

A large, dark blue silhouette of a shark is positioned on the left side of the cover, swimming towards the right. The background consists of horizontal stripes in various shades of blue and teal. In the top right corner, there is a black circle with a yellow border.

CHAPTER 1

THE DROWNING SHARK

A SIERRA ROUGE
ADVENTURE

STORMY
SWEITZER

WILL
SWANEPOEL

THE DROWNING SHARK: A SIERRA ROUGE ADVENTURE.

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“New beginnings are often disguised as painful endings.”

LAO TZU

CHAPTER 1

CAPE POINT NATURE RESERVE JUST SOUTH OF CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Sierra Rouge is trapped.

To her left, there's a vertical rock face too steep to scale. To her right, the hill drops down several hundred feet into the ocean. Behind her, a dead end.

Up ahead, the sounds of grunting and gravel skittering on the trail get louder. The noise echoes off the rock wall, coming at her from all directions. Whatever is making the sound is closing in on her and she can't see it.

Out of nowhere, fog so thick it feels like she's standing in a cloud has rolled in. It's dense, mysterious, and wet enough that she feels the moisture collecting on her face. She holds her hand out in front of her. It fades to white.

Even if she could see through the misty wall, she knows she doesn't have a lot of options. The fact that she's at the end of the trail—the end of the world, really—seems fitting. Everything important in her life seems to be ending lately.

She lets that thought pass. She can't afford to feel sorry for herself right now.

She considers taking her chances. If she jumps off the side of the trail, maybe, just maybe, she'll land on an outcropping of dirt. Or

her jacket will catch on a branch and keep her from crashing into the angry waves below. Isn't that how it always happens in cartoons?

No. Sierra knows better. Besides, her legs are frozen in place. She doubts she could move them even if she tried.

There's a whooping noise above her. She looks up through the fog to see shadows moving against the hazy sky. Squinting, she can just make out the outline of several dark, four-legged creatures racing along the ridgeline, kicking loose gravel that Sierra hears cascade down the rock face, but doesn't see. It ricochets off the ground onto her pant legs. She flinches.

A deep grunt brings the noises, the movement, and time to a halt.

Sierra tries not to gasp. The air sticks in her throat like a bite of dry toast and she has to fight the urge to hiccup. She holds her breath until the feeling fades.

Through the eerie silence comes the sound of breathing. A creature is sitting close by. Her skin crawls with the feeling that it's watching her; that it's able to see her through the fog, even though she knows that can't be possible. She imagines it enjoying her fear. The idea sends a shiver down her spine.

Not wanting to provoke it, whatever *it* is, she stands as still as possible. Statue-like, her neck stiffens. After a while, she can no longer tell if her shivering is from fear or the cold.

A strong sea breeze disturbs the morning air. As the gusts of wind force the fog up the cliff, the dark blue waters of False Bay seem to appear out of nowhere. So do the creatures.

Sierra takes a cautious look around. She is surrounded by dozens of Chacma baboons.

A few of the baboons are perched along the cliff face, but most of them are scattered along the trail in front of her and in the brush behind her. They must have stopped in place when the alarm grunt was sounded, leaving her smack-dab in the middle of the troop.

Great.

Careful not to make eye contact, she sneaks a glance at the

baboon that she knows is sitting on the wall next to her. At least ninety pounds of solid muscle and fur, he peels his lips back at her in a ferocious yawn that shows off his long, sharp fangs.

Sierra oh-so-slowly edges away from the alpha male, moving as close to the side of the narrow trail as she can. This isn't like some tourist spot in the U.S., with ropes and safety precautions. No. Here, the only thing preventing her from falling off the trail and rolling down the cliff is her own good sense. She hopes that's good enough.

She remembers the warning signs in the parking lot. When she'd read that *baboons are dangerous and attracted to food*, she'd emptied the snacks out of her pack and left them in the car. It's good that she did. The last thing she wants is to attract unwanted attention because she smells like a mushy banana.

She's grateful that the baboons don't seem to notice her and are going about their business. One is foraging for leaves on the trail. Another is breaking branches off bushes and gnawing on them. Others are hunting insects to add to their morning meal. Even the alpha male looks like he's lost interest in her. Some younger upstarts chase each other around in what looks like a frenzied game of tag. Sierra feels herself relax. She can't help smiling at what she sees.

