

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 15

"Admiral." Buddy stands on the levee above the pitpan, and uses her arm to wipe her eyes.

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

"Osceola's dead."

Her grandfather looks momentarily confused.

"The boy dolphin."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry." He holds his arms out.

"Miss Conroy was right. She said he was killing them." Buddy comes down the side of the levee and wades into the canal to let him hug her, and sees the wire stringer dangling in the water. "Did you get any fish?"

"Yep. Three snooks. Nice ones, too."

He leans over and lifts the stringer where a loop of wire runs through each fish's mouth.



"Can I have two of them?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so. One of them ain't all that big, and this one here you and me can share." He takes off the biggest fish and hands her the stringer. "We'll give them dolphins your pa's share." He grins.

Buddy kisses his cheek, scrambles back up the levee and crosses to the pond. She swings herself down onto the pipe. "Annie. I brought you a fresh fish. My grandfather just caught it." She unhooks the wire and slips it out of the thin skin of the largest snook's bottom lip. Making sure she has a good grip on its tail, she holds it out to the dolphin.

Annie up-ends and stands with her whole head out of the water, but makes no move to take the fish.

"Please, Annie. It's fresh." She wiggles it in the air. "See it's still alive."

Annie opens her mouth, and Buddy tosses the fish. The dolphin catches and swallows it, then bobs her head. Lucie slides past on her side. Buddy unhooks the smaller snook and holds it out to Lucie.

At that moment, a whistle blows, and the scratchy Lone Ranger's theme crackles over the loudspeaker. Both dolphins dive and surface again by the gate to the pool.

Buddy carefully puts the fish back on the stringer. "Don't either of you die."

She leans over and peers into the culvert. The water level in the channel is obviously higher than in the pond; clean water is still gushing in.

"I don't see how he's allowed to keep them if he don't feed them right."

Buddy hands the stringer back to the Admiral, and steps into the pitpan. She jerks the lines loose from the willows, and rocks the pole angrily until it comes loose, then pushes them off and out into the channel. The southward flow catches and floats them quickly downstream, stern first.

"Always start your motor first, honey, before you untie, in case the motor don't start. Now you got no control over where you're going." He speaks calmly and smiles over his shoulder at her, but his grip is tight on his armrests.

Buddy yanks the starter rope over and over. "Admiral?"

"It's okay, honey. Take it easy. We're going to lodge in the patch of sawgrass, see?" They drift sideways until her grandfather grabs a handful of the sharp-edged grass and holds on.

"The engine's cold. Pump a little gas to her, and pull the choke out a bit. That's it. Now let the starter rope wind in all the way, then pull it."

The motor fires with a roar, plunging them forward toward the mountain of trash rising out of the weeds at the end of the levee.

The momentum throws her off balance and she falls across the engine hood.

"Turn!" he shouts.

With a hand on either side of the engine, she's pushing herself upright when he yells his warning. She twists the motor. The pitpan makes a sweeping arc away from the embankment and backs out into the channel.

"Well, I'll be dipped." The Admiral laughs. "You saved us. Guess you'll remember to make sure you're in neutral next time, huh?"

"I'm so sorry, Admiral." She shakes her head. "Maybe Dad's right. . ."

"Oh bull. I made plenty of mistakes when I was learning. I ran my pa's boat aground so many times, he gave me a hoe one Christmas. Said I spent so much time on dry land, I might as well plant something."

She laughs. "Is that true?"

"Word of honor." He raises his right hand.

"Admiral, your hand's all bloody."

"Couple little scratches. Ain't nothing. Shows my hide's getting soft."

He wipes his hands on his pants and uses his shirttail to clean the blood off the armrests of his chair.

"Pretty soon, now. There's a secret lagoon I want to show you."

"Where you used to go with the Indians?"

"An Indian showed it to me, but I 'spect I'm the only man alive, white or red, still knows where it is. It ain't easy to find. Even back then, the way to it was only wide enough for a dugout." He faces forward and sets his cap low against the sun.

Buddy adds gas slowly until they are clipping along down the airboat trail. She slows when they reach the river, and turns right, spooking a Great Blue heron. He flies downriver staying just ahead of them with deep, sweeping strokes.

His passing shadow alarms schools of fish, which explode into the air with each down-stroke of its wings.

"Nice, huh?" her grandfather says. "I'd forgotten how beautiful it is up here."

