

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 27

At school the next morning, Miss Daniels is out with the flu. After lunch, using the roll book, the substitute calls on Elizabeth Martin to stand up and continue reading, starting where they left off at lunchtime.

A whoop goes up in the back of the room. Alex clamps his hand to his mouth, and does a silent cheer in his desk. His pudgy bottom wiggles as he pumps his fists in the air, before turning in his desk and grinning broadly at Buddy.

"Quiet, please," says the substitute. "Elizabeth?" She looks from girl to girl, though it should be obvious since all heads turn to stare at Buddy.

Buddy stands slowly, steadying herself with her hand pressed to the desk top. Blood whooshes in her ears.



"There you are. Good. Start at the top of page 79, please."

"Af, Af, After the . . . ba, battle, Presi . . . dent Lincoln saw . . ."

"Saw," Alex snorts. "The dummy can't tell saw from was. Any first grader knows the difference," he informs Timmy.

"Oh my," cries the substitute. "Are you Buddy? Buddy Marvin?" She runs her finger down the roll book. "It's Martin. I thought Miss Daniels said Marvin. I'm sorry, dear, you may sit down."

"Oh dear me," Alex cries, imitating the substitute's voice. "You're the retard."

"Be quiet back there. Be quiet this instant."

The substitute tries to move ahead, and calls on the next person down on the list of students: Alex Townsend.

He grins and stands up.

"Oh," she says. "Not you. You sit down."

Alex ignores her, picks up the history book, turns it upside down, and moves his finger heavily from word to word to word. "Duh," he says, letting his mouth hang open. "Duh." He scratches his head.

"Sit down," the substitute pleads.

The class giggles. A few let their lips loosen and their jaws go slack, they utter "duh," poke their textbooks, and scratch their heads.

"Stop it," the substitute screams. She swoops toward Alex, who dodges into his desk. She whirls on the class, her face red with fury. "You heartless little bast . . ." Her eyes become round with horror, and she clamps her hand to her mouth.

The class breaks into hoots and hollers. A few take up the imitation again. Alex makes a spitball and shoots it at Buddy. They all began to make spitballs, with Buddy the main target, but each other and the substitute, too.

The substitute swirls around the room, shouting for them to sit down, but that only makes it worse. Buddy stares straight ahead. In her mind, the Admiral, his arm no longer in a cast, is on the porch; he smiles and waves as she comes up the road toward him. She doesn't blink. If she does, he may vanish and then she'll be back in the midst of this frenzy again.

The classroom door opens with such force the papers on Miss Daniels's desk are sucked up, then seesaw to the floor. Buddy's ears pop. Mr. Anderson from the class next door strikes the desk with a pointer, which snaps in two.

There's a scramble of feet, then silence. "You will all pay for this." His voice is even and menacing. He takes the substitute by her arm and guides her to the door.

"I didn't know she was a girl," the substitute whimpers as he guides her out of the room.

He reappears and the whispering stops, heads droop, hands appear and fold on desktops.

Buddy sits with her hands gripping the far edge of her desk; she gasps for air. The more quickly she breathes, the more air she needs.

"Come with me." Mr. Anderson puts his hands under her arms and lifts her, but her knees won't lock, and she feels as if she is trying to breathe through mud.

Mr. Anderson supports her as far as the outside breezeway, then picks her up and runs with her to the nurse's office.

Mrs. Watkins, the nurse, forces Buddy to cup her hands tightly over her nose until her breathing quiets, then she has her lie down on the cot, and wipes Buddy's hot face with a cool damp cloth. "You rest for a bit, okay?"

"I'm all right now."

"Just lie there, and close your eyes."

Buddy nods, and closes her eyes. The next thing she remembers is a bell ringing and the racket of kids shouting in the breezeway. Mrs. Watkins is standing in the doorway smiling at her. "You slept for two hours. Feel better?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I tried to call your father to come get you, but the operator said you don't have a phone. If you'll wait five, I'll take you home."

Buddy doesn't want her father to know what happened. She just wants to get home to see the Admiral. "No ma'am, I'll take the bus, thank you anyway."

"Are you sure, sweetheart?" The nurse strokes her hair.

"Yes, 'am, I'm sure."

"Elizabeth." Mrs. Watkins lifts her chin so Buddy has to look into her eyes. "I heard what happened in there and I want you to know something. I don't know you personally, but I'm sixty-three years old, got four grown kids, eleven grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and been nursing kids for forty years, there is nothing wrong with your mind. I don't know what your problem is, but I know slow when I see it. Slow is in the eyes. Your eyes are bright with the light of a good mind."

Tears slide down Buddy's cheek, but the nurse won't let her look away.

"I bet you're smarter than any kid in that class."

Buddy begins to sob.

"That's it, sweetie," Mrs. Watkins whispers. "You cry now, here with me, but the next time that little poop face pokes fun at you-punch him." The nurse's fist whizzes through the air.

Buddy laughs, then hiccups.

The nurse picks up the pillow and punches it, hard. "Hit him in the belly; hit him in the nose." She hugs Buddy. "Okay?"

"Yes'm."

Mrs. Watkins holds the pillow, and Buddy punches it as hard as she can.