

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 8

Lunchtime is always a nightmare. She expects nothing less as she stands in the cafeteria line with one bare, oily, black foot covering the other. She hates recess, lunch, and fire drills, or any other time she is out of the direct sight of a teacher. She doesn't need to turn around to know Alex has found her; she'd heard him coming.

"We need to get in here." He pushes the fourth grader who is behind Buddy out of the way. He, Jason, and Timmy step into the line behind her. "I think Dumb Bunny, Buddy. I meant Buddy." He slaps his forehead. Jason and Timmy laugh. "I think she's changing color on us." He points to her feet and the spots on her legs. "She's turning as black as a Seminole. Dumb Buddy, is you a Seminole squaw?" He cocks his head like a dog.

Buddy pushes her tray along.

"She ain't answering me." Alex moans and sticks out his bottom lip.

She takes a napkin and silverware.



"Any of you guys speak Seminole?" Alex asks, taking a tray and bumping Buddy's with it, nearly catching her fingers between them.

"I know a word or two," Timmy says. He raises his hand in an Indian greeting. "How cow."

Alex slaps his back and laughs.

"Maybe just moo will do." Jason raises his hand, too.

"You're a poet and don't know it," Timmy whoops. All three boys, and the fourth grader now in line behind them, raise their hands too. "Moo," they say in unison, then collapse against each other laughing.

Buddy takes what the servers hand her over the top of the steamy glass case.

"She don't want that," Alex says to the shower-cap wearing server, who pays him no mind, having never listened, as far as Buddy knows, to anything kids say. "She wants some stew; Semi-hole stew: water moccasin, gator tail, frogs legs, and sawgrass stew."

Jason laughs so hard he has to cling to the railing for support.

"And a pond apple for dessert." Alex elbows Buddy. "Right, squaw?"

"No, no," Timmy says. "Don't you remember, she wants dolphin."

"You want one cut in steaks or filleted?" His eyes are damp from laughing.

Buddy takes her tray and looks at the messy tables and crowded benches. She doesn't have anyone she always sits with, and if she takes a table alone, they will sit with her. Sometimes she sits with the Indians, who are always nice to her, but she decides not to give Alex any more ammunition.

She weaves slowly across the room. Alex, Jason, and Timmy are right behind her, Alex bumping her back with his tray. At an empty table next to a group of teachers, Buddy puts her tray down. This is a safety zone - a table for cast-offs. Alex, Jason, and Timmy peel off to join some other boys by the window and soon they are all laughing and ducking their heads to see her feet.

Buddy smiles but doesn't speak when Larry, then Naomi, sit down. Larry, whose mother is one of the servers, centers himself opposite her on the bench. His plate is piled high with potatoes, roast beef, and three rolls. He hangs over it and jams huge forkfuls into his mouth until his cheeks bulge like a squirrel's, then he begins to chew. Naomi, without looking at either Buddy or Larry, sits down on the bench as close to the end as she can and still have wood under her.

Her eyes, tremendous behind her thick lenses, give the appearance of being horrified by all she sees.

Naomi's glasses remind Buddy of when she was in the second grade and her father took her to Doc Little to have her eyes checked.

"She still can't read," Kirk told him.

"Do you know your alphabet?" Doc Little asked.

"Oh yes, sir."

"Good. I want you to read the letters on each line of that chart as I point to them. Okay?"



Buddy looked down and flicked at the linoleum floor with her toes. "I can say the alphabet, but I don't know how to read all the letters yet."

"You know the alphabet, but you don't know the letters?"

Doc Little stroked his chin.

"I just don't know which letters is the ones I know." She crossed her eyes and stroked her chin.

"Look," he said, "the first letter is an E.

"E. E. I see a three."

"Do you see an E in this line?" He pointed to the third line.
There were no Es or threes.

"No, sir."

"How about the fifth line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you see one in this line?" He pointed to the eighth row of letters.

"Two," she laughed. She'd caught him trying to trick her. "I see two in that line."

