



# *Snow Leopard*

*by Diane Carlisle*

## Reviews

“A polished, compelling, utterly readable story that is really inventive and dark and, frankly, gave me the heebie jeebies when I first read it.” --**David Yoo**, Author of *Stop Me If You've Heard This One Before* (Hyperion) and *Girls for Breakfast* (Delacorte).

# Snow Leopard

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Flashes from cameras and cheers from fans pierced the night when Theresa Milner emerged from the limo and stepped onto the red carpet. She forced a smile, flashing expensive white caps surrounded by freshly plumped red lips. Her long auburn hair was full and her locks swayed to and fro while she moved across the make-shift stage roped off to control the crowd. She waved like a prom queen to all her adoring fans. Jennifer, Milner's assistant, followed close behind. She could tell her boss was still seething over the near mishap with her wardrobe moments earlier, but to anyone else, she would appear to be the merry, iconic Theresa Milner.

The local animal rights activists had set up camp to greet Milner as well. The boos and jeers would indicate they were not as exuberant to see her as were her fans. She pulled the lush collar of her leopard fur coat snug against her neck and leaned over to Jennifer. Through clenched teeth, she said, "Get my attorney on the line." Milner never stopped waving or smiling. She nudged Jennifer away after she had spoken, and then stood upright, lifting her head high and

widening her smile. A photographer yelled, "Ms. Milner, over here...Theresa Milner!" Flashes from bulbs made her teeth look even whiter and the color on her lips more vibrant.

Jennifer retrieved a phone from her bag to make the call. She had been Milner's assistant for six months and was just as intimidated by the actress as she had been the first day working for her. It was then she learned her lesson in dealing with Theresa Milner's wardrobe. She'd sent off the wrong fur coat to the cleaners. It was a minor mistake, but not one she would make again. Jennifer recalled the angry tirade.

"Don't...!" Milner had started and then stopped herself. She took in a slow, steady breath and began again, "Don't you know anything about furs?" she asked Jennifer in a tightly guarded voice, her face contorted into an ugly snarl. She was beautiful, but her anger transformed this beauty, leaving her skin stretched across her face with an appearance of having had too many collagen injections.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Milner. I've not worked with furs before," Jennifer spoke quietly. "I promise, it won't happen again." She had felt like crying, but Milner's glare struck a chord with her, which kept her from breaking down completely. Milner had closed her eyes, and then opened them up in the direction of the ceiling. "The snow leopard goes in when my reds go in, the yellow leopard with my whites," she said through terse lips.

Jennifer looked on in a daze, speechless.

"Got it?" Milner said, and then she turned and walked out.

Jennifer dialed Milner's attorney. "Hello, Jennifer. Please tell Theresa I'm 10 minutes behind," said the familiar voice. Jennifer recoiled at hearing Theresa's name. She would never call her anything but Ms. Milner.

"Yes, but the P.A.W.S. people are here, Mr. Jenkins. You should come now." She watched the animal rights activists closely. *What Ms. Milner needs is to invest in a bodyguard*, Jennifer thought to herself. The last time she put herself in harm's way was when she deflected a water balloon. She had no idea what the object was, but she reacted quickly in fear of it causing embarrassment to Ms. Milner.

Mr. Jenkins's curse was barely audible and after a brief pause he offered, "I'm on my way."

It was not surprising to discover P.A.W.S. members and supporters chanting at Milner, but the decibel levels created by her cheering fans drowned out the unwanted noise at the left corner of the stage. Milner dismissed their presence, chiding them by turning away and drawing her furs closer to her body, even slipping her fingers gently through the strands and stroking the pelts with slow, deliberate motions.

P.A.W.S. stood for Protecting Animals from Wealthy Society. The group was formed by a plastic surgeon who argued about humans readily replacing parts of their own bodies with fake parts, how they should invest in fake furs and spare the lives of innocent animals. The

controversy had grown in the past two years and P.A.W.S. grew a member base of 5 people into an empire of over 45,000 members in the regional area.

One such member stood idly by while Milner waved and smiled. Jeremy Simms lifted his camera to his right eye and zoomed in for a shot, toothpick gripped between his teeth. "Say cheese, lady," he said to himself. The grafted skin over his left eye socket twitched and pulsated.

Theresa Milner stepped into the center of the stage just as the flash from Jeremy's camera snapped her picture. She looked up into the light and the entire area around her became illuminated. The light faded and everything slowed to a halt.

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When her eyes recovered from the bright flash, the walls surrounding her were made of steel. She felt the coolness of the room drift across her entire body and every pore seemed to contract, pulling each strand of hair to attention. She looked down and found she was without any clothing. Her leopard fur was gone and so was everyone else.

