

The Pod

by Maureen Crane Wartski

Couldn't Pete talk about anything but *fish*?

Jesse Waring tried to block his cousin's voice, but there was no escape.

"Dolphins aren't fish, they're mammals," Pete was lecturing. "They look big and tough, but they can get stressed or scared, like the stranded dolphin we rescued . . ."

5 "Jesse?" His mother was standing beside him, her eyes full of concern. His parents were always worrying about him these days, Jesse thought, irritably, and the other relatives were just as bad. *Poor Jesse, it's a shame about the accident. He used to be a great athlete . . .* Even when they didn't talk to him, he could feel their pitying thoughts.

10 "Can you go to the store for me?" his mother was saying. "We've run out of milk. That is," she added quickly, "if you're not too tired . . ."

". . . And I want to make sure to visit the Cape Cod Stranding Network," Pete was droning on. "They have a hotline, and they do great work. . ."

Yada, yada, yada. "Sure, Mom," Jesse said. *Anything to get away from Pete's lectures and all these pitying eyes.*

15 He snatched up car keys from the table in the entryway, grabbing his windbreaker as he limped out the door. Once outside, he wished he'd brought his parka—the wind had an icy sting—but he wasn't going back into the house.

20 He'd always enjoyed the annual Waring family reunion, when cousins, uncles and aunts from all over the country got together and rented a house on New England's Cape Cod, but this March was different. It was the first time the clan had gathered since the accident.

Jesse didn't want to think about how a man driving a pickup had jumped a red light, slamming into his car and fracturing his legs. Until then Jesse had been the star of the school soccer team, certain of an athletic scholarship.

25 "Not anymore," he muttered, then frowned as he realized he'd passed the store. Well, OK, there was a convenience store about 30 miles away, and the drive would give him some needed alone time.

At first, the silence was great.

30 But as Jesse drove on the road that wound beside the ocean, he kept thinking how his future had been smashed along with his legs. Pep talks that people gave him made it worse. He was a cripple, and he knew it. These days Jesse always felt as if there was a tight, hard knot in his chest.

35 On impulse, he turned the wheel, pulling into an empty parking lot that faced the water. He got out and limped down some stairs. Except for screeching seagulls and a few scattered rocks, the beach was deserted.

Suddenly, Jesse tensed. *That rock . . . did it move?* He took a step closer and saw that it was no rock.

40 The dolphin wasn't very big, not even four feet long. When Jesse hobbled over, the big fish . . . *mammal*, according to Pete . . . rolled an eye at him. How long had it been there? It was breathing, but its sides were heaving painfully.

Fragments of Pete's endless monologue came back to him. His cousin had said that a dolphin's rib structure wasn't built to protect it on land. The body weight of this creature was slowly compressing its vital organs, and if it didn't get back into the water soon, it could die.

45 It was going to low tide, and the waves seemed far away. The best thing to do was to call Pete, who would know what to do. Jesse reached for his cell phone.

It wasn't there. He'd left it in the pocket of his parka! He could drive home and get Pete, but that would mean leaving the dolphin. Would it be alive when he got back? He knew nothing about this creature except that it was helpless.

50 The dolphin's eye rolled again, and Jesse felt a sudden jolt of empathy.

It looked as scared as he had felt when they'd wheeled him into the emergency room that afternoon.

"Hey, Bud . . ." Jesse knelt down beside the dolphin. "OK, I can't just leave you to die. But how do I get you back into the water?"

55 Even if he managed to drag this creature that weighed—what? maybe 75 pounds? back to the water, the coarse sand might damage its skin. Jesse looked helplessly toward the gray ocean and was surprised to see dark shapes arcing out of the waves. A *pod*—Pete's word—of dolphins was out there.

60 "I think your family's waiting for you, Bud." Carefully, Jesse reached out and patted the dolphin. Was it his imagination that his touch made the dolphin calmer?

Jesse didn't waste time thinking about that. He was trying to remember what Pete had said about how, when he'd helped rescue a stranded dolphin, they had put the creature on a sort of blanket sling and carried that contraption down to the water. Well, he didn't have a blanket handy, so his windbreaker would have to do.

65 Carefully, Jesse scooped a hollow in the soft sand under the dolphin's head, then eased part of the windbreaker under it. He was streaming with sweat by the time he'd managed to maneuver as much of the dolphin as possible onto its makeshift "blanket," then began to drag the dolphin toward the water.

70 Twice, his legs buckled under him tumbling him backward onto the sand, but he kept going until water was lapping around his ankles.

"Almost there, Bud," Jesse gritted.

As Jesse waded knee-deep into the water, the dolphin made some kind of noise and then began to swim.

75 "Woo hoo!" Jesse yelled, then yelped in dismay. The dolphin was swimming back toward the shore.

What was wrong with the crazy creature? Pete's voice began to drone in Jesse's mind again, recounting his own dolphin rescue: "*The dolphin was disoriented. It kept heading for the shore. We had to guide it back into the deep water . . .*"

80 Jesse waded deeper, past the breakers. Icy waves broke against him as he tried to head off the young dolphin. When he'd finally managed that, it wouldn't turn. He wished he had paid more attention to Pete's lecture, but wishing never helped.

Waves sent freezing spumes into his face. "Bud, you've got to save yourself," Jesse gritted through chattering teeth. "Nobody's going to do it for you. If you give up, you're finished . . ."

85 Suddenly, as if it had at last understood, the young dolphin turned toward deeper water and began to swim toward the pod. Waiting dolphins arced nearer as if in welcome, and watching them, Jesse thought of his own family. They'd be worried because he'd been gone so long.

My pod, he thought.

90 He was freezing as he limped back to his car, but he was grinning, and he was happier than he'd been in a long while. He was going to drive to the nearest store and call Pete, who would probably contact that Cape Cod Stranding Network hotline that he'd been talking about. The CCSN would make sure Bud didn't strand again.

"But that's not going to happen anyway," Jesse said aloud.

95 He had a feeling that the young dolphin was finally on the right track.

In your response, be sure to

- identify what the dolphin represents
- explain how the symbol of the dolphin helps the reader gain a deeper understanding of the central idea of the story
- use details from the story to support your response

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