

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 4

The woman tries to turn around, but her belt is caught on the wire where each link twists like crossed fingers at the top of the fence. She gets herself loose, and shouts, "You won't . . ." but by that time Buddy and Kirk, and the other sweaty customers, are all staring at her. Her hands ball into fists and she glares at Stevens, then quite suddenly, turns away.

"I think she's crying."

"I doubt it," her dad says.

Because of the dense growth of weeds and willows, Buddy hadn't seen the gate between the pond and pool. When she hears the creak of rusty metal hinges, she looks over in time to see the fins of two dolphins appear and crowd through the opening. A



moment later, a third seems to float through and drift toward the cattails on the far side of the pool.

Buddy smiles as she watches the first two whiz across the surface of the pool, then dive. When they come up again, they are on their backs with their pectoral fins waving back and forth like they're clapping. Buddy laughs, then steals a glance at the woman.

She's pretty, especially her thick dark hair. Buddy rolls a clump of her own short, sweat-soaked blond hair between her fingers, and sneaks a peep at her dad to see if he's admiring her, too. Buddy's mom has been dead for years, and she and her grandfather both think a nice woman in Kirk's life would make him happier than he is.

The woman is wearing white Keds on her small, slim feet. Buddy looks down with shame at her own big feet, with their long, dusty toes and soles as tough as anchor rope. She's sure her mother had nice small feet and that she's inherited hers from her dad.

She joins her dad on the first bench and tucks her legs under it. "Why do you think Mr. Stevens smashed that tube?"

"I'm not sure, but it looked like she'd taken a water sample."

"It doesn't look too clean, does it?"

"Not very."

The water in the dolphin pool is the color of coffee with milk, like the shallow waters around Chokoloskee after a storm.

She thinks she's seen dolphins in those waters after storms, but she's not sure. Even if she has, it was much nicer to see them in clear water the day they raced her dad's boat. Here they are only visible when they surface, but that makes watching them more exciting, as if someone is turning the hand of a jack-in-the-box.

She finds herself holding her breath between the explosions of air that announce the surfacing of one of the three dolphins. A dolphin's gray head pops up in front of the woman who defied Stevens's order to leave. It opens its mouth, like it's grinning, squeaks and bobs its head. The woman says, "I'm sorry," and shows the dolphin empty hands, but then her expression changes to one of concern and she leans over the fence to stare at something on the dolphin's face.

"Dammit." She turns and glares at Stevens.

Buddy stands to see what the woman is looking at, but her dad pulls her back down beside him. "Mind your own business; you'll only encourage her."

"I told you . . .," Stevens shouts, then glances at his audience. A smile cracks open around the cigar stub clenched in his teeth. "The show is about to begin, ladies and gentlemen." He flips a switch on an old record player and drops the needle onto the record. A scratched version of the Lone Ranger's theme groans to a start. He lowers the volume,

then marches down the path toward the woman.

As all eyes follow him, the woman slowly, deliberately, takes a small pad from the hip pocket of her khaki shorts. She pats her thick hair, and pulls the stub of pencil from behind her ear. Even from where they are sitting, Buddy can see she's making a drawing, she writes something, then jams the pad back in her pocket. She squares her shoulders, and smiles up at Stevens, whose face is inches from her own.

"My name is Jane Conroy," she says. "You'll remember that, won't you?" She puts her hands on her hips and stares up at him through narrowed eyes. "You're breaking the law here." She keeps her voice even. "And it has the potential to kill these animals."

Buddy looks at her dad.

"That's bull," he says. "These dolphins are beloved family pets. Now get out!" Stevens snarls, even though his body blocks the path.

Miss Conroy, pointedly, looks both ways around him, shrugs and steps up on the first row bench. She takes a ticket stub out of her breast pocket, holds it up, then turns, climbs to the very top row, and sits down.

The music ends and the needle bumps on for a while before Stevens stomps back down the path, lifts the arm, and turns it off.

