

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 31

"A whale?" Buddy says. "A real whale?"

Jane nods. "This is the Seaquarium, and they've had this whale since May. His name is Hugo. He's an orca, a killer whale. A small whale, as whales go."



"He's a killer?"

"That's our tag for them. Other toothed whales, of which dolphins are the smallest, eat mostly fish and squid. The largest whales eat krill, just about the tiniest organisms in the sea." She pays for their tickets. "Orcas eat either fish or mammals like seals, sea lions, and penguins in the Southern Hemisphere."

"I hope when I'm grown up, I know as much stuff as you know."

Jane smiles. "I'm pretty sure you will know all I know and more."

From speakers in the parking lot comes an announcement:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the dolphin show will begin in the Seaquarium's center tank in ten minutes."

"Would you like to see what passes for a real dolphin show?"

Buddy shrugs. "I'm not sure. One part of me wants to see dolphins whenever I can, but not in a pen."

"There's the dichotomy."

"What's die-cot-omy mean?"

"In this case it means our feelings contradict each other. We love them and want to see them up close, know them better, but we have to imprison them to do so. Love shouldn't form a cage around the loved."

They enter through a cool, dark entrance to the center tank. Buddy looks up the wall. "Was that a real dolphin?"

High above their heads is a white dolphin mounted on the wall over a machine that makes plastic replicas of dolphins and whales.

"Yes." Jane doesn't look up. "That's Carolina Snowball. She was captured off the coast of South Carolina."

"Did they kill her just to hang her above that machine?"

"No, she got sick and died, and they put her up there. People came here from all over the country to see the

world's only white dolphin. They still want to see her."

"I'm surprised Mr. Stevens didn't do that to poor Osceola," Buddy says as they climb the circular concrete staircase to the main tank.

"I'm sure he would have if he thought he could recoup the cost of having him stuffed."

Buddy lays her arms on top of the railing, puts her chin on her fist, and peers down into the deep, clear water. Dolphins—seven of them—sweep by as if caught in an eddy of their own making. She turns to look at Jane. "Do you think it's right that they caught that white dolphin and brought her here?"

"No, I don't. Being rare and beautiful cost her freedom, then her life."

"Me, either." Buddy watches the dolphins circling and circling, before turning to face Jane again. "I don't remember my mother, but I think she was like you." Buddy taps her chest. "In here, she was like you. She don't come into my head so much since I met you. I think she must be resting better knowing you're my friend."

Jane blinks and crinkles her nose to fight back the tears that fill her eyes. "She must have been very special to have had a daughter like you." She turns Buddy back to face the tank, wraps her arms around her shoulders, and puts her chin on top of Buddy's head. "How old were you when she died?"

"Three."

"She must have been awfully young. Was it cancer?"

"No. It was an accident. Dad never mentions it or her, but the Admiral told me she died in a plane crash and Daddy was flying."

"Oh my word." Jane gasps. "How awful, and your poor father. The guilt must be unbearable."

Buddy lets her arms dangle down the side of the tank.

"That's why I'm not supposed to ask, or talk about her. But I'd like to know more, you know, like what was her favorite color, whether she liked broccoli, could she bend her thumb back and touch her wrist-" Buddy turns and shows Jane how she can press the side of her thumb to the inside of her wrist.

"Just ordinary stuff that other kids know about their moms."

"Can't you ask your grandfather?"

"He doesn't know much either. Until Momma died, we lived in Miami. Daddy was a pilot for National Airlines and Mom was a stewardess. Back then, it was against the rules for her to be married, or to have a baby, so she and I lived with her mom, and Daddy kept an apartment nearby.

The airplane he was flying was brand new, and he was bringing her over to meet my grandmother and the Admiral when they crashed in the Everglades. After that, Dad quit his job, and took me to Chokoloskee to live."

"You weren't in the plane?"

"No. I had a cold, so they left me in Miami with my other grandparents."

A young woman in a bathing suit climbs a ladder to a platform above the tank, welcomes them to the Top Deck Dolphin Show, then blows a whistle, and raises her arms. All seven dolphins sail into the air, turn somersaults, and dive into the rolling water.



Inexplicably, Buddy feels as if she might start to cry. A somersault, such an apparent joyous act, is just a circle that takes you right back where you started. Their only escape is the wall above a machine that cranks out plastic toys. She turns. "Dad says animals is missing the parts of their brains that let them miss their homes and families. He said scientists found out." She hesitates. She's about to ask a question that will change how much trust she has in her dad.

"Is that true?"

