

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

Chapter 41

Buddy goes up the wheelchair ramp at a dead run. She stops herself against the back railing, jerks the kitchen door open, and bashes through the swinging door into the living room. When she reaches her father's room, she flings herself at him.

He bolts straight up. "Jesus, what is it?" He grabs her shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Lucie is stuck in the culvert."

"What?"

"Lucie-the dolphin-is stuck in the culvert in the levee."

"Dammit." He leaps up, pulls on the fishy-smelling jeans he'd thrown over the chair, and runs with her through the house.

"How did this happen?" He jumps behind the wheel of his truck.

Buddy stops beside him. "We need the pitpan."

"What for?" He gets out and stares down at her.

Buddy hesitates. She's trembling from the cold. "I got Annie out, and I'm taking them both to the Gulf."

"Oh no you're not."

"Yes, sir, I am." She straightens her shoulders and looks up at him. "Daddy, Annie and Lucie both have the same thing that killed Osceola." She blinks back tears. "Jane says it's caused by stress and the filthy conditions they live in. Moving them to Marineland won't help. The only difference between their pools and Stevens's hole in the ground is the water's cleaner. I don't want her to die, but if she has to, I don't want it to be in a fish tank."

"It's stealing," he says, but his voice lacks conviction.

"No, sir. It's not. Stevens kidnapped them. The Admiral . . ." She glances at her feet. Nothing will turn her father against this faster than thinking she and her grandfather are in it together. "Stevens stole them. All I'll be doing is taking them back to where they belong."

Kirk takes her hand, and though his face is full of regret, he says, "I can't help you do that. They still belong to him for another two weeks."

"They never belonged to him!" She jerks her hand free, turns and runs down the road to the boat ramp. Jane is the only

person left.

As she unties the pitpan, she hears her father start the truck, then gravel crunching under its tires as he backs toward her.

He sets the emergency brake, gets out, walks to the back and drops the tailgate. "I guess . . ." he says, as he lifts the pitpan, "that it boils down to how we see this. I'm not sure you're right, but I'm less sure that I am. And maybe the fine line in between is the most we can hope for."

With the pitpan in the bed of the truck, they race up the highway, and skid into the Everglade Eden parking lot. Buddy leaps out, jumps the chain and runs down the levee. There in the moonlight, on the channel side of the culvert, Annie upends, bobs her head and whistles. From inside the pipe, Lucie whistles, too.

Buddy motions for her father to come on. She speaks softly to Annie, trying to reassure her, but the dolphin sinks away, and surfaces again near the cattails across the channel.

The water in the channel, even where the pipe pokes out of the levee, is over Buddy's head, but only neck deep on her father. He slips into the water, wades over and looks into the culvert. Lucie reacts violently, splashing, clicking and whistling.

Buddy dives in and swims to her dad. "Lucie. It's all right."

She crawls into the pipe, and puts her hand out. "It's okay."

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He's my dad."

"Is this my visqueen?" Kirk holds up an end of the plastic sheeting.

"Yes. I was afraid there'd be sharp edges."

"Pretty smart."

Buddy strokes Lucie's forehead. "I tried to get your tow rope around her, but even if I could have, I'm not strong enough to pull her out."

"Is her weight on the sheeting?"

"It must be or she could have gotten through like Annie did. Oh . . ."

It dawns on her what her father is thinking. "Let me get behind."

"That's too dangerous. If she slaps her tail, she could break your leg."

"I'll stay out the way. I'll just make sure you don't pull the sheeting right out from under her. If I roll that end up, and you pull . . ."

"Okay," her dad says, "but don't try to crawl past her. Go over the top of the levee and come in behind her."

She'd left the rasp and the hacksaw on top of the levee.

"I'm ready," she says when she's in the pipe on the pond side. For a better grip, she's brought the rasp in with her and rolls it up in the plastic.

Lucie's back is dry. Buddy splashes water over her, then gets behind her in the pipe, away from her tail, and sits down, holding the plastic-wrapped rasp like a ski rope.

The moon has crossed to the western sky. Its light falls on her shoulders. Her dad is in shadow. Behind him, in the channel, she hears Annie blow and go under.

"Come forward with your end as I pull." His voice echoes through the pipe.

Lucie's tail comes up, but when Buddy whispers to her, she lies still again.

He's still wearing his tennis shoes, and she can see him roll his end of the plastic sheeting, bring his feet up and press them against the bottom of the pipe. He holds himself in place for a moment, like a swimmer in a backstroke race. "Okay?" he says.

