

GOING VIRAL

a
socially
distant
love
story

Katie Cikatelli-Kuc

Scholastic Inc.

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

Copyright © 2021 by Katie Cicatelli-Kuc

Interior photo © Rabilbanimilbu/Shutterstock

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-338-74519-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First printing 2021

Book design by Baily Crawford

It's a Thursday in mid-March. There are teases of spring in the air, and the sun seems to be staying out just a little bit longer each day. Aside from that, though, it's a pretty average, unforgettable Thursday.

I'm walking through the hallway of my high school with Vanessa, my girlfriend. It's just after lunch, and I only have two classes left until my day is done.

Vanessa squeezes my hand. "You're still coming over after school today, right, Claire?" she asks, peering at me with her huge blue eyes.

I squeeze her hand back. "I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world."

She smiles, and even though we've been dating for almost five months, her smile is still so electric, and I can't help but smile back.

"Oh, get a room, you two," someone says behind us.

I whip around, annoyed, ready to scowl at whoever said it, but it's just Gaby. She sits between Vanessa and me in physics class, and she gets stuck in the middle of our whispered conversations all the time.

I stick my tongue out at her, while Vanessa squeezes my hand harder, laughing.

“We have a lot of homework to work on!” Vanessa says.

Gaby rolls her eyes, and I start to say, “I need a lot of help with—”

But then the loudspeaker overhead crackles to life. Everyone in the hall reflexively covers their ears as the speakers squeak and squeal. Principal Shaffier taps the microphone like he always does, the signal for everyone to settle down and uncover their ears.

“Um, good afternoon, students,” he says, then pauses. Which is a little weird. Usually his announcements seem like they start when he’s in the middle of thinking about something.

There is a whoosh over the speakers, which I realize is him exhaling deeply. Also weird. Vanessa and I look at each other, a glimmer of confusion in her eyes.

Then comes another whoosh, another deep breath, and I look around the hallway. Some students look confused, some look annoyed; some are still chattering away to each other without a care in the world.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never had to make an announcement like this before,” he finally admits.

“Spit it out!” Simon Jacobson yells. His meathead friends crack up like it’s the funniest thing they’ve ever heard. There are so many of them, and they’re all standing way too close to us, laughing so loud I don’t catch everything Principal Shaffier says. All I hear is something about “unprecedented times.”

“Will you please shut up?!” someone hisses at them.

They act all insulted, muttering to each other. Now I can hear the principal loud and clear.

But I kind of wish they’d be loud and awful again because even though I can hear what the principal is saying now, I don’t fully understand it. He’s saying something about the virus—this virus that we’ve all been hearing about for a few weeks. I’ve heard my parents talking about

what was happening in Japan, in Italy—the rising number of infections and lives lost all over the world—but it wasn't supposed to be something that could ever happen in our country, in our lives. That's what they told me, anyway.

But now it's here. It's in New York.

“We've just received word of over fifty cases of the virus in hospitals all over the city, with many more suspected, and many more awaiting positive confirmation,” Principal Shaffier says, his voice quivering a little. “Per the governor's emergency state-mandated protocol, our school will be closed for two weeks. We will be switching to remote learning, as we have seen schools in other parts of the world do. Your teachers are working hard to determine what exactly this will entail, so be sure to check your emails. In the meantime, there will be no in-person school tomorrow, in order for your teachers to prepare for the next two weeks.”

Simon and his friends start cheering and yelling, “No school tomorrow! Let's party!”

But this time a lot more people are annoyed with them. Even Fred Parris, the obligatory class clown, who seems to pride himself on how bad his grades are, yells, “Shut UP!”

Simon and his friends still look mostly insulted, but one of them, I can't remember his name, says kind of half-heartedly, “Yeah, guys, this sounds important.”

Principal Shaffier continues, “I'm going to repeat myself because I know this is a lot to process. We are hopeful that over the next two weeks we can adequately clean and disinfect and install proper filtration devices throughout the school. During that time, you will still be responsible for your assignments and projects just as you are now. It is strongly encouraged that you stay home and isolate in lockdown with your family.”

A flurry of whispers erupts around me. Even Simon Jacobson doesn't have a clever joke to make in this moment.

"This is not just an order from me, but from the governor as well," Principal Shaffier goes on. "This is not a snow day; this is not a drill. This is a pandemic, a very serious situation, and I know you will all do what you can to ensure that we can return to school and normal life as quickly as possible."

I look around, but everyone seems as confused as I feel. Vanessa squeezes my hand again, and I realize one of us is shaking.

"Your parents and guardians have been notified via email, text, and phone call about the situation, tomorrow's school closure, and today's early dismissal," Principal Shaffier informs. "Many of them could be receiving similar news from their employers about staying home and working remotely from their offices for the next two weeks as well. Be safe, get home quickly, and we'll see you all in two weeks."

"What early dismissal?" I say to Vanessa. But everyone else around me is talking, and my voice is almost lost in the roar of the crowded hallway, a mix of excitement and confusion. Some students are cheering and laughing, but most look like I feel, as if they're also still processing what they just heard.

Vanessa looks at me, puzzled as well, and says, "Yeah, I guess the day is over now. I'm going to head to my locker. I'll meet you by your locker in a few?"

