

THE LION CUB'S SECRET

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SIGNS

It was a good day for a wrong turn.

That's what struck Martine later. It could have been raining. Not drizzling or spitting or coming down in grubby grey sheets, the way it did in her memories of England. There was nothing tame about the earth-shaking, boulder-splitting, heart-stirring thunderstorms that came roaring across the flaxen plains of Sawubona Wildlife Reserve, sending the springboks springing and the zebra and wildebeest racing. Three months after moving to South Africa, Martine was still in awe of the torrential downpours that arrived sizzling with lightning, blurring out Table Mountain and testing the nerves of any sailor battling the waves around the Cape of Good Hope.

A day like that, Martine felt sure, would have changed everything.

At the first clap of thunder, her grandmother would have cut short their trip to fetch feed for the reserve animals and whisked them straight home to Sawubona. Martine would have gone to bed that evening never

knowing how close she'd come to sharing her dreams – and her nightmares – with a wild creature.

Instead, the sky stayed a heavenly blue and the sunshine was warm and mild. As they sped across the thirsty landscape, a whisper-soft breeze ruffled the tops of the passing trees.

Martine leaned from the window of her grandmother's battered Land Rover, watching out for funny signs.

In her old life, her family's Hampshire-village neighbours had warned off burglars with a 'BEWARE OF THE DOG' sticker on their front door, although in truth their only protector was an elderly chihuahua missing most of its teeth.

In South Africa, intruders were just as likely to be advised to 'BEWARE OF POISONOUS SNAKES', or even 'BEWARE OF THE PYTHONS', which were not venomous but had around eighty-four recurved, needle-sharp teeth, which they used to grip their victims while squeezing the life from them.

Any burglar who met one would think twice before making off with the TV.

Out on the roads, Martine loved the signs reminding drivers that animals mattered too. Visitors to her school were greeted with a 'WARTHOGS AND CHILDREN HAVE RIGHT OF WAY' notice, while at Sawubona, Tendai the game warden had put up a poster imploring tourists to: 'SAVE DUNG BEETLES! DON'T DRIVE OVER ELEPHANT POO!'

But Martine's favourite sign was one in Table Mountain National Park, where daytrippers returning to the car park were asked to: 'PLEASE CHECK UNDER YOUR VEHICLE FOR PENGUINS.'

Before moving to South Africa, it had never even occurred to Martine that penguins could live in the baking heat, but there was a colony of over a thousand endangered African penguins at Boulders Beach near Cape Town. She and her best friend, Ben, had spent an unforgettable afternoon watching them play, dive, and paddle in the sea.

Martine had hoped that Ben might join them on the journey to Wild & Wonderful Supplies, but he was going rowing with his dad, who was on shore leave from captaining a cargo ship. Had Ben been with her, they'd have been looking out for funny signs together.

Earlier, he'd made her laugh with a photo of a warning board he'd spotted at the lake. Beneath a cartoon of a hippo biting a boat in half was the stern command: 'IF A HIPPO CAN DO THIS TO A CANOE, IMAGINE WHAT IT'LL DO TO YOU – DON'T APPROACH!!'

So far, Martine hadn't seen anything that could compete. The 'BUMPY ROAD AHEAD – FASTEN SAFETY BELT AND REMOVE DENTURES' picture she'd sent in return seemed a bit lame.

Her grandmother's voice broke into her thoughts. 'Martine, would you mind checking the map again? Are you sure we haven't missed the turn?'

Martine put up her window and hurriedly unfurled the map. She had a guilty feeling that, while she was distracted, she might have missed the sign she was supposed to be watching out for – the one for Wild & Wonderful Supplies.

If her phone had had a signal, she'd have checked the GPS, but they were in the middle of nowhere. Her grandmother kept insisting that the feed store wasn't too much further, but Martine suspected they were lost.

As she glanced around for landmarks, the high fence of a wildlife reserve flickered alongside them. Beyond it, a shadow moved in a thicket of thorn trees. Antelope or predator? Martine couldn't be sure.

A sign flashed by: 'CAUTION! DON'T FEED YOUR FINGERS TO THE ANIMALS!'

