

*THE*  
*GIRL*  
*& THE*  
*GREEN*  
*HAT*

*RACHEL ALLORD*

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“Addie! You’ve lost something again!”

I pause in my mad dash down the hall. It’s the last few seconds of the last day of school of a year that has lasted forever. But I know that voice. If I don’t give it my attention, it’ll only keep pestering.

I sigh. Turn around.

There stands Victoria. Crisp, contained, always telling me what to do Victoria, holding out my green striped tie and looking as smug as ever.

How did she get her hands on that? I yanked the thing from my neck moments ago and thought for certain I had crammed it into my pocket. But all I find is a pound coin, some folded-up paper, and a packet of half-eaten gummy bears.

I trudge over and grab my tie.

“You’re welcome,” Victoria says.

“Thanks,” I mumble, shoving it into my pocket, this time for sure.

“Put it on, Addie. We’re still on school grounds.”

“Then let’s get out of here!” I grab her arm and try to drag her toward the door but Victoria plants her feet, refusing to run wild. She wouldn’t break a rule if her life depended on it.

“You’ll get into trouble,” she warns.

“Not if I don’t get caught!”

I zip past curly haired Oliver and horrible Peter and my Maths room that’s more depressing than a dentist’s office. My teacher catches my eye and casts a scowl.

Rats! He’s always had it in for me.

I slow to a casual stroll, hoping Sir will find his heart and give this poor American girl who’s survived her first year of British school a break, even if I am tieless and sprinting down the hall and breaking two rules at the same time. He wouldn’t be so mean as to issue me a detention on the very last day of school, would he?

Yep. He probably would.

But no voice calls me back and after a few more steps I burst out the main doors. Freedom! Six weeks with no school!

Compared to the long summers I’m used to in the United States, six weeks still seems like a rip off. If Dad and I hadn’t moved to the UK almost a year ago, I would have been done with school at the beginning of June, instead of the middle of July. But we’re here. Finally. The official start of summer. In twenty-four hours I’ll be airborne over the Atlantic Ocean, munching pretzels and watching movies from a cramped airplane seat.

I dash to the big tree in front of the school, drop my bulging backpack, and keep an eye out for my friend Parisa.

When she emerges a minute later, Victoria is beside her.

"I can't believe you'll be away for the entire summer," Parisa says when she joins me under the tree, her dark eyes mournful.

"I'll miss you," I tell her, "but I can't wait for camp!"

"So you've told us," Victoria says. "Repeatedly."

I shoot her a look. "If *you* had attended Camp Potawatomi the last three summers of *your* life you'd understand."

Victoria furrows her eyebrows. "Camp *what?*"

"Potawatomi. It's in the Northwoods of Wisconsin."

"Potawatomi," Victoria tries out the word. "Is that the name of a Native American tribe?"

I look at her, surprised. "How do you know?"

"I *read*, Addie. You should try it."

I roll my eyes. "Who needs to read about something when you can experience it?"

"I've heard about these summer camps in America," Victoria goes on. "Where you sleep in cabins and roast marshmallows on a campfire. I'd like to try it someday. Perhaps my aunt has heard of Camp Potawatomi."

I shrug. "Maybe. Camp is way up in the north, hours away from my aunt's house in Chicago."

Victoria and I have only one thing in common: We both have aunts who live in Chicago and this summer we're visiting them.

“Perhaps you and I will run into one another,” Victoria says.

“In Chicago? Doubt it. It’s too big. Not as big as London, but still, highly unlikely.”

“Well yes, unless we...” She falls quiet.

I know what she’s trying to suggest, but I play dumb. She’s hoping to get together over the summer, since we’ll both be in Chicago. I’m hoping to take a break from all things London, and that very much includes Victoria.

“While you two are in Chicago, I’ll be stuck here,” Parisa says.

“We can FaceTime,” I tell her, wishing *she* was the one with an aunt in Chicago. “I promise. But for now I better go! I haven’t packed yet!”

“You two go on ahead,” Parisa says. “I’m waiting for my sister.”

I give Parisa a great big hug, then Victoria and I head off toward the station. We wait at the curb to cross the busy street. Bright red double-decker buses, friendly black taxi cabs, and stern-faced cyclists zip past. When the green man flashes, signaling it’s safe to cross, I notice a puddle, right at the bottom of the curb. A deliciously tempting puddle...

