

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 22

Her father comes into the kitchen, as Buddy is finishing telling the Admiral about meeting Miss Conroy and her dad toying with Carlisle Townsend. They are sitting at the kitchen table, laughing, with the crab between them. Buddy's trying to get it to eat the small squares of bacon she has cut up.

"It's not going to eat bacon, especially not sitting on the table." Kirk goes to the sink to wash his hands then fills a pot with water. "Why don't you let it go down to Smallwood's."

"If he doesn't die, I can use him in my science project."

"Oh yeah. I forgot about that." He puts the pot on a burner and dumps a bag of claws into the sink. "I got \$900 for three hundred pounds. At that measly price, we might as well eat them ourselves."

"What do crabs eat?" She scrapes the bacon bits off into a napkin.

"Clams and oysters, mostly," the Admiral says. "You named him yet?"

She thought for a moment. "Maybe I could name him Osceola. Do you think that's bad luck, Admiral?"

"Not at all. He's lucky to have you taking care of him, and that dolphin would like having a tough little namesake to be remembered by."

"Good, then Osceola it is."

"You know, we used to have a fish tank. I ain't seen it in years, but your grandma never gave nothing away, so it must be here somewhere."



"It's under the front porch," Kirk says. "I saw it there a few months ago."

Buddy puts Osceola in the bucket and leaves through the back door, letting it bang shut behind her. "Sorry," she shouts. Minutes later, she returns with the fish tank under her arm. She's washed it, but not the sand off her knees and elbows, and she has a cobweb in her hair.

". . . you really think that they're going to close the Park?" the Admiral is saying.

"I don't know." Steam rises from the pot on the stove.

"Buddy, look what you're doing." Her father points to the puddle forming on the floor.

"Sorry." She grabs the dish towel off the refrigerator handle, wipes the floor, then the fish tank.

"I bet they close it," the Admiral says. "A promise made by the government is as useless as the politician that makes it. Remember old man Smallwood's 167 acres? He helped them survey it, and they took it from him for his trouble. Yep, they'll close it."

"Dammit, Buddy, that's a clean dish towel." Kirk snatches it out of her hand.

"I'm sorry."

"Quit saying, I'm sorry. Just think about what the devil you're doing and you won't have to be sorry."

"Quit yelling at her," her grandfather shouts.

"Mind your own business," Kirk snaps.

Buddy takes the bucket and the tank and goes back outside. She sits on the top step and leans her head against the wall. Once again, something she's done has started another argument.

"She's as much my business as she is yours, and she takes enough of a beating without you yelling at her."

"She needs to pay attention to what she's doing."

"It's a little water on the floor."

"Look, old man, I've had a brutal day. Get off my back."

"Son, you've got your priorities all screwed up. But someday you're gonna realize what you've lost." He hesitates then shouts, "I wish it on you."

Osceola is scuttling around and around his plastic-bucket prison. "I know how you feel," she whispers, "but as soon as you're well, I'll let you go, I promise." She hitches the tank up on her hip and heads down the road to Smallwood's store.

Over sixty years ago, Ted Smallwood cleared away a few red mangroves and sea grapes to expose a narrow strip of sand as a place for the Indians to land their canoes. Buddy sets the bucket on the sea wall and wades out from the beach with the aquarium, past where small waves roll over on themselves and hiss against the sand. In cupped hands, she scoops sand into the tank until she has about a two-inch layer. She's thinking that will probably be enough at the moment the tank lists to the side, fills with water and sinks. She turns it on to its side to empty the sand and water, and puts it back on the sea wall.

"This ain't gonna work," she tells Osceola. "I'll be back, okay?" She starts to run, stops, comes back, carries the tank and the bucket to the bushes by the old boat cradle, then runs back home.

"Admiral?" She taps on his door.

There's no answer.

"Admiral?" She cracks the door.

He opens his eyes. "Hi, honey." He's in bed, propped up on pillows.

"Admiral, Osceola's tank is gonna be too heavy for me to carry back."

"Where's your father?"

"I don't know. Still in the kitchen, I guess. I don't want to ask him, anyway. He's mad at me and don't like the crab none either."

Her grandfather strokes her arm. "How about the wheelbarrow?"

"The tire's flat, remember?"

He nods.

"Can I borrow your wheelchair? I'll be careful and I won't get it too wet."

"I ain't worried about you getting it wet. Wet dries. Aren't you smart to think of it."

He's always trying to make her feel smart. She kisses his stubbly cheek.

"Thanks."

