

PREY ZONE



The grass in the bushveld was dry and dusty. Shield bugs and flower beetles glinted as they buzzed lazily through the heat, their shells shimmering shades of blue and green in the sunlight. Ralph and Robyn Ballantyne took a rest beside the enormous barrel-like trunk of the largest baobab tree in their father's game reserve. This one was almost twenty metres tall; they used it as a landmark on many of their adventures. Its beautiful white flowers had faded weeks ago with the end of spring, and January's summer heat wrapped around them both.

Ralph took advantage of the shade the baobab's spreading, many-fingered branches provided, and sipped from his water bottle. He watched his sister as she crouched beside an elephant's footprint. They had risen at six a.m. and spent two hours following the huge bull's tracks, which made smooth impressions like large dinner plates.

'How far ahead do you think he is, Rob?'

Ralph asked.

'Can't be far.' Robyn, fifteen and one year Ralph's senior, smoothed her long dark hair back from her eyes. 'The grass is still bending back here from where he's stepped on it. Here, boost me up to that branch, will you?'

Launching from the stirrup of Ralph's hands, Robyn scaled the tree with an easy grace and pulled out her field binoculars. She peered around, scanning the veldt for any trace of the elephant. If he'd forced his way through the forest he would have left clear signs behind. If not, he must have detoured around the forest, towards the stream that fed into the river.

'Just think,' Ralph said. 'If you didn't enjoy sorting through giant mounds of elephant crap we could be swimming right now.'

Robyn glanced down at him from her vantage point in the tree. 'And an elephant could be starving to death,' she said pointedly.

The day before, while trekking down to the river that ran alongside the reserve, she had found a knee-high pile of muck containing whole leaves and twigs.

'It must've come from an old elephant,' she'd told their dad at dinner last night. 'His teeth must be really worn down because he can't chew his food properly. He needs our help.'

'What are we supposed to do, cut up his grub for him?' Ralph had joked.

'We can make certain that he's not in pain,' Robyn argued. 'That he has a decent quality of life.'

'Well said,' Dad agreed.

Roland Ballantyne's love for Africa and its animals had deep roots stretching back through generations of his family, and he'd passed that love on to his children. In wilder days, Roland's grandfather had stocked his ranches

with prime cattle; now, Roland was the guardian of a rich ecosystem that he worked hard to maintain. In the Crocodile Lodge Game Reserve, protecting endangered species, keeping track of animal numbers, and ensuring a healthy balance of prey and predators formed part of everyone's responsibilities.

Ralph squinted up at his sister as she scanned the veldt. He sighed. 'I wish Dad would let us do something a bit more exciting than trailing old elephants.'

Robyn snorted. 'You know what he's like. "Since your mum died, you're all I've got. I can't lose you too, blah blah blah . . ."'

Ralph winced and nodded. Seven years ago, the whole family had caught the Ebola virus. Some quirk of Roland's immune system had saved him, a genetic lifeline that by fluke he'd passed on to his children and which helped their bodies fight off the virus and recover. But their mum had no such protection, and she was one of the ones who died.

'I get that he doesn't want anything to happen to us,' said Ralph. 'But that means nothing *ever* happens.' He tapped his fingers against the Smith & Wesson Mercox dart gun he carried in his hip holster. 'We'll spend our whole lives plodding about like this old elephant.'

'*You're* all right,' Robyn said. 'It's me that Dad's sending on work experience with his girlfriend tomorrow. As if I want to be a nurse – like she is.'

'You totally know she's not a nurse; she's a professor,' Ralph pointed out. 'Anyway, it's school that's sending you. Dad's just keeping it in the family.'

‘Niko is not family,’ Robyn snapped, then saw the wicked grin on Ralph’s face. She scowled, hating how easily he could wind her up. ‘Anyway, it’s a waste of time. I’m going to work with animals when I’m older. Not people.’

‘Until Niko opens your eyes to the wonders of human medicine,’ said Ralph cheerily.

