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Opening extract from

The Last Leopard

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Dawn was casting spun-gold threads across a rosy sky over Sawubona Game Reserve as Martine Allen took a last look around to ensure there weren't any witnesses, leaned forward like a jockey on the track, wound her fingers through a tangle of silver mane, and cried, 'Go, Jemmy, go!'

The white giraffe sprang forward so suddenly that she was almost unseated, but she recovered and, wrapping her arms around his neck, quickly adjusted to the familiar rhythm of Jemmy's rocking-horse stride. They swept past the dam and a herd of bubble-blowing hippos, past a flock of startled egrets lifting from the

trees like white glitter, and out onto the open savannah plain. An early morning African chorus of doves, crickets and go-away birds provided a soundtrack.

For a long time Martine had only ever ridden Jemmy at night and in secret, but when her grandmother had found out about their nocturnal adventures she'd promptly banned them, on the grounds that the game reserve's deadliest animals were all in search of dinner after dark and there was nothing they'd like more than to feast on a giraffe-riding eleven-year-old. For a while Martine had defied her, but after several close calls and one terrible row with her grandmother, she had come to accept that Gwyn Thomas was right. When lions were on the hunt, the game reserve was best avoided.

Another of Gwyn Thomas's rules was that Martine ride sedately at all times. 'No faster than a trot and, in fact, I'd rather you stuck to a walk,' she'd counselled sternly.

Martine had paid almost no attention. The way she saw it, Jemmy was a wild animal and it was only fair that he should have the freedom to do what came naturally, and if that meant tearing across the savannah at a giraffe's top speed of thirty-five kmph, well, there wasn't a lot she could do about it. It wasn't as if she had reins to stop him. Besides, what was the point of riding a giraffe if the most he was permitted to do was plod along like some arthritic pony from the local stables?

Jemmy clearly agreed. They flew across the grassy plain with the spring breeze singing in Martine's ears. 'Faster, Jemmy!' she yelled. 'Run for your life.' And she

laughed out loud at the heart-pounding thrill of it, of racing a wild giraffe.

A streak of grey cut across her vision, accompanied by a furious, nasal squeal: '*Mmwheeeh!*'

Jemmy swerved. In the instant before her body parted company with the white giraffe's, Martine caught a glimpse of a warthog charging from its burrow, yellow tusks thrust forward. Had her arms not been wrapped so tightly around the giraffe's neck, she would have crashed ten feet to the ground. As it was, she just sort of swung under his chest like a human necklace. There she dangled while Jemmy pranced skittishly and the warthog, intent on defending her young, let out enraged squeals from below. Five baby warthogs milled around in bewilderment, spindly tails pointing heavenwards.

The pain in Martine's arms was nearly unbearable, but she dared not let go. She adored warthogs – warts, rough skin, pig ears and all – but their Hollywood movie star eyelashes didn't fool her. In a blink of those lashes, their tusks could reduce her limbs to bloody ribbons.

'Jemmy,' she said through gritted teeth, 'walk on. Good boy.'

Confused, the white giraffe started to lower his neck as he backed away from the warthog.

'No, Jemmy!' shrieked Martine as the warthog nipped at the toe of one of her boots. 'Walk! Walk on!'

Jemmy snatched his head up to evade the warthog's sharp tusks, and Martine was able to use the momentum to hook her legs around his neck. From there, she was able to haul herself onto his back and urge him into a

sprint. Soon the warthog family was a grey blur in the distance, although the mother's grunts of triumph took longer to fade.

Martine rode the rest of the way home at a gentle walk, a rueful smile on her lips. That would teach her to show off – even if it was only to an audience of hippos. At the game reserve gate, Jemmy dipped his head and Martine slid down his silvery neck as though she was shooting down a waterslide. That, too, wasn't the safest way of dismounting, but it was fun. She gave the white giraffe a parting hug, and strolled through the mango trees to the thatched house.

In the kitchen, brown sugar-dusted tomatoes were turning to caramel in the frying pan. Martine's nose wrinkled appreciatively. She was starving. Six days a week her grandmother served up boiled eggs and toast, with the occasional bowl of cornflakes as light relief, but on Sundays and special days like this she made up for it by cooking delicious brunches or roasts or allowing Martine to go for a campfire breakfast on the escarpment with Tendai, the Zulu game warden.

Martine took off her boots on the back *stoep* and stepped inside barefoot. ''Morning, grandmother,' she said.

'Hello, Martine,' Gwyn Thomas said, closing the oven and standing upright. She wore a red-striped apron over a denim shirt. 'Wash your hands and come take a seat. Did you have a nice ride? Did Jemmy behave himself today?'

'Jemmy was an angel,' Martine responded loyally,

thinking: When does he ever *not* behave himself? It wasn't his fault if the warthog had woken up on the wrong side of her burrow.

There was a polite knock at the door.

'Ah, Ben,' said Gwyn Thomas with a smile, 'good timing. Breakfast is almost ready. Come and join us.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' said a clear young voice.

Martine turned to see a half-Zulu, half-Indian boy entering the kitchen a little shyly. He wore an army-green vest, heavy brown boots and ragged jeans – the only pair he owned since turning his others into shorts during an island adventure a little over a month earlier. He had glossy black hair and skin the colour of burnt honey and, though very slim – some might even say thin – he was sinewy and strong.

