

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 17

After what seems her entire life so far, Buddy sees the end of the river open up and Chokoloskee glistening like a mirage on the horizon. She feels a rush of relief in just holding steady as the bow smacks into the choppy waters of the bay. She points the pitpan straight across and lets the spray on her face and the fear of capsizing keep all her other terrors under control. She steers with one hand and bails with the other.

The momentary rush of joy she feels at seeing her father loading more crab traps onto the stern of his boat is equal to the anguish that sweeps over her when he looks up and sees her coming into the channel alone. His face goes sheet-white.

Kirk calls Naples from the pay phone on the docks for an ambulance to meet them at Stevens's. And, since the pitpan is the only boat small enough to make it through the narrow parts of the river, they race up the highway with it in the bed of the truck. His hands grip the steering wheel so hard his knuckles are white.

He doesn't speak, or even look at her. She wishes he'd yell, or something, anything. The cab of the truck feels filled with his hatred of her, the air like soup in her lungs. She keeps her eyes focused on the roadside streaking past, breathing as quietly as she can, since each exhalation is a reminder she's still there.

The speed at which they come off the road and into the parking lot at Stevens's creates a cloud of white dust. Her father leaps out into the heart of it. "You stay here." He slams the door.

"No, Daddy, please." She jumps out. "Let me go with you."

"No!" He drags the pitpan by its stern from the bed of the truck, lifts and runs with it to the boat dock, where he drops it into the water.

She runs after him. "You don't know where he is."

"He's the only old man in a wheelchair out there, isn't he?"

He glares at her. "And he's not the only person who knows that river." He steps in and pushes the pitpan away from the dock.

"Start your motor first," she whispers, swiping at her tears with the heels of her hands.

"You wait for the ambulance, and tell Stevens to send an airboat to meet us. Can you do that?" He pulls the starter cord; the engine blows out a cloud of smoke.

"Yes." Her shoulders sag. "I can do that."

She watches him travel across the open water, turn onto the airboat trail and disappear as if the swamp swallowed him whole. For a moment, before she runs to find Mr. Stevens, she feels completely deserted. The Everglades now holds her entire family.

For over an hour, Buddy sits on the canal-side of the levee listening for the airboat to return. Far down the highway, she thinks she hears a siren, but then the scratchy, sickening sound of the Lone Ranger's theme starts and fills the air.

The ambulance arrives before the dolphin show ends. When it pulls into the parking lot, she runs to meet it. She's explaining what happened, when the music from the show pool ends, and she and the two paramedics turn toward the sound of an airboat approaching.



While they get a stretcher out, Buddy runs to the dock, and shades her eyes trying to spot her grandfather. He's lying on the front bench of the airboat.

The pitpan is on its side jammed into the space between the second and third benches. Her dad sits at her grandfather's feet. His mud-caked wheelchair lies in the bow.

The Admiral's eyes are closed. For a moment Buddy's throat closes with the fear he might be dead, but when the driver puts the engine in neutral he opens his eyes.

He winces as the paramedics lift him onto the stretcher. "I'm fine, honey, don't you worry." He pats her hand.

Buddy looks at her father, pleadingly.

"You can ride with him," he says.

"What did your father say?" her grandfather asks over the wail of the siren. The hand she is holding, like the rest of him, is smeared with mud.

"Nothing. I think he was too mad to talk."

"Well, I hope he stays that way. He chewed on me like a tough steak until he got me to the airboat; I don't want to listen to one more 'I told you so.'"

"How high was the tide when he found you?"

"Only to my chin." He grins. "All the time in the world."

The paramedics have given him something for the pain and, after a few minutes, his eyes close.

"He's really gonna hate us now," Buddy says.

Her grandfather opens his eyes and rolls his head to look at her. "You're wrong, honey. This was never about him not liking us. It's about his liking us too much. He just don't know how to do it right."

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## Chapter 18

For the first few nights after her grandfather came home from the hospital, Buddy took his meals to him on a tray, and retrieved them nearly untouched. Tonight he decides he feels well enough to join them for dinner in the kitchen. Her dad puts him in his chair, and wheels him to the table.

