

DOLPHIN SONG

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Summary: A second prophesy, this time involving dolphins, comes true for eleven-year-old Martine, an orphaned South African girl who has mystical powers over animals, when she embarks on a school trip to study marine life off the coast of Mozambique.

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*For my godson, Francis,
who is not quite old enough to read this book
but who loves dolphins, and sharks with “big teef”*



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 sneakers 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 Agulhas banks on the west coast of South Africa in pursuit of their main food, the nutrient-rich plankton flowing eastward 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 dusky, ragged-tooth, and bronze whaler sharks, dolphins, 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 continu-

ing 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, gray 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 midterm, and on a cruise ship no less. So was Martine, until her teacher handed around some notes on the trip. Top of the list of what to pack was:

1. Bathing suit

Martine put up her hand. “Excuse me, Miss Volkner, but why do we need a bathing suit?”

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 suit!”

More laughter.

“But what if . . .?”—Martine tried to get the wording right—“. . . what if some of us prefer 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’ve swum in the open ocean, where the sea floor 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 color 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 Technicolor 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 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 water hole, gray 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, whom 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.

"Sometime 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 sleeping in on Sunday mornings.

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 vacation 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 the 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 sea floor and she'd tumbled over and over as if she were in the spin cycle of a washing machine. When she felt certain she would drown, the wave had spat her out, 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 overjoyed 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 vacation. 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 that something or someone would force her into the sea, and that she would drown or be eaten by sharks.