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Chapter Two

Why Waneeda and Joy Marie were in Sicilee's way

There was no exhausting round of parties or events in the world of Waneeda Huddlesfield and Joy Marie Lutz this holiday season. They spent the Christmas vacation much as they spend most of their free time: Joy Marie studied, read, practised her violin and completed the special project on the Magna Carta she's been doing for extra history credits; Waneeda played video games, watched television and ate.

And now, as Sicilee searches for somewhere to repair the damage wreaked by nature and Kristin searches for Loretta and Ash, Waneeda and Joy Marie move slowly through the hallways on the first floor. Joy Marie, her hair in a single perfect braid and dressed in a grey skirt and plain white blouse, is carrying a dispenser of tape, and a box of drawing pins clacks in the pocket of her grey sweater. Waneeda, her relentlessly unruly hair pulled back into a tight bun, her sweatpants and baggy pullover

looking as though they are wearing her more than she is wearing them, is carrying a stack of flyers and chewing her last gumdrop. They move slowly, partly because Waneeda doesn't really "do" quickly, and partly because they have been at the school for over an hour, going up and down the corridors taping flyers to the walls and pinning them to bulletin boards, so that even Joy Marie's enthusiasm is starting to wane. The flyers say:



Joy Marie is here this morning because she is the co-founder, vice-president and (due to a lack of volunteers) secretary of the Clifton Springs High School Environmental Club, which has the distinction of being the most unpopular club in the history of the school. Not that this lack of popularity bothers Joy Marie. She doesn't do things because she wants to be liked; she does things because she is driven to achieve. Mr and Mrs Lutz expect a lot of her.

In comparison, no one expects much of Waneeda, and they are rarely disappointed. Indeed, it's fair to say that Waneeda could be the girl for whom the words "I can't", "But I'm tired" and "Do I have to?" were invented. Waneeda is here this morning only because Joy Marie slept over last night and was, therefore, in a position to make her come.

"Are we done yet?" Waneeda moans as they finally complete their circuit of the first floor. "I have to sit down. My blood sugar's really low."

Joy Marie gives her a so-what-else-is-new? look. Waneeda's blood sugar is always in imminent danger of collapse. "Almost. I just want to put a couple by the restrooms."

Waneeda sighs, but dutifully follows. Waneeda is not so much driven as pulled.

She shifts restlessly from one foot to the other as she holds yet another flyer up against yet another wall. "I don't

know why you bother," complains Waneeda. "Everybody who's in the club knows about the meeting. And nobody new's ever going to join."

"You don't know that," says Joy Marie. Joy Marie's nature is basically a positive one.

Waneeda's is not. "Yes, I do know that," she insists. "Everybody thinks your club is the pits." Even the über-hip kids who wear vintage clothes and drink Fairtrade coffee have stayed away from the Environmental Club the way you'd avoid a house where someone died of the plague. "They'd rather pick up litter on the highway with a toothpick than join."

"We still have to keep trying," argues Joy Marie. "They could change their minds. Rome wasn't built in a day, you know. These things take time."

"I thought time was the thing you don't have." Waneeda fumbles in her pockets, hoping to find at least an overlooked stick of gum. "I thought the end was nigh."

"Well…" Joy Marie's single braid bounces as she marches on. "You know what they say, Waneeda… It's always darkest before the dawn."

And it is certainly very dark at the moment. The club's official enrolment (larger than the number of people who actually show up for meetings) has always hovered at the minimum needed for school support and funding, but that, unfortunately, is not its biggest problem. Its biggest

problem is a greying and portly man who, besides being famous for his amusing and colourful ties, commands a great deal of authority and respect in the community. Although he likes to be seen to be politically correct, Dr Firestone, the principal of Clifton Springs High School, has never fully appreciated the club's efforts to alert the student body to the many dangers facing the planet. The hundreds of plastic bags they dumped outside the main entrance… The posters of tortured animals they plastered through the corridors… Their picket protesting the sale of soda and water on campus… All of these things annoyed Dr Firestone, but it was last year's infamous Earth Day Speech (in which Clemens Reis, co-founder and president of the club, suggested that his fellow students and their teachers were all complacent kamikaze consumers) that caused the principal to become openly critical. He said that the club, in general, and Clemens, in particular, lacked the delicacy and subtlety of the nuclear bomb.

This past November, things took a turn for the worse when Clemens began his current campaign to save the 500-year-old trees at the side of the tennis courts from being cut down to make way for the new sports centre. Clemens has written letters to the council, to the school, to the administration, to the school board, to the developers and to the local papers. More than one. Although these letters have proved no more effective than sticking a plaster

over a crack in a dam, they did manage to alienate Dr Firestone even more. "Are you aware, Mr Reis, that you're like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills and thinking they're giants?" boomed Dr Firestone, running into Clemens in the corridor. "I suggest you stop wasting the club's resources and address some real issues, not the fate of a couple of trees." Clemens said he'd see what he could do.

