



K.R. Alexander

Author of *The Collector*

# the Fear Zone

Whatever you're afraid of—it's coming to get you.

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Scholastic Inc.

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For those brave enough  
to face their fears



PART ONE  
the dare

# April

**“Hey, give that back!” I yelp.**

Andres grins, which looks really creepy since he’s wearing fake vampire fangs for Halloween. He doesn’t hand back the folded piece of orange paper he’s snatched from my locker—instead he takes a step back and waves it while other costumed kids walk down the hall around us. He’s been my best friend since sixth grade, and even now, two years later, he sometimes acts like my little brother. My very annoying little brother.

Andres starts opening the folded letter.

“Come on, give it back.”

Andres shakes his head, still smiling, unfolding the note slowly.

Honestly, I have no idea what the note is, and I don't want Andres to be the first to find out. Maybe it's from a friend telling me about a last-minute Halloween party. Or maybe it's from my archnemesis, Caroline, telling me I look ugly in my black cat costume. It wouldn't surprise me. She's gone from good friend to enemy ever since last year.

I feebly snatch at the paper one more time, but Andres dances back a step. The page is almost entirely unfolded now.

He reads it to himself. His smile slips.

"What is this?" he asks. "Some sort of joke?"

He turns the paper over, and I read what's written in messy paint on the other side.

**MEET IN THE GRAVEYARD.  
TONIGHT. MIDNIGHT.  
OR ELSE.**

"Huh?" I ask. I grab for the paper again. This time he lets me have it. "Who wrote this?"

Andres shrugs and leans against the locker beside mine.

“Maybe it’s a prank?” he says.

I keep rereading the note. I don’t recognize the handwriting. It’s not Caroline’s, that’s for sure. I don’t think I have any other enemies at Jackson Middle School.

Do I?

I want to crumple up the letter, but when I look at it again, chills race down my spine. Those two words: *Or else.*

Or else *what?*

“It has to be a prank,” I reply. “A Halloween scare. I bet some kids from the high school are going to be there to scare us or something.”

It wouldn’t surprise me. Kids in our town love Halloween, and I’ve heard a bunch of stories about high school kids taking the scares too far. Dressing up as monsters and running after little kids. Throwing pumpkins on cars. Apparently, years ago, a kid even went missing while playing hide-and-seek in the graveyard, and wasn’t found until the next morning.

I shudder and crumple the note, tossing it in a

nearby trash can. Whatever this is, I don't want any part in it.

"Come on," I say. I shut my locker and zip up my bag. "Let's go. I think Mom finally brought all the Halloween candy out of hiding."

"You had me at *candy*," Andres says. He takes my arm, and together we walk down the hall and out of the school. But no matter how loudly we talk about other things, I'm haunted by the feeling:

Someone wants me to be at the graveyard.

At midnight.

Someone wants me to be afraid.

# Andres

We walk down the halls of Jackson Middle School and all I can think about is who left that weird note in her locker. Caroline? I could totally see her doing something like that, but it seems too . . . I don't know, too obvious. Caroline's more the type to spread nasty rumors than leave creepy notes.

I should know.

Ever since last year, Caroline has seen me as an enemy too. Which bites, since Caroline and I used to be friends when we worked in the drama department together.

I can tell April's freaked out—and I don't want to freak her out any more. So I don't tell her that I got a

similar note in my locker. Only, my note wasn't as scary. It didn't threaten me. It just said:

**MIDNIGHT. GRAVEYARD.  
PREPARE TO BE SCARED.**

Which makes me think this is all some elaborate prank being played on the eighth graders rather than a vengeance thing by Caroline. Either that, or it's some sort of party.

I plan on going either way. If it's Caroline trying to be scary, I *have* to see her fail. And if it's a party, I don't want to miss out.

I do what I can to cheer up April as we walk to her house. Pretty much everyone we pass is in costume. There are the usual zombies and mummies made of toilet paper, the costumes kids put together last minute. Others have clearly put a lot of thought into it. I pass by a pirate with a squawking stuffed bird on his shoulder. I nearly jump back when I see he has a plastic shark eating his leg. A very realistic shark.

Our town goes all out on Halloween night, and this year our trick-or-treat is going to be huge. They've



closed down all of the main street downtown and set up stalls with vendors giving away free candy and hot cider, and April's house is right around the corner. We're going to have *tons* of visitors. I can't wait. April no longer seems as enthusiastic.

"We're still on door duty, yeah?" I ask.

She nods. Clearly, she's still thinking about the note.

"Mom is taking Freddy out tonight. It's his first trick-or-treat."

"Cute," I say. "Just means we get to eat all the candy ourselves!"

She smiles, but I can tell her heart isn't in it.

"It's nothing," I say. I nudge her. "Just some kids playing a prank. They probably didn't even know it was your locker. I bet it was random." I have to stop myself from saying, *I bet everyone got one*, because then she'd ask if I got one, and I know that wouldn't end well.