He rinsed his hands at the sink and sat down at the table. 'Have a bit of trouble with a warthog this morning, Martine?' he teased. 'You and Jemmy left skid marks all over the bush. The ground was so torn up it looked like the starting grid of the East Africa Safari car rally.'

'What happened?' demanded Gwyn Thomas. 'Were you going too fast, Martine? You know very well that you're expressly forbidden to gallop Jemmy. I won't have you breaking your neck on my watch. Ben, did the tracks show that she was going very fast?'

Martine glanced quickly at Ben. She knew that he knew she'd be in big trouble if she was caught racing the white giraffe, but she was also aware that he never lied about anything. Nor would she expect him to. She braced herself for a scolding and a temporary ban on

riding Jemmy. Just her luck. And on the first day of the school holidays, too.

'I think . . . ' Ben shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Her grandmother put her hands on her hips. 'You think what? Out with it, Ben.'

' . . . I think the toast is burning,' Ben said brightly.

Gwyn Thomas jumped up and seized the smoking grill pan, blowing on it to put out the flames licking at the four bits of charcoal that had once been bread. Just then the oven timer started beeping to indicate that the mushrooms were done and Martine noticed the tomatoes were starting to smoke. By the time they'd managed to rescue their charred breakfast, make more toast and hastily scramble a few eggs to go with it, her grandmother appeared to have forgotten about Martine's dangerous riding.

Ben distracted her further by relaying a warthog story Tendai had told him that morning, about an apprentice hunter he'd met during his game ranger studies. One afternoon the young hunter decided to entertain the other apprentices and demonstrate his bravery by tormenting a warthog in a game enclosure just for the fun of seeing her riled. He planned to hop over the fence if she came after him.

'Only problem was, the fence was electric!' reported Ben with a grin. 'The hunter was hanging on for twenty minutes, sort of sizzling, before she got bored and went away.'

Martine, whose arms still ached from her own encounter with an exasperated warthog, laughed, but

not quite as hard as her grandmother.

'What do the two of you have planned for the holidays?' asked Gwyn Thomas, pouring them each a glass of paw paw juice. 'Apart, Martine, from riding the white giraffe very, very slowly.' She gave her granddaughter a meaningful glance, indicating that she hadn't forgotten what Ben had said but was prepared to let it go just this once.

Martine smiled gratefully. 'Don't worry,' she said, 'I'll be riding so slowly that even tortoises will overtake us.'

When she wasn't doing that she was hoping to brush up on her bushcraft skills and paint watercolours of the animals in Sawubona's sanctuary, a hospital and holding area for injured wildlife and new arrivals to the game reserve.

Ben, meanwhile, had his parents' permission to spend almost the whole holidays at Sawubona, studying under Tendai as an apprentice tracker.

When Martine first met Ben, he'd been almost completely silent, never speaking a word to anyone but her and his parents. Most kids at school had believed he was dumb. Some still did. But at Sawubona he seemed to really enjoy chatting to Tendai, Gwyn Thomas or anyone else who happened to be around.

As she listened to him describe his morning in the reserve, Martine absent-mindedly speared the last few potatoes on her plate and took in the scene in the kitchen. Eight months ago, her mum and dad had been killed in a fire in England on New Year's Eve and she'd been shipped like a parcel off to Africa to live with a

strict grandmother she hadn't even known existed. For the first month or two Martine had been convinced she would never be happy again. Yet here she was sitting contentedly at the breakfast table with that same grandmother who, after a rocky start, had become one of her very favourite people, and with Ben, her best friend in the world apart from Jemmy.

Through the open doorway Martine could see zebras splashing around the distant waterhole. She would never stop missing her parents, but it definitely helped that her new home was one of the most lovely game reserves in South Africa's Western Cape and that she could ride through it on her own white giraffe and get close enough to zebras and elephants to touch them. She preferred the weather in Africa too. It was early but already the sun was spilling orange across the kitchen tiles and Shelby, the ginger cat, was stretched out in its warmth.

The telephone trilled loudly, making them jump. Gwyn Thomas checked her watch and frowned. 'It's barely seven o'clock. I wonder who's calling us so early on a Saturday morning.'

She went into the living room to answer it. Evidently the line was a bad one because she had to speak very loudly.

'Sadie!' she cried, her voice carrying clearly. 'What a lovely surprise. How nice to hear from you. How are things at Black Eagle Lodge . . . ? Oh, no. Oh, surely not. I'm very sorry to hear that. Well, if there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to let me know. *Excuse me?* Oh. OHHH . . . !'

Ben and Martine looked at each other, and Ben raised an eyebrow. 'Sounds like trouble,' he murmured.

'Uh, uh, yes, I understand,' Gwyn Thomas was saying. 'No, no, it's not an imposition. Please don't think that for a minute. In fact, the timing couldn't be better. We're on our way. Try not to worry. We'll see you very soon. Take care of yourself in the meanwhile.'

There was the sound of the receiver being replaced, followed by a long silence. When she returned to the kitchen, Gwyn Thomas's face was sober. 'Martine, Ben,' she said, 'I'm afraid you're both going to have to put your plans on hold. Martine, we leave first thing in the morning. We'll be gone for a month. We're going to Zimbabwe.'