"Her eyesight is perfect," he told her dad, patted his shoulder and gave Buddy a lollipop. "I'm sorry, son. I don't know what it is, but it's not her eyes."

Buddy failed the third grade. Her one and only friend moved on, and Alex Townsend caught up.

In the fourth grade, her father hired a high school student to tutor her. Buddy liked her, and the girl came every Friday evening for three months until she eloped one weekend with a shrimper from Marco Island.

Then in the fifth grade, she got Lillian Wilson for a teacher. A woman, who after one look at Buddy's handsome father, insisted Buddy's problems were "all in her darling little head."

The child is just nervous reading aloud because she is shy, Miss Wilson chirped when she called Kirk and Buddy in for a conference. I was like that myself, she told him. I'll give her such special attentions this year; you won't recognize her when I'm through. She beamed at Kirk and patted his arm, while fanning herself with a report card.

And almost daily, she was true to her word.

"Buddy Martin," she'd call out in her high sing-song voice, and Buddy's shoulders would sag. "Will you please stand up and read now, dear?"

Lillian Wilson cocked her head and smiled at Buddy.

"Practice makes perfect dear," she cooed. "Your father will be so proud."

"Practice make perfect, dear," Alex Townsend mimicked, cocking his head to one side and smiling sweetly at Timmy. "Your father will be so proud."

"Be quiet, Alex," Lillian snapped. "Stand up, dear. We are all on your side."

Buddy wrapped her left arm around her waist and dug her fingernails deep into her side.

Miss Wilson's tinny voice filled the room again. "Stand up, dear."

"Stand up, dear." Alex aped.

Buddy closed her eyes and concentrated on the Admiral's face. Not until she could see him smiling did she move her legs, slowly, from beneath her desk and stand up.

Alex, Timmy and Jason turned in their seats, put their chins on balled fists on their chair backs, and stared up into Buddy's face. Timmy crossed his eyes at her.

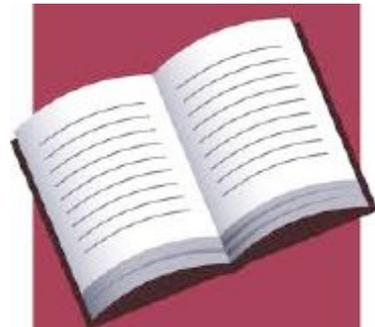
Alex put a finger to his lips. "Shh. Dumb Buddy's gonna read to us."

"Start right at the top of page seventeen, dear."

"Th, Then the . . ." Her voice quivered.

"That's 'when the,' dear."

Alex pretended to yawn, then began to drum the top of the desk behind his.



"When the . . . children was . . ."

Alex snorted and elbowed Jason.

"Saw, dear. Saw." Miss Wilson sighed.

Buddy cleared her throat and gripped the edge of the book as if it was the railing of a swaying tuna tower. "When the children . . .saw the little . . . g, go, god . . ."

Alex slapped his forehead. "Little g, g, g, god," he sneered. The kids around him laughed.

"That's dog, dear. Alex. Turn around please. You're making the poor thing nervous."

Jason did as Alex was told and found he alone had obeyed. He whirled back around in his seat and went back to drumming his fingers in time with the others.

Buddy tried not to, but she glanced at Alex to see if he was still staring at her. He stuck his tongue out at her.

Miss Wilson, hunched over something on her desk, she stuck her tongue out, too. Buddy blinked. Miss Wilson had put on lipstick and was leaning over her compact, wetting her lips with quick little licks like a snake's tongue. She glanced up and smiled. "You're doing just fine, dear. Go ahead."

Buddy felt sick to her stomach, but she found her place and started again. "When the children . . . saw the little . . . dog and the cl, cl, clown, they began to . . ." Buddy stared at the next word. Alex, Jason and Timmy's drumming fingers made her temples pound.

"Laugh, dear. Laugh," Miss Wilson said.

Buddy looked up and tried to laugh. It came out as a cry, short and shrill.

The class erupted.

"Quiet," Miss Wilson shrieked. "That was very nice dear. You may sit down. You be sure and tell your father how much better you are reading, won't you?"