She half smiles at me; it's not convincing.

"Look at that!" I point at a nearby yard. "So cool."

The yard has been completely transformed into a horror scene. There are open caskets with moving skeletons inside and giant cauldrons filled with smoke

and green light. Animatronic bats flap around on the front porch, and fabric ghosts hang from the trees, billowing in the breeze.

“Whoa,” she says. “They must have spent a bunch of money.”

One of the standing caskets opens as we pass.

With a terrifyingly loud giggle, a clown with a giant red smile pops out, his hands raised to grab us.

April yelps and jumps back, nearly knocking me over. I catch her before she tumbles off the sidewalk into traffic.

“It’s okay!” I say. “It’s fake!”

We pause there for a moment, staring at the mannequin as it angles back into the coffin and the door shuts. April’s hand is on her heart and her breath is fast. She stares at the closed casket with wide eyes.

“Why?” she gasps. “Why does it always have to be clowns?”

I squeeze her shoulders. “Because everyone’s afraid of clowns. Even clowns are afraid of clowns. It’s, like, human nature or something.” Even though I know that’s not the reason *she’s* scared of clowns, I would never bring it up. There are certain things that we don’t talk about, and *clowns* are one of them.

“But you aren’t scared of them,” she says. She doesn’t take her eyes off the casket. “You aren’t scared of anything.”

“Not true,” I say. I start walking—there’s another group of kids coming up behind us, and I don’t want her to be near when the clown springs out again. “I’m terrified of sharks.”

“We live in Iowa,” she replies. “There’s literally no way to be afraid of sharks here. Unless you go to the aquarium or something.”

“You tell that to five-year-old me, who refused to take baths for a year because he watched a shark documentary.”

April chuckles. Phew. At least she’s no longer thinking about the note.

“Scared of a stupid yard decoration, April?” someone calls from behind us.

I grimace before I even look back.

Of course. Caroline.

“Just keep walking,” I mutter under my breath.

April doesn’t. She stops and turns around, her hands on her hips.

“I wasn’t scared,” she says. “Just surprised.”

“Please,” Caroline says. She steps up to us and

sneers. Which is super effective, since she's dressed as a green wicked witch, complete with a long warty nose and black lipstick. She eyes April up and down, and the sneer widens. Oh no. "What are you dressed as, anyway? A scaredy-cat?"

Caroline's two friends—Lia is dressed like an angel, Joann a devil, which seems a little too appropriate—cackle with laughter.

"Good one, Caroline," Angel says. "Scaredy-cat."

"More like scaredy-*fat*," Devil replies. "Look at her."

They all start laughing and point at April's costume. It's a simple costume, but it works—a black T-shirt and jeans, a black tail, ears, and painted whiskers. She was proud of it when we did her makeup this morning. Now she practically deflates.

Fat jokes. How creative.

Anger fills my chest with heat.

"This coming from the girl who finally dressed as her true self," I say, looking between the devil girl and Caroline.

Caroline's laughter cuts short. She glares at me.

"What are you supposed to be, anyway? Aren't vampires supposed to be pale?"

I roll my eyes. Who says vampires can't be Latinx?

"Wow," I say. "Ugly *and* unoriginal. That costume really does suit you. Or is today the day you finally took your costume *off*?"

Caroline says something under her breath that I know is insulting, but I don't hear it. I've already turned and taken April by the arm. Together, we cross the street and continue walking home. Thankfully, Caroline and her goonies don't come after us.

"You didn't have to do that," April says when we're a block away.

"What, defend my best friend?" I shrug. "I'm not going to stand around and listen to ignorant people insult you."

"They're going to come after you now," she says. And maybe I was wrong before. Maybe clowns aren't the things that scare April the most. Maybe it's bullies like Caroline.

"Whatever. I'd like to see them try."

"You wouldn't," she whispers.

I squeeze her arm again. Last year, Caroline went from being one of April's best friends to her worst

enemy. It seemed to happen without any warning. We hadn't heard from Caroline all summer break, and when she got back to school, she was just . . . distant. April tried to connect with her, but Caroline lashed out, saying she didn't need friends like April. Since then, Caroline has made it a point to be as mean to April as possible, no matter how much April once tried to be her friend. Sometimes she takes it too far. Lately, it seems like whenever Caroline sees April, she has a new, cruel name thought up for her.

If anything is evil incarnate, it's her.

"Don't worry about me," I say. "Or her. Come on! It's Halloween. Let's go stuff ourselves with candy and dance to terrible pop music."

"I don't think I want any candy," April says.

I sigh.

"We can still dance around like idiots?" I say hopefully.

She smiles—this time, for real.

"Yeah, we can."

I take her arm and do a stupid little dance to make her giggle before we set off toward home.

I feel like I'm being watched.

I turn around, thinking that maybe it's April, starting daggers at my back.

But there's no one there.

Just that clown still popped out of his casket,  
reaching.