At the curb, I leap into the air and... *Splash!* My feet plant hard. Water shoots everywhere.

“*Addie Brown!*” Victoria shrieks. “What’s the *matter* with you?”

The force of my self-made fountain surprises me too. Who knew the puddle ran so deep?

“I’m soaked!” She shakes water droplets from her fingers.

“Oh come on, you’re not soaked,” I insist as we hurry across the street.

“And you’ve ruined your shoes!”

She’s right about my Mary Janes. Poor things are drenched and done for. Oh well. Mary and Jane have grown too tight anyway and Dad promised me a new pair of school shoes before next term. “It was only a puddle,” I say. “Besides, it’s the last day of school!”

“What’s that got to do with anything!” Victoria tornadoes toward the Underground station, her stringy blonde hair trailing behind her.

I feel the teensiest pang of guilt when I spot the wet splotches on her grey school skirt. But talk about overreacting! Why would I want to get together over the summer with someone who is so uptight she can’t handle a little spray of water on a hot, muggy day? Yes we’ve sat at the same lunch table for an entire school year, but I still don’t know if we’re friends. Can you be friends with someone who drives you crazy half the time?

At the Tube station, I press my travel card to the electronic reader. The barricade flaps open and I join the throng of travelers. At the platform I spy Victoria standing behind the cautionary yellow Mind the Gap line and join her.

“Come on. I was just having a little fun.”

She narrows her pale, blue eyes. “Fun? For you maybe, but that’s the trouble with you. You only think about *yourself*!”

I blink. Shocked. Stung. That’s not true, is it?

“Well you... you...” I feel my hands clench into fists. My mind scrambles for words. Words to bite her back. “You are nothing but a bossy killjoy who needs to loosen up! Is it any wonder I need a break from you?!”

Wow that felt good. But then Victoria’s face falls, and the fire in her eyes goes out. Without a word, she turns her face away.

Maybe I went too far.

I turn around and catch my breath.

It’s her.



She's sitting on a bench. Back straight. Book in hand. Customary green hat on head.

We haven't seen each other in months, not since she helped me get home after I ran off to central London one night, all by myself. The lady is both familiar and foreign – otherworldly, like a character who has stepped off the stage and into real life. *My life.*

I wave to the friendly stranger – or is she a strange friend?  
She waves back.

How I want to talk to her. But Victoria, still facing the tracks, makes a little sniffing sound, and it dawns on me: The lady in the green hat heard everything. What must she think of me? This lady who has only ever been kind and patient and helpful.

She tips her head. Her eyes flit over to Victoria.

I glance over my shoulder at Victoria, then turn back to the lady who's now peering at her open book perched in midair. I take a step toward her when she glances up and fixes her gaze square on me, the rest of her features hidden

behind the hardback. All I can see are her eyes, those dark, steady, penetrating eyes.

She shifts her focus to Victoria. Back to me. Her eyebrows lift. *What are you going to do here?*

Right. I get it. First Victoria.

I take a big breath and rejoin Victoria behind the yellow line. Reach into my pocket and fumble for the packet of sweets. “Gummy bear?” I say, holding it out.

Victoria acts like she hasn’t heard me. She stands as stiff as a pillar and stares straight ahead at the huge advert stretched out on the dingy tunnel wall of a family having the time of their lives at the beach.

I pop a pink bear into my mouth. “What do you plan to do in Chicago?”

She’s silent. Then finally, “My aunt promised to take me to the ballet.”

I’m about to tell her she should check out Chicago’s Tap Theatre instead, but I bite my tongue. See. I can think of other people.

I dip the toe of soggy Jane over the safety line, then pull her back. “Cool. Where in Chicago does your aunt live?”

“In a suburb where the houses are massive and include a cinema room in the basement and three garages and a community swimming pool.”

“Oh.” I glance back at the lady. She’s gazing at her book but smiling slightly. Listening. Watching. I turn back to Victoria. “My aunt and uncle and cousins live in the suburbs too, but no movie theatre in their basement. Only a dart board with a wall full of holes behind it.”

Victoria looks at me, puzzled.

"My three cousins are all boys. They try to miss on purpose, I think. They're crazy like that."

Victoria's mouth purses into a half smile. "How stupid."

The ground begins to vibrate. Now to come up with an excuse to stay and talk to the lady. I'm forming a story when the train thunders up. "Oh," I say to Victoria as if I've just remembered something. "I think I forgot my..."

