

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 14

A few feet short to the levee, Buddy cuts the motor and lets them drift into a dense stand of willows. She waits while the Admiral ties the bowline to a branch before she pushes the stern around parallel to the levee, jams the pole into the mud to hold the pitpan in place, and ties the stern line to it.

"Hand me that fishing rod and the shrimp bucket before you go visiting, will ya?"

"I wish you could come see them." She passes the bait bucket to him.

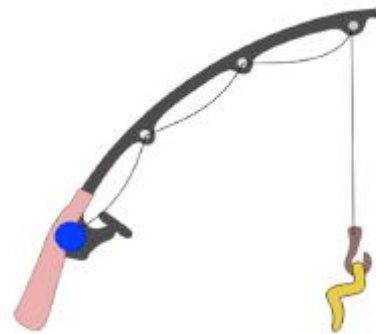
"I've seen a thousand dolphins."

She watches him bait his hook.

"Go on now. I'm as happy as a pelican under a cleaning stand."

He holds her hand out to steady her as she steps from the pitpan onto the side of the levee.

At the top, she waves to him, then crosses to the sea grape tree and steps down to the culvert.



The pond is smooth and empty looking. She peers over at the show pool, but it's quiet there, too.

"Annie? Lucie?" she calls, softly.

A sucking sound comes from the pipe as a swell lifts the garbage caught against the metal screen. It takes her a moment to realize the movement of the silty brown water was caused by a passing dolphin. But then the pond is still again.

A palmetto frond floats amid gum wrappers, plastic ice bags, beer and Coke cans, and two dead fish. Buddy gets on her stomach, reaches into the trash and lifts the long frond. The rotten leafy part drops off leaving only the paddle-shaped end of the stalk. She uses it to scoop the garbage away.

Her heart leaps when, at the far end of the pond, two dolphins surface, blow misty plumes then disappear. For a minute or two, she watches for them to come up again, then goes back to work cleaning the debris from the pipe that, if it weren't for the rusty mesh screen, wouldn't be clogged with junk. Clean water from the other side of the levee could get in this and this dirty pond water would flow out.

Behind the screen are three metal bars.

The screen isn't like the screens on their windows. It's a heavier metal, more like chicken wire, but with one-inch square openings. A section of it has broken loose at the top. If she could break more of it loose, then bend it in half, trash wouldn't stay trapped against it.

Every twenty or thirty seconds, she hears the blow of a dolphin, and looks up in time to see a pale gray back arch over and disappear. She keeps working at bending the screen back and forth trying to exhaust the wire, until an eye in a circle of gray cheek breaks the surface a few feet away.

"Hi." She holds very still.

More of the dolphin's head appears until she can see the smile-shaped curve of its mouth.



"I figure if I can get this screen off, you'll get some nicer water in here." She holds her hands out so the dolphin can see they are covered with rust.

The dolphin sinks away.

That's when she remembers that the Admiral has needle-nosed pliers in his tackle box. He uses them to pull his hook out of a fish's throat. She climbs up on the levee and goes back to the pitpan.

"How's the fishing going?"

"Got a couple. How's your visit going?"

"One came by to look at me."

"That's a start."



"Can I borrow your needle-nose pliers?"

"Help yourself." He nods toward the tackle box. "Whatcha gonna use them for?"

"There's wire mesh over the mouth of the pipe on that side, and it's clogged with trash and stuff. If I can take it off, they'd get some cleaner water."

"You don't want the pliers. Get my wire cutters out." He sits up straighter in his chair, and cranes his neck to look down the levee.

"Don't let nobody see you dismantling nothing. I 'spect ole Orange Blossom might have some objections."

"He should thank me. I'm trying to clean his pond out for him."

"He ain't too likely to see it that way." He hands her the wire cutters. Buddy lies back down on her stomach, leans over and, as quietly as she can, cuts the wire away from its frame one square at a time.

By the time she completes the top, a red, painful precursor to a blister has formed in her palm.

With both hands, she pulls the wire loose, then leans over as far as she can reach and pushes on it until the top folds to about a right angle to the bottom half, which is still attached. The culvert is big. Probably tall enough for her to walk from one end to the other if she kept her head down. To fold the wire mesh down so it's flush with the bottom half instead of sinking out where the sharp points could cut one of the dolphins, she'll have to get in the water.

The dolphins, at least the two she's seen, have mostly stayed near the parking lot end of their pond. She takes a deep breath, slides off the side of the culvert, and wades in. The bottom is slimy mud and it squishes between her toes.

She has to wade out until she's up to her armpits in the smelly water before she is past the end of the culvert. Being careful not to cut herself on the sharp points of wire, she pushes down on the screen. It bends easily, and she realizes that below the water line, it has rusted through completely. There is no solid ground beneath her to brace against, so she pulls on one side. When it breaks loose, she swims to the other side and pulls on it. It, too, breaks away. One more tug and the screen comes loose. She lets go, and it sinks to the bottom of the pond.

