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opening extract from

Dolphin Song

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1

When her teacher first told the class that they were going on an ocean voyage to see the 'Sardine Run', Martine Allen had a funny vision of the silver, tomato sauce-covered sardines that come in cans, only whole and wearing matching silver trainers in which they'd sprint along the South African coast.

But that wasn't it at all. The Sardine Run was, Miss Volkner told them, one of the greatest wildlife spectacles on earth. It was a migration by sea. Every June and July, millions of sardines left their home off the Aghulas banks on the west coast of South Africa in pursuit of their main food, the nutrient-rich plankton flowing eastwards on the cold current. The sardines swam after the plankton with their mouths open, gobbling it up as they went. They in turn were pursued by tens of thousands of predators, including dolphins, dusky, ragged tooth, and bronze whaler sharks, and great flocks of Cape gannets with fledgling chicks.

Joining this caravan would be Martine and her classmates. Miss Volkner explained that they would follow the Sardine Run up the KwaZulu-Natal coast, before continuing north to Mozambique, where they would help count the

population of dugongs.

'What are dugongs?' Martine whispered to Sherilyn Meyer, and was told that they were those 'cute, lumpy, grey things . . . You know, sort of like a cross between a hippo and a seal. The old sailors used to think they were mermaids.'

The whole class was in a fever of excitement at the thought of ten whole days off school in mid-term, and on a cruise ship no less. So was Martine, until her teacher handed round some notes on the trip. Top of the list of what to pack was:

1 Swimming Costume

Martine put up her hand. 'Excuse me, Miss Volkner, but why do we need a swimming costume?'

There was a lot of giggling, and Miss Volkner couldn't resist a smile. 'It's called a *sea* voyage because we're going to sea, Martine,' she said. 'There'll be endless opportunities to snorkel, dive and splash around in the waves, and I don't think we want you swimming without a costume!'

More laughter.

'But what if . . . ' Martine tried to get the wording right, ' . . . what if some of us preferred not to swim?'

'Why ever would you not want to get into the water?' asked a surprised Miss Volkner. 'The reefs are glorious. Trust me, Martine, once you swum in the open ocean, where the seabed might be as much as half a mile beneath you, we won't be able to keep you out of the water.'

Somebody else asked a question then, so nobody noticed that the colour had drained from Martine's face and that, beneath her desk, her knees had started to tremble.

That night, the sharks came for Martine for the first time. They circled her in Technicolour nightmares, their deep-set dead eyes on her flapping white limbs as she struck out across tempestuous seas. Over the weeks, the dreams increased in frequency and intensity to such an extent that Martine became afraid to go to sleep. Two nights before she was due to leave on the school trip, she took the extreme measure of sitting up in bed with a stack of books on her head so that they'd crash to the floor and wake her if she nodded off. Unfortunately, by then she was so exhausted that the third time they toppled she barely heard them. She simply scooted down in the sheets and gave herself up to the sharks.

She was battling to stay afloat and uneaten in an ocean so icy that her limbs felt paralyzed, when a disembodied voice cut into her dream. 'Wakey wakey, Martine! We'll need to go soon if we want to get to the beach while it's still early.'

Martine forced herself into consciousness. It was morning and a blurry figure was sitting on the edge of her bed. She blinked and it swam into focus. Her grandmother, dressed, as usual, in denim jeans but wearing a pale blue shirt instead of her khaki work one with the lion on the pocket, was watching her with sharp indigo eyes.

'How many times have I told you not to sleep with the window open?' Gwyn Thomas reproached her gently. 'No wonder you have nightmares. You're freezing. June is winter in Africa, Martine. Try to remember that.'

Martine struggled to free herself from the cold tentacles of her dream. 'I was drowning,' she said blearily. 'There were sharks and I couldn't breathe.'

'*Of course* you were drowning,' said Gwyn Thomas,

leaning forward and briskly shutting out the biting, antelope-tinged air. 'You were all caught up in the blankets. And what are these books doing on the floor?'

Martine disentangled herself and sat up. She didn't want to worry her grandmother by telling her how bad the nightmares had become. 'I was trying to find something good to read.'

