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The Second Life of Amy Archer

Written by R. S. Pateman

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The Second Life of Amy Archer

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I

Sometimes I see her in the roundabout's blur. Hear a giggle in the squeak of the slide. But she's not really there, of course. Nor are the slide or the swings.

The council have ripped out the rickety see-saw and roundabout and replaced them with more modern playground equipment: a bucket swing, gyroscope, fountain and sand pit, traversed by platforms and zip wires. For safe but adventurous play.

They've moved the site of the playground too, shunting it to the other side of the park so it's close to the café. Parents now chat and drink cappuccinos as their children dangle, dig and spin.

But I have been robbed of the last place Amy was ever seen.

The old playground, the one Amy knew and loved, has been swallowed by smooth tarmac and marked out as courts for umpteen different ball sports. Lines and circles criss-cross the tarmac, like a dropped geometry set.

No one seems to know what the courts are for; I've never seen them being used. Not for sports, anyway. Today is no different.

Beneath a buckled, net-less hoop, a gang of boys smoke,

their heads bowed over mobile phones. They look up as I get closer to the fence. I grip the bouquet in my hand tighter. The cellophane rustles.

I avoid the boys' stares as I bend down to lean the flowers against the glossy blue railings. They're new too, straighter than the previous ones. Stronger too, I hope, capable of keeping children in.

I take off my gloves and adjust the card on the flowers. *For my darling girl. Forgive me. Love always, Mum xxx.*

I clasp my hands together and dip my head. My words are misted by the chilled air, little puffs of prayer that evaporate into nothing, just as Amy did.

I stand up, using the railings for support, and pull my gloves on. I wonder if the park staff will clear the flowers away tomorrow morning, like they did last year. Maybe they won't even last that long.

The bouquets I've seen attached to lampposts, marking the scene of fatal road accidents, remain until the stems are withered and the cellophane around them is shredded and grey. They are as much road safety warnings as acts of remembrance. My bouquet is no different, although the danger it warns of is stealthier than a speeding car and trickier for parents to explain.

At the end of the path I stop and look back. If I'd been here to turn around and look, ten years ago today, keeping watch, like a mother should . . .

One of the gang gives a sarcastic wave. The others laugh and mutter. The flowers will probably be kicked around before I'm even out of the park, or lobbed through the

basketball hoops, the petals making the tarmac's geometry even more hectic.

Cold bites at my face. Frost ghosts the branches of the plane trees and makes a glistening web of the nets on the tennis courts. The clock on St Mark's church chimes ten.

I have an hour before my appointment, enough time for a coffee – but not in the park's café. I can't bear to walk past the playground, let alone sit in earshot of the children's squeals and squabbles. The scrapes and grazes, the tears and hugs that heal. That is intolerable even on an ordinary day, and today is no ordinary day.

I pull my coat up around my neck and walk towards the park gates.

The receptionist looks up as I open the door. She must be new; I haven't seen her before. Her smile is quick and efficient.

'Can I help?'

'Beth Archer,' I say, unbuttoning my coat. 'I have an appointment at eleven.'

Her eyes drop to the diary on her desk. Ragged fingernails drag down the list of handwritten names.

'Ah, yes. Eleven o'clock with Ian Poynton.' She smiles again. 'He's our new boy.'

'Yes,' I say. 'I know.'

I've been dubious about seeing Ian. The picture on the website shows a boyish face framed by a schoolboy haircut. He looks too young to be qualified to do anything, let alone speak with the dead.

My doubts over his credentials feed a creeping scepticism that has dogged my annual visit over the last few years. I've shut it out because I want to believe Amy will come through to me. But I also want my hope in psychics to be proved right as much as I want – *need* – Brian's cynicism to be wrong.

I made my husband come with me the very first time I went, soon after Amy first went missing.

'If not for my sake, then for Amy's,' I said. 'She's your daughter too.'

He sat outside the room, huffing and puffing, tapping his foot on the floor, muttering about it all being a waste of time, a con. He was no better once we got inside, and refused to shake the hand of the tiny, white-haired old woman who ushered us into the room.

She introduced herself as Edna Hussey and asked us to close our hands in silent prayer as she summoned her spirit guide, Akara. Brian snorted but loosely linked his fingers.

'I'm not getting anything. Except a sense of resistance,' Edna said.

She screwed her eyes up in concentration and fiddled with the hearing aid in her left ear. Brian suggested that she change the battery. When she failed to deliver anything conclusive, he sneered that she should change the frequency too.

'That will get it working as efficiently as my bullshit detector,' he said, and walked out.

