

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 38

Buddy leaves the pitpan tied in the willows near Osceola's body and wades up the trail carrying the bucket of fish, scissors, and a hacksaw. She comes out behind the chickee as a whistle blows and Stevens announces the first trick to scattered applause.

The chickee is separated from the dolphin pond and the show pool by an open stretch of thigh deep weeds that end where the stand of cattails begins. She hears two splashes from the pool, some applause, then the boom of Stevens's voice announcing the next trick. Buddy bends low and dashes to the cover of dense holly bushes that edge the show pool. She can't see the water, but she can see the hula hoop Stevens's son is holding up. The whistle blows. Annie sails out of the water and through the hoop. Buddy grimaces and turns away. When the applause and the Long Ranger's theme start, she clenches her fists.

Now, she thinks. She grabs the bucket of fish and runs to the pond. She leaves the bucket in the cattails, and dives in with the hacksaw. While the music blares, she uses it to cut away the final bar on the pool side of the culvert.

Because of the hurricane and the nearly constant rain since, the water is much higher. She climbs inside and crawls its length. Thick, slimy moss grows on the bottom, but she refuses to think about how icky it feels. Once the rains stop, the water level will fall. There isn't much time, especially now that the first cold front has come through. It doesn't rain much in the winter.

She gets part way through the top of one bar before the music stops. A minute later, the gate between the pool and the pond grinds open. Buddy is sitting chin deep inside the culvert when Annie and Lucie come through. She whistles softly, and they veer straight for her.

She drops into the water, hooks a hand over Annie's dorsal fin and lets herself be pulled around the pond, before dropping off at the edge of the cattails where she waits for Annie to circle back and nudge in beside her in the shallow water.

Annie puts her head across her thighs and Buddy drapes her arms across the dolphin's head. "They are planning to take you away." Her voice cracks with emotion. She swallows, trying not to cry. "It would be a better place with clean salt water and there are other dolphins . . . Oh, Annie."

The airboat is returning.

Buddy sits up and wipes her nose with her wet T-shirt. "People can see me when they get off." She scoots backwards, out from



under Annie's head, deeper into the cattails. Annie lurches in beside her, flattening their cover. "They're gonna see us."

She puts her hand under Annie's snout, lifts it and pulls some of the cattails free. Her fingers brush across a small, hard, dry-feeling bump. Her stomach flip-flops before she leans to look at the lump. It's white and cauliflower-shaped.

The airboat engine whirs and dies.

Crying softly, she lies back in the water, deep enough to cover her ears. Annie presses her snout to Buddy's cheek where the scalded patch of skin is peeling. Though the burn itself no longer hurts, it's a pressure-Annie's skin on hers-that she can't stand. She turns her head and thinks of stone crabs, remembers that when their shells become too small and tightens around them, giving them no more room to grow, no peace, they empty themselves of water, and shrivel down until they can escape. That's what she wants to do, empty out, shrink until she can escape her skin, now tight and cracked with grief. This shell has failed her, and has let slip in the knowledge that what and who she loves can die.

People are leaving the airboat, laughing and talking. It makes her angry.

She'd come here with some vague plan-a maybe-but not anymore. When the last of the tourists disappear, Buddy gets up and carries the bucket of fish back to where Annie and Lucie wait for her.

"I'm very sorry," she says to the first fish she takes from the bucket, then, with the scissors, she begins to trim off its fins starting with the tail. She doesn't cut its skin and hopes that it can't feel what she is doing. When she's done, she holds it up for Annie to see. Annie upends and opens her mouth.

"Not that way. You have to catch it yourself. If you are going to be free, you have to be able to feed yourself."

Lucie surfaces nearby.

Buddy puts the fish in the water and lets go. Without all its fins, it kind of staggers through the water, and after a moment disappears into the murky depths. Annie stays put, but Lucie's dorsal fin arches over and she disappears. Buddy feels the movement of the water, which feels the same as it does when Annie sweeps by under water, but she can't tell if Lucie caught the fish. She takes another from the bucket, apologizes to it, then trims its fin, and holds it up for Annie to see.

This time when she lets it go, Annie goes under. A moment later, the finless fish is flung into the air. Annie comes up under it, opens her mouth and catches it before it strikes the water again.

There are four more fish in the bucket. For the next one, Buddy only trims the tail fin before letting it go. Annie waits while Lucie chases it. Again, Buddy can't tell if she catches it, but assumes she has when she returns and waits for Annie to go after the next one.

The last two Buddy releases fully finned. Annie alone comes up with the fish in her mouth, before



tossing it in the air and catching it. Lucie, Buddy decides, must like to eat in private.

After all the fish are gone, Buddy floats for a while with Annie until Stevens's long-winded sales pitch chops at the stillness like whitecaps. When it ends, she raises her head. An airboat engine fires up. Stevens hangs the microphone on a hook inside the ticket booth and waves as the airboat pulls away from the dock with its cargo of tourists. The driver tests the rudders, blasting Stevens and rocking him back a few steps. In Buddy's mind, he topples over, rolls like a log across the parking lot and out onto the highway where a semi smashes him. She smiles at the vision, then kisses Annie's forehead. "I'll be back day after tomorrow."

At home that evening, Buddy sits beside her grandfather's bed.

"What if it don't work?"

"It sounds like a good plan to me; the moon will be full, and it's a high tide. Are you sure the culvert's big enough."

"I'm sure." She has his cap on. "It'll be stealing, you know."

"Them dolphins is victims of a kidnapping. You're righting a wrong."

"I guess, but it'll still be stealing in the eyes of the law."

"The law ain't always right. Look at the ones that protected slave owners, or keeping women from voting." He leans to look into her eyes. "The state's already decided he ain't doing right by them. All you're planning is to move them early and to a different location." He smiles. "It ain't about the law, honey, it's about what's right."

"How can you tell the difference?"

"When it's done you will feel good if it was the right thing to do. If you feel bad, it was wrong."

"Alex feels good when he does bad things."

"That boy ain't got no moral compass. He'll never stand for anything and, in the long run, it will bite him in the butt. Mark my words." He squeezes her hand.

Buddy puts his cap back on the bedpost. He watches her, and his eyes get sad-looking. "I'm gonna miss my little girl," he says.

"I ain't ever leaving you, Admiral."

"I mean if you get your dolphins out, you will come back all grewed up."

She leans over and puts her head on his chest. "I'll still be your little girl."

He strokes her hair, then her cheek. His hands are dry and still have calluses, and his breath is warm against her forehead.

"That ain't the way it's supposed to be. To keep you my little girl would be as wrong as penning them dolphins." He lifts her chin. "I've never seen such a love of something like you got for that dolphin. If she's sick with what killed the male, you have to try to do this, honey. And if you succeed, you'll do all your growing when she swims out of the reach of your hand. Just like me, you'll want her to stay because you love her and you'll want her to go because you love her."

He puts his head back on the pillow and closes his eyes.

"I always thought I'd die at sea-pull a trap full of crabs or a net full of fish and just keel over. But here I am, like them dolphins, trapped and legless, yards from the sea, and no way to get there." He turns and looks at her, tears creep down the gullies in his face. "Show her the way home, honey. Lead her back to the sea for me."