

Ouija

OUIJA



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For Charles and Doreen
What would I do without you?



1. LISA CORNWELL – FRIDAY 23RD JUNE - EVENING

Rena has the most *idiotic* ideas at times. I don't know why we encourage her. Well, actually, yes, I do, it's because she's incredibly fun to take the piss out of. But a recent idea of hers has surpassed crazy and I'm now seriously considering having her sectioned. Lex and I have known Rena since primary school – I'm making myself feel really old now - and she was crazy back then too. Except back then she didn't have quite such a suicidal bent. I think it's all that red hair – it overheats her brain.

So anyway, it's Friday night, and what does any hard working girl want to do on a Friday night? That's right: get hammered and relax with her girlfriends. This evening Lex and I had agreed to head over to Rena's. Just the three of us. Oh, mustn't forget Rena's daft

moggies too. Sappy creatures. They trip you up as soon as you set foot through the front door in their efforts to get your attention and if you sit still for too long you become a viable place to nest. Rena has two cats, Skittles and Smartie – I can't even begin to think why she called them that. I refuse to call her cats in from outside. The first and last time I did that, I could hear half the neighbourhood laughing. Mind you, I can't really talk about bad names for pets: I called my goldfish Scary Mary. But I digress.

We had parked ourselves randomly all over Rena's cosy front room and we had turned the telly on low in the background. I've discovered MTV can be just as entertaining without the sound.

I love Rena's house. Whereas I like my home to be spick and span with a place for everything and everything in its place, Rena's house is a treasure trove of pure weirdness. She loves to collect mindless tat. People at car boot sales see her coming and they just seem to *know* they can offload half their crap onto her. I don't know what it is about her – she must send off invisible waves to these people as she approaches: *hey, give me your rubbish; I'll take absolutely anything...*

I nursed my bucket-sized glass of red wine and let out a huge sigh.

"Now that was a huge sigh," Lex commented as she stretched out on the sofa and drained her second glass. "What was that for?"

"Oh...that was for numerous things," I replied as I stared into the dark red liquid in my own glass. I took a sip and leaned my head

against the back of the armchair I'd managed to claim before the cats. Why do I feel so bad when I turf them out of a chair? They're just cats!

"Numerous things? Such as?" pressed Rena. Like a pair of terriers, once Rena and Lex get hold of something that catches their interest, they don't let go.

"I'm... I'm just glad it's the weekend; it's been a busy week. You know, the usual." I stroked the smooth sides of my glass and tried to ignore their curious stares. Rena was sitting on the floor between her cats and in front of Lex, who was on the sofa. I even felt as if the cats were staring at me now and I could feel my cheeks beginning to turn red.

"No, no, no," Rena grinned. "If that was a glad-it's-Friday sigh, it would have sounded more like this," she let out a medium sigh that made Lex grin as she reached over Rena's shoulder for the bottle of wine. "That sigh was very much a 'my-boyfriend-is-such-a-git-and-I-don't-know-what-to-do' sigh."

"Oooh, bingo!" Lex giggled as she tried to point at me from the sofa with the hand holding her glass. I could feel my cheeks redden a bit more – so much so even my ears were burning - but I couldn't help laughing. Lex frowned with concentration as she topped up her glass again and I watched, hoping she wouldn't slop wine everywhere.

I've been seeing a guy called James in an on/off relationship for over a year. The relationship's been more off than on if I'm honest. Frankly, he's a bloody nightmare. He's the most unreliable, selfish,

ignorant bastard I've ever met. But... oh, I still like him. I wouldn't go as far as saying I *love* him, because I don't. But let's just say, he has a place in my heart and I wish he didn't, and leave it at that. He's the embodiment of everything I like in a man but also personifies everything I hate, too. He's worse than a hair shirt for irritating the life out of me, but the sex is amazing. Not that sex is everything, but it helps me forget about all the times I've wanted to beat him over the head with a spanner.

