

# CHAPTER ONE

“Re-use! Re-duce! Re-cycle!”

“Don’t get mad; get green!”

“Save a planet, save a tree, in the end it’ll save you and me!”

The chants filter through the open windows at the end of final period, drifting on the warm breeze. Ms. Lockhart pauses, walking over to check out the noise, while the rest of the class cranks their necks around and strains to get a better look.

I just cram my books into my bag and wait, poised on the edge of my seat.

The second the final bell rings, I spring into action: racing to my locker, I grab some last-minute supplies and dash out of the building. I can see the Green Teens already, marching in a circle on a plot of land at the end of the field, past the graffitied bleachers and batting cages.

The school board is proposing to sell it off to developers; already there are tire tracks cut into the muddy ground and the beginnings of a construction site taking shape. But not for long.

“You didn’t wait!” I arrive, breathless, at the edge of the grass. I pause for a moment to kick off my ballet flats—not exactly off-road shoes—and yank on a pair of flower-print plastic boots.

“I know, I know,” Olivia apologizes, skidding down the dirt bank. Her own matching boots are already filthy from the mud. She grabs a couple of my bags and eagerly rifles through them. “Did you bring the banners? And sign-up sheets?”

“Check and check!” I pull a Greenpeace shirt over my regular tank top. “And cookies, too.”

“Perfect!” She grins. She’s braided blue yarn through her hair for the occasion, the same shade as the paint on the signs we were up half the night making. “Then we’re all set.”

We take our places in the middle of the group, unfurling a ten-foot-long banner and joining in the chant. After six major demonstrations, and our weekly Saturday morning session handing out flyers at the Fairview Mall, Olivia and I are protest experts. We need to be. With the old Green Teen leadership graduating, it’s up to us to keep the spirit of environmentalism alive and well at North Ridge High.

“Louder, everyone! We need them to hear us all the way to the parking lot!” Olivia yells through the megaphone we, ahem, “borrowed” from the AV room. Volume and visibility—those are the keys to a good protest, I’ve

learned. And plenty of snacks. One time we tried an all-day sit-in outside City Hall to demand better recycling services, but I forgot to bring provisions; the group lasted exactly two hours before the aroma wafting from a nearby pretzel van became too much to bear. Needless to say, we still have to trek out to Maplewood with our paper and plastics, and I haven't forgotten the Fig Newtons since.

Sure enough, after a few minutes a curious crowd starts to gather, drawn by the shouting and—yes—the lure of those cookies. A group from my study hall looks around with interest, and a handful of cheerleaders even stop to ask what's going on.

“Never underestimate the power of free food.” I grin, giving Olivia a high-five with my free hand. “What do you say, time for phase two?”

“Do it.” She nods.

Passing my corner of the banner over to an eager freshman recruit, I retrieve the stack of clipboards and begin circulating with sign-up sheets.

“What is it this time?” A guy from my econ class is loitering suspiciously near the crowd. His collar is popped, and he's spent the last semester idly kicking the back of my seat, but every signature counts. “Saving the whales?”

“That was last week.” I keep smiling at him: my infallible “you know you want to help me out” grin. “Right now we're trying to stop them from building on the field.”

“Are they going to put up a mini-mall?” He looks hopeful. “Man, a Pizza Hut would be awesome. Or a Chili's!”

“No,” I answer, thankful. I'm all for a challenge, but convincing a thousand teenagers to pick the joys of nature

over double pepperoni with extra cheese? That might be out of my league. I move closer, pen outstretched. “But do you really want to have this field paved over? Bit by bit, we’re losing all the natural habitats and green space in the area, and we won’t be able to get them back. What about the local ecosystem, and wildlife, and—?”

“Whoa.” He backs off, looking alarmed. “Relax, Jenna!”

It’s obvious I’m not going to win this one with logic and sense, so I decide to try a new tactic. “It’s OK—you don’t have to sign now,” I coo. “I mean, we’ve got two whole weeks of classes before summer vacation. We can talk through all the issues together, in tons more detail. I could even ask Mrs. Paluski to pair us up!” I beam as though I’m just thrilled by the thought of describing every detail of our cause. “I’m sure I’ll convince you. Eventually.”

He practically snatches the pen out of my hand to sign.

“Aw, thanks.” I grin, taking back the clipboard to check my progress. Fifty-six down, just another thousand to go. . . .

The crowd around us has swelled to about a hundred students by the time I see Principal Turner huffing his way across the field. I intercept him at the edge of the grass with my best innocent look. “Anything I can help you with?”

“Jenna Levison.” He eyes the dirt and puddles suspiciously. “To what do we owe this particular show of—”

“Community spirit?” I finish hopefully. “Environmental awareness?”

“Disruption and disobedience.” He folds his arms and glares at me. As if they can sense the battle to come, the crowd behind me turns to watch, while the rest of the Green Teens pause their chanting.

I gulp.