The boy who'd taken their tickets comes through the gate carrying a beach ball, two hula hoops, and a bucket of fish. He puts them all by the fence, then drags a folded ladder from beneath the bleachers. The smell from the bucket spreads up to the audience. Buddy wrinkles her nose.

"Looks like you got a bad one in the bucket, Junior." Stevens hangs the bucket on the fence and starts picking through the contents. He chooses a fish and tosses it into the bushes near the gate. All three dolphins head in that direction but when it lands in the weeds, they turn, and swim back.

Stevens makes a point of not looking at Miss Conroy, but says to everyone in general, "Don't you folks worry none. My dolphins don't get no bad fish."



Miss Conroy snorts. "Those dolphins haven't seen a fresh fish since the day you trapped them and brought them here."

Stevens points his cigar at her. "I'm gonna ask you to be quiet, little lady, or I'm gonna ask you to leave."

He looks at Kirk and Buddy, then walks over, takes Buddy by the chin, and rotates her head around to face Jane. "You're ruining this kid's birthday." He shakes his head sadly. "Sorry, kid. You get 'em like this sometimes."

Stevens's son has opened the ladder so it straddles the fence. He climbs to the top and blows a whistle. Three fins come across the pool and pop up in a row at the edge of a wooden raft with a couple of boards missing.

Stevens reaches beneath the record player stand and brings out a microphone. "Testing," he bellows.

Buddy covers a giggle with her hand. There are five rows in the bleachers and only twelve customers-not counting Miss Conroy-all of whom are sitting clumped together a few feet from Stevens. Even if he whispers, they can all hear him.

"Ladies and gentlemen. . ." The microphone squeals.

Stevens bangs it on the fence railing. The domed top falls in the water.

"Damn," he mutters, then shouts, "Ladies and gentlemen, this here's my son Owen Stevens, Junior. He wants you to meet Annie Tiger, Lucie Cypress, and Osceola. Take a bow, kids."

Stevens's son bows stiffly then turns toward the pool, blows his whistle and points skyward. One dolphin, with a pink scar on its snout, brings itself out of the water and tail-walks backward. Another one follows. The movement of their tails

makes their bodies bob in a quick succession of bows. The third dolphin doesn't join in, and seems to kind of drift away.

Buddy applauds with everyone else, but the silence from the woman above her makes her uncomfortable.

Junior takes three fish from the bucket he's hung on a hook on the side of the ladder and throws one to each of the two dolphins who did the bowing. He holds the third fish by its tail and wiggles it, trying to get the last dolphin to jump for it.

"He's sick enough without you giving him another rotten fish to eat." Miss Conroy says this softly, but Kirk, Buddy and the rest of the audience turn to look at her.

"Why don't you cool it, lady," Kirk says.

Jane lifts her chin and stares down her nose at him. Buddy thinks her cheeks look wet.

"For their next trick," Stevens shouts. "Annie and Osceola will jump through hoops. Lucie is excused from this trick because," he hesitates, clearly forcing himself not to look in Miss Conroy's direction. Instead, he gives a suggestive wink to the audience, "because we think she might be pregnant."



The audience applauds, almost too loudly, as if they've taken his side. Buddy glances around.

Miss Conroy's elbow is propped on a raised knee and her chin rests on the heel of her hand, knuckles pressed to her lips. Their eyes meet for a moment, then Miss Conroy closes hers and shakes her head.

Buddy turns and jams her hands under her thighs. She's taken a side, too.

From the ladder, the boy leans out over the water holding two hula hoops. He blows his whistle, and the flat surface of the pool erupts, but only the dolphin with the pink scar explodes into the air. A soft 'oh' comes from the audience.

Unfortunately, the boy moves the hoop just as the dolphin starts through. One of its pectoral fins hits it, ripping the plastic ring out of his hand. The dolphin disappears into the pool. The hula hoop springs back to the surface.

Stevens leans over the railing and says, "Make her do it again." He turns and beams at the audience. "We'll have her try it again for you folks."

