

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 23

The sky is beginning to gray when she wakes up again. Osceola is behind the glass, and seems to be watching her, but when she stretches and yawns, he dashes into his pipe.

After she gets dressed, she digs a clam out of the sand in the tank, and creeps from her room to the kitchen. From the window over the sink, she sees her father's boat is gone. She uses a coconut to smash the clam, then takes the fat, slimy blob to the kitchen sink to rinse the sand and shell bits off, before slicing it into tiny pieces.

Back in her room, Buddy taps on the glass and drops a piece of clam into the water. It settles on top of the tube. The next one drifts down and comes to rest just in front of the opening. She sits on the edge of her bed and waits.

The tip of a jointed leg appears, then half a crab. A tiny pincer opens, reaches slowly out, picks up the piece of clam, and carries it to his mouth-two flaps open and the clam is sucked in.

Buddy dumps the rest of the chunks into the tank, takes her cap from the bedpost, checks on her sleeping grandfather, and leaves the house.

Near the trash pile at the end of Stevens' levee, Buddy cuts her motor and drifts into the willows. Even though it's too early for the airboat rides, and the ticket booth is closed, it's still too far and too open to cross the levee from here to the pond. She pushes off again and poles the pitpan along the embankment then hides it in a stand of cattails.

Buddy wades through the cattails, and crosses the few feet of open ground to another stand of cattails growing at the edge of the pond. To her left, near the gate to the show pool, both dolphins surface, expel air, and disappear leaving two slick circles in the brown water. Buddy creeps along the edge of the pond to the pipe. A moment later, Annie slides by and looks up at her.

"Hi Annie." She feels like smiling at the dolphin, but Annie's smile is nothing more than the way her jaws fit together. She should apologize instead. People do anything they want with dolphins and then pretend, because they look like they're smiling, that they're happy.

Annie circles back, stands on her tail, squeaks and tosses her head. Buddy gets down on her stomach and slowly extends her hand, palm up.

They look at each other for a moment, then Annie lowers her head and presses her snout against Buddy's palm.

Heat rushes from the tip of her toes to the top of her head. Her heart pounds as she slowly, carefully, covers Annie's snout with her other hand, leans and kisses its scarred tip. When the dolphin doesn't move, she inches herself farther out over the water, presses her cheek to Annie's and closes her eyes.



The unexpected clatter of the gift shop's metal folding doors opening startles them both. The dolphin disappears, leaving Buddy suspended for a moment over the water before she tumbles in head first.

The instant she hits the water, Buddy feels a dolphin pass beneath her. She gasps, swallowing pond water. A second later she's being lifted, draped like wet moss across Annie's head. It frightens her. She flings herself sideways and is sucked deep beneath the surface by the eddy of the dolphin's departure. With no air in her lungs, she fights her way up toward the murky light and bursts out into the air. She spins around, looking for the dolphins.

Annie's near the gate to the show pool. Lucie is at the far end by the parking lot.

"I'm sorry," Buddy coughs. "I know you wouldn't hurt me." She puts out her hand and Annie comes slowly toward her, but sinks away before Buddy touches her. The dolphin circles, and Buddy feels her pass, feels the pressure that the movement of her tail makes in the water. She turns, trying to keep track of where Annie is. Suddenly, a dorsal fin arches up beside her and slides into her hand. Buddy catches it at the narrow tip, but quickly lets go, afraid her weight will break it.

Annie dives, circles, and comes up again. This time Buddy takes hold, closing her hand over the lowest, broadest part of her dorsal fin. Annie pumps her tail, dragging Buddy toward the parking lot end of the pond, makes a wide circle and carries her back toward the cattails. Water sprays off her chin, until she rolls off laughing and bumps to a stop, sitting shoulder deep in the water.

"That was wonderful," she says, when Annie noses in next to her and lays her snout across her legs. Buddy puts her arms across the dolphin's back, one on either side of her blowhole and kisses her with big smacking sounds.

Annie moves off Buddy's legs, lifts her head and brings it down heavily, splashing and rocking her. When she laughs, Annie does it again, then flops sideways and zips across the pond, then back again, this time with a sea grape leaf stuck to her forehead.

Buddy plucks it off and flicks the tip of Annie's snout with it, then tosses it away. Annie retrieves it and brings it back, but when Buddy tries to grab it from her, she twists and skims away.

"Give me that leaf." Buddy dives after her.

Annie opens her mouth and lets the leaf go. It bobs between them on the churning surface of the water.

Buddy swims slowly, sneaky-like, as if Annie can't tell she's moving closer. Inches from where the leaf floats, Buddy makes a grab for it. Annie snatches it and dives, popping up a second later just behind her.

Annie, with the leaf in her mouth, tail-walks backwards.

Buddy remembers Stevens' son saying Annie likes having her tongue tickled. "If you give me the leaf, I'll tickle your tongue." Buddy wiggles her fingers in the air.



Annie sinks back into the water, and opens her mouth. The leaf floats.

Buddy runs one finger along Annie's lower row of teeth, and dances her fingers up and down the pink tongue. The leaf bobs in the water beside them. Buddy grins suddenly.

"It's mine now." She grabs it, splashes the dolphin, and dives under.

She feels the suction as Annie passes beneath her. Buddy lets herself bob to the surface, takes a breath, then dangles face down, making a slow circle, trying to find the dolphin. From directly beneath her, Annie looms up out of the murky water. That monstrous form moving slowly towards her, floods Buddy with the same fear she felt when she first fell into the water. Panic wells in her, flattening her lungs against her ribs until her breath leaves her in a gasp. But she doesn't move or scream and, in that moment, realizes that her fear exploded on the surface in that bubble of air. The emptiness in her chest fills with love. She reaches down and touches the side of Annie's face before lifting her head to refill her lungs with air.

The dolphin stops, leaving her cheek against her palm until the moment Buddy lifts her head, then Annie pumps herself high out of the water and spins in a circle, splashing Buddy with her flippers. Buddy splashes her back.

"I'll race you," she challenges, diving away from the dolphin.

Annie flashes by her, covering Buddy with her wake, then makes a tight circle and gently brings her dorsal fin into Buddy's hand.

"Buddy Martin!" Stevens bellows. "Get out of there!"

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