I muttered a quick apology and hurried after him. But

I made another appointment for the following week. And the month after that. Every month, in fact, for a year.

'If psychics had loyalty cards, you'd have enough air miles to fly around the world,' Brian would say. 'I wonder if their air miles can only be redeemed for astral flying?'

He said it was just holding me back, preventing me from moving on. My counsellor took the same line.

But I can't give up on Amy, not altogether. I let her down once before and she paid with her life, although of course her body has yet to be found. I'm not going to let her down again. If she tries to reach me from the other side, I have to be there.

If there is any one day when Amy's voice is more likely to be heard, it would be the anniversary of her disappearance, so I promised Brian I would cut back my visits and only go once a year.

'It's still one time too many,' he said. 'Just when you're starting to heal, you pick at the scab and open the wound again. I never had you down as a masochist.'

'I never had you down as a sadist.'

'*I'm* not hurting you, Beth.'

'You are if you don't let me go.'

I didn't need his permission. I could have gone without him even knowing. But the secrecy would only have made it feel grubby and sordid – as if I was doing something to be ashamed of. And I needed Brian to accept that it was part of my grieving process, even if he couldn't approve of it. My annual appointment was a grudging compromise that ate away at our marriage. One of them, anyway.

Over the years I've seen a succession of psychics. The pudgy man whose body odour soured the small room; a flint-eyed Scot who wore the same blouse and skirt whatever the weather; a former miner, breathless from nicotine and coal dust. Each of them gave me something: vague exhortations to go to America, a warning about my back or needing an eye test, jokes about doing too much housework. All of which had a kernel of truth, or seemed to have, at some point.

But none of them made contact with Amy.

'They haven't even got the decency to lie,' Brian said, as he tapped at his laptop on the kitchen table. 'Well, lie even more than they already are about being psychic.' He shook his head. 'They must know who you are and why you're there. All they need to do is say Amy's fine and is watching over you and sends her love. But they can't even do that. Or won't.' He sniggered. 'Fortune. Teller. They're well named. Counting cash doesn't have quite the same ring.'

'It's *because* they don't lie that I keep going back,' I said. 'You're right, they could easily tell me what I want to hear, build a reputation on it, but they don't. Why?'

'You tell me.'

'Integrity.'

Brian chuckled.

'From a psychic? Don't make me laugh.' He stood up and kissed me in the centre of my forehead, where my 'third eye' should be. 'Beth, the only thing they see coming is you. But as you seem to think it helps . . .'

It did. And it still does, although I don't know why. Whatever it is, I keep going back, a compulsive gambler who needs one more throw of the dice that might, *just might*, be the one that wins the jackpot.

Even though my faith is dwindling, I hope Ian succeeds. According to his biography on the website, his approach is modern and fresh. Maybe that's what Amy needs.

Let her be here today. Let her speak. Help me hear her.

The receptionist tells me to wait outside room twelve.

'It's just up the stairs,' she says, 'just—'

'Thank you. I know the way.'

She gives another quick smile and I turn and climb the stairs. Other people don't come back as often as I do, I think. Maybe they don't hear what they want either and have got wise to the ruse quicker than I have.

The white paint of the narrow corridor is scuffed by shoe and elbow marks – mostly mine, probably – and the thinning carpet is grubby. The chairs outside each of the rooms are empty, the doors closed.

A sign outside room twelve says there's a sitting in progress and asks not to be interrupted. Another sign instructs passers-by to be quiet.

The door opens and a young woman steps out, eyes bright and energised. She loops a scarf around her neck and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

'Thanks again,' she says over her shoulder, and closes the door. 'He said to give him a few minutes before you go in.'

I nod.

'He's very good,' she whispers. 'He got that I was pregnant right away. A boy, he said.'

She screws her face up in delight. I do my best to smile my congratulations.

My eyes drop to her belly. It is flat, inscrutable. It could have just been a lucky guess, but guess or not, he's got it right. The fact of it anyway; the detail has yet to be proved.

The woman walks away, her step light. I envy her certainty, her confidence that what she's heard is true. I resent the fact that she's been told something meaningful at all.

The door opens quickly, startling me.

'Sorry!' he says. 'Didn't mean to make you jump. Come on in.'

He stands back to let me pass. He's shorter than I thought he'd be, but his eyes are as blue as they were in his picture – a glacial blue, one eye set slightly higher than the other, refracting his gaze. If any eyes can see into heaven, his can.

'I'm Ian, the newbie,' he says, sitting down at a small table and waving me towards a chair on the other side. 'Have you been here before?'