"I don't know why you don't just go out and find someone else, Lisa," Lex said. "You deserve so much better than him." She gave Rena a nudge with her knee and offered her a top up. Rena held out her glass and I winced as Lex's glass tilted in unison with the bottle in her other hand as she poured. "There are so many other men out there, men who would *kill* to go out with someone like you. Why don't you just give James the boot and do yourself a favour? Do us *all* a favour, for goodness sake, because if you don't do something about him soon, we will. I'm fed up with him treating you like this."

Yes, she's right, I know that, but... oh, for some reason I just can't tell him to get lost even though he farts in bed and doesn't put stuff in the dishwasher when he's finished with it. I think he believes he's endearing himself to the female sex, pretending that he can't do things for himself and stinking my bedroom out with his vile anal eruptions, because I smile benevolently, but inside I'm screaming. God... when I put it like that, it makes me wonder what the hell I *am* doing...

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I didn't like the way Lex and Rena were all of a sudden focussing on my love life. It was a situation more mortifying than having a boil on your arse. I didn't need to have it analysed by my friends as well. Sometimes I think they know far too many personal little details about my private life than I'm comfortable with.

"Well, *anyway*," I tried for a swift change of subject, reaching for a handful of crisps from a bowl on the coffee table, "enough about me and my nonexistent love life! Has your guy from work asked you out yet?" Yeah, time to pass the baton of shame. I looked pointedly at Rena and she gave me a withering look over the rim of her glass. Rena works at a garden centre not far from a little town called Harlow. She says that working with plants gives her a sense of peace but unfortunately one of the guys she has to work with gives her anything but.

"Wash your mouth out," Rena shuffled closer to the edge of the table and began picking through a bowl of nuts. She was clearly hoping she could avoid the conversation if she ignored it for long enough.

"Is he *still* stalking you?" Lex giggled, showering the back of Rena's hair with half eaten crisps. She covered her mouth and looked at me with wide, shiny eyes. Rena didn't appear to have noticed. I hid my grin behind my glass.

"He doesn't *stalk* me!" Rena cried. "He's just got a bit of a ...fixation, that's all. Anyone would think I'm his boss or something, the way he has to run everything by me all the time. He's creepy."

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She noticed a wet crumb of crisp stuck to the shoulder of her plum coloured velvet top and brushed it away with a frown as if wondering where on earth it could have come from.

“He’s probably working up the courage to ask you out.” I said, as seriously as I could manage. I was feeling a little bit wobbly from drinking wine on an empty stomach. Rena cringed enough to disturb Smartie, who was busy vigorously kneading her lap in an effort to make it a comfy place to kip.

“Oh God, don’t say that! He reminds me of a complete psychopath as it is. He hardly ever says anything, no one seems to know anything about him and he only works at one speed: slow. Do you know, he was asked to prune the standard roses back the other day; it was like a Valentine’s Day massacre. He butchered the lot of them. We had to throw half of them away because there wasn’t enough left to sell!” Rena screwed her face up with horror at the thought and Lex snorted into her wineglass. I sat there giggling, imaging an Edward Scissorhands-like character doing his worst to a load of rosebushes.

Lex put her glass down on the table with a clunk and crawled to the end of the sofa on her hands and knees to Rena’s bookshelf. She pulled out a huge, hard-backed black book with the face of Pan embossed on the front in faded gold.

“What an unusual looking book,” she said to no one in particular, turning the book over in her hands. “Folklore and Legends. Where did you get this from?” The cover was held together by bits of

tape and it looked pretty ancient. Rena squinted over to see what Lex had in her hands.

“Oh...I...uh...I pinched it from the school library about ten years ago,” Rena blushed, suddenly becoming absorbed in the act of scratching Smartie behind the ear to avoid looking at us.

“Rena Southall, you should be ashamed!” I gasped, trying to sound horrified but only managing to make it to mildly amused. Rena’s morals were normally higher than one of her cats after a dose of catnip, so even the slightest deviation from her usual whiter-than-white behaviour was cause for celebration.

