

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 36

Jane drives her home. Her dad is in the kitchen and smiles when they come in.

"How'd it go?"

Jane is carrying the empty tank. Kirk dries his hands, takes it from her, looks inside then looks at Buddy.

"Go see your grandfather," Jane says. "I'll tell him."

"Admiral?" she whispers from his doorway.

He's asleep, snoring softly.

The room is exactly as she'd left it this morning: the blinds open, light off, wheelchair pulled close to the bed, one footrest up, one down. How could everything be the same? The only difference is he'd put her picture back on the bedside table, beside the glass with his teeth. And the room smells of urine again.

"Damn him," she hears her father shout.

She steps in, closes the door, and quietly slips into his chair.

"Admiral." Tears slide down her face. "Alex killed Osceola."

She reaches toward the bedpost, takes his Mack truck cap off and puts it on.

He sighs, and opens his eyes.

She pulls the cap lower.

"Is that you under there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you crying?"

"No."

He leans over trying to see under the brim. She tilts her head up and smiles at him.

"How'd the report go?"

"It was the best one."

"I told you, didn't I? How'd they like that crab?"

"I let him go, Admiral."

"Ah, that's what the sniffing's about." He pats her leg. "You think he was ready?"

"Yes, sir. He was ready."

"And he didn't look back, did he?"



"Not once." She looks up at the stain on the ceiling. "I'll miss him."

"I know, honey, but when something's born free, like your crab and them dolphins, then caught and kept, even by someone who loves and takes care of them, they is still only thinking about being free again."

"I never meant to keep him." Tears brim again and roll down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, honey." He takes her hand. "He knows that now."

Before Jane leaves to go home, she and Buddy walk the road to Smallwood's. Buddy sits on the sea wall, draws a circle in the sand by her left hip, then gets on her knees and begins to dig a hole. When it's deep enough, she lines it with the napkin, lays his claws in first, then his body before mounding sand over Osceola. She takes her shoes and socks off, and puts her feet in the water

Jane sits beside her, the grave between them.

"How awful," Jane says of the pile of rusty engines. "Such a pretty place to dump all that junk."

"Oh no, they ain't awful." Buddy smiles. "I like them and know who most of them belonged to."

She stretches her leg out until her big toe touches an exposed edge of one near the bottom of the pile. "This was my great-grandfather's engine. Took Teddy Roosevelt tarpon fishing. And that one there," she points her toes, "that was the first school boat's motor. It used to drive Mr. Simmons crazy by quitting whenever it got around other engines. Putting it here was Mr. Simmons's revenge, but I think it looks happy, don't you?"

Jane cocks her head to one side, and shrugs.

"I like it here best when the tide is out and they stick out of the water. Waves come in and fill them up and then go out again, so it sounds like they're breathing. I want the pitpan's motor to end here." She strokes the top of the pile with her foot. "But I guess they ain't too pretty to someone who don't know them."

"They're nicer than they were."

Buddy runs her hand over the small mound of sand. "We all see things different, don't we?"

Jane nods. "My mother used to say there are three hundred and sixty ways to see an elephant."

"She did? Why?"

"That was her way of saying what you just said. We all see things differently. There are three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle. If the elephant is in the center, every one, at each degree, has a different view of him. Get it?"

"Yes 'am." Buddy draws a circle around Osceola's grave. "It means as long as we is all looking at it from a different place, we ain't never gonna agree on what we see."

Jane puts her arm around her and touches the side of her head to Buddy's. "We can all agree it's an elephant."

Buddy stands by the back door and waves as Jane pulls away. She turns to go in, but Jane honks, puts the Volkswagen in reverse, backs down the hill and stops. She gets out and walks to the railing of the wheelchair ramp. "This probably isn't the time, but I think you should know. Stevens lost his license. The Marine Patrol will move the dolphins right after the holidays."

Buddy looks down and digs her toes into her sandals.

"I'm sorry, honey."

She nods.

"They will die if they aren't moved. It's their only chance."

"I know."

A first quarter moon breaks out of the clouds. Buddy looks up. "Lucie has the same thing Osceola had."

Jane winces. "Dolphin pox? That's not good."

"Can it be cured?"

Jane goes back and turns off the ignition, then comes to the railing again. "Knowledge about the cause and cure is sketchy, especially in wild dolphins, but it seems to be caused by a virus and is related to poor health and stress." She bites her bottom lip. "Not surprising. Considering the conditions they're kept in."

Buddy grips the ramp railing. "Will they get better at Marineland?"

Jane covers her hand. "I have to be honest with you. They will be in clean, filtered seawater, and get fresh fish, but they will still be in a concrete tank."

"Why can't they just be put back in the ocean?"

Jane crooks a finger. "Let's go sit on the porch for a minute."

Buddy offers the swing, but Jane chooses to lean against the railing. Night-blooming jasmine deceptively sweetens the air.

"We humans are creatures of light because we orient ourselves visually. Dolphins are sonic creatures.

They rely on sound to communicate and to locate their food. When we put a dolphin, or lots of dolphins into a concrete tank, the sounds they make bounce back at them from every direction. It must be like being inside a drum someone is beating on. They become confused, disoriented and either have to stop using sound, or go crazy."

"So wouldn't Annie and Lucie, and Lucie's baby, have a better chance if they just set them free?"

"Scientists believe that once they stop using sound to locate their food, and get used to doing a few tricks every two hours for fish, they lose their ability to return to the wild, and function as wild creatures again, or at the very least, they starve before they get the hang of it again."

Buddy gets up, sending the swing creaking on its chains. She takes both Jane's hands. "Do you believe that's true?"

"I can't . . ."

"Do you believe that an animal as smart as a dolphin forgets how to catch its food?" she demands.

Jane shakes her head. "I don't really."

"Me either."

Jane lifts her chin. "Smells nice out here."

"It's the jasmine." Buddy sits down again. "You know what the Admiral told me he saw once?"

"I don't. No."

"He was bonefishing in Florida Bay and seen three dolphins make a mud-net to catch mullet. You ever heard of that?"

"Can't say I have."

"He said he told people, but they didn't believe him. He said I should keep it a secret 'cause people will think I'm a fruitcake, but you're a scientist. You always got people thinking you're a . . ."

"Fruitcake?"

"Well not that, but look what happened to the guy who said that it was gravity caused that apple to hit him in the head."

By light from a lamp in the living room, Buddy sees Jane smile. "True. It didn't turn out all that well for Mr. Newton. Tell me what a mud-net is."

"It's a made-up word for what the Admiral saw them do. The water in Florida Bay is real shallow, and he said he watched a dolphin swim in a big circle around a school of mullet, slapping its tail in the mud the whole way 'round."

That stirred up the mud and the fish started jumping over the muddy circle rather than swim through it and the dolphins caught them midair, just like they do when the trainers at Seaquarium tossed fish to them. He said he ain't never seen nothing like it before or since."

"Actually, that's pretty amazing, and . . ."

"And what?"

"Well, last year I did an aerial survey for the National Audubon Society of which islands in Florida Bay were being used by nesting birds. From the air, I kept seeing these circles in the mud, like underwater crop circles. I asked the helicopter pilot what made them, but he didn't know. What your grandfather saw might be the answer." She grins. "You, my dear friend, may have given me my next research project."

