

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 33

The rain from the second squall stops, but the wind gusts coming across the open prairie are strong enough to blow the pitpan sideways. One blows her stern into the sawgrass, where the motor stalls. Buddy lifts the engine and pulls the weeds off the prop. Thunder rumbles.

When she finally comes off the prairie trail and onto the river, there, strung on a line like fish on a stringer, are both airboats tied to the mangroves with ropes. She remembers the men laughing and decides this must be a joke they're playing on Stevens, though she can't imagine anyone having the nerve.

As she turns off the river in to the channel, another squall hits, bringing pouring rain and strong, gusty winds. Up ahead she sees one of the dead-end channels. She swings the bow toward the entrance, cuts her engine, and guides the pitpan into the narrow opening. Once inside, she pulls her cap low, wraps her arms around her drawn-up knees, and puts her chin in the crack between them. This is pretty scary, Admiral.

The low, steady howl of the wind whirling above her and the creaking of swaying limbs are the only sound she hears, and it's dark in the tight mangrove tunnel.

She's not sure how long she sits hunkered in the bow of the pitpan, but it's during a momentary lull in the wind that she thinks she hears the sound of a boat's motor. She pulls the pitpan, hand over hand, backward out of the tunnel. When the stern pokes out into the river, the wind catches her cap and blows it upstream. It hits the water, whirls in an eddy until it's so waterlogged, the wind gives it up to the current, which floats it back toward her. There's no sign of a boat. She waits for her cap to drift into reach, wrings it out, and puts it on.

This part of the river has a tidal influence and even as strong as the wind is, she can see that it's ebbing. Her mind keeps going to what the Admiral said about the Calusa Indians using the shellmounds for high ground during hurricanes, and now she believes that's what this is. A hurricane would explain why her father was nailing boards over their windows to protect them from flying branches, roof shingles, and whatever else the wind tears loose. She starts the pitpan's motor and tries to steer it into the flow of the outgoing tide, but the little motor is no match for the howling wind, and the driving rain stings her face, legs and arms. Her teeth chatter with the cold.

It's too late to try to get to back to the shellmounds in the cove her grandfather showed her, and the ones near the mouth of Turner River are too far away.

But she can't stay here. She needs another hiding place. Buddy cuts the motor, crawls to the bow, leans out, and begins pulling herself downriver, root by root. When the river narrows and is shielded by the mangroves, she starts her motor and makes some progress until the river fans out again. Then the wind is too strong and bay water is being pushed ahead of the storm so even the help of the tide ends.

It's nearly dark when she sees a small opening in the mangroves. She jumps overboard and pulls her boat, stern first, into the tight black, dead-end tunnel, she crawls back in and curls into a knot on the bottom of the boat. The low-slung branches creak above her head.

Her body warms the water she's lying in, and in this little tunnel, the wind barely touches her. She starts to get used to the howling above her hiding place, so when the sound of the wind becomes a roar like that of a semi sweeping by on the highway, she covers her ears and closes her eyes. She tries to see her grandfather's face on the black insides of her eyelids, but she can't, and the roar grows louder, and nearer.

"Admiral," she screams.

A moment later, the hair on her arms and legs stands straight up, pulled by the wind, and in the next instant, it feels as if someone is covering her nose and mouth with cold, dead lips and sucking the air from her lungs.

The branches above her head crack and splinter, and are torn away, exposing the sky.

Eyes wide, she gasps for air and screams in terror as the black funnel cloud sweeps upriver.



Somewhere, over the receding roar, she thinks she hears someone shouting. Shouting her name. Admiral?

She scrambles forward to the bow and leans out.

"I'm here," she cries.

Twenty yards downstream, a pale arc of light from a dropped flashlight is shining up from the bottom of a boat. She can see the tops of white rubber boots and a man's knees. She takes her cap off and waves it back and forth low over the water.

"I'm here," she calls. "I'm here, please." But the wind lifts and carries her voice away.

The boat draws nearer, until, when it's only yards away, she recognizes it as the dory from Stevens's and the driver, her father. He's doubled over, rocking back and forth with his arms locked over his head.