“Well!” she exclaimed, desperately searching her alcohol-tainted mind for a viable excuse, “I didn’t think anyone had ever read it and... and I’ll always look after it.”

“Yeah, no one ever read it because you always had it!” Lex snorted. We collapsed into wine-fuelled giggles.

“Actually, I was thinking of getting it rebound,” Rena added, as if that made her criminal acts at school more acceptable. Lex shoved the book back into its place on the bookshelf and cast her eye along all the other titles. “What do you see in all this mumbo jumbo, Rena?” Lex asked. “It’s all a load of rubbish, you know. Completely unsubstantiated twaddle.” Rena’s bookshelves are stacked with spell books of all shapes and sizes and untold numbers of books on the paranormal. Every available bit of wall space either had a bookcase parked there or a shelf wedged in it. A pyromaniac’s heaven.

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“It’s not mumbo jumbo,” Rena corrected, sounding a little abashed. “There’s a lot to be learned from the spirit world.” Lex and I paused for a moment, Lex with her glass halfway to her lips, waiting to see if Rena was being serious or not. After a moments silence, it appeared she was indeed being serious.

“Oh Rena, get your head out of the clouds and have some more crisps!” I smiled. “Have you *ever* seen a ghost?” Rena’s other cat, Skittles, appeared with a silent leap onto the arm of my chair and I squeaked with shock. A few spatters of my drink slopped onto my fingers and I put my drink down on the table so I could lick the wine off my hands. Yes, I am that uncouth. “Bloody cat!”

“No... no, I haven’t seen a ghost, but that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. I mean, have you ever seen God?”

I pursed my lips and looked across to Lex, who was still kneeling on the end of the sofa, surveying books. Lex glanced at me and shrugged her shoulders as if to say I was on my own on this one. I considered Rena’s question as far as I was able, and then after ten seconds, gave up the struggle. It was too much effort for last thing on a Friday.

“Okay, point taken,” I conceded as I gave Skittles a scratch behind the ear now that I was over the initial shock of his sudden appearance. Skittles took this as a sign to claw his way onto my lap and collapse into a pile of stripy grey fur. “Make yourself at home, why don’t you?” I muttered to his warm little body. Skittles looked up at me with lazy green eyes and then promptly went to sleep.

"I've seen a ghost," Lex piped up from her position in front of the bookcase. Her finger was still trailing along the spines of Rena's books.

"Get out of it, you have not!" I said. Rena craned around to look at Lex with a pleasantly surprised look on her face, although I could tell she was waiting for Lex to make a joke out of it all.

"I fucking have, too!" Lex twisted around and sat cross-legged on the edge of the sofa so she could see both of us. Her foul mouth never ceases to shock me even though I must hear her swear at least a hundred times every day in one form or another. Lex's earrings glittered in the light under her short black hair. She likes to wear four tiny gold hoops in each ear. I don't think her boss is too impressed about them at the recruitment agency where she works, but I think he's too frightened of Lex's temper to say anything. I don't think anyone would be brave enough to say anything to her even if she dyed her hair sky blue pink. She fixed Rena and then me with a stare that just dared us to try and argue with her. I wasn't in the mood for one of her rages tonight.

"So, what did you see?" I asked, keeping to safe ground but still wondering if she was just trying to wind us up. She reached out and grabbed a fistful of peanuts and settled back into the sofa. Lex blinked her big brown eyes mischievously, staring into space as she reminisced.

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“I went on holiday one year with my mum, dad and brother and we stayed in a villa with some friends. I think I was about six or seven...”

“So that was about 1876 then...” I muttered. Lex gave me a withering look before ploughing on with her story.

“There wasn’t anything particularly scary about the place; it was just a holiday home in Spain as far as I was concerned. Nothing happened for a couple of days but one night I woke up and saw someone standing at the bottom of my bed. I thought it was just mum or dad, checking on me but when I asked who had been in my room the next morning there was nothing but silence and a lot of concerned eyes looking at me. Mum went mental and made dad search the place from top to bottom and I had to share a room with Sam because they didn’t want their kids sleeping alone, just in case. God, two weeks having to share a room with my brother,” she mused, taking sip of wine. “A holiday I’d rather forget, that one.”

