

A Secret Invitation

3:29:58.

3:29:59.

Rrrrrriinnngg! 3:30. Spring break had begun.

I bolted out of Hurston Middle School into the bright Brooklyn sun. As I reached into my backpack for my shades, I found a piece of bright green paper with a weird message printed on it:

ZWA YZT OZG OZAL EX

ZCO MEZLE ARN ZDET ECTI VEZTRI CKS

ZME ETZME ZBE HIN DZTH EZMON UMENT

ZINZ THEZPA RKZT OMOR ROW

ZATZEX ACTLY ZTWE NTYZO NEZMIN UTES

ZAF TERZT WOZOCL OCK

ZKE EPZTH ISZNO TEZTO PZSE CRET

I knew it was a code, and I knew I'd figure it out soon. My friends don't call me Alex "Code King" Fernandez for nothing.

Okay, I admit it. I was totally stumped at first. I studied the note and noticed it had a lot of Zs. I had a hunch this fact would be important in solving the code.

I stared at the first few words and thought about all the code-cracking tricks I knew.

ZWA YZT OZG OZAL EX

What would happen, I wondered, if I split up the letters in a different way? On my first try I got:

ZWAY ZTOZGO ZALEX

The last word looked very familiar. Then it hit me. Except for the Z, *ZALEX* was my name.

I guessed that all the Zs were nulls. Those are letters that code experts stick into a code just to fool people. I crossed out all the Zs in the first line and copied down the leftover letters:

WAYTOGOALEX

When I put a few spaces between these letters, I figured out that the first line said, "WAY TO GO ALEX." I had cracked the code!

Can you figure out what the rest of the secret message on page 1 says? Remember, first cross out all the Zs. Then copy down the rest of the letters in order and figure out where the spaces should go between words. *Hint:* The person who wrote the coded message put the letter Z before every word.

The answer is on page 99.

The next day, I followed the note's instructions and went to the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument in the park.

"I'm here!" I whispered, glancing around. I waved the green note in the air. "I cracked your code!"

"Aha! I suspected this was one of your tricks, Alex."

I turned and saw Jamal.

"Jamal!" I said. "Did *you* send me—"

I stopped when I saw what he was carrying: a piece of bright green paper with a coded message on it.

"This is weird, man," I said. "You got a coded note, too?"

"Yeah, and I was going to call a rally, but the note said to keep it top secret," Jamal said.

Then we heard a familiar voice.

"Yo, Alex, Jamal! ¿*Qué tal?* Did you guys send me this note?"

It was our friend Hector Carrero. We told him we didn't know who had sent the notes.

Before long, the rest of the Ghostwriter Team arrived—Lenni Frazier; Tina Ngyuen; Jamal's cousin, Casey; and my sister, Gaby. Everyone had received a coded note on bright green paper.

"All right, 'fess up, Mr. Code King," Gaby said. "You sent us these notes, right?"

"No way. I'm innocent," I said. "Although I do take credit for being such a great code teacher. Otherwise, you guys would *never* have cracked this one."

"Gimme a break!" Tina said, rolling her eyes.

"I have a hunch who sent the notes," I said, pointing my finger at Hector. "Admit it, pal."

"Not me," Hector replied. "I think it was Casey."

We all accused each other, but no one would confess.

Suddenly the letters on the monument flew into the air. It was Ghostwriter, our invisible friend who can talk to us only with printed words.

Welcome, Team! I'm delighted that you decoded my messages.

Whoa! Ghostwriter sent us the messages!

"WHAT'S UP, GW?" Hector wrote on the back of his coded note. (GW is our nickname for Ghostwriter.)

I've been reading about famous detectives and their crime-solving tricks, Ghostwriter wrote back. So I have lots of fun detective puzzles and games planned for you.

"Cool," said Jamal.

GW announced that every day of spring break, his special detective club would meet at exactly 2:21 P.M.

"That's a weird time," Casey commented.

"I get it," I said. "We're meeting at two-twenty-one because Sherlock Holmes, the world's most famous detective, lived in London, England, at Two Twenty-One B Baker Street. I've read tons of mysteries about him. And get this—even though Sherlock Holmes is a make-believe character, more than two thousand people write to him every year to ask him to solve their mysteries."

“And I thought *you* had a lot of pen pals, Alex!” Jamal joked.

“How do you know all that stuff about Sherlock Holmes?” my sister asked.

“Elementary, my dear Gaby, elementary,” I bragged in my best British accent.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Lenni shouted. “Speaking of mysteries, I think we have a great big one here. Ghostwriter can’t actually *write* notes on paper. His words always fade away! That means somebody wrote these coded notes for Ghostwriter.”

Lenni took out her notebook and jotted down her thoughts for Ghostwriter.

Ghostwriter scrambled the letters in Lenni’s notebook to give his answer: Very clever, Lenni. You’re right! I had a secret accomplice!

“What’s an accomplice?” Casey asked.

“Somebody who helps someone else do something sneaky,” Jamal explained.

Ghostwriter continued, My accomplice typed the coded messages on a computer and then secretly delivered them to you. And my accomplice is . . . one of you!

We all eyed each other and wondered: *Which one of us is Ghostwriter’s accomplice?*

And that person will help me again soon,

Ghostwriter added. Every day, my accomplice will help me print out a coded message and deliver a copy to each of you. You will have to decode the message to know where our secret club will meet. See you tomorrow at 2:21!

Ghostwriter vanished in a burst of light.