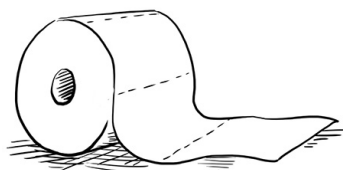


CHAPTER 1

LINING UP FOR TP AT THE END OF THE WORLD



“Your name’s Kat, right? Kat Dylan? You go to Crabtree Middle?”

Questions like that make me nervous. The boy who asked it had turned around from his place in the long line at Rite Aid. He didn’t look familiar. Didn’t matter. Did he have a bone to pick with me? Or did he want to thank me for my good works and sunny demeanor?

Probably not. That never happened.

Either way, I didn’t know him or what he wanted. So I said, “Who wants to know?” I felt sufficiently tough with that response, but then I had to tug at the dark blue handkerchief I’d turned into a facemask for my trip to the drug store.

I hated that handkerchief. It looked like something a cowboy hung around his neck.

But I didn’t hate it as much as I’d hate getting a possibly fatal disease. So, there it was, barely covering my nose and mouth. My face felt sweaty and itchy whenever I wore it. Even before someone asked if I was the real live Kat Dylan.

The boy continued. “Heard about you from the kids at school.”

Now I squinted. I didn’t recognize his face, though half of it was covered with a crisp, fresh, disposable light blue mask. Where’d he get those? Should I ask him? Or would I have to cop to my true identity first?

He was Black, a little taller than me, and thin. He wore a red sweatshirt, dark wash jeans, and a pair of retro red, black, and white Jordans that looked right out of the box.

“Like who?” I asked. “I never forget a face. You don’t go to my school.”

That was a total lie. I forget faces all the time, but he didn’t know that. I *was* pretty sure that he didn’t go to Crabtree Middle, though. I knew my classmates.

He grinned the way boys sometimes do when they think they’re smart. His eyebrows arched like he was challenging me. “You sure?” he said. “I’m in three of your classes.”

There was no way. I opened my mouth to tell him so, but he interrupted. “I didn’t get here until after everyone got sent home. I’ve seen you on the virtual classes, but it’s not like we’ve passed each other in the hall.”

Maybe he had me there. The schools had closed down nearly a month before, and I’d started taking classes over Microsoft Teams. Attendance had fallen off a cliff with the advent of Virtual Crabtree Middle. Math had less than half the students. English and History about a third. I couldn’t tell you about Health because I wasn’t going, either.

“I’m Barnaby,” he said. “Barnaby Grey.” He put out a hand for a fist bump.

I didn’t bump. “Kat,” I said. “But you knew that.”

He left the hand there for a beat, then took it away and laughed. “People said you were tough. I heard you help people sometimes.”

“Finally!” my little brother Alec said, pulling at *his* mask, which had once been a bright yellow T-shirt with a picture of Snoopy on it. It clashed nicely with the bright pink skateboarding helmet that hung from the back of his neck and the teal elbow pads he’d sported this morning. “I’ve been waiting for this to get good.

What'd you hear? It's mostly true. Stealing cars? True. Breaking into high-rises? True. Kicking butt? Sometimes true."

It was 8 a.m. on a Friday in April 2020, little more than a month after the coronavirus pandemic sent everyone home from work and school—and two weeks after all the experts had told us we were supposed to be "back to normal."

Welcome to the new normal. Online school over Grandpa Nick's spotty home Wi-Fi. People dying at Crabtree Community Hospital. People hoarding eggs, hand sanitizer, and worst of all, toilet paper.

Today, Alec and I (and our new friend—if he was a friend—Barnaby) were in line at the Rite Aid on Kirkwood. We were skipping our first class because we'd heard through the grapevine that the store would be getting a full shipment of stuff I'd taken for granted before the pandemic.

Like toilet paper. Maybe most of all, toilet paper.

The trouble was other people had heard the same thing, probably through the same grapevine. Now here we were, in a line that snaked from the cash register down the main aisle, took a left turn at home goods, veered again at the refrigerated cases, and then spanned the length of the store. Past pharmacy, into the shampoo section, and back to the entrance.

We were in the main aisle, so we'd be able to leave soon. I felt grateful. Couldn't believe I was grateful about anything at Rite Aid, but times had changed. Now I felt good about being tenth in line behind an array of Crabtree's finest.