I nod.

'So you know how this works? About—'

'There are no guarantees. I know.'

My tone sounds defeated, even to me. It must sound suspicious to him, as if I'm daring him to prove that he can really do it. And I suppose I am.

Somewhere inside me I sense the shadow of doubt

darken. It isn't personal; it is not *his* clairvoyance I doubt as such, but the possibility of communion with the dead, full stop.

I twitch with irritation, angry at Brian, at Ian, at my own circumspection. Angry that, even now, I'm still hoping I'm wrong.

Ian pulls his chair in closer. His face is flawless, its skin smooth and waxy; only the faintest of lines appear when he smiles. He reminds me of a choirboy; even his voice is suitably musical. I reach into my handbag and take out my portable cassette recorder.

Ian smiles.

'I haven't seen one of those for a while,' he says. 'Most people use the digital recorders now.'

I feel old and out of touch. Vulnerable.

He leans towards me. 'Are you all set?'

I nod, and he takes my hand.

His approach isn't new, just more direct. Who's Arthur? Who's thinking of getting a new car? Why am I being shown a bunch of heather? I sense he's fishing and I have no answers to fit neatly on his hook.

'Will you take it anyway?' he says, after I give each question a shrug. Even his catchphrase is more direct than the psychics I've seen before. They just say 'I'll leave it with you', or 'Maybe its meaning will come to you later.' Ian demands a response, my participation, as though he needs the reassurance. Each time he asks if I will take it, I answer with a shrug.

He coughs and closes his eyes. His breathing is deep

and deliberate. Then he changes tack and talks of darkness lifting, of escaping quicksand, of problems bursting like bubbles, all delivered in a gentle, chiming tone.

He sees a 'For Sale' sign, alerts me to an important turning point in the spring but doesn't specify what it is or which year, and nags me to take more supplements to help with my apparently feeble joints.

I stop listening, nod when his tone implies I should respond and sneak a look at my watch. When he asks if I have any particular questions or issues I want help with, I say no, like I always do. He is here to interpret, not for me to prompt. He must lead for me to believe.

'Was that all right?' he asks when our thirty minutes are up. 'Helpful?'

'Thank you,' I say, switching off the cassette recorder and slipping it back into my bag.

He opens the door, smiles, says he hopes to maybe see me again. As I pass, he puts a hand on my shoulder. His head is tilted to one side and he's staring at a corner of the ceiling in a strange, unfocused way.

'She's close,' he says. 'The little girl. Close.'

The ground seems to buckle beneath me. I've waited so long for something – anything – that I could link to Amy. Now it's here I'm flushed with surprise and relief; I feel vindicated in my persistence, glad that I haven't let Amy down once again. But there is something else too: fear.

Before, I was scared she wouldn't come through to me. Now, I'm afraid of what she might say, of learning the truth.

I put my hand against the door for support.

'Who?' I say breathlessly.

He screws his eyes up, tilts his head the other way, tuning in.

'I'm being shown an E,' he says. 'No, wait . . . There are two of them. A capital E and a small one.' He nods and opens his eyes. 'Sorry. It's gone. Eleanor? Elizabeth? Ellie, maybe? Will you take it anyway?'

He looks anxious, as if he needs to get something right, not for my sake, but for his.

Only he's got it wrong. If he'd given me an A instead of an E, I'd have taken it and insisted we continue the reading. But he hasn't even got one letter right. Disappointment snuffs out my flickering faith.

The smile from the receptionist is snide and knowing. As I close the door behind me, I know I will never come back here again.

Outside, the air is brittle cold. I breathe it in deeply, feel giddy from its chill and purge.

At home, there's a message from Jill on the answerphone, reminding me of her New Year's 'gathering' later on.

'Nothing fancy,' she says. 'Just a few friends, some bits from M and S and a couple of bottles of bubbly. I know you prefer to stay in. I understand why. But, well, if you fancy a change – a break – you're more than welcome.'

I delete the message. I cannot face a party, informal or otherwise. I have my own New Year's Eve ritual: flowers at the playground, a sitting with a psychic, a bout of furious

housework and sobs so loud they drown out the midnight booms and bangs from the celebrations along the Thames. Doing anything else is unthinkable to me and disrespectful to Amy.

I pick up the phone and dial Brian's number, my call yet another part of my vigil. He answers within three rings.

'Beth,' he says. 'I thought it would be you.'

His intonation is flat and matter-of-fact. Joyless. I am one of his New Year's Eve chores. Like taking out the rubbish. 'How's things?'

