

POSSESSED: The Ouija Board

By

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Prologue

The boy huddled behind a tombstone, trying not to sob. He took in a ragged breath, goosebumps exploding on his skin. It was only the end of August and the California nights had been cooler, but far from chilly. Tonight, however, felt like the middle of winter, in *Canada*. All around the graveyard, shadows flickered without the slightest hint of wind.

Panic flooded the boy as he debated with himself. *Why did I agree to do this?* He didn't need to be in this group. He had friends—*good* friends. Sort of. What had he been thinking when he'd said yes to this dare?

"Hey, what's the hold-up?" a voice called out in the distance. "If you're too scared, just say so. Quit wasting our time."

A gust of wind swept icy raindrops down his neck. He shivered and leaped to his feet, making up his mind. The boys had dared him to race to the center of the graveyard, touch the ancient crypt, and come back to the gates, where they waited—an initiation that had sounded painless, at first.

"Yeah, come on back if you want and we'll go home," said another boy in a hollow voice. "No one's forcing you to do this." Muffled laughter echoed in the mist.

He *could* do this. He was going to do it! He just had to be brave for a few minutes and he'd be in. Surely that couldn't be too hard? And then no one would say he was a coward.

The boy gulped, swallowing the lump of fear lodged in his throat, and took off. Blood, and the sound of his own footsteps, pounded in his ears as he ran, dodging tombstones and open graves. The globe lights atop lamp posts shed watery light along the path that led to the crypt. As he approached, a stink of rotting leaves rose up in the air. There was something else, too, something putrid. A dying animal? A skunk? He covered his nose and mouth with his arm and hurried on.

An iron fence with a latched gate enclosed the crypt: a dark, squat square of brick. The cold metal of the gate seared the boy's fingertips. Every instinct screamed at him, *Run! Forget this initiation and get out of here.*

Only pride and a deep desire to join the cool kids made him walk into the enclosure. The dread in his heart ballooned as winged shadows flitted past his face, making him whimper. The bats stank of damp fur and urine. Still the boy approached the crypt, his breath fogging in front of his face. He reached out an arm, which shook so badly, he felt as if he had the flu.

But under his palm, the brick was warm. Pleasantly so. The boy breathed deeply.
I did it!

Nothing had jumped out of the crypt or crawled out of the cavernous entrance. The mist hung as it did before, almost seeming friendlier. Letting his shoulders fall back, he made a mental note: Reality was less scary than your imagination. All you had to do was see something right through to the end. He tried to smile, but his face wouldn't cooperate.

The grand realization sank in. Now that he'd completed the task, he was part of *the* group. Not only would he never be lonely again at school, but he would also have a place at the cool kids' table. *Him!* Relief and adrenaline made the boy bolder.

He stared at the crypt and slapped a hand on it. "You're just an old, useless pile of bricks and I'm not scared of you."

Nothing happened and, feeling braver, the boy gave it a swift kick. "There! That's for scaring me—"

A sharp current jolted him from head to toe. It felt as if someone were ripping him apart and climbing into him. He couldn't scream or breathe. His limbs seemed paralyzed, and his skin seemed to be on fire.

What was happening to him? *Help!* the boy screamed silently as the world momentarily turned dark.

As suddenly as the sensation had started, it stopped. The boy gasped for air and took in a shuddering breath as the graveyard came back into focus. His head pounded, his lungs were fit to burst, and his mouth was dry.

Were the others playing tricks on him? Was it someone else? How . . . ? He scanned the surroundings. The gravestones looked back at him silently, offering no explanation. Only the shadows shivered in the wind. As soon as he regained command of his feet, the boy raced back to the gate, where the gang stood.

“So?” one of them asked.

“P-piece of cake,” the boy replied.

Everyone gathered around him, thumping his back and punching him playfully.

“Welcome to the club,” another said.

But the boy barely heard him. Inside his head, someone was cackling like a maniac.

