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How to Seduce a Ghost

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

When Astrid McKenzie went up in flames at the end of my road I was fast asleep in my bed, dreaming about my mother.

Had they ever met, I think Astrid and my mother would have got along rather well. They are two of a kind, which is to say they are everything I am not. I didn't really know Astrid except to nod to in the street but the word in the market—on which I rely for virtually all my gossip—is that she was a live wire. My mother is a naturally gregarious person, who leaps about the place like a mountain goat most of the time. Frankly, I'm amazed they haven't signed her up to model for one of those over-fifty-five fitness programs that offer to rejuvenate your mind and body, or a fashion spread in *Saga* magazine. She has that lithe, eager-beaver look about her and I imagine talk of a party will still get her ears flapping when she's ninety.

I, on the other hand, am what they call a loner. Or, and here's a word that really makes me cringe, a homebody. I like to live vicariously. I realized pretty early on that my aim in life was not to sit night after night in the Met Bar getting smashed and going home with the first hot guy to buy me a cosmopolitan. Nevertheless I wanted to hear about the people who did, just as when I refused invitations to glamorous parties and sat home, happily watching the box, I looked forward to the calls the next

morning from all and sundry with a detailed account of everything I missed.

I never got the point of going out all the time. I never had the stamina for a start, but I also always preferred being one-on-one with someone and you could have a cozy dinner à deux at home just as easily as going to a crowded restaurant. The problem is, while I don't think there's anything wrong with spending a lot of time on one's own, I have to admit that my antisocial lifestyle is not the norm. I mean, I don't know anyone else like me, and it worries me sometimes. Everyone's always saying things like *You should get out more, You're only young once, It's not healthy sitting at home on your own all the time.* I think it makes them uncomfortable having a friend who's not like them but I notice it doesn't stop them making me a captive audience for all their problems. They seem to like the idea that, more often than not, I'll be home alone and ready to listen. Of course I turn on the answering machine and screen my calls for days on end and that really turns me into a hermit. It's been particularly bad lately and if I don't get a grip on myself soon, I am in danger of becoming seriously unglued. Sooner or later my life is going to require a major shake-up or else I'll join forces with Astrid and spontaneously combust. I'm talking about all areas—work, living arrangements, and most important, my love life for, despite my reclusive nature, I do have a long-standing boyfriend. But, I find myself wondering far too often lately: For how much longer?

I feel terrible that while Astrid crackled away I was totally oblivious to her suffering. My mother maintains you always dream in opposites so I suppose it makes sense that in my dream she was running toward me with her arms outstretched, ready to embrace me. This simply does not happen in real life, which is probably why I was so deeply ensconced in the dream, enjoying something I never normally experienced, that I never heard the crackling of the flames only a little way down the road.

Astrid was a children's television presenter. I was always mildly intrigued that she was one of my neighbors because she was a minicelebrity and celebrities are my stock in trade. I'm a ghostwriter. I'm the "as told to" or the "written with" in small type you see underneath the celebrity's name on the cover of their autobiography. Every time I hear the name of someone in the news I automatically start asking questions, filing away a mental profile, just in case. Although Astrid was hardly likely to need a ghostwriter now.

But Astrid, it seemed, was not responsible for the blazing inferno that killed her. I first learned about the fire when I watched the local news on breakfast TV. It had started just after midnight. I must have slept through all the sirens. Seeing the street where I lived on television was unnerving. I pulled a pair of jeans on and rushed outside to look at the charred remains of Astrid's little mews house. The crowds and the press had already accumulated in the street outside and I noted that one or two of the women wearing particularly high heels were having a problem with the cobblestones in the mews. This was exactly the kind of inappropriate detail I would take into account rather than facing up to the unpleasant fact that there was a dead body lying in the house. She'd gone to the trouble of painting the outside pale pink and she must have started very recently because only yesterday the postman had come away cursing the pink paws he received when he tried to put her mail through the letterbox. What a shame, since it was now almost totally blackened by soot, I thought irrelevantly. Anything to ward off the images that would begin to terrify me at any moment.

"It's all right, love, they already took her away." Chris, a merchant I knew from Portobello Market touched my elbow. "You look terrible. Did you know her?"

