

CONGRATULATIONS!

Your team has been chosen to compete in **THE WILD LIFE**, a race around the world to experience the majesty of the animal kingdom.

Be the first team to answer all the clues and you'll win the ultimate prize—a million dollars for the team.

There are four legs, each in a different habitat. At every stop, you'll meet strange and wonderful animals. Keep your eyes and ears open for clues. And watch out—the wild world is beautiful, but it can also be dangerous!

GOOD LUCK!



CHAPTER 1

SEEING RED



Russell Dean watched as the other contestants came into the clearing. They had all said goodbye to their parents the day before and boarded a plane. Russell had barely ever left his hometown. Now he was far away, in the middle of nowhere. Well, not exactly nowhere. It was the most awesome place he had ever seen.

The trees rose over one hundred feet, and their thick leaves blocked out almost all the sunlight. The warm, moist air clung to his skin, giving

him the chills. Everything on the forest floor was cloaked in spooky green shadows. When he looked up, it was like a kaleidoscope of green with slivers of golden light. This place felt special, almost sacred.

When Russell looked down again, the clearing was full of people: mostly kids around his age and a few adults with clipboards. Russell hadn't paid much attention to the other kids the day before, because he'd been with his best friends: Jayden, Dallas, Damien, and Gabe. They'd played flag football together for three years. Even though they'd all wanted to be contestants on *The Wild Life*, it had been Russell's idea to enter.

But now he didn't have a choice. He had to deal with the other kids. He wasn't with his friends anymore.

"Welcome," a man called out. "I am Bull Gordon." The man was standing behind a podium, but not the kind of podium that a principal stands behind at an assembly. This one was made from the trunk of an old tree, with roots reaching into the ground like spindly fingers. The man stretched his arms and wrapped them around the top of the podium's crusty bark.



“You are in the heart of the Amazon rain forest, home to some of the world’s most exotic animals,” he bellowed. “For all you lucky contestants, this is the start of the Wild Life competition—the first of four legs, each in a different ecosystem. To win, you’ll have to prove that you understand what makes these different environments work.” Bull paused and surveyed the contestants. “Now, you need to find your teams. And hurry up! This is a race after all.” A sly smile gave way to the trademark grin that showed up on all the ads for *The Wild Life*.

“Hey, you!” Russell heard a voice call. The voice seemed to be directed at him. “You, with the red folder.” The voice sounded impatient.

Russell looked down at the folder in his hand. It was definitely red, unlike the ones his four friends had. Theirs were all green.

“What? Are you going to make us come to you? Fine.” In no time, the voice and its owner were in Russell’s face. “What’s your deal?” The voice belonged to a girl. The girl was tall, and she had a red folder tucked under one arm. A hiking backpack dangled from the other. “You’re on our team. I’m Sage Stevens.” Sage turned around and pointed to a much shorter girl whose long dark hair was pulled into a braid so thick that it looked like a panther’s tail. “This is Mari Soto.”

Next, Sage pointed at a boy. The boy had a gigantic camera hanging around his neck. It was almost bigger than his head.

“And this is—”

“Dev Patel, at your service,” the boy said, cutting Sage off. He politely stretched out his hand. Russell gave it a shake.



"And you are?" Sage Stevens prompted. Her intense blue eyes returned their gaze to Russell. She tucked her shoulder-length hair behind her ear.

"I'm Russell," he answered. "Russell Dean."

"And what would you say your strengths will be?" Sage asked, eyebrows raised. "In the race, I mean. What do you have to offer the team?"

Russell wasn't about to answer. Who put this girl in charge? She was getting on his nerves.

"There's a million dollars up for grabs," Sage said, as if Russell didn't already know that. "As a team, we need to be fast, generous, and smart if we are going to win *The Wild Life*."

Russell knew all about the race. He didn't need Sage's advice. After all, it had been his idea to

enter in the first place. He was the one who had sent his friends the link. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to travel to the world's most exotic places and see wildlife up close. Plus, there were challenges that meant real adventure: mountain climbing, river rafting, maybe even a safari. That's why it was called *The Wild Life*!

Russell couldn't believe that his friends were all on a team together, and he had ended up with a bunch of strangers. He'd even been the one to talk Damien's mom into letting him go. Russell had promised he'd look out for him.

He glanced over and saw Damien and his other friends, laughing together. They hadn't said a word to him since they found out he had been booted from their team. They hadn't been mean, but they hadn't been particularly nice about it

either. “Who knew they’d change the number on a team from five to four?” Gabe had said, like it was a random piece of trivia. The worst part was that Russell knew his friends. He knew they were smart and fast. He knew that they had come here to win.

“And tough,” Russell said after a long pause. He looked at each of his new team members in turn.

“What?” Sage asked.

“Fast, generous, smart, and tough,” stated Russell. “We’ll also need to be tough if we want to be the winning team.”

Sage nodded, and the corners of her mouth turned down. Russell could tell she was holding back a smile. Dev and Mari nodded, too.

“Now, groups,” Bull announced over the

excited frenzy, “you have two duties. First, get to know your teammates. Second, get some sleep. Tomorrow, when the sun rises, you will receive your first challenge. Have a good night.” He stepped away from the podium and began talking to one of the adults with a clipboard.

Russell leaned over, grabbed his bag, and swung it over his back. He turned to Sage, Mari, and Dev. “Anyone know the way to the red team’s bunk?” he asked.