I nod, but I don't move.

"Hey," Vanessa says, gently tugging on my hand, and I try to snap out of my daze. She does it again, then guides me over to my locker. "I'm going to go pack up whatever I might need for the next . . . gosh, two weeks. I'll come back in a few minutes and we can walk to my place together?"

I look at her, but it's like my mouth has forgotten how to work.

Vanessa gently touches my face, makes my eyes meet hers. "It's going to be okay, Claire. Just get your stuff together, all right?" I must have nodded, because Vanessa looks satisfied. "I'll be right back."

I watch her go, then turn back to my locker and open it. But it's like I've never seen the things inside it before. I stand there, looking at nothing, and I get jostled by two girls. One has her turtleneck sweater pulled up over her mouth and nose. She says something to me, but I can't hear her, and I don't recognize her with half her face covered. Her friend gives me an apologetic look, but they're swept down the hallway with the rest of the crowd.

When Vanessa comes back a few minutes later, I'm still standing in front of my locker, digging through piles of crinkled papers, trying to figure out what I might need for the next two weeks.

"Babe, do you need some help?" she asks, looking at me sympathetically.

I look at her, her wavy brownish-reddish hair in a neat ponytail. Her black flowered dress is clean and unwrinkled, and even her boots are tied perfectly.

She doesn't wait for me to answer and steps forward. She starts pulling textbooks and notebooks out of my locker and putting them in my backpack. I watch her, and then I finally speak. "How are you so calm?"

The hallway is mostly emptied out now, so she actually hears me this time.

She turns to me, zipping up my backpack. "Freaking out won't do anything, ya know?"

I nod. Of course, she's right. She's always right.

She hands me my backpack. "Ready to go?"

I nod again, because it seems like that's all I can do.

* * *

Vanessa and I hold hands on the walk to her apartment. She's quieter than usual, and I'm still having trouble speaking. Trouble thinking. Every once in a while, she says something, about how she's glad she cleaned up her bedroom desk last week, how she's glad her desk chair is so comfortable.

But the principal's words are still echoing through my head.
Lockdown, pandemic, isolate.

The sidewalks are bustling with other students, with other people, and it's almost like a normal day, except that we're out of school two hours early. I keep hearing snatches of conversations. All anyone is talking about is the virus and the lockdown.

"I wish I had gone to the grocery store yesterday," I hear a passerby say. "I definitely don't have enough food to last two weeks."

"Doesn't matter. Shelves are empty," another responds.

"Can't find hand sanitizer anywhere either," someone else chimes in.

My head buzzes, trying to understand everything I'm hearing around me.

When we're almost at Vanessa's apartment building, something occurs to me, and I finally speak. "Wait, Vanessa, if we're supposed to stay home, in quarantine or lockdown or whatever . . . should we be hanging out right now?"

Vanessa smiles, then scrunches up her face as she thinks about it. "I mean, we've already been together at school. What difference will a few more hours make?"

I nod, agreeing with her logic. But something else is bugging me. "What about after today? When can we see each other again?"

"You heard the principal," Vanessa says. "We'll stay home for two

weeks. But we can still see each other on video chats. And look at the bright side: I bet this will give you more time to think about the schools you want to apply to!”

“Right. College stuff. Just what I want.” I try to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, but I don’t think it works, because Vanessa gives me a dirty look.

“And just think,” she says, unlocking the door to her building, “two weeks of no school lunches, no rushing to classes, and no dealing with the annoyingness of daily high school life.”

That’s true. A couple weeks away from school might do me some good. I could finally update my Babble account, this app where people can post book reviews and even share their own original stories with others. I’ve had it for so long that it still has my original screenname, Clarissareads—a pseudonym my mom came up with when I was younger to protect my identity. I’m actually kind of looking forward to it now.

“I guess you’re right,” I say.

But Vanessa doesn’t hear me. She’s looking at something on her phone as we walk up the stairs.

My phone! Suddenly, I realize that I haven’t checked it since before Principal Shaffier’s announcement. I wonder if my parents have tried to get in touch with me at all. If they’ll be working from home too. That would mean all three of us home at the same time, together, for two weeks. Together. In our tiny Brooklyn apartment.

I shake the thought from my head and pull my phone out of my back pocket. Oops. Eleven missed calls, and a bunch of text messages. A whole bunch of text messages. Almost all from my mom, and she’s freak-ing out. Big time.

Uh-oh.

Mom:

C, I heard your school is getting out early and will be closed tomorrow. I'm heading home now too. When are you getting home?

I'm home, where are you?

Why aren't you answering your phone?

Your dad hasn't heard from you either.

Claire, pick up your phone!!!

Dad:

Claire, where are you? Mom is really worried.

Call your mother.

I'm on the third floor, Vanessa's floor. I don't even remember walking up here.

She's standing in front of the door to her apartment, keys in one hand, reading something on her phone.

"Vanessa, I think I need to—"

"Claire, maybe we shouldn't—"

I take a breath and wait for her to go first.

"Maybe we shouldn't hang out right now," she says quickly. "My parents left work early and are both picking up Lucy from school, and then coming home."

I nod, suddenly feeling like I want to cry. "Yeah, I think my mom is pretty freaked. I should head home."

"I understand."

And then we just look at each other.