

COMING SOON:

TURNABOUT

THE THIRD KAT DYLAN MYSTERY

Read on for a sneak peek . . .

“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, but that didn’t matter. Did he have a bone to pick with me? Did he want to thank me for my good works and sunny demeanor?

Probably not. That never happened, no matter how long I waited.

Either way, I didn’t know who he was or what he wanted. So I said, “Who wants to know?” As I did, I tugged at the dark blue handkerchief I’d turned into a face mask for my trip to the drugstore. It looked like something a cowboy might have around his neck, and I hated it.

But I didn’t hate it as much as I’d probably hate getting a possibly fatal disease. So it was there, barely covering my nose and mouth. Not to mention making my face feel sweaty and itchy.

The boy continued: “I think we’ve got a couple classes together.”

I squinted at him. I didn’t recognize his face, though half of it was covered with a blue surgical mask. He was Black, a few inches taller, and thin, in a faded red sweatshirt and worn blue jeans.

“I don’t think so,” I said. I knew my classmates, and he wasn’t one.

“I just started. No reason you’d know me. I got to Crabtree after everything shut down.”

Maybe he had me there. Ever since the schools closed and I’d started taking my classes over Zoom, I hadn’t been checking who was present onscreen. In general, it seemed like fewer kids were going to virtual school than had made it to in-person classes.

“I’m Barnaby,” he said.

“Kat,” I said. “But you knew that.”

It looked like maybe he smiled under the mask. “I’ve heard stuff about you.”

“Finally!” my little brother Alec said, pulling at *his* mask, which was bright yellow and had a picture of Snoopy on it. “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 in the morning on a Friday in April 2020, a little more than a month after the coronavirus pandemic sent everyone home from work and school—and about 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, patients still dying at Crabtree Community Hospital, and people hoarding eggs, antibacterial wipes, hand sanitizer, and—worst of all—toilet paper.

Today, Alec and I were skipping our first classes because we’d heard through the grapevine that the store would be getting a full shipment of everything I’d taken for granted before the pandemic, most of all toilet paper.

Trouble was, plenty of other people had heard the same thing, probably through the same grapevine. So there we were, in a line that snaked from the cash register down the main aisle, took a left turn at the aisle for home goods, crappy plastic toys, and bad clothes, veered again at the refrigerated cases, and then spanned the length of the store. Past the pharmacy, into the shampoo section, and then toward the entrance.

We were in the main aisle, which meant we’d be able to leave soon. I felt grateful—and then couldn’t believe I felt happy about anything at a Rite Aid. Especially being tenth in line behind an array of Crabtree’s finest. And this Barnaby guy.

I leaned against our cart (last available one!), which was loaded down with off-brand paper towels and TP. We’d snagged a container of wipes, a bag of rubber gloves, and sponges. We also had a

dozen eggs and a loaf of Wonder bread. Alec's skateboard was on the floor piled high with paper napkins made from bamboo (for when the paper towels ran out) and a case of bottled water.

We'd hit the mother lode. Or something. Barnaby's haul was a pack of paper towels, two rolls of TP, and a two-liter of Coke. How'd he manage to pack so light?

Barnaby decided to start the conversation again. "I heard you help people sometimes."

That I hadn't expected, and I wondered who he'd talked to. And what he needed. It had to be a big enough deal that he'd approach a total stranger in Rite Aid, which meant it was more than him needing a tutor for Spanish class.

But how big could it be? I opened my mouth to start asking questions, and then I stopped. This was what always got me in trouble. 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.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not really doing that right now."

"What?" Alec shrieked. I'm pretty sure the whole store heard him. Maybe the whole town. "Since when?"

"Don't you want to hear what I need?" Barnaby asked.

"Not really," I said. That was the truth. If I heard more, I might get interested. There wasn't much to do stuck in Grandpa Nick's house all day. If I got interested, who knew where it'd lead? I'd already checked bank robbers, killers, and kidnapppers off my list. What next?

"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 and napkins off his board. "The name's Alec. Kat's detective partner. The brains of the operation—and the good looks. Pleased to meetcha."

He stuck out his hand to shake, like a character in an old mystery flick. He'd been watching a lot of Turner Classic Movies since the pandemic started.

"I heard Kat had a brother," he said.

"You're looking at him, pal," Alec said. "What's the rumpus?"

Did I mention the movies he'd been watching?

The line moved in front of Barnaby. Barnaby went forward, and Alec joined him, leaving me to handle the cart and his board. I tried to push both at the same time, and the napkins tumbled off his board. I tried to pick them up, and the water bottles followed.

