

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 25

Monday afternoon, Buddy walks the sea wall from school to the Rod and Gun Club, passing cabin nine. She slips into the dark lobby of the hotel, takes a chair opposite the grandfather clock, and watches the second hand flick from one minute to the next. At three-thirty, she gets up, and walks down the steps, across the lawn and back along the sea wall to Miss Conroy's cabin. She raps softly on the screen door.

"Come in, Buddy."

It's dim in the cabin and very bright outside. Buddy lets the screen door close silently behind her but stands with her back against it until her eyes adjust.

"I'm in here." Miss Conroy leans around the door to the little kitchen. "I'm fixing us a snack. Make yourself comfortable."

"Yes ma'am." There's a stiff-backed chair by the door. She sits and hooks her feet behind the front legs.

Miss Conroy comes out of the kitchen carrying a plate of Oreos. "I said make yourself comfortable." She smiles. "I think

that chair belonged to the Marquis de Sade."

"Ma'am?"

"The first guy to make a kid eat spinach." Jane puts the cookies on the coffee table in front of the sofa, goes back to the kitchen, and returns with two glasses and a sweating bottle of milk hugged to her chest. "Help yourself."



Her dad never buys cookies, and Oreos are her favorite. Buddy takes three, thinks perhaps that's too many, and puts one back.

With the exception of the Admiral, she's never sat and talked with an adult before. She's nervous.

I heard about your grandfather's accident. How's he feeling?"

"About the same. It'll be great when the cast comes off. He hates asking Dad to help him or one of us to push him in his wheelchair. And he's my best friend. I miss us doing stuff together."

"Tell me about your other friends." Jane takes a cookie.

"Well." Buddy pulls one of her cookies apart and takes a bite of the bare side. "I ain't really got any other friends, but if I did, the Admiral would still be my best one."

Jane dips her Oreo in her milk. "I didn't have friends when I was your age, either, and no grandfather to make up for them."

This is a surprise. "Why didn't you have friends?"

"I was an army brat. We never lived anywhere long enough for me to make a friend, or if I did, to keep one."

Buddy has no idea what an army brat is, but it doesn't sound like something Miss Conroy would like to have to explain.

"That's too bad, ma'am," she says, because she thinks she should say something.

"Ma'am is a little formal, don't you think? My name's Jane. Okay?"

"Yes ma'. . .sorry, Jane." She takes a bite of the sugar-coated side of the Oreo, savors the taste, then washes it down with a sip of milk. "Jane's a nice name for a lady. Buddy don't sound like a girl's name, does it?"

"I kind of like it. It sounds like you'll be a good friend right from the get-go."

"I never thought of that."

"What's your real name?"

"Elizabeth. It was my mother's name."

"Would you rather be called Elizabeth?"

"I don't guess nobody would know who I was then."

"Would you like me to call you Elizabeth?"

"I don't know. I think it's too fancy a name for me."

"People grow into their names. Grow until they fit just right. My father used to call me Janie, but it doesn't suit me anymore."

"Elizabeth," Buddy says. "No, not yet. Maybe when I turn sixteen."

"When will that be?"

"In three years. I'm tall for my age."

"Yes you are."

"The Admiral's name fits him real good." She nods. "Yep, it's perfect for him." She takes another cookie, and smiles at Jane. "What do you think about my dad's name?" She thinks they might like each other if they'd give each other half a chance. To her disappointment, Jane shrugs.

"It's hard to say, isn't it? I guess it fits him. Did the crab live?"

"He did. I named him Osceola after old Orange Blossom's dolphin."

"Orange Blossom?" Jane laughs.

"Dad told me Mr. Stevens's friends call him that."

Jane slaps her thigh. "I bet not to his face they don't. Now that's a perfect name for that blowhard."

Buddy laughs, too. "What's a blowhard?"

"A braggart. Somebody who's always talking and never saying anything. You know what I mean?"

"Boy, do I. I got one of them baggarts in my class at school. He's Mr. Stevens's nephew."

Jane laughs all the harder, but doesn't correct Buddy. "That's another strike for nature over nurture."

"Ma'am?"

"Scientists have been arguing for years about whether we humans are shaped, you know, by our personalities, by what we inherit from our parents-nature, or by the way we are raised-nurture."

"Oh." Buddy nods, then leans nearer, as if they might be overheard. "If you're interested, Alex didn't get his uncle's fat lip."

"Life's not fair, is it?" Jane grins.

"No, it ain't. When Alex teases me 'cause I can't read too good." Buddy glances out the screen door, and lowers her voice again. "I wish his uncle's lip on him. I shouldn't, I guess, but it ain't worked yet anyway." She sits back and shrugs.

"Keep wishing." Jane snaps her fingers. "I forgot to tell you, I talked to Miss Daniels yesterday about your report."

"Yes. Thank you. She told me."

"Well I thought maybe you'd like to go out with me one day, and I'll show you how I do my research and what I'm learning. Would you like that?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'd love that." She drops her eyes and bites her lip. "I ain't much help. You sure you want me to go?"

"Of course. I'm not asking you because I need help, I'm asking you because I'd like for you to come. I get lonesome out there working by myself. And what makes you think you aren't much help?"

"I get things like directions confused. They seem right to me and the Admiral, but to other people they ain't right. They're backward-like."

"Is that why you have trouble reading?"

"And doing arithmetic and steering a boat. . ." She stands up and walks to the mirror mounted on the outside of the door to the bathroom. "For me, the only time things is the way they should be is in a mirror."

"What do you mean?" Jane gets up and goes to stand behind Buddy. "Explain that to me."

"I don't make mistakes in the mirror." Buddy slings her arms out to the right then swings them left, raises them in an arc over her head, catches Jane's eye, blushes and drops her arms. Jane stares at their reflections, turns, grabs a magazine off the coffee table and holds it up to the mirror. "It's not just backward," she says, "it's reversed." A huge smile spreads across her face. She grabs Buddy's shoulders and turns her. "How would you like to go to Miami?"

"To Miami?"

"Yes. Miami."

"I'd love to go, but. . . but why?"

"I want to ask Ruth Daniels something, then I'll call and ask your father. Okay?" Buddy's heart sinks. "We ain't got no phone."

"That's okay. I'm in Chokoloskee two or three times a week. I'll stop by and ask him next time I see him."