



upfront

Men we love LION KING

Kevin Richardson, aka the lion whisperer, can whisper sweet nothings in our ears any time.

Main photograph Kevin with Napoleon, the lion he raised from a cub along with his brother Tau. Below, from left to right Kevin with white lion Thor; Meg; hyena Bongo; Napoleon and Tau; and Thor again.

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You must've seen the YouTube video of the hot but obviously crazy guy playing with the lions in their enclosure north of Joburg. He was also on CNN with lions nuzzling him. Much shaking of heads by critics who say, 'they're animals, it's only a matter of time...' But you know, you can't blame the cats for not eating the man.


Relatively tame I may be, but even I can see Kevin, 35, is seductive. Plus they know him intimately – he's one of the pride. Kevin says he had a fascination for 'creatures' from an early age. 'Then, the back garden was my game reserve.' From the age of three he was often in the 'dog box', well, in the dog kennel or raising baby birds. 'It appealed to the side of me that explores boundaries.'

Kevin didn't realise his dream of becoming a vet and became an exercise physiologist instead. He met businessman Rodney Fuhr (Fuhr bought the Krugersdorp Lion Park, situated just outside of Johannesburg, in 1999) who said, 'hey, why don't you visit?' Kevin visited every day for months – specifically two cubs separated from the pride, Tau and Napoleon. He was finally offered a job there and completely bonded with Tau and Napoleon – 'empathy developed almost immediately'.

But he says animals are animals, and now he's also cuddling hyenas. 'We like to put our emotions on them, but you know a mother lion will eat or ignore her weakest cubs.' Kevin says he's developed a sixth sense and can gauge the mood before

entering the enclosure. He also says they didn't ask to be kept in captivity so they need to be treated in the best way possible.

And people? 'I like people I like. I don't like how humans are stuffing up our habitat, ploughing up land to put up malls.' Animals, he says, never bite off more than they can chew.

Wife Mandy gave birth to their own cub, Tyla, in November last year, but still his bond with the lions remains. 'I speak to them. Anyway, if they did kill me, it would just be one of those things.' Growl!  ♦ Kevin's movie, *White Lion – Home is a Journey* will be released on 19 February. His park, *the Kingdom of the White Lion in Broederstroom*, opens mid 2010. See the video clips at lionwhisperer.co.za.

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN LIEBERBERG

