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The Ex-Wife's Survival Guide

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Published by Pocket Books

Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Alcohol Does Not Encourage Clear Thinking

Sarah's father always said amateur dramatics was a dangerous pastime.

The danger, when it finally appeared, came in the shapely form of Hyacinth Harrington, who was the first new member to have joined the Ambercross Players in years. Audrey Masterton, the company's self-appointed director, took one look at her flaxen hair and her baby-blue eyes and gave her the main part in the forthcoming production of *Dear Octopus*, thus gravely offending Harriet Evans, who had played the romantic lead in every production for the last eighteen years and had expected to go on doing so for the next eighteen.

Sarah, despite her father's grave misgivings, had never been concerned about the dangers lying in wait for her husband. Andrew had been a member of the Players for fifteen years and had never shown any disposition to stray from the marital path even when the horrible wife of poor Martin Chamberlain had done her very best to lure him into her web with the now legendary invitation, 'Martin and I have an open marriage, if you know what I mean.' As if, as Andrew said to Sarah when

recounting the episode, poor old Martin would know what an open marriage *was*.

When Andrew came home and told Sarah he at last had a credible leading lady, Sarah was glad he would no longer be irritated by Harriet Evans's simpering imitation of youth. When Andrew returned from rehearsals, enthusing about Hyacinth's charismatic stage presence, Sarah said with genuine sincerity that she couldn't wait to meet her. When Andrew came home from rehearsals in the early hours, she didn't bat an eyelid. When she watched the final performance she was moved by the intensity of Andrew's scenes with Hyacinth, and when she said this to Martin Chamberlain at the after-show party, she assumed his discomfort was due to painful memories of his now ex-wife's performance in the same role twelve years earlier. Sarah went up to Hyacinth and told her how wonderful Andrew thought she was and Hyacinth told her the feeling was mutual, which at least, Sarah thought later, cringing at the memory, was truthful.

Sarah had an inkling that something was not quite right when, driving home after the party, Andrew asked why the twins hadn't come. He sounded as if he'd only just noticed their absence, which was odd because this was the first time they had ever missed one of their father's plays. Sarah said they'd felt dreadful about missing the big night but had forgotten that it was their friend's eighteenth birthday party. The boys, with characteristic absent-mindedness, had only recalled the engagement an hour before the play and Sarah had dreaded telling Andrew. It was a family ritual that Andrew would return home like a victorious warrior and they would all enjoy a celebratory bottle of champagne. Andrew

merely asked if they'd be out for the night. Sarah said apologetically that they would. Andrew nodded. He wasn't angry, he didn't even look disappointed. Sarah did glance at him then and wonder at the reason for his unaccustomed equanimity in the face of such provocation.

She found out, during her second glass of champagne. He was, he told her, glad they were on their own. He had something difficult to tell her, something he never thought he would have to say and he wanted her to know he still cared for her and would never stop caring for her and that . . .

'Oh my God!' Sarah exclaimed. 'Don't tell me! You want to be a proper actor! I knew you'd say this one day! Andrew, of course I'm with you! If the money's a problem, I'm sure I can find ways of earning more money.'

'Sarah!' Andrew broke in irritably. 'What on earth makes you think I want to be a professional actor?'

'Well, you did,' Sarah said. 'After *Move Over, Mrs Markham,* you said you did.'

'That was eight years ago! I wasn't a partner then! Now you've made me forget what I was saying.'

'You said you still care for me and that,' Sarah squeezed his hand affectionately, 'you always will.'

'That's right. And of course I will. You've been a great friend to me as well as a wife and I hope we'll always be friends . . .'

'Of course we will,' said Sarah. A terrible thought struck her. 'Andrew, are you trying to tell me you have some horrible illness?'

'No, I am not! How much did you drink at the after-play party?'

'More than I meant to. Dear old Adrian kept filling up my glass. He's so sweet!'

'He's a boring old idiot,' said Andrew brutally. 'I'm finding this very difficult, Sarah, and it doesn't help that you keep interrupting me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'The thing is, as you know, I've spent the last few months rehearsing with Hyacinth . . .'

'She was terrific tonight,' Sarah mused, 'but she made me feel so old. Do you know she could be our daughter?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Andrew, adding for no obvious reason, 'she comes from Surrey.'

'She could be. She can't be more than twenty-three.'

'She's twenty-six.'

'Exactly. If you and I'd had children at seventeen, she could be our daughter.'

'We didn't know each other at seventeen. Honestly, Sarah, your habit of going off at some hypothetical tangent is extremely irritating. Will you please shut up and listen? The thing is, there's no easy way to tell you this – in fact, in your present state there's no easy way to tell you anything – but the thing is that Hyacinth and I have become very close.' He glanced at Sarah who smiled encouragingly. 'We've become very, very close.' Andrew looked significantly at Sarah. Sarah looked back blankly at Andrew. Andrew rubbed the back of his neck with his hands. 'Do you understand what I'm telling you?'

