unbanistered steps, entering the long, open shed of the three-story building. The structure was laced with ribbons of steel-roller conveyors, each filled with crates end-to-end, beginning high overhead where the cartons were assembled and stored. Women wearing rubber aprons and boots packed the boxes. Terry passed a washing machine that sprayed the produce to give it a final cleaning before green shredded paper was put over it and a top was nailed on. He approached one of the aproned women.

“May I have a piece of celery?”

She tore off a stalk, gave it to him with scarcely a glance, talking to a fellow worker.

He passed a concession stand where most of the laborers purchased quick lunches of hamburgers, hot dogs, chips and soft drinks. A tantalizing lure of cooking sauerkraut tempted him to invest his nickel in a spoonful. Or better yet, he might trade away his lunch to one of the black people working here, for a dime or fifteen cents more. He had done this before. They were tired of eating the same food from the hot-dog stand day after day. It was a fair exchange. But he didn't do it. He was fresh from breakfast. Besides, the best deals were made close to lunch.

Terry saw several men taking a break, smoking. He asked one of them, “Could I have a cigarette?”

“You're too young to smoke.”

“Please.”

“Give the kid a cigarette.”

“Stunt your growth, boy.”

“Thank you.” He put the Camel in a top pocket, careful to place it so it wouldn't break if he leaned over. He crossed the packinghouse to another group.

“May I have a cigarette?”

The same protests, the same results. He did this four more times before he reached the end of the building. Six cigarettes of different brands, one with a filter, the rest without. One mentholated, one overpowering Home Run, one equally potent Picayune. These he could trade away to the boys at the high school, who willingly paid as much as three cents for a cigarette, regardless of the brand.

He followed a circuitous route through several packinghouses, arriving at the far end of the last one, which abutted the back way to the icehouse. Bucky Dallas was sitting on the warped steps of a shack constructed under an eave of the building. Bucky had a crossed eye. His father ran the icehouse. Bucky's parents didn't seem to care whether he went to school or not.

“Want to buy a cigarette? Terry asked.

“I got no money.”

“Want one then?”

“Sure.”

Terry gave him the Picayune. It was the hardest to sell. Bucky was always good for a chunk of crystal-clear ice on the hottest day of summer. He once socked Billy Poole in the mouth on Terry’s behalf, too.

“Going to school?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re late.”

Terry went across the pavement, avoiding pitch bubbles raised by the blistering sun. A canal separated school from the packinghouses. It was lined with thick growths of bamboo, a source for fishing poles, anoles and occasional green snakes. It was a cool retreat for errant boys who would not be in class today.

“School started?” His question was posed at large to three older boys.

“Long time ago.”

“Want to buy a cigarette?”

“How much?”

“Nickel.”

“Shit.”

“For two,” Terry added.

“Forget it.”

“Okay. Three for a nickel. My choice.

The deal was made: mentholated, Home Run and Camel, a nickel.

“Your mama’s going to whip your ass, redhead,” one of the boys said, chewing a bamboo shoot.

“How come?”

“Teacher’s already been out here looking for you. She’s going to tell your mama.”

The realization brought a quickening heartbeat, a hurried debate of alternatives.

“I’m going to school,” Terry said.

“You’re late.”

"I'm going." He crossed the single rickety board linking the narrow canal banks, through more bamboo and into the fenced schoolyard. Deserted. Through an open window, he heard the Pledge of Allegiance, from another window, the morning prayer, and from across the bare, burnt brown yard, a ting of flag clasps against the metal pole.

If he didn't go, Mama would be angry. If he did go, Mrs. Wright would send him to Mr. Hammond, the principal, for being late again. He heard one of the older truants laugh.

"You going or not?" came the question.

"I'm going."

"In time for lunch," somebody stated.

"Are you inhaling?"

"Sure I'm inhaling."

"Let me see. Take a puff and open your mouth so I can see."

"He swallowed it."

"No I didn't, piss-ant. I inhaled. Watch this."

A frog plopped in the canal. Behind Terry, the bamboo stirred, settled, murmured anew.

"Hey, Red," Bucky's voice close by. "Come on. Let's go swimming."

"No."

"You really going in this late?"

