

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 32

The stone crab season, so far, has not been good and her father is short-tempered. She keeps out of his way when she can.

On Saturday, from the kitchen window, she sees his boat coming back into the docks before noon. Not a good sign. She retreats to her room where she stays to work on her science report until she hears him in the shed, sawing wood.

With him at work in the shed, Buddy feels safe moving to the front porch to start work on the poster she needs of the stone crab's life cycle. She's been at it for a while when she hears her father hammering something. She creeps down the side of the house, presses her stomach to the wall behind the hedge, and peeks around the corner. He has nails pinched between his lips. A stack of short boards leans against the wall under her bedroom window. He selects one, fits it across the one he has just nailed, and pounds it into place.

She pulls her head in and moves quietly back to the front porch. When she opens the screen door to go into the house to ask the Admiral why her father is nailing up her

window, she knocks over the jar of water she's been using to clean her paintbrush.

She passes the bathroom on her way to the kitchen for paper towels and hears water running in the bathroom sink. She knows her grandfather is bathing himself as best he can because he hates asking his son to do it.

"Dammit, Buddy," her father shouts.

She dashes to the kitchen, grabs a stream of paper towels, circles back and bursts out onto the porch.

Her father is staring down at the papers, paints, the overturned jar, and the spreading blue stain on the wood.

"I'm going to clean it up." She drops to her knees to wipe the wet spot. The cracks in the wood snag strips of toweling. She tries to dig those out with the end of her paintbrush, but it's too thick.

"You're only making it worse. I need you to help around here, not make more work for me," he snaps and walks away in a flurry of brown leaves.

Buddy raises her hand as if she could catch his shirt and stop him-ask him to wait. Tell him it will only take a minute, but she drops her hand, rubs the white cords of skin on her knees where they were pressed into the cracks, and realizes she doesn't want to help. That would mean being with him. She

for sure doesn't want to do that.

With her arms loaded with paints, brushes, the empty jar, her notebook, and the unfinished poster, she stops at her door and stares at the dark X the two boards make against her sunlit window. She feels as if it already marks the work she's done a failure, and her,



too. She dumps it all on the foot of her bed, crawls onto the bedspread, and rolls herself into a ball. She winds her T-shirt into a knot and holds it hard against her stomach. The curtains on her window flare out suddenly, then are sucked back flat against the screen. Osceola appears at the entrance to his tube, raises himself up and scuttles to the side of the tank and looks out at her.

The hammering hurts her head. She reaches up and feels along the headboard to the bedpost for her red plaid cap. She gets up, puts it on, and slips out of the house.

Only two boats are at the docks, her father's and one other. She paddles the pitpan out the channel and around the point before starting the motor. Outside the harbor, a gusty breeze chops the creamy-looking, pistachio green water. It laps at the low sides of the pitpan, splashing in and down her bare legs to swirl and roll around her feet.

On the back side of the island, the waters calm, and a warm breeze presses her shirt to her back and puffs it out in front like a wind in a sail. The clouds are long and round like rolling surf and they pass quickly overhead in a wide arc.

It's ten twisty miles to Stevens'. In the open, she can push the pitpan up to twelve or so miles per hour, but through the narrow mangrove tunnels, she likes to putter slowly, looking for birds. Today, even though they should be busy building nests, there are none. The silence is creepy.

At Stevens' Buddy creeps up the side of the levee and looks both ways. She's about to dart across when an airboat's engine explodes to life at the boarding dock. Buddy squats down in the cattails and pulls her head in like a turtle.

There are no customers on the benches of the airboat as it heads out the channel past her hiding place. She keeps low and watches until it disappears into the sawgrass. A moment later, the other airboat engine whines to a start then whizzes away in the wake of the first. Stevens's son puttters after them in a little dory, the sound of its motor lost in the roar of the airboat engines.

When everyone appears to be gone, Buddy dashes across the levee to the culvert, slides into the water, and pats the water. "Annie."

A fin breaks the surface at the far end of the pond, and Annie comes toward her through the murky water. Buddy has that same heart-pounding moment as she wonders if Annie can tell it's her. The fin disappears, and an instant later, Annie's blowhole appears and blasts out a warm, misty cloud. She rolls on her side to look at Buddy, then slides her dorsal fin into Buddy's hand.

Buddy hangs on as Annie whisks her to the shallow end of the pond and deposits her waist-deep and giggling in the muddy water. Annie runs herself aground beside her.

The sun winks through the clouds one last time and disappears.