A female baboon plonks down on the ground a few feet away from her. A much smaller baboon follows. The mama begins grooming her baby tenderly, searching through its hair for mites and dirt.

Watching the two of them, Sierra feels a memory tug at her. She's sitting on the edge of her bed in pajamas. Her mom is next to her, brushing Sierra's hair, tucking a loose strand behind her ear, talking with her about the day's events.

The background changes—different cities, different rooms—but the ritual is always the same. Every night, for years. That was their thing, until last month anyway. It's funny the things you miss when they're gone.

Sierra tucks a strand of her own hair back and wraps her arms around herself. *To keep the breeze out*, she tells herself. But the truth is

that she wishes her mom was here with her now.

The mama baboon looks up at her. Sierra knows she should look away, but she can't. She holds the baboon's gaze. As if sensing that Sierra means them no harm, the baboon turns back to her little one.

Sierra shakes her head in astonishment. A sense of wonder washes over her and her skin begins to tingle. She has never been so close to wild animals or felt so at their mercy. Even though there is a chill in the air, she feels warm with the excitement of it all.

Since she can't go anywhere until the baboons leave, she enjoys the moment.

Then, in one swift motion, all the baboons rotate their heads toward the trail, like a flash mob that choreographed their moves ahead of time. Ears alert. Nostrils flaring as they sniff the air. Sierra follows their lead, but sees nothing. She wonders what they sense that she doesn't.

Moments later, a man lumbers around the curve up ahead. Not wanting the baboons to freak out, she waves her arms in the air, warning him to slow down.

As he gets closer, she notices that he's wearing an Adidas tracksuit, a low-cut, white T-shirt, and Puma sneakers. A look shared by many rappers, gym rats, and mobsters. He even has the gold around his neck, on his fingers, and on his teeth to match. The sun glints off all of it with every step he takes.

The thing is, he doesn't quite pull off the look. The pink tracksuit is a little too snug and shines like the skin of a sausage that's been out in the sun too long. His bald head and pockmarked cheeks are oily in a way that soap would struggle to get clean. Sierra raises an eyebrow in amusement. *This guy*. She laughs and shakes her head.

As he closes in on her, she realizes he either doesn't see the baboons on the path or doesn't care that they're there. She stops waving.

With twenty yards between them and closing, she makes eye contact with him. His focus on her is intense. Something's not right

about this. She drops her arms.

Fifteen yards and closing.

“Stay there, leetle gurl,” he yells in strongly accented English. Then, gasping for breath between each word, “I. Want. Talk. To. You.”

She doesn’t recognize him; she’s never seen him before in her life. She looks closer. Tracksuit Man has large, moon-shaped sweat marks under his armpits, and his raspy breath is loud enough that she can hear him. He’s either been running for a while or that tracksuit of his is just for show. Probably for show. His feet pound the ground in a way that tells her he isn’t used to running.

Ten yards and closing.

Sierra narrows her eyes, trying to figure out how the situation could play out. The man is at least a foot taller than her and weighs three times as much. But he’s also losing steam.

With the instincts of someone who has faced similar opponents before, she clenches her fists and steps one leg forward into a fighting stance.

The man looks surprised to see her do this and shouts, “You can make easy or make difficult. You choose.” He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a syringe filled with a milky liquid. When he flicks the needle with his thumb, she watches its plastic cap fall to the ground.

As he continues toward her, closing the space between them, a familiar rush of adrenaline pulses through Sierra. Her heart beats faster. Her energy surges. Her focus becomes laser-sharp.

She stands her ground, ready.

Tracksuit Man raises his free hand up and reaches out to grab her.

A bone-chilling shriek pierces the air.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Stormy Sweitzer is a writer and leadership development consultant with a love of food, animals and the natural world.

Will Swanepoel is a writer and information technologist with a passion for animals, adventures and motorcycling.

Together, they are on a mission to inspire young people to make a positive difference in the world. *The Drowning Shark* is their first novel together.

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