

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 35

A week later, early on the day of her science report, Buddy goes to the Admiral's door and raps softly. He doesn't answer, so she opens it a crack and slides in. She still can't get used to the smell of urine in his stale, closed-up room. Before she wakes him with his breakfast, she empties the urinal, opens the blinds and the windows, and turns off the light on his dresser.

"You gonna read me your science report," he says, without opening his eyes.

"Want me to?"

He looks at her and smiles. "Of course."

"Eat your breakfast first."

"That can wait. You know I don't wake up hungry. Go get some extra pillows."

"What for?"

"To prop me up like a real audience."

When she finishes, she closes her notebook and looks at him.

"That was brilliant." He applauds by slapping the top of his nightstand. "I didn't know none of those things about stone crabs," he shifts one of the pillows. "And I been catching and eating 'em for sixty years."

"I'm awful nervous, Admiral."

"I know, honey. That's natural, but I'm telling you, that there will be the best report of any of 'em. You just wait. Now stand up and let me see how pretty you look." He makes circles in the air with his finger.

She gets out of his wheelchair and turns all the way around. The skirt and blouse were the ones she'd borrowed to wear to Miami. Even though it's still way too warm, she wears her new red sweater.

Buddy faces the mirror on his dresser and straightens the long bow at her throat. With her index finger, she traces the initials on her sweater then pulls her shoulders back, lifts her chin high and grins at her grandfather's reflection in the mirror.

The Admiral takes the picture Jane gave him of Buddy and Hugo from his nightstand and holds it up, comparing them.

"You're even prettier than this picture." He presses it to his chest and shades his eyes. "The room's glowing, you're so pretty."

"Oh, Admiral." She blushes.

He holds his arms out to her. "Knock 'em dead, baby. Knock 'em dead."

Kirk has siphoned most of the water in Osceola's tank into a bait bucket, which is in the back of the truck with the lid snapped in place. The aquarium is on the floor at Buddy's feet, and a coil of plastic tubing on the seat between them. He puts the key in the ignition, but before starting the engine, he reaches over and squeezes her shoulder.

"You look beautiful," he says, then turns the key. "I'm very proud of you." His lips compress, and his eyes get that faraway look she's seen all his life, but he says what he's never said before. "I just wish your mother could see you now."

"I wish she could, too." She leans across the tubing to kiss his cheek.

Her father clears his throat and takes his foot off the brake. "Jane said she would like to sit in while you give your report. Do you mind?"

"I was hoping she would." Buddy smiles down at Osceola, then turns and grins at her reflection in the window.

After introducing Jane to the class, Ruth Daniels does as she promised and calls on Buddy to go first, so she won't have to sit and grow more nervous through other reports.

From her corner in the back, Buddy looks at Jane sitting in the desk she'd dragged up beside Miss Daniels's. Her face is expressionless, but Buddy feels her eyes lift, hold her steady, then balance her as she comes slowly to the front of the room.

As she passes Alex's desk, he leans over and whispers something to Jason. Muffled giggles erupt.

Jane's eyes narrow, but they don't leave Buddy's face.

At the corner of Miss Daniels's desk, still holding Jane's eyes, Buddy stops and puts her hand on the rim of Osceola's tank. She closes her eyes for a moment, takes a deep breath, and turns to face the class. Sunlight pours in the high windows along the front wall, lighting her blond head and warming her shoulders.

The other kids squirm in anticipation, grinning and whispering to each other, expectantly, like an audience waiting for a performance. Miss Daniels's chair scrapes back. The room quiets, except for Alex's last words to Timmy.

"Dumb Buddy looks like a lit sparkler."

The class snickers.

Buddy lets her shoulders sag and lowers her head. Jane taps the desk with a fingernail. Buddy glances at her and sees her straighten in her desk, and lift her chin. Buddy takes a deep breath again and does the same.

"Elizabeth Martin on stone crabs," Miss Daniels announces, glares at Alex, and sits down.

"My . . . my report is on stone crabs," Buddy whispers.

"A bit louder," Miss Daniels says gently.

"My report is on stone crabs," she repeats, her eyes cast down, her toes, in socks, work inside her sandals. "When stone crab eggs hatch, they don't look like baby crabs. They come out as little squiggly things that float in the water." She holds up a drawing and points to the top figure. "These is . . . are called the lar" She looks at the ceiling, not at Jane.

"Larvae," she blurts. "These larvae keep changing shape." She draws her finger down the row of drawings. "Six times.



These are called larvae stages. Larval stages," she corrects.

"The larvae float in on the tides and do their changing around the mangrove roots where they are food," she put the poster down, "for snook, trout," she ticks them off on her fingers, "redfish, mullet, jack, and grouper. Stone crab larvae is at the bottom of the food chain Miss Daniels told us about."

"Nothing eats full-grown crabs except octopuses and us. Conchs can get them when they are in a trap."

"To make sure stone crabs ain't extinct when we're grown, we need to protect the females with eggs, keep the males out of the sun and wet them when they are in the fish boxes, and be careful how we break the claws off."

"Osceola here had one claw snapped off at what Miss Conroy calls. . . I've forgotten," she told the class and looks at Jane.