"Okay." She holds the rasp with all her might. She tried to water ski once, and feeling the sheet tighten reminds her of how hard it was to try to stand against the pressure of the water.

Lucie feels it, too. She begins to click and lifts her head and tail.

For a moment, she thinks that the sheeting will pull her against Lucie's tail, but there is nothing she can do but hold on, or let go. She feels the moss, slimy against her bare feet. She hears her father grunt like he does when he's pulling the weight of a crab trap up through fifty or a hundred feet of water, and then they begin to slide.

Lucie's clicking is frantic, and from the channel, Annie answers. Rather than add her hundred pounds to Lucie's four or five hundred, Buddy lets herself be pulled over onto her belly, then lets go of the rasp. The dolphin keeps sliding until her father, having stretched to his full body length, goes under.

Lucie's head is out of the pipe, and Annie swims up and nudges her. Buddy scrambles backwards as Lucie's tail comes up, then crashes down, sending a shock wave through the pipe. A wave of water inside the pipe lifts Buddy and washes her backwards. In the channel, Kirk pops up in front of Lucie.

"Dad, get back."

Buddy back-pedals out of the culvert, grabs a sea grape branch, pulls herself onto the culvert and climbs up on the

levee.

Her dad climbs up on the levee and takes her hand.

Annie's dorsal fin cuts ellipses in the channel, out toward the cattails and back again.

Lucie's tail slaps inside the pipe. Buddy turns to watch water wash out into the pond, then flow in again. She imagines it lifts Lucie for a moment. She'll arch her back and float for a second, and move another inch.

The tail slapping goes on for a few minutes, and each time they see a little more of Lucie's head, until they are looking down on her blowhole opening and closing.

Annie continues to circle. She clicks and whistles. Buddy gnaws her bottom lip. Her father tightens his grip on her hand. The air is still, the only sound is the airboats rubbing together, metal on metal. Miles away, from the intersection of the highways, Buddy hears the gears of a semi shifting as it gains speed coming off the traffic light. Annie has stopped on the far side. She squeezes out one long, shrill note. Lucie answers. Annie sinks below the surface and starts clicking-a constant even series of sound. Buddy's heart pounds. "This is it," she whispers.

The rumble of the approaching semi drowns out the dolphins. The high-beam headlights sweep up the road, across her dad's truck, the ticket booth, and the airboats

swaying on their ropes.

Buddy holds her breath as Lucie's pectoral flippers slide out of the pipe. At the moment darkness engulfs them again, Lucie splashes into the channel.



Buddy throws her arms around her dad, who lifts her and swings her around.

The two dolphins, side by side, race toward the highway, then back past her and her dad. Stevens's airboats scrap and crash against each other.

Buddy slides down the embankment and into the water.

They make another sweeping circle, but when they are opposite Buddy, Annie upends and twirls, spraying an arc of water over her, then flops sideways in a crash of spray and a wave that buffets her.

Her dad looks at the sky, then over his shoulder at the moon.
"You need to get going."

"I know."

"I'll get the pitpan."

"Will you come with us?"

"I can't leave the truck here. The minute Stevens sees the dolphins are missing, he'll know exactly who's to blame."

"Take it across the road. There's a little road that goes to his billboard. Nobody'll see it there."

"How will I get back?"

"I'll bring you."

Her dad looks at the graying sky, then at her.

"Do you still need me?"

"I just think we should finish this together, don't you?"

Annie bobs her head.

Kirk laughs. "I really would like to be with you when they reach the bay."

He backs down the levee. "I'll be right back." He turns and jogs toward the parking lot.

Buddy hears the scrape of the pitpan as he pulls it from the truck. He carries it down the steps to the dock and places it in the water. Buddy swims over and heaves herself over the side, then sits waiting for her dad.

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Buddy hadn't realized how shallow the airboat trail through the prairie is until Annie balks at leaving the deep water of the channel. She starts into it behind the pitpan, churning mud with her tail, but stops and turns back toward the channel. Buddy calls to her, but she lies still, clicking.

Buddy steers the pitpan off into an open area of short grass at the side of the trail. The alligator she jabbed a few hours ago flickers in her mind before she goes over the side, and wades shoulder deep through the muck to Annie. She strokes her face, speaking softly, then turns and starts down the trail with the dolphins following. After they pass, her dad steers the pitpan out onto the trail and the procession putters along - Buddy, Annie, Lucie, and her dad bringing up the rear.

At the end of the trail, where the water deepens again, Buddy washes the mud off by rolling in the water. Annie rolls, too, and floats on her back, with her flippers in the air. Buddy laughs. Lucie arches her back and slaps her tail in the water.