At the other end of the pond, Lucie surfaces and eases toward them until she is near enough to touch. Buddy puts her hand out and Lucie nudges it with her snout then backs away, but not before Buddy sees the small, dry, white lump at the side of Lucie's mouth.

Annie's head is bumping against her hip. Please, please not Annie. She runs her hands over the dolphin's slick, cool skin, under her chin, and around her mouth. When her hand crosses Annie's blowhole, the dolphin squeezes out a raspberry sound that startles Buddy and makes her laugh.

No dolphin pox on Annie. Relief spreads over Buddy. Her Annie is all right.

Annie seems to agree. She lifts her head, and drops it with enough force to roll Buddy over with the wave.

Buddy rights herself and splashes Annie. "You want to play, huh?" She splashes her again, then bellies into deeper water like an alligator.



Annie wiggles herself backward out of the muddy, shallow water and comes up beside Buddy, slipping her dorsal fin into Buddy's cupped hand.

The first pumps of Annie's tail suck Buddy's legs down, then lift them again, suspending her above the dolphin's back.

Annie takes her gently along the show pool side of the pond, then faster and faster, so when they make the sweeping turn at the parking lot end of the pond and start down the levee side, she is nearly full speed, her tail pumping furiously.

Buddy tilts her head up to keep the water out of her mouth. Her chin throws off a spray of water like a slalom skier. When they start around the second time, Lucie joins them, on the inside, making a tighter circle.

When the rush of water against her chest breaks Buddy's hold, Annie stops. The backwash rolls over Buddy, dunking her. She sputters to the surface across Annie's snout and is carried to the shallow end of the pool.

Her feet touch bottom and Annie sinks away. A moment later, she shoots into the air from the center of the pond and does a somersault.

Buddy thinks about the dolphins at the Seaquarium for a second, before Annie surfaces again, stands on her tail and spins like a water spout. From the river, Buddy hears the dory's motor and the sound of men laughing. Annie and Lucie sink beneath the surface. Buddy wades deeper in the cattails, squats down and freezes. From there she can see the two airboat drivers and Stevens's son get out, remove the motor, then pull the dory up under the dock and tie it-bow and stern, two lines from each-to the four dock posts.



"That should hold her," one of the men says, then they march up the ramp, and across the lot toward the gift shop. She stays still until she can no longer hear them talking, but wonders what they did with the airboats.

The wind has been coming, off and on, in gusts, calm one minute, agitated the next.

Now, for the first time, a light sprinkle of rain begins to pock the surface of the pond.

Buddy sits in the water with Annie nosed in beside her. She puts her head back and catches raindrops on her tongue, but when the wind kicks up, she sinks deeper into the water to keep from shivering.

The little squall passes quickly, but one look at the sky convinces her the weather isn't going to get better. She rolls over and puts her forehead against the side of Annie's face. "I had a wonderful time, and I love you, but it's gonna storm." She kisses her. "I better start for home."

Annie swims with her to the culvert.

It's over Buddy's head now so that fresh water is getting into the pond from the channel, so she holds one of the pipes in the mouth of the culvert, and leans to kiss Annie on the tip of her snout. The pipe snaps off, dunking her. The second she surfaces, she grabs and pulls on each of the other two bars. The one on the left breaks loose, and the long one in the center snaps off at the bottom where it has rusted away, but stays firmly attached at the top.

The culvert is about three times the diameter of a hula hoop, clearly big enough for a dolphin to swim through, but the water inside is only about two feet deep.



The bars at either end of the culvert are part of a metal circle that's bolted to the inside rim of the pipe. There is no way for her to remove the rusted bolts, but she might be able to take out the bars, one at a time.

She pitches the two rusty bars up and over the levee, and hears them splash into the water on the other side. Freedom-a lousy twenty feet away.

Buddy turns and puts her hand against Annie's face. "My friend is going to get you out of here." She closes her eyes. She doesn't care that Annie's smile is just the shape of her mouth. It reminds her too much of how her grandfather smiles to comfort her. She feels as if her heart is breaking off in bits, a little piece at a time.

She steps up on the levee and turns. "I wish you lived in the bay where the water is clean and the fishing good. You could come to Smallwood's and we could swim together there."

Her pale hair, rusty with silt, produces rivulets of water, which run down her face and neck. Everywhere, crooked little streams make their way down her body, her arms and legs, dripping finally off her fingers and chin. The wind gusts suddenly, chilling her.

Annie rolls on her side and moves a flipper up and down.

"Bye." Buddy raises her hand and holds it there for a moment before folding her fingers and letting it drop to her side. She crosses the few feet of dirt and crushed shells that separate the pond from the channel to the river to the sea.