I shook my head. "No, I never met her."

"Well, you won't now. I heard she was dead when they carried her out. That's her bedroom up there"—he pointed to a window toward the back of the house overlooking the mews—"that's where they found her."

And then it began to hit me. I had a sudden flash of Astrid waking up to a wall of fire around her bed. I wondered what went through your mind when faced with something like that? Did you automatically leap out of bed and try to wade through it? Would you stop to think about anything at all in the face of such danger? What would it be like to know that in a few seconds you would be subjected to heat that would cause your flesh to fry, your blood to boil, and your bones to snap, crackle, pop into powder. These were the kind of thoughts that would now begin to haunt me. Sometimes I lie awake, working myself up into a state of panic imagining the worst kind of violent death I could encounter. Plane crashes have always been favorites. Boating accidents and drowning feature high on the list. It doesn't matter that I made the swim team at school and passed the lifesaving exam. Somehow I will be caught in the perfect storm with drowning the only option. Elevator cables snapping, tornadoes hurling the car I am in through the air, sharks lurking beneath the surface in a bay where they have never been seen before, waiting to bite my leg off. I've entertained all these eventualities and many more.

And then of course there's murder. They're all out there waiting for me but murder is the worst. One night, while I'm fast asleep, someone is going to creep into my bedroom and smother me with a pillow. It doesn't help that I live in Notting Hill, an area of west London that has more than its fair share of crime. The carnival that takes place over the August Bank Holiday weekend is known for its race- and drug-related violence and there has been a stabbing at the end of my road two years running. I hear talk in the market of people opening their front doors in the morning to

find blood on their doorsteps. It doesn't seem to matter that mine is a designated "ritzy neighborhood" to which tourists flock on a Saturday afternoon. What they never mention in the guide books is that living side-by-side with the celebrity residents gathering their organic groceries and frequenting the amazing number of fancy bars and coffee shops that have sprung up all over the place, are junkies, prostitutes, and dealers armed to the teeth. The only clue is the crumbling facade of the stucco-fronted crack house whose walls abut a millionaire's mansion.

I know the kids who grew up across the street from me and with whom I used to play hopscotch on Saturday mornings are now busy heating up their cocaine in a solution of baking soda until the water evaporates and they have their base cocaine. Many a night I can hear the whirring of police helicopters hovering overhead and I know that someone's getting stabbed somewhere. I force myself to ignore them and the danger their presence signifies. I huddle away in my house and pretend I'm safe. I know I'm behaving like an irresponsible ostrich, but once I allow even a snippet of the outside world to penetrate, my imagination starts to run riot.

So Astrid's death at such close quarters had really shaken me and I couldn't stop thinking about her. Nor, it seemed, would I be allowed to banish her from my mind even if I wanted to. Clearly, the fire was all anyone in my neighborhood was going to talk about for quite a while.

"You know," said Chris, looking at his watch, "it's eight forty-five. She'd have been on round about now for her morning slot. Johnny, two stalls down, told me his wife always parked their youngest in front of her when the older kids left for school. It upset him seeing his brothers and sisters leaving him, but Astrid took his mind off it. She was a lovely person. Did you watch her at all?"

"Never. Was she married? Did she have kids of her own?" I realized I didn't know much about Astrid beyond seeing her in the street and the pictures in the *Sun* the market merchants sometimes showed me of her leaving nightclubs on the arm of footballers or B-list pop idols.

"No, she had a bit of a problem in that department."

"She couldn't have children?"

"Don't know about that. I meant the married bit. She wasn't."

"Why was it a problem?"

"She went in for the wrong sort of bloke. You could tell she . . . No." He stopped. "Shouldn't go into that. Don't want to speak ill of the dead. Listen, gotta run. I'm supposed to be picking up a couple of sacks of potatoes from the lockup. Carrots are lovely this week and I've got some of them sweet potatoes I know you like. Stop by later."

I went home to tip Tommy out of bed and get him off to work. Tommy Kennedy is the "love life" I've begun to wonder about that I mentioned earlier, my boyfriend if you can call a man in his early forties a *boy*friend. He'd stayed the night, not something I encourage on a regular basis but I'd had too much to drink and when that happens my resistance is low. I knew I'd regret it later.

