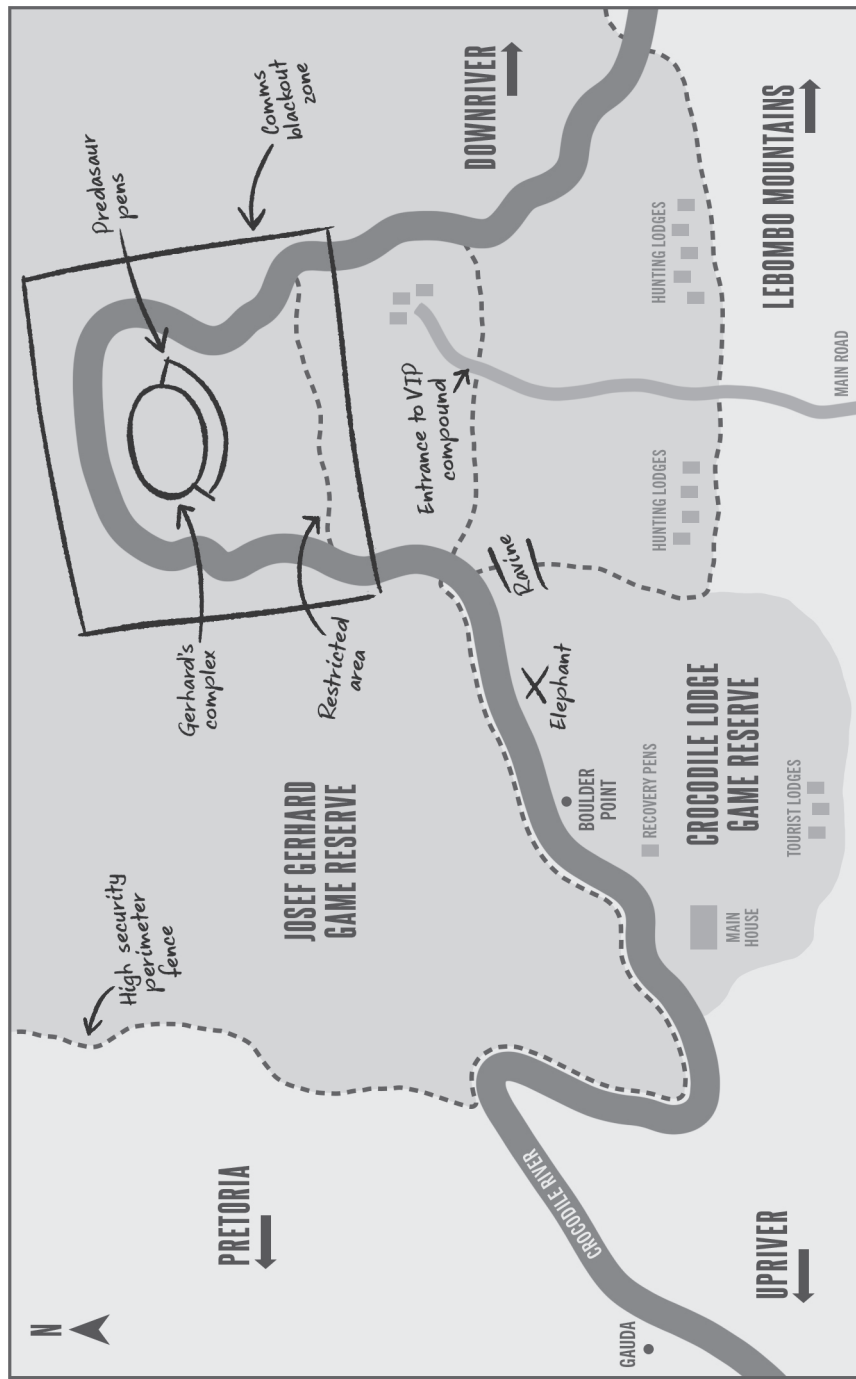


**PRESS
ZONE**



PROLOGUE

The place: Josef Gerhard Game Reserve,
South Africa

Time: The near future

Panting, Dane Mellanby leaned hard against the trunk of a jackalberry tree. The stitch in his side felt like hot knives in his ribs, and sweat stung his eyes. He'd been running like hell through the thorny undergrowth. His hands were more bloody scratches than skin, but he felt no pain. Only terror, and sheer desperation to escape.