"Daddy. Daddy." She crawls over the bow and drops into the water.

Kirk's head jerks up when Buddy grabs the side of the dory. In the glow from the flashlight, she sees his eyes are red and swollen. Blood from a gash on his forehead washes down his left cheek and neck, staining his denim shirt. "Daddy, I'm here. I didn't know a storm was coming."

He grabs her hand. "Thank God," he cries. "The tornado. Oh, thank God."

He slips a hand into an armpit, but before he can get a good grip and lift her into the dory, which is still moving downstream, she feels her foot hit a tangle of branches. They snag her legs and tear her loose from her father.

"Daddy," she cries as her hand slips along the dory's gunnel.

Kirk makes a grab for her wrist, and catches it just as her fingers slip off the stern. His grip is painfully tight and she screams as her left arm is pulled from its socket. She tries to kick her feet, but instead her wet hand slips out of his and she goes under.

It's silent and black beneath the surface. She flails her arms and feels the shocking pain of her arm popping back into its socket. Her hands strike mud, and she gasps in surprise, swallowing brackish water.

She's face down and twists in the other direction to force her hand out into the wind.

She hears the splash of her dad jumping overboard. A second later her hand breaks the surface and is caught in a steel grip. He catches her under each arm and lifts her and the tangle of tree branches into the air. He pulls her close and crushes her to his chest.

"I'm so sorry, honey," he says against her ear. "So sorry."

Her father snaps away the branches that cling to her feet, and wades, carrying her, to the dory, which has been blown back upstream. He puts her inside, then physically points it toward home.

Buddy looks back at the pitpan wedged in the mangrove tunnel.

"We'll get it tomorrow," he says. "Get in the bow."

Twigs, leaves, and even large branches sail through the air. Buddy wedges herself into the narrow vee of the bow and keeps her head down. Her dad keeps his cap pulled low to protect his eyes, but otherwise being pelted by debris.

The river offers some protection from the high winds, but where the river meets the bay, huge waves roll in, and foam and spray fill the air.

Her dad makes a sweeping turn and guns the motor and steers them back into the slightly calmer waters of the river.

Buddy shouts to make herself heard, and points to the shellmounds that rise up behind the old cistern near the first bend in the river. Her dad nods and turns the dory. He rams the boat ashore, and jumps over the side to drag it up the beach. Together they carry the dory up through the wind-stripped white mangroves to the top, turn it on its side against a tree, and lash it down with the bowline wrapped around the trunk and tied to the stern. When her dad's sure it's not going anywhere, they crawl beneath it.

He wraps his arms around her, and presses her head to his chest. "Try to sleep," he says against her ear.

It's more the silence than the light of dawn that wakes her. She's tucked into the S curve of her father's body, as if she'd been sitting in his lap and they'd fallen over. His right arm is across her shoulders; his other arm is her pillow.

She carefully lifts his arm and crawls out from under the dory, stands and stretches.

The trees are pitifully bare of leaves, but the sun is blazing in a clear blue sky.



The gronk-call of a Great Blue heron wakes her dad.

"How's it look out there?" He rubs the print of her head on his arm.

"Bay's still a little choppy." She squats in front of him, and smiles.

"Are you okay?" He takes a hand.

She nods. Her left shoulder hurts but not enough to mention.

"I thought I'd lost you last night." His voice is soft, and he doesn't look at her. "When I found the pitpan gone, and knew I'd let you go off without knowing about the hurricane, I . . . I was terrified." He pulls her into his arms and kisses the top of her head. "Stevens said he hadn't seen you, but I knew, after the way I acted, that's where you'd go. That's where I would have gone. I borrowed the dory thinking I could catch up."

"You almost did. I was in a tunnel sitting out a squall when you passed the first time."

A pained look crosses his face. "Can you forgive me?" For a moment, she thinks he means for not finding her the first time, but that's not what he means at all. She remembers what the Admiral said in the ambulance about him loving them, just not knowing how to do it right.

Now she understands. He's asking her to forgive him for having let her love slip away. He doesn't know it hasn't. He doesn't know, for her there is nothing to forgive. He doesn't know she's just been waiting.