Chapter 1

How did I get so lucky to have not one but two best friends in the world? thought Michiko. So why couldn't she confide in them?

"Penny for your thoughts?" said Sophia, tossing back a mass of wavy black hair as she glanced at the cafeteria door over her shoulder.

"I'd go up to a dollar," said Kate. Her green eyes, boring into Michiko, were tinged with concern. "Is something bothering you? You know we're always here for you, right?"

"Ditto," added Sophia with a wink. "You know I got your back, girl."

Michiko nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. These two were the absolute best and yet . . . she couldn't tell them the secret she'd been keeping for months.

Just then Lucas walked by. Kate and Sophia immediately fell silent as their eyes followed the new boy in their Grade 8 class. Tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, Lucas oozed swagger, even though he'd just started here in September. It seemed to Michiko that her best friends were crushing on the popular kid, too. As far as she was concerned, though, he was just . . . *meh*.

"Should we join them?" asked Kate, curling a lock of brown hair around her finger as the object of her attention plunked himself down at the packed table next to theirs.

"We should get him to sit with *us*," said Sophia, not taking her eyes off him.

"Hey, Lucas, Sasha," a voice called out, "mind if I join you? All the other tables are full."

Michiko didn't turn around. She knew that voice. From Kate's and Sophia's grimaces, they recognized the high pitch too. Sadia Siddiqui—only the most irritating girl in their class—slid into the seat across from Lucas without waiting for his response.

Michiko exchanged glances with Kate and Sophia. Without saying a word, Michiko knew what they were all thinking. Sadia wasn't afraid to show she craved Lucas's company. From the day he'd arrived, she'd tried to find excuses to spend time with him. It infuriated Kate and Sophia but not enough to make them equally pushy. The three rolled their eyes in unison.

There were plenty of open spots in the cafeteria, so Sadia wasn't fooling anyone with her lies. Yet *she* was at the table with Lucas, Sasha, Chadwick, and Irfan—while her friends weren't. If only she could do something to help Kate and Sophia. Something that would make Lucas take notice of the two of them and see how much cooler they were than his gaggle of fans.

"Hi Sadia," Lucas replied. "What's up?"

"What else? I'm excited about our class trip!" Sadia replied, munching on a golden fry.

"The Mojave National Preserve?" drawled Sasha. "Sand, rocks, trees . . . yawn."

Sophia and Kate were eavesdropping, but Michiko's mind had wandered back to her usual worry. How was Mom feeling right this minute? Had she eaten anything, or was she still sleeping the day away?

"We could have asked Lucas to join us when he walked by," said Sophia, her face glum. "You both would have helped, right?"

"Umm . . . do we want to look that desperate?" said Kate.

"That's just called being friendly, right, Michiko?" asked Sophia but got no answer. "Earth to Michiko! Are you *sure* everything's okay?"

"Wha . . . oh, sure!" said Michiko, pasting on a smile and hoping her friends wouldn't probe any more. "Hey, we should decide what we're bringing on the trip. It'll be two days and *two whole nights*, almost like an extended sleepover! Plus, we'll be roomies. Shall we pack something fun to do in the evenings?"

Loud laughter from the next table made them all look. Sadia was laughing as if she'd heard the funniest thing in her life. Lucas was smiling. Sasha looked bored, which seemed to be his default expression.

"Wish we could do something to get into Lucas's group," mumbled Sophia.

"Yeah, this trip will be make or break, I can feel it," said Kate. "By the end of it, either we're in or we're still out." She paused. "I just wish we knew *what* to do to win him over. Should we get bolder or keep playing it cool?"

"Should we ask my Magic 8 Ball?" Sophia smirked.

“Nah, this might be a job for a crystal ball,” said Kate with a sigh.

“Kokkuri-san!” Michiko spoke up without preamble. “I mean, Kokkuri-san is the answer to all our problems.” She had long been meaning to bring up the topic and here was her chance. “The trip is the perfect time to play.”

