

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 13

They putter past the faded No Wake sign at the entrance to the channel. As they approach the spot where Buddy would have to turn them into the side channel that separates Smallwood's store from the mangrove islands off shore, she sees the Admiral tighten his grip on his armrests. His confidence in her had given her confidence; she glances at the life jacket at her feet.

"Admiral?"

"What, honey?"

"Nothing."

"You're doing great." He lets go of his armrests and lowers his shoulders, so from the back, he looks relaxed.

She turns to check the prop and lets her mind visualize the way the pitpan needs to turn. Knowing how her mind reverses things, she does the opposite and makes a flawless left turn.

"What a seaman," her grandfather says.

The breeze off the Gulf is fresh and warm. The Admiral puts his head back, takes a deep breath, then spreads his arms wide. "Smell that," he says. "Just smell that air."

They motor slowly past Smallwood's. From there less than a half mile of choppy bay separates them from the wide mouth of Turner River. The Admiral points left.

"Go around and cross on the lee side of the causeway," he calls over his shoulder. "You want to stay where the water is calm."

At the last minute, she'd added an empty Folgers coffee can to bail with. Now she's proud of herself for thinking of it. She hadn't realized even the smallest waves splash up and over the low sides of the pitpan. There's already a puddle at her feet.

It probably takes fifteen extra minutes for them to circle the backside of the island then cross to the mouth of Turner River. Once on the river, she eases off the gas, opens the tackle box, and takes out the pink plastic ribbon and the scissors. Carefully, she steps forward and hands them to her grandfather.

As she steers them upriver, he measures ten strips the length of his forearm and cuts them. Where the river narrows and turns rust-colored, the tug of the tide becomes less noticeable.

And then, after two more bends, the river looks as if it ends.

"There's a tunnel there somewhere." He holds his cap against the sun to shield his eyes and scans the wall of mangroves.

"There?" She points to what looks like a break in the mangroves.



"No, that ain't it. That's a dead end. Look at the water. It's scummy and stagnant 'cause it ain't flowing nowhere. That's how you tell. Got it?"

"Got it."

"I see it." He points to the right. "Ease her into the opening so I can cut those branches back. It may be too overgrown to get through, but we don't know 'til we try."

Her grandfather takes a pruning saw from the tackle box, and with Buddy holding the pitpan steady, saws off the few limbs that hang down, blocking their way. Once they get past the new growth and into the shade, it's pretty open. He ties a pink ribbon to one of the white stakes and hands it to her to jam into the mud.

"Your first marker." He smiles at her.

The tangled red mangrove branches, with their high arching prop roots, close over their heads, plunging the river into cool darkness. They aren't ten yards in when the mosquitoes discover them.

"You want some spray?" She takes the can of 6-12 from the tackle box.



"Naw, I don't feel them anymore. My hide's too tough."

Buddy wishes her hide was tough because she hates the smell of mosquito spray, but she hates being bitten by mosquitoes more. She takes her cap off, holds her breath, squeezes her eyes shut, and sprays herself from head to toe. She aims a cloud of spray at the Admiral before putting the can away.

The tunnel winds and twists through the mangroves. They move slowly so her grandfather can cut away the lowest branches and they stop when they come to an opening large enough for her to doubt which way to go. He shows her how to watch the current.

"Always look for the strongest flow. That'll be the main stream," he tells her, but ties a ribbon to a branch or has her drive a stake to mark each one.

Overall, from the bay to the point on Turner River where the

This Ten Minute Tutor print out is part of a learn to read program and comes with a video. It is © Copyright by Transformation Trust.

Go to www.thetenminutetutor.com to find out more.

mangroves give way to open water, takes about two hours to reach. From there it's another three hundred yards to where the constant traffic of Stevens' airboats have cut a channel across the sawgrass prairie to Everglade Eden. Buddy catches a glimpse of the sun glinting off the windshields of cars in the parking lot at the same time she hears an airboat coming.

Before she can think of where to go to get out of its way, it bursts onto the trail just in front of them, makes a sliding right turn and roars away toward Stevens' dock. The blast from its propeller blows the pitpan's bow around nearly tipping the Admiral over, and it might have if he hadn't leaned into its wind.

"I hate them things," he mutters. "See those willows?" He points to the small stand of trees growing up the levee. The drainage pipe from the dolphin's pond juts out of the embankment just behind them. "If you pull in there, we'll be out of the jackass's way."

Buddy smiles to herself, and taps her bare foot in the puddle on the floor of the pitpan as if she were listening to music.