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Alyssa Milano

with Debbie Rigaud

HOPE

PROJECT GO GREEN



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC S. KEYES

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This book is dedicated to all the young people
who are fighting every day to make the world a
better place. You give me hope.

—A. M.

For Bernard. And with
special thanks to Grace Gordon!

—D. R.

To Ollie, his friends and all of the kids who have
enjoyed following Hope on her journey.

—E. K.



HOPE

Project Go Green



Chapter I

“This way, explorers!” bellows the animated camp counselor in the yellow Camp Go Green T-shirt. Her waist-length braids swing back and forth as she climbs up a knobby mound of dirt to get a better view of our group.

I can’t believe we’re in the great outdoors surrounded by a real forest. Our entire grade, plus the JFK Middle School science club, just arrived here in a caravan of buses. The long ride went by faster than I expected. As soon as we stepped off the bus, we were assigned different Camp Go Green counselors and separated into groups.

My best friend, Sam, turns to me, her wide eyes

flashing with alarm. “Do you think there are any bears in this forest?” she asks.

“We’ve waited so long for this class trip,” I say sadly. “It would be a huge bummer if we all got eaten.”

Sam’s mouth drops open like she’s on her first roller-coaster ride, and I throw my arm around her shoulders and giggle.

Once our camp counselor makes it to the top of the dirt mound, head and shoulders above the crowd, she waves her arms and announces, “Welcome to Camp Go Green! I’m Ms. Gordon, your guide for this two-day stay. It’s a pleasure hosting JFK Middle School. And it’s an honor being your camp counselor.”



“Do you think ours is one of the hiking groups or one of the tour groups?” Sam whispers to me.

I glance at the groups already being led to a giant log cabin, on their way to view the camp’s indoor facilities. It wouldn’t bother me if we didn’t follow. I’m just so excited I’m in the same group as Sam and my good friends Camila, Grace, and Chloe. Most of the guys from the science club are also in the group—including my rude classmate Connor and his sidekick, Shep. But having Henry Chen here, too, makes up for it.

“She doesn’t look like the indoor-tour type,” I answer Sam, taking in Ms. Gordon’s hike-ready outfit and the sizable backpack strapped to her shoulders.

A bird trills somewhere above us, and Ms. Gordon smiles. “You hear that warm welcome, explorers?” she says, a playful glint in her eyes. “A little birdie told me you’ll make the most of this trip. Just consider this your home for the next two days.”

“Uh, does that mean we’ll be camping in the woods?” asks Connor, his voice traveling over our heads.

“Well, no, you’ll be sleeping indoors,” replies Ms. Gordon, and a few people around me—including Sam and Camila—give loud sighs of relief. Ms. Gordon holds up a finger. “But with its amazing views and all-natural construction, the Cabin is the next closest thing to outdoor living. I’ll give you a tour of our facilities soon. For now, you’ve got more bird concerts to enjoy, majestic trees to walk among, and trails to blaze!”

“Plus, bears to run from?” Sam whispers to me.

Chloe and Grace, who are standing in front of us, turn around and giggle with Sam.

“Are you ready for a hike?” Ms. Gordon shouts cheerfully.



Everyone nods or mumbles their replies, except me. I'm pumped. I can't wait to hear and see more.

