

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 7

The school bus is due any minute, and Buddy is shoveling eggs into her mouth.

"Slow down. I'm taking you to school this morning." Her dad puts his plate on the table, and reaches past her for the toast.

"How come?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full." He feels the top piece with two fingers, then takes a slice from the bottom. "I have to go to the bank in Immokalee. I'm stopping at Homer's for a haircut on the way. You need one, too."

"I'll be late." Her first dread is school. Her second is being late for it and having to sit with her back to Alex Townsend.

"You won't be late," Kirk says. "We'll get yours done first, then you can walk over to school."

"I don't need a haircut." She lifts her chin and shakes her head so her hair falls away from her face. "It's short enough."

"Buddy, please. You'll need one by next week, and that will mean another trip for me. I'm getting everything done over there today, so I can spend the rest of the week getting the traps ready."

"The Admiral's fixing the traps," she says, without looking up.

Her father snorts. "I've got three hundred traps to dip and . . . why am I explaining this to you? Why are you arguing with me?"

"I hate being late for school."

"You hate school. You'd think the later you got there the better."

"I might have to sit in the front."

"Maybe if you sat in the front, you'd learn something."

"Yes, sir." She pokes her eggs, which are cold now anyway.



Homer Dawson, the barber, has a customer when Kirk and Buddy come in, and Homer likes to chat. It's after eight when Buddy gets into the chair. She gives her father such pleading looks that he tells Homer to just trim her bangs.

Fifteen minutes later, Buddy bursts out of the barbershop and runs toward the sea wall along Barron River.

The wall is a shortcut to school, but once past the Rod and Gun Club, the backyards of every house are full of traps, ropes, and buoys. She darts through the first gap she comes to, past four men dipping traps in a blend of diesel fuel and burned oil which helps to keep the bore worms out. It isn't until she splashes through the puddle of black oily dip that she realizes her shoes are under Homer's barber chair.

She runs across the playground, climbs the railing and races along the breezeway until she stops herself against the wall next to her classroom. She swallows quickly, trying to control her breathing, opens the door quietly, and slides in through the crack.

Two desks are empty: one in the middle of the first row, and one in front of Alex Townsend. He's sitting in her favorite seat in the last row on the far side of the room. Buddy always angles that desk a little so her back is in the corner, windows on one side of her, wall on the other. Once she gets positioned, she can watch the Barron River flowing past on its way to the bay, she can see mullet jumping and watch the Great Blue heron fishing, without even turning her head. And with the slightest breeze, she can smell the river's swirling blend of fresh and salt waters. That desk is safe from Alex because he can't get behind or next to her. And the view of the river and sky are nearly as good as not being there at all.

Alex looks up when she comes in, grins and takes his foot off the seat of the empty desk, then pats the back of it, inviting her to sit where he can torture her for the rest of the day.



Buddy ducks down, crosses in front of Miss Daniels's desk, and slides into the one in the first row.

Miss Daniels smiles at her. "I was just telling the class about this year's science project." She points to the map she'd pulled down from the roller above the blackboard. "Our end of Florida is unique and very important to the economy of the state. Particularly our mangroves and estuaries because that's where baby fish, shrimp, and crabs are sheltered. In other words, this area protects the health of our fishing industry, which is how most of your parents make a living.

"There's a biologist here in town right now who is working for the Florida Department of Natural Resources. Her name is Jane Conroy, and she's here doing her Ph.D. work on stone crabs."

Jane Conroy? The lady from the dolphin show.

"A Ph.D. is a doctorate degree, the kind scientists and college professors have."

Alex raises his hand and waves it.

"Yes, Alex."

"Will Miss Conroy be a stone crab doctor?"

Timmy and Jason start laughing, but Alex wears a mask of sincerity. Miss Daniels gazes at them over the rim of her reading glasses. "Why don't you three stay after school and I'll explain it to you more thoroughly," she says. "Miss Conroy will be doing field work on stone crabs . . ."

"I ain't ever seen a stone crab in a field," Alex whispers to Jason, who laughs out loud before he can stop himself.

". . . instead of in a laboratory where most scientists work." Miss Daniels' eyes are pinned on Alex. "The project I have in mind will give you an idea of how she goes about her study. We're going to make a big poster, an overview of this whole area. Each of you will pick a plant or an animal you wish to study. I want you to write a report describing your subject's life cycle and, this is the most important part, where it fits in the food chain. In other words, what it eats and what eats it. You will also have to draw a picture of your subject's life cycle and attach it to the poster. Are there any questions?"

Hands wave like cattails in a breeze.

"Belinda?"

"Can I do turtles. I have a pet turtle."



"You may do turtles, but you have to explain where they are born, what they eat, and what eats them. Alex."

"I'll do stone crabs. My dad catches the most stone crabs of anybody."



Miss Daniels's jaws tighten. "You may do your report on stone crabs, but not on stone crab fishing, except to mention we eat them. I want the stone crab's life history. Perhaps if you see Miss Conroy around, you could ask her what she is doing for her study."

Her elbow on her desk, Buddy unfolds her fingers.

"Yes, Buddy."

"Could I do dolphins?" she whispers.

Miss Daniels comes from behind her desk and leans over. "I couldn't hear you, honey."

"Could I do dolphins?"

"Well, sure. Do you know somebody who knows a lot about them, otherwise you would have to . . ." she hesitates, "you would have to read about them."

"Yes ma'am," Buddy knows what she means.

Sometimes after school, Miss Daniels, if she has a meeting

later, will ask Buddy to stay and she helps her with her reading. "Mr. Stevens up there at Everglade Eden is probably an expert. I could ask him."

"He's no ex . . . His dolphins. . ." She glances at Alex. "He's not a suitable source. To do dolphins, you will have to find someone else, or go to the library."

Alex took stone crabs, the only animal anyone she knows anything about. She's thinking maybe a bird would be better, like an egret or a heron, when the bell rings for lunch.

