

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 24

Standing between his uncle and an Ochopee policeman, Alex grins down at her, then tips back on his heels, glances quickly from one to the other, and shoots her a bird.

Buddy swims slowly to the culvert, swinging one leaden arm after the other, barely kicking her feet. She wants to sink into the cloudy water like Annie did, quit moving her arms, drift to the bottom and wait there for them to go away.

The policeman steps down onto the culvert and reaches out to her. She treads water and looks up at him before taking his hand, putting a foot on the bottom rim of the pipe and letting herself be pulled up.

"Hi, Dummy." Alex grins, nearly split his face in half.

She looks away.

"Go back to the booth." Stevens smacks the back of Alex's head.

"Aw, come on. I'm the one what . . ."

"Git." His uncle shoves him. Alex only moves a few feet until Stevens stomps the ground and points down the levee.

When his uncle turns around, Alex gives her the finger again, then kicking up shells and dust, trudges down the levee.

"Son," the policeman said, "you . . ."

"I ain't a boy." She stares at Alex's back.

"Oh. He called you Buddy."

She turns to the policeman. "That's my name. Buddy Martin, but I ain't a boy. They call him Orange Blossom," she looks at Stevens, "but he ain't."

The cop stifles a laugh.

"Watch your mouth, girlie," Stevens growls. To the cop, he says, "I want you to take her to jail. This is the second time she's been here teasing my dolphins."

Buddy's eyes widen. "I ain't teasing the dolphins." She touches the policeman's arm. "We're friends. We were playing."

Stevens snorts. "My taxes pay your salary, boy. Earn it." He pokes the cop in the shoulder. "Arrest her." He waddles off.

In the pond, an eye and a gray cheek break the surface.

The cop, lips tight, turns from watching Stevens's departure and brushes his shoulder.

"Are you going to arrest me?"

"No." He smiles. "And I don't believe you were teasing the dolphins. I'm sure you think they are your friends, but . . ." he puts a hand on her shoulder and lifts her chin with the other. "They belong to Mr. . . . old Orange Blossom. You can't swim with them. It could be dangerous, and if you got hurt, your parents could sue him."

She turns her head so he has to let go of her face. She looks down her toes curling and uncurling in the wet sand and shells.

"Annie would never hurt me."

In the water, Annie up-ends and shakes her head from side to side. The cop smiles before he can help himself. He glances away and clears his throat. "I'm sorry, but you still can't come here anymore. If you do I'll have to call your parents."

"I 'spect my dad knows where I am and my mom's right in here." She taps her chest.

He's confused for a moment, then sad. "That's where my mother is, too."

He straightens his shoulders, takes her hand, and pats it. "I'm sorry, honey, you're trespassing. It's against the law to trespass."

Annie makes clicking sounds behind her. When Buddy turns, Annie lifts out of the water, bobs her head, then flops backward into the pond with a great splash.

Buddy turns back to the policeman.

"It ain't right. She's my friend. She wants to see me."

"It's not up to her-or you. They belong to him. He can do as he pleases with them."

Buddy puts her hand on his arm. "It used to be okay to own black people."

His lips compress again. "Yes, it was." He pats her hand, then takes it and starts toward the parking lot.

Annie moves along in the water as they walk down the levee.

"Did you ride your bike here?"

"No, sir. I came up the river."

"Where's your boat?"

"In the cattails." She points behind them.

"Oh." He turns around, takes her other hand and retraces their steps. Annie turns and swims back along side them. Off the end of the culvert, she lifts up, then twirls, spraying an arc of water.

"I can't play, Annie. They won't let me."

The dolphin flashes away.

"I'm sorry," the policeman says. "Really I am."

From the pond comes a series of whistles and clicks. Annie flops over sideways, swims in a tight circle, then pops up in the center of the eddy she's made. She bobs her head, and opens her mouth. On her tongue is the tattered sea grape leaf.

"Oh, Annie," Buddy cries, jerks her hand free, slides down the side of the levee, wades into the pond and sits down. Annie propels herself up and puts her head across Buddy's thighs.

"Young lady."

She looks up.

"When I was your age, I'd have given anything to have a friend like that. So when you come back to see her . . ." he winks, "don't let that old fart catch you." He tips his hat, and walks away whistling.