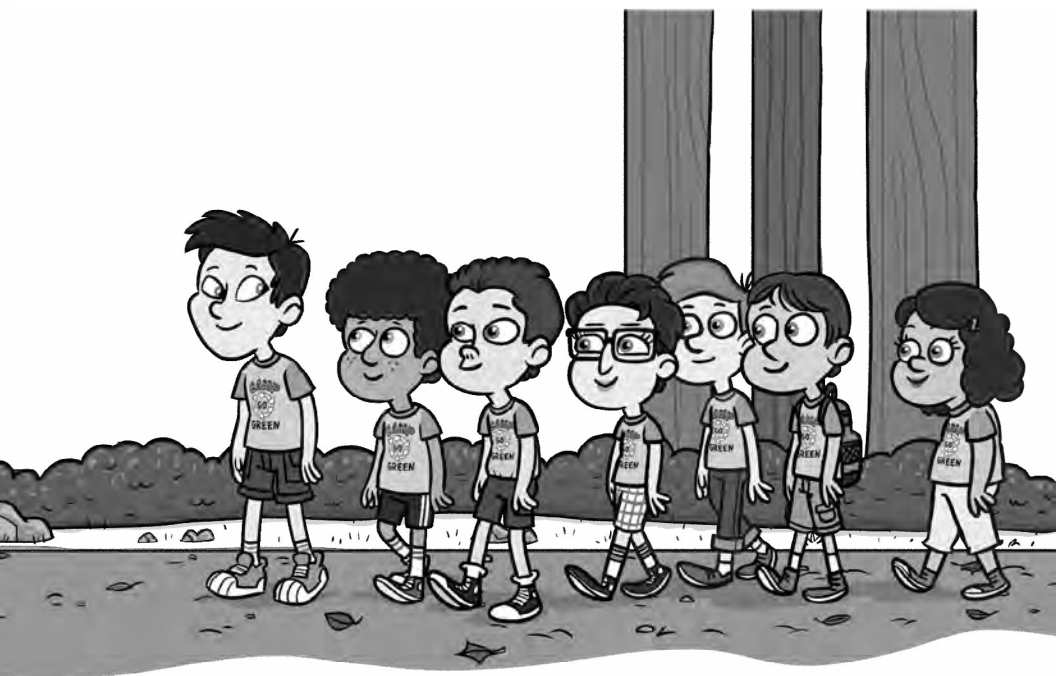
"Yes!" I shout back, not expecting to be the only one.

Thankfully, Sam and Camila echo my shout right away to cover me.

"Good looking out, guys," I mutter to them, and they giggle before shooting me matching thumbs-ups.

Ms. Gordon leads the way, and as we break through the tree line, suddenly a dense forest surrounds us on all sides. In here, the crunching sounds of leaves and twigs under our feet seem to be amplified. Even the bird calls echo!

"Aah, they're starting the concert with my



favorite song,” jokes Ms. Gordon. Or is she not joking? I can’t help but smile.

Ms. Gordon continues bellowing as we follow her deeper into the woods. “Keep an eye out for flying squirrels . . .,” she says.

As I listen closely, I begin to outpace Sam and Camila and walk past Chloe and Grace.

I get so absorbed in Ms. Gordon’s nature facts that—*whoops!* My toe hooks under a knobby tree root and . . . I trip.

And fall.

Right into a mud puddle!



I'm totally mortified. I don't even make an effort to get up. Maybe, just maybe, it's safer to stay where I am, on my hands and knees.

Snickering breaks out, and I can easily identify the loudest chuckle as Connor's. I wonder how long I'll have to pretend to be a statue before the group loses interest and just walks on by.

"Woman down, Ms. Gordon," someone alerts our camp counselor.

She whips around and spies me.

Great. Everyone's still here.

At that moment, I feel a gentle tug on my arm, encouraging me to stand. I look up at the owner of the helping hand, and my eyes meet Henry's.

"Are you okay?" he asks, raising me to my feet.

I nod bashfully. "I'm fine," I tell him.

My cheeks grow hot, and I'm not entirely sure if it's because I'm embarrassed I fell in front of so many witnesses, or if it's for another reason. A Henry-shaped reason.

"You're all right," says Ms. Gordon, who's also now at my side. "It's a good thing the earth caught ya!"

A few kids laugh at Ms. Gordon's joke, their eyes all still on me.

“Hope, are you hurt?” asks a worried Sam, who has just rushed over, with Camila, Grace, and Chloe right behind her.