'And you thought you'd start with *The Enthusiast's Guide to Model Railways* and the *Jeep Engine Repair Handbook?*'

Martine didn't answer. As usual, she was absorbed by the view from her bedroom window. Beneath the thatched eaves, a herd of elephants straggled around the distant waterhole, grey ghosts in the wintry dawn mist. She'd been at Sawubona for six months now, and she still couldn't believe she lived on a game reserve in South Africa; still got a thrill every single morning when she opened her eyes, propped herself up on one elbow and looked out over the savannah wilderness she now called home. Those things didn't take away the knot of sadness that had dwelled inside her ever since her mum and dad had died in a New Year's Eve blaze in their Hampshire home in England, but they definitely helped.

It helped, too, that she had a new family. It wasn't a replacement family, because no one could ever replace the parents she'd worshipped. But at least she didn't feel so isolated anymore. Along with her grandmother, there was Tendai, the big Zulu who had recently been promoted from tracker to game warden. Tendai taught her bushcraft skills to help her survive the beautiful but deadly African landscape, and took her for campfire breakfasts up on the game reserve escarpment. Martine adored Tendai, but she had a very special

relationship with his aunt, Grace, an African medicine woman and traditional healer – a *sangoma* – who also happened to be the best cook in the world. Grace alone knew the secret of Martine's gift with animals, and many other secrets besides.

Last, and to Martine's mind, most important, was her white giraffe, Jeremiah (Jemmy for short). Martine thought of Jemmy, who she'd tamed and could ride, and Ben, the boy who'd helped her rescue the white giraffe when he was stolen, as her best friends, although since Jemmy couldn't talk and Ben was mostly silent, they hadn't actually confirmed that.

'Some time today would be nice,' said Gwyn Thomas pointedly, and Martine remembered that she was supposed to be getting up. She glanced at the bedside clock and stifled a groan. Six a.m.! Sometimes she wished her grandmother was more of a fan of Sunday morning lie-ins.

Gwyn Thomas saw Martine's expression and her eyes sparkled with amusement. Once, those eyes had only ever studied Martine with coolness or hostility but these days her tanned face was more usually creased in a smile.

'You must be so excited about leaving on the school trip tomorrow,' she said. 'Ten whole days at sea. Ten whole days of history and nature and, I suppose, a little adventure. I envy you, I really do. I almost wish I was going with you.'

'Want to swap places?'

Gwyn Thomas laughed. 'For a minute there, you sounded almost serious, Martine. You are looking forward to it, aren't you?'

'Absolutely,' said Martine with as much conviction as she could muster. She swallowed a yawn. 'Can't wait.'

'I'm glad to hear it, because you've been looking quite pale recently. You could do with some sea air. Well, I'll see

you downstairs in a few minutes. I'm just packing a picnic for our beach walk.'

'See you downstairs,' Martine said brightly, but as soon as the door swung shut behind her grandmother, she put her head in her hands and closed her eyes. She knew very well why she was having the shark dreams and it had nothing to do with sleeping with her window open in winter, getting tangled up in blankets, eating cheese late at night, or any of the other things people said caused nightmares. She was getting them because of something that had happened almost exactly a year ago.

She and her parents had been on holiday in Cornwall, England. On their last afternoon there Martine's dad, a doctor, had received an emergency call to help some boys who'd fallen down a cliff. Martine's mum, Veronica, was recovering from a bout of flu and was having an afternoon nap, and her dad had asked Martine if she would mind reading or drawing for a while because he wanted her mum to get plenty of rest.

But it was a roasting hot day and after a while Martine was bored and decided that if she nipped down to the beach and put her toes in the sea, she could be back before her mum woke up. When she got down there, though, the water was so inviting that soon she was up to her knees and then her waist. Then, out of nowhere, a wave had knocked her flat. It had dragged her along the seabed and she'd tumbled over and over as if she was in the spin cycle of a washing machine. When she felt certain she would drown, the wave had ejected her forcibly, and she'd managed to half swim, half crawl back to the beach.