‘Oh, go smooch a yawning leopard!’ Robyn put the binoculars back to her eyes. ‘There’s no sign of the elephant. He must have gone to drink or bathe in the river. If he walked on through the water, there’ll be no tracks.’ She was about to lower the binoculars again when a flash of contrast caught her eye. A strip of something dark hung from a broken branch near the riverbank at the edge of the forest. And it looked like blood had been spilled on the ground.

Robyn dropped lithely from the baobab tree to the ground. ‘Wait here,’ she said. ‘I just want to check something.’

‘Knock yourself out,’ said Ralph. ‘Not literally. I don’t want to carry you back.’

‘Like you even could,’ Robyn retorted.

Ralph watched her stride away through the long grass towards the forest edge. He felt a twinge of guilt for teasing her. It soon faded, though. He didn’t like the way Robyn treated Niko; she was a good, caring person, and he was glad Dad had grown close to someone since losing Mum. Robyn wasn’t so happy about it, even though Mum and Niko had been friends. The two of them had even worked together during the Ebola outbreak that took their mum’s life.

That was the problem, Ralph supposed: Mum had died

and Niko hadn't. And as far as Robyn was concerned, Niko was stepping into Mum's old life. Ralph was sure that was why their dad was pushing Robyn into work experience with Niko. First, it would help Robyn to see Niko as a caring health worker, not a scheming man-stealer. Second, spending time with people instead of animals, for once, might just make Rob understand them a bit better.

Ralph's brooding was interrupted by a rustling, and a crunching that came from the undergrowth in the direction of the river. A large animal was on the move: the elephant, maybe. He turned towards Robyn. She was studying the ground by the trees, as if looking for tracks. Ralph shrugged. If she could go off by herself, so could he.

Quietly, he ducked into the undergrowth, swinging himself nimbly through leafy bushes and gnarled branches, following the sounds.

Then he heard it.

Ralph had lived alongside the animals of the bush all his life. He knew the sounds of prey running for their lives and the howls of triumphant predators. But this sound was like nothing he had ever heard: a deep, wheezing rasp, and the clack and grind of powerful jaws. A desperate yowling roar sounded beneath it, made by something else – a big cat, maybe?

What the hell was going on?

Ralph's first instinct was to run. But on the other hand, hadn't he just been craving excitement? And if an animal was hurt and needed help . . .

He pulled the dart gun from his holster and quickened

his step. With his left hand, he grabbed his satellite phone from his back pocket to call Robyn – just as it buzzed in his hand to say that she was calling *him*.

‘Rob,’ he said breathlessly, still pushing through the undergrowth. ‘Listen.’

‘No, you listen!’ Robyn said urgently. ‘I’ve found something here.’

‘I’ve *heard* something!’ he shot back. ‘I don’t know what it is, but . . .’

The words died in his throat as a shaggy, sand-coloured blur of muscle bounded past, almost knocking him over. He dropped the phone in shock and stood as still as stone.

I was nearly run down by a lion, he thought numbly. *It didn’t even notice me. Chasing down prey? Or running for its life . . . ?*

Next moment, the snap of branches and the pounding of heavy feet signalled new danger. Something else was beating a path through the vegetation. Through swaying boughs, Ralph glimpsed a massive dark shape rush after the lion with horrifying speed. The ground seemed to shake as it passed – or was that just the hammering of Ralph’s heart?

As suddenly as it had arrived, the thing was gone.

‘It can’t have been chasing the lion,’ Ralph breathed. ‘Lions have no predators apart from humans . . .’

Hunters could take many forms, but the dark shape he’d glimpsed? It looked somehow wrong. Unearthly.

‘Ralph!’ Robyn’s voice broke tinnily from the phone. ‘Will you stop playing around and get back here?’



‘Damn right I will.’ Ralph scooped up the phone, ended the call and ran back the way he’d come. He gripped the dart gun as he ran, his knuckles white, as if it was a charm that could ward off nameless horrors.