“Weren’t you frightened after you found out it hadn’t been your parents or Sam wandering around? Jeez, what if it had been an intruder or something?”

“Well, no,” Lex said thoughtfully, “I wasn’t frightened as it goes. I remember seeing this figure at the end of my bed and, thinking it was probably mum or dad checking on me, I just went back to sleep. I remembered what had happened the next morning but everyone swore blind they hadn’t got up during the night for any reason. Dad looked everywhere for signs of forced entry and couldn’t find anything,

and he and mum have always been careful about locking doors and windows at night. So, either we had a visit from Houdini, or it was a ghost. Can't think of any other explanation."

"It couldn't have been Sam? You know he likes to wind you up," Rena suggested. Lex had her rapt attention. I don't think it had ever crossed her mind that someone as down to earth as Lex might have had a paranormal experience.

"He swore he'd been asleep in the next room. Besides, the figure was far too tall for it to have been him. Unless he was on stilts."

"Ah," said Rena. Sam and Lex fight like cat and dog even now, so I can only imagine what a holiday where they had to share a room must have been like.

"So you really think it was a ghost?" I asked, intrigued. Skittles fidgeted on my lap and rolled over onto his back to make himself more comfortable.

"Well, it *could* have been an intruder, I suppose, but I doubt it. Mum and dad are fanatical about locking up at night, always have been, and no doors or windows had been found open. I can't think of anything else it could have been." There was a comfortable silence for a few moments while we watched the silent music videos on the television, sipped wine and chewed on nuts and crisps.

"Have you never had any experiences at all, Rena?" I asked, eventually. "I know you're really in to ghosts and stuff like that. I would have thought ghosts would have flocked to you."

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“Nothing really worth mentioning,” she said a little despondently, scratching at a small mark on the carpet. Her bare toes poked out from the hem of her long skirt showing off her perfectly painted toenails. “Well, there was *one* time when I worked in London; it was at that place in Regent Street, remember? I helped out on reception occasionally – God, I hated doing that; you had to carry heavy trays and smile at rude clients. I came out of the kitchen carrying a huge tray and I was *sure* that out of the corner of my eye I saw someone coming down the corridor towards me. I stopped dead to let them go by because the corridor was so narrow if we both tried to walk down it the tray would just get knocked out of my hands. But when I looked up... there was no one there.” She paused for dramatic effect.

“Spooky,” Lex and I agreed in unison.

“Have either of you used a Ouija board before?” Rena asked with a small smile. The question just seemed to hang in the air for a moment, unanswered. She topped up our glasses and broke open the bar of chocolate I’d bought with me. I can get through an entire king size bar all by myself at home, but as I was with my friends I supposed it was only polite not to keep it all for myself. See, I was thinking of my figure by sharing the chocolate with my friends; I thought of all those calories I wasn’t consuming by letting my friends eat them for me. How nice of me!

“I wouldn’t touch one of them if I were you,” I warned the two of them as I took a couple of pieces of chocolate from Rena. “I’ve heard

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so many terrible stories about them, you know: things go wrong or a nasty ghost escapes and terrorises whoever used the Ouija board and all sorts. I've heard stories of people having to get priests in to get rid of the ghosts!"

"They used to sell Ouija boards as games, you know," Lex told us, also helping herself to some chocolate. "It was right there on the toy shop shelves with games like Monopoly, apparently."

"Wow, what a game," I mumbled over a mouthful of chocolate. "You can just imagine it, can't you? Come on little Jimmy, let's raise old Uncle Herbert from the dead for a giggle!" I laughed into my hand and then gasped as Skittles decided my lap wasn't as comfortable as he'd hoped, quickly rolled over onto his front again and dug his claws into my trousers and through into the tender skin of my thighs. He then propelled himself off my lap and out of the living room door. "You little bugger!" I cursed, rubbing my scratched legs. Rena ignored the fact her cat had clawed me because it happened so often. *You don't have to let him up onto your lap*, she'd told me once when I'd complained but... well, I secretly enjoyed having the little ball of fluff asleep on my lap, even if the pleasure was sometimes accompanied by a flurry of claws and scratched skin when he decided it was time to get off.

