

# **DOLPHIN SKY**

**By Ginny Rorby**

## **Chapter 20**

Buddy glances from Miss Conroy to her father's angry face.

"You're damn right, it's my trap. What right do you have . . ."

She holds up a hand. "I'm doing a survey. I have a permit from the state to pull up your traps and everyone else's."

"Why?"

"For the Department of Natural Resources and the Park Service." She smiles at him. "They're thinking about making the Park off-limits to commercial fishing."

"That's bull crap."

"Perhaps, if your haul is sufficient today, you could afford a dictionary. Your vocabulary seems a bit stunted."

"My language is all that's keeping me from coming over there and pitching you overboard."

She sighs. "Life's little blessings."

"You're real clever lady, but you haven't proved to me you have any right to pull my traps."

Miss Conroy finishes measuring the crab then, with an oddly shaped pair of pliers, attaches a small metal tag to its shell before putting the crab back in the trap.



She pulls her backpack from the compartment under the wheel, rifles through it, comes up with a piece of paper and hands it to Kirk.

He reads it and hands it back. "My father helped survey the Park boundaries." His eyes are on the storm, which is much nearer now. "He was at the dedication. They said it would always be open to commercial fishing."

Miss Conroy's expression softens. "Things change," she says, then carefully reaches in for another crab, takes up the calipers and begins to measure first the claw, then the carapace.

Buddy saw that she meant it nicely, but her father didn't. His eyes narrow.

"What exactly are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm counting the number of trap lines set in Park waters and spot-checking individual traps in each line."

"What are you going to find out?" Buddy says, then glances at her father.

"Hopefully, the impact of commercial crabbing on the Park population."

"That's just more bull," her father says, calmly. "There are a zillion crabs in these waters."

"You people always think the supply is endless." She tags and replaces the active, angry male, then takes out a soft, molting female. "I did this survey three years ago, and I'm finding the numbers much lower this time."

Her dad's eyes are on the female crab in her hands. She measures it, makes a note on the pad, and drops it over the side.

"Don't," he says too late.

"That was a female." Her tone is shame-on-you.

"I know that," Kirk snaps. "It was a molting female, a young honey."

"So?"

"You leave them in the trap, doctor," he sneers. "They attract the big boars."

"Clearly," Jane says.

Buddy laughs and ducks her head.

"That was funny," Kirk says. "Now explain how we are reducing the numbers of stone crabs when we only take their claws-which grow back-and then only those of the male crabs."

"Well for one, we suspect the claws of large females are being taken."

Buddy knows Alex's father does. He brags about it.

"If they close the Park," she continues, "that will change anyway. Outside the Park boundary, you'll be allowed to take any legal-sized claw. A stupid trade-off, in my opinion, but I'm not the one making the decisions. The existing law is

unenforceable anyway unless they go back to having the crabbers bring the whole crab to the docks before declawing. That practice guarantees they all die. Now just most of them die."

"They die?" Buddy says.

"They don't die," her father says.

"Laboratory studies indicate that taking the claw kills the crab."

"Laboratory studies . . . why don't you people speak English?"

"Your level of English, Mr. Martin?" She holds the female she's measuring out over the water, and smiles at him. "May I?"



He makes a be-my-guest motion.

"Thank you." she drops it into the water, closes the lid of his trap, and pushes it overboard.

"Oh, and thank you." Kirk bows as the heavy, crab-laden trap sinks to the bottom.

Miss Conroy nods to Buddy and turns to start her motor.

"Ma'am," Buddy calls to her. "Why does taking the claws kill them?" She looks up at her father. "I have to do a science project for school. Maybe I'll do something on stone crabs."

Jane's boat has a hoist. She leans over and hooks his trap again, loops the rope over the part of the hoist called the snatch block, and lets the hoist bring the trap up until it dangles above the stern. She swings it on board, opens the lid and with a gloved hand, grabs a crab.

"Help yourself," she says to Kirk. "In the lab," she says to Buddy, "we keep crabs in aerated tanks."

Buddy's brow wrinkles.

