

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 5

When the gate slams behind Miss Conroy, Buddy turns to see Junior's reaction, but at that moment the gate between the show pool and pond opens. The dolphins disappear through it.

Her dad is still busy calming Stevens down, so she climbs over the fence, slips out the gate and runs the length of the fence and the hedge that hides the dolphin pond from cars passing on the highway, and those in the parking lot. The ticket booth is closed. She glances around to see if anyone is watching, then steps over the rusty chain, which has a 'No Trespassing' sign dangling from one hook.

The levee ends at a trash heap that spills into water. But about halfway down, she sees a huge metal drainage pipe that runs beneath the levee and connects the man-made channel to the pond. It ends even with the bank on the channel-side and pokes out into the pond beneath the branches of a large sea grape tree. Buddy swings herself down on a sea grape limb to sit on the rim of the pipe.

On the far side of the pond, near the gate to the show pool, a dolphin surfaces, expels air, then a moment later slides past the end of the pipe where Buddy sits dangling her feet in the water. Its snout has a pink scar.

"Hi, Annie."



The dolphin up-ends and her face cracks open in a grin.

Remembering what Miss Conroy said about the female dolphins begging for food, Buddy holds up her empty hands.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any fish. I just wanted to see you again."

The dolphin makes a whistling sound by squeezing air through her blowhole, then rolls on her side and waves a flipper up and down.

Buddy laughs, waves, then presses her lips together and blows air through them, making a sound that is not at all like Annie's whistle. She shrugs.

The dolphin draws nearer. When Annie's snout brushes her right foot, Buddy leans over and holds out her hand. Annie moves her head against Buddy's palm, then rolls on her side, and lets Buddy stroke her cheek.

"You're so beautiful."

"Buddy?" Her dad calls. The dolphin disappears.

"I'm down here, Dad." She sticks an arm through a gap in the sea grape branches and waves. He steps over the chain and walks down the levee.

"What are you doing?"

"Petting a dolphin." She grins. "This is where they live." She looks up at him, her brow knotted. "It's not very clean, is it?"

Kirk looks at the brown silty water and shrugs.

"Do you think that lady is right? Do you think Mr. Stevens is killing them?"

"Did they act sick to you?"

"I guess not. But they do look kind of old to be doing tricks. The boy dolphin, Osceola, has saggy skin like the Admiral's and a white, bumpy spot by his blowhole."

"Look, don't worry, ole Orange Blossom isn't going to let his meal tickets die." Kirk hunkers down on the levee above the drainage pipe. "I think she was just upset by the fish smell. She's probably a city gal who's never smelled dead fish without a white wine and lemon-butter sauce."

Buddy laughs. She thinks about asking him what a meal

ticket is but decides not to chance it. She'll ask the Admiral what it means.

"Too bad the Admiral couldn't come with us. He'd know if they was sick, or not," she says and is instantly sorry. Her father's jaws tighten, and he stands up.

"Let's go."

It bugs her dad that she bypasses him to take every question, every problem, every discovery to her grandfather. But for as long as she can remember, not one thing she did was finished off right until she told the Admiral about it. And covering her love for him is as hard as keeping her stomach from growling when she's hungry. It just rolls up and out of her.

Buddy steps up beside her father and tries to think of something to ask him. When she can't, she cautiously takes his hand. A dolphin surfaces and sweeps the length of the pond. As it passes it turns on its side and slows.

"Don't you think the dolphins would rather live in the ocean?"

"If they could think about it, I suppose they would."

"Should people keep things that would rather be free?"

"Animals can't want things. They aren't able to think like

people do about the past or the future."

"How do you . . . How do people know that?"

"Scientists say their brains aren't big enough, or they are missing the parts that control those sorts of thoughts."

"Oh." She nods, then just to keep the conversation going, asks, "Do you think they miss their families?"

"They can't miss things, either." His voice sound tense. "And even if they could, Stevens bought them; they belong to him, right or wrong."

"Where do you buy a dolphin?"

"Someone caught them and sold them to him."

Buddy walks beside him watching for a break in the surface of the water.

"Do you think it's okay to buy something that ain't selling itself?"

"Don't say ain't, Buddy. It's isn't, and that question doesn't make sense. Animals are here for us to use. There's no difference between catching those dolphins to use in a show, and catching crabs and fish to sell for food. They're dumb animals."

Buddy stops. "They're dumb?"

Kirk turns. "Now what's the matter?"

"People say I'm dumb."

Her father closes his eyes for a moment, then takes her by the shoulders. "It doesn't mean the same thing. It's an expression. A stupid expression, okay?"

"Okay."

"Watch them a while longer if you want to. I'll go get the truck." He walks away with his head down and his hands jammed in his pockets.

Buddy watches the dolphins circle through the murky water and thinks about what her dad said. She knows that everyone except her grandfather thinks she isn't very smart; she's pretty sure they are right and that the Admiral just loves her too much to care whether she is or she isn't.

But even if she's dumb like the dolphins, she's still able to miss her mother, wish her father liked her better, and pretend to the Admiral that she has friends.

Kirk pulls up to the chain, leans and opens her door. If she can feel all those things, can't they?