'I'm . . .' I bite back the tears.

'Oh Beth, please.'

'Ten years, Brian, ten years.'

'I know. I haven't forgotten.'

'I didn't say you had.'

There's a pause, as if he's counting up to ten, cutting me some slack. In the background I can hear pop music and girlish laughter. His new family, excited and ready to see in yet another new year.

'Sounds like you're having a party,' I say sulkily.

'No. It's just the girls mucking about in front of MTV.'

The girls. Not just one daughter, but two. Stepdaughters anyway. Amy's replacements. I grip the phone tight. I shouldn't resent them, but I do.

Instead of dedicating a bench to Amy's memory in the park like we'd agreed, Brian bought a session in a recording studio. The girls' school choir made a CD of show tunes and classic pop, including a song by her favourite group, the Spice Girls.

'It's better than a bench,' he said. 'Amy would have loved it.'

The dedication to her in the CD booklet was lost beneath the name of the choir and the list of its members, his daughters at the top. The Spice Girls' track wasn't even one of Amy's favourites and felt more like an instruction from Brian: *Stop*.

'I'd better go,' I say. 'Happy New Year.'

I hang up before he can meet my sarcasm with some stinging comment of his own.

I go into the kitchen, switch on Radio 4 and pull on my rubber gloves. Armed with bottles of bleach and polish and swathes of sponges and cloths, I set about each room. It's a big house, more room than the three of us needed really, so definitely too big for just one. But I won't move. It keeps me close to Amy. My memories of her are as integral to the structure as the walls and ceilings.

After the divorce Brian thought I'd sell up. A handsome red-brick Victorian villa overlooking the park, just five minutes' walk from the tube and within striking distance of several good private schools – I could downsize to something more manageable, with fewer memories.

'It's the memories I want,' I said.

'You can take them with you wherever you go. Amy will always be with you.'

'And I'll be here for her.'

If – by the most unlikely, fluky of chances – Amy *is* still alive, I must make it easy for her to find me, should she care to look. So there will be no 'For Sale' sign outside my

door, despite the psychic's prediction that there would be.

I spray and rub and buff until my arm aches and my brow is damp. The house smells of scented chemicals, a heady fog of lemon, lavender and pine; the Hoover adds a dusky base note of warm dust and rubber.

I sit for a moment in Amy's room, although there is no physical trace of her here. It is not a shrine; Brian saw to that. He cleared out her stuff a year after she vanished so we could begin to be free of her and find room for something else – each other maybe.

I watched as he carried out boxes and bags, weeping fitfully at Tracy Beaker books, Spice Girls posters, a tangled Slinky. I'd rescued a few favourites – her battered panda with the missing eye, the grubby Bagpuss, the bendy Postman Pat she hid so her friends wouldn't call her a baby – but the rest was swept away in an apocalyptic rush.

I made Brian promise he'd take it to charity shops in Streatham or Greenwich – anywhere but locally so we wouldn't have to see somebody else with our daughter's toys or clothes. He said that the Sue Ryder shop in Lewisham had been glad of the haul, but soon afterwards I saw a little girl in our local Tesco wearing Hello Kitty jeans with frayed hems, just like Amy's. The purple Puffa jacket looked familiar too.

I've had Amy's room decorated several times since then, and the curtains and bed linen have been replaced, but no one has ever slept in there. No one ever will. I never have guests, and there are several other bedrooms to choose from even if I did.

I wipe the mirror on the back of the door, where Amy used to watch herself pretending to be Baby Spice. All blonde and dreamy, blue-eyed and white-smiled. I see her in my reflection, although my mouth is set firm, my eyes flat and haunted by dark rings and crow's feet. My blonde hair is infused with grey, like mist in a cornfield, but lacks the elegance I've seen in other women of fifty-plus. But that discrepancy is nothing in comparison to the growing gap in my resemblance to Amy. Even my reflection is dissolving.

I put the cleaning materials back in the cupboard, rinse the rubber gloves and hang them over the side of the pristine butler sink. When I open the front door to put the rubbish bags in the wheelie bin, the sky is already dark and busy with premature fireworks. A Roman candle sends up intermittent puffs of colour; each one is announced by a soft pop of gunpowder, but reaches only a few feet into the air before flickering out – like my prayers to Amy and my calls for her to come back to me.

