

A graphic for the chapter title. It features a large, light gray oval with a dark gray border. Inside the oval, there is a stylized illustration of an underwater reef scene with various fish and coral. A white horizontal banner with rounded ends is superimposed over the middle of the oval, containing the text 'CHAPTER 1' in large, bold, black capital letters. Below the banner, the text 'GREAT REEF, GREAT RACE' is written in a smaller, bold, black sans-serif font. To the left of the text, there is a silhouette of a manta ray swimming.

# CHAPTER 1

## GREAT REEF, GREAT RACE

**S**age Stevens surveyed the beach bungalow and took a deep breath. The smell of the salt in the air reminded her why she was there. It wasn't for the lunch buffet that stretched the length of the banquet room. Nor was it to make friends with the other contestants. She didn't even care about the breathtaking ocean views and sending home postcards with pictures of tropical fish.

The only reason Sage was in Australia was to win the next leg of *The Wild Life*, a competition

where kids traveled the world and explored the wonders of the animal kingdom.

Sage twisted one earring to keep calm. She'd been up since dawn. Despite the time change, she hadn't needed an alarm clock. Her brain was wired for competition. She had gone ahead and woken up her three teammates using the cuckoo call that they'd picked up on the first part of the race. The birdcall had come in handy in the Amazon rain forest, but no one had been happy to hear the chirping cackle again at 6:47 that morning. If Sage had known the second stage of the race wouldn't start until after lunch, she might have let her teammates sleep. After all, they'd need their energy for the challenges ahead.

Sage nudged Mari so they didn't lose their place in line. Mari was only a year younger, but Sage still

felt the need to look out for her. Maybe it was because Mari reminded Sage of her sister. They were both Smarties, for one. “Smartie” was a name Sage used for kids who were unusually intelligent, so smart they couldn’t hide it. Mari could spout facts about nature in her sleep. Her knowledge about animals and habitats had made all the difference to Team Red on the first leg of the race.

“Good luck holding on to first place.”

It took Sage a moment to register that the comment was aimed at her.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Thanks,” she responded, matching stares with Eliza, the tallest member of Team Purple. Eliza was a Smartie, too, and she wanted everyone to know it.

“I heard this part of the race is about power. Brainpower.” Eliza had a smug smile. Her lips

stretched out in a flat line and didn't let her teeth show.

"Team Red is up for it," Sage answered. She reached past the other girl for a biscuit. "Excuse me," she said, and turned away.

As they made their way through the buffet line, Sage put two links of sausage onto Mari's empty plate. "You have to eat if you're going to compete," she said absentmindedly. It was the phrase her track coaches always used when they were handing out snack bars before a big meet.

Mari looked up at Sage with her deep brown eyes. "I'm a vegetarian," she said, her words soft but even. "I don't eat meat."

"In that case, I'll take those," Sage said, piercing the sausages with a fork. "There are all kinds of pasta and cheese and peanut butter

sandwiches at that end,” she suggested, motioning to the far side of the room. The long table was crowded with every kind of food imaginable: fruit, grilled fish, nuts, jerky, veggies, and dips.

Mari nodded, her thick dark braid swaying as she walked away.

As soon as her plate was full, Sage looked for the other two members of their team. She spotted their bright red T-shirts, and headed toward the table they’d claimed. Russell’s plate was piled high with deli-style sandwiches and fruit. Dev’s plate, on the other hand, looked like the picture on a poster for the five essential food groups. There were equal portions of each protein and vegetable. Sage noted that his peas did not touch his carrots or mashed potatoes. She had seen

inside Dev's hiking backpack—it was just as organized.

Just as Mari and Sage sat down across from their teammates, Dev and Russell stopped talking. Russell hadn't said a thing to Sage since she'd woken him up that morning, but he had shot her a few foul glances. She wondered if they didn't want her to hear what they were saying. It was a moment before she realized that a hush had fallen over the entire bungalow.

That's when Bull Gordon strode into the room, the heels of his cowboy boots announcing his entrance. *The Wild Life* race's host wore his trademark fedora, an enormous shark tooth tucked into the leather band. Like all great adventurers, he had a notable scar on his tanned chin. He also had disarmingly white teeth, which he

flashed at all the contestants as he approached the front of the room.

“So you survived the Amazon,” Bull announced, one thumb hooked through the belt loop of his jeans. “All the teams logged impressive times, but some fared better than others with the actual clues.”

When they heard this, the members of Team Red locked gazes. The clues had been their strength. They had stolen the win from Team Green in the last moments of the first leg, all because Russell had known the answer to the final question.

“But that’s in the past,” Bull continued. “The Great Barrier Reef has its own set of challenges. It is one of the most diverse marine habitats in the world: a string of living coral so long it can be





seen from space.” As he scanned the room, his eyes narrowed. “It’s also fragile. Life here is a delicate balance, and you have to respect it. If you don’t follow the guidelines, you will get a time penalty . . . or worse.”

Sage’s forehead crinkled as she tried to figure out what Bull was saying. Would they get disqualified? There was no way her team was going to be disqualified. She would not let that happen.

“So, protect the reef first,” Bull announced. “Then protect yourselves. You are in Australia, where everything is bigger, more beautiful, and more dangerous. You have to get serious.”

Sage smiled tightly. Bull Gordon could save his advice for the other contestants. They all seemed like amateurs. Sage was born serious, and she planned to win.