

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 12

Buddy sits in the stern of the pitpan on her grandmother's milking stool with her hand on the little 7hp Johnsons engine's handle. She's been practicing the Admiral's instructions by pretending the motor is running and she's steering. He's told her the boat will turn the opposite direction from the way you push or pull the handle.



That sounds "Okay," she says to the engine. "I want to go that way."

She points right, then leans over the stern to watch which way the propeller points. She pulls the handle into her stomach, then sits for a moment looking between the propeller and her chosen direction, before she grins and smacks the engine's cover.

"We did it."

She straightens the motor before choosing to go left this time.

She pushes the handle away and leans over the stern to look. It's perfect. So perfect, she feels she's cheated by choosing to go the opposite direction. But if she'd chosen the same direction, it would have been just as easy.

Buddy takes the gas hose out of the toolbox, attaches it to the fuel can, then to the motor. She pumps the bulb exactly three times, pulls the choke out, then stands up and pulls the starter rope as hard as she can. The second time she tries, it starts with a rattle and a puff of smoke. She eases off the gas and pushes in the choke.

The pitpan is nosed in between the bow of the Missing You, her father's boat, and the sea wall. Buddy's afraid to try reverse, so with the motor in neutral, she unties the bow line then, hand over hand, pulls herself down the side of his boat.

When she has maneuvered the pitpan's bow so it points out into the channel, she holds her father's stern line while she slowly twists the handle into forward. Her heart pounds, even in her fingertips. The pitpan doesn't move. Buddy tries to give it just a little more gas but goes too far. The engine roars and, because she's still holding onto the stern line, the bow swings around and smashes into the back of her dad's boat. She twists the handle back too far the other way and the motor dies.

Her hands are sweaty and shaking, and even from where she's sitting in the stern, she can see that a chip of wood is now missing from the front of the pitpan. Where she hit her father's boat is indistinguishable from the dents a thousand stone crab traps have made. Still she peeks around the Missing You's stern to see if anyone she knows has seen her. A boat is coming in the channel, but the docks are empty, except for two men cleaning fish by the boat ramp. She can't see them, but she can hear the sounds that accompany fish cleaning: catfish sucking at the surface, the flapping and jostling of pelicans, and the scream of gulls overhead.

Holding on to a piling, Buddy waits for the incoming boat to pass. It's Miss Conroy, the woman from the dolphin show. Buddy waves, then pushes the pitpan around to face the direction she wants to go.

With the motor carefully notched into neutral, Buddy pushes off the piling and pulls the starter rope. The engine rattles to life. She twists the handle into forward, then a little further, adding gas. The pitpan putters down the channel toward the boat ramp.

At the ramp, Buddy wants to go left, but she's forgotten which way to turn the motor. She jerks the handle into her stomach and the boat swings right.

She pushes it away too late to miss scraping the sea wall on the other side of the canal.

Miss Conroy has backed into a slip two down from the boat ramp and is tying her bowline. She glances up when Buddy hits the wall. So do the fishermen. They all watch her use her hands to push off and line herself up with the ramp. When it's a straight shot, Buddy gives it some gas.

"Cut your motor, little fella," a fisherman calls to her.

"I'm not a boy," she says, though not so they can hear her over the motor, then she twists the handle the wrong way and roars up the ramp. The propeller gouges into the concrete and stops.

"You need a mite more practice there, sonny," the second fisherman says, and they laugh.

Even the Great White heron standing nearby waiting for a fish head, or some skin to be tossed its way, turns to watch her.

"First try?" Miss Conroy says.

"Yes, ma'am." Buddy raises the pitpan's motor and jumps out, nearly slipping on the moss. She pulls the boat up the ramp, ties the bowline to a cleat on the sea wall, and grins at Miss Conroy.

"My grandfather and I are going up Turner River to see . . ."

She bites her lip. "To fish."

"That's nice."

"I'm Buddy Martin. We live right here." She points to their little house.

"Jane Conroy."

"Yes 'am, I remember."

Miss Conroy looks at her, questioningly.

"My teacher, Miss Daniels, says you're studying stone crabs."

"That's right, I am." She puts a cooler and a toolbox on the dock.

"Well, see ya." Buddy waves, then dashes across the road.

She bursts into the kitchen. "Admiral, I did it," she shouts, before she sees her father standing at the window. The water's running and a mound of white foam shows over the rim of the sink.



"I'll do those, Daddy." She gathers the rest of the breakfast dishes off the table.

"I'll do these. You fix a couple of sandwiches for yourself and Dad, and fill a jar with water." He drops the last plate into the suds. "I want you to know I'm against this, but I'm not going to stop you. Maybe it'll teach that old coot a lesson."

"Yes, sir. We'll be care. . ."

Kirk holds up a hand. "Seems everybody around here is trying to prove something to someone, whatever the cost."

