



OUTBACK ALL-STARS

•BY **KRISTIN EARHART**•

•ILLUSTRATED BY **ERWIN MADRID**•

SCHOLASTIC INC.

TO MY DAD, WHO IS A REAL WORLD-CIRCLING JET-SETTER –KJE

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

Text copyright © 2016 by Kristin Earhart.

Illustrations copyright © 2016 by Scholastic Inc.

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-545-94064-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A.

40

First printing 2016

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll



CHAPTER 1

ALL-STAR EXTRAVAGANZA



“I wonder what we’re in for this time . . .”

Sage Stevens recognized the voice as soon as she heard it. She could identify it even with the blindfold on. Russell Dean! She was glad he was there. She had only met Russell six months earlier, but he was a loyal teammate and friend. The Wild Life organizers might be trying to keep the contestants in the dark, with the blindfolds and all, but at least she could count on Russell being on her team.

“Hi, Russell,” she said as her escorts led her into a tent. “Who else is here?”

Sage couldn’t believe she was back for another race. She felt the familiar tightness in her stomach, the rush at the thought of competition. Still blindfolded, she turned to one of the guides who had directed her to the tent. He was fumbling with the knot at the back of her head. “I can get it. Thanks,” she announced, swatting the clumsy hands away.

In a smooth motion, Sage reached up, easily loosened the sweaty blindfold, and placed it in the hands of the dazed guide. She brushed her blonde hair from her face and then faced the three kids gathered in the dim light of the camping tent.

“Team Red!” she exclaimed. “Dev!” She reached up for a high five. It had been four months since



she'd seen any of her old teammates. Dev Patel looked taller, but the tech-wiz was just as skinny.

"Russell," Sage stated solemnly, a smirk tugging at the side of her mouth.

"Sage," he answered, giving her hand a firm, dignified shake. Sage squeezed as hard as she could. Russell tried to stay serious, but his face erupted in a radiant smile, his teeth a bright white against his dark skin.

"Show-off," Russell said. "What? You been lifting weights?"

"Maybe," Sage answered with a shrug, even though she hadn't. But she suspected Russell might have. Between baseball, track, and football, he was always training for something.

Next, Sage turned to Mari Soto, the final and most essential member of Team Red. Mari looked

pretty much the same. Her hair was still in a single, long braid. Her eyes were still a soft, warm brown.

“Hi, Sage.” Mari’s voice was quiet, but she stepped forward and wrapped her thin arms around Sage with impressive force.

“Hi, Mari,” Sage answered, giving Mari’s back a gentle pat.

It was obvious they were the same four kids. Sage wondered if they still had the same “stuff” that had made them a great team. They’d all been strangers six months ago, but they had somehow come together to conquer all of the other teams in the tenth running of *The Wild Life*, an around-the-world race through the animal kingdom.

But that was last summer. Now it was winter break, and the Wild Life organizers had decided

they wanted a best-of-the-best competition—an all-star extravaganza. Team Red—Mari, Russell, Dev, and Sage—had been invited back. This time, the prize was even better: one million dollars for the team and one million dollars for the team’s favorite charity. Plus, the winners got to take their families on a true safari. With track season over, Sage was thrilled to have another race ahead of her.

They would be pitted against other winning teams from past races. “Do we know who the competition is yet?” Sage asked.

“Nope,” Russell replied. “Remember the blindfolds?”

“We don’t know much,” Dev added. “We only have this note. And it isn’t even a real clue.”

Reunited — together again,
But not complete.
Soon you will have
The missing piece that
Will help you to compete.

“A missing piece?” Sage repeated, doubt in her voice.

“Maybe it’s the ancama,” Dev suggested. Of course Dev mentioned the device that all teams used to communicate with the organizers of the race. It had been how they had received all of their clues—and how they had submitted their photos and answers. Dev had always been in charge of it for the team.

“So we know nothing,” Sage concluded.

“Except that we’re back in Australia,” Mari pointed out.

“And we can be sure they won’t send us to the reef, since we were just there,” added Russell.

Sage agreed with that. Team Red had spent an entire leg of their race just off the shore of Australia in the Great Barrier Reef. It had been amazing, but the Wild Life organizers wouldn’t go back there so soon. “Any idea where we’re headed then?” Sage asked, looking again at Mari.

It wasn’t as if the other girl had inside information. What Mari had was better than that. Sage called it “animal intuition.” Back in the African savanna, Mari had predicted one of the key questions in the race. Sage hoped she would do that again.

“I have no idea,” Mari answered with a shrug.

“This is All-Stars. We don’t even know if the clues will work the same way.” Mari pulled off the rubber band at the end of her braid and ran her hands through her long, dark hair. Absentmindedly, she began to divide it into sections and twist it into a tight, neat braid again. “Of course,” she said after a while, “the koala lives only on the eastern side of the continent.”

“Really?” Russell questioned. “I thought they lived all over. There were koalas on tons of the postcards at the airport.”



“Nope,” Mari confirmed with an exacting shake of her head. “They live along the coast, on some islands, and in forests, but all on the eastern side. I know it seems obvious, but I’ll bet there’s a clue for them early in the race, before we head inland.”

“Yes!” Sage exclaimed. “I knew you’d get us thinking on the right track, Mari. Everyone, start thinking of koala facts.”

But Mari was just getting started. “There are lots of other awesome marsupials that live in the eastern rain forests,” Mari added. “And we can’t forget the mountain heath dragon.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. The mountain heath dragon,” Dev mocked. “How could we forget that?”

Mari shot him a playful scowl. She opened her mouth, ready to add other animals to the list,

when the tent flap lifted. The two guides who had escorted Sage into the tent stood there.

“Team Red, Season 10,” the one with a beard said, tapping an electronic pad with his finger.

“You got it,” Russell confirmed. “That’s us.”

“When you get outside, look for your banner on the left.”

The other guide pulled a slender gadget from a canvas bag. He handed it to Dev.

“All right,” Dev murmured, running his fingers across the keyboard. “Another ancam upgrade.”

Sage led the group out of the tent. They were in some kind of outdoor theater with a stage down in front. Tall trees grew on either side. There were two rows of long wooden benches. Sage recognized teams from previous seasons

already in their seats. It was crowded. This was going to be a full field of contestants.

Just as she located the banner that marked Team Red, Season 10's spot, she noticed a line of people on the stage. But they weren't just any people. They were former contestants.

"What are they doing here?" Russell whispered over Sage's shoulder.

"I don't know," Sage admitted, and she wasn't sure she wanted to find out.