"Alec!" I called out.

"In a second," he said, not really looking back.

Annoyed, I pushed the cart into Alec. Gently. He yelped. OK, maybe not *that* gently. "Thanks for your help," I said with all the edge I could muster.

"Sorry," Alec said in a condescending tone, like I was the problem. "Why didn't you say something?" I could already feel my face getting red. I couldn't think of a reason Alec needed to survive this trip to Rite Aid. More TP for me.

Barnaby stepped in. "You want me to catch you up? Even though you don't do this right now?"

"Fine," I sighed. At least it would pass the time till we reached check-out.

"It's my grandfather," Barnaby said. "My family just moved here because we thought he lived here. But now we can't find him. Some of the kids in school mentioned the stuff you did in the fall and winter, and I thought maybe . . ."

"Maybe you came to the right place," Alec said. "Right, Kat?"

I sighed again. I'd listen. I knew a thing or two about estranged grandfathers, anyway.

A few minutes later, we paid for our goods and met Barnaby outside the Rite Aid. The line had now stretched outside. I doubted all these people would get TP and wipes. Someone was going home unhappy.

“So where are you from, anyway?” I asked.

“Huh?” Barnaby said.

“You weren’t at Crabtree Middle before coronavirus. And the fact that you’re attending class regularly when it’s all online makes you different from most of the locals. So where?”

“Arizona, right?” Alec said.

“Huh?” Barnaby replied. “Yeah. Outside Phoenix.”

“You must miss the sun,” I said. It was cloudy outside with about an 80 percent chance of rain later in the day. Crabtree in spring had a lot of that.

“Huh?” Barnaby said.

“The sun?” I said. “Phoenix is sort of known for it. You OK, Barnaby?”

He shook it off. “Fine. I just wasn’t expecting a lot of questions.”

“That’s how this works,” I said.

“Got it,” he said. “I miss Phoenix. It’s not so bad up here right now. I thought it’d be way colder than this. Of course, we’re barely outside.”

“Give it time,” Alec said. “It’ll get colder.”

I decided I’d had enough of the chitchat. “Tell us about your grandfather.”

Barnaby shrugged. “We’re looking for my Grandpa Dom. My mom’s dad. They’re not really close, but they’d been in touch. Only we got here, where he was supposed to live, and he’s nowhere. We went to the address he gave, and he’s not there.”

“Why not call him?” I said. “He must have a phone.”

“Number’s disconnected.”

“You sure he’s still alive?” I said. “How old is he? I don’t want to be morbid, but—”

“We thought of that,” Barnaby said. “Especially since the virus seems to be killing older people, right? But no obituaries online. Nothing like that. Crabtree Community Hospital won’t tell us if he’s maybe there under a different name.”

Alec interjected. “I’m assuming you did a Google search? Or your search engine of choice?”

“We did. My mom also tried to get in touch with some of his old friends she knew, guys up in Chicago. Nobody seemed to know where he went.”

The sky had a series of dark clouds glowering above. It looked like it might start to pour any minute. I decided to hurry this along. “What’s your grandfather’s name? You got a picture?”

Barnaby pulled a beat-up iPhone from his pocket, searched something on the screen, and showed Alec and me a photo of an older white guy with gray hair hardened into a helmet-like shell. He had caterpillar eyebrows and a nose that looked as if it’d been broken more than once. In the picture, the man wore a golf shirt with brown and yellow horizontal stripes on it.

I looked back and forth between the picture and Barnaby. “Send it to me,” I said, giving him my number. “I’ll also need his full name, and his age wouldn’t hurt, either.”

“You don’t look much like your grandfather,” Alec said.

“How much do you look like your grandparents?” Barnaby retorted.

I didn’t feel like answering. For the record, I look more like Grandpa Nick than I cared to admit. Mostly it’s the eyes. The man needs a haircut, and he’s fifty-some years older than I am, but when you see us, you don’t doubt we’re related.

But none of that would matter to Barnaby. And it shouldn't. "What's his name?" I repeated.

"Dominic J. Carbone," he said. "He'd be about seventy. And look, I'm telling you in advance, he had some trouble with the law. You'll see that if you Google him, but after he got out of prison, he supposedly got away from that. That's when he moved here."

He'd been in prison? I wondered if I should ask Grandpa Nick about old Dom, or if the simple act of bringing him up would land me in trouble.

I could take the heat from Grandpa Nick, but I liked to know what I was getting myself into. And I didn't even know if I was really getting myself into this. Time to make that clear.

"Alec and I'll poke around," I said. "No promises, but I'll try and figure out if this is something we can help out with."