"I want to sit over there." He means Buddy's seat.

Since the accident that put him in a wheelchair, the kitchen table has been pushed against the wall beneath the window that looks out onto the road. Buddy sits with her back to the other window, her dad across from her.

"Why?" her father demands.

"I can see the water and the docks from that window."

Kirk backs him around but his chair won't fit without pulling the table down the wall. "I got a thousand things left to do to get ready for tomorrow, and you want me to add rearranging furniture to the list because you're feeling sorry for yourself."

"Speaking of self-pity," her grandfather snaps.

"Yeah, well as long as I'm the only one feeding us and keeping a roof over our heads, I've got the right to gripe."

Buddy's hand is on the Admiral's bandaged shoulder. His left arm is in a sling. He pats her hand. "I been meaning to apologize for inconveniencing you."

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm suggesting at some point you might give me a little consideration."

"I want to watch the bay," the Admiral says. "Is that too much to ask? To at least be able to see the water."

"Oh bull."

Kirk's expression hardens to match his father. The legs of the table bump across the uneven floor as he drags it down the wall where it partially blocks the back door. It will mean pushing it back after every meal. With one hand he steers his father's wheelchair into place then, with the side of his arm, he drags the salt, pepper, and Tabasco across the table to within easy reach of his dad. He rolls his father's knife and fork in his napkin and delivers them to him like a diploma.

"There." He stands back, his hands on his hips, surveying the new setup. "Does that suit you?"

"That will do." The Admiral unrolls his napkin and tucks the corner into the edge of the bandage around his chest.

Kirk turns away and slaps the frying pan back on the burner.

"Maybe you're right." His back is to them. "From the looks of you now, watching is what you should stick with."

There is total silence in the room.  
Even the fish he'd been frying  
hasn't started to sizzle again.



Buddy slouches in the seat she's taken on her grandfather's left. Her father's words sting her just as deeply as if he'd meant them for her, and only she sees her grandfather's expression change from defiance to defeat. His face muscles go slack, and his eyes remind her of a landed fish with all the fight gone out of it. She gets up and goes to stand behind him. She puts her hands on his shoulders, and looks at the back of her dad's head.

"That's not true," she says.

Kirk glances over his shoulder. "What's not . . . ?" His brow creases.

"Hey old man, something's got to snap you out of this." He turns back to the stove, flips the fish, and says, "How about proving me wrong and coming with me in the morning?"



Buddy knows he doesn't really want them, that this is his way of apologizing, but she leans and smiles at her grandfather.

"Want to, Admiral?"

"I'd be in the way."

"No you wouldn't," Kirk says. "You can run the boat."

"Yeah, Admiral, you can steer. Dad can pull 'em, and I'll . . ." She can't think of anything left for her to do. "I can bait 'em."

"No." Her grandfather snatches the napkin from the rim of his bandage. He tries to roll away from the table, but only manages to bash himself against a table leg.

"Please, Admiral."

For a moment his eyes spark. "If I'm in the way here at my own damn table, I sure ain't going out on that boat of his."

"Jesus," Kirk mutters, then jams the spatula under the cooked fish, slaps it onto a plate, and brings it to his father.

"I'm not hungry."

"You haven't eaten all day." Kirk tucks his father's napkin back into his bandage.

The Admiral snatches it out again. "I'm still your father; don't you tell me what to do."

"Eat, dammit, or I'll take you back to the hospital and let them feed you through a tube."

Her grandfather glares at Kirk, then grabs the Tabasco and douses the fish with it. He tears off a piece with his fork and stuffs it in his mouth.

"I'd miss school if we went with you tomorrow." She wants this to stop.

"It's the first day of the crab season, a lot of kids will miss tomorrow. They're needed on the boats."

"Okay then," she says, not believing for a minute that he really wants her tagging along. "How 'bout it, Admiral?"

As if he hadn't heard her, he pushes his plate away. "I should have been sitting here all along." His eyes focus somewhere in the darkness beyond the glass.