

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 19

The next morning Buddy comes down to the docks at five-thirty, rubbing her eyes and yawning. It's still dark but already warm and humid. The only light comes from a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling of the trunk cabin of the Missing You. Her dad has the engine running, the cover off, and is checking the bilge pump.

She waits until he slides the cover back across the opening.

"Morning."

She covers another yawn with the back of her hand.

"You all set?"

Buddy wonders about that herself. He's asked her to help out of regret, not because he thinks she'll be of any use. "Is it still okay if I go?"

"Yeah," he says, then looks at her. "Sure it is." He holds his hand out. She takes it, and hops down to the deck.

Her father pulls traps from the starboard side of the stern.

He's already put all his equipment within reach. Leaning against the starboard gunnel is the broom handle with a large hook driven into one end that he'll use to snag the buoy lines. On his right are buckets full of fish heads, skins, and other scraps. It's called stinking bait, and it does. Next to the bait buckets are three large green plastic bins, stacked on top of each other.

The headlights of an approaching truck flash across the stern of Missing You, followed by the crunch of tires crossing gravel to the docks. A door slams, and another crabber steps out of the morning blackness.

Soon more men appear. An engine starts farther down the dock, then another. Diesel fuel, cigarette smoke, and the smell of bait blend with, then edge out the heavy smell of the sea.

The sky over Chokoloskee has a high, thin, gauzy layer of clouds, but far to the south, lightning flickers silently through spiraling thunderheads.

"Cast off the stern line when I tell you, okay?"

His voice startles her. "Yes, sir." She steps up and edges along the port gunnel to the stern.

Kirk unties the crossed bow lines. "Okay," he calls.

The line is taut. She struggles to pull the boat backward for slack, unties the line, loops it neatly, and lays it on the dock.

"No. No." His voice is already full of impatience. "We need to have the rope with us. You know that, don't you?" He jumps the gap between the stern and the dock, grabs the coil of rope and tosses it to her. "Retie it."

She does know that and is not sure why she did it wrong-aside from how nervous her dad makes her. She picks up the rope and loops it back and forth in a figure eight over the arms of the cleat.

"That'll do." Kirk pulls the boat tight to the dock, and steps back on board.

"I'm sorry," she says as he goes past her. "I guess I forgot."

"It's okay."

With only a spotlight from the front of the trunk cabin, her dad steers his boat out of his slip and into the channel. He turns the light off when they are clear of the channel markers, but until he does, it makes the water look like old, cold coffee. After the blackness settles over them, Buddy leans back against the cabin bulkhead and rolls the end of the bowline around her palm. Its rough, scratchy texture feels like a calloused hand to hold in the thick, still darkness.

She puts her head back against the bulkhead, closes her eyes, and falls asleep to the subtle throb of the engine and the whoosh of water against their bow.

A half hour later, her dad raps on the cabin window to wake her. They have come out of Chokoloskee Pass into the dead calm waters of Florida Bay. Buddy's face and hair are so wet from the humidity that she thinks it may have rained on her while she slept. She wipes her face with her sleeve and glances up at her father.

"Look over there." He's pointing off to their left, at the exposed bank of a mangrove island.

Buddy stands up. There's a dolphin on the beach. In the water behind it, another is churning and splashing, as if in distress.

"Can we go help them?"

"They don't need us. They're fishing." Kirk slows the engine and swings the bow toward the island.



As they get closer, the first dolphin arches its back and bellies back into the water. Both dolphins disappear. Buddy's thinking they scared them, when first one fin then the other breaks the surface.

The two dolphins cross back and forth, getting closer to the shore each time, until the shallow water boils with fish. When they have driven a mass of them up onto the bank, the two dolphins nose in, roll a little to one side, and pick off the fish, one by one, as they flip flop on the exposed mud.

"How'd you know that's what they were doing?"

"Seen it a dozen times."

It is still over an hour's run to her father's first trapline. The sun rays knife through gaps in the storm clouds. Only their wake disturbs the calm water, which has now colored to a pale shade of rose, like the belly of a dolphin.

Just past Indian Key, Buddy spots their first buoy.

Her father has 450 traps out in three lines, dropped in different parts of the bay. He'll pull 150 traps a day for the next three, then wait a few days



before starting all over again. He does this all season, October 15 to May 15.

Carlisle Townsend, Alex's father, has nearly a thousand traps out. But he can afford to hire help. All he has to do is steer a course between the rows of traps while the pullers, one on either side of the stern, do the work her father does alone.

Because he pulls alone, her father's lines are in two single rows of seventy-five traps each. One half starts just ahead, the other half is a quarter mile west, too far for her to see the string of small buoys.

Kirk slows and raps on the port wall of the cabin for her attention. When she looks around the edge, he crooks a finger for her to come.

"You're going to run the boat," he says.

"I am?"

He smiles. "It's a straight line. Just watch the markers and do what I tell you."

"Okay." Her palms start to sweat.

Stretching out before them is the row of Styrofoam mannequin heads her father uses as buoys to mark the location of each trap. Their faces are pink in the morning sun. A black nylon rope runs from the end of the trap, up through the mannequin's neck, and out the top of its head like a ponytail. The first one in the line has a barnacle on her chin and chunks missing from her face, pecked away by gulls.

