

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 16

Buddy swings the pitpan wildly to miss hitting him with the bow. The stern sweeps around until the motor's blade hits a mangrove root and stops.

"Admiral!" She screams and leaps over the side. She wades, armpit-deep, her arms out like bird wings as she fights her way upstream against the flow. She trips over something, falls and is washed back a few yards.

Her grandfather floats on the surface with his right arm hooked around a prop root. His other arm moves like a cat's tail switching, and his useless legs point downstream, moving freely with the current.

She falls again before she reaches him, then catches his left hand.

"No!" His face contorts with pain.

A thin rivulet of blood rises from the lower half of his arm where a jagged point of bone pierces his skin, and joins the water flowing by. She closes her eyes.

"I think it's broke," he whispers.

She cups her hand around her mouth, "Help us. Someone. Help."

"No good calling, honey. Ain't no one to hear you."

"Let me help you." She tries to pull him up higher by his belt, but she startles him into thinking he's losing his grip on the roof.

"Don't," he yells.

"I'm sorry, Admiral. Tell me what to do."

"Start with fetching the boat, honey."

She tries to run downstream but the water is too deep and the mud on the bottom is too thick. It sucks at her feet. She dives and swims toward the pitpan, her arms beating the water. Every few strokes she looks back to make sure he's still there.

The pitpan has drifted around a bend and is lodged among the mangroves thirty yards down the river. She climbs up into the trees, crosses the roots, holding the branches for balance, and steps down into the boat. She is shaking so hard, the starter cord handle slips out of her hand on her first try to start the motor.

The second try, the propeller chips into the barnacles on the roots, flinging sharp pieces of shell into the air, before it catches on a root and stops. By grabbing tree branches, she maneuvers the pitpan into the flow of the river, and pulls the cord again. The motor is still in forward, so the boat lurches toward the opposite bank of trees.

All this time, she's looking upstream, trying to glimpse her grandfather's white head among the roots, but the trees and roots all look the same. She doesn't know whether she's looking at the spot where she left him, or if he's further upstream and out of sight. Panic nearly overwhelms her. If he got tired, and lost his grip on the root, he might have been swept right past her.

She takes a deep breath, puts the motor in neutral, and lets the stern swing downstream before putting it in forward again. She's only gone about forty yards, when she spots his white hair, now red around his ears with tannic silt. She points the pitpan toward her beacon, and waves, but his eyes are closed.

When she's a yard or two away, she cuts the motor and jumps overboard, startling him. He flinches with pain.

Buddy ties the bowline to a branch just above his head.

"You're gonna have to leave me here," he says.

"I can't do that."

"You have to. I can't get back in the boat with no legs and only one arm."

"I'll help you."

"You can't lift me." His voice is harsh with pain. "You gotta do what I tell you."

Tears run down her cheeks. "Yes, sir."

"Get my chair and put it here as near me as you can."

She wades to the pitpan, lifts his chair above her head and carries it back to him. When she puts it in the water, it tilts, tips up and starts to float away. She grabs it and tries to jam it in among the roots, but they are too dense and gnarled.

"Untie the stern line."

She lays the chair in the bow and wades down the side of the pitpan until she can reach and untie the rope. His eyes are closed when she starts back.

"Admiral?" She touches his cheek and, when he opens his eyes, she holds up the rope.

"That's my girl." He tries to smile. "Tie one end to a good strong root." He watches her. "Pull it tight."

She puts her foot against a root and pulls on the rope with all her weight.

"Good. Now get my chair."

She puts the wheelchair in the mud, just behind his back, and holds it in place with her foot on the left tipping lever.

The seat points downstream. She feeds the rope between the armrest and the side panel, around his chest, and through the gap on the other side, then loops it around the same root. With her free hand, she lifts and floats him into the seat, and tightens the rope some more.

"That's it," he groans. "That's it. Tighter." He moves his grip along the root, trying to help her get him squarely into the chair. "Pull me in as tight as you can."

The water had been to his chin, but now his shoulders are exposed.

Buddy pulls the rope as tight as she dares.

"Make it tighter," he yells.

"I'm hurting you."

"I can take the hurt. Pull it tight."

Buddy wades around behind him, reaches her hand down the back-rest, gets her grandfather's belt in her fist and pulls him against the back-rest. She tightens the rope again.

"How's that?"

"We'll see." He lets go of the branch he's holding. The chair shifts but holds. The water comes to his armpits.

For the first time, she can see that he's also bleeding through his shirt beneath his collar. With one finger she peels his shirt open. The splintered end of his clavicle pokes through his thin skin. Blood seeps from the wound, spreads down his chest and swirls away when it reaches the water.

Buddy puts an arm across her eyes.

"Ain't got time for that, honey." He's holding his broken arm still with his left hand. "I'm pretty banged up, but nothing that won't heal with time. Now get me them napkins from the tackle box and cut a stripe of ribbon."

"What are you going to do?"

"Put some pressure on where my neck is bleeding and tie my arm down to the armrest. Go on now. We ain't got a lot of time before the tide turns."

Buddy feels sick to her stomach. "How long?"

"Plenty of time for you to get help."

She hands him a wad of napkins, then uses a length of pink ribbon to tie his wrist to the armrest. She uses another to tie his elbow down. In between the two ribbons, blood oozes off the tip of the splintered bone. His eyes are squeezed shut and his jaw muscles work, but otherwise he doesn't show how much she's hurting him.

"You go slow now, okay?"

"Can't I just wait here with you until somebody comes by?"

"Honey, nobody uses this river any more. Leastways not up this far, and it'll be dark in four hours. The trail's marked, and I promise to wait right here for you." He smiles, hooks her neck with his good arm and pulls her close enough to kiss her cheek. "I'm a tough old coot, honey. This will all work out. You go on now."

"I'm so sorry, Admiral."

He shakes a finger in her face. "Don't you go trying to blame yourself for this." He lifts her chin. "It was my own fault. I was supposed to be watching and I dozed off."

Buddy turns to go.

"Better leave my fishing knife," he says. "If the water gets too high, I'll cut myself loose and hug a root 'til you get here." He grins at her.



"By the way, if you pa ain't home, and I kinda hope he ain't, get Raffield or one of the Browns to come back with you."

"Isn't it shorter to go back to Stevens's?"

"No. Unfortunately, we're closer to home than the highway."

Buddy hands him his knife, climbs into the pitpan, checks to make sure she's in neutral then starts the motor. When she steps forward to untie the bowline, he makes an okay circle with his thumb and forefinger.

"This here is some adventure we're having, ain't it, honey?"

Smiling for him, and turning the pitpan for home is the hardest thing she's ever done.

She keeps looking back and each time she does, he waves. When she rounds the bend and can no longer see him, she begins to sob. About a mile downstream, she slows, leans over and lifts his Mack truck cap out of where the mangrove roots have trapped it. She takes hers off and puts his on. Water pours down her neck and into her ears. She looks up through the overhanging branches. "Momma, guard him for me."