I shut the door, wash my hands and unwrap the tissue paper from around the creamy beeswax candle I bought from Borough Market. A match rasps against the box; the flame heats the spike of the iron candle-holder, which slides easily into the base of the candle. I carry it, unlit, into the front room and place it on the mantelpiece, next to the photo of Amy. It was taken in Zante, the year before she disappeared. She's brown as a Caramac, her smile fresh as surf. Behind her, the glint of sunlit water and the dazzle of white sand. Her cupped hands cradle a huge dead jellyfish,

its translucent blubber like a melted crystal ball.

I light the candle; shadows jump around the photo. Tears prick my eyes as I kiss the tip of my finger and press it to the glass of the picture frame.

I draw the curtains, then switch on the hi-fi. The CD I was listening to earlier is still in the player. The Spice Girls' Greatest Hits. I press '4' on the remote control, then the repeat button, and sit down facing Amy's picture, watching the candlelight dance on her sun-kissed face.

Mama.

Halfway through the fourth play, there's a knock on the door.

I turn the music down, hoping that whoever it is will go away. I want to be left to my vigil. But the knock comes again. Louder. The letter box rattles.

'Mrs Archer? Are you there?'

It's a woman's voice; not one I recognise and with an accent I can't quite place. I mute the music, then wish I hadn't, as it tells whoever it is that I'm in.

'Mrs Archer. Please. It's important.'

I stand up and peer through the curtains. I jump back. The woman's got her nose pressed to the window right in front of me. I gasp and let the curtain drop.

'Sorry!' she says. 'I didn't mean to scare you.'

'Go away,' I say loudly so that she can hear me through the glass. I hope she hears my insistence too.

'But I need to talk to you.'

'If it's about swapping electricity suppliers, I'm not interested. I'm busy.'

'That's not why I'm here,' she says quickly, her voice getting louder. 'Please. It's important. It's about Amy.'

'I've got nothing to say to the papers.'

'I'm not from the papers.'

'If you're the police, then show me your badge.'

'I'm not the police either.'

'So who are you? What do you want?'

'My name's Libby Lawrence. I really need to talk to you.' She sounds anxious and impatient. 'Face to face. Without a pane of glass between us. I've come a long way. Please. This isn't something you'd want shouted through a window or a letter box.'

I pull the curtain back. Deep auburn hair frames a pale-skinned face. Her eyes are a hectic blue. They hold mine and soften with the smile on her lips as I open the window.

'Well?'

'It's Amy,' she says. 'Mrs Archer, I know where she is.'

For years I've dreamed of someone bringing news of Amy. I've dreaded it too in equal measure. Hope or heartbreak on my doorstep. The police with news of a body. Journalists chasing gossip. Ghouls come to gawp or commiserate. Sometimes I used to think the knock might be from Amy herself.

My heart thumps.

This could be the moment I've waited for. All the questions of the last ten years finally finding an answer. It might be the chance to hold my daughter once again, feel her real and solid in my arms, the beat of her heart against

mine. Or the opportunity to lay her to rest, for us both to begin to find some peace.

All that agony of not knowing is suddenly swamped by fear of what I might discover. I want to know; I don't want to know. What this woman has to say could break me once and for all. I'm caught in a whirlpool of hope and horror and have nothing to cling to but myself – and that might not be enough. I fight for air, sink beneath waves of pain and sorrow, then crest the surface on a surge of hope and expectation.

I run to the front door. My trembling fingers fumble with the latch and pull the door ajar.

She's taller than she looked from the window and her face is made paler by the sliver of light falling through the doorway. Her smile falters. When she tries to speak, no words come. They desert me too. I take a deep breath. My question comes out in a desperate whisper.

'Where's my daughter?'

Libby swallows and bites her lip.

'It's a long story. You might want to sit down.'

Slowly I stand back and open the front door. The cold follows her into the hallway. She takes off her gloves and holds out her right hand. Her grip is brief but I can feel every bone in her fingers. I pull my hand away.

'I know this can't be easy,' she says. 'Believe me, it's not easy for me either.'

'Just tell me what you know,' I plead. 'Please.'

She shrugs and takes a breath.

'This is going to sound very odd. You'll think I'm mad – if you don't already.'

She takes my hand again. Once more I take it back.

'I know where Amy is.' Her voice is firm. Her tone final.

'So you've said. But . . . if her body had been found, they'd have sent the police round to tell me.'

'I haven't found her body.'

I lean against the wall, eyes closed, and pinch the bridge of my nose. I can barely find the breath or the courage to say out loud what I think she's telling me.

'I . . . don't understand. Do you mean . . .?' My head swims with impossible promise.

Libby nods imperceptibly.

'That's right, Mrs Archer. Amy is alive.'