"When I hook the buoy, put the engine in neutral," her father instructs.

He leans over with the broom handle and snags the line to the trap just below the mannequin's neck. When he has it within reach, he puts the broom handle down, grabs the rope, then hand over hand, hauls the sixty-five-pound trap up through the water and lifts it onto the stern.

"When the trap's here," he says, "put the engine in forward. That way we'll be on our way to the next trap while I'm emptying this one. You don't need to touch the throttle. Got it?"

Buddy nods and wipes her damp palms on the seat of her shorts. Her heart hammers in her chest as she takes the wheel.

"Go ahead," he says. "Put it in forward."

She eases it into gear, and they begin to move slowly forward.

Kirk turns the catch and lifts the lid of the trap.



"Four," he mutters. "One's a short, one's a gravid female." He holds the female up for her to see. A mass of orange eggs covers the back of her abdomen. He drops the under legal-sized short and the female over the side. The other two are big males, called boars.

He tosses them into the nearest green plastic tub, scoops up a fistful of fish scraps, stuffs them down the cylindrical steel bait chute, slams and latches the lid. He shoves the trap over, then checks the position of the next buoy.

She has steered them too far left. Her dad comes to the cabin, reaches around her, jerks the wheel hard right, then straightens it before he rushes back, and leans to hook the buoy's rope.

"Stop!"

Buddy puts it in neutral.

"Good," he says, pulling the trapline in, hand over hand. "Got it. Go."

She moves the gear into forward and leans out the cabin door to watch for the next buoy.

"Seven," he says, "and a blue crab and a snapper." He pitches the blue crab and another gravid female over the side and throws the snapper on the deck. "Dinner. Put it in the fish box when you get a chance."

She makes sure they are lined up, runs out, grabs the fish, and climbs back behind the wheel. When it's time to put it in neutral again, she darts forward, throws the fish in on the ice and dashes back to the wheelhouse.

The bottom of the first green tub is covered with stone crabs but the seventh trap comes up with two of its sides torn away.

"Damn loggerheads." He cuts the buoy off, throws it forward and elbows the ruined trap off the stern.

"Why do the turtles do that?"

"To get the bait."

She's forgotten to put the engine in gear.

"Let's go," he snaps, then jerks his shirt off over his head. His arms glisten with sweat.

By ten-thirty, he's pulled the first seventy-five traps-half his line.

"The tide's due to change at noon," he says, taking the wheel. "I don't think we'd better try pulling down tide."

Buddy knows pulling down tide means hooking the buoy line, then backing up to the trap. She guesses he doesn't think she can do it. And she's pretty sure he's right.

"We'll go back to the Indian Key end of the line and wait for the tide. If you're hungry," he says, rotating his aching shoulders, "get a sandwich from the cooler."

Buddy sits on the ice chest listening to the thunder and watching the crabs in the bin circle around, challenging each other. She nibbles off the corner of a peanut butter and apple sandwich, decides it reminds her too much of the Admiral's accident, and puts it back in the bag. She leans over the bin, close enough for a large boar to see her. He opens his huge claws, flings them wide, and backs across the rippling mass of crabs beneath him until he bumps into a corner. She wags a finger at him, the movement of which he follows with his stalk eyes and finger-crushing claws.

"We've got a lot of crabs, don't we?" She covers a yawn.

"Pretty good. About eighty pounds in claws. You tired?"

"No." She yawns again. "It's gonna rain."

"We'll probably be finished before it gets here. Hand me another Coke, will you?"

She opens the cooler lid, moves the snapper, and digs into the ice for his third Coke.

"Do you remember when you were real small, right after your grandmother died? Dad and I brought you out fishing with us, and we kept you in the fish box so we didn't have to worry about you falling overboard. You were only tall enough to see over the rim, but you'd laugh and clap every time we brought a trap up."

Her father looks at her and smiles, then his expression saddens. "You were too young to remember, I guess."

"I think I do remember," she says, and wishes with all her heart that she did.

"That seems so long ago now," he says to himself.

They drift for a quarter hour near the head of his line, waiting for the tide to change. Buddy tries to nap, but it's hot and the thunder rumblings keeps her on edge. At least a breeze has kicked up. Kirk sits on the edge of the fish box with his fourth sandwich and watches the tug of the tide around his first buoy. Minutes after noon, the flow hesitates, then resumes in the opposite direction.

They'd pulled about ten traps when Buddy spots a boat about three-quarters of a mile down his line. She calls his attention to it when she realizes one of his traps is on its stern. He comes into the trunk cabin, pulls Buddy away from the wheel, holds her arm to keep her from falling, and slaps the throttle and the gear fully forward. The bow lifts out of the water, hesitates, then slams back down and bounces full speed toward the other boat.

Kirk pulls the power and settles in beside Jane Conroy's boat. His trap is still on the stern.

"What in blue blazes do you think you're doing?"

Jane sits on the gunnel with her pad in her lap, a pencil behind her ear, one of Kirk's crabs in one hand and calipers used to measure their shells in the other. She smiles at him.

"Measuring a crab." She nods to Buddy who smiles back, then quickly ducks her head. "From your tone of voice and the expression on your face, this must be your trapline."