At more or less the same time, a fisherman had pulled in a basking shark. Martine had seen its sinister shape on the sand as she staggered up the beach and somehow the two things had

become combined in her mind – the shark and the washing-machine wave. Moments later she was in her mum's arms. Veronica, who'd been searching high and low for her, was so ecstatic to see her safe that she forgot to scold her. Not wanting to distress her mum further, Martine had thought it best not to mention the wave and how she'd nearly drowned, although she did vow to herself that she would never again swim in the sea if she could help it.

None of that had mattered until now because they'd left Cornwall the next day, and her parents had died before they could have another seaside holiday. As a result, nobody had found out about the one thing Martine had never confessed to another living soul because she didn't even want to admit it to herself. She was petrified of deep water.

2

In the six months she'd been in South Africa Martine had not once been to the beach because her grandmother rarely left the Storm Crossing area and wasn't the sort of person who would ever be caught covered in sunblock, reclining on a striped deckchair. For obvious reasons, Martine was quite content with this arrangement, so she'd been taken aback the previous evening when Gwyn Thomas had suggested that they get up at dawn and go for a walk along the Cape coast. Luckily it was far too cold to swim, so swimming wasn't an issue, which meant that Martine was much more enthusiastic about the idea than she would have been had it been summer.

She was even more pleased when they reached Uiserfontein shortly before eight that Sunday morning and she saw the ocean spilling out before her. The sun was a band of glittering gold splayed across a heaving wilderness of metallic blue. Purple heather grew right up to the shore. As she climbed out of the car, the sea breeze snatched at her scarf and the smell of the waves filled her nostrils.

It was definitely not warm and Martine was glad her grandmother had insisted she 'rug up' with a woolly hat,

windcheater and gloves. Seagulls aside, there was no one around but a kite surfer out in the bay. Martine stood riveted on the dunes as he rode the waves like a charioteer. At intervals he'd disappear behind a swell and all that would be visible was his kite, a billowing parachute in candy-coloured stripes. He'd be gone for so long that she'd begin to think he'd fallen victim to the undertow, but then he'd come speeding out on the face of a breaker.

The wind whipped the waves into powdery plumes of spray, like the manes of white horses. They'd toss the man and his board into the air, and the kite would catch him and lift him even higher, allowing him to somersault and twist in effortless defiance of gravity. Then he'd float back down and slip behind another swell.

Out on the beach, the whistling wind made conversation difficult and Martine couldn't help thinking about the school trip again. Her swimming fears aside, it did sound fantastic. Miss Volkner had told the class that the Sardine Run was one of the great wonders of the natural world, as marvellous a migration as that of the wildebeest in East Africa, where every year over a million of the curly-horned beasts moved in an epic black sweep across the yellow plains of the Serengeti, evading lions, hyenas, the spotted gold streaks which were hunting cheetahs, and slow-blinking crocodiles in torrential rivers. On the Sardine Run, she said, it was not uncommon for shoals of sardines to be as much as fifteen kilometres long and three kilometres wide, and for the pods of dolphins which pursued them to be a thousand-strong.

Martine was looking forward to the dolphins most of all. She had only ever seen one dolphin in real life and that was at a grim aquarium she'd visited with her equally grim former

school, Bodley Brook. In a peeling swimming pool, a trainer had coaxed it into performing dozens of tricks with beach balls and rubber rings. Some of the children had been invited to reward it with fish from a bucket – probably sardines – but Martine had kept her distance. When the dolphin approached the poolside she'd noticed its mouth was curled at the corners in a permanent smile. Throughout the show, she'd had the feeling that the dolphin was smiling only because it couldn't help it – like a clown smiling through tears.

The dolphin memory reminded her of another animal she felt was being taken advantage of: her own white giraffe. The best thing about Jemmy becoming famous after the rescue was that he'd lost his currency to hunters. As the only white giraffe on earth, he was still very valuable, but not nearly as valuable as he had been when he was a mythical beast of legend. And he was not exactly of a size which would make it easy for a poacher to catch him and dye him a different colour for reasons of disguise.