Holding on to the rim of pipe, she sticks her hand between the widely spaced bars and pulls out a giant tangle of fishing line, including the lure, the bobbin, bits of plastic along with all the moss that has grown around it. The drain makes a gurgling sound, then a loud sucking noise as water from the pond sweeps through, belching filthy water into the channel in front of the pitpan.

"What the . . ." she hears her grandfather bark then, "Good job."

"Helloooo," she calls through the pipe. Her voice echoes.

"Hello," she hears him answer.

She turns and is face to face with the dolphin named Annie. Buddy lurches backwards, scraping her back on the pipe. "You scared me."

The dolphin backs away.

"I don't suppose you remember me. I was here two weeks ago."

The dolphin sinks out of sight. A moment later, two dolphins surface at the far end of the pond.

"I guess you don't."

She swims to the bank, and is about to reach for a sea grape branch when Annie pops up behind her.

"Yikes!" She spins around. "Annie, you scared me again." Holding onto the pipe, she reaches her hand out. "I'm Buddy. From Chokoloskee. Right down the river."

The dolphin opens her mouth and bobs her head like she understands.

"My grandfather marked a trail for me so I can come up to see you any time. He's just over there now-fishing." She jerks her head in his direction. "He'd like to come see you, too, but he can't walk."

Annie bobs her head again, then squeezes a whistle and a couple of pops from her blowhole.

Buddy can't help herself, she covers her mouth to keep from laughing.

One of the other dolphins surfaces nearby, expels air and disappears. As if they were wired together, Annie vanishes, too. Stevens is leaning against the ticket booth when Buddy crosses to the pitpan.

"Mr. Stevens is down there, should I go say hey?"

"Don't see why not. Tell him I say hi, too."

Stevens is leaning across the bottom half of the door to the ticket booth, talking quietly to, and rubbing the shoulder of, the young ticket-seller. The girl looks relieved when Buddy touches his arms. "Mr. Stevens."

He jumps. "Yeah. What do you want?"

"I'm Buddy Martin. Remember?"

"Who?"

"Kirk Martin's daughter."

"Oh yeah. The birthday girl. Where's your pa?" He glances toward the parking lot.

"He ain't with me. My grandfather brought me up."

"The Admiral? Where's that old codger?"

"In the boat."

"What boat?" He looks over at the channel, but the pitpan is out of sight in the willows.

"The pitpan. We came up the river."

"Ain't he still in a wheelchair?"

She nods.

Stevens sucks at his teeth making a sound like the catfish at the docks, then snorts a laugh.

"If that don't beat all. What are you two doing here?"

"I came to see the dolphins again."

Stevens sticks a short pinky into his mouth and scrapes at a back tooth.

"Well, okay." He flicks whatever he found off his finger. "You want me to send some boys to get that crazy grandpa of yours out of the boat? We got another show in about ten minutes. I'll only charge for the old man. You can go in free."

"No, sir. Thank you anyway. I've already been to see them. We gotta be heading back."

"You were in the last show?"

"No, sir. I-"

"You're all wet. You were in swimming with them?"

"Oh, no sir." Her mind races, then she crosses her fingers behind her back. "The Admiral's fishing and his lure got hung up in them cattails over there." She points across the canal. "It's a favorite of his, so I swam over to fetch it for him."

Stevens jams his cigar in his mouth and rolls it around so it looks like a fat worm trying to escape a bird's beak.

"That there's a no trespassing area. Folks ain't allowed down there. In the canal neither."

Buddy ducks her head, and begins working the gravel with her toes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to trespass."

"It's because of the snakes. Pygmy rattlers is around there. You stay away from there from now on."



"Yes, sir." Buddy starts to back away.

Stevens presses his big belly against the bottom half of the door again, and pats the girl's cheek.

"Mr. Stevens?"

"Yeah?"

"I only saw two dolphins."

He looks over his shoulder. "Osceola died."

Buddy's eyes are on his lip. It glistens like a wound.

"How come?" she whispers. "How come?" Her voice cracks.

"He was old, kid." Stevens pats her shoulder, which makes her step away from his hand. "That's all. Just died of old age."

"How old was he?"

"Can't know for sure, twenty maybe." He turns back to the girl in the booth. "I'll talk to you later." He winks at her, then clicks her under the chin.

Buddy steps over the chain with the No Trespassing sign still dangling by one hook. She stands there for a minute watching the water, then looks back in time to see Stevens go through the gate to the show pool.

She balls her hands into fists.

"Miss Conroy told you he was sick," she shouts.

He doesn't hear her, but the girl in the booth leans forward and peers out.

Buddy picks up a chunk of limestone and throws it as hard as she can at the sign. It misses. She runs at it and kicks it. The sign breaks loose and spins out into the parking lot.