Mellanby pulled at the high neck of the jumpsuit he'd been forced to wear. It was dotted with reflective markers that dazzled ruby-red in the midday sunlight – and the damn thing couldn't be removed. It was choking him.

A thin mechanical buzz knifed through the heavy stillness. Mellanby saw a silver sphere with a dark eye – a camera

drone – bob into sight through the trees.

So . . . they *were* watching him. Recording every fearful, sweat-soaked moment.

And Mellanby knew the sickening reason why.

Keeping his head down, he ignored the drone and pushed onwards. Behind him, he could hear the hungry howl of the *thing* that was chasing him. It was so much closer now. Mellanby knew he couldn't keep running much longer. His sides were burning, breath scraping at his throat. Finally, he staggered and fell to his knees. Two drones buzzed about him like steel hornets. Ahead of him was a thicket of mopane and red bushwillow trees.

Climb, he thought. *Get out of the thing's reach.*

Then, beyond the trees, he glimpsed a chain-link fence rising from the grassland, perhaps ten metres high. The perimeter fence. Another drone hovered close by.

If he could only scale it and reach the other side, he might stand a chance of escaping.

He heard something heavy crash through the thicket behind him, then the whine of an electric engine. It was a vehicle. Could it be coming to his rescue? It sounded as if it was approaching fast.

But the beast was approaching faster. Mellanby heard its deep growl, the thud of its heavy paws in the long grass.

He forced himself up and ran for the fence as if the devil was behind him.

In reality, it was something worse.

The beast pounded over the dusty ground and gave a shriek of triumph. Mellanby saw its red eyes narrow, its

huge jaws crank open.

He knew he had seconds to live.

Desperate, he jumped for the chain-link fence and began to climb. A moment later the beast slammed against the fence, which shook like a sail in the wind. Mellanby was almost thrown free. A drone dropped down to his head height, scanning him. Mellanby closed his eyes and whimpered, not daring to look down as he climbed higher. The colossal beast jumped up, clawing at the fence. Moaning with fear, Mellanby clung on, sweat-soaked and shaking.

The blare of a horn, like the call of a cavalry, stirred the dusty air. Mellanby turned, blinked tears from his eyes, and saw a luxury model jeep skid to a stop maybe eighty metres away. The beast turned to face this new arrival with a roar of defiance.

Thank God, thought Mellanby. *Gerhard's come to his senses. He only wanted to scare me into keeping quiet, not kill me.*

The man in the passenger seat stepped carefully down from the jeep and signalled to the men inside. 'No one shoot. Not yet.'

Mellanby saw who it was. 'You . . . ?' For a moment, his grip on reality slackened. His grip on the fence slackened too.

The beast, as if sensing that Mellanby was off-guard, reared up and slammed its powerful forepaws against the fence. Mellanby screamed as he lost his hold on the fence and fell six metres. His right ankle buckled as he hit the ground. The pain was so intense that he thought he would pass out.

He didn't.

He was still conscious as the beast closed its jaws around his injured ankle and tore at it in a vicious frenzy. Mellanby would have screamed again, but a giant paw was pressing down on his throat, crushing, suffocating. He thrashed in the crimson grass as if drowning as the mantrap jaws bit down.

Two men with automatic weapons stepped down from the jeep, keeping the beast covered while it tore Mellanby apart. Their leader joined them, calmly watching the beast as it fed.

'It's only fair that the condemned should enjoy a last meal, eh?' he said. Kneeling, he took careful aim with his bolt-action rifle. From this distance, a Bell shot – angling the bullet through the neck and into the brain for an instant kill – was a huge challenge. But if he only wounded the beast it might bolt away to die in the bush, where its body would be lost to a dozen scavengers. He wasn't losing a trophy like this.

The shot was perfect. The powerful beast jerked . . . and died.

The hunter accepted the applause of his companions and posed for photographs as Mellanby's blood soaked slowly into fur, skin and soil.

The hunter was smiling.



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 Mercos 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.



2

Robyn was waiting for Ralph at the forest's edge. As he ran into sight, she frowned. He was pale and sweaty.

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' she said. 'What happened?'

Ralph hesitated. 'I saw a lion being chased, I think,' he said eventually. 'No idea what was after it. I didn't see it clearly.'

'Something with a death wish, presumably.'