“No.” I fake a chuckle. “I’m fine—not hurt at all. No big deal. Can we just keep the tour going?”

“Looks like she needs to go to the Cabin to clean off whatever *that* is,” says Connor, walking over and pointing to my leg.

I look down and see a glob of mud slowly sliding down from one knee onto my calf. Without thinking, I reach down and wipe it off, but now my hand is super muddy.

Connor takes an exaggerated step backward like he’s afraid of dirt. “Don’t wipe that on me.”

“Anyone have a tissue?” I ask, cringing. We just got here, and already I’m a mess. The only person carrying anything is Ms. Gordon. The rest of us were instructed to leave our things on the luggage carts lined up by the buses. But Ms. Gordon doesn’t reach into her backpack, and now more people are joining in with Connor’s immature snickering.

“No scrapes,” Ms. Gordon says, finishing her close inspection of me. “It’s only a little mud—nature’s spa treatment.”

“Hope, you are so lucky we couldn’t bring our phones,” Connor teases, miming like he’s snapping a picture of my muddy hand and knees.

Ugh, make it stop.

Suddenly, Henry is moving. He reaches down and scoops up a handful of mud and scrapes it across his own calf.

“You’re right, Ms. Gordon,” he says, though he’s looking—and smiling—right at me. “It’s only mud.”

I almost cover my mouth with my soiled hand but stop myself in the nick of time, my palm hovering



inches from my lips. That's when we both bust out laughing at my near miss. We keep laughing at the state of our muddy legs, and suddenly I feel all the cringe just melt away.

"Thank you, Henry," I say, still smiling.

Ms. Gordon interrupts the moment to hand me a soft and fuzzy leaf. "Try this," she says with a wink. "There are natural and biodegradable tissues all around us."

I smile and wipe my hands with the leaf. It works pretty well. The show over now, Ms. Gordon gets us all moving again. Sam, Grace, Chloe, and Camila are at my side as we follow.

Ms. Gordon heads down a rocky hill lined with thinner trees. Sam and I let go of each other's arms so that we can keep our balance trekking downhill. My hiking boots loosen a few pebbles and they tumble farther down, but I stay upright this time.

Though her back is facing us, I can tell Ms. Gordon is super excited because her head is bobbing and she's pointing this way and that as she talks. "Like with any new friend you meet, it's good to share your backstories," I hear Ms. Gordon say. "So, let me tell you about your pal the Camp Go Green



forest. Sure, today she's a preserved area. But not too long ago, this forest was going to be razed and turned into a highway off-ramp."

Sam puts her hand to her heart in surprise. A few others gasp. My friends and I edge toward the front of the group as we try to get closer to Ms. Gordon. I don't want to miss a word of what she's saying.

Ms. Gordon nods and turns her profile to us as she throws her voice over her shoulder. "Yup, imagine what that would be like. The air wouldn't be this clean, for one. Can anyone think of any other changes losing this forest would cause?"

"The animals would lose their habitat," says Henry.

“People wouldn’t get to enjoy this amazing view,” answers Chloe, looking around in awe.

“Yeah, this place is unbelievable,” another classmate exclaims.

“How did you save the forest?” I call out.

“Oh, with lots of effort,” says Ms. Gordon. “It took the entire community pitching in, collecting petition signatures all over the county, and convincing the landowners not to sell.” Ms. Gordon claps once, but thunderously. “Whoo! It was a huge victory.”

She finally stops at a small clearing and waits for everyone to catch up. From there, we can hear and see flowing water a little farther ahead. It looks like a narrow river or creek. The cooler rush of air from the water feels refreshing.

Once every last one of us is accounted for, Ms. Gordon waits for the murmuring and chuckles to fade away. Her stillness is all the hint we need. Little by little, our chatter dies down until the only sound left is the trickling of water over smooth stones.