"If we can't help," Alec added, "we know just about every cop in Crabtree. Our grandfather's the chief here. He may have some ideas."

"We've also got a contact at the Crabtree Public Library who's a whiz at hunting people down. She's helped us a lot."

Barnaby looked skeptical, but also like he was trying to decide what to say. When he said, "No cops," it seemed a little too strong. That was interesting.

Barnaby seemed to know he'd stepped in it. "But I guess I'd talk to the librarian."

"If it comes to that," I said, trying to calm things down. I suck at calming things down, but I was trying to build a skill set. "First we'll see what Alec and I can do."

"So what now?" Barnaby said. "Do people pay you for stuff like this? I don't have a lot, but I could probably come up with something."

I hadn't thought about it. All I'd come out to do today was buy TP. And honestly, this didn't sound all that hard. Alec and I were probably skilled enough to find Dom Carbone before dinner. Which reminded me that I didn't know what I was going to cook for dinner.

Maybe if it took us slightly longer to find old Dom, we could order delivery.

"For now, don't worry about it," I said. "You'll owe me one."

* * *

At Grandpa Nick's, I was on Zoom watching Ms. Gardner graph a math problem when I got interrupted by a louder than necessary cry from across the room.

"Holy monkey!" Alec yawped.

I checked to make sure I was muted and then yelled back: "I'm in class. Stop bugging me."

"Dude! I just Googled Dominic Carbone. This is him. The picture matches. And now I can't unsee what just came up."

Grumbling, I got off my bed and walked over to his side of the room (which now smelled like a combo of farts, tween boy BO, and cinnamon gum). There was at least a fifty-fifty chance I'd get there and he'd show me a meme with a Thanksgiving turkey dancing a jig.

He pointed at the screen, and I looked.

No Thanksgiving turkey. No jig. Just Dom Carbone.

I couldn't un-see it, either. Had I really signed up to find this guy?

What I read made me pretty sure I didn't want him found.

"No way it's the same guy, right?" Alec asked.

"You think there are lots of Dominic Carbones in the world? Who all went to prison?" I said.

Alec clicked on his touchpad and opened up a page of photos. We were greeted with a bunch of mugshots. The man who glared back at us had caterpillar eyebrows. And a head of gray hair shel-lacked into a helmet. The same Dominic Carbone.

Alec clicked back to the search results page. “No lack of press for this guy,” he said.

Not at all. Most of the stories came from the Chicago media in the 1990s and early 2000s. They were not the kinds of things I would want to read about my grandfather.

SUSPECTED MOB KILLER FREED ON LACK OF EVIDENCE

REPUTED MOB ENFORCER INDICTED IN 3 MURDERS

BLOODBATH: ACCUSED OUTFIT ENFORCER CARBONE
‘PULLED THE TRIGGER ON ALL FOUR,’ WITNESS SAYS

CARBONE SENTENCED TO LIFE

The last one had a subhead:

*Mob enforcer, who dodged earlier convictions, finally sentenced
for 4 killings, including Chicago cop*

“We really did it this time,” I said.

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Alec sputtered. “You’re the one who committed to finding this guy.”

“Alec! What happened to Mr. ‘Aren’t You So Bored’?”

“Two things can be true at once! You can be totally bored and also not want to find a missing mobster killer!”

I sighed. “Let’s read up on this guy.”

“OK, where do we start?” Alec asked.

“Click the article about his sentencing.”

“Really? Not the bloodbath one?”

I glared at him, and he picked the article about sentencing. Under his breath, he mumbled something about me lacking any sense of excitement or drama. I pretended to ignore him, but really I'd hold onto it and add it to my list of grudges.

The article clicked open, and I read it aloud. “Dominic Carbone, a suspected Outfit Enforcer for more than thirty years, was sentenced in Cook County Criminal Court Tuesday to two concurrent life sentences for the murders of three men last year and a Chicago police officer in 1999.”

“What year was this?” Alec said. He scrolled up.

“Looks like 2003.”

“If he got two life sentences in 2003, what would he be doing out and living in Crabtree now?” he asked. “If he is living in Crabtree, which I guess we don't know yet.”

I had him click open another tab on the browser. “Search ‘Crabtree’ with his name.”

Alec typed the words and hit return. There was a Dominic Carbone who lived—or had lived—on East Third Street, about halfway between the Kirkwood strip and the Crabtree Mall.

“Looks like he's living here,” Alec says. “Or was.” He clicked on the map. We could be at his house in about twenty minutes. After a beat, Alec said, “I know you think living in Crabtree is like being in prison, but I didn't think it needed maximum security!”

