

YOU

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We were death partners before we were friends. When we met thirty years ago, I was so pregnant with my first child, I resembled an overstuffed sausage bursting its casing. I'd forsaken style weeks earlier when my shoes no longer fit. I couldn't even reach around my massive torso to shave my legs; my limbs sported enough hair to scrub clean a barbecue grill.

You, on the other hand, had just wrapped up an open house and strode across my threshold for the first time like a seasoned runway model. I'll never forget your chic, black pencil skirt, topped with one of those mustard-hued real-estate jackets you somehow made fashionable, or how you pivoted on heels resembling knitting needles. Your cropped, platinum hair parenthesized the diamond studs that shimmered on your ears; your teeth were straight and white as a toothpaste commercial. I caught the subtle scent of an expensive perfume. The last fragrance I'd worn was a sample surreptitiously ripped from a magazine in my obstetrician's office.

Our husbands, officers and gentlemen of the highest caliber, lost all decorum, leaving us post-introductions in the foyer, off to the den to watch football.

"Afraid they'll miss a Doritos commercial." You winked at me. "I'm so envious—you look amazing." I caught a hint of a Southern accent.

I stepped forward and stumbled over nothing, as usual, and you gracefully caught me. "Sorry, I'm so clumsy these days."

"Oh, darlin', I trip going upstairs. A loose cord and my foot inevitably tangles in it. I get it, and I don't have a bowling ball around my abdomen." You cradled my elbow. "Here, let me help you."

"Kitchen's good. Let's sit in the kitchen." If weasels could talk, I'd sound like them.

You seemed so sincere, I could've wept in gratitude. Lately, though, I cried at tissue commercials.

This get-together was our husbands' idea. It made me very nervous, the entire reason we needed to meet. Spooning one night with Jimmy, our go-to sleep position those pregnant days, he had broached the subject. At first, I had been incensed at the entire morbid concept. Jimmy had chosen you, and Ken had chosen me.

While he twisted a random strand of my hair, he had explained that your dad had been a CIA agent, and you personally knew the likes of Oprah and Hillary. I'll admit, I was intrigued. He added that at some point you'd owned an upscale bar in Georgetown and fell for Ken, a fighter pilot years your junior, and gave up all that DC glamour for places named Raison and Beeville. I became fascinated by the idea of you, so I agreed.

Ken and Jimmy were more than just fighter pilots stationed in the same squadron. They'd become close friends, having spent the previous six months deployed on an aircraft carrier in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Our meeting was essential to the cause. Technically speaking, we were an assignment they had to carry out. Their detachments were intensifying. They needed us to like each other.

Meanwhile, you cursed like a pirate, housed enough gossip to warrant your own radio show, and fiercely loved your man. Within a half hour, I was putty in your palms. We laughed about things as if we'd been friends for years. You made the extreme business at hand less overwhelming.

While our guys watched television, we sat in my tiny, sunny kitchen and reviewed the government-issued paperwork in front of us. Form DD193 was mandatory for married special-ops officers. Signing these forms meant one of us would be present if the other was informed her husband was killed in action. You and I were total strangers discussing a contract where we'd bear witness to each other's worst nightmare.

Before signing, you clasped my hands in yours. "I know we just met, but you need to know something." Your tone was hushed, your hands warm, and momentarily, I was both comforted and confused. "If officers show up at my door with you, I'll know. They only come in person if your husband is dead. Injured, they'll call. And let's get real, who simply gets injured should something go awry in a jet traveling one thousand five hundred miles an hour?"

You sighed. I stiffened. "I feel obligated to inform you before you sign on. Should I see you at my door, flanked by uniforms, I will simply excuse myself, get Ken's gun, shove the barrel in my mouth, and pull the trigger. Discussion is off the table."

I gasped. I knew you less than an afternoon, and you were serious. You continued. Something about Ken being your universe ... not wanting to live in a world without him ... promise never to tell anyone, especially Jimmy. In utter shock, I reluctantly nodded. You let go of my sweaty palms, flamboyantly scrawled your signature on the bottom of your copy of the form, grinned, and slid it over as though you'd just sold me a duplex.

That day, we passed bits of ourselves back and forth like poker chips. I was intoxicated by your this and that of such minutiae—your latest guacamole recipe, the upcoming masquerade gala, and the Commander's wife *who thinks she poops rainbows*.

Yet, somehow, I read through your gregariousness. At one point, you asked to touch my belly because all you really wanted to know was what it felt like to be pregnant. I placed your delicate hand on the crest of my abdomen. Something more than my baby swelled inside me that afternoon. It was the seedling of our friendship.

Early on, you confided in me that you couldn't have children. Your mother had taken a prescribed drug during her only pregnancy that ultimately killed her and robbed you of your mom and your uterus. I felt pain in my heart—to my very core. I had no words, not like you. All I said was, "You'd make an amazing mom."

I wish I'd told you then that I was honored to share my children with you. I'd even consider having one for you. But I knew you'd have straight-up asked me if you wanted my help, even my viable uterus. And I'd have said, "Yes," with the same certainty I had when Jimmy proposed.