Jane nods. "It's called the fracture plane. It's where the claw releases naturally without causing a wound."

"That's right," Buddy said. "His other claw was twisted off and his meat showed. If I hadn't kept my thumb over it, he'd have bled to death. Their blood ain't red. It's clear and sticky."

She taps the side of the tank, and Osceola comes to the end of the tube, looks up at her, then disappears again.

"He's scared of everybody but me." She pushes her sleeve up, reaches in, tips Osceola out, catches him as he scuttles across the tank, and holds him up for them to see.

"The claw that got twisted off had to heal first." She taps the left one. "So the little claws he's got growing is different sizes. They're under this clear cover, so he can't pinch 'til he molts."

"Can we see," Belinda says.

Buddy, holding one hand under Osceola so he doesn't drip on the floor, walks the aisles showing him to the class. When she nears Alex's desk, he turns away. Jason does, too, but Timmy looks on.

When she gets back to Miss Daniels's desk, she carefully puts him back in his tank. The class giggles when he scuttles across the sand, darts into the tube, creeps back to the opening for a peek, then jerks himself out of sight.

Miss Daniels initiates the clapping; Jane joins in, as do all the other kids, except Alex, and Timmy after Alex hits him.

"Excellent report," Miss Daniels says. "Exactly what I'd hoped for." She comes around her desk and stands so her back is to the classroom.

"Congratulations, honey." She shakes Buddy's hand.

At lunch, Buddy puts her tray down at the table with Naomi and Larry. Naomi smiles at her.

Belinda and Lisa, who were a bit behind her in line, stop as she is about to sit down.

"Wouldn't you rather sit with us by the window with Megan and Pam?"

"Sure. I . . . I guess . . ."

Naomi looks at her plate.

Buddy sits down. "Maybe tomorrow. I think I'll stay here, but you can sit with us, if you'd like."

Belinda snorts and turns on her heel. Lisa follows.

"You should have gone with them," Naomi says.

"Why? They didn't like me yesterday, and I'm that same person today."

Naomi shrugs.

"If they'd ask me, I'd go."

Over Larry's shoulder, Buddy sees Alex, Timmy and Jason, in a giggling knot, coming at her from across the cafeteria. Alex is holding his plate up like a waiter with a tray of meals.

He stops at the end of the table, grins at her, then puts the plate down and pushes it toward her. He's laughing so hard, tears run down his cheeks, and she knows by his cruel expression of glee what he's done. She closes her eyes.

"We fixed you something special for lunch, Dummy."

The cafeteria noise roars in her ears. She lets her head droop and opens her eyes. Steam rises from Osceola. She screams, grabs and presses his body to her cheek.



She sees Jane coming, sees her break through the crowd of kids, shoving them aside. She grabs Osceola out of Buddy's hands and pours Naomi's cold milk over the blisters in her palms, then presses the cool, wet glass to the red print his shell has made on her cheek. "I'm so sorry." She folds Buddy into her arms and rocks her.

Ruth Daniels drops her hands away from her tear-streaked face and whirls on Alex, who tries to back away, but no one behind him moves.

Coach Burns breaks through the crowd and snatches Alex away from Miss Daniels. Alex tries to pull free. "Hold still, or I'll rip your arms off," Coach snarls.

Teachers begin to move the kids away, but the ones at the back, who haven't seen what happened, push in now to take a look.

"There ain't nothing there but a stone crab," a girl whispers to her friend. "Is she crying over that stone crab?"

"I think it was a pet," the other girl says.

"Got little claws, don't it?"

Alex had pried the shields off Osceola's new claws, broken them off and put them apart from his body on the plate. They were on either side of a catsup cap full of yellow mustard.

"You're hurting me," Alex whines, and again tries to twist free of the grip Coach Burns has on his arm.

Buddy wipes her eyes, first on one shoulder then the other. She stands, but trembles like a muscle that's held a weight too long. "That's it," she says. "No more." Her voice is soft and even. And like a pebble dropped in a pond, rings of silence sweep across the cafeteria. "Don't ever call me dumb again. I . . . ain't, I'm not dumb. But if I was, nothing is so dumb it ain't got feelings and can't be hurt." She puts her hand over Osceola's shell. "He trusted me, knew I wouldn't hurt him. When you took him out of the tank and killed him, he was afraid. He died afraid . . ."

Her voice cracks, and tears erupt and run down her face. She doesn't wipe them away. She lifts her head higher. "You shouldn't have killed him." She spreads her napkin, places his body in the center, lays his little claws on top of his shell, folds the ends over, and puts him in the pocket of her red plaid skirt.

She steps over the bench and comes around the table to face Alex. Coach lets go of his arm. "I'm a better person than you, and I'm smarter. I got the same thing wrong with my brain that Einstein had. I'll get better. You never will."

Alex's eyes twinkle and a sneer twists his lips.

"If nothing else, I'm bigger than you are." She makes a fist and swings at his face as hard as she can.

Alex's head snaps back and blood spurts from his nose. "She hit me," he wails, covering his face. Blood drips through his fingers. He lowers his hands, wipes them on his pants, and starts to cry.