

# DOLPHIN SKY

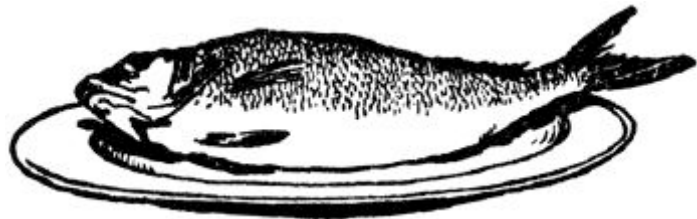
By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 10

"So you say them dolphins, is in a pen up on the Tamiami Trail, huh?"

They are seated at the dinner table. Her grandfather winks at her, then glances at Kirk, who's watching a pot boil on the stove with his back to them.

"Must be right near Turner River." With his knife and fork, he lifts a fillet of broiled yellowtail and slides it onto his plate.



Buddy tucks her head and grins at him.

"Yes, sir," she says, hoping her dad can't detect the giggle in her voice. "According to the map they had it on the side wall of the ticket booth, the airboat rides cut right across the sawgrass prairie to the river."

The window above the sink fogs as her dad drains the water off the vegetables. He brings a bowl of steaming Brussels sprouts to the table and sits down.

Buddy makes a Brussels-sprout-hating face at her grandfather. He nods in agreement, then takes a deep breath.

"You know, Turner River comes into the bay just north of here. The Calusas, and later the Seminoles, used it like a highway inland from their camps. Hells bells, wasn't that long ago, I knew that river like the back of my hand-used it to get up into the 'glades' to hunt. Good fishing in that river."

He chews a piece of fish, thoughtfully like an idea is just forming in his mind. "I 'spect the river's overgrown in places, but I betcha we could find the way."

Buddy swallows to keep from laughing out loud. She keeps her head down and picks bones from her piece of fish.

"Up the river?"

"Sure."

"To see the dolphins again?"

"Yep. And maybe do a little fishing for mangrove snapper."

Kirk looks up from his plate. "Don't be ridiculous."

Buddy glances at her grandfather, and sees his eyes narrow. He doesn't like being challenged. "Yep," her grandfather says, "it's been too long since I've been up that ole river."

Kirk gets up, opens the fridge and takes out a beer.

"I was thinking," the Admiral says without looking at his son, "maybe you and me could clean up the pitpan and give it a try."

Buddy tries not to, but she glances at her dad. He's standing at the sink with his back to them looking out the window at the docks.

"Could we?" she says to the Admiral, but it's her father who turns. "No, you couldn't."

He comes to the table opposite his father, leans on one fist, and points his beer bottle at him. "What the hell are you talking about, you old fool? You're going to patch up the pitpan. You can't patch a crab trap without dozing off."

The Admiral's eyes flash, and the muscles in his jaw work under his thin, wrinkled skin.

"I'll help him finish the traps before we go," Buddy whispers.

"We?" Her father looks at her and snorts.

She sags in her chair like a punctured inner tube.

Kirk leans closer to his father. "On your little cruise, where are you going to put your wheelchair? On skis, maybe."

The Admiral smacks the table so hard with the palm of his hand, Buddy nearly jumps out of her skin.

"I put glued blocks in to hold my chair in place," he snaps.

"You've put blocks in?" Kirk gets it now. She can tell by his face. "You two have this all planned, don't you?" He slams the empty beer bottle down on the table and turns to Buddy. "You're not going!"

It seems that every argument they have-and they have lots-is about her.

She slides out of her chair, but stops at the door to the living room. Her dad grabs another beer from the fridge and heads for the back door.

They both jump when he slams it, full-force, behind him. Her grandfather stabs a sprout with his fork and eats it like a meatball on a toothpick. This is all her fault. The Admiral is only trying to make her happy. Buddy crosses the living room and slips out onto the front porch. Her father is standing on the sea wall looking at the bay. She wonders sometimes, when he stands like that looking out across the water, if he's thinking about her mother, and wishing she was here so it wasn't always two against one.

Sorry, Daddy, she thinks, then tiptoes to the far side of the porch, ducks under the railing and pads away into the darkness.

The Smallwood store is a red, tin-roofed, rambling hard-pine building anchored atop eight-foot pilings. In the dark, it looks like a giant, black, rectangular spider, but she still loves it best at night.

She goes there just to sit on the sea wall under the store and watch the foamy white lip of the bay seep in and out of the rusty pile of engines, which according to her grandfather, were dumped there during the Second World War to keep the government from making bullets out of them.

When a boat passes in the channel, its wake creates a series of small waves that wash across the motors so they make little sucking sounds, hiss and occasionally sigh, as if life is being breathed back into them.

She loves these engines. They have faces, cracked and old like the Admiral's. She likes to dangle her feet in the water with her toes touching them, and feel the water rise and fall as rhythmically as the Admiral's chest when he's sleeping.

Nowadays she finds it hard to believe that she'd once been afraid of the store.

When she was six, the Admiral told her the story of "Bloody" Ed Watson, who had lived on Chatham River, down the coast from Chokoloskee. He grew sugar cane and made syrup to sell to moonshiners for what people called "low-bush lightning," a blend of cane syrup and Red Devil lye for moonshine so strong it lathered like soap.

At cane-cutting time, the Admiral told her, Watson would go to Naples and hire folks with no kin. When the crop was in, instead of paying them, he shot them and buried them around his farm.

For a couple of years Buddy had a recurring nightmare in which her father took her to Watson's farm and gave her to him.

"She's worthless to me," he told Watson, "Maybe you can get some work out of her."

After the cane was cut and boiled, the syrup was put in tins, Watson chased her with his shotgun, shouting, "Come back, I want to pay you."

She always ran away from him down the bank of the Chatham River. And each time, at the same spot, she turned to see Watson taking aim and would trip over one of the three-hundred-pound Hannah Smith's rotting legs, which the tides had exposed.

Buddy would fall, hear the crack of the shotgun blast, and wake up. It was after clam diggers found Hannah Smith's body that the men of Chokoloskee killed Ed Watson.

"Killed him right here on Smallwood's dock," the Admiral said. "Right where them rusty engines is now. And after they killed him, they found fifty bodies buried on his farm. 'Course no telling if that was all of them."

A couple years later, her grandfather found out she was afraid of the store, and must have realized it was he who'd frightened her with his stories. One evening, just before his accident, he walked there with her and they sat on the sea wall and watched dolphins fishing in the channel.

He told her about Teddy Roosevelt and the Calusa Indians and the history of the shellmounds. After that, the store became theirs and she went often, though now she went alone.