"Tanks with air hoses in them," she explains. "And they have plenty of food. We did a test where we took one claw off a hundred crabs and both claws off another hundred. The breaking was done properly, cleanly, like this." She pops the crab's right claw off by snapping it down, sharply, at a right angle to its body. She tosses the claw to Kirk. "There was another group of a hundred, none of whose claws were taken, and none of them died."

Buddy can't take her eyes off Jane's face. Though her hair is dark and curly, something about her reminds her of the

picture of her mother. And Jane's voice is soft and deep, like she's sure her mother's had been.

"Of the crabs from which we took one claw, twenty-nine died within twenty-four hours. Of the ones that lost both claws, half died the next day. Out here where they have to feed themselves, and defend against groupers, octopuses, conch, sea turtles and other crabs with claws, we don't think any of them survive."

Buddy looks at the two bins of stone crabs, then at her father.

"That's not true," he says. "I'm always finding crabs with small claws, or those nubs that grow under the sheath before they molt."

"Those have probably dropped a claw. When a crab releases its own claw, the wound seals naturally. And it rarely loses both claws at the same time."

Kirk stares at her, stone-faced, making Buddy wonder if he realizes Miss Conroy's probably right.

"Not only that," Jane says, peering over into the bins. "They should be kept out of the sun and wetted down often."

"Would you like me to stop and dig clams for them, too?  
And if you're so sure they are going to die, why bother?"

"To give them a fighting chance. I'd like to see that law read that you people could only take one claw, but that's unenforceable, too. Do you know how to properly break off a claw?" she asks Kirk.

"No, I've only been doing this off and on for thirty years. Why don't you show me, doctor."

She ignores his tone and smiles at him again. "I'm doing this study for my Ph.D., so I'm not a doctor yet."

"See how clean this break is." She shows Buddy. "When the claw is twisted off it tears the meat and the crab bleeds to death." She twists off the remaining claw. "I wanted to show you something. See this white sticky stuff? That's the crab's blood. Put him in a bucket of water, take him home and see how long he lives." She hands the crab to Buddy and tosses the claw to Kirk.

"I'm sorry," Buddy says to the crab, stroking its carapace. She pushes the snag of meat back into the break, and puts her thumb over the hole. "Miss Conroy," Buddy says. "Osceola died."



Her expression is blank for a moment, then she places the name and shakes her head. "He never had a chance."

"Who's Osceola?" her dad asks.

"The male dolphin at Stevens's."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I guess I forgot with what happened and all." To Jane she says, "What do you mean he never had a chance?"

"He'd given up. Floating on the surface like he did was a death knell. His skin was blistering in the sun and he was getting a peanut-shaped head from insufficient food. He also had dolphin pox."

"Was that the white bump near his blowhole?"

Jane nods. "In the wild, active dolphins are in and out of the sun, but a combination of poor nutrition, polluted water, and dolphin pox. . ." Her lips compress and she shrugs. "In captivity dolphin pox is often fatal. In the wild, it rarely is."

"What about the others?"

"I don't know," she says. "But the condition he's keeping

those dolphins in, it's not likely any of them will survive for long."

Buddy chews her bottom lip.

Jane looks at Kirk, then at her. "You know, I bet he's learned his lesson. He'll take better care of the other two."

"I cleaned the drain, so they're getting better water."

"Good for you. That may help."

Buddy studies her face and sees kindness, maybe even pity, and she knows that Miss Conroy is only hoping, too. She strokes the crab.

"Look," Jane says. "Why don't you come by after school one day and I'll help you with your science project. I'm staying in cabin nine at the Rod and Gun Club."

"I'm not sure if I can really do stone crabs. Alex Townsend told Miss Daniels he wanted to do them."

"Ruth Daniels is a friend of mine. If you'd like me to, I'll ask her to let you do them."

"Oh yes, please. I'd like that."

"How about Monday at three-thirty, okay?"

Buddy looks at her father. "Is that okay with you?"

"I guess so."

Nearer, the thunder rumbles.