

The title 'FOLLOW ME' is centered on the page. The word 'FOLLOW' is on the top line and 'ME' is on the line below it. Both words are in a large, bold, black, distressed font. The text is surrounded by several dark, irregular splatters of varying sizes, some of which overlap the letters.

K. R. Alexander

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“I’m getting closer,” she says, her voice echoing around the room. “I’m going to find you, Tamal. I’m going to get you!”

I squeeze my head to my knees because if I can’t see her, she can’t see me, and I’m already as hidden as I can be up here, tucked away behind the moving boxes and covered with a blanket that had—only moments ago—been wrapped around my great-grandmother’s old rocking chair. It’s the perfect hiding place. But I can’t convince myself it’s good enough to avoid her.

The floorboards creak.

Inches away from my hiding place.

I don't peek.

I know if I do I'll see her feet under the gap in the blanket.

I know if I do, she'll find me.

I try not to breathe. Try not to move the slightest bit.

The floor creaks again.

She's moving away.

I let out a sigh.

"Gotcha!" she yells, tossing the blanket off me.

"Aww," I moan. I collapse back on the carpet and look up at my new friend Lela. Even though my family just moved here, we're already fast friends. It helps that she was the first person I spoke to my first day of fourth grade. It also helps that she really wanted to check out my house.

She giggles at my look of defeat. "That's no fair," I say. "I totally saw you peeking when I went to hide."

"Did not!" she says. Her hands go to her hips. "You're just angry that I found you first. I still have to find Max. Did you see which way he went?"

I open my mouth to tell her that he isn't up here—I saw him going toward the kitchen when we ran off to hide—but catch myself. Her smile widens.

“Nice try,” I say.

“Not even a little hint? This place is *massive*.”

She’s telling me.

We’ve been in our new house a whole week, and I still haven’t memorized the layout. There are at least a dozen bedrooms and as many bathrooms, and there are three whole stories to explore. Not including the basement—not that I’d ever go down there unless Mom made me go do the laundry. The mansion is monstrously large, but somehow costs the same as our two-bedroom condo in New York. I guess moving to the country has its perks. We get to stay in a sprawling mansion.

“Fine,” she says when I shake my head. “I’ll find him myself, then. He’s a lot better at hiding, though, so it might take a while. You have to stay here and . . . unpack as punishment!”

She winks, then turns on her heel and runs off down the hall.

I try not to take her remark personally. I mean, I barely know her or Max—I just met her at school on Monday—so I’m still getting used to her brand of humor. It’s November, which means they’ve already

been in school awhile. I'd honestly been terrified that I wouldn't make any friends, but the moment I showed up in class, Lela walked right over to me, Max beside her, and introduced the two of them.

"You must be the kid who moved into the manor house," she'd said. "Welcome."

And really, they were the only kids who *were* welcoming. Pretty much everyone else in class ignored me. I didn't know if it was because of the color of my skin or the fact that we'd moved into the biggest house in town, but it was unsettling. Lela and Max, though, didn't seem to care about any of that. We played together and swapped stories all through recess, and after school that first night, we went to the park until dark. Max's mom even drove me home, which was super kind, since my house is at the top of the hill and surrounded by woods.

Lela and Max had come with, and the moment we reached the house, Lela gasped in awe.

"Wow," she whispered, then looked at me. "I bet it's even cooler on the inside!"

Which, I guess, seemed like more than enough reason to invite the both of them here for game night.

Truth be told, I think they're both just excited to get to explore the house. Apparently, it's sort of a mystery to the kids in town. I'm just grateful for the company—we've barely been here a week, and the massive empty hallways and enormous rooms feel incredibly lonely, no matter how loudly my parents blare their music.

I stand by the door, listening to her run from room to room, calling out Max's name. It makes me smile. Even though we just met, I can tell that the three of us will be best friends. Which is good, because my parents were terrified that I'd have a hard time adjusting out here. If I ignore the strange looks I get from some of the other classmates, I'd say I'm doing a good job.

I think I'm having an easier time adjusting out here than I did back in NYC.

There, I didn't really have any friends. I didn't play sports, and I wasn't cool or smart enough to be in any of the clubs, and my school didn't have a band program until fifth grade, so I couldn't even play an instrument. Which just meant I spent a lot of recesses on my own. And weekends.

Hearing Lela wandering down the hall, singing

out “Oh, Maaa-aaax” as she searches for him, makes me smile. But then I remember that I’m supposed to be unpacking, as punishment for her finding me first, so I head back into the room and peel the tape from one of the boxes. Nothing but dishes inside. Ugh. This was supposed to be down in the kitchen. Two floors down.

I pick up the box when I feel it.

A tingling on the back of my neck. A cold breath. Someone watching me.

“He’s not in here,” I say to Lela. “I already told you.”

I glance up.

Toward the standing mirror propped in the corner.

I can see all the way to the end of the hall.

To where a girl stands, clutching a teddy bear.