

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 37

Buddy's coming along the path from Smallwood's, where she put the last of Osceola's clams back in the water, when she hears her father swearing. She steps off the gravel path onto the weeds to mute her approach.

He's on the first rung of a ladder, painting the porch ceiling. The plastic sheeting that covers the porch is splattered with paint, as are his boots, pants, shoulders and hair.

"Need some help?"

"I look like I need help, don't I?" He smiles down at her.

"I'll go put on some old clothes." She opens the screen door just wide enough to squeeze into the living room.

"Don't slip." He jerks his head to indicate a large circle of paint between the door and the ladder. "I hit the bucket with my elbow."

By the time she gets back, the ceiling is nearly done. Only an arc above the screen door is still the color of sanded-down forest green paint. The ladder blocks the door. "I'm sorry about Osceola."

She nods from the other side of the screen.

"I'm going to have a talk with Carlisle."

"You don't have to do that."

"I think I should. He needs to know if crap like this happens again, there will be consequences."

Buddy smiles up at him. "I think Alex knows what the consequences will be if he ever bothers me again."

"How so?"

"Didn't Jane tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I gave him a bloody nose, and he cries like a baby."

Kirk laughs. "I suppose I should scold you for hitting him, but I wanted to pinch his head off, so bravo for showing such restraint."

He finishes above the door, steps off and moves the ladder so she can get out.

"Jane also told me they are moving the dolphins."

A physical pain, like she's been punched in the stomach, makes her flinch. She looks at her feet.

"I've been thinking, and I don't want you going up to see them anymore."

"How come?" She bites her lip.

He folds the ladder and leans it against the railing. "It's going to be the crab thing all over again." He dips his brush in the bucket of paint. "You'll be crushed when they move them to north Florida. And Stevens doesn't want you there."

"But Annie does," she whispers.

He scrapes the excess paint off both the sides of the brush. "The dolphin?" His expression is one of amusement, but it changes when he looks at her. "Look." He lays the brush across the top of the can, and holds his hands out to her. "I want you to stop being hurt." His eyes narrow and his voice sounds bitter. "By me, or anyone else."

"I already love Annie, so not seeing her again starting now would be as bad as not seeing her after they take her away."

Her dad sighs. "You win." Then he smiles. "Try not to get arrested; bail money is hard to come by."

"What's bail money?"

"When a dolphin lover gets thrown in jail, it's the money her father has to bring to get her out."

She looks at him and grins. "My piggy bank is on my dresser."

Buddy blushes when he laughs. She can't remember a single time in her life that she and her dad shared a moment like this.

"I think I'll call it a day here. This front will stir up the crabs." He leans to check the lead-colored sky. "I'll need to pull traps tomorrow morning, but if you really want to help we could do the railing in the afternoon."

"Sure. That'd be fun."

"Good. I was looking for a sucker."

They smile at each other, shyly, like new acquaintances.

The next morning, she sits huddled on the milking stool in the stern of the pitpan. Last night's rain preceded a cold front, which has left a crispness in the air, a biting, tingling chill. She keeps the bow into the wind until she reaches the calm shoreline midway between the bridge and the mouth of Turner River, then she turns east. Out of the wind, it's warmer and the sky is a cloudless deep blue.

All last night, she thought about what Jane said about what life for Annie and Lucie and Lucie's baby will be like at Marineland-more of the same, only cleaner.

And she thought about what her grandfather said about wild animals wanting to be free. She's made up her mind, and she has a plan.

She ties the pitpan to a mangrove limb, then baits her hook with the clams she dug this morning. Within the hour she has caught four snapper and a jack.

Buddy comes out of the mangroves onto the river. The levee in the distance looks like a narrow ribbon of dirt, an inch or two wide, hardly strong enough to trap and hold even the spirit of a dolphin. They aren't like Hugo separated from his home ocean by twenty-five hundred miles. Annie and Lucie are only ten miles from the sea. When the wind is right, she bets they can smell it.

At the north end of the levee, an airboat roars away from the dock. Buddy swerves off the open water into a stand of cattails and cuts her motor, not that



the driver could hear the little Johnson over the whirring scream of the airboat's engine. A limpkin squawks and lifts into the air like a question mark, its long neck and bill arcing, its thin legs hanging down. The airboat sweeps past her in her hiding place, its benches lined with tourists.

From here, she can see the roof of a chickee where gator hides are hung to dry.

She leaves the cover of the cattails and poles toward it through yards of short sawgrass but out of sight of the ticket booth.

Willows line the entire length of Stevens's property, except the trash dump. Behind the willows on higher ground, is a wall of Florida holly. It looks impenetrable, but a horrible stench draws her to the narrow cleared path that leads to the back of the chickee. Cast up in some willow branches, at the mouth of the trail, is Osceola's body, his skin shriveled, dry and wrinkled over his nearly rotted insides. Bones stick through in places and she sees maggots and beetles feeding on his remains.

"This is all he meant to you; all you cared," she says aloud. If there was a doubt left in her mind, it's gone.