"Yes." Terry turned, looking at Bucky.

Bucky studied him with one eye as the other eye contemplated the bridge of his nose.

"Come on, Terry. No point in getting your ass whipped for being late. Might as well get it whipped for being absent."

He heard a scraping of wood chairs on floors as students settled down. An insect droned past his ear, whirred again and darted toward the stand of bamboo.

"What you say?" Bucky prodded.

"I got to go to school." He started a cross the open expanse of the yard toward the red brick building. He had the uncomfortable sensation that all eyes were on him. He passed by skeletons of playground equipment, swings inert over scoops made by thousands of pushing feet in motion, a slide hot enough to cook flesh, a tangle of monkey bars.

The covered walkway between the high school and elementary classrooms was cool, red terra-cotta tile. A water fountain on one wall was surrounded by a wet place where trickled sips had eluded the thirsty. He was trembling, clutching the paper sack.

From the hallway off which the first- through sixth-grade rooms were situated, he felt a flow of air. He smelled chalk, heard a coughing student, a teacher's voice. His room was all the way at the other end.

"Son?"

He wheeled. It was the secretary from Mr. Hammond's office.

"What class are you in?"

"Mrs. Wright."

"Well, hadn't you better get on in there?"

"Yes ma'am."

He walked down the hall, her footsteps behind him. He heard her stop, tap on a door; he kept walking.

"Aaaayyyy..." voices in unison, "beeee..."

The door had frosted glass panes except for one in the very center, higher than he could stretch to see. He heard Mrs. Wright now. "Who knows what this is?"

"Ceeeee..."

The secretary had concluded her errand and was going back the way she'd come, heels tapping the floor.

"Eeeee..."

He swallowed, putting a shaking hand on the knob to turn it.

"Efffph..."

At this end of the hall was another set of doors, seldom used, leading to a large storage room beyond. The doors were ajar to admit as much air as possible.

"Eddy can you open the windows for me?" Mrs. Wright's disembodied voice requested.

Across the hall, another teacher, voice booming, "All crayons must be replaced in the boxes, students. Check around your feet to be sure you haven't dropped one. Let's all do that now."

"Geeee..."

Terry walked back along the hall, gaining momentum as resolve evaporated. He hit the door at full run, bolting like an animal with a glimpse of freedom. Past the water fountain, into the yard, a shimmering wave of heat searing bare legs and arms, brushing his face as he impelled himself as fast as his legs would move.

“Terrell!” Mrs. Wright was at the window. “Terrell!”

He reached the plank bridging the canal and in three racing steps cleared it, went past the smoking boys, across hot pavement and into the packinghouse. He dashed between conveyors, skirted stacked hampers, and vaulted a dolly being pushed toward a boxcar. A rasp of metal teeth shredding blocks of ice roared in his ears as he ducked beneath a tube shooting frozen matter into the open lid of a fruit car.

“Hey. Kid. Damnation!”

He crawled through a jumble of burlap sacks heaped in a bin, gained the far side and higher elevation to the second floor.

“Hey. Get outta here! Hey, you. Get the hell out – ”

He scampered down steps to the first floor again, settling to a slower pace. He glanced back repeatedly, as though expecting a horde of teachers led by the principal, armed with rulers and bent on dragging him to class.

“Want to buy a lunch?”

“What is it?”

“Potted meat sandwiches. Two of them.”

“Nah.”

“Cost you a quarter.”

“Nah. I brung my own. Potted meat.”

Next man. “Want to buy two potted meat sandwiches? I’ll throw in an apple too, all for a quarter.”

“No thanks. Look, get out of the way, son.”

Next. “I’ll sell you two potted meat sandwiches and a apple.”

“How much?”

“Quarter?”

“Dime.”

“Fifteen cents.”

The man fished out coins, holding them as he inspected the sandwiches. "They're smashed," he said, but gave Terry the money.

"Thanks."

Twenty-five cents total, snug in his pocket, trouble at home tonight, but until then – he paused at the hot dog stand and bought one, and a big RC cola. He sat amid workers taking first lunch break.