"I'm glad," she says, but it's hard to feel his enthusiasm.

"Go past our tunnel about a hundred yards," he says, "then slow up so I can watch for the opening to the lagoon."

A few minutes later, he holds his hand up. "I think that's it on the right. See?"

Where he points looks like nothing more than a deep dent in the mangroves to her. "You sure that's it?"

"Wouldn't be a secret lagoon if you could find it easy, would it?"

She eases the bow of the pitpan into the mangroves, and kills the motor. Her grandfather cuts away the limbs blocking their way, and pulls them into the dark tunnel hand over hand.

"Let's tie a ribbon where only someone who knows it's here will see it." He hands a length of ribbon back to her, and points to the arching roots. "Tie it low and nobody'll see it."

While the Admiral holds the pitpan steady, Buddy steps over the gunnel, grabs a limb for balance and crosses the roots to the base of a tree.

"Is here good?"

"Perfect."

She ties the ribbon, knotting it snugly, then crosses back to the boat.

The tunnel is long and narrow with a bend in the middle that makes it look, once inside, as if the trees have closed behind them. At the end it balloons into a small lagoon with shellmounds rising up from its shores.

Chokoloskee was mostly shellmounds, but all the expansion since the bridge and causeway to the mainland was built has obscured or flattened them.

"Last year, my teacher told us the Calusa Indians built the shellmounds for high ground in hurricanes. Is that true, you think?"

"No it ain't true. Hurricanes didn't bother the Calusas none. They were hurricane savvy. They built their houses on stilts, which took a lot less effort than piling up oyster shells just for some high place enough to sit out a blow.

"Now, the Seminoles weren't any smarter than we are. When they drove the Calusas off, they burned their houses. Next hurricane that hit, they had to skedaddle up Turner River and ride it out in the mangroves. You can tell that hotshot, know-it-all, Yankee teacher of yours that she don't know her rear end from a bait chute."

Buddy laughs. "She was my teacher last year, so I won't get a chance to tell her that, but I would have liked to."

"Well, if you run into her, you can tell her for me that they didn't build those mounds for no purpose, they just shucked a lot of oysters in 3,000 years. And then ask her what she thinks they was doing about hurricanes the first thousand years while they were waiting for the mounds to get some height."

"Oh, look." Buddy points to six Roseate spoonbills-birds the color of their pink-plastic ribbon-on the far side of the lagoon. A couple look up, then apparently deciding the distance between them and the pitpan is safe, go back to sweeping their bills through the water for food.

Buddy poles the pitpan along the edge to a shady spot under the mangroves. She ties the stern line to a thick prop root, then takes the bowline from the Admiral, and ties it off to a tree limb. She hunkers on the roots when she is done so they can have their sandwiches facing each other.

Her grandfather hands her the sandwich bag, and she takes

the rubber band off his sandwich, unwraps the wax paper and hands it to him.

"Peanut butter and apple. Your favorite."



"Thanks, honey."

"Admiral, have you ever wished you was something different than you are?"

"Yep, bunches of times. Right now, I wish I was forty years younger and didn't have this chair attached to my butt." He pats her knee. "Do you wish you was something else?"

"Uh-huh." Her brow furrows. "I wish I was a bird or a dolphin or grewed or something, that I didn't have to go to school on Monday-or ever again."

"Would you feel different if Alex was a snook on that stringer?"

"Yep. That would sure help." She smiles. "You know what?" She's watching the spoonbills. "Mr. Stevens got a bottom lip that's the same shape as that bird's bill."

"I remember." He wipes peanut butter off her cheek.

The water level in the long, narrow tunnel is considerably lower on the way home.

In a few places, the receding tide has left yard-wide half moons of reddish mud, glistening wetly. Buddy slows for each one, and carefully noses the pitpan into the flow around the exposed mud.

"Low tide." Her grandfather yawns, then lets his head droop onto his chest.

It's hard to see around him, so the first warning she has is the dull clunk of the bow hitting something just beneath the surface. The Admiral startles awake and grips his armrests as the pitpan's bow scrapes over a washing machine or the corner of an old stove. His sudden movement and the tilt of the bow are enough to tip his chair. He tries to lean the other way, but it's too late. The chair falls over but stays in the boat. Her grandfather falls out and disappears beneath the swirling red water.