

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 21

Buddy holds the crab with her thumb over the hole in its side and steers the Missing You with her free hand. She's put a bucket of water by her right foot. When they idle for her dad to pull a trap, she holds the crab underwater so it won't dry out. Its legs move in search of freedom.

Her father misses a trap because she veers off course. "Dammit, Buddy, throw that thing overboard and pay attention to what you're doing."

"He'll die."

"Then put him in the bucket until we get through."

In her mind, she sees the blood from the Admiral's shoulder and arm swirling into the flow of the river. It's stupid, she knows that, but if she can save this crab, it will somehow compensate for hurting her grandfather. "If I do that, he'll bleed to death."

The first raindrop splatters against the trunk cabin window. A black wall of clouds meets the sea to the south.

"Okay." Kirk throws the broom handle down, stomps to the cabin, and pulls her away from the wheel. He spins her by the shoulder and pushes her outside. "You nurse that crab, I'll finish alone." He jerks the wheel hard to the right, then jams the motor into reverse and roars backward toward his buoy.

Kirk puts it in neutral, marches to the stern and grabs the broom handle. It's when he reaches to hook the buoy that he sees he's backed over it and the line is wrapped around the prop. He glares at her as if it were her fault, strips to his underwear, rips his gloves off, and dives overboard.

Buddy carries the bucket of saltwater to the pile of nets at the back of the trunk cabin and sits with her knees pulled to her chest. "I've done it now," she tells the crab, then lowers him into the bucket.

Kirk comes up, expels air, sucks in another lungful, and goes down again. Thunder booms closer. Rain pelts the choppy surface of the bay. The wind turns cold and frantic.

When he gets back in the boat and pulls the trap, it's empty and broken. This one is mendable, unlike the first one he'd found completely smashed. He's clearly angry when he swings it aboard. It hits the deck at the exact moment thunder crashes over them. Buddy releases the crab, pulls her knees tight to her chest and plugs her ears.

She peeks into the trunk cabin when her father puts the engine in gear. Rivulets of water run from his matted black curls down his face and chest. Wind-driven rain sheets the window, so he has to steer with his head out the door to watch for his next trap. Buddy begins to shiver. An old, dried-stiff towel is under an edge of the netting. She stretches her leg out, hooks a corner with her big toe, and drags it over.

Two cockroaches fall out when she shakes it. One scurries into the net, but the other runs up the leg of her shorts. She shudders and



squashes it, then wipes its remains off her hip with the towel before reaching into the bucket of cold water, to catch the scuttling crab. She puts her thumb back over its wound.



There's a searing flash of light followed by an explosion of thunder. Her father ducks and throws his arm over his head.

Buddy starts violently, knocking the bucket over. "I'm scared."

Kirk puts the engine in reverse and backs slowly toward the buoy he missed. "Don't be. It's gone now."

Buddy stays curled in a ball until the storm is over and she feels hot sun on her shoulder. She gets up and finds the crab lodged in the port scupper. She dips the bucket, puts the crab in, then settles back on top of the nets to watch her father.

"Is there still Coke in the cooler?" he asks.

"I think so." She lets go of the crab and jumps up to get him a drink.

"Three more and we're through. You want to take us in?"

She forces herself not to glance at the bucket. "Yes, sir."

"That was quite a storm." He pats her shoulder, drains the Coke in one long swallow, and throws the bottle overboard. It rights itself and bobs away in water nearly the same color as the bottle.

"There should be another buoy here," he mutters. He looks ahead to the next trap, then back at the last one. "Damn tourists." He guns the engine and steers on to the next trap.

"Why damn tourists?"

"They run over our lines, but instead of taking the time to get untangled, they cut themselves loose and I lose a trap."

"Are the crabs trapped in there forever then?"

"We are certainly into worrying about crabs all of a sudden, aren't we?" Buddy lowers her eyes.

"The trap eventually rots away, okay? But let me tell you something. Bleeding hearts are always coming along wailing about killing crabs, shooting deer, feeding a bad fish to a dolphin, but they've got nothing at stake. They make their living in offices somewhere, and they don't have to kill what they order up in a restaurant or what they buy packaged and bloodless in a grocery store. It's easy for them to care about things they have no stake in. Do you understand?"