"You know, I've got a board up in the loft," Rena said quietly.

"Really?" Lex asked, leaning forwards in her seat with interest. I felt myself go cold. I had a bad feeling I knew what was coming.

"Have... have you ever used it?" I asked.

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“No,” Rena sighed. “I got it when I lived with my mum and dad but dad went a bit loopy when he saw it arrive in the post. He made me promise never to use it in the house; he reckoned it wasn’t natural. He’s a bit superstitious and suggested I throw it away, or preferably burn it. He stopped short of telling me it was a direct telephone line to Satan though.”

“But you didn’t?” Lex asked, a little too eagerly for my liking. “Burn it, I mean?”

“Of course not!” Rena said exasperatedly. “It cost me two weeks pocket money!”

“Well, where is it? Can we see it?” Lex asked excitedly, glancing around the room as if she might find it stuffed in amongst the books somewhere.

“Well... I suppose it can’t do any harm. If you’re not too frightened, that is,” Rena teased, with a grin, as she got to her feet. I wanted to tell her not to fetch it but I didn’t think I could put up with an entire evening of good-natured ridicule. Rena looked at me and I forced a small smile that didn’t commit me either way. Rena hesitated at the look on my face but then Lex fired up again.

“Go and get it then,” Lex encouraged her. I wasn’t keen on the idea at all. The thought of dabbling with dead people left me feeling as if I’d swallowed a lump of ice. I am firmly of the opinion that when people die, they should stay dead. I don’t think they should be hauled back from the grave so people can enjoy a cheap thrill and have their curiosity entertained.

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Rena left the room with a spring in her step and charged up the stairs. We heard the screech of metal as she pulled the loft ladder down. Yep, she had the board well and truly hidden away in case her dad came across it during a visit.

He stopped short of telling me it was a direct telephone line to Satan though ... her words rung in my ears and the metaphor made me smile even though I was actually a bit concerned her dad might have a point.

“Are you *sure* this is a good idea?” I asked Lex. “There are so many stories out there; they can’t all be made up surely.”

“You’re not worried are you?” she asked. “Nothings going to happen you know. I remember reading an article about Ouija boards, and it reckoned the pointer only moves because of... because of...uh ‘ideomotor movement’, that was it.” I looked at her blankly. “You know,” she pressed, clearly pleased that she’d heard of something I hadn’t, “it’s the theory that we move the pointer ourselves, subconsciously. Nothing much supernatural about that, is there?”

“But... but what about these tales of...” I started.

“They’re just stories that have probably been passed down so many times no one really knows what the truth is anymore, Lisa – who knows how much they’ve been embellished with each retelling? And I bet the only thing that actually happened in the first place was someone’s imagination got a bit overheated.”

“But Lex, how do you *know* nothing’s going to happen? How can you be sure?” I felt like a whinging child and I could feel the

colour rise to my cheeks. “What if we start messing with something and it doesn’t like us?”

“Then... then we just shut the board and that’s that.” Lex gave me a wide-eyed look and sounded resolute that I started to feel a little bit better. I could even go as far as to say I felt a little excited. I’d never done anything like this before.

“Who are you going to ask for?” I asked, sliding onto the floor to help her clear a space on the coffee table for the board. Skittles wandered back in from wherever he’d been and headed straight for me. The skin on my thighs were still smarting from where he’d done a runner earlier on and I steered him away from me as gently as I could. He veered around me and leapt up into my recently vacated chair. Cats, I’ve concluded, are just heat-seeking missiles underneath all that fur. I stuffed another bit of chocolate in my mouth and made myself comfortable on the floor instead, deciding it would just be petty to fight with a cat over the ownership of the chair. Skittles glanced at me with narrowed eyes and then curled into a tight ball and went to sleep.

