

VACANCY

K. R. Alexander

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 Alex R. Kahler writing as K. R. Alexander

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 978-1-338-70215-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

First printing 2021

Book design by Baily Crawford



“You know what Saturday is, don’t you?” Rohan asks.

My stomach twists with fear and excitement.

“Of course we know,” Mira says. Despite the crowded lunchroom, her voice is soft. She looks down at her tray while she says it, her dark cheeks flushing in embarrassment. “You haven’t stopped talking about it all month.”

Rohan grins at her discomfort. Mira’s right—Rohan hasn’t dropped the subject since the end of November. Now, a few days before winter break, it’s practically all he can talk about.

“And I’m not going to stop talking about it now,”

he says. He pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, his brown eyes gleaming with excitement. “This is our one chance to *finally* be among the cool kids. *No one* has ever completed the Dare. All we have to do is spend one full night in the Carlisle Hotel. That’s it. If we do it, we’d be the most popular kids in Gold River, like, ever.”

Mira sighs. This is the same thing he’s said every day since the word spread that the seventh-grade Dare would take place this Saturday at ten. Everyone who wanted to be anyone was expected to show up and test their bravery.

“I don’t know,” Mira mutters.

Rohan turns to me.

“What about you, Jasmine?” he asks. “Can I count you in?”

I look to Mira. She and I have spent countless nights talking about the Dare. The truth is, I don’t really mind the idea of staying overnight in the Carlisle Hotel; if I’m honest, I want to know why I’ve always felt drawn there. But Mira is scared to death of it. Unlike me, she grew up here, which means she’s grown up with all the scary stories associated with the hotel. Rumors that it never reopened because a

bunch of people had mysteriously died there. Or that it's haunted. Or cursed. That it still craves human souls and will snatch up anyone brave—or stupid—enough to step foot there.

That's the whole point of the Dare: Around here, kids believe that if you stay a full night, you'll never be allowed to leave.

Despite my dreams drawing me in, I'm still not sure. It could be dangerous. Mira, though, is pretty convinced—she most definitely does *not* want to go in. Ever. There's no way to answer without upsetting either of my new friends, which is the last thing I want to do.

“I'll go if Mira goes,” I reply.

I hope it's the right thing to say, but it's clear from the glare she shoots me that it isn't.

Rohan whoops with glee.

“See! You can't chicken out now, Mira. If the *new girl* is willing to do it, you have to as well.”

She doesn't look at either of us, just stares at her tray of food.

A second later, she flinches as something smacks the back of her head.

I look over to see a fry drop to the floor.

She grumbles, but she ignores it. She always ignores it. And yet, kids still pick on her, maybe because she tries so hard to pretend the bullying doesn't exist.

Rohan lowers his voice and leans in.

"Come on, Mira," he says. "We need this. You know we do. If we do this, maybe they'll leave us alone. I'm not saying I believe it will make us popular, but it might make us *safe*. I don't want to keep dealing with this all through high school. You know it will only get worse."

Mira keeps staring at her tray.

"How do you know?" she asks.

"Because everyone—"

"No," she interrupts. "How do you know we'll make it the entire night?"

Rohan reaches across the table and takes her hand. "Because the three of us are a team. We can do anything," he says. He looks at me when he says it, and it makes my heart warm to know he thinks of me as a true friend, even though I've only been here a few months. I didn't have any friends like that back in Florida.

Another fry flies past us, just barely missing my ear. Behind us, a table of kids erupts into laughter.

I glance over my shoulder to see Bradley among them. Most of the kids look away when I glare at them, but not Bradley. He acts like he runs this town, and I guess in a lot of ways he does; his dad is the mayor, and he lives in a manor nearly as big as the Carlisle. This is something he points out all the time, whenever I'm in earshot. Somehow he knows I live in a tiny house on the outskirts.

Bradley isn't scared or ashamed of anything. He stares right back at me and sticks out his tongue.

My hands ball into fists. Ugh. I wish I could show him.

There *is* a way I could show him.

I look back to Mira and say, "All I want to do is wipe that smug smile off Bradley's face. I don't know why he's such a jerk to us."

Without missing a beat, Rohan points to himself. "Band geek." Then to Mira. "Mathlete." And me. "New girl." He shrugs. "We've basically got targets painted on our backs."

"It isn't right," I say. It's not that I was popular in Florida—honestly, it was the opposite. So far, Rohan and Mira are the best friends I've ever had.

But the fact that we're being picked on, let alone by someone as boring as Bradley, makes my blood boil. I thought these tourist towns were supposed to be friendly to everyone, but I guess there are mean people everywhere.

"Of course it isn't right," Rohan says. "But there's not much we can do to change it. Some kids are meant to be bullies, and some are meant to be picked on. It's like the natural order or something."

"Don't tell me you actually believe that," I say.

He shrugs again and goes back to eating his sandwich.

"Of course I don't believe it," Rohan says. "But that doesn't matter so much when people like Bradley do. The only way we're going to change things is to make him realize we aren't his victims. And we do that by proving we're braver than he is. We do it by staying overnight at the Carlisle."

Mira groans as another fry lands on her sandwich. This fry definitely had a bite taken out of it. She pushes her tray forward and stands.

"I'm not hungry anymore," she says. "I think I'm gonna go to the library until recess."

“Just promise me you’ll think about it,” Rohan pushes. “We can do it together. You don’t have to be scared.”

Mira bites her lip. “I’m not scared,” she says after a moment. “I just . . . it feels wrong. Like we’re playing into their game. Besides, you know it’s illegal to step foot on the Carlisle property. What if we got caught?”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” he says.

Something smacks into the back of my head. I reach back and pull a fry out of my curls. Anger burns inside me, but I don’t look back to Bradley. I don’t want to let him know he gets under my skin.

The words leave my lips before I can stop them, before I even realize I was going to speak them: “Me too,” I say. I lock eyes with Rohan. “I’m in. But no pressure, Mira. Rohan and I can do it alone if you don’t want to.”

“I’ll think about it,” Mira says with a sigh. She picks up her tray as she stands to leave. “I just don’t know if being popular is worth doing something like this.”

“It will be fine,” Rohan says. “It’s just one night. The stories are just stories—I bet there are some high schoolers hanging out at the hotel trying to scare us

off. Nothing *bad* ever happens. Kids have been doing the Dare for years, and no one's died."

Instantly, my dreams flash into my mind. Walking down the long, flickering white hallway. The imposing door at the end.

The terrible fate behind it.

Maybe Rohan is right. Maybe no one new has died staying overnight at the Carlisle.

At least, not yet.