"It was your kid's fault," Miss Conroy mutters. "Not the dolphin's." Stevens glares at her, and so does Kirk. "You don't feed them enough to have them do your stupid tricks twice."

Stevens points a broad finger at her. "You shut up."



Junior blows his whistle and points to the floating hoop. The dolphin with the scarred snout, the one they call Annie,



brings it over so Stevens' son can reach it.

"She's awfully mad, isn't she?" Buddy whispers to her father.

"I don't know who she thinks she is," Kirk says.

The pleasure has gone out of this for Buddy. She watches Annie and Lucie bounce a yellow, red, and blue striped beach ball back and forth, and is glad when the breeze catches it in the space between them, floats it up and carries it across the pool into a stand of cattails. Buddy doesn't want them to do any more tricks.

"Ladies," Stevens hisses, making a sweeping bow in Jane's direction, "and gentlemen, Annie and Lucie have been taking dancing lessons from my boy here, Arthur Murray-Stevens, and they would like to show you folks their fancy fluke work." Stevens slaps his hand over his exposed navel, and his belly bobs as if it was having a good laugh, but his eyes are angry blue pinpoints.

"Arthur Murray? I thought his name was Owen," Buddy says to her dad.

"It's like a pun." Kirk glances at her. "A joke. Arthur Murray was a famous dancing teacher."

Junior blows the whistle, and Stevens puts on the Lone Ranger music again. The dolphins face each other, then hoist themselves out of the water on pumping tails. Their flippers are held up and out to each other, almost touching, so for a minute, they look like a couple dancing, before they flop back into the pool. The bleachers above them creak. Buddy and Kirk both turn to watch Miss Conroy make her way along the top row, then down the far side of the stands. Near the exit gate, she stops and leans over the fence. The dolphin named Lucie Cypress upends and opens her mouth. Miss Conroy again holds up empty hands.

"That's it, folks," Stevens shouts, then bows to tired, hot applause. He slaps customers on the back as they file past, thanking each one for coming and reminding them to tell their friends. When only Buddy and Kirk remain, he leans over and whispers something to his son, then motions for Buddy to come. She looks at her dad.

"Go on. It's the rest of your birthday present."

"Really?" she says, when Stevens offers to help her up the ladder.

"No problem. Happy birthday." He gives her shoulder a friendly thump, but he's watching Miss Conroy.

The three dolphins are circling around the gate to their pond.

When Junior blows his whistle, only the dolphin named Annie comes back across the pool and upends in front of the raft.

"Here, give her this." Junior hands Buddy a fish.

It feels mushy. Buddy sniffs it, and makes a face. "I think this here's another bad one." She hands it back to him, and wipes her hands on the seat of her shorts. She glances to see if her dad is watching, just as the gate clangs shut behind the last of Stevens's customers.

Stevens slaps the lid down on the record player and marches toward Miss Conroy, who turns to face him. He leans so close that his cigar is less than an inch from her nose.

"Out!" He pokes her shoulder twice, hard. "Now."

Miss Conroy knocks his hand away. "Don't you dare touch me."

Stevens grabs her arm, spins her around and shoves her toward the gate. "Get out and stay out. This ain't none of your business."

She jerks her arm free. "I'm making them my business, so get ready. Dolphins don't do tricks unless they are kept hungry. Both the females begged food from me, and the male is already too sick to eat."

Kirk had stretched out on the bleachers, his long legs over the bench in front of him, his elbows on the one behind.

"Hey." He jumps up and runs past Buddy to land between them just as Stevens lunges at Jane.

"Get off my property!" he screams. The veins in his forehead rise like buoy ropes.

Miss Conroy's back is against the cypress gate. "I'll see this show" she sneers, "and you out of business if it's the last thing I do."

"Lady," Kirk struggles to hold Stevens. "Get out of here."

"I'm leaving. For now." She jerks the gate open and slams it as hard as she can behind her.