He wasn't going to think about what was coming later. He savored the onion and relish, steamed bun and mustard. He took huge swigs from the RC, maintaining suction to avoid a backwash. He considered buying a pack of salted nuts to pour in his drink, but decided against it. Salt took the fizz out of soda.

He walked out the Chosen road, detouring through a cane field where black men with machetes were harvesting thick, juicy stalks.

"Peel me a stalk?" he inquired of a gleaming ebony worker.

"Sure nuff."

The man flashed startling white teeth. His accent told Terry this was an islander from the Bahamas, come to cut cane and make a few dollars American before returning to his own home. The cane dripped around Terry's hand. He had no way to cut off plugs, so he chewed from top to bottom, reducing each bite to a tough fiber sucked dry of fluid.

He ate as he walked, still carrying his books, chewing cane and wondering if he'd see McCree today. Snake man, they called him. McCree called Terrell Terry or Little Hawk and never asked discomfoting questions.

Terry heard a car coming and got off the road. His second week of school had taught him about Miss Ramsey, the truant officer. She came this way every morning, gathering the unwary to haul them back to Mr. Hammond's office.

There were stories that Miss Ramsey had caused a tenth-grader to be shipped to Marianna, to the boy's reformatory, because he skipped school. And stole things. And broke out windows of the school over one weekend.

The car passed. It was not Miss Ramsey. It was the greenskeeper at the golf course, on his way to work. Dust swirled from the roadbed, settled on saw grass and temporarily colored the air russet.

Terry crawled down a bank to reach canal water, ever mindful of snakes. He pushed aside blue-blossomed hyacinths, a favorite resting place for the cottonmouth moccasin, and washed away sticky cane juice from his hands.

He nearly slipped. Only a quick grab for the belt around his books saved them from total loss. He retrieved the dripping bundle and moaned. A red dye from the cover of his reader bled onto his fingers. He knew his problems had just been compounded.

He continued toward Chosen, alert to the sound of an occasional approaching automobile; dust, sweat and red dye from his book turned his hands and all he touched a dingy brown.

He followed a familiar path from the road down a canal bank, to a crossing board, through a thicket of Australian pines and into a small clearing. Here lived Eunice Washington, a stout black woman and her sole grandchild, LuBelle.

“Hey, Eunice.”

“Lord, God, boy, you near scared me to death! Don’t come creeping up on Eunice like that.”

“You seen Mr. McCree?”

“Not yet. He’ll be along directly.”

“Can I wait?”

“Help yourself.” Eunice poked a bleached broomstick into a boiling cauldron of lye soap, rainwater and “took in” clothes, which she washed and ironed for money.

“LuBelle here?”

“Ain’t she always?”

“Inside?”

“Most likely.”

The house was built on stilts, over earth packed hard by years of foot traffic. There were no windows, only holes cut in the siding with hinged shutters that opened from the bottom. No screens kept out insects, and the inhabitants shared the cool, dark, three-room building with whatever chose to enter. The house was always an odd mixture of odors. Boiling beans simmered on a wood stove where Eunice also heated her irons, and a damp, musty aroma of fresh dirt rose through cracks between floorboards.

LuBelle was sitting in the middle of a bed naked. A year younger than Terry, she never wore clothes. It had not occurred to him to give this a second thought. He had never seen her otherwise.

“You want some taffy?” she offered.

“No,” Terry said.

“Mawmaw made it last night.”

“Listen, LuBelle, you got any worms?”

“No.”

“Reckon we could go dig some? I’m going to ask Mr. McCree to take me fishing.”

“He ain’t going. Today’s his day to trade with Mawmaw. Mr. McCree don’t do nothing on trading day, except trade.”

“Today?”

LuBelle pointed at two quart jars on a bare table. The contents looked like kerosene. But they weren’t.

“Ho, Eunice.”

“There he is,” LuBelle grinned.

“Look what I got you, Eunice.”

“Lord God, Mr. Cree,” Eunice always dropped the Mc from his name, ‘what you doing bringing that here?’

LuBelle and Terry ran to the front porch and looked down. Mr. McCree was standing in the yard, laughing, Eunice holding him at bay with her broomstick. The old man gripped the heads of two huge rattlesnakes, one in each hand, tails whirring a dry staccato warn.