To her right, she saw a young man, squatting and holding his head down with his hands. His wrists were restrained by steel cuffs. She followed the chain on the end of the cuffs to an anchor protruding from the wall above. The man looked up at her naked body, unaffected.

"Sit down or you'll bring attention to yourself when the inspectors come in," he said in a hushed tone. Theresa looked at the man. She was not able to comprehend what he was saying. His mouth moved, but she only heard grunts and squeals.

He reached up with both cuffed hands and gently pulled on her right arm, indicating she should sit down. That's when Theresa noticed her own cuffed wrists and chains. Her feet were shackled to the steel floor. She inched her way down until the man stopped tugging on her, the shock subsiding somewhat, but not much.

"What's going on?" an incomprehensible squeal arose from the back of her throat. The man watched her. He looked puzzled.

A loud clang burst from an adjacent steel door, startling them both. The circular wheel on the door began to move to the right and a continuous honk pealed through the steel plant. They were in a factory or vaulted facility.

"But why?" another query rose from the back of Theresa's throat.

The man watched her but quickly diverted his eyes in the direction of the door when it opened. Two figures entered the room.

Theresa felt her heart quicken and her stomach drop. A humanoid looking snow leopard and a similar creature, with the markings of a Bengal tiger, approached, their tails swishing

about. Neither of them appeared aggressive, but Theresa remained guarded and pulled her limbs closer to her body. The cat-like creatures were both on their hind legs and they walked, upright, past the humans. The snow leopard's fur, white as new fallen snow, was speckled with black spots. The tiger had a deep orange fur with large, black lines cutting back and forth across its furry canvas.

The snow leopard was holding a clipboard and both large felines were wearing white nylon coats. Theresa could only make out the name tag on the snow leopard's coat, Dr. Fiona Lynch. At closer inspection, she noticed the hair on the heads of both cats. The snow leopard's head donned a long, cascading mane of blonde hair flowing down its back like human hair. The Bengal tiger had a shorter mane of deep red.

The snow leopard looked at Theresa from across the room and when it did, Theresa saw its forehead was covered with skin rather than the white speckled fur on the rest of its face. The black eyes brightened when they glared back at her.

"That's the latest find?" the snow leopard's voice was soft and feminine while she questioned the tiger, her tail still swishing back and forth, but not as vigorously as before. Theresa was surprised she understood what was said.

"Yea, it's the rare one for Han, of the Bola tribe," said the tiger. His voice was low and raspy, but also feminine.

"I understand they paid a great ransom for it," said the snow leopard in a hushed tone. Theresa strained to hear but their voices were too faint.

"He wanted that color and length. I think he'll like it," said Franz.

Theresa watched the exchange between the two cats. To her surprise, they behaved much like humans, with the exception of the swishing of their tails.

The snow leopard brought her attention back to the table beside her and lifted the tarp. She wrote down something on the clipboard, "Looks ready for the transplant room, Franz," she said and smiled at the tiger. "Good work."

Both the snow leopard and tiger moved to walk out, the tiger pushing the tarp covered table on its wheels from behind.

When they approached, the snow leopard retrieved a syringe from her pocket, kneeled down and pulled Theresa's arm away from her body. She plunged the needle deep into Theresa's bicep and injected a clear liquid. "What's that?" Theresa heard the slurring of her own words when she spoke them, but she went under quickly and did not hear the reply from the snow leopard, "You won't feel a thing sweetie. I promise"

When the liquid had been completely dispensed, Fiona stood erect again and said to Franz, "Have Petri take her to the transplant room. I'll be preparing for surgery." Then she left.

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In the preparation room, Fiona walked over to a table to begin sharpening her cat-like claws, her preferred surgical instruments. Her hands were like human hands, only covered with white fur, and her nails were an inch long and curved like the crescent moon. She sharpened five at a time, the device slowly stripping away shavings from the insides of each nail. She did the same with the other hand. When she was finished she slipped both hands into a bowl of disinfecting solution and swished away any remaining particles. With hands dripping wet and nails sparkling clean, she tilted her fingers up toward the ceiling and walked into the transplant room, using her hip to push through the door.

Theresa lay unconscious on a sterilized table, arms and legs strapped securely to her body. Next to the table, on a slab of ice, was a scalp with a full mane identical in look and feel to Theresa's. Fiona glanced at the young woman standing next to Franz.

"This is our new intern," said Franz. He put a hand to the shoulder of the intern. "She will be observing today."

Fiona nodded at the intern and said, "I hope you will gain much by your witness to our procedures today. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

The intern nodded once, but slowly, "So when she awakens, she will not discover anything is different." It was more a statement than anything.

"Correct," said Fiona.

Franz stepped in and added, "Theoretically, it won't be noticeable for several months until she realizes it's not growing. Then of course, I'm sure the questions will arise."

"Theoretically?" asked the intern.