Buddy sank into her desk and bowed her head. Oh, Admiral.

Occasionally, when Buddy was called on to read, she did quite well.

"Wonderful," Miss Wilson would gush, fanning her thin neck with a handkerchief. "It's night and day, the difference. Night and day. Makes all the work worthwhile, doesn't it dear?"

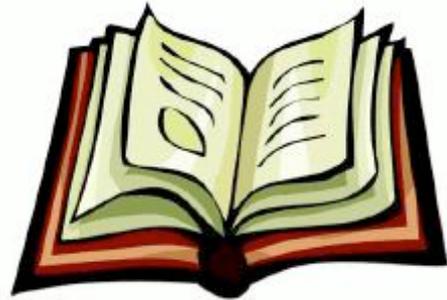
The times Buddy read well were when the reading assignment was given in advance and Buddy asked Iris Smallwood, their next-door neighbor, to read it to her the night before class. She not only could remember most of the words, but they had context in the story, so she could guess the correct word, even if it didn't look right.

In one of Miss Wilson's frenzies of delight, she must have tried to call Kirk only to find out they had no phone. Buddy guessed this because she saw a perfumed, pink-flower-bordered note addressed to her father from Miss Wilson. She wasn't sure but she doubted he ever answered it, and soon Miss Wilson grew less and less interested in whether Buddy could read or not.

She finally gave up, but not, Buddy soon found out, before bragging of her progress to Miss Daniels, her sixth grade teacher.

The first week of the sixth grade, Ruth Daniels called on Buddy to read. The reading was from an assignment she'd given the day before. Buddy read slowly, her voice low enough that Miss Daniels twice asked her to speak up, but she read the two paragraphs with only two mistakes.

The next time she was called on, it was not from an assignment. Buddy went white under her tan. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and upper lip. I can't, she thought, please don't make me. I can't. But she made it to her feet, steadying herself with one hand on the desktop. The textbook trembled, blurring the print.



Alex, Timmy, and Jason turned in their seats and propped their chins on their fists.

"Turn around," Miss Daniels hissed, her voice low and threatening.

All three boys whipped around and folded their hands on their desks.

"Are you all right?" she asked Buddy. There was real concern in her voice.

Buddy nodded, then slowly began to read. Apparently what she heard sounded perfect because Miss Daniels relaxed and sat back.

"I just read that part," Belinda Bailey said.

Buddy stopped. The perspiration on her forehead ran down the sides of her face. She let go of the desk, lifted her arm and wiped her cheek on her shoulder. The book slipped, hit the desk and landed at her feet. Buddy stared down at it, blinking rapidly and swallowing over and over like someone trying not to gag.

Ruth Daniels stood up and came down the row of desks toward her. At Alex's desk, she slapped the desktop. "I told you to turn around. Do it!"

When she reached Buddy, she bent her face to her ear and whispered, "Are you all right?"

Buddy felt her knees buckle, but Miss Daniels caught her under her arms and walked her toward the door. Outside, Buddy stumbled to the railing and threw up.

Miss Daniels leaned against the door, her head tilted back against the little oblong window and her eyes closed.

"I'd like to tie Lillian Wilson's smelly little hanky in a knot, tight around her turkey neck," she said, through clenched teeth, then, fighting back tears, herself, she said, "I'm so sorry, honey. Please forgive me."

Whispers and giggles came from the other side of the door. Miss Daniels shifted her weight and kicked the door with the heel of her shoe as hard as she could. There was a scurry of feet, then scraping desks.

Miss Daniels walked to the railing and put her hand on Buddy's shoulder. "I didn't know. You read so well the first time."

"You assigned it the day before and Miss Smallwood read it to me that night."

"You memorized it?"

"I guess so."

Miss Daniels lifted Buddy's chin and leaned down so their faces were very close. "You'll never have to stand and read aloud again. I promise."

Buddy suddenly began to cry. Miss Daniels turned her away from the little window in the door, wrapped her arms around Buddy's shoulders, and held her until she was quiet.