“Depends who’s there,” Lex replied. “I reckon...” she began, but I never got to find out what Lex reckoned because Rena started shouting for her.

“Lex!” Rena called from the top of the stairs. “*Alexandraad!*”

“Fuckin’ hell, I’m coming! I’m coming!” Lex rolled her eyes at me as she got to her feet and ran to the door. When Rena calls Lex by her full name, it always makes me laugh. It has a magical effect on Lex,

probably because she's only ever called by her full name when she's in trouble. I listened to her bound up the stairs and heard her giggling as she helped Rena climb down out of the loft. I went to the door to watch. Rena had a board in her arms the size of a Monopoly board and she was desperately trying to hold on to it as she clambered down from the loft. Lex stood at the foot of the loft ladder, trying to angle herself so she wouldn't be staring straight up Rena's skirt. Lex grabbed hold of Rena's left foot and tried to guide it down onto the next rung of the ladder. Rena shrieked with laughter.

"That *tickles!* Stop it, woman, before you make me fall!"

"Oh... look, just..." Lex swatted at Rena's voluminous skirts. "Give me that bloody board before you do both of us a mischief," Lex cackled. Rena tried to hand the board to Lex and I flinched as a triangular piece of cream-coloured plastic fell from the folded board and tumbled down the stairs towards me. I leapt out of the way until it bounced onto the hall carpet and came to a halt. I picked it up and looked at it.

"What's this?" I asked, turning it over in my hands.

"That's the pointer for the spirit to push around," Rena called down to me. I looked down and saw Smartie staring up at me with curious eyes, his tail twitching constantly.

"What are you staring at? It's not something to eat, you know," I smiled. He mewed at me and reared up on his back legs to meet my hand as I bent to stroke him. I can't be sure, but it seemed that as soon as Smartie saw the pointer in my other hand, he turned tail and

ran for the kitchen. I heard the cat flap smack open as he scrambled out into the garden. I stared after him, bemused. “Daft creature,” I whispered. I glanced down at the little pointer and realised I’d been squeezing it so tightly it had left indentations in my palm.

Behind me I heard Rena and Lex clumping down the stairs with the board. Both of them had big smiles on their faces.

“You okay, Lisa?” Lex asked. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“That was rubbish, Lex,” Rena groaned with a pained expression. “Lisa, could you grab one of the candles from under the kitchen sink?”

“A candle? What for?” I asked. Rena wandered past me into the front room. Lex stood at the foot of the stairs with her hand resting on the newel post, apparently taking a moment to recover from assisting Rena down from the loft.

“We’re going to turn the lights out and I want to be able to see what’s happening,” Rena’s voice came from the front room. I glanced at Lex and she shrugged as if to say ‘oh, just humour her.’

“Do we... do we have to turn the lights out?” I asked. I felt nervous enough as it was. I certainly didn’t like the idea of sitting in the dark with nothing but a bloody tea light for illumination while Rena tried to drag ghosts into her front room through a...

direct telephone line to Satan

...Ouija board. I think *my* dad would have gone mad if he’d known – I dreaded to think what Rena’s dad would have done. Disownment?

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Public flogging? Nah, Rena's dad could be strict, but I didn't think he would fall *quite* that far out of his tree over it. He definitely wouldn't be best pleased with his daughter's escapades into the unknown though.

"You're not scared of the dark are you?" Lex asked, eyeing me carefully. She twiddled with one of her many gold hoops in her ear, a sure sign that she was feeling a little anxious too.

"No, no, of course not," I lied, trying to give her a convincing smile.

Me? Frightened of the dark? Hah! What a crazy idea...

But, I was. I hated the dark and had done ever since I was a child. I knew that I wouldn't get a wink of sleep tonight – or for months afterwards, probably - if that pointer so much as twitched. I don't know if it was the wine that made me feel braver than normal, or if I just didn't want Rena and Lex to think I was a chicken, but I found myself sitting on the floor at one end of the coffee table while Lex and Rena settled themselves on opposite sides. Rena slapped the dust covered Ouija board down in front of her and Lex coughed exaggeratedly as if she was starring in a bad horror movie. I handed Rena the pointer and she placed it in the centre of the board.