And then, just before Christmas, Clemens took the mike at the end of the morning announcements, saying that he wanted to send holiday greetings from the Environmental Club to the rest of the school. What he did, in fact (as the few people who actually listened could tell you), was launch into a passionate plea on behalf of the ancient oaks and the inestimable value of the natural world. "If you eradicate a species or chop down a tree, it's gone for ever," he told them. "If you destroy everything, you'll eventually end up with nothing." If there was some eloquence as well as truth in Clemens' speech, Dr Firestone failed to see it. Dr Firestone said it was a diatribe and summoned Clemens to his office for "a little chat". Dr Firestone was decked out for the holidays in a Christmas-tree tie with tiny, flashing lights on it. Clemens was wearing a T-shirt he'd made himself that featured a photograph of the threatened trees and the legend: *Where were you five hundred years ago? Where will they be next spring?* Dr Firestone did most of the chatting. "You're turning what should be an ordinary high school

club into a gang of junior eco-terrorists, Mr Reis," he accused. "You'll be setting fire to SUVs and breaking into animal labs next." Dr Firestone made it clear that if the club didn't improve both its image and its membership, the school would have no choice but to shut them down at the end of January.

"Anyway, we do have till the end of the month." Joy Marie snaps off a piece of tape and slaps it into position. "And it doesn't say anything about trees on the announcement."

Waneeda blows fluff from the Tootsie Roll she found deep in the pocket of her sweat pants. The Tootsie Roll looks as if it may have been washed. "Does Clemens know you left out the trees?" Unlike Joy Marie, Clemens isn't intimidated by Dr Firestone's threats. Clemens would argue with God, never mind a man whose tie lights up.

Rather than answer Waneeda's question, Joy Marie says, "What I was thinking was that we should do a serious recruitment. We could set up a table in the main hall … and do an announcement at the next assembly … and even go around the homerooms…"

Waneeda's expression, though slightly diluted because of the candy in her mouth, delicately balances disbelief and disdain. Joy Marie is too shy to make announcements or talk to homerooms. When forced to speak in front of a class, she turns the colour of tomato soup and talks so softly that even *she* can't hear what she's saying. "You're

going to send Clemens out to convince people to join?" Which would be like using wild bears and packs of hungry wolves to convince people to picnic in the woods. "Are you nuts?"

"I didn't mean Clemens." Joy Marie smoothes out the paper she's half fixed to the wall. "I was kind of thinking of you." Waneeda may be self-conscious about her looks, but she is less shy than an angry bull.

"Yeah, right," snorts Waneeda. "As soon as I give up my part-time job as Peace Envoy for the UN."

"I'm serious." Joy Marie cuts another length of tape. "Why not?"

"Why not?" Waneeda widens her eyes. "Well, just for openers, I don't even belong to your dumb club."

"But you *could* join." Needless to say, this is something Joy Marie has suggested before.

"Yeah, right," snorts Waneeda.

"No, really," argues Joy Marie. "I know you don't believe me, but it's really very inspirational."

Waneeda laughs. The only thing the Environmental Club has ever inspired is ridicule. "You mean besides causing public outrage."

"That only happened once," says Joy Marie. "And anyway, the point is that it'd be good for you to join."

Waneeda sighs.

Joy Marie is always coming up with things that would be good for Waneeda. Yoga. Swimming. Green

vegetables. Jewellery-making. Scrap-booking. Gardening. You'd think she was a personal lifestyle guru rather than a best friend.

"So would be being adopted by Bill Gates," says Waneeda. "But that's not going to happen either."

Joy Marie doesn't laugh. "That's not funny; it's defensive," she says, leading the way down the hall. "It wouldn't hurt you to get involved in some kind of extracurricular activity, you know. You need to get some outside interests."

As if Waneeda has any interests at all. She sighs again.

Joy Marie stops outside the girls' bathrooms. "And a little work wouldn't kill you, either." As a general rule, the only part of Waneeda that's ever seen to work is her mouth.

"What do you call this?" Waneeda waves the flyers over her head. "Chopped liver?"

"You know what I mean." Joy Marie readies the tape dispenser for another assault. "Maybe if you really involved yourself you'd have some fun."

Waneeda is about to amend the truth slightly by saying that she already has plenty of fun when something brightly orange whacks into her arm and her stack of papers falls to the ground.

"Hey! Why don't you watch where you're going, Princess Pumpkin?" screams Waneeda.

The other girl barely turns around. "Are you talking to *me*?"

"Yeah," says Waneeda. "I am talking to *you*. Look what you did!"

"Waneeda, shhh," warns Joy Marie. "Don't start any trouble."

"What do I care?" snaps Waneeda. "I hope her eyelashes fall off in her lunch. She is such a stuck-up witch."

Chapter Three

And now it's Maya Baraberra's turn to be in Sicilee's way

Meanwhile, in the virtually empty first-floor girls' room, Maya Baraberra and Alice Shimon hug each other with the enthusiasm of people who have been tragically separated by a long war. (It has, in fact, been less than two weeks since they last saw each other, and it was distance that separated them, not heavy bombing.) Alice's ethnic scarf gets caught on one of Maya's crystal earrings, and Maya's handmade backpack, heavily decorated with an intriguing assortment of iconic badges from EZLN and Che Guevara to Homer Simpson and the Sex Pistols, bangs against the sink.

