

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 3

It's the gravel pelting the underside of the truck as they leave the highway and turn into the parking lot that startles Buddy back to the present. The truck rolls to a stop near the entrance to the gift shop. She leaps out, leaving the door hanging open, and runs toward the fence where she presses an eye to a crack between the tall cypress boards. She can see the edge of some bleachers (*bench seats*) and a strip of brown water beyond them, but no dolphins.

The fence ends at a dense hedge of pink oleanders and the oleanders end at a levee that keeps the swamp from reclaiming this roadside island built of limestone dredged up



from the shallow Everglades. Where the levee merges with the parking lot, there is a plywood booth and a girl inside selling tickets for the airboat rides. Two airboats are tied, side-by-

side. One has a few passengers waiting in the hot sun for the next tour.

A large man, dressed in white, sits on a stool in front of the booth and blows on the microphone he's holding.

A loud, damp whistle comes from the orange speaker wired to the lamppost above Buddy's head, then the man's voice booms across the parking lot.

"Folks," he drawls, "we got two different length airboat rides." He coughs a gurgly cough, then spits a long stream of brown juice. "The shorter one," he continues, "is a trip that goes to the edge of the swamp and around the mudflats. That'll give y'all an idea of what airboats is built for and how they operate. The grand tour is a seven-mile trip that takes thirty minutes and goes deep into the swamp to an old Indian village. They ain't no injuns living there today, but you can see how they built their village.



"We've had folks come from all over the world to take this ride." He flashes a smile as yellow as a ripe banana at the few people in line to buy tickets, then beckons to the hesitant. "While y'all is in the Everglades area, don't miss it. It will be the highlight of your Florida vacation."

Her father shuts the door she left hanging open, then joins her by the fence. "Who's that man?" she whispers.

"The owner. O. B. Stevens in the flesh-his rather abundant flesh."

O. B. Stevens has a long torso and narrow shoulders.

His arms and legs are a matched set, short and heavy, and his rear end is broad and round. He wears white pants, a white shirt, and a red belt.

"Kinda looks like a bowling pin, doesn't he?" her dad says. She's never been bowling, or seen a bowling pin, but she wants her dad to think she knows what he means. She smiles up at him.

"Orange Blossom, you old son of gun. How are you?" Kirk sticks out one hand and smacks O.B.'s shoulder, hard, with the other. "Good to see you."

O.B. snorts, spits another brown stream of chewing tobacco, and takes Kirk's hand. Buddy had stepped behind her father when Stevens started toward them.

"You've never met my daughter," Kirk says, pulling her around, and holding her in place with his hands on her shoulders. This man has the biggest bottom lip Buddy has ever seen, and it glistens wetly. She tries not to stare at it.

"Hello, Mr. Stevens." She puts her hand out. He ignores it.

"Call me O.B. kid. How old are you today?"

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen, huh? I thought you was in the sixth grade with my sister's kid. Ain't you supposed to be in the seventh?"

"Yes, sir." She puts her hands behind her back and drops her gaze from patch of damp belly exposed by too much strain on his buttons, to her bare toes digging themselves a little trough into the oyster shell path. She glances at her father. He's looking at her feet, and scowling.

"She was out sick a year," he says. Buddy hasn't been sick since she had measles when she was five, but she's grateful to her father for lying.

Stevens is watching a couple approach the ticket booth. "Well, happy birthday," he says without looking at her.

Her father says she needs to get over her shyness, and stop standing around like a post, but the only person she's really comfortable talking to is the Admiral. It takes her a moment to think of something to say after thank you. "Who's your nephew? Maybe I know him."

"Huh? Oh, my sister's kid." He's still watching the couple standing near the ticket window. When the guy finally takes out his wallet and hands the girl selling tickets some money, Stevens smiles. "Alex Townsend. Know him?"

Buddy's breath catches. She glances at her dad, who raises his eyebrows, rolls his eyes, then shrugs.

"Yes, sir. I know him." Alex Townsend is a bully, and Buddy is his favorite target.

Stevens turns and squeezes her shoulder. "I'm going to make you a gift of a ticket to see the dolphins." To Kirk, he says, "Just give the girl five bucks for yourself."

"Thank you Mr. Stev . . . O. B."

"That's nice of you, Stevens," Kirk says, "but if I let you do that it won't be my present then."

"Suit yourself, Martin. See you inside." O. B. walks away, rocking from side to side like a penguin.

"He's Alex's uncle?"

"Who knew."

"Why did you call him Orange Blossom?" Buddy asks.

"Because his initials are O. B. and people who know what a bag of wind he is gave him that nickname as a joke."

"That is funny," she says and hopes he thinks she got it.

Her dad looks at her. "Come on. Let's get you in there to see those dolphins."

Tickets for the dolphin show are sold in the open-air gift shop. Kirk buys two tickets and two Cokes. When Stevens announces the start of the show, Kirk and Buddy join the flow of tourists through the gate in the tall-board fence.

They hand their tickets to a boy about fifteen, who, from the shape and size of his bottom lip, appears to be O. B.'s son.

As soon as they're inside, Buddy slides past her father and runs to the edge of the pool, hooks her toes into the metal triangles of a waist-high chainlink fence, steps up and leans out over the water.

The 'show pool' is a small, rectangular, limestone pit, walled on the south and west sides by Florida holly, willows and cattails. Through the weeds growing along a dike on the east side, Buddy glimpses a pond about the same size as the show pool, and thinks she hears a dolphin blow.

To her right, at the far end of the oyster-shell walkway, Stevens is talking to a woman whose back is to Buddy. She looks kind of official in her khaki shorts and shirt with an emblem on the sleeve. Buddy can't see what it says, but she can see that Stevens is mad at her.

"These critters belong to me and ain't any business of yours, girlie." His face is very close to hers, and Buddy's nose crinkles remembering his chewing tobacco-breath.

She steps down off the fence when her dad comes up behind her. They both stare at Stevens and the woman. Stevens sees them watching and forces a smile.

He waves them to seats in the once bright blue 'splash zone' of the sagging bleachers where now only the cracks, nicks, and gouged-out initials still have blue paint.

The woman turns to look at them. In her right hand, held between her thumb and forefinger, is a glass tube of murky water. Stevens snatches it, then jabs her shoulder with a stubby finger.

"You get on outta here." He opens his hand. The vial hits the gravel path but bounces. The woman bends to pick it up, but Stevens puts his shoe over it, then tips forward. Buddy hears it pop then splinter under his weight. Stevens grins at the woman, before spreading his arms in welcome to his customers. He brushes past, bumping her against the fence.