

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 28

Thunder rumbles as Buddy walks slowly to the bus stop. Children seem to run in every direction, chasing each other and screaming. No one notices her. She stands in the narrow-arching shadow of a palm tree watching them push and shove to get on one of the buses. She sees Linda Ellen Brown shove the boy in front of her, then shriek and run away when he gives chase. Linda Ellen had been Buddy's friend in the third grade.

When Buddy failed that year, Linda Ellen never bothered to speak to her again. That seems so long ago Buddy can't remember what having a friend her own age felt like.

Her books shoot out from between her arm and her hip and splay on the grass.

"You got us all in trouble, Dumb Buddy," Alex says. "We gotta write essays and stay fifteen minutes after school every day for a week cleaning up the room. It's all your fault 'cause you're so stupid."

Buddy squeezes her hands into fists.

"You gonna hit me?" Alex hoots and dances in front of her, shadowboxing.

She relaxes her hands and squats down to pick up her books. Each one she reaches for, he kicks away.

Buddy stands and starts walking with Alex skipping around her like a yappy little dog. He dances alongside as she leaves the schoolyard, and crosses Copeland Avenue. It's not until she crosses to the highway, that he finally drops off, apparently satisfied to call out, "Dumb Buddy is teacher's pet," until she's too far away to hear him.

Thunder rumbles nearer, and it's raining by the time she gets to the bridge home.

Lightning flashes.

"One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand ..."

Boom!

She flinches. Three miles. She walks faster.

Boom.

Buddy ducks and covers her ears, then starts to run, stops, takes off her sandals, steps onto the highway, and runs for home.

Lightning flashes so near that the trees, for an instant, have no color. The world goes white, then sounds as if it has blown up.

She shrieks, drops to her knees, and covers her head.

Brakes squeal. The school bus driver flings the doors open, jumps down, and races across the highway. "Are you hurt?" She touches Buddy's shoulder.



"I'm afraid of storms."

"Isn't everybody?" The driver helps her up.

Buddy takes a seat in the front of the bus, and ignores the whispering and giggling behind her. Hers is the second stop. "Thank you," she says before stepping off.

The sun is out and steam rises from the pavement. She runs down the hill, up the ramp, across the kitchen and living room to her grandfather's door.

She stops to catch her breath, then knocks softly, and sticks her head in. He isn't there.

"Admiral?" she calls at the bathroom door, pushes it open slowly, then dashes back through the kitchen and down the ramp.

Her father is on his stomach on the deck of his boat leaning over the engine.

"Hi."

He looks up. "Why are you wet?"

"I waited for the bus in the rain." She looks down at her feet. If he ever really paid attention, he'd know when she was fibbing. She always stares at her feet when lying.

"How was school?"

"Not too good. We had a substitute."

"Uh-huh." He's back in looking at the engine.

"Where's the Admiral?"

Kirk points the wrench. "I put him on the porch to get some sun."

In spite of her fantasy, he's not at all like she pictured him when the class was tormenting her. His arm is still in a cast, and his head is against the pillow her father has jammed down between his shoulders and the back of one of the

Adirondack chairs. His mouth is open and he's snoring.

Buddy sits on the porch railing, watching, until there's a momentary pause in his ragged breathing.

"Admiral?" She leans to touch his shoulder. "I'm home."

He blinks and squints at her. "Hey there, honey. How was school?" He runs his hand over his crusty eyes.

"Awful." She moves to sit on the armrest.

"Alex again?"

She nods against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, honey." He rubs a circle on her back then kisses the top of her head. "You're wet."

"I walked most of the way home, and it rained on me."

"Ah." He put his cheek against her wet hair.

His skin smells moldy and stale, like damp clothes in the hamper too long. His hair is matted and oily, and he hasn't shaved for a week or more. His shirt has the decaying odor of river mud when the tide is out; a smell she used to like.

At the sound of her father crossing the gravel road, Buddy jumps to her feet and, without thinking, steps behind the Admiral's chair, putting him between herself and her father.

Kirk stares at them for a moment, and his expression hardens. "Dinner's going to be early tonight. I've got to be up at five, so I want to get it over with and get to bed." He scoops the Admiral up, plunks him in his wheelchair, then goes into the house, letting the door bang shut behind him.