Tommy got in under the wire about eight years ago and while we're still seeing each other, the precarious state of our relationship is something I keep pushing under the carpet along with the rest of my worries. The problem is he's ready to get married and have kids and I'm not. I've got the biological clock—I'm nearly forty—but he's the one keeping time. He'd settle for just moving in with me but I don't want that either. I'm quite happy on my own. I take my ghostwriting very seriously. The last thing I need is an overweight radio engineer cluttering up my life, demanding meals on the table, and turning up the television to full volume whenever Chelsea score a goal. I need peace and quiet to order.

Or, to put it another way, I'm just terrified what would happen if we spent too much time together. Tommy has the patience of a saint but I don't know how he'd react when faced with constant exposure to my neurotic phobias. I keep telling myself I love Tommy and that I don't want to lose him but I'm not 100 percent sure I still believe what I'm saying. I pretend to myself that we're doing fine as we are and the more people urge me to think about settling down, the more I resist it. The thing is, I *am* settled down. Marrying Tommy would only unsettle me.

Tommy works for the BBC in the bowels of Broadcasting House and he has the complexion to prove it. He's gray. If I had the time I'd spend a week spying on him to check if he ever sees daylight. He works underground in a studio all day and I know he doesn't go out to lunch because if he ever does stay the night here, I have to make him sandwiches to take to work the next morning. Cheese and pickle on white. I keep a jar of Branston specially. That's about the extent of my culinary activities as far as poor Tommy's concerned. I have to make at least four sandwiches. They didn't call him Thomas the Tank Engine for nothing when he was at school although I confess I find his solid bulk reassuring when the helicopters are hovering and the police sirens are roaring up Ladbroke Grove.

We met when I went along to the recording of a late-night chat show with one of my subjects, as I call them. I think it was the medium. I seem to remember she did a lot of radio. Spooky phone-ins with people calling to see if their loved ones would get in touch over the airwaves from the other side.

Tommy wandered in and out of the studio with earphones hanging round his neck and did a lot of very pretentious fiddling with knobs. Then he asked me if I'd like to go for a Kit Kat and a cup of BBC tea.

The basement of Broadcasting House is not the most romantic

venue for a first date. He led me down a long underground corridor to a vending machine, asked me if I had any change before we progressed to an empty canteen. We sat under the kind of harsh fluorescent lighting that probably gives you bags under your eyes and wrinkles if you are under twenty, let alone approaching forty. But it didn't seem to bother him.

He didn't say much but I found his presence oddly reassuring. I always have. The only thing I remember about that first encounter was that he asked:

"Why are you so nervy? Why do you look so worried? Why do you keep lining up the salt and the pepper and the ashtray?"

"I don't know. I probably have an obsessive-compulsive disorder or whatever it's called. I have to touch things a certain number of times, I won't walk through a door until I've touched the jamb four times. I can't go to sleep if I don't have a certain pillow."

"Weird," said Tommy. "I suppose you wash your hands fifteen times a day."

"You're not taking me seriously."

"I'm taking you perfectly seriously," he told me, smiling. "I just think you're talking a lot of rubbish, that's all. I suspect you might be a bit neurotic, a bit of a worrier rather than this obsessive thing. Still, something seems to be bothering you, you're all jumpy."

"It's the radio show," I confessed. "Listening to her just now, it reminded me of all those people she got in touch with who died such violent deaths. I hated doing the book, writing up all the gory details and the way they were still in pain when she caught up with their spirits."

"'Caught up with their spirits'! You believe all that crap?" Tommy was incredulous but when I started to tell him about how freaked out I could get at the thought of someone coming to a grisly end, his face softened. He listened in a way nobody else ever had and he didn't laugh at me the way most people did when I

tried to explain how the mere mention of physical danger could start my imagination working overtime.

"You funny old thing," he said affectionately when I'd finished. "What a waste of energy."

"It's not that I think I'll die tomorrow," I said, "just that when I do it'll be horrible and agonizing."

