

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 26

Buddy stands in the doorway of her grandfather's room watching his chest rise and fall. He's propped up in bed with three pillows behind his head. The room is hot and smells stuffy and stale. His lunch, an untouched sandwich, is on his bedside table. A house fly feeds on a dollop of mayonnaise.

"Admiral, are you asleep?"

"Nupe." He starts, and yawns.

She pulls his wheelchair around and sits down. "How come you're in here, in bed with the blinds closed and the lights on?"

"I don't know. There wasn't nothing to do, and I got tired of sitting on the porch."

"You're okay, ain't you?"

"Sure I'm okay, honey. Just feeling lazy. Whatcha up to?"

She studies his face for a moment, then nods. "I been visiting that biology lady. Remember? Miss Conroy. Jane Conroy."

"I remember."

"Don't tell Dad this, okay?" She lowers her voice. "I told her about things being right for me-for us-in mirrors and for some reason, she got all excited and asked me to go to Miami." She grins. "How 'bout that."

"Well." He blinks and glances away. "Ain't that something."

"Admiral?" She takes his hand and smooths the wrinkles toward his wrist.

He puts his other hand over hers. "That's real nice, honey."

"You know, before she asked me to go, I was telling her about you being my best friend."

He cups her cheek, then leans back against the pillows and closes his eyes.

She doesn't like the color of his skin in the lamplight. "Do you want me to open the blinds and turn out the light?"

"No, I want the light on." His eyes stay closed.

Buddy sighs and stands up. "I guess I'll go feed Osceola." When he doesn't answer, she walks to the door, stops and looks back at him. "I miss us doing stuff, Admiral. Promise you'll feel better soon."

"I promise to try, honey." He opens his eyes, and shields them against the glare of the afternoon sun coming in through the open door behind her. "You look so tall there in the light-all

grown up."

She bites her lip. "I ain't though."

Kirk's in the shower when she filches a hammer from the shed and smashes a clam on the front porch.

"Whatcha doing?"

At the sound of his voice, Buddy starts. "I'll clean it up." She edges the hammer off the step into the bushes with the side of her hand.

His hair is wet and slicked back. "That's okay," he says. "How's he doing?"

"Who?"

"Your crab."

"He's fine."

"Good. How was school today?"

"Fine, thank you."

"And your meeting with Miss Conroy. How'd that go?"

"Fine."

"That's nice." He smiles. "I thought I'd barbecue some lobster for dinner. Does that sound good?"

She loves lobster. "Yes, sir."



"I'll barbecue some corn on the cob, too. Would you like that?" She loves corn on the cob. "Yes sir."



"Good. That's settled." He jams his hands in his pockets and gazes past her toward the docks. "Well, then," he says finally, "guess I'll see you later." But he doesn't move, and after an uncomfortable minute of neither of them saying anything, he nods towards the wad of smashed clams on the step. "He likes that, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

He sighs. "I like clams, too. Guess we crabs have the same tastes." He leans to pat her shoulder then walks away, leaving her to wonder if that was some kind of apology, and if it was, for which thing?

Three days later, through the dirty school bus window, Buddy sees Jane's Volkswagen pull away from the stop sign at the top of the hill above her house and turn right, headed back toward Everglades City.

Her father's truck is backed up to the shed where he's unloading cans of paint. The instant the bus driver opens the door, Buddy hops down and runs across the yard.

"Was that Jane?" She grins.

"Don't you think you should call her Miss Conroy?"

"She told me to call her Jane. Did she ask you anything?"

He looks mystified. "Like what?"

"Anything about Miami?"

"Oh that. Yes, she did mention Miami."

"Can I go?"

"May I."

"May I?"

He looks at her over the top of his sunglasses, and smiles.

"Yes."

Buddy wants to hug him, almost does, but turns instead, grabs two of the paint cans and hands them off to him, then crawls into the bed of the truck and carries two more to the tailgate.

When they have them all unloaded and stacked, he unrolls a large piece of plastic, cuts a sheet, and covers the cans with it.

"Whatcha gonna do with the paint?"

"Paint the house, when it's cooler."

"Can I . . . may I help?"

"Maybe," he says, bending over to tuck a corner of the plastic under a paint can.

"Did Jane tell you why she wants to take me to Miami?"

"She talked about mirrors, and seeing things in reverse, and asked whether I'd ever had problems reading. Nothing that seemed to make any more sense than she usually does."

"Why did you say yes then?"

"Because she seems so positive that the problems you have reading can be fixed. There's a doctor she wants you to see."

"A doctor?"

"One who specializes in learning disabilities."

"Oh." Buddy works her toes into the grass. This confuses her a little. The Admiral is disabled, and there's nothing anybody

can do to fix him. It doesn't matter, she decides, it will be worth getting poked and prodded. It would even be worth getting a shot to go to Miami.

"Did she say when we're going?"

"The appointment's in two weeks."