I could do without this Barnaby guy, but I'd take it.

For one thing, we weren't squished together. The experts made it clear we needed to be socially distanced, which meant we were supposed to be standing in line with six feet between us and the person in front of us. And another six feet from the people

behind. Strips of filthy pink masking tape reached from one side of the aisle to the other. Supposedly the tape showed us where we could safely stand.

The tape next to me curled at the edges. Closer to the shampoo aisle, it'd started to come up. Did everyone pay attention to the tape in front of them? Did they buy into the idea we were all in this together and we should keep our friends and neighbors safe?

They did not. Barnaby stepped off his piece of tape toward us. I took a mini-step back. My butt collided with the person behind me, so I went back to my original spot.

Social distancing wasn't easy. Also, were these pieces of tape really six feet apart, or had someone just eyeballed it?

I leaned against my cart (last one!), which was loaded down with off-brand paper towels and TP. We'd snagged a container of antibacterial wipes, a bag of rubber gloves, and sponges. We also had a dozen eggs and a loaf of bread. Alec's skateboard, next to the cart, was piled high with paper napkins made from bamboo, for when the paper towels ran out. Hopefully not for when the TP ran out.

He also had a case of bottled water. We'd hit the mother lode.

Barnaby's haul was smaller: a roll of paper towels and a two-liter of Coke.

How'd he pack so light? Why didn't he need TP?

"Is it true?" he said. "You help people sometimes?"

Who'd he been talking to? I didn't like this. I wondered what he needed. It had to be a big enough deal that he'd approach someone he'd never met (even if we were in virtual class together) in Rite Aid. Probably he didn't need a math tutor. Were we in Math together?

I opened my mouth to ask, then stopped. This was what got me in trouble, every time. The last two times I'd tried to help people

in Crabtree, it hadn't worked out for everyone. Sometimes, even when you mean to do good things, there can be bad consequences.

"Not doing that right now," I said. It wasn't a lie. I was hardly doing *anything* now that the world was shut down.

"What?!" Alec shrieked. The whole store probably heard him. Maybe the whole town. "Since when?"

"Don't you want to hear what I need?" Barnaby asked. The eyebrows arched again, only this time it softened his face. He also did something to his tone. He wasn't quite begging, but almost. "I really need someone's help."

Of course I wanted to hear what he needed. But I said, "Not really."

If I heard more, I might get interested. Hanging out all day in Grandpa Nick's house had gotten old. If I got interested, who knew where it'd lead? The last couple times, this sort of request had led to bank robbers, killers, and kidnappers.

"She may not want to hear, but I do," Alec said, stepping in front of me and almost knocking the Jenga tower of bottled water off his board. "The name's Alec. Partner in this detective game. I'm the brains of the operations. And the good looks. Pleased to meetcha."

He stuck out his hand to shake, like a character in an old gangster flick. Alec had been watching a lot of Turner Classic Movies since the pandemic.

"Alec," I said, giving him my stock angry tone. If he was going to get involved on his own, it didn't matter if I didn't want in. Alec would screw things up, like usual, and then I'd have to save him. Like usual.

But there Alec was, hand still out. Barnaby cautiously fist bumped him.

"I'd heard Kat had a brother," Barnaby said.

“You’re looking at him, pal,” Alec said. “Let’s get down to it. What’s the rumpus?”

Did I mention all the movies he’d been watching?

“It’s my grandfather,” Barnaby said. “My mom brought us to Crabtree a couple weeks ago. We were going to live with him. When we got here, she couldn’t find him.”

“Maybe he left town,” I said. “Or he’s sick with corona?”

“He’s not at the hospital,” Barnaby said. “We can’t get into his apartment, but his neighbors don’t know anything about where he’s gone.”

“He’s gotta have a phone,” I said.

“Disconnected,” Barnaby said. “And now my mom’s got corona. We’re running out of money, and I don’t know what to do.”

The line in front of him moved, but Barnaby didn’t notice. He sounded short of breath. His eyes looked watery. I swallowed. It wouldn’t be easy to tell someone you don’t know that you’re in trouble.

“Keep talking,” I said. Maybe I’d help this kid after all. Besides, I knew a thing or two about estranged grandfathers.