"It's all in the mind," he said. "You do know that, don't you? You're no more likely to encounter the kind of violent end you keep thinking about than you are to slip away quietly in your sleep. So stop worrying. It's a waste of time. Just deal with problems when they turn up, that's what I do. I don't see the point of fretting about something unless you can actually do something about it. Like right now. I'm not going to hover in the background while they record the show. They'll holler if they need me."

At that point they hollered and he disappeared, but first he scribbled down my phone number.

When he called I don't know what made me say yes to a pizza and a movie just as I don't really know why we're still together after all this time. I had a bunch of snotty friends at the time, cynical up-and-comers. People with whom I had nothing in common other than that we were fellow journalists, destined to go in opposite directions. I don't know how I drifted into such a disagreeable crowd but I was too young and callow to be able to extricate myself from their midst. Unwittingly, Tommy managed to do this for me. They took one look at him and dubbed him the Radio Nerd assuming he'd be out of my life so fast they needn't bother getting to know him. As it turned out they were wrong. I found myself spending more and more time with Tommy and losing touch with them. He began to grow on me until it got to the point where he was a more or less permanent fixture in my life. Radio Nerd he might be, but he turned out to be an expert lover. Must be something to do with twiddling all those knobs. Yet it was more than that. He

was so completely my opposite that his very presence was beneficial and I began to relax for the first time in my life. And the one time we did split up for about four months—when he realized I was serious about not letting him move in with me—I discovered to my horror that I missed him dreadfully. It was as if someone had removed my television or my toaster or some other reliable and intermittently rewarding object in my life.

Tommy was emerging from the bathroom stark naked and dripping wet from the shower when I walked in.

"Tommy, you're making the floor all wet . . ." I began but he waved me away. He had the phone clamped to his ear.

"Christ, Genevieve, was it right here in this road? Are you sure? Is she dead? I never heard a thing. Good God, I'd better tell Lee, she's just walked in. Yeah, I'll tell her. I'll get her to call you if she can't make it." He hung up and returned to the bathroom to grab his towel. He looked a lot better from behind, I noted. His bum was still in quite good shape and he'd always had sensational shoulders. His biggest problem was his budding paunch that was starting to hang over the top of his jeans in a mildly off-putting manner. He reemerged rubbing himself vigorously with the towel and shaking his head so I was showered with beads of water.

"Lee, listen. You'll never believe what's happened right here in our street while we were fast asleep. Just up the road, incredible! That kids' television woman lives here, did you know? Well, let me tell you—"

"Tommy."

"No, let me finish. You never let me finish. This is really something. She's dead. Her house burned down last night. Let's go down and see if it's on TV yet."

I explained to him I had already seen it on TV and been down the road to look at the aftermath of the fire. He looked predictably crestfallen.

"You might have woken me up. Why did you let me miss all the fun?"

"I'd hardly call it fun. Somebody died, Tommy."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. It's awful." He looked sheepish.

"So what did Genevieve want so early in the morning?" Genevieve is my agent.

"Well, she wanted to be the first to call you about the fire and she has a job for you. She was very mysterious. Wouldn't say who it was who needed a ghost, she wants to surprise you. Can you go to her office at three this afternoon? She's out and about till then so only call her back and leave a message if you can't make it. Otherwise just show up. So, did your mother get off okay?"

I caught the note of resentment in his voice. My mother had just been over from France where she lives. She was with me for five days and I banished Tommy from the house for the duration. It had nothing to do with them not getting on—the few times they met, they appeared to have rather liked each other. What I couldn't stand was the thought of having the two of them in the house at the same time, getting in my way while I was trying to work.

It's a bit exhausting having a whirlwind for a mother. Tommy's mother, Noreen, whom I adore, couldn't be more different. She's got a mind of her own and plenty of opinions to go with it but she'll sit and listen to you for hours if she senses you've got a problem. My mother races through life going a mile a minute and expects everyone else to keep up. To be honest I gave up years ago. She's always been like this. She used to have a pretty impressive career in advertising—I remember being taken to her office when I was a child and watching her boss a lot of people around—but she gave it all up when Dad retired and off they went to France, and that too was impressive. Dad was a lifelong Francophile and it had always been his dream to cross the

Channel for his retirement. Instead of fighting it, my mother supported the idea from the start but it must have been a huge sacrifice for her to leave her busy London social life and bury herself in the French countryside. She can't even count on me to live it for her and I think she takes her frustration with her current state out on me. I know my hermitlike existence is a huge disappointment to her and whenever I see her now, I revert to being a seven-year-old and stand there letting her berate me for not living the life she had lined up for me.