"Oh, God, I am so glad to see you!" shrieks Alice, disentangling. "It was like I'd been abducted by aliens and was living with creatures with two heads who beeped. I missed you so much."

"Me too. I can't tell you how much I missed you. I mean, truly, Al, there's nothing like a week with your

relatives to make you appreciate your friends." Maya swings her backpack off her shoulder with a sigh. "You wouldn't believe how soul-suckingly horrendous it was. There were times when I felt like I'd been sent to a penal colony and would never see home again."

"Oh, I believe you." Alice slides her own backpack down her arm and sets it on the edge of the sink. "Trust me, the Shimons are a world unto themselves." She makes the face of someone who understands what suffering is. "And it's definitely not a better world."

"They can't be any worse than the Baraberras. Seriously, you would not believe the junk I had heaped on me in the name of peace on Earth this year. Really and truly." Words fail her for nearly an entire second. "Everything they give you is made by workers who are virtual slaves. And even if it wasn't, you wouldn't want it because it's, like, so uncool."

Their eyes now on the wall of mirrors behind the taps, Maya and Alice remove their make-up bags from their packs and set them in the sinks.

"How did they like the stuff you gave them?" asks Alice. "Mine hated my gifts. You should've seen them. You'd think I'd wrapped up roadkill or something." She reaches for her lipgloss. "Like my Gran? I gave her a box of those eco balls? So not only would she be environmentally friendly for a change, but she wouldn't have to spend a fortune using detergent any more? She thought they were

shuttlecocks! You know, for badminton? 'Alice,' she says, 'I'm too old for games like that.' I didn't know whether to laugh or cry."

"I know… I know… They just do *not* have a clue. If it doesn't exist in their world, then it doesn't exist. Which pretty much limits reality to going to work, shopping, and watching TV." Maya leans into the mirror, eyeing her reflection in a critical, semi-professional way. "I swear, if I'd had to listen to my cousin Petra drone on about her adventures as a cheerleader in the wilds of Vermont for one more minute I think I would have run outside screaming and buried myself in a snowdrift."

"Ditto." Alice pouts at her reflection. "I'm not saying that it's not nice to see them – we do share at least part of a gene pool, and they can be really sweet and everything – but they are *so* limited." She puts on a thin, whining voice. "*Why are you wearing that? Why did you get your nose pierced? Why are you reading about that? What do you have against this? How can you drink that tea? It smells like boiled flowers!*"

"Same thing here." Maya applies more kohl. "They act like *I'm* some kind of freak because I care about stuff. My Uncle Morty said that I sounded like one of those fanatical *environmentalists*! You know, like Clemens the Lemon? I said, 'Excuse me, but do I look like a nerd?'"

"Exactly," agrees Alice. "You just have to show a little concern or think a little differently and they get all warped."

"Two hundred and thirty-six plastic bags," says Maya. "My grandmother has two hundred and thirty-six plastic bags under the kitchen sink. I counted them."

Alice whistles. "Jumping Jehoshaphat. That's got to be some kind of record."

Maya pulls roughly at clumps of her hair. The effect of her haircut is supposed to be funky and windblown, not flat and blown over. "That's what I mean, you know? They all act like there's nothing wrong with the world. It's like Gran doesn't even know that we have an environment, never mind that it's going to be buried in plastic thanks to people like her."

"What about the food?" Alice stretches her eyes and rolls mascara on the lashes. "Did they get on your case about the food?"

"Are you kidding?" Maya shakes her head in a speculative kind of way. "It was like the soundtrack for the whole visit." She almost has to heave herself onto the sink to make certain her eyes aren't smudged. "*What do you eat if you don't eat meat? How do you get any protein? Oh, you have to try the ham, Gran's been baking it for the last 200 years.*"

"Praise the Lord for inventing fish and chicken." Alice, like Maya, is a practising vegetarian – though some, of course, might say that they could practise a little harder. "I would've starved to death or been mercilessly nagged into eating some poor cow if it wasn't for them. Because,

trust me, the Pittsburgh Shimons do not do tofu."

"The Vermont Baraberras do not—"

Maya breaks off as the door to the restroom is suddenly flung open. She and Alice both turn to see who it is.

"Talk about what's wrong with the world," mutters Alice.

"The Barbie doll made flesh," mumbles Maya.

Strictly speaking, the new arrival is neither of those things. It is Sicilee Kewe.

Although Maya and Alice are staring right at her, they don't acknowledge her presence by so much as the flicker of an eye. There is nothing unusual in this. They may live in the same country, in the same state, in the same town and go to the same school as Sicilee Kewe, but they might as well live on different planets. And rather wish that they did.

Sicilee is smiling, of course, but it is a smile that goes a long way towards redefining both loathing and insincerity.

"Sweet Mary," Sicilee says, not quite under her breath. "The dipster hipsters." And for the second time that morning, turns and flees.