'But it was massive, and so fast. I . . . I don't know what it was.' Ralph blew out a shaky breath. 'I guess it had the lion's scent so strongly in its nostrils, it didn't notice me.'

'There's no meat on you anyway,' she teased, trying to joke him out of it. But Ralph still looked haunted. Robyn felt a stab of concern. 'This lion you saw – it wasn't Jari or Sabal, was it?'

'I couldn't tell,' Ralph admitted.

Robyn looked downcast. She had helped to rear Jari and Sabal when their mother was killed by hunters. They had formed a deep bond that persisted to this day, even now the cubs were full-grown adults.

Time to change the subject, Ralph thought and wiped his clammy hands on his top. ‘What were you calling for, anyway? What did you find?’

‘This.’ Robyn held up a length of tough grey material. ‘Hanging from a low tree branch at the forest’s edge. What do you make of it?’

‘It’s some sort of heavy-duty strap,’ said Ralph. He fingered the frayed end. ‘Something’s cut through it.’

‘I think it was attached to a harness worn by an animal,’ Robyn said. She pointed at the mud between then and the river. ‘Look at these tracks.’

The little heart-shaped tracks in the bloodstained mud were clear and unmistakable. ‘Springbok,’ Ralph said. As a child, he had loved the little antelope above all other animals: it was South Africa’s national animal, and its hoof prints had been the first he’d learned to recognise.

‘No sign of the predator,’ noted Robyn, trying to make sense of the story told by the soil. ‘But look how the rear hoof prints overstep the front.’

‘It was running. Running fast,’ Ralph said. ‘Like the lion.’

Robyn looked at him. ‘You think this is linked to what you saw?’

‘No clue,’ said Ralph. ‘But it’s obvious that the springbok was attacked by something – something that cut through the strap of the harness it wore.’

‘It managed to get away, though,’ Robyn said. ‘There’d be more blood if it had been killed here, and a clear trail if the body had been dragged off by predators.’ Robyn tucked the strap into her belt. ‘I guess the elephant will have to

wait. The springbok's definitely injured, and from the size of the tracks it must be young.'

'It needs help,' Ralph agreed. 'We have to find it. We can keep an eye out for any signs of the lion too.'

'And whatever was chasing it,' Robyn added gravely. 'Anything that can make a lion run like that is something we need to learn more about.'

She led the way carefully through the bushland, tracking the injured springbok. She and Ralph fell into an easy coordinated pace side by side, as they had done for years. Now that he knew what he was looking for, Ralph pointed out details as they tracked – tiny drops of blood, broken blades of grass, half-prints in the terrain.

It took them twenty minutes to find the little antelope, a ewe, with no sign of the lion or its pursuer. Ralph was beginning to think he'd imagined the whole thing. The springbok was real enough, though. She lay shaking under a red bushwillow tree, where she had tried to hide herself among the leaves and clusters of fruit. She lifted her head as the Ballantynes approached. From the set of the ewe's muscles and the tiny tremors in her movements, Robyn could tell the animal was in terrible pain. On closer inspection she saw the ewe's left hind leg was scored with a deep gash.

'Hello, girl,' Robyn whispered. Slowly, on all fours, she edged forward and stretched out a hand towards the ewe, breathing slowly. After a few moments the springbok lowered her head again and closed her eyes. Her shivering slowed. Robyn cleared away the leaves that covered her.

‘I’ll never know how you do that,’ Ralph murmured. ‘You’re like a witch.’

‘A witch who’s spent most of her life with animals studying their communication techniques,’ said Robyn casually. She knew that was only part of it, though. She had always been able to connect with animals, to soothe them and make them trust her. Robyn could never explain how, but deep down she felt it stemmed from her connection to the land here; land that her family had loved and lived on for generations.

‘The poor thing’s wearing some sort of collar.’ She fingered the tough material around the springbok’s neck, fixed with a heavy Velcro fastener. The stub of a strap dangled from it.

‘Matches the material you found on that branch,’ Ralph noted. ‘You were right – it was part of a lead. Somehow it pulled free.’

‘Why would anyone try to take one of our springbok?’ said Robyn. ‘They’re worth nothing to poachers. And a hunter would just shoot her, not take her for a walk.’

‘That gash on her leg could have been made by a knife.’

‘Or claws, maybe?’ Robyn felt something of the springbok’s own fear and confusion. From her trouser pocket she took a small packet and tore it open to reveal a folded piece of white gauze with blue threads running through it. ‘The blue stuff’s a clotting agent,’ she explained to her brother. ‘Helps prevent blood loss.’