"Should we give the board a wipe first?" Lex asked. The dust on the board was so thick I was tempted to write 'clean me' in it, but I thought Rena might get the hump.

"No, I don't think so," she replied, airily. "I think a bit of dust gives the board character."

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“Character? It’s a bit of printed cardboard, not an antique,” Lex pointed out. Rena rolled her eyes at Lex’s lack of understanding.

I looked down at the board. It appeared to be fairly innocuous. Just a thin piece of board, rectangular in shape with the alphabet ornately inscribed in an arc across the top, numbers from one to nine printed at the bottom with the words *yes*, *no*, *hello* and *goodbye*, in the corners. I looked across the table at Lex, hoping that she would come up with some sensible reason not to go along with Rena’s idea of evening entertainment, but Lex was busy chewing on another piece of chocolate and was clearly looking forward to experimenting with the board. Rena was now in her element.

Next stop: Rena’s house – all things dark and spooky please alight here.

Rena snapped the television off and looked around for a moment before locating a small box of matches that were tucked away on one of the lower shelves of a bookcase. She lit the candle and placed it on the empty side of the coffee table, opposite me, before getting up and turning the lights off. The room plunged into darkness. The hairs on the back of my neck immediately stood to attention. The cat flap pinged again and I had the feeling that Skittles had also fled the house in a hurry. The candle struggled to spread its light far enough to light our faces with its soft glow. Lex’s face had been thrown into shadow and for an unnerving moment her eyes disappeared into pools of darkness so her face resembled a skull.

Then she shuffled closer to the table and the horrible image was dispelled. Rena knelt on the floor and looked at us with excited eyes.

“Okay, now what?” Lex prompted. Rena gave me an ‘isn’t-this-fun?’ grin. I couldn’t quite muster the enthusiasm to return it.

“Now you all have to place one finger on the pointer and... um... close your eyes.” We did as she instructed, some of us with more trepidation than others. I heard Lex giggle. “Will you concentrate, *please*, Ms Beaumont,” Rena demanded, but I could hear the smile in her voice. This was all a big game to them. I wish I felt as comfortable about it all. Suddenly, the darkness behind my eyelids seemed a little too all-encompassing and I let my eyes open just a crack so I could watch what was going on through my eyelashes. The others seemed to still have their eyes shut.

“Now,” Rena intoned, “I need you both to imagine a ring of light around us.” I peeked at Lex and found her squinting back at me. I snapped my eyes closed and tried not to laugh. “Imagine your energy passing around us in a bright white circle of light.” I tried to imagine it, I really did, but I was also busy trying not to laugh, especially now I could imagine Lex sitting next to me, also trying to hold in snorts of laughter. I had the image in my mind now of Lex peeking at me from beneath her eyelids. Suddenly the whole damned thing just seemed ridiculous. What on earth were we doing? Playing along at some daft idea of a Victorian parlour game? For a second I imagined the room full of whey-faced women from the last century dressed from neck to

foot in swathes of silk and lace, trying to entertain themselves while their husbands talked business and smoked cigars in another room.

“Promise you’ll stop if anything remotely nasty happens?” I whispered, blinking to dispel the image in my mind.

“I promise,” Rena whispered back, “now try and concentrate. You’ve got a mind like a butterfly!” I stopped talking and went back to concentrating, even though I couldn’t focus on the circle of white light that Rena wanted us to visualise. My mind kept wandering to everything but – had I turned my computer off at work? What time did I tell my mum I’d drop by tomorrow? Would we have to call a priest to cleanse the house after using the Ouija board...? I frowned and tried to concentrate on the white light again. I could hear the soft ticking of a clock somewhere in the room. Someone sniffed. My legs started to complain about the sensation of pins and needles setting in. I suppressed the urge to fidget in case Rena accused me of not concentrating hard enough. I wondered if I could get away with reaching for another piece of chocolate without being noticed. The opened bar was sitting, teasingly, on the edge of the coffee table, so near and yet so far. If I could just...