His face is so close to hers she can smell the Coke on his breath. "I care about the crabs and the deer and the fish and the lobsters." He ticks them off on his fingers. "All of them, because they feed us. That's why I don't take the females even though, in a fish basket on the scales, the Feds can't tell a female's claw from a male's. I don't take them because they are protected and I believe they should be. So don't belly up to a plate of crab claw tonight and give me this conservation crap now. Got it?"

She keeps her head down and nods.

Buddy tries to watch the declawing without it looking like she's watching. Done right, it makes a snapping sound she soon becomes comfortable with.

Snap, snap, she hears, then sees the splash she can't hear over the engine. Snap, snap, splash. For an hour and a half, crab after crab somersaults through the air and disappears into the foam of their wake.

Twice, she hears him mutter dammit, and looks in time to see the claws disappear over the side and the crab land in the claw bin.

At the dock, there is a line at the fish house waiting to have their catch weighed. Crabbers loll on decks, drinking Budweisers, smoking, and complaining about how lousy their hauls were. Buddy has never heard a fisherman admit to a good day. The Admiral says it's so other fisherman won't move their lines near yours. He told her about the time he brought in so many claws the next time he went to pull his line he couldn't find it in the crowd.

Her father never joins in these discussions. He exchanges nods as he glides his boat in, but that's all. No one offers him a beer or asks about his day, except Carlisle Townsend. He's the only one who ignores Kirk's remoteness. And it apparently doesn't bother him that her dad rarely responds. Like his son, Townsend is a show-off. To him a quiet audience is engaged.

"Looks like you got a nice haul there, Martin," Townsend calls from the next slip. "Considering the number of traps you got out."

Kirk's washing down the deck of the Missing You with the hose from the dock, and doesn't even glance up.

"I hauled nearly seven hundred pounds," Townsend adds.

"How many of them were females?" Kirk says loud enough for Townsend to hear.

Townsend laughs. "Bout half, I'd say."

The crabbers in the next slip gives Townsend a dirty look. He puts up his hands. "Only kidding," he says, and smiles, like he can't help himself. "Only a third, maybe."

It makes Buddy sick to know he thinks it's funny to break the law. If taking the claws does mean most die, then taking the claws of females means there are fewer crabs born each year. That's like cutting off your nose to spite your face, as her grandfather likes to say.

"From the barnacles on 'em," Townsend says, "I'd say most of 'em were locals this time. We get a good nor'westers and them suckers start walking, I bet I double my haul."

He means a good storm would stir up the bay and the crabs would have to move around more to find food.

"I'll pray for you," her dad says, under his breath.

Buddy puts her bucket on the dock and hops across to land beside it.

"Whatcha got there, Buddy?" Townsend says.

"A stone crab."

Carlisle snorts. "Don't you know it's against the law to keep a crab." He winks at Kirk.



"Miss Conroy gave him to me."

"Who's that?"

"Just some broad out there counting our crabs."

Townsend had walked over to look in the bucket. "What do you mean she's counting our crabs? Why?"

Kirk glances at Buddy, then his eyes crinkle at the edges like the Admiral's do when they are keeping a secret from her dad. He folds the hose in half to stop the water, and smiles at Townsend. "She said she was helping the Park people get an idea how many females are being taken."

Townsend is standing with his arms crossed over his belly. Buddy grins at her dad, and glances at Townsend's face in time to see his usual puffed-up, self-important expression deflate like someone stuck a pin in his crusty cheek.

"She's real nice, Mr. Townsend. She gave me this crab for my science project."

"She was working on my traps today," Kirk says. "I can't remember which direction she said she was coming from. Your lines are to my west, aren't they? Do you remember, Buddy?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"Well, you're a lucky guy, Townsend. Maybe she was moving west when we saw her." Her father lets water blast through the hose again.

Alex's father spins and stomps down the dock.

Buddy starts to laugh, but Kirk puts a finger to his lips, and shakes his head, his eyes sparkling with amusement. Buddy doesn't know anyone who doesn't enjoy seeing a Townsend squirm. She grabs her bucket and starts for the house to tell the Admiral about their day.