A giggle burst from her. She was about to ask her grandmother if they could stop for a photo when Gwyn Thomas groaned and slowed, braking in front of a barrier hung with a bright-orange sign: 'ROAD AHEAD CLOSED.'

The arrow directing them to the diversion was twisting in the breeze. One moment it pointed to the gravel road on the left. Next, it swung over to the one on the right.

'What are we expected to do now?' Gwyn Thomas said in frustration. 'Martine, hand me the map . . . What do you mean, the roads aren't marked? Well, yes, I am aware that the map's as ancient as I am, but—'

A lorry zoomed up behind them. It honked impatiently before swerving round them and swinging left. Moments

later, a motorbike and a crammed minibus did the same. A plume of dust obscured them.

‘I guess it must be that way,’ said Martine.

‘I suppose it must,’ her grandmother agreed uncertainly, tossing the map onto the back seat and putting the Land Rover into gear.

A strange thing happened when they crunched onto the gravel road. The sunshine seemed to go out of the day. A cold feeling came over Martine. Her heart began to pitter-patter against her ribs, like the first warning drops of rain before a storm.

The stony surface was rough and quickly got rougher. Despite her grandmother’s best efforts to appear confident, Martine could tell she was anxious.

The vehicles that had overtaken them had whizzed on ahead. No others came behind. The place had an eerie, forgotten air about it.

Martine wished that she was safely at Sawubona with Jemmy, her beloved white giraffe. Jemmy had a way of making everything better. When she rode him at dawn or by the light of the moon, the peace and happiness she’d once been sure she’d never experience again radiated through her.

They passed an empty quarry. An unsmiling watchman, hunched over a small fire, stared as they went by. Behind him, heaps of white rocks shimmered like snow. It reminded Martine of the snowdrifts banked around her English garden the night she lost her parents.

Tears stung her eyes. She had the same feeling of foreboding she'd had when she walked upstairs to bed that New Year's Eve; a sixth sense that something was about to happen. She'd never been able to get her dad's final words out of her head. 'You have to trust, Martine. Everything happens for a reason.' Hours later, she'd woken to find a blaze devouring their Hampshire home.

The Land Rover ramped over a rise. Martine gasped. A magnificent male lion was in the middle of the road, prowling towards them. His tawny coat was covered in battle scars and his sinewy frame was gaunt beneath his flowing mane, but the fierce pride in his amber eyes burned as bright as the African sun. He raised his head and stared directly at Martine, right into her soul.

As surely as if he'd spoken aloud, she heard him say, 'Follow.'

Bent over the wheel, Gwyn Thomas accelerated towards him.

'STOP!' screamed Martine.

Her grandmother slammed on the brakes. The Land Rover skidded on the gravel and went into a tailspin. Bush, sky and trees whirled across the windscreen, like a movie on fast-forward. Martine's seat belt slammed tight across her chest. For an instant, she feared she might die.

There was a harsh metallic screech as the bumper collided with a fence post, followed by a loud pop and hiss as a tyre burst. The Land Rover came to a juddering halt, tipped sideways in a shallow ditch.

Silence fell.

Choking dust billowed in through Gwyn Thomas's window. She unclenched her grip on the steering wheel. 'Oh my goodness, oh my goodness. Martine, are you hurt?'

Martine shook her head. She couldn't speak.

Dizzily, she stumbled from the car, steeling herself for the worst. She dragged her gaze to the spot where the regal creature had stood.

The lion had vanished. There was no trail of blood to show where it might have limped or crawled away to if it were wounded. Other than a confusion of tyre treads, there were zero tracks of any kind.

The trees were too few and far between to conceal anything larger than a rabbit. Martine strained her ears but could hear no whimpers of pain or distress. Butterflies danced lazily around a patch of wildflowers. A glossy Cape starling regarded her with interest from the top of an anthill.

Her grandmother hurried up behind her and took her by the arm. Her hands were trembling, her blue eyes frantic with worry. 'Martine, what are you looking at? Why did you scream? What did you see?'

Martine stared at her in bewilderment. 'The lion! The huge, beautiful lion, standing right in the middle of the road. I was afraid you were going to hit him.'

'*What* lion?' demanded Gwyn Thomas.