“This river is perfect for skipping rocks, but that’s not why we’re visiting this site today,” Ms. Gordon begins. She slips her huge backpack off her narrow

shoulders and places it on a boulder. She opens the flap and pulls out mini wooden plaques. Even though they look small and lightweight, it's a wonder Ms. Gordon fit them all in her bag. There are enough plaques for each one of us in the group. "The wonderful folks in our gift shop used their handy laser printing machine to create these personalized messages."

Ms. Gordon calls out our first names, one by one, and we walk over to collect our plaque. I examine mine when it's finally in my hands, and it begins to make sense why the camp needed our email addresses before we got here.

The message reads: *We are middle school students conducting an experiment. Please email me with the location you found this. Thank you!*

"By now you've all received a plaque and read its message," says Ms. Gordon, smirking at us with a raised eyebrow. "Anyone want to guess what we're about to do with them?"

Grace raises her hand, and Ms. Gordon points to her.

"Toss them in the stream and see how far they go?" asks Grace.

“Exactly that! And not to worry—these plaques are biodegradable, so if no one finds them, they will dissolve in a reasonably short time,” explains Ms. Gordon.

We all check the wood-like material again, and this time I realize it gives when I pinch it. Pretty cool.

Ms. Gordon continues. “But until then—or until it’s found—this plaque will continue following where the stream leads, to bigger rivers, to lakes or reservoirs, and ultimately to the ocean. It’s a reminder of how our ecosystem is all interconnected. So, that means what we do in one natural setting can impact another—no matter how far away.”

We follow Ms. Gordon out of the clearing and closer to the stream’s edge.

“After dropping in your plaque, you’re welcome to dip your toes in the water,” says Ms. Gordon. “Or find what we at Camp Go Green call your sit spot. A sit spot is a peaceful place where you can sit quietly and just chill with nature. Think, observe, be still.”

A few kids remove their socks and shoes and

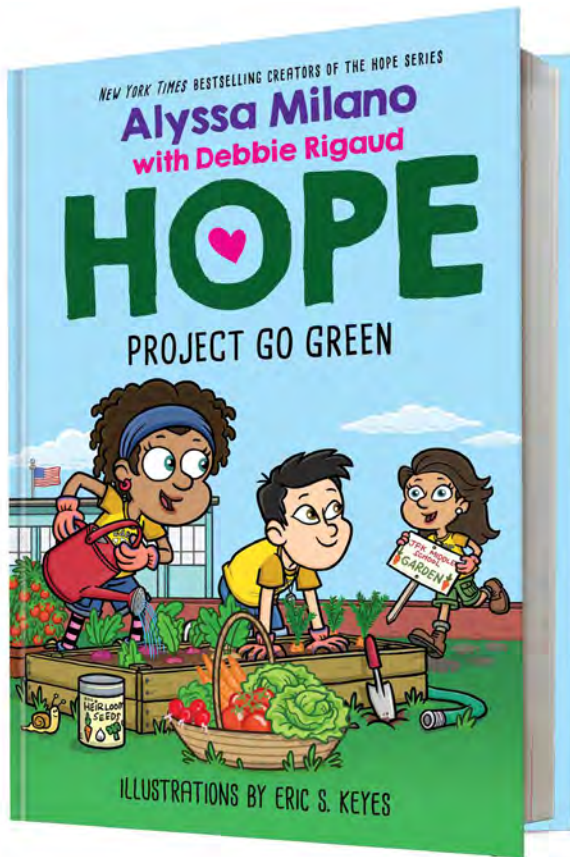
wade into the water to release their plaque. Others walk away from the group and find a less crowded area to drop it in. I hold on to my plaque a little longer, feeling the grooves of the etched message, hoping it finds someone who is excited to email me news of its final destination.



A few minutes later, I stand at the edge of the water and watch the current carry my plaque away. I wonder about the likelihood that it'll be found by a person instead of some beaver that has no idea what the Internet is.

Either way, this is such a cool start to our field trip. I can't wait to see what Ms. Gordon has in store next.

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