The kitchen door makes a whooshing sound as it flips back and forth behind him.

Catch him and tell him we won't go, she thinks, but she doesn't move. Instead she raises her arms, palms up, in an exaggerated shrug, then twirls like a coin flipping through the air. When she stops, she's facing the sink, so she does the dishes.

For their lunch she makes peanut butter and apple sandwiches-the Admiral's favorite. She wraps them in wax paper, held in place by rubber bands, and stuffs them into a small paper bag.

Her grandfather has put a list of what they need to bring with them next to his tackle box by the kitchen door. Buddy gets a pencil and reads it again. Fishin nife. Check. Szisors. Check. Hamer. Check. Thum taks. Check. Ribon.

From the drawer where her father keeps the flashlights and batteries, she takes a spool of bright pink plastic ribbon. She puts it, and everything else in the tackle box, lays the sandwiches next to the ribbon, and closes the lid lightly to make sure the fishing-fly trap doesn't smash their sandwiches. It doesn't, so she shuts and latches it, then carries it down to the pitpan.

She's finished spraying every crack and crevice, bolt and screw on the little Johnson with WD40, when she hears the kitchen door slam behind her and the Admiral. She gives the oarlock a final squirt and puts the can away. Neatly laid out in the bottom of the boat are her grandfather's fishing rod, a machete, two oars, a long pole, and the small pile of stakes he'd recently cut and painted white. She reaches up, takes the bucket of shrimp off the sea wall and puts it next to the tackle box.

The Admiral rolls his chair down the kitchen ramp and crunches down the crushed oystershell road to the docks. Kirk hops over the railing. Both their chins jut forward and their jaws are locked.

At the top of the boat ramp, the Admiral stops and sits grimly with his elbows on the armrests. Kirk lifts him out of the chair, swings him round and without great care plunks him down on the sea wall.

He snatches up the chair with one hand, stomps down the ramp, and jams its wheels between the wooden blocks.

Miss Conroy, who's washing down her boat, glances over her shoulder at them, then crimps the hose to stop the flow of water.

"This is my grandfather," Buddy says. "Admiral, this here's Miss Conroy, the lady from the dolphin show."

"Ah ha," Jane says, obviously realizing where Buddy remembers her from.

Kirk looks around in surprise, then puts his hands on his hips. "Well, well. We have a new boat in the fleet. Are you for charter, Miss Conroy?"

She lifts her chin and looks down her pug nose at him.

Kirk laughs, turns, slips on the wet moss that grows at the water's edge, falls flat on his butt, and slides backwards into the water.

Buddy and the Admiral look at each other then burst out laughing. So does Miss Conroy, and the two fishermen. When Kirk comes up sputtering, Buddy takes a breath and covers her mouth with her hands. Miss Conroy turns her back and releases the hose. Only the Admiral and the fishermen continue to laugh.



Her father comes out of the water on his hands and knees.

"I wish I'd been carrying you, you old goat," he snaps.

"I know," the Admiral says, and laughs all the harder.

"That's enough," Buddy says. "It's not funny anymore."

Just to the left of where her dad stands dripping on concrete so hot each drop dries seconds after it hits, is a deep gouge. Two and half years ago, the Admiral had been standing on that very spot on the ramp holding another fisherman's bowline when the boat a tourist was hauling out of the water broke its cable and slid off the trailer. Everyone shouted a warning, and her grandfather spun in time to see the boat lurch toward him. He tried to jump clear but, like Kirk, his feet skidded on the moss-covered concrete and he slid on his back down the ramp.

Everyone agreed that if he had dropped off into the deep water of the channel he'd have been all right, but he stopped himself by grabbing a trailer tire and tried to roll in tight against it. The vee of the bow caught him on his left side at his waist. He still might have been okay if a hospital had been closer. By the time they got him to Naples, over an hour away, a blood clot had destroyed that portion of his spine and he was paralyzed from the waist down.

"It's all right, honey," her grandfather says. "My accident was too long ago not to have a good laugh on your pa."

He's still grinning when Kirk gets him around the waist, slings him over his shoulder like a sack of flour, then flips him into his chair. He pitches the bright orange life jacket onto the floor of the pitpan and pushes them off, leaving a wide scrape of fresh red paint, like a streak of blood, on the ramp. The pitpan drifts to the far side of the channel and bumps against the sea wall.

Buddy twists the handle into neutral, stands up and jerks the starter rope. The motor sputters to life. She fits her cap low to shade her eyes, then looks back to wave to her dad just as the kitchen door slams behind him.

The Admiral twists in his chair, glances at the house, then smiles at her.

"Okay, captain, dead ahead." He swings his arm like a general leading troops into battle.

Buddy straightens the motor, eases the handle around to forward, then waves good-bye to Miss Conroy, who watches them go with a puzzled look on her face.