I groaned. That was horrible, even for him.

“So what now? You want to go over there? See if Loretta Mae at the library can find where he may have gone? Abandon this enterprise altogether?”

I thought it over, then said, “I don't think we should start with Loretta Mae. A guy like this is probably going to be well known to the law enforcement community in Crabtree.”

“You mean like Sheriff Dancer? He says we never call anymore.”

“Or maybe Grandpa Nick,” I said. “You know, the guy who lives with us, is a good cop, and used to be a detective in Chicago?”

“Oh, *that* Grandpa Nick. Sure. Why not?”

I pulled out my phone and dialed Grandpa Nick. I expected to leave a message, which would’ve been witty and fun, name dropping a convicted mob killer while also not raising the old man’s blood pressure. No problem. Except that he answered.

“California,” he said. “Shouldn’t you and Shortstop be doing online school?”

I had to think quick. “We are! We’re working on a project.”

“Like a baking soda volcano? Just don’t make a mess again.”

“Social studies,” I said. Because I couldn’t think of how else to bring up my next question. “Grandpa, did you ever hear about a guy named Dominic Carbone?”

There was silence on the line, and for a second I thought the call’d been dropped. Or that Grandpa Nick’d hung up on principle. After I said, “Hello?” a couple times, he responded.

“Why are you asking about that creeping crud? This one of your true crime research projects?”

“Something like that,” I said, lying through my teeth. “We’re talking about real-life Crabtree stories. I Googled Crabtree true crime, and he came up. Did you know about him living here?”

He blew out a long, low whistle. “Heck yeah. Figured it out before I even moved in. I’ve been keeping tabs on him since I got here. He used to have a place not far from the mall. I figured that guys like him don’t ever leave the criminal life unless they go to prison or die.”

“What about now? You still keep tabs?”

“Not as often. Dom’s old now. And not well. He might not have died out yet, but he’s on his way. Not that he can really go anywhere.”

“Why’s that? Is he back in jail?”

“Assisted living, California. He’s over at the Crabtree Board and Care. Same one where Nancy McCloud’s dad is living.”

“I never did get there.”

“Don’t start with Dom. I’m being for real here, California.”

“The Google stories say he got two life sentences. What’s he doing here anyway?”

“Now that’s a mess. I’ll tell you later, and we’ll clean up the truth for your report,” he said.

I didn’t say anything, so he kept going. “There any other reason for your call, California? Otherwise I’ve got to get back to it. Justice never sleeps during a pandemic and all that.”

“Nothing else,” I said, and we hung up. It was a total lie. I had loads of questions now, but if I kept at it with Grandpa Nick, he’d know I was up to something. He probably already did, but I was banking on him being too distracted to get in my business for another few hours.

And now, since I knew where Dom Carbone was, I’d only need a few hours. If I still wanted to do this job. I wasn’t sure, so I did the worst thing you can do when you’re waffling about something. I asked Alec.

“Dom’s at the Board and Care over by the mall. We could probably confirm it, and tell Barnaby in the next couple hours. Only should we?”

“What do you mean? Of course we should. Full speed ahead.”

“Dom Carbone’s a really bad guy. The kind of full-time bad guy that Grandpa Nick keeps tabs on.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that. He might really be dangerous. Like, worse than Mick and Redbeard or the Monster Gang. We’re talking a guy

who gets paid to kill people. Should we really be putting him in front of Barnaby and his mom?”

“He’s their family,” Alec said. “You feel like we can keep them from him? What would you want if you were in his shoes? Wouldn’t you want to connect with your relatives?”

“Are you kidding? I should be so lucky! I know where all our relatives are, and I wish they’d get lost!” I mean, really. Mom was downstairs, and I liked her better when she was around the world in a war zone. And she wasn’t my favorite then, either.

“So we tell Barnaby we couldn’t find him. Game over. Back to virtual school.”

That didn’t sit well with me, either. I was pretty sure we had found him—easier than I thought, even. All I needed to do was verify. Then I could make a decision about what to tell my new friend. That’s probably what I should do. I’d offered to help. I wasn’t too good for this. This wouldn’t be like Gabby Martinez. It definitely wouldn’t be like having to save Grandpa Nick.

I started bargaining with myself. I’d get to Dom, and then I’d see what I could do. If he was too crazy and creepy for words, I’d just spare Barnaby from meeting him. Maybe it would even turn out OK.

Something told me there were a million ways this could go wrong. I wondered which one it’d be.

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s skip school and go find Dom.”

to be continued . . .