He smiles, and closes his eyes. At the door, she turns. He looks tired-and old-and for the first time she feels a flutter of fear in her stomach.

She rolls the chair off the porch, kicks up the footrest, gets in, and launches herself down the road, spinning the wheels as hard as she can. The trail from her house through the pines is slightly downhill. When she's flying, she throws her legs out straight, flings her arms wide, and tilts her head up into the humid wind.

Before she wheels the tank back, she puts Osceola in it and watches as he bashes himself into first one side, then the other. She scoops up a half bucket of water, puts it in the seat with the tank, then wades into the shallows and walks back and forth digging her toes into the sand for clams. When she has half a dozen, she wheels her collection home.

Buddy parks the chair at the bottom of the ramp, tiptoes up, quietly opens the screen door, and peeks in. The kitchen is empty. The claws are on the counter in a bowl of ice water so the meat doesn't stick to the shell. She carries the bucket up first and uses it to prop open the door. The shower is running as she wheels past the bathroom.

She clears a spot on her dresser, then puts the tank against the mirror so Osceola can keep himself company. His tracks pock the sand as he scurries back and forth, bumping the glass, north, south, east, and west.

"You need to hide, don't you?"

She tiptoes past the bathroom again where she now hears the shower dripping and the scrape of a razor across a cheek.

In the shed, she chooses the oldest trap, breaks the tubular steel bait chute loose, then drags the trap to the darkest corner and stacks another trap on top of it. She stands on the front porch, listening, before quietly opening the screen door and sliding in through the crack. The metal tube is behind her back, in the waistband of her shorts, with her T-shirt pulled out to cover it. She creeps across the living room, past her father's bedroom door. Her hand is on her doorknob when he touches her shoulder. "You ready for dinner?"

She spins and presses her back against her door.

"Are you still messing with that crab?"

"No, sir. Well, yes sir."

"Well finish and get cleaned up for dinner."

"Yes, sir." She backs into her room.

Osceola has partially buried himself in the sand. She smiles at him over the rim. "I can still see you."

Puffs of sand explode into the shallow layer of water.

"That did it. You're gone now." Buddy puts the tube in the aquarium, adds most of the water, and drops all the clams in except one. "I'll open this one for you after dinner," she says, holding the clam up for him to see. She puts the bucket in the wheelchair, wheels it into the hall and closes her door.

Her grandfather snores softly. She parks his chair beside his bed, and brushes the traces of sand off the seat. At the door, she turns to watch him breathe. Without opening his eyes, he scratches at the cast on his arm.

At dinner, Buddy pushes the claws to one side of her plate and eats her string beans and potatoes.

"Why aren't you eating the claws?"

"I'm saving them."



When he's not looking, she turns each claw so she can see if the broken end is ragged. None are. She feels better.

After she finishes the dishes, Buddy gets a sharp knife, turns the clam on its flattest side, works the blade between the two shell halves, and pushes down as hard as she can.

The blade goes through the clam and the bucket. Water seeps out the crack in the plastic. She grabs it, puts her hand under the puncture, and runs from her room toward the porch. She hits her father as he's coming out of the bathroom. Some of the water splashes up the side of the bucket and soaks the front of his shirt, the rest drips out on his shoes.

"I can't believe this." His voice is calm. "What are you doing?" He strains to control his anger.

"I was trying to open a clam for Osceola."

He seems to try, for a moment, not to yell. "You know better than to play with a knife. Don't you?" His fists knot and unknot.

I'm thirteen. I don't play with knives, she thinks. "I wasn't playing." The bucket is empty now. They are standing in the puddle.

"Screwing with that stone crab is playing," he yells. She looks at her feet.

"And you've ruined that bucket. They're expensive, and I have to go to Naples for them." He snatches it away from her, stomps across the living room, opens the screen door, and sails it off the porch, clam and all. "Now clean up that mess."

A tear rolls down her cheek and splashes into the puddle at her feet.

"Don't cry." He shakes his finger at her. "It's time you grow up."

She stares at his door after it slams behind him.

"And get rid of that crab," he shouts.

Osceola is out of his tube when she comes into the room and flings herself across her bed. He shoots back into it and clunks against the glass at the other end.

It's morning, but still dark, when she hears her door open. She doesn't turn over or open her eyes as the floor creaks under her father's weight. He stops at the end of her bed and stands there for what seems like a long time. She can hear him breathing.

Her right foot is out from under the sheet. He pulls the sheet free, covers her foot and tucks in the corner, then the floor boards creak as he walks away. "I'm sorry, honey," he whispers before he closes the door.

"Me, too, Daddy," she whispers back.