

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 6

The instant the truck rolls to a stop under the strangler fig by the kitchen door, Buddy jumps out. "Admiral?" She runs up his wheelchair ramp and into the house. "Admiral, where are you?"

Her grandfather is not really an admiral. He was born Perry Martin, but in 1909, when Teddy Roosevelt came to Chokoloskee to tarpon fish, Perry's father was his guide. The President, probably because of his friendship with Admiral Peary, nicknamed eleven-year-old Perry the Admiral. The nickname stuck and now only a handful of old islanders remember his real name.

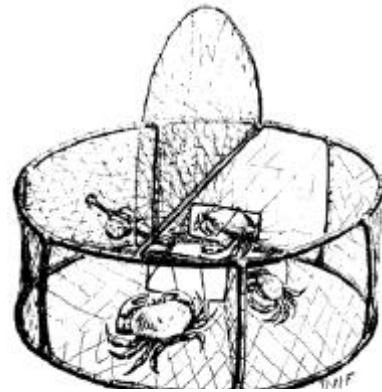
Buddy goes back to the kitchen door and presses her forehead to the screen. "Have you seen him?"

Her dad is using a whisk broom to sweep gravel out of the truck. He'd put her sandals on the hood. "Have you looked in the shed? He said he was going to mend traps today."

His wheelchair is pulled up under the workbench when she rounds the corner of the house.

She creeps toward him on bare toes. She's never actually caught him sleeping, but she feels pretty sure she has him this time. His white-haired head droops so that his chin rests on his chest. His grip on the hammer in his lap has loosened, and several of the galvanized nails have slipped from his fingers and fallen between his legs. A stone-crab trap and stack of thin wooden slats are on the workbench in front of him. Two mended traps are on the ground.

Fifty more, in need of repair, are stacked along the back of the shed. No sound disturbs the still air except his shallow, rhythmic breathing and the hum of mosquitoes.



When she's right beside his chair, he smiles without opening his eyes. A thin, wrinkled, brown arm shoots out, wraps around her waist and pulls her into his lap. "Thought you'd caught me napping, didn't you?"

"I ain't never caught you yet, have I?" She giggles, and throws her arms around his neck.

He kisses her cheek, then unties her arms and holds her away from him so he can see her face. "Was it wonderful?"

"Oh Admiral. . ." She jumps up smiling, but her smile quickly fades. "It was at first. I mean there are three dolphins, you could see real close and they did a few tricks, walked on their tails, and pretended to dance. But there was this lady there. She was real upset with Mr. Stevens, and he was real mad at her. They had a serious fight. I swear." She raises her right hand.

"Really? Did ole Orange Blossom punch her?" The Admiral pokes her belly with his forefinger. She giggles.

"Nope. But he might have if Dad hadn't stopped him. He was sure red in the face, all his teeth was showing."

"What was they fighting about?"

"I missed the beginning, but later she was upset 'cause she thought he was giving the dolphins rotten fish to eat. He said just one fish was rotten, and he threw it away, but after the show was over they gave me a fish for one of the dolphins and that fish was rotten, too. I told Dad, but he still thought the lady was just some, um . . ." Buddy looks off toward the bay, trying to remember what he'd called the woman when they were driving home.

"I remember." She slaps the workbench. "He called her an overacting good doer who was making a mountain out of a molehill." She frowns. "That ain't it, but it was something like that. But you know what?"

She leans close and lowers her voice. "I think Dad thought she was cute."

"What makes you think so?"

"Cause he spent the whole ride home talking about how awful she was."

The Admiral smiles. "What did you think about her?" He flattens the mosquito biting her arm, leaving a spot of blood.

"I don't know. I think maybe she was right. Mr. Stevens's dolphins didn't look as pretty as the ones that played with Dad and me that day. And, Admiral, she had some of the show pool water in a glass tube and Mr. Stevens took it away from her and stomped on it."

"Wow. They really were fighting, weren't they?"

"Oh yeah. He wanted to punch her."

"She kinda sounds like a nosy pain in the butt to me."

"Oh no, sir. I mean she said bad things about Mr. Stevens and talked all through the show, but she wasn't a pain. I think she was just worried about the dolphins."

Her father comes up behind them. "How's it going?"

"I was telling the Admiral about the pretty lady at the dolphin show."

"Her mouth was too big to tell if she was pretty or not." Kirk looks at the two mended traps.

"Did you get a late start?" he asks his father sarcastically.

Before her grandfather can answer a horn honks. "Yo, Martins." Carlisle Townsend waves to them from the stop sign at the top of the hill. He's driving his brand new 1969 Ford truck that he'd gone all the way to Miami to buy. The bed is piled high with new traps.

"Doesn't that make you sick?" the Admiral mutters, but he smiles and waves anyway.

"Yeah. The cheating bastard," Kirk says, gives a half-heart nod, then walks away.

Buddy fiddles with the barnacle scraper and keeps her head down because Mr. Townsend is Alex's father. She figures Alex might be in the truck, too, and she wouldn't wave at him if her life depended on it. But when the Admiral elbows her, she raises her hand but not her head.

