

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 9

Buddy finishes her lunch with Larry and Naomi but not without thinking she still has the number one most hated part of her school day to go, gym class. For her it's the time set aside each day for children to ridicule one another. At least the school's coach, Mr. Burns, sends the boys to the far side of the playground once he's chosen the day's team captains. His selection is meant to give everyone a chance at the job, but even he has never picked Buddy or Naomi for captain of the girl's team, or Larry for the boy's.

Every day is the same: after the captains are selected, the rest of them form a line. Today it's softball. Buddy stands a little apart from the others, her trap-dip-covered toes root into the sand of the diamond. Either she or Naomi will be the last chosen.

A Great Blue heron is fishing on the far bank of the river. After the teams are chosen, Buddy takes the seat at the very end of the bench where she can turn around and watch the heron. She's startled when someone punches her, and looks up.

The girl who'd been sitting next to her on the bench is standing at home plate holding the bat out to her. Buddy rarely bats, and the few times she has she's struck out. She stands, amid moans and groans, and walks to the plate. When she reaches to take the bat, the girl drops it.

"There's the bat, dummy, try not to hit yourself in the head with it."



Buddy picks it up and holds it like everyone else does, but she doesn't swing at the pitches. The first one is a ball. Someone claps but is silenced by a teammate. Buddy looks across at the heron.

The umpire calls the second pitch a strike.

"She's just gonna stand there," someone says, then slaps her forehead.

Buddy swings low at the next one.

"Strike two," the umpire calls.

"Here comes our third out," the team captain says.

Buddy wants to sit down. A ball whizzes past her head.

"Ball two."

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the heron stab a fish and step up on the bank.

The pitcher winds up and throws again.

"Swing," someone shouts.

Buddy closes her eyes and swings as hard as she can. The crack of the bat stings her hands. She drops it in the dirt.



"Run," they scream. "Run. It's a homer."

Buddy looks at them, then starts running toward the first base. The rush of air against her damp skin is cool; the air on her arms makes her skin prickle as the sweat dries. She can hear the kids screaming her name. She slaps past the first base and races toward second. She is running faster than she has ever run. She smiles as she rounds second and sweeps toward third.

Her eyes follow the heron as it flies up river. Buddy feels as if she, too, has taken flight, has lifted off, leaving the playground far below. The screams fade until she no longer hears them at all. No one can reach her. No one even tries. Home plate grows larger. Chill bumps spread down her arms and legs.

Even though she imagines it is going to hurt, she slides into home plate like she's seen the boys do, then puts her head back and laughs.

Pairs of brown legs covered with fuzzy blond hair gather around her. She is grinning when she looks up into the quiet, sneering faces.

"You're so stupid," the team captain says. They turn, all the girls, and scatter to their positions on the field.

Buddy watches their backs as the incoming team files past her, snickering, thanking her. One of the girls is carrying the ball, retrieved from the yard of a nearby house. When she passes Buddy, she taps her shoulder with it. "You're out."

Coach Burns holds his hand out to help her up. "You ran like a deer," he says, "but in the wrong direction." He pats her back. "Maybe next time."

Buddy looks left in the direction the sun rises, the direction she ran. She looks right, toward the river where the heron had been.

"You gonna stand there all day?" the catcher asks, smacking the ball into her glove.

Buddy doesn't look at her, or answer.

She starts walking straight out from home plate, past the pitcher, past the second base, into the outfield, out of the school yard, down the road to the traffic circle.

At the bridge on Highway 29, she starts to run, and she runs until she's running as fast as she ran the bases. Then she pushes harder, runs faster, her arms pumping at her sides, and the wind in her face dries her cheeks. She doesn't stop until she has crossed the last bridge, until she is on her island, home and safe.

She hears hammering from the shed as she comes over the hill above their house. She stops to catch her breath with her hands on her knees. When she's breathing normally again, she pulls the hem of her shirt out of her shorts and wipes the sweat away from her face and neck before crossing the yard.

"Hi Admiral." She kisses his cheek.

"Hey there. You're early ain't you?"

"A little."

"How was school?" He looks closely at her face.

"The same." She turns and takes the scraper from a nail on the wall and starts working on the back side of the trap. "I made a home run today," she says without looking at him.

"Did you now? That's my girl." He's still watching her. "I didn't hear the bus."

"I missed it." She keeps her head down as she chips away at a patch of barnacles.

He reaches and takes the scraper out of her hand. "Come with me."

He wheels himself out and around to the side of the shed.

"Oh, Admiral. For me?"

"Got your name on it, don't it?"

Resting on two wheelchair-height sawhorses, in the shade of their avocado tree, is the Admiral's old pitpan from his alligator hunting days. It's a short, wooden rectangle of a boat, small enough to be carried on his back when the water got so shallow he had to wade between gator holes. Its bottom glistens with wet red paint, and he's painted BUDDY'S on the stern in tall black letters.

She hugs his neck. "Thank you, oh thank you," she says, then she throws her arms open and twirls in circles, stopping in front of him. "It's beautiful."

"Happy Birthday, sweetheart. I'd have given it to you yesterday but I didn't get your name finished."

"It's the best present in the world."

"I've gotta add a couple of oarlocks and patch a plank or two, otherwise, she seems seaworthy. We'll test her-" He grins.

"Then I'll show you the way up river to see them dolphins of yours again."

"What?" Buddy claps her hands over her mouth, then drops them to her side. "You're teasing me, right."

"Course I ain't teasing."

"How?"

"Up Turner River." He tests the paint with his finger, leaving a fingerprint.

"Dad'll never let us go."

"I'll handle him. You just follow my lead." He glances down.

"What's all over your feet?"

"Trap dip."

"Well good. That's good." He laughs. "It'll keep the bore worms out of your toes."