

WILD WAVE

A NOVEL

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Scholastic Press / New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-88231-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 24 25 26 27 28

Printed in Italy 183

First edition, August 2024

Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi

1.

The Screaming Begins

It all depends on where you were when the world ended. Not Planet Earth, of course. My little world. The beach, the bay, my school, my friends, my family: vanished, wiped out, changed forever. None of us saw it coming, not until the last possible second, and by then it was too late.

The survivors all have their own stories. Mine starts like this: A Saturday morning in June, two weeks before school gets out. I'm checking out an animal rescue place called Friends of the Wild. The sanctuary is spread out over a green hillside overlooking the bay. In my opinion, a fantastic location because you can see most of Cape Courage. The boat-crowded bay, the waterfront hotels, the marinas and restaurants that make this a busy tourist destination. A mile or so behind us, at the top of the hill, is the Pinewood Forest, a nature preserve of tall pines and hiking trails.

My name is Nick Chase, and I'm the dorky kid with the backpack and the glasses strapped to my head, totally clueless that my life is about to be torn apart. The volunteer



showing a group of us around the facility is Jess Hardy. She goes to my school, but we don't really know each other. When I see her in the hall she always looks real serious and unapproachable, but at Friends of the Wild she's all smiles, like she really enjoys volunteering.

Phones are allowed, so I'm videoing the tour as we go.

"We take in injured animals," she explains. "Not pets, but just about everything else. Today our guests include turtles, bald eagles, hawks, deer, fox, and in this cage here, bobcats, sometimes called wildcats."

"I can't see any!" complains a little kid. His mother shushes him.

"Bobcats are hard to spot," Jess says kindly. "They're really good at blending in. The cage area is full of foliage so they can hide, which they like to do. Look for their bobbed tails and their orange tracking collars. The collars mark them as sanctuary guests. See? There?"

"Kitty!" screams the kid.

"Not a house cat," Jess explains. "The bobcat is bigger, twenty to forty pounds, and it doesn't do well with humans. It's a predator, hunting small animals, preferably rabbits and squirrels and the occasional rattlesnake. But it will also attack house cats and small dogs."

"A cat that eats dogs?" says the little kid.

Jess shrugs. "Sometimes."

To be honest, I'm here for a class assignment. My homeroom teacher, Mrs. Bowditch, wants us to make a short



podcast about something in our area. Something interesting, obviously. I chose the wildlife reserve from a list of suggestions. Not that I've ever done an actual podcast. The thought of recording my scratchy, two-tone voice is a joke, if you ever heard me trying to get through a sentence without my voice cracking.

My idea, I record other people talking about the sanctuary, namely Jess, and hope the recording explains itself with no help from me. Maybe if I do a good job with this project, my teacher won't think I'm "unfocused and performing below expectations in everything but reading." Or maybe not.

"Best way to spot a bobcat is to crouch down and hold very still." Jess demonstrates, crouching a few yards from the big cage. "Look into the foliage. Bobcats are super good at remaining motionless, but if you look carefully you'll see their eyes. Glowing yellow eyes."

Holding his mother's hand, the little boy crouches beside Jess. "Where is kitty?" he asks.

The answer to that shocks us all.

BANG!

Out of nowhere a bobcat launches itself at the chain link, holding on with long sharp claws, midway up the fence. Its yellow eyes look angry, or maybe frightened. It seems to be staring at me, as if demanding answers.

The big cat hisses, showing razor-sharp teeth.

"Weird," Jess says thoughtfully. "This has never happened before."



BANG! BANG! Two more bobcats cling to the chain link, hissing and moaning.

The little boy starts wailing. His mother scoops him up and leaves quickly.

Jess backs carefully away from the cage, indicating that visitors do the same.

“Something is wrong,” she warns. “Very, very wrong.”

That’s when the screaming begins. Shrieking and hissing, the cats join voices, announcing their common fear. Fear of what, I have no idea.

The screaming gets louder and louder, until it hurts.

I cover my ears, but that doesn’t help.