Alex Townsend is always bragging about something, so it surprises her to find out that the man who owns those wonderful dolphins is his uncle and that nobody at school has heard about them from Alex.

"He don't like us," she says. "Why's he waving?"

"He's just rubbing in that new truck."

"I'm sorry." She puts her arms about the Admiral's neck and kisses his cheek. "I didn't mean he don't like you. Everybody likes you."

He leans back, takes her face between his calloused hands and studies her eyes. "I know what you're thinking and you're wrong. Everybody loves you."

"Just you, I think, Admiral. Just you."

"Baloney. And anyway, Townsend ain't waving 'cause he likes me, he's waving 'cause he wants the oldest stone crab fisherman on the island to see how rich he's getting. Everybody else says hi to me because I'm the most historic character around here. . ." he pokes her with a wooden slat, ". . .that ain't dead yet."

Buddy smiles because he's trying to make her feel better, and she wants him to think he has. She takes up the barnacle scraper and goes to work scraping the slats that wouldn't need replacing, the ones the bore worms haven't eaten.

His joke about dying doesn't really bother her. Nothing she can remember loving has ever died. Her grandmother died, but she has only a vague memory of her being sick. Her mother is dead, but she can't remember her alive.

All the memories she has of her mother, she's made up-one for each photograph in the shoe box on the shelf in her father's closet.

She frequently steals into his room to study one picture in particular. In that one, her mother stands in the open door of an airplane, waving and smiling. It's a warm smile that makes her dark eyes sparkle like sunlight off the engine's prop. Her mother's long, curly blond hair is loose over her shoulders, and she's wearing a corsage of white roses.

Buddy can hold that picture, close her eyes, and watch the breeze move wisps of her mother's hair and see her mother's arm wave wildly with joy. And in that vision she is waving hello, not good-bye, and it's her daughter she's so happy to see.

"Admiral?" She brushes barnacle pieces off the workbench with a sweep of her hand. "If I'm dumb like Alex and everybody else says I am, but I can still miss my mother even though I was too little to remember ever meeting her, can't animals. . ."

"You ain't dumb!" He smacks the workbench with his palm. "That sawed-off little squirt's the dumb one." He pulls her over and takes the scraper from her hand. "You ain't dumb, honey. You're just like me, that's how I know. You'll learn to read better. I never did 'cause of the swamp angels." He grins, so she does, too.

Swamp angels are what the islanders call mosquitoes.

"Yep. Every time some teacher with pioneering blood drifted down all determined to start a proper school, the swamp angels would suck her dry and escort her back across the bay. I only know what I know because of the teachers who got here in January. The ones that came in June had mosquitoes for porters both ways. That's it by golly," he says. "You could say mosquitoes was the main hitch in my education." He holds her at arm's length and lifts her chin so she has to look at him. "You'll be fine. Believe me." He pats her cheek, then hands back the scraper.

"You think pieces of our brains is missing?"

"Where'd you get a fool idea like that?"

"Dad said the dolphins is dumb animals, that the pieces of their brains for remembering the past and their families, or when they was free, is missing. He said scientists found that out. I figured maybe that's why I can't read too good, 'cause a chunk or two is missing."

"You listen to me." The Admiral takes her arm, pulls her around to face him, and holds her in place. "There ain't nothing missing up here." He jabs her forehead. "Your pa's the one with something missing, and it's in here." He smacks his chest with his fist. "Nobody's dumber in this family than he is. And another thing." He grabs a slat and shakes it at her.

"Those dolphins ain't dumb, either. They know more about the sea and fishing than even I do. Humans is just too stupid to figure them out."

Buddy takes the slat from him, lays it next to the trap, then puts her arms around his neck and buries her face in its creased and wrinkled curve. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply. His skin smells of day-old sweat and Old Spice, which he uses daily though he only shaves once a week. His shirt smells of being worn often and seldom washed. She loves the smell of him.

He clears his throat, gently pushes her away and tilts her head up by her chin. "You ever known me to be wrong about anything?" She shakes her head. "So there," he says. "Come on, let's head in 'fore the swamp angels drain us dry. Does the birthday girl want to race me or ride?"

"Ride." She pulls his chair away from the table. "Can we start from the top of the hill?"

"Where else."

Buddy pushes him across the yard, onto the road, then turns his chair to point downhill. She wraps her hands around the rubber grips, folds one bare foot over a tipping lever, the post attached to the front casters, and pushes them off with the other. She slaps the ground twice to gain speed before folding that foot over the other post on the other side.

The Admiral gives hard turns to the wheels as they roll down the road.

"Faster, Admiral, faster," she whoops, swinging one arm in large circles like a calf roper. As they near where the pavement ends and turns to crushed shell, Buddy leaps off, runs alongside, jumps in front of the chair and stops it, just a couple of feet from the top of the boat ramp.

"Someday we ain't gonna make it," he pants, "and them catfish is gonna think they died and went to heaven when two big skins with plenty of meat, heads and all, roll down that ramp and land in the middle of them."

"We ain't even been gutted." She arches her back and pokes out her stomach.

A sad look comes to her grandfather's eyes. "At least not so them catfish could tell."