

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 29

Buddy pulls her blue, Swiss-dot church dress off a hanger in the back of the closet. She holds it out, snaps it in the air, fans away the dust and sneezes. The dress's white lace-trimmed bib and the cuffs on the short sleeves have yellowed. She holds it up even with her shoulders. The hem is still out in the back where she caught it getting out of her dad's truck. But even where it hangs down, it only hits her mid-thigh. She puts it back on the hanger and closes the closet door.

Osceola is half buried in the sand, but his eyes watch her like tiny black pearls. "You hungry?" She peers back at him.

Puffs of sand obscure his dash into his tube, and she hears him clink against the glass at the other end.

She reaches in and pokes a finger into the sand, feeling for a clam. When she withdraws her dripping hand, he comes to the rim of his tube and looks up at her. Buddy smiles at him. "I'm going to Miami. What do you think about that?"

Her grandfather is in his wheelchair in the shade on the front porch, snoring softly. She tiptoes over and kisses his cheek.

He opens his eyes, grunts, rubs the back of his neck, then glances at the hammer in her hand. "You cooking for that crab of yours?"

"Yeah. He's getting little claws." She goes down the steps, squats down and smashes the clam with the hammer, then picks out the shell bits. She looks up at him. "Did you know that when their claws grow back, they is under a clear little cap-thing?"

"I've seen it a time or two."

"Neat, ain't it?"

"Yep. When he molts, that shield will drop off and he'll have himself a nice new set of claws."

"Soon as he can feed himself, or after my science report, I'll let him go and hope he has the good sense not to climb into a trap again. But I kind of hope he don't molt before the kids see his little claws under them caps." She scoops the pieces of clam into her palm. "After I feed him, you want to play some cards or something?"

"I don't think so. Looking at them little spots makes my eyes hurt."

"Want to go for a walk? Smallwood's is closed. We could go sit under the store and watch for dolphins."

"Maybe later, okay?"

"Okay." She nods but watches his face for a sign that he really means later this time, or at least for the twinkle in his eye that would mean he feels better.

Instead, he yawns.

Buddy stands, folds her fingers over the wet, slimy clam, and puts her arm around his neck and her cheek against his. "I gotta go see Iris or Miss Nancy 'bout borrowing something to wear to Miami. My church dress don't fit no more. I'll be back to fix your lunch, okay?"

"I ain't seen you in a dress in years." He rubs the bumps of her spine. "You sure is beautiful in a dress."

"Ah, Admiral, a dress ain't gonna make me beautiful. I ain't even sure it'll make me look like a girl."

He takes her arms. "You're the prettiest girl in Collier Country, and getting prettier every day. You just wait, won't be long before I gotta sit out here with a shotgun across my knees to keep the boys away. Bang. Bang." He fires his fingers at the two palm trees in their yard.

Buddy blushes. "If boys is all like Alex and his friends, I ain't ever gonna want one. We can both sit out here and shoot at 'em." She scrunches into the chair with him and leans her head against his shoulder. "If I ever do get married, will you come live with me?"

"It will be mighty hard to find you a husband if he's gonna get me in the bargain."

"Then I ain't getting married." She holds her arm out so the juices from the clam trickles through her fingers and drips on the porch. "Not ever."

Short, round Iris Smallwood can't find a dress to fit tall, lanky Buddy, so she makes her pick a skirt from her closet. Buddy chooses a faded, pleated, plaid one because it looks like her fishing cap, though she doesn't plan to wear them together.

Iris, who was Ted Smallwood's granddaughter, takes the skirt in at the waist, lets the hem out, and presses it. When it's finished, they walk over to the Blue Heron Motel where Iris's aunt, Nancy Smallwood Hanson, adds a white blouse with a long scarf attached to the edge of the stand-up collar. They tie and retie it until they get a bow that droops evenly on both sides. When they finish, Buddy looks like a thirteen-year old, barefooted Sunday school teacher. She glances from one to the other, her long bangs snagging her eyelashes.

"Well," Nancy and Iris say together. "That will be fine for Miami," Nancy says to Iris, who nods her agreement.

"Do you have some white sandals?" Iris asks.

"Yes ma'am. My school sandals is mostly white."

"Good. Then all we need is a barrette for your bangs." Iris pushes them to one side, and turns Buddy's head this way and that by her chin. "A red one. I have one down at the store."



Early the next morning, Buddy hears Jane shift gears when she comes off the stop sign up the hill. She grabs her sandals from the closet, the barrette off her dresser, shouts, "Bye, crab," and dashes from her room. She bursts into the Admiral's room. "She's here."

A sandal dangles from each pinky as she pushes her bangs to one side and snaps the barrette closed on them. She turns from the mirror and grins at her grandfather, then does a little jig, her arms poking the air, sandals bouncing. "Just think, Admiral, all the way to Miami."

He smiles and holds his arms out. "I found something I want you to have." He opens the drawer in the little table beside his bed and takes out a small box like a ring would come in.

He hands it to her but holds her hands to keep her from opening it. "When I was in school, the first of my adult teeth I lost was an eyetooth." He lowers his voice and winks. "Got it knocked out fighting, if the truth be told. Back then I figured an eyetooth was worth saving, so I picked it out of the dirt and kept it." He lets her hands go. "It's brought me good luck ever since. You take it now."

Buddy opens the little box, lifts the tissue, and takes out the tooth. She closes it in her fist. "I wish you could keep an eye on me through this tooth."

"Maybe I can. Ain't ever tried."

There are two short beeps from the road.

"Try Admiral, okay?"

The pocket in the skirt has a small hole in the bottom. Buddy dashes to her room, dumps her bottom drawer out on her bed and sorts through the mess until she finds the white patent leather purse that went with her church dress. She opens it, drops the tooth inside, snaps it close and runs from the room. At the Admiral's door, she holds up the purse. "It's in here. I love you."

Buddy holds her purse in her lap and focuses on the arrow-straight, brown water canal until it seems to be the thing moving instead of them.

When they reach the blinking light at the intersection of 29 and 41, she knows they will turn right. She knows Stevens's is five miles, and that they will pass a sign: Miami 72. She feels like, until today, these have been the boundaries to her world, and she is about to break through. She's glad Jane is quiet because she wants to memorize what appears at each and every mile marker.

Two cars, one with a New Jersey license plate and one from Iowa, are already in Stevens's lot.

"Tourists!"

Buddy jumps when Jane's voice breaks into her thoughts.

"Their money keeps that old fart in business."

Buddy laughs, a short burst of a laugh, because Annie and Lucie jumping through hoops is the picture that comes to mind next.

"I filed a report with the Marine Patrol. Hopefully, they'll jerk his license."

"Will they let them go free?"

"No, they'll move them somewhere else where they will be properly taken care of."

"Why can't they just let them go."

"It's assumed that once an animal has been tamed, it loses its ability to care for itself in the wild. That makes us responsible for what we tame forever."

Buddy looks back as they whiz past Stevens'. "Do you think that's true? That they can't take care of themselves anymore."

"I don't know. It's true for a lot of animals, especially ones taken when they are young, but I'm not convinced about animals as smart as dolphins, and those two were captured as adults. It's pretty hard to believe they've forgotten how to feed themselves."

"Osceola is getting tame. Is that a bad thing?"

Jane shakes her head. "Once he's back in the ocean, he'll go right back to finding his own food. He's not tame, he's trusting; that's easy to get over."