Sarah didn't say anything. Nothing could be heard but the wheezing of the old fridge. Sarah didn't understand. The noise of the fridge echoed her own thought process. She

sucked in her lips and frowned with concentration.

'My God!' she exclaimed, the penny having finally dropped with the efficiency of a cement-covered body thrown from a great height. 'You're having an affair with Hyacinth!'

Andrew corrected her gravely. 'I am in love with Hyacinth.'

Sarah, feeling as if she'd been hit in the solar plexus, took a slug of her champagne. 'Isn't that the same thing?'

'No,' said Andrew. 'One is a transitory experience based on sexual desire, the other is a meeting of minds as well as bodies.'

Sarah gaped at him for a few moments and then smiled. She felt the relief coursing through her veins. 'Andrew Stagg, I almost believed you!'

'Sarah,' Andrew said, 'I am not joking.'

Sarah looked at him in disbelief. 'I don't know what's worse,' she said at last. 'The fact that you're having an affair or the fact you believe all that stuff you just said.'

Andrew smiled. It was a very annoying smile and it made Sarah long to hurl her champagne at him. Since the urge to drink her champagne was even greater, she said nothing and filled her mouth with bubbles instead.

'Sarah,' Andrew said gently, 'I expect you to be bitter. I understand you are hurt and resentful and I want you to know I think you have every right to be.'

Sarah stared at him. 'That's very big of you,' she said.

Andrew gave a sympathetic nod which was even more annoying than his annoying smile. 'I have one question for you,' he said, craning his head towards her. 'Do you love me?'

'Funnily enough,' Sarah said, 'at this precise moment, not at all.'

Andrew sighed. 'If you are going to be flippant,' he said, 'we won't get anywhere.'

Sarah folded her arms. 'Where do you want to get? Do you want me to say I love you? Do you want me to say our marriage is a farce, a passionless farce? Well, pardon me, but when we made love last week, you gave a pretty convincing performance for a man in a passionless farce.'

Andrew raised his hands in the air and dropped them again. He had used exactly the same gesture to great effect in Act One, Scene Two of *Dear Octopus*. 'You see, I talk to you of love and you respond with a smutty comment about sex. It's what I'm trying to show you. We don't speak the same language any more.'

'I agree with you there,' Sarah said. 'You sound like you've eaten and inwardly digested every romantic novel in the library. Is this Hyacinth's influence? Does she talk like this?'

Andrew put his elbows on the table and pressed his fingertips together. 'Hyacinth and I are in love with each other. I knew you'd find that ridiculous. You've never been happy to talk about love, have you, Sarah? Don't get me wrong. You've been an excellent wife and you're a wonderful mother.'

Sarah frowned. One moment he was a walking Mills and Boon and the next he was an end-of-term school report. She swallowed her observation with more champagne and assumed an air of polite interest.

'The point is . . .' Andrew paused as if he'd temporarily lost the point and was waiting for it to show itself. 'The point is . . . and I am not in any way trying to denigrate your contribution to our life together –' which meant, of course, he was trying to

denigrate her contribution to their life together – 'I don't think you ever really loved me.'

The rank injustice of this comment cut through Sarah's champagne-muffled brain like a knife. This was revisionist history with a vengeance.

'Do you know something?' she exploded. 'You are just like Stalin! I mean you are not exactly like Stalin because you haven't created a man-made famine or sent people to labour camps or grown a silly moustache but in every other way you are just like Stalin!'

Andrew stared at Sarah and then, meaningfully, at the bottle of champagne. 'Sarah,' he murmured pityingly, 'what are you trying to say?'

'When Stalin came to power, he had Trotsky's image removed from all the photos of the Russian revolutionary leaders. He made it look as if Trotsky hadn't been there. That's what you're doing, only you've started a revolution of your own, a revolution with you and Hyacinth, and you're wiping me out, you're obliterating me from your past and I won't have it because it's not true!'

'Perhaps,' said Andrew, whose sympathetic tone was sounding like a piece of clingfilm that had been stretched too far, 'I should talk to you when you're sober.'

'If you talked to me when I was sober I could give you year by year evidence to refute what you said. Be glad, be very glad I am not sober. How dare you say I haven't loved you! How can you say I haven't loved you!'

'I think,' said Andrew carefully, 'you thought you did and I think I thought I did too. It's only since I've met Hyacinth that I realize I didn't know what love was.'

Sarah, knowing it would annoy him, poured herself another glass of champagne. 'How very convenient,' she said. 'So what do you want to do?'

For the first time that evening, Andrew seemed to be at a loss for words.

'Well?' she demanded, daring him to make things worse. 'Are you leaving me?'

Andrew hesitated. 'I'm so sorry,' he said, 'but I think I am.'