Gently and carefully, Robyn bound the springbok’s wounded leg. The animal didn’t react, just lay in the grass, her breathing fast and shallow. ‘She’s in shock. We need to get her back to the Lodge for treatment.’

‘It’s time we were getting ready for class, anyway.’ Ralph pulled out his phone. ‘I’ll get one of the rangers here with a pickup. A couple of nights in the recovery pens and our patient will be good as new.’

Robyn stared into the ewe’s dark, fearful eyes. ‘I hope so,’ she murmured, and wondered just what the springbok – and Ralph – had seen.

That evening, when the sun was still warm, Ralph and Robyn paid a visit to the recovery pens. You could smell the place clear across the Lodge compound – a pungent cocktail of animals, dung and disinfectant.

For Ralph, the stink was like a vitamin shot in the arm after the sterile drudge of online school. The Lodge was too remote for them to take classes in person, so lessons over the internet were a necessary evil – and better than boarding, at least. And if they were needed for Lodge business, they could skip some classes, so long as they made up the time later.

Ralph had found it hard to concentrate today. The shadowy shape he’d seen in the forest haunted him. And of course, like Robyn, he was keen to know how the little springbok was getting on.

As they walked into the cooler shadows of the pens, Ralph saw his dad and smiled. His dad was looking down at the injured animal beside his friend and business partner, Xai. They were both in their usual working clothes – short-sleeved olive-green shirts and tan shorts. Roland Ballantyne was tall and lean, his skin weathered bronze from a life spent outdoors, while Xai had the typical short

stature of his tribe and dark skin that wrinkled early in life. A traditional hide bag was slung over one shoulder. Xai had worked extensively with Roland's Special Forces squadron, 'Ballantyne's Brigade', back in their combat days. They had saved each other's lives often enough to create a lifelong bond of friendship, and their work together had continued ever since. When Roland left the army to look after the Crocodile Lodge Game Reserve, Xai came with him and had lived in one of the staff cottages ever since. Xai had been part of Ralph and Robyn's lives since their birth. He had been a bedrock of stability for them all when their mother died.

The springbok was sleeping. Ralph noted that no fresh blood was showing through Robyn's bandage.

'Hey, kids,' said Roland. 'Well done – you saved this little one's life. If you hadn't found her and stopped the bleeding . . .'

'Thank goodness,' said Robyn. 'The wound isn't infected, is it?'

'I've cleaned it up,' Xai said. 'She'll be running about again in a couple of days.'

'It's who else might be running about here that troubles me,' said Roland.

Ralph raised an eyebrow. 'Meaning?'

'One of our rangers spotted intruders in the park today,' Xai told them.

'Poachers?' Robyn said the word like it stank; to her there was nothing filthier than people who killed animals to make a profit.

‘Poachers don’t usually carry automatic weapons,’ said Roland. ‘And they aren’t seen going downriver in military-grade amphibious craft.’

‘Seriously?’ Ralph stared at him. ‘Downriver towards Gerhard’s lodge?’

‘To trespass there too?’ Xai mused.

‘Or to report back to their boss.’ Roland sneered.

‘You think Gerhard sent them?’ Xai looked unconvinced. ‘Why would he be fool enough to risk sending an armed patrol into our territory?’

‘More intimidation tactics,’ Roland suggested. ‘He’s been quiet lately. Probably preparing.’

Robyn’s brow creased. ‘Do you think he’s lobbying to bring back trophy hunting again?’

Ralph sighed. Josef Gerhard was a millionaire tech giant and hunting enthusiast from the USA who had controversially been granted the right to buy half the Kruger National Park from the South African government two years ago – land adjacent to Crocodile Lodge and just across the river. He’d promised to revitalise animal numbers and boost the tourism industry. Unfortunately, his plan to do that involved bringing back trophy hunting – the practice of killing the biggest, most impressive wild animals purely for pleasure and bragging rights.