“Okay,” Rena said eventually, her eyes still closed, just as I was about to reach out for the tempting gold wrapper. My hand quickly dropped back into my lap, defeated. Thankfully, Rena still had her eyes shut but Lex’s eyes twinkled at me in the gloom. She smirked at me as if she could read my thoughts. Perhaps she had been

contemplating doing the same thing. “Okay, you can open your eyes now.” Lex and I already had our eyes open.

Mustn't laugh... mustn't laugh...

The three of us sat there with one finger each on the little plastic pointer which... wasn't going anywhere fast. Lex and I looked expectantly at Rena. She took a deep, dramatic breath. Oh, right, I see, the magic hadn't started yet. “If there's anyone here with us,” Rena announced grandly, “please move the pointer on the board.” I felt a surge of adrenaline as I waited for the pointer to start flying around the board. I looked at Rena, half expecting to see her eyes roll into the back of her head as some terrifying phantom took possession of her body. But no, she didn't look like she was ready to become a screaming psycho just yet. I waited for a moment longer and when nothing happened I gave into my desire to have a little fidget because I couldn't feel my toes anymore. Lex was peering down at the pointer, as was Rena, her forehead wrinkled with concentration. Lex's earrings glinted in the candlelight as she reached up to scratch her chin. “Please try and move the pointer if you are here with us,” Rena intoned again. We waited again, fingers poised lightly on the pointer. Still nothing. Lex cleared her throat cautiously.

“I don't think anyone wants to talk to us tonight,” Lex whispered. “I think they must all be out shopping or something.” I began to giggle stupidly, relieved that apparently nothing was going to happen. Rena frowned and tried to suppress her own laughter. She

took her hand off the pointer and looked at the pair of us, trying to appear stern, but failing miserably.

“Honestly, you two!” she chided. “I wouldn’t want to come and talk to us either if I was dead, what with you sitting there giggling. Be serious!”

“We *are* being serious,” I said, shoulders now heaving with laughter. “Well, *I* was before I caught *her* laughing – she started it.” Lex had tears in her eyes from trying to hold it all together.

“Bloody *charming!*” Lex retaliated, trying to sound offended.

“Give it one more try,” Rena implored us. The little candle flickered and spat as a piece of debris near the wick got caught up in the flame. The sound made me jump. I shivered suddenly, the laughter quickly fading away from my lips. I rubbed the backs of my arms. The short-sleeved shirt I was wearing had been warm enough up until a moment ago.

“You couldn’t turn the heating up a few degrees, could you Rena? I’m feeling a bit chilly.”

“Sure... just... just have one more go first?” She fluttered her eyelashes at me. I rolled my eyes and grudgingly reached out for the pointer again. “Oh, you’re such a diamond,” Rena gushed, happy again. Lex leaned on the edge of the table with her chin resting in one hand, her other hand reaching out for the pointer. Rena placed her finger on the edge of the pointer and took another deep breath, ready to try and coax the spirits into her little front room again.

Ouija

It was at that moment that the pointer jumped under our fingers. All three of us snatched our fingers away from the pointer and just stared down at the board. The hairs stood to attention on my arms and on the back of my neck. My heart began to pound. Lex looked worried, her eyes darting between Rena and me.

“Was that you?” I asked no one in particular. My hand hovered hesitantly over the board, not wanting to touch it anymore. I desperately wanted one of my friends to start laughing, wanted one of them to admit that they were just messing around.

“No,” Rena replied quietly, giving the board a sideways look. “Lex?” Lex had sat back on her haunches and was playing with her gold hoop earrings, her face creased with a frown. She didn’t take her eyes off the dusty board for a moment.

“Nothing to do with me, whatsoever.” I edged around the coffee table and shrank back against the sofa, wishing I had put my foot down a little more firmly about Rena’s Ouija board.