

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 39

Two nights later, Buddy waits for an hour after she hears her father go to bed before getting up and lining her pillows up under her blanket. She takes her cap from the bedpost and tiptoes to her grandfather's door. Moonlight glows through the Venetian blinds, casting bars across his bed, the floor and his wheelchair. He's a prisoner, too, she thinks. "I'm going now," she whispers, then snaps her fingers, spins and runs on her tiptoes back to her room. She gets the purse she took to Miami from the top drawer of her dresser. There's a ticket stub from the Seaquarium, a nickel, and the Admiral's eyetooth inside. She takes the tooth and puts it in her pocket. Before she leaves, she lowers her blinds so no light falls on her bed, then tiptoes past her father's door, stopping to listen for his snores with her ear pressed against the wood.

She stands for a while between the closed door of her father's room and the open door of her grandfather's. She watches the bedcovers rise and fall with each breath. The arm that was broken has shriveled, and it lies at a bit of an odd angle on top of the bedspread.

"I've got your tooth," she whispers, patting her pocket, before she silently closes his door and presses her forehead to its jamb. "So you can keep an eye on me."

It's ten to eleven by the clock on the stove. She takes a flashlight from the drawer next to the refrigerator, slips out the kitchen door and around to the shed. Without using the light, she feels around in the corner until her hand hits what's left of the roll of plastic sheeting. She lifts it onto her shoulder.

The docks are lit by one bright light on a tall pole near the cleaning stand. Buddy crosses through Iris's yard, staying in the shadows until she is opposite her father's dock slip, then she darts across. She boards his boat on the port side, crosses to the pitpan, and lowers the roll of sheeting onto the deck. From the trunk cabin, she gets a tow rope—just in case.

The hacksaw she used before is dull, so she gets her father's from his tool kit. He keeps it sharp and it has a nice grip, and she takes the rasp to file any sharp edges.

Sitting on her knees in the bow, she paddles the pitpan away from the docks, out of the channel, and along the shore until she is opposite Smallwood's silent, dark store. In the still night, the little motor, when she starts it, sounds as loud as an airboat engine.

Once away from the island, the bay is flat, calm and as silvery as a baking sheet.

The pitpan's wake slices into two halves. Twice, schools of mullet explode out of the water in front of the bow in a shower of phosphorescence. At the mouth of the river, her approach disturbs a roost of ibis. They rise into the air in a thunderous squawking protest.

It hasn't rained since the front went through three days ago. She worries. It doesn't take long for water levels to drop once it stops raining. The entire Everglades is nothing but a wide, slow-moving sheet of water on land all tilted toward the tip of Florida and its bays. In another couple of months it will be dry as bone in places, with the fish taking refuge in the holes that alligators evacuate for themselves.

In the moonlight, it's bright where the river is wide and open, but where it narrows and the mangroves on either side join their limbs in a dense tangle above her head, it's very dark. Red eyes appear, blink at her, then, amid a rustle of leaves and the creak and sway of branches, disappear.

"Raccoons," she says aloud-hopefully, since it could be a bobcat, a panther, or a bear. She doesn't use the flashlight, afraid that when and if she really needs it the batteries will be dead.

Spider webs, easily ducked during the day, stretch unseen across the black tunnel and rip away when her face goes through them.

As she comes out of the tunnel onto the river, she takes down a web that leaves a large golden orb spider dangling off the bill of her cap. She lifts the cap, lowers it until the spider gets its footing on the gunnel, then she breaks the strand that links them and puts her cap back on.

Stevens's levee looks like a narrow white scar on the pale face of the prairie. A hundred yards short of it, a distance she hopes is far from anyone's hearing, she cuts the pitpan's motor. When the engine goes silent, so do the frogs, leaving absolute stillness.

Buddy, who is nearly always alone, feels suddenly mired in loneliness. She wads the pocket that holds the Admiral's tooth in her fist and looks up at the moon, now very high and small in the sky, its face dim and far away.

She poles the rest of the way, ties the bow up in the willows, and jams the pole in the mud for the stern line. She crosses her fingers and flicks the flashlight. The water is down in the culvert; she can only hope it is still deep enough.