While supporters of trophy hunting touted it as a way to protect animals, claiming that hunters’ fees for slaughtering the biggest game were ploughed back into conservation efforts, the Ballantynes stood squarely on the opposite side of the debate. Roland argued that trophy hunts killed

animals with the rarest traits – prime specimens with the darkest manes or the largest tusks – and so led to a weaker, more vulnerable wild population. And he had played a key role in finally getting the practice banned some years back. Unwilling to let that good work go to hell on the whim of a greedy businessman who wasn't even a local, he'd led public protests, petitions and legal challenges against Gerhard's efforts to revive trophy hunting, and had blocked all Gerhard's attempts to overturn the law. Of course, in the process, he had made a powerful enemy who lived on his doorstep.

Ralph was just glad his dad didn't scare easily. Roland, with Xai at his side, had only become more determined in the face of the threats and harassment from Gerhard's staff. But it had made Roland's already protective attitude towards his kids that much fiercer.

'The first thing I'm going to do is get Van Rok and his team in to upgrade our comms network and surveillance systems,' Roland said firmly.

Ralph nodded. VanRok Security was an up-and-coming company run by Mr Van Rok, a regular visitor to Crocodile Lodge with his son Luke. 'Are you going to give in to technology and finally get some drones?' Ralph asked hopefully. 'I've been saying for ages you need camera drones here to properly keep an eye on the animals . . .'

Xai snorted softly; Ralph knew that he considered technological trackers little more than a toy, a pale imitation of the real thing. But Roland waved away his friend's concerns. 'Yes, drones, infrared sensors, more hidden cams,

the works – as a priority. And at first light tomorrow, we’re going out searching for any evidence these intruders have left behind.’

‘Good,’ said Robyn. ‘I’ll come with you.’

‘You can’t,’ said Ralph. ‘You’re on call with our dear Dr Niko Haart from SangoMed Healthcare . . .’

‘Work experience!’ Robyn groaned. ‘Dad, get me out of it. This is way more important!’

‘No, Robyn. It’s all been arranged. Niko’s making a field visit tomorrow and she says she could really use your help.’

‘Can I join you, Dad?’ Ralph asked. ‘I could show you where I saw the . . . whatever it was.’

Roland frowned. ‘What?’

‘Out on the trail I saw a lion being chased by something. I thought it was an animal of some kind – but what could be hounding a lion? Maybe it was the intruders.’

‘Is this a joke?’ Xai said warily.

‘No, it’s true,’ Ralph insisted. ‘It shot past me so fast, I didn’t get a proper look at it. I can show you. First light tomorrow. I’d stay with you and Xai and not get in the way.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Roland. Xai winked.

‘So unfair,’ Robyn muttered. She pushed past Roland and unbolted the springbok pen so she could take a closer look. ‘Well,’ she said, moving slowly inside. ‘At least her eyes are brighter . . .’ She stroked the springbok’s head and neck, and the animal nuzzled closer to her. ‘Wait a minute.’ She was feeling the springbok’s neck more closely now. ‘There’s something under the skin. Something hard, like an implant.’

‘Let me feel.’ Xai joined her inside and felt around the springbok’s fur with sure hands. ‘Funny. Feels like a data tag.’

Ralph frowned. ‘You don’t chip the springbok, do you?’

‘No, only the bigger animals,’ Robyn said.

‘I’ve got the tag-reader app.’ Xai took out his satellite phone – which was identical to Ralph and Robyn’s phones, as were all the handsets – and pressed it to the springbok’s hide. ‘If that really is a chip . . .’

There was a chime. Xai stared down at the screen, stony-faced. Then he showed it to Roland.

‘This springbok belongs to the Josef Gerhard Reserve,’ said Roland, with a snort. ‘I bet he catalogues every last animal on his land, right down to the mosquitoes. All tech, no sense.’

‘But how did one of Gerhard’s springbok wind up on our land? And would that explain the armed intruders?’ Ralph shook his head. ‘Why would they take an amphibious landing craft downriver to recapture one little ewe?’

‘She was wearing a harness,’ Robyn reminded him. ‘Someone didn’t want her to run. Perhaps there’s something special about her?’

‘Xai, make sure she’s monitored, will you?’ said Roland. Xai nodded.

‘Tomorrow we’ll have a proper search around where the intruders were spotted.’

‘Yes,’ said Ralph. ‘We will. Some of us, anyway . . .’

Robyn scowled at him. Ralph gave her his most saintly smile, contemplating the day ahead with a thrill of anticipation. He felt sorry for his sister, missing out, but she

wouldn't want his sympathy. She was far too independent for that.

Neither of them knew it, but the next day would change both their lives for ever.