

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 11

Early on the Saturday following the day the Admiral surprised her with the pitpan, Buddy taps on his door before opening it a crack to peek in. He's in his wheelchair, waiting. He smiles, toothlessly, and presses an arthritic finger to his lips then crooks it for her to come in and close the door. His other hand is behind his back.

"I got something for you."

He pulls out a red plaid hunting cap, smacks it against his knee, and waves away the eruption of dust.



"For me?"

"It's old, but it ain't never been wore. I bought it for your pa twenty-five years ago. He said it was a redneck's cap, and handed it right back to me."

Her grandfather's cheeks are sunken without his teeth, and his lips form a thin, hard line.

He scratches at something on the brim then holds it out to her with both hands, like an offering.

"It'll keep the spiders out of your hair when we go through where the mangroves is thick and low."

When she leans over, he pushes her bangs off her forehead and fits the cap on her head. She straightens, and turns to look at herself in the mirror. The mirror is tilted at an angle so her grandfather can use it from his wheel chair. She bends her knees and smiles at her reflection.

"I've been wanting one of these." She pulls the bill a little lower over her eyes. "I love it. Yes sir," she says, placing her palms flat on his dresser and lifting her chin to the mirror. "I've really been needing one just like this."

She leans towards her image in the foggy mirror and surveys the room.

"You know something, Admiral? When I'm looking in a mirror is the only time everything's where it's supposed to be."

"Yeah, I know. It's that way for me, too."

She comes back and squeezes into the chair beside him. She pushes the cap back and puts her head on his shoulder.

"I'm glad Dad didn't want it."

"He was just young and full of beans when he slung it back at me. It didn't hurt, but I don't blame him now. He didn't want to spend his life hauling nets and traps like his pa."

Buddy turns the cap around so the bill is in the back. "If he hates fishing, why's he doing it?" She traces the path of a blue vein along the top of his hand.

"'Cause he found out he hated the rat race in Miami more. And after your ma died, he needed help taking care of you. You were such a little thing then."

She gathers his gnarled fingers into a pack, one at a time, holds them in a fist and looks at him. "Why has Dad always called me Buddy instead of my name?" She lets his fingers go.

Her grandfather stares up at the large stain on the ceiling where the roof leaked during the hurricane of '48.

"I 'spect 'cause Elizabeth was such a big name for a little girl."

"It was Momma's name, too, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but I don't think that's the reason. Your pa just didn't know much about being a father. He called you his little buddy from the day you moved in with us. I 'spect he was planning on you two being pals."

"We ain't though. He's always mad at me."

"He works hard, honey. Especially now with me in this thing. One day, then he's not bone-tired, he'll figure out what a prize he's got in you. I know that for sure." He catches her chin and tilts her head up. "You believe your grandpa, don't you?"

"Yes sir." She takes the cap off and rubs the material between her fingers. "You think we should invite him to go up the river with us?"

"That's nice, sweetie, but he don't want us going, so I picked today 'cause he's busy getting the last of the traps weighted with concrete. Too busy to fuss with us."

"Did you tell him we was going today?"

"I wasn't planning to, but I guess I need him to put me and this bloody thing . . ." he smacks the armrest, "in the boat." He grins suddenly. "This is sure gonna make him mad."

When Kirk calls them for breakfast, Buddy goes to get the Admiral and pushes him to the kitchen door. He puts a finger to his lips. "Wait here a minute," he whispers. He butts the door open with the footrest, and wheels across the pitted linoleum to his spot at the table. "I'm taking Buddy up the river today," she hears him say. She pushes the door open enough to see though the crack.

Her dad has a loaf of bread in his hand when he turns to look at his father. He puts the end of the wrapper in his mouth, sucks the air out, spins and knots it. "Which river, you crazy old coot, the Chattahoochee?"

"Turner."

"Yeah? That's nice." He adds a dash of Tabasco to the eggs he's stirring. "In the pitpan, huh?"

"Yep."

"You are nuts," Kirk says, not cruelly, but with a hint of admiration. He scrapes the eggs onto three plates, then adds two slices of toast to each. On his way to the table, he kicks open the swinging door. "Buddy. Breakfast."

Buddy sees him coming and knows he'll kick the door. She plasters herself against the wall just in time to keep her nose from getting broken.

"Buddy, now," her father shouts. "Your eggs are getting cold."

"Like the toast," the Admiral calls.

"Anytime you want to take over the cooking and give up riverboat piloting, be my guest."

Buddy runs on tiptoe to her bedroom, grabs her cap off the bedpost, and dashes back to the kitchen.

She takes a deep breath, puts her cap on and goes in.

"Hi."

Kirk only nods, his mouth full.

She grins at her grandfather, and turns her head first one way then the other, so he can see the fishing lures she attached to her cap. Then she turns all the way around to show him where she carefully printed her name on the back with marker: BUDDY, but the B and both Ds are backwards.

"That's a good-looking cap you got there. Don't you think so?" he says to Kirk.

"Yeah." He scoops up a forkful of eggs, brings it to his mouth and stops. "You really think you're going to do this, don't you, you old fool?"

"Watch who you're calling an old fool. I've been up that river a thousand times in the last seventy years."

"I'm not saying you don't know the way." His jaw muscles work. "I know you know the way," he shouts. "I'm saying it's not safe to go, you in a wheelchair, with just her," he indicates her with a jerk of his thumb.

"What you're saying," the Admiral shouts back, "is that I'm helpless and she's stupid."

Buddy flinches, then closes her eyes. A second later she feels her grandfather's hand on her shoulders and lets herself be pulled out of her chair.

"He's wrong about both of us. We ain't, neither of us, either one of those things."

"Don't listen to him," Kirk says. "That isn't what I meant at all." He leans back in his chair, casually, as if the misunderstanding is settled, but his balance is off. The chair tilts too far back, startling him. He swings his arms in a large circle to regain his balance and brings the chair down on its front legs with a jolt.

The Admiral's expression remains cold and angry. He puts his arm around Buddy's shoulders, which are humped like she's been hit in the belly. And when she turns to look at her father, he averts his eyes as if that was exactly what he meant to say. He scrapes his chair back and leaves the kitchen.

"Daddy." Buddy gets up and runs after him. She catches up just as he's about to shut his bedroom door. "Daddy, it's okay." She stops when he stops, lowers her head, and strokes a pine knot with her big toe. "I know I ain't stupid." She doesn't look at him but at the floor. "I just get confused. The Admiral understands 'cause he gets confused, too."

Her father is so quiet, she glances up to see if he's still there, then looks back at her toe flicking the pine knot. "My feelings ain't hurt."

Kirk stands with his long arms straight at his sides, his head down. He doesn't say anything or look at her until the Admiral wheels up, then he turns, goes into his room and closes the door. From within, Buddy thinks she hears him say, "I'm sorry."