Jane thinks a moment, and Buddy knows she's trying to decide whether to contradict her father, or tell her the truth.

"Some scientists do believe that. I don't. I think what's missing is our ability to think beyond our own egocentric view of the planet."

"What does egocentric mean?"

"The belief that we are the ultimate species and that the world revolves around us. Just because animals can't tell us what they miss or how they feel about things, we conveniently ignore what they try to show us. That may change."

"How?"

"There are people working to teach chimpanzees American Sign Language. If they succeed, we may finally be able to communicate with other species in a language that we both understand."

Buddy turns back in time to see Flipper, the star of the show, jump twenty-three feet in the air for a fish. She claps with the rest of the audience, then says, "Maybe after a while they finally give up thinking about freedom."

"Perhaps they do," Jane says, but when Buddy turns to look at her, she sees that she said it to reassure her, not because she believes it.

In the next show, Salty, the sea lion, played with his trainer by catching a beach ball on the tip of his nose, balancing it, then launching it back with a flick of his head.

"Don't you think it would be a lot more interesting if the trainer had to catch and balance it on the tip of his nose, too?" Jane whispers in her ear.



Buddy giggles and nods.

The trainer rolls out a sheet of red plastic, wets it with a couple of pails of water, then signals Salty who shoots up onto one side of the long raft, slides the entire length, and drops into the tank at the other end.

Buddy grins at Jane. "Does the trainer have to go next?"

"Seems only fair."

Hugo, the killer whale, had been at the Seaquarium for six months. He was being trained but, as yet, there was no show. Buddy watches the faces of the people who come to look at him.

Just as she had done, they come in full of curiosity at first, then awe, then pity as they stand and watch him slowly move around and around his tank.

And as much as she had wanted to see him, Buddy finds she



can't bear the sight of him there alone in a pool that is only a few feet deeper than he is long. She takes Jane's hand. "I'm ready to go home."

Jane's lips compress. "Yeah. Me, too."

It's nearly dark when they pass Stevens's, but Buddy glances toward the pond automatically, as if it were possible to catch a glimpse of Annie. "How long will it be before the Marine Patrol people take them away?" she asks, looking back at the pond.

"January, at the earliest. It will take that long to finish the bureaucratic B.S. necessary to revoke his license and find another place willing to take them. And if Lucie's really pregnant, they may want to wait until after the baby comes."

"I wonder if Annie and Lucie can call the sea up in their heads like I can call up Momma and the Admiral. If they can, do you think the memory makes it easier or worse?"



"Worse, I think."

"Me, too. And Hugo. He must hate being in that little pool instead of the ocean."

"I'm sure he does. It's wrong of us to take away his freedom, but maybe, if we try, we can learn how wrong it is from him."

Buddy's quiet until they turn left off 41. "If you don't mind me asking, do you get paid to find out if stone crabs is being used up?"

Jane nods. "I work for the State of Florida, but they pay me with money they get from the federal government-tax money."

Buddy puts her head back against the seat. "Did the Seaquarium have to pay anybody for Hugo, Flipper, or Snowball?"

"No. At least not directly. They may have paid someone to catch them."

"You know what? I think the government ought to make places like the Seaquarium give some of all the money they make to people like you. It ain't fair they can take them from the ocean but not have to pay to find out if they're using 'em all up, or how bad they feel being taken away from their families."

"Did anyone ever tell you you're brilliant?"

"Nope." Buddy grins. "That's one thing nobody ever told me."

"Well, let me be the first. That is a great idea."

Kirk is sitting on the porch with his feet on the railing, drinking a beer, when they pull in. He drops his feet, and stands up.

"How'd it go?" he calls.

Buddy jumps out of the car and runs toward him. "Great," she says, as she passes him on the steps. She jerks open the screen door and dashes across the living room to her grandfather's room.

The Admiral is asleep. She stands by his bed and whispers his name. He continues to snore. She watches his chest move up and down for awhile, then crosses to his door, and turns.

"We're dyslexic, Admiral," she says softly, then smiles. "You and me and Einstein."

Buddy stops at the kitchen door when she hears Jane say, ". . . it's not a form of retardation at all. Einstein was dyslexic."

"Where does it come from?"

"It's inherited."

"I don't see things backward and neither did my wife."

"But your father does."

Buddy coughs before pushing the door open. They are sitting across the table from each other, each with their hands wrapped around a sweating bottle of beer.

Her dad turns but his smile quickly fades. He reaches and takes her hand. "All these years . . ." he says, "you and Dad." Then, for the first time in all of Buddy's memory, her dad pulls her into his arms and hugs her.