

# DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

## Chapter 40

It's Lucie clicking and whistling from the other side of the pipe that dulls Buddy's joy. She's calling to Annie, and her clicks become frantic. She tail-slaps the water. Annie answers, swimming back and forth near the end of the culvert. She stands on her tail at her end and Lucie stands on hers at the other. They look like dolphin book ends.

Buddy crawls back through the pipe, hoping to encourage Lucie to follow, but when she feels the plastic sheeting tighten and glances over her shoulder, Annie's head is in the pipe. "No, Annie." Buddy turns and swims back to her.

Buddy's only hope is that Annie will get Lucie to follow them, otherwise-and she hates this-she'll have to leave Lucie behind. But would Annie leave Lucie? She holds onto the bow of the pitpan and tries to think, while the two dolphins click and whistle to each other. She looks up when Annie dives and speeds toward the airboats. On the other side, Lucie is silent. A moment later, they both soar into the air.

Buddy looks up at the moon. "I don't know what to do, Admiral."

Annie swims to the culvert, and she and Lucie begin clicking again.

What have I done? Buddy puts her forehead against the bow of the pitpan.

On the highway a semi sweeps past. When the noise of its passing dies, she hears splashing inside the culvert. Buddy swims silently over and looks inside. Lucie is in the middle of the pipe, calling frantically, and beating her tail in the water.

"Come on, girl. You can do it." But it's clear after a moment that she can't. The size of the baby Lucie is carrying is making it impossible for her to swim through the culvert.

Why didn't I think of that?

Buddy swims to the pitpan and grabs the tow rope.

Speaking soothingly to Lucie, she crawls into the pipe. She stokes her face then drapes the

rope over Lucie, behind her pectoral fins, but can't get it all the way around her. And even if she



could, she's not strong enough to pull her through. She puts her forehead against the dolphin's side. "I'm sorry."

Annie swims in and nudges her foot.

That's what she needs-Lucie blocking the pond side of the pipe, Annie blocking the channel side and her in the middle. She pushes on Annie who backs off into the channel again.

"I'm going for help," she says. "Please understand me. You have to stay here with Lucie."

Buddy climbs into the pitpan, unties it from the pole, starts the engine and jerks the bowline loose from the willows. She looks back over her shoulder. Annie is at the end of the culvert watching her go, but she isn't trying to follow. That's the only thing that's gone right so far. Even over the noise of her engine, she can hear Lucie's shrill and frightened clicks echoing against the walls of the culvert.

Her approach to the airboat trail through the prairie is too fast. She sweeps sharply left, but the stern swings into sawgrass, where the prop grinds to a halt. Buddy pulls the starter rope over and over, but the prop's clogged with weeds. She grabs the pole and frantically pushes the stern free, then steps to the bow and poles towards deeper water, jamming it into the muddy bottom in hard short quick strokes. She hits something solid. Limestone, she thinks in the instant before the bow of the pitpan rises, tips to one side, and throws her out. The moment she hits the water, she knows what she hit: a gator-a big gator. She comes out of the water like a dolphin soaring without any sense that she even touched bottom.

She flings herself over the side of the pitpan. There is a wide swatch of flattened sawgrass where the startled gator shot out from under her boat. His wake still ripples, swaying the grass in the moonlight.

Shivering as much from the cool night air and her sopping wet clothes as from fright, Buddy gets the flashlight and shines it across the water looking for the pole. It's yards away in an open area among some lily pads. She gets the paddle and pulls herself toward it. She's nearly there when a dark form breaks the surface near it. She flicks the light on and aims it at the black, lumpy mass.

The gator sinks slowly, his eyes glow back at her, reflecting on the surface like he had four eyes instead of two, then he disappears.



She turns the pitpan and eases it between the pole and where she last saw the gator, then she hunkers in the bow and waits. When he doesn't come up, she slowly lifts the oar and brings it down sharply against the bow. The gator spins away beneath the surface, rocking the boat. Buddy snatches the pole, cleans the prop, and starts the engine.