But when I turn around, I find the bench empty. The lady is gone.

Should I be surprised? Isn't this how it's always been? The lady in the green hat is as mystifying and unpredictable as the London weather. She can't be pinned down. Why she pops into my life when she does, I can't say. I'm just glad she does. Spotting her is like catching sight of a rainbow. You don't care exactly how something so wonderful appeared, or how long it's going to last, you just enjoy it while you can.

Victoria and I press ourselves into the carriage. As the train lurches forward, I'm still scanning the platform for the lady but there's no trace of her.

I pop another gummy bear into my mouth and offer them again to Victoria. She gives me the tiniest of grins and takes a bear.

Ten months ago, riding the Tube to and from school felt as alien as rocketing to the moon, but now it's routine. A lot can change in a year.

We pick up speed. The wind blowing in from the little window at the front of the carriage and the wide-open

possibility of summer rush over me, exhilarating me from the top of my frizzy head down to my sopping wet toes.

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Cats are experts at holding grudges. At least Earl Grey is, my downstairs neighbor's cat. All because I sat on him.

It happened months ago and it was a complete accident, and it wasn't like he was permanently damaged or anything, so you would think he would have gotten over my blunder by now.

I've tried to win over Earl Grey but he won't have it. I smile at him and consistently say hello when I enter Lilian's apartment and dangle my fingers to try to get him to play and always, always check my chair before sitting down, but he wants nothing to do with me. Every Tuesday, while Lilian and I sip tea in her cluttered kitchen, Earl Grey glowers at me like I'm a piece of rotten fruit.

Lilian's more welcoming. That evening, when I pop downstairs to say goodbye, she makes two cups of peppermint tea – not as disgusting as the regular stuff – and asks if I'm all packed and ready to go.

"Almost. Although I'm running out of room. I don't think I'll be able to fit my tap shoes and wellies in."

She holds out the biscuit tin. "Does one wear wellies in Wisconsin?"

I snag a custard cream. Good point.

"Well, I'm not going without my tap shoes." I take them everywhere. Even to camp. I never know when inspiration

might strike and Aunt Becky usually wants to watch me perform, even if it's just for her.

We chat for a while but I can't stay long. I've got stray socks to track down.

After we finish our tea, Lilian walks me to the door, Earl Grey sauntering behind us. As I'm hugging Lilian goodbye, I notice that Earl Grey is looking up at me with wide, golden eyes. His face is so squishy, his body so fluffy, like a huggable soft toy. The way he's looking up at me, maybe he senses I'm leaving. Maybe this is our moment. Before he dashes, I scoop him up and hold him close to my chest.

He yowls and writhes.

Suddenly my cheek is burning. I drop the scrambling cat. Feel my face. My fingers come away red.

"Earl Grey!" Lilian scolds. "You ghastly beast!"

He bolts out of sight.

"He scratched me," I say stupidly.

"Indeed he did. Come with me." Lilian steers me toward the bathroom and directs me to sit on the toilet seat. She wets a cloth and holds it to my cheek while I try to hold it together.

"I guess he didn't want a hug."

"Does he ever?" Lilian finds a tube of cream. "I'm sorry, darling. I'll fix you right up."

When she dabs the cut with antiseptic, I wince. The cut is too long for a simple plaster – that's what they call band-aids here – so Lilian finds a square of gauze in her first aid kit. As she affixes it to my face, Earl Grey struts by and plants himself in the doorway.

He doesn't look sorry. Not at all. In fact, the grump looks pleased with himself. Now we're even.

"Keep it clean and change the bandage when you land," Lilian says, binning the paper wrapper. "Once you're in Chicago, your Aunt Becky can take over. Do send her my love." She gives my shoulder a little pat. "Chin up. This will heal just fine and you'll have a grand time back home."

I stand and study myself in the mirror, at my brown hair untamed as ever, my watery eyes that right now seem more pink than brown, and the bulging patch of gauze stuck to my face like I've survived a war.

Not how I imagined the kick-off of summer.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Originally from the American Midwest, Rachel Allord lives in London. She's married with two adult children and has a deep fascination with London's Underground. *The Girl and the Green Hat* is her fourth novel, and the sequel to *The Girl on the Tube*. Connect with her at [rachelallord.com](http://rachelallord.com).