Her dad's eyes are sad when he gives her a hand back into the pitpan. "I've missed so much," is all he says.

The sky is just turning pink by the time they reach the mangrove tunnel. When they come out the other end, the pink glow has crept across the horizon.

"It's a dolphin sky!" Buddy says. "Pink on the bottom, gray on the top."

The river opens up and the tide tugs, pulling them downstream. At the stretch of the river where the water subtly



shifts between fresh and brackish, the dolphins sweep past the pitpan, taking the lead for a few yards, then dropping back, as if unsure. Annie makes large, fast, sweeping circles, slowing at the bottom of each arc to slide close to the boat. Each time, she turns on her side, parts her jaws in a deep smile, then shoots away.

"Her smile is real now."

Her dad nods.

As they round the last bend of the river, the first whitecaps of the bay come into sight. "There's home, Annie." Tears sting.

Lucie has gone way ahead, but Annie comes back again and again to circle and nudge the pitpan, bumping it with her snout.

"I'm coming as fast as I can," Buddy tells her when she stands on her tail to wait for them.

"What's Lucie doing?" Her dad points to where she is floating with her back arched high out of the water.

"I don't know." Buddy steers the pitpan towards them, but when they get closer, Lucie moves away. How awful it would be to get them this far and have something to be wrong with Lucie. Buddy shades her eyes and squints against the reflected light on the water.

Annie zips past Lucie, then swims back and makes slow circles around her. After a few moments, Lucie straightens and begins to move toward open water.

Buddy follows.

"How far are you taking them?" Kirk is sitting on the bow on the milking stool with his long legs drawn up like a frog.

"Out to where there ain't . . . to where there isn't a speck of mud in the water."

Beyond the mangrove islands, out of Rabbit Key Pass, the water turns from pale brown to pale green, then to blue. A hundred yards in front of the pitpan, just where the water turns its deepest blue, Annie and Lucie soar into the air, side by side.

Two dolphins . . . Buddy blinks . . . with three tails.



She and her dad look at each other. "What the . . ." Kirk says.

Buddy grins. "Lucie's having her baby." She whoops and throws her arms around her father's neck. "We brought back the exact number of dolphins Stevens stole."

For about an hour, Lucie floats quietly in the water, her back arched, tail down. Annie floats between the pitpan and Lucie. Buddy strokes her with one hand, and holds her father's with the other.

When Lucie raises her tail, their hands tighten. Then suddenly a gush of blood turns the water brown. Annie dives, Lucie follows. Her dad kisses the top of Buddy's head.

Moments pass before the dolphins surface. Lucie pushes her baby to the surface, where its blowhole opens and fills its little lungs with its first breath of air heavy with only the smell of the sea, not garbage or rotting fish or the sound of highway traffic and airboat engines.



Lucie rolls on her side and looks at Buddy. Her baby bumps against her, resting at its mother's side.

Lucie lets herself drift toward the pitpan until her baby is an arm's length away. Buddy leans over the gunnel and slowly reaches out until her fingers touch the tip of the baby's dorsal fin. Lucie comes up between them, presses her snout into Buddy's hand, then with a pump of her tail, takes her baby toward the open sea.

Annie follows them for a dozen yards, then comes back.

"Balance me, please."

Kirk leans a little starboard. She swings her legs over the port side, kicks and drops into the water. Annie glides up beside her and stands on her tail.

Buddy puts her thumb over the white bump on the underside of Annie's snout. The thumb that sealed Osceola's wound and saved his life-for a time. She closes her eyes for a moment and prays for healing, then she puts her arms around the dolphin and lays her head against the pink folds of her neck. Annie's flippers are under her arms.

"It's okay to go, Annie." Tears well and stream down her face. "You should be with Lucie. She and her baby are your family. That's where you belong.



Where you have always belonged." Annie's tail moves gently keeping them afloat.

"When I miss you, I'll close my eyes and remember how much I love you and how much you love me. That will be enough." She presses her face to Annie's and closes her eyes. "I can still see you," she says, then slowly opens her arms.

Annie lowers her head, touches her snout to Buddy's cheek and sinks away without a sound.

Buddy gropes behind her for the side of the pitpan, turns and presses her forehead to the gunnel. That's my girl, she hears the Admiral whisper in her mind. We're free now, baby. We're all free now.

Her dad puts his hands under her arms, the same way Annie held her, lifts her out of the water and wraps his arms around her. "She'll come back."

"I don't think so, Daddy." With her head against his shoulder, she turns to face the sea. "I don't think I'll ever know where she is, but I'll know where she isn't."