The *worst* thing about Jemmy becoming famous was that everyone wanted to see him. Previously, he'd had slept in his secret sanctuary during the day and only come out at night. Now, he went there at night and roamed the game reserve during the day, and Gwyn Thomas led White Giraffe tours around Sawubona in search of him. She had even ordered White Giraffe mugs and White Giraffe T-shirts.

Over the past few months, Martine and her grandmother's relationship had improved about a thousand per cent, but the White Giraffe tours were a bone of contention. Gwyn Thomas organized them very carefully so that Jemmy would not be stressed in the least, but Martine loathed the idea of camera-laden tourists gawking at Jemmy. She had made her

feelings on the subject very clear. She'd begged and pleaded for the tours to stop and gone on and on about how sensitive and special Jemmy was, but her grandmother was adamant that the best way to ensure that the white giraffe stayed special was to allow people access to him in a controlled environment. Added to which, the game reserve needed the money he earned them.

'It's simple arithmetic, Martine. The more money we can make, the more animals we can save.'

And there was nothing Martine could say to that because times were tough at Sawubona and she, too, wanted to save as many animals as possible.

A mitten-covered hand tugged at her sleeve. She realized that her grandmother was trying to get her attention.

'Honestly, Martine, I sometimes think your hearing's worse than mine. I haven't got my glasses with me. What's that on the beach up ahead? Is it a seal? Or is it just an oddly-shaped rock?'

Martine blocked out the sun's bright rays with her hand. She gasped. 'I think . . . I think it's a dolphin.'

Martine reached the dolphin first. Gwyn Thomas later commented that she would never have believed her granddaughter – hopeless at all sports bar giraffe-riding – was capable of moving at such a speed, had she not witnessed it herself. But Martine slowed for the last few steps so as not to alarm the dolphin if it was still alive.

It was, but if appearances were anything to go by, not for much longer.

Martine crouched by the edge of the water and two things happened at once. She looked into the dolphin's dark

blue irises and had the curious sensation she was falling into them – into a place of wisdom beyond understanding and innocence beyond measure; and not only that, but that it wanted to communicate with her. Simultaneously, she put her hands on its shining grey body expecting it to have a cold, rubbery feel, and found instead that it was satin-smooth and muscular. When she stroked it a bolt of electricity ran up her arms, just as it had when she'd first touched the white giraffe. She snatched her palms away as if she'd been scorched.

'The poor thing has beached itself,' said her grandmother, hurrying up. 'It's a real mystery why they do that, but it's happening more and more. Only the other week I was reading about 300 dolphins stranded on the shore in Zanzibar. Martine? Martine, are you all right? You're as white as snow. If this is too upsetting for you, you can wait in the car while I get help.'

Martine found her voice. 'What do we do? How do we save it? How will it breathe?'

'Well, dolphins are mammals not fish so they breathe oxygen like us, but shock and being out of the water are what kills them. We need to keep its skin wet. There's a bucket in the car. You're a lot younger and fitter than I am. Would you run and get it, and fetch my mobile, too. I'll call the marine rescue department. Isn't it amazing how that wretched phone is never handy when you need it?'

Martine stood up reluctantly. The dolphin was dying and it had as good as asked for her help. If she did as her grandmother requested it would take time – time that might mean the difference between life and death. If she attempted to save the dolphin herself she could start immediately, but there were two big hurdles. The first was that she'd never tried

healing a dolphin before. What if she couldn't do it and she had wasted a crucial half hour which could have been used to summon the marine rescue people and the dolphin died and it was her fault? The second was that her grandmother didn't know about her gift. She did know about the Zulu legend which said that the child who could ride a white giraffe would have power over all the animals, but she had never seen any evidence of it and she didn't really know what it meant.

'It's a shame that any powers you've been given don't extend to keeping your room tidy, Martine,' she liked to joke.

Not even Martine knew what the legend meant. All she knew was that she had to find an excuse to get her grandmother out of the way.

'Martine, this *is* an emergency!' Gwyn Thomas reminded her.

A family of dog walkers spilled into view. They were moving down the creamy beach in the opposite direction, pulled by a trio of exuberant black Labradors.