“Umm . . . who?” asked Kate.

“Play what?” said Sophia.

Michiko gestured for them to huddle, even though the din in the cafeteria would have made it impossible for anyone to eavesdrop. “In Japan, one just asks Kokkuri-san—a spirit who comes when summoned, answers all questions, and leaves. It’s like the Ouija board.”

Kate paled; her green eyes wide. Sophia’s thick eyebrows knitted together as she stared at Michiko, looking thoughtful.

These were the exact reactions she’d been expecting—and Michiko knew she’d have to press harder. Kate and Sophia were usually game to try new things, so why not this too? She *had* to convince them; in fact, she had no other choice.

“Well?”

“I’ve heard . . . umm . . . terrible things about Ouija board summonings gone wrong,” said Kate almost in a whisper. “Like when the spirit refuses to leave and haunts the people who called it? Sometimes for as long as they live.” She rubbed the goosebumps on her arms, blinking rapidly. “No way.”

“But Kokkuri-san is different,” insisted Michiko. “A mix between a fox, a dog, and a raccoon, Kokkuri-san is an *animal* spirit. Each time you call, it’s a different aspect of those animals that manifests itself. Surely, you’re not scared of cute animals, right, Kate?”

She said nothing, her eyes darting to Sophia.

“What if Kokkuri-san told you which of you had a chance with Lucas? And how to get into his group?”

“Ooh! Have you done this before?” asked Sophia, her curious gaze locked on Michiko. “Summoned this spirit with a Ouija board?”

“Wait, seriously?” Kate frowned before adding, “Have you?”

Now this was a gray area. Michiko had been part of a summoning loads of times with her cousins in Japan—though she'd never summoned the spirit on her own. If she glossed over that detail, they would play. And she *needed* them to play because this game just wouldn't work with one person. Two was the minimum and three was best. Also, it had to be played with people you trusted. Michiko's mind whirled as she cringed inside. She trusted Kate and Sophia with her life, and yet she was about to lie to her best friends. The irony did not escape her.

"Yes or no, Michiko?" asked Kate. "It's a simple question."

"Yes," replied Michiko simply, squashing her guilt. To herself, she added, *I'm doing this for her.*

"When did you ever use the Ouija board to summon this Ko thingy?" pressed Kate.

Michiko stared back at Kate. She was timid—she could make a puppy look ferocious—but her mind was razor-sharp. "It's Kokkuri-san, and the name means "to nod." I played it when I was in Japan last year. It was easy and fun. And we got some excellent answers and made the right choices, thanks to the spirit's help."

"I'll save you a seat on the bus tomorrow, Lucas," Sadia's shrill voice interrupted them, again, just as the bell signaled the end of lunch break.

Michiko looked over at the other table, where Lucas sat with a curiously glazed expression on his face, as if he were here, yet far away. His pepperoni pizza, which smelled a bit stale—she'd always had a very sensitive nose—was untouched. Michiko mentally chided him for being so wasteful, even with food that didn't seem too appetizing. Mom would have had a fit if that were her plate.

Mom.

"So?" asked Michiko, snapping back to the present and getting to her feet. "You guys in or out?"

"In," said Sophia. "I have a question or two I'd like to ask about Lucas—and that *cucaracha* Sadia."

"That's the spirit!" said Michiko with a laugh, though her heart was thumping hard.

Sophia flashed her a cheeky grin. "Nice one!"

Kate said nothing, but Michiko knew she would play, eventually. That's what Michiko was counting on—that her best friends would come through for her.

Walking down the bustling corridor, the three kept gabbing about all the answers they would have by the end of this trip. If Sadia could get any worse, if Lucas would finally be their friend, if one of them had a real chance with him, if they'd ever be dubbed the popular kids . . .

Only Michiko couldn't speak aloud the one answer she was desperate for.