Fiona shook her head and held up a finger. "Our goal is to get the surgically acquired mane onto Han, fuse the synthetic to the human and transport her back in time to the point directly after the flash," said Fiona. "What happens from that point on is not our concern and is not reflected upon our world."

Franz agreed. "There's nothing really to fret about either. She will never have to maintain that gorgeous head of hair anymore and it will never turn grey when she gets old. She should be grateful."

With her hands still upright and ready, Fiona said to Franz, "Position the light closer to the subject for optimal exposure."

The surgical lines were clearly drawn about the subject's forehead with a path leading toward the nape of the neck. Fiona placed both hands in the middle of the subject's forehead. She sank two fingernails into the flesh and dark droplets of blood seeped onto the clean surface of the skin, one droplet meandering down the slope of the nose, sinking into the crevice of the nostril and finding its way to the lips, where it emptied itself like a creek into the mouth of a river.

The nails worked better than a scalpel, moving to either side of each temple and then around the ears. Fiona continued with the incision until she reached the endpoint at the back of the neck, not missing any strands of the precious red mane. When the incision was complete, Fiona looked at Franz and nodded.

He reached over and pinched the edges of the subject's exposed skin at the top of the forehead, careful to maintain a grip, the blood slipping between his fingers. He was not a surgeon, so was blessed in not having to maintain his nails like Fiona.

He pulled the bloody skin away from the skull. It peeled much like the skin of a grape. He was careful to maintain the integrity of the incision by following along the slit. He pulled the skin away from the thin membrane, protecting the skull, and when the entire scalp was free, he plopped the newly acquired piece onto the slab of ice. It would later be wheeled into the adjoining room, where lay Han, awaiting his much prized mane of red human hair.

When Franz finished washing his hands, he picked up the fake piece from the slab of ice and placed it over the subject's exposed surface. All three watched with anticipation while the

synthetic skin-like material stretched across the skull on its own and fused together in marriage with the subject's skin.

With the fusion complete, Fiona let herself breathe some. She had come further than last time and her procedures were almost complete. She flipped her wrist to check the time on her watch. They had five more minutes before the subject would be conscious again. "Inject the stabilizer," she said.

Franz removed the plastic tip from the syringe and slipped the needle into the back of the subject's neck and injected the solution. Fiona realized the mistake when the synthetic material invaded beyond the incision and then further into the subject's real skin, overtaking it. "That was the facilitator, Franz!"

They all watched in horror. The synthetic material began invading Theresa's skin and replacing it with itself. Theresa came to just before it reached her eyelids, absorbing them and immobilizing them. She saw the fear on the faces of her spectators and she tried to blink back her surprise, but her eyes would not close. She screamed, but the cats stood there as frozen as her lids felt. The material invaded her lips and quickly replaced the skin about her cheeks which were now pushed up to accommodate her widely stretched mouth. She stopped screaming, hoping to rectify the grotesqueness of it all, but her mouth remained open, frozen and contorted.

She screamed again, realizing how she must look. A quick glance at a mirror behind the cats confirmed what she'd feared. Her face was stretched into a horrific caricature of a frightened woman and the look, suspended on her face, mocking her vanity.

"We have to put her down, Franz!" said Fiona.

Franz pulled out a vial containing Phenobarbital and switched out the hydrating IV. Theresa, now almost completely consumed by the skin-like substance, came to the realization that it was over, and her audience watched while the last moments of her life passed by. Seconds later, the monitor flat lined. The subject's eyelids and mouth remained open and frozen in place. Fiona felt for a pulse and there was none.

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Jeremy Simms had just arrived home to his one bedroom apartment. He picked up the remote control to the 32-inch wide screen television on a nearby stand and clicked the power button. He pulled the media card from his camera and dropped the camera on the sofa before making his way across the room to his media center. He studied the trophy board he had created a few years ago. It was nothing more than a peg board filled with articles about women vanishing into thin air. The only color photographs pegged to the board were of two beautiful women, wide smiles and wearing fur coats. In one picture, the woman was wearing a grey fox, full length coat

and in the other photograph, a different lady wore a white mink, mid length with a white fox collar.

The News network was broadcasting in the background about the latest vanishing woman, Theresa Milner, "...who moments prior stood right here on this red carpet that I'm standing on now. This is reportedly the third vanishing mystery in three years, Steve, and it has left investigators with no leads as yet. The only things left behind from where Ms. Milner vanished were some articles of clothing, a clutch bag and her snow leopard fur coat. Back to you, Steve."

Jeremy was vaguely aware of the media attention surrounding the vanishing women, but was not concerned, and P.A.W.S. would never be connected to the disappearances. The window to the underworld was safely tucked away in his camera. He smiled to himself and his eye socket pulsed. He pulled the snapshot of Ms. Milner from the printing device and pinned it onto the board.