From the other side, she hears the whoosh of expelled air. "Annie, it's me." With the rasp and hacksaw, in one hand, and the roll of sheeting across one shoulder, she steps up on the embankment and crosses to the pond. Annie upends. The moonlight makes it look like she's popped up in the center of ripples of light. She bobs her head and lets out a

long whistle. "Shhhh. We have to be really quiet."

Buddy slides into the water, puts the roll of sheeting, rasp and hacksaw inside the culvert, then turns and wraps her arms around



Annie's neck. All the emotions that have been building in her suddenly feel overwhelming. She's going to try to steal these dolphins, and if she fails, they will be taken away and put in a tank for the rest of their lives. If she succeeds, she may never see them again.

Annie whistles, stands on her tail and spins, throwing an arc of water with her flippers.

"There's no time to play, Annie."

With the dolphin at her elbow, Buddy runs her hand along the inside of the pipe until she locates where each of the two bars she broke out, day before yesterday, was attached. With the rasp, she files down the sharp edges.

Getting on her knees inside the pipe, she begins sawing through the center, and final post on the pond side of the culvert. Thankfully, this bar, like the others, is hollow, which makes it easy to cut away with her father's sharp hacksaw.

After the middle one snaps off, she uses the rasp to smooth the bottom edges, then she finds the end of the sheeting, and leaves about five feet of it floating on top of the water in the pond. The rest she unrolls as she crawls through the pipe. Annie puts her head inside, and whistles, which reverberates off the metal tube.

Sitting inside the culvert, the noise the hacksaw makes is deafening, made louder by the echo, and the stillness of the night. She silently prays there's no one around to hear.

The first pipe snaps off at the top, and is so rusted through at the base, it comes loose easily when she pulls on it. She drops it into the channel, and begins to work on the next two.

After the last of the three bars breaks away, Buddy feels the rim for sharp places, files them down, then rolls the plastic sheeting out into the channel.

When she turns, Annie, in dark silhouette, is resting with her head in the culvert, watching her.

With her chin up to keep from swallowing any water, she crawls back to where Annie waits. From there she can see Lucie circling nearby-shy but curious.

Buddy sits at the end of the pipe, shoulder deep in the water; Annie nudges her head onto her lap.

This whole plan hinges on having seen the dolphins chase fish up into shallow water, then belly ashore to pick them off the beach. If they can do that, Annie and Lucie can make it through this pipe. But it will be for nothing if Annie doesn't follow her, or if she does, but not all the way through to the other side. Buddy's heart is in her throat as she puts her cheek against Annie's forehead, and whispers, "Please follow me."

She gently pushes Annie's head off her lap, turns, and swims the length of the pipe straight out into the channel on the other side.

"Come on girl." She splashes water back into the mouth of the culvert, like it's their game. "Come on."

By the light of the moon, she can see Annie swimming back and forth. When Buddy calls to her, Annie pops up, and twirls splashing water into that end of culvert.

A dim circle has formed around the moon like it gets sometimes before a rain. It seems brighter, as if the circle is a mirror



reflecting more of its light. The channel for as far as Buddy can see is a silver trail across the prairie-laid out to lead her and the dolphins home.

Buddy crawls through to the pond again.

When Annie opens in front of her, Buddy splashes her, turns quickly and swims through the pipe, calling for Annie to follow.

Before she reaches the other side, she feels a tug on the plastic sheeting. She looks over her shoulder and sees that Annie is resting inside the pipe. She can't tell for sure but it looks like she's about half her body length in, half out.

"Come on girl." Buddy dives into the channel, turns on her back and kicks her feet to create lots of splashing. When she reaches the center of the channel, she holds her arms out, and spins, spraying water in all directions. By the time she's made a second full circle, Annie's head is sticking out the channel end of the pipe. She lies there for a moment-long enough for Buddy to think she's stuck, then her back arches, her tail slaps the water and she slides out into the channel.

"Oh my God." Buddy covers her mouth with her hand.

Annie dives beneath her, and Buddy feels the roiling backlash of water as Annie races by, swimming first toward the tied-up airboats, then back past where Buddy treads water in the middle of the channel. The surface sparkles and undulates in the moonlight as Annie passes. It crosses Buddy's mind that she may have kept on going when Annie sails out of the water in a cascade of silver beads, does a flip, and crashes back into channel.