

Jump For Joy
by Lesley L. Smith

I've heard of April showers, but if this rain keeps up, Grassy Key is going to be underwater key. I stepped out of my jeep and right into a puddle in the Dolphin Research Center parking lot. The rain immediately wet my hair and drops ran down my cheeks. I shrugged. I guessed it didn't matter, I was going to be in the water my whole shift anyway.

Third shift could be busy with tourists, but it didn't seem busy this evening as I slogged through the building. I was hoping not to run into Dr. Rivera, so I kept my eyes peeled for him. Damn! There he was! I ducked my head down, hoping he hadn't seen me, but no such luck.

He gestured me over.

I considered making a break for the women's locker room, but reluctantly decided against it. I trudged over to him to face the music.

"Ashley, there you are!" I couldn't believe there was a time when I thought his little mustache was cute. Now it looked sinister as he stroked it with his finger. "I've been trying to get a hold of you."

I glanced at the tiled floor. I knew what this was about. Unfortunately. They were firing me.

"We have to let you go, effective immediately. Please give me your badge/keycard. You just haven't made enough progress in your research." At least he sounded sad about it.

"Are you sure, Dr. Rivera?" I asked. "I'm so close to proving the dolphins understand numerosity. So close! I really think with some more time I can do it."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ashley. We just can't afford to keep on workers who can't deliver."

"What if I deliver?" I asked. "Just give me the rest of the week. I'm sure I'll have something."

"Ash, it's Friday." He looked at me with sad puppy-dog eyes.

I gave him some sad puppy-dog eyes right back.

"Oh, Ash." He sighed. "Well, I guess I can give you tonight and the weekend."

It was better than nothing. "Thanks, Dr. Rivera! You won't regret it!" I made a dash for the locker room before he could change his mind.

Unfortunately, Nicole had left me a sticky note on my locker: "Ash, You're on your own tonight. I had to leave early. Personal reasons. -Nic"

Ugh. What was the saying: it never rains but it pours? Nicole being gone was inconvenient. Usually we worked with the dolphins in pairs: one person ran the boards and one person watched the dolphins. I guessed I would just have to make do.

In the rain, out at the pool, the salty, tangy ocean smell permeated the air. I slipped into the water to say hi, and Flipper and Skipper swam over to greet me. "Hi, guys," I said, rubbing them hello happily. They whistled hello back. Flipper even made a little leap out of the water--they did that when they were happy. "It's nice to see you too, Flipper," I said, smiling.

I got out the numerosity boards. Tonight was the night I felt sure they'd pick out fewer dots consistently. They had to. We'd been trying to determine if the dolphins understood that one, two, three, four and five were different from six and had some success but it was a bit spotty. With Nicole gone, I'd have to tape the dolphins and review the recording later.

I got to work, holding out the boards and watching Flipper and Skipper make their choices. I made sure not to look at the front of the boards and hence possibly influence the dolphins.

After a while my stomach rumbled and I decided we all needed a break. I gave Flipper and Skipper some mackerel. "Here you go, guys." They didn't

immediately approach the fish, seeming nervous. "What's the trouble? You love mackerel. Come on." Finally they came over and started eating. "That's my guys."

It was cool and gloomy outside and I needed a pick-me-up, a hot cup of soup and some hot tea sounded like just the ticket. It was getting dark out; the moon may have come up but it was too cloudy to tell. I flipped on the external lights as I went inside.

When I came back out to the research pool I was shocked to see a strange dolphin in the pool chittering with Flipper and Skipper. They'd backed up against the edge of the pool, but were talking back to her.

"Where'd you come from?" I asked the stranger. Could the rain have flooded the passageway between the pool and the ocean? Must have--it wasn't like the dolphin could walk over to the pool.

The stranger's mouth looked odd and I turned on the pool lights to get a better look. When the lights glinted off her oversized teeth, I drew back in alarm. "Ew! What's wrong with you?" Her teeth were huge and pointy. I'd never seen anything like it. "You poor thing. Are you okay? Are you in pain?" She did an impressively high leap into the air, and I deduced she was all right.

"Wow." I clapped. "Very nice leap. You must be in a good mood. Are you from another dolphin study facility?" I didn't see a band on her peduncle.

The strange dolphin gestured towards the numerosity boards.

"What?" I said. "You want to try it?"

I could have sworn she nodded her head.

"Okay," I said. "Let's give it a shot. We'll start with just two and six. Please pick out the boards with the fewest dots." I held out the boards and the strange dolphin made her choices very quickly. So quickly in fact, I got up, rewound the camera and watched the recording. She picked out two dots every time! "You're brilliant! I love you!" I said. This strange dolphin was going to save my job.

It looked like she nodded again.

Then she started nudging Skipper and Flipper until they approached me.

"What? Do you guys want to try it?" I asked.

They chattered.

"Okay," I said. I got the camera ready and started the board sequence. Something definitely seemed different. The dolphins were making their choices much more quickly than usual.

I got up and checked the data. Skipper and Flipper had each picked the two dot boards every time. I jumped up in the air. "Awesome! Mackerel all around!"

After their treat, I said, "Okay, let's try something harder. Three dots versus four dots." I shuffled through the boards. "Please pick out the boards with the fewest dots."

Again, all three dolphins very quickly picked the boards.