'Those people might have a phone,' Martine suggested. 'It might be quicker if we ask them to call the marine rescue services.'

'Good thinking, dear. Why don't you run and ask them.'

'I can't,' Martine said. She hung her head in what she hoped was a bashful way. 'I'm shy. Please can I stay here with the dolphin?'

A germ of a suspicion crossed Gwyn Thomas's face. 'You're shy?'

'Yes.'

'I would have thought that this was one time when . . . Oh, never mind. Well, try to keep it calm while I'm gone.'

Martine waited until her grandmother was well on her

way to the dog walkers before laying her hands on the dolphin's silky-smooth body again. Its skin was dry and hot. Once again, the electric current zapped her but this time she was ready for it. She kept her palms on the dolphin's side, and in her head she apologized to it for knowing nothing whatsoever about the healing of dolphins. Nothing happened at first, but then her palms heated up to the point where they were almost sizzling, her heart felt full to bursting, and into her mind came a vision – not of tribesmen in animal masks and swirling smoke and great herds of buffalo and giraffe, as she'd experienced when she'd tried healing before, but of an island with white sand. And in the aquamarine waters which surrounded it, she saw herself quite clearly, swimming with dolphins.

'Is it dead?'

Martine jerked back to reality to find that her jeans were soaked through, as if she'd been waist-deep in water. The kite surfer was standing over her. 'Excuse me?' she murmured vaguely.

'Is it dead?' he repeated a little impatiently.

Martine shook her head, as much to snap herself out of her trance as in reply. She heard herself say: 'No, it was just resting. Would you mind helping me put it back into the sea?'

The kite surfer was powerfully built and he used the lines from his kite to assist him, but it took every ounce of their combined strength to pull, push and roll the dolphin into the ocean. Submerged in water, the dolphin made no attempt to swim. It sank slowly.

Martine's heart sank with it.

'I thought you said it was just resting?' the kite surfer said.

The dolphin gave an experimental twitch of its tail, then a more vigorous wiggle. It surfaced, tipped on its side and regarded Martine with inquisitive eyes. It flapped a fin, sent some cheerful squeaks and clicks in her direction, and was gone in a shining streak. When next she saw it, it was performing acrobatics in the far breakers.

The kite surfer chuckled. 'Funny thing about dolphins,' he said, 'ever noticed that you can't help smiling when you're around them?'

He picked up his board and departed with a friendly salute. Martine waded out of the icy water and wrung out the bottoms of her wet jeans. Her hands still tingled. She felt elated. Her gift had allowed her to help a wild dolphin. What else would it allow her to do? It seemed to be a gift of healing and communication. She didn't feel as if it belonged to her, though. She felt as if she was the caretaker of it. A sort of conductor.

Watching the dolphin dive gleefully over a wave, Martine found that the kite surfer was right. She couldn't keep from smiling. However, when her grandmother homed into sight, she hastily rearranged her expression.

'Well, that was a waste of time,' Gwyn Thomas reported as she strode up, bucket swinging. 'They had no phone so I did have to go to the car after all. Really, Martine, I think it might have been kind if you'd volunteered to do it for me. I'm not as fit as I used to be. Good heavens, you're soaking! What were you thinking of, going in the Atlantic in mid-winter? You'll end up with pneumonia.'

She did a double take. '*Where* is the dolphin?'

Martine pointed out into the bay. 'There,' she said, unable to suppress a grin.

'But how?' asked her grandmother. 'I don't understand.'

Martine shrugged. 'The kite surfer came by and he helped me put the dolphin back into the sea. Then it just swam away.'

'Just like that, huh? It just swam away?'

'That's right.'

'Hmmm.'

Gwyn Thomas stared at her with a mixture of puzzled admiration and something else which Martine couldn't quite fathom, but which gave her a warm feeling inside. It was obvious that her grandmother wanted to probe further, but for some reason she resisted the urge. 'Come on, you,' was all she said, 'let's get you out of those wet things.'

They were almost at the car when Martine realized that, if she was soaked to the waist, she must have waded or swum in the sea during her trance. The odd thing was that she hadn't been afraid. She hadn't been afraid at all.