It always made me sad the way she failed to get the point of me but I accepted it. I appreciated her need for an active social life and all the conventional trappings that went with it. I wanted her to have all the things that made her happy but at the same time I knew it was a waste of time expecting her to reciprocate. That's what upset me. She loved her daughter, Lee, some abstract person I barely recognized, but I never felt she loved *me.* How could she? She'd never taken the trouble to find out what made me tick.

As usual her visit caught me on the hop. She never gives me any warning, just turns up, lets herself in, and proceeds to give me hell the entire time she's here. Of course she's entirely justified. My parents and I have a deal. When they retired to France a few years ago, they said I could live in the house on condition that I took care of its upkeep. I said, *Wow! Thanks, yes please, no problem.* Living rent free in a four-story Georgian house in the middle of Notting Hill Gate is probably the best deal anyone's likely to get even if it's no longer a particularly fashionable part of London—but I'm this close to blowing it. I've let the house fall to wrack and ruin and pretty soon there is going to be the most almighty showdown. Every time I pick up the phone to call the plumber, the carpenter, or the window cleaner I start thinking about the noise and the disruption to my precious solitude and I hang up. Men on ladders are my particular aversion. They always leave them propped

against the window so someone can hop up them, climb in, and murder me while I'm asleep. Or while I'm awake, come to think of it.

I know I'm unbelievably spoiled to have such a big house all to myself. I tell myself that over and over again and at least once a week I get into bed and *swear* just before I fall asleep that I'm going to get everything taken care of first thing in the morning.

Never happens.

I'm still not quite clear of the real purpose of my mother's visit, if indeed she had anything else in mind other than terrorizing me. She charged about the house brandishing a list and flapping it in my face.

"The pressure in the shower on the top floor, it's nonexistent, Lee. They must be able to do *something*. What did they say?"

I kept quiet, always the best thing to do. Most of her questions were rhetorical anyway.

"The gutters are full of leaves, you absolutely must get them cleared. The windowsills are falling apart inside and out, I mean they are literally *crumbling*. And I thought we agreed you'd get the floors in the living room sanded."

We agreed no such thing. I wasn't going to put up with the noise and the smell of that awful sanding machine in a million years.

"And there's no bath plug in the guest bathroom. There never is. I bought six last time I was over. What do you do, throw them out the window when you get out of the tub?"

I was rather intrigued. Losing six bath plugs was something of an achievement. I opened my mouth to say Tommy was the only person to use the guest bathroom and then shut it again. I didn't want her demanding to see Tommy.

"At least you got the dishwasher repaired." I kept quiet there too. There'd never been anything wrong with the dishwasher so

there was no way I could have had it repaired. "But the water in the sink doesn't run away. It must be blocked. What have you done with the plunger?"

I looked at her. I don't think I'd recognize a plunger if you whacked me over the head with it.

But of course all these things were nothing compared with the big problem: The Damp. I had riffled through the Yellow Pages a few times looking for ads that included the words "damp course" and that was as far as it went. But I had the drop on her here. I had taken the precaution of locking the door to the basement and hiding the key. If you opened the door the smell of the damp festering below smacked you full in the face. But I was on safe ground for the simple reason that I couldn't for the life of me remember where I had put the key. No one was going to have access to the basement unless they bashed the door down.

When it became clear that the only item remaining on her list was the damp, I took the drastic step of diverting her attention by inquiring what she and my father were planning to do for Christmas.

"You and Tommy are coming to stay with us in France. New Year's too if you want."

This wasn't quite what I'd asked. Nor was it what I wanted to do for Christmas. And there was something else. I'd had my father on the phone a couple of weeks ago and I had distinctly heard him say he would be in London for Christmas and was looking forward to seeing me then.

