

Sharks Incorporated

FINS

Book One

A Fiction Series for Middle Grade and Young Adult Readers

By Randy Wayne White

CHAPTER ONE

Lightning Strikes!

After a few weeks in Florida, Luke decided he wanted to be a fishing guide like his aunt, Capt. Hannah Smith, and was learning faster than usual until the day he was struck by lightning.

That's what he was told, anyway, by the old man standing over him when he woke-up. By then it was raining.

"You okay?" the old man asked.

Luke blinked water from his eyes and croaked, "Huh?"

When the man's mouth moved to repeat the question his words were muffled by a terrible ringing sound. "Huh?" Luke said again.

"My lord, you're deaf as a rock, but at least you ain't dead." The old man exhaled and extended his hand. "Come on – get up."

Luke realized he was curled on a wooden dock where he'd been watching a storm sail across the bay. The colors of the sky – neon green and purple – were unlike anything he'd seen growing up on a farm in Ohio.

"What happened?" he asked when he was on his feet.

The old man pointed and spoke louder -- or the ringing noise was going away. "A lighting bolt hit close to where you were standing. Seemed to snake up out of the water and zapped you, too. I saw it all from the porch, and come on the run. You okay?"

The man was short with thick glasses. Water poured off his straw hat, it was raining so hard. Luke hoped that's why everything was blurry, and why splotches of bright colors -- neon green and purple -- flickered behind his eyes.

"I feel sortta weird," he said, shaking the numbness from his hands. "Who are you?"

The old man appeared concerned. "You don't know?"

Luke squinted and tried to remember despite the swirling colors. "A fisherman, I think," he said finally. "Captain . . . Arlis something. Arlis Futch?"

The man took him by the arm. "You weren't the sharpest hook in the box to begin with, but now I'm worried. Come on, let's get out of this rain."

Luke was on the porch, a blanket around him, staring at an oddly shaped blister on his hand, when Capt. Futch came out of the house carrying a steaming mug of something to drink.

"I'm too young to like coffee," Luke told him.

"I'm not," the man said. "And I'm too old to be running around in a dang storm that could'a got us both killed. You just sit there and take it easy. Down the road we'll discuss an old saying about fools and ducks coming in out of the rain. Is your memory coming back?"

"I don't remember losing it," Luke replied.

"If you were the clever type," the man said, "I'd think you're being a smart aleck. How do you feel?"

"I thought I got hit by a nest of hornets," the boy said. "I couldn't breathe -- like my body was on fire. But I'm okay now." After a moment, he added, "You shouldn't have phoned her."

The man was confused. "Who, your Aunt Hannah? She don't answer the phone when she's on a fishing charter. You should know that by now. That woman's all business in a boat. When this squall starts to slide south, I'll try then."

“Not Hannah, the lady doctor who told you to call an ambulance,” Luke said. He scratched at a painful area on his arm and kept talking despite the look of surprise on the old captain’s face. “Dr. Tamika had to say that because most doctors are worried about getting sued. “

The man squinted through his glasses. “How’d you know? You never met Doc Tamika. Doubt if I ever mentioned her name before.”

“You must’ve had the phone on speaker,” Luke reasoned. “I heard every word she said. She told you to make us some hot tea while we waited. But she didn’t mention making coffee for yourself and pouring whiskey in it. Oh -- and that I should be checked for burns.”

Capt. Futch looked at the door to the house. It was closed. Through a window, he could see a fireplace then a hall which led to the kitchen where he’d spoken in whispers to the only doctor on the island.

“If that don’t beat all,” he said. “Ten minutes ago you were deaf as a tree stump, and now you can hear through walls. Tell the truth – did you sneak inside when I wasn’t looking?”

Luke wasn’t sure how he’d heard the conversation from the porch during a rainstorm, but he had. “I don’t need an ambulance,” he said, getting up. “I feel okay now that my feet stopped stinging. Sorry you had to go out in this storm because of me, mister.”

The old fisherman watched the boy start toward the door. “Where you think you’re going?”

“Home,” Luke said, “to put on some dry clothes.”

“Home where?” the man asked carefully.

“You’ve never heard of the place – Ohio. A little farm town west of Toledo. I don’t mind walking in the rain.”

“How do you feel about walking through snow?” the man inquired. This stopped the boy in the doorway. “Son, Ohio’s a thousand miles north. If it’s true that lightning never strikes the same person twice, I reckon you’ll be safe as far as Kentucky -- but I’d pack a pair of mittens. I need to tell you something before you hike back to the Buckeye state.”

As Luke started to respond, a buzzing silence exploded sparks in a nearby tree. Thunder shook the house. He didn't flinch – seemed perfectly at ease in a squall fired by lightning bolts and rain.

Capt. Futch noticed and thought, That boy was afraid of his own shadow yesterday. Then said for Luke to hear, “I can give you two reasons you should stay and wait for the doctor. Take a look around. Do you remember being on this porch before?”

The pulsing colors in Luke's head dimmed while he squinted and tried to think. Inside the house, a baby began to cry, frightened by the thunder. “Who's that?” he asked.

“That's your second cousin, baby Tucker,” the old man said, “so have a seat and don't argue. Luke . . . I'm your grandpa, and you've been living here for close to a month.”

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Before he was struck by lightning, Luke was average or below average at most things except baseball and farm work. He wasn't bright, and knew it. In Ohio, his mother and teachers had let him know often enough, but in a kindly way that took the form of excuses.

“He's easily bored,” they would say as if Luke wasn't in the room. “All children react to challenges differently.” Or, “His mind is so active it tends to wander.”

This was true. Sort of. He was prone to wander off in a dreamy way that seldom invited his brain to tag along. Once, he'd set off following fresh deer tracks in the snow. He didn't realize he had crossed the border into Michigan until a smiling State Trooper informed him he was fifteen miles from home.

He often forgot important items: his lunch, his homework, even his catcher's mitt. It was fine Wilson A-2400, the professional model, he'd bailed hay most of a summer to buy.

“The little dufuss would forget his head if it wasn't attached,” his stepsister, who was not kind, had said more than once.

His stepfather, who was worse, had warned him, “If you don't smarten up, I might forget my promise to your mom and send you to live with your crazy old grandpa. You wouldn't like Florida – nothing but heat and bugs and snakes down there. The place he lives isn't anything like Disney World.”

That was a bad thing? Luke had been a kid, maybe seven years old, when his mother had taken him to Orlando. He'd hated the crowds and noise. Disney World sucked compared to this tropical island on the Gulf of Mexico where he'd been struck by lightning and was learning to fish, but had yet to see a snake.

This was a disappointment. Luke didn't know much about reptiles but liked animals. He'd raised pigs, Black Angus steers, a flock of chickens and trained a dog as 4-H projects. He figured a snake might be an interesting creature to have around.

Which is what he should've told his stepfather the day Luke forgot to shut off a tractor that, somehow, popped into gear and rolled into the pond. There'd been bunch of yelling, then another threat when his stepfather hollered, "If I could afford it, I'd fly you south to live with your real family for a year. I swear I would."

Grandpa Arlis Futch was right – Luke wasn't clever enough to sass an adult. But he was a hard worker and good at saving money.

Luke had looked up at the man who wasn't his real father and said politely, "How much does an airplane ticket to Florida cost? I'll pay my own way."