Dying of curiosity, I had to get up again and review the tape. They did perfectly.

"Wow! You're great!" I was so excited, I got back into the pool, and swam over to them. "Great job! You guys rock!"

The strange dolphin started to nod again, her mouth falling open. Was she smiling?

The next thing I knew those big teeth were digging into my shoulder. "Ow!" And then I felt woozy.

I woke Saturday morning, naked, half-in half-out of the pool, with the most horrible taste of raw fish in my mouth. I crawled the rest of the way out of the pool and collapsed on the deck. At least it wasn't raining again. I

squinted in the sunlight. What happened last night? I vaguely remembered a dream involving a lot of swimming.

In the pool, Flipper and Skipper looked totally normal, playing with one another. I could also see pieces of my shredded wetsuit floating in the pool. There was no sign of the strange dolphin.

Dimly, I recalled it attacking me with those huge teeth. I shuddered and checked my shoulder for injuries, but didn't see anything. That was odd; was that a dream, too? At any rate, I was lucky I hadn't drowned.

"What the hell are you doing, Ashley?" Dr. Rivera said behind me. "The Center's about to open. Why are you naked?"

Where did he come from? I gulped and tried to cover myself with my hands. "Sorry, sir," I said. "It's an accident. I, uh, had a wetsuit malfunction." With my elbow, I pointed at my suit in the pool. "Can you get me a towel?"

He handed me the towel I'd left near the door. "What. Are. You. Doing?" he said, enunciating every word.

I wrapped the towel around me. "I was working." I stood up. "And I got some awesome numerosity data. You've got to see this." I rushed to the camera and rewound it.

Grudgingly, Dr. Rivas came over and looked into the camera with me.

When it started playing, however, it was all static. All the beautiful data was gone. "No! It was right here!" I couldn't believe it. I'd watched the recording last night. How could it be gone? "Damn it!" I stomped my feet. "No way!"

When I turned to Dr. Rivera he was livid. "I can't believe I gave you a second chance. You're fired, Ashley. Get out of here!"

It was sunset on Saturday night and I was skulking in my jeep in the Center's parking lot. After Dr. Rivera fired me this morning, I left in shock. But now I was back. I refused to let years of work go up in smoke. I was sure dolphins understood numerosity and I would get it on tape again, if it was the last thing I did. I was going to prove myself to Dr. Rivera and he was going to give me my job back!

After the last car pulled out, I snuck over to the research pool. Luckily, Dr. Rivera forgot to ask me for my keycard this morning--I guess me being naked had flustered him.

At the pool, that aggressive big-toothed dolphin was back! She was squeaking and whistling happily with Flipper and Skipper like they were old friends. I didn't get it, Flipper and Skipper usually didn't like strangers. I stepped close to the pool, wondering how or if I could chase her off. Truth-be-told I was a little afraid of her. Had she attacked me last night or not?

And then, near the water, I had an overwhelming urge to take off my wetsuit and get into the pool. All fear was forgotten. I couldn't tear off my suit and slip into the soothing water fast enough.

The water had a rich array of fish and salt and machine tastes, and the fishy taste was especially appetizing. I wanted to crunch fish with my teeth.

Then I realized I could understand what the dolphins were saying! I flexed my tail and propelled myself toward them. As I swam, I instinctively knew the whole extent of the pool and where everyone was in it.

I had a realization: I was a dolphin.

It didn't even seem strange; it seemed right, like I'd been waiting my whole life for this. I felt strong; I glided through the water easily. I could see and taste everything.

I swam up to Flipper and Skipper and the stranger and whistled hello.

"Hello, Ashley," Flipper said, "we are happy you swim with us."

"Ashley!" Skipper said. "Happy greetings. Welcome to our pod."

I clicked my thanks, and turned to look at the stranger. Even with her bizarre teeth she looked strangely familiar now. "Nicole?" I asked.

She nodded. "Welcome to our pod, Ashley."

"Thanks, I guess," I said. "But, I don't get it, Nic. You're a dolphin? I could have sworn you were a person." I tried to smile and it worked.

"I'm both," Nicole said. "And now so are you--at the full moon."

Her words made perfect sense. I still felt like me, Ashley the person, and I felt like Ashley the dolphin. "We're weredolphins," I said, understanding.

Nicole nodded.

"Hurray!" It was a dream come true; now I could truly communicate with the most intriguing creatures on earth. Happy, I jumped out of the water and high up into the air. The others soon joined me, and the four of us had a grand time leaping.

After a while, we had to stop and rest.

"I'm sorry I had to erase the tape," Ashley said. "It showed me turning you. Do you want to repeat the experiments?"

I nodded. "Definitely."

Flipper said, "Yes. The numerosity games are fun."

"Yes; let's play," Skipper said.

"After you get the data, I bet Dr. Rivera will give your job back," Nicole said.

But my mind was churning like sand in the undertow. Why be satisfied working for Dr. Rivera? Nicole and I could write our own tickets. We could work anywhere. We were going to be the best marine biologists in the world!

"Actually, guys," I said, "I want to tell you about some games called addition and subtraction. And when you master them, multiplication and division."

"Yes, let's play lots of games, friend Ashley," Flipper said.

"And we can teach you our games," Skipper said.

I looked into their smiling faces. "That sounds wonderful."

I jumped for joy, and my pod jumped with me.