"Dad said—" I began.

"I don't care what your father said. I want you to come to France."

"But—"

"Lee, please, *PLEASE,* just this once. Come to France, bring Tommy, let's make it a nice family Christmas."

I could have sworn there was a slight catch in her voice, as if she were about to break down, but this was so unlike my mother that I dismissed it. But she was suddenly looking so forlorn for some reason that I said "I'll speak to Tommy," knowing I would do no such thing.

She perked up immediately. "We'll have such fun. Now while I'm here I'm going to call people to come and deal with all these repairs."

"I'll do it." I held out my hand for the list. If I didn't take charge there would be nonstop banging throughout the house for the next seven days.

"Well, I know how it interferes with your work," she said, handing it over. I was amazed. She was never usually so considerate about my writing. "So making the calls is the least I can do, but if you're sure?" She looked doubtful. "Anyway, I've been thinking, Lee, maybe I should get a lodger in the guest bedroom and leave him or her in charge of the upkeep of the house—for a lower rent, of course. Then you wouldn't have to worry about it all."

This was one conversation I did not want to get into. I was leaning over the counter and I had my back to her. I picked up a pen and pretended to be writing something, acting like I hadn't heard her. Then I took her list and Scotch-taped it to the front of the fridge.

"There," I said, "now I can't possibly miss it. So let me take you out for dinner, Mum. How long did you say you were staying?"

When she finally left, her list had increased right down to the bottom of the page. She'd added to it every day in her tiny handwriting that looked as if a bird had dipped its claw in ink and scratched away at the paper. It reminded me of the indecipherable scrawl on a doctor's prescription. That was as good an excuse as any. *Sorry, Mum. Couldn't take care of anything. Couldn't read your writing.*

"So how was she?" Tommy had finished drying himself and was on his hands and knees searching for his socks under the bed. "By the way the pressure in your shower's a disaster. You ought to do something about it."

"Tommy," I said, fishing one of his socks out from halfway down the bed, "you want it fixed, *you* do something about it."

I stomped out of the bedroom and up to my office where I tried to ignore the sound of the Dixie Chicks coming from the radio in the kitchen five minutes later. Why Tommy always had to have everything going full blast was beyond me. And of course when I heard the front door slam behind me as he rushed out, late for work as usual, I had to stomp all the way down to the kitchen to turn the radio off, something it would never occur to him to do.

By the time I left for my meeting with Genevieve later that day, the *Evening Standard,* which appeared at noon, had the story.

ASTRID MCKENZIE DIES IN BLAZE
Suspicious Fire at TV Presenter's Notting Hill House

Suspicious fire. I read the whole story. They were very careful, it was all supposition, bets were hedged all over the place, no concrete statements that could get them into trouble, but the message was pretty clear. Check in with them later. They might have an arson story to print.

I stopped by Chris's stall in the market. I pay him a visit three or four times a week to pick up my fruit and veg. He's part of my marketing routine. I shop at the same places until they close down and I am forced to go elsewhere. I've lived in the Blenheim Crescent house for as long as I can remember and my mother sometimes used to send me along the road to pick up a last minute lettuce or some parsnips or something. In those days you wouldn't think twice about sending a little girl out on her own on an

errand. The stall had been in Chris's family going back two generations and there'd be a welcome from his mother once I arrived. I'm such a creature of habit that I continued going to the same stall even after she retired. Besides, it wasn't as if I didn't know Chris. He was about five years younger than me, and as he was growing up, he'd be there behind the stall on Saturdays, helping his mum. I remember him as a cocky little boy. There didn't appear to be a father anywhere in the picture and I never learned the reason why although it didn't seem to bother Chris. He could shout louder than anyone else in the market even when he was a young lad.

"Seen this?" I flapped the *Standard* in his face.

"Doesn't surprise me. I didn't want to mention it earlier but what the hell? Word on the market is she fancied a bit of rough. Got herself beaten up pretty bad once or twice. Someone probably had it in for her."

"You mean . . . ?" I didn't like the sound of this.

"Sure as eggs is eggs. I'll bet you two pounds of Golden Delicious she was murdered."