

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 30

Sawgrass stretches away to their right nearly as far as she can see. On the left, a dark water canal runs parallel to the road. Cattails line its far side. Buddy leans back and watches the scenery sweep by. Near the highway, in open shallow pools, egrets and herons cluster, poised, eyes locked on the water, motionless as statues until, with a lightning-fast thrust of a head, one then another catches a fish, like a Seminole spear fishing.

"Are you excited about seeing Miami?" Jane asks after a long silence.

"Oh yes ma'am." She bobs her head and her barrette falls out. She picks it off the floor mat, sweeps her bangs to the side and snaps it shut again.

Jane glances at the clock on the dash. "We're a little late, so we have to go straight to Dr. Wheeler's, but we'll see the city right afterwards."

They ride a while longer in silence before Buddy turns to Jane. "Do you really think this doctor can fix me?"

They couldn't fix the Admiral."

"I'm not sure I understand what the link is."

"Dad said you said I had a learning disability. The Admiral's spine getting crushed gave him a disability, at least according to the insurance company."

"I told your dad I think you have a learning disability. That's not the same thing. Your grandfather has a permanent physical disability, but if you do have an LD, as they call it, Dr. Wheeler can help you."

Ellen Wheeler clears two chairs, one of books and the other of more books, a stuffed raccoon, and a musical bear. She puts them all on top of her cluttered desk behind a sign that reads: 'Dyslexics of the World Untie'.



Dr. Wheeler is a large, tidy woman with a bubble of soft blonde hair and cheeks that inflate like shiny pink balloons when she smiles, which is nearly all the time. She leans forward so her head appears above the books as if it rests on them, and smiles at Buddy. "Miss Conroy tells me she thinks we have a problem in common, you and me."

Buddy looks at Jane, then back at Dr. Wheeler. "Can't you read either?"

"Well, I can now, but for a very long time, I couldn't. Miss Conroy thinks you may be dyslexic like me."

"What's that?"

Dr. Wheeler smiles. "Just a different way of seeing things." She puts the raccoon against the stack of books next to a musical bear, which lets out two slow notes like a sigh.

"When I was your age, they thought I was retarded. I was teased by other children and left out of games."

Buddy ducks her head and scrapes her toes back and forth inside her sandals.

Dr. Wheeler comes around her desk, and kneels in front of her. "They were wrong about me and they are wrong about you. We are very smart, we are. I've got some tests here. If you are dyslexic, they will show it. And if you are, I'll show you how to get around it. Okay?"

Buddy nods. If she speaks, she may start to cry.

Dr. Wheeler squeezes Buddy's hand. "How many grades have you failed?"

"One. So far." Buddy slips her feet out of her sandals, puts her hands under her thighs, and digs her toes into the shag carpet.

"I failed two."

"You did?"

"Yes ma'am, and now I have a Ph.D. Do you know what that is?"

"Kinda. Jane here's getting one on crabs."

Both women laugh, and Buddy waits until they stop. "I ain't too good at tests."

"These aren't like the tests you take in school. Some are even fun."

"You two go to work," Jane says. "I have errands to run." She walks to the door, turns and gives Buddy a thumbs-up. "See you in a couple hours."

After Jane leaves, Dr. Wheeler sorts through a drawer and comes up with a plastic bag full of small square tiles with designs on them. "This first test is a game that lets me interpret what you see." She shakes the tiles out in the space she's cleared on her desk then looks at Buddy. "Do you know that Albert Einstein, the smartest man who ever lived, was dyslexic?" She selects tiles and places them in a line, end to end. "So was Rodin, a brilliant artist, and Woodrow Wilson, one of our presidents and . . ."



"Was Teddy Roosevelt?"

"I don't think so." She smiles. "But he was smart enough to have been."

"Well?" Jane knocks on the door, and pokes her head in the office. Buddy and Dr. Wheeler are laughing, tears running down their cheeks. "Looks like you two are having a bit too much fun."

Buddy holds her hand up to silence Dr. Wheeler, and grins. "I've got it. I'm dyslexic."

Jane high-fives her. "That's wonderful."

"And watch this. I can subtract." Buddy places a recipe card over the tens and the hundreds columns of the problem 279 from 543 . "Nine from three will not go," Buddy whispers to herself. "Strike, change, make a teen. Nine from thirteen is four." She writes four and moves the card left to the next column. "Seven from there will not go, strike, change, make a teen. Seven from thirteen is six," she says but writes nine.

"Watch your sixes and nines," Dr. Wheeler says.

"Oops." Buddy erases the nine and carefully makes a six.

"Nine from thirteen is four, seven from thirteen is six, and two from four is two. Two hundred and sixty-four." She slaps the pencil down and throws up her arms. "How about that?"

The women applaud.

"The secret is keeping the other columns covered so that the numbers can't be reversed. And remember," Dr. Wheeler says to Buddy, "be extra careful when you see a six or a nine and a five or a two. We tend to turn those numbers upside down."

Dr. Wheeler gives Buddy a folder of instructions to parents and teachers, a workbook called Solving Language Difficulties, and seventy-five dollars in Monopoly money she'd won doing arithmetic. "You're probably too old to care about toys, but take your pick." She indicates the priced toys in plastic bags thumbtacked to a corkboard on the wall behind the office door.

Buddy hands the money back. "No, thank you. I got this book." She runs her hand over the bright orange cover. "I won't have time for anything else."

Outside, Buddy stops with her hand on the car door. "Thank you for bringing me here."

"My pleasure, madam." Jane makes a sweeping bow before ducking into the driver's seat and leaning across to unlock Buddy's door. "I've got a surprise for you."

"You do. What?"

"Aha." Jane wags a finger. "Patience."