No matter how many angry officials I face, I still feel like I’m doing something wrong (OK—something *really* wrong). But I can’t back down. Backing down won’t save the field from construction, and it certainly won’t make the rest of the Green Teens believe in their new leaders. It’s my job to deal with authority now. Preferably without winding up in perpetual detention.

“Is this about the demonstration last week?” Deciding that distraction is the best form of defense, I try to steer him away from the melee. “Because the *Star-Ledger* said it was a great example of youth engagement. They even invited us to a dinner for community leaders.”

“Congratulations.” His response is dry. “So, what is it this time? I’m assuming there is a point to all this.” Turner surveys the motley crew with a weary expression.

“You’re selling off the back field!” Olivia appears beside me, her voice ringing with accusation. What she lacks in height, she more than makes up for in volume. “They’re going to rip it up and build condos!”

“And?” Principal Turner is unconcerned. “Those proposals were announced months ago.”

“Yes, but we’ve discovered the plans will endanger a rare species,” she announces proudly. “One that will have its habitat destroyed by the greedy, profit-driven decision-making of the school board. Not to mention the

generations who will be robbed of a prime natural environment for the sake of—”

“Yes, yes.” Turner waves at her to stop. He pinches his sinuses for a moment, as if he’s got a headache coming on. “Endangered species?”

“Knieskern’s beaked-rush,” I confirm, hoping I got the pronunciation right.

Turner brightens. “You’re getting worked up over a type of grass?”

“Just because it’s not something glamorous like a bald eagle doesn’t mean it’s not important!” Olivia protests, hands on her hips.

“I agree.” Then, if his agreement wasn’t worrying enough, Turner begins to smirk. “Knieskern’s beaked-rush certainly needs protecting.” He gives us a smug smile. “Although since it’s a wetland species, I don’t think we’re in danger of breaking any laws here on dry land, do you?”

Busted.

“But the ground is pretty damp,” Olivia argues in vain. “Miss Kirk won’t let us practice cross-country back here because of that time Meghan skidded and sprained her ankle.”

“It wouldn’t take much to commission an independent wildlife assessment,” I add, trying to be the voice of reason. “Maybe delay the sale by a couple of months and—”

“Enough!” Turner suddenly explodes. “I want you and your . . . fellow agitators packed up and gone. Do you hear me?”

We both take a step backward. His face is turning a strange shade of pink.

“You may have complete disregard for my authority, young ladies, but perhaps some of you, your *comrades* care about their college applications!”

I hear fearful murmurs behind me, but despite my faint lurch of panic, I don’t surrender. The school has been waving around that “college application” trump card for years now, but every single one of the Green Teen seniors got accepted into their first-choice college. It’s an empty threat. At least, I hope it is.

Luckily, I have one last card to play, too. “You know, why don’t I give that nice woman at KPXW a call?” I turn to Olivia theatrically. “The one we met at that last council meeting?”

“You mean Linda, in the news department?” Olivia catches on, answering with an exaggerated frown.

“That’s right. She did say to call if we were doing any more protests.” I glance back at Principal Turner. “I bet they’d have a crew out here in no time to see what all the fuss is about.”

“Great idea.” Olivia pulls out her cell phone. “I think I’ve got her number here. . . .”

“That won’t be necessary!” Turner suddenly has a change of heart. “Why don’t we, uh, all calm down?”

“We are calm,” I answer sweetly. “We’re just trying to protect the environment.”

“And that’s very admirable.” His bald spot is shiny with sweat, and I can just see him picturing the local evening news: “Evil Principal Kills Defenseless Wildlife!” He pauses. “Didn’t you say something about an independent assessment . . . ?”

“To study the natural impact of construction,” I finish, handing him a flyer. “See? The federal hotline number is right there.”

We wait. Olivia clutches my hand, and we both cross our fingers. Behind us, the crowd grows restless.

Finally, Turner gives a long, mournful sigh. “Very well. I’m sure we can delay the final approval for a while.” He looks around, defeated.

“Omigod!” Olivia shrieks, clutching me with joy. “We did it! We did it!”

The Green Teens begin to cheer, and I feel a wave of pride sweep through me. Victory!

We’re enveloped by shouts and high-fives as the group celebrates, but I remember to turn back. “Thank you!” I tell Turner. “Really, I mean it. Thank you!”

He almost rolls his eyes, turning to go, but before he can even take a step, Olivia grabs a sign and lunges forward.

“Don’t mess with the Green Teens!” she yells, just inches from his face. Turner jerks back in shock, and the ground underfoot must be wetter than he expected, because he lands heavily on one foot and starts to slip. I gasp, but there’s nothing I can do. His foot slides forward, his body tips back, and before any of us can move, he skids ass-backward into a huge puddle of noxious liquid.

*Squelch.*

“See?” Olivia sniggers. I grab her arm to shut her up, but she just can’t help laughing triumphantly. “Wetlands. We told you so!”