When Jimmy and I met in college at seventeen, he was determined to be a pilot. A truly benevolent warrior: he spared spiders, built surprise snow families in the middle of the night, and whispered under his breath, "Two points," when anything he tossed landed in the trash can. I melted in his arms when his hugs lifted me off the ground. But Jimmy was born to fly. I accepted long ago, as all pilots' wives do, that our husbands' first love would always be flight.

Over time, the more I understood you, the more your suicide plan simultaneously fascinated and troubled me. Killing myself wasn't an option; I was a mom. But what if I weren't? Did my not wanting to take that eternal journey with Jimmy mean I loved him less than you loved Ken? Or did it mean I loved myself more than I loved Jimmy? At twenty-four years old, I hadn't a clue.

In the waning hours of lonely nights, I devised intricate scenarios should I have to deliver that fatal news to you. According to Form DD193, I'd get the call, and then I'd be officially escorted door to door, somehow, to your whereabouts.

I imagined myself physically restraining you. Having garnered strength from childbirth, I'd have a small advantage over you in your stilettos, but I couldn't hang on to you like a chimp indefinitely.

Another plan involved confiscating Ken's gun. One afternoon during lunch, I broached the subject of the firearm. "Doesn't having that gun in the house frighten you? You shouldn't own a gun unless you know how to use it. Let's go to a range and practice. I'll go with."

Your response was not something one soon forgets. "I don't need practice when the only target is inside my own mouth."

And that was that.

While our husbands were deployed over those long weeks and months, you and I ran the gamut of emotions. I soon realized that you missed Ken more than I had room to miss Jimmy. Our differences made us a unique pair. In the end, you found family with me; I found my soulmate in you. We survived Thanksgivings and Christmases without our husbands. You held my hand when I gave birth for the second time and stayed until Jimmy returned home. You were the catalyst for my application to graduate school.

One of my fondest memories of you was the evening we braved our first and only Officers' Wives Club meeting. I was a bit nervous, but you exuded your usual self-assuredness.

Upon arrival, we were schooled on the unwritten seating arrangement at these affairs. Higher-ranking spouses occupied the front rows, while lower-ranking wives were resigned to seats further back. You would have none of it. You shoved me forward, and we occupied two empty chairs front and center.

When we received what could only be described as stink-eye from maybe everyone in attendance, and the whispering behind us escalated, you turned to the cluster of women with enough disdain on their faces to suggest we were contagious, and said, "My husband is ranked, but I'm not. I can sit wherever I please." You saluted no one in particular, in perfect form with your middle finger, then said, "Let's go get a cocktail at a real club." Under your breath, you whispered, "I wish Wives Club was literal so we could club a few of these bitches."

When the guys were deployed, we spent the better part of our weekends together doing everything and nothing. Phone calls were endless. It seemed like we could talk about anything, but I knew you carried a lot of secrets. You told me once that a secret was only a secret if just one person knew. But I relished every story, every bit of wisdom, and, best of all, how free I felt when I was near you. Freedom to be myself.

I recall a conversation last summer at the beach you and I had about hormones. "Pesky, unpredictable little shits," you called them. I confided that I felt like I was turning into a raging bitch ever since my second birth. I gave you an example of how Jimmy was in the garage one afternoon a week prior, spray-painting something blue for his new office. He was wearing a very expensive, brand-name pair of white sneakers. I freaked out. Told him not only was he selfish for getting shoes that cost more than the electric bill without mentioning it, but who in the hell painted in white sneakers anyway? "You're an idiot," I'd said to him. I hated myself at that moment, when I replayed that memory from the previous week.

"There goes a secret, huh?" You told me Jimmy had the sneakers delivered to your address so he could wear them at home and maybe I wouldn't notice. You laughed from your belly, a sound I try to conjure all the time.

“But they looked like frigging clown shoes. The white was blinding, I’m not joking. We’re talking, should’ve-come-with-a-UV-warning shoes. Still good to keep him on his toes, though—no pun intended.”

I laughed so hard tears were rolling down my cheeks. Then said, “My husband is afraid of me.”

I knew I owed Jimmy an apology, but it wouldn’t happen. Not intentionally; at least there was that. Any doubt of my love for Jimmy was fleeting. I was just so tired of being alone. I missed him all the time, raising my boys with you while we waited together. As for Jimmy, my apologies usually came in other forms that he definitely preferred and, as you pointed out, why I was turning into a human PEZ dispenser.

You paused until my laughter subsided. I knew wisdom was coming. “We signed on for this. Besides, can you imagine a life without Jimmy and those babies?”

I could not. I told you I finally understood you not wanting to go on should you lose Ken after years of so much. “When you and I first met, I was a very different person. Right?” You didn’t respond. “I was definitely a kinder, more forgiving person. Children have changed me. I woke up about a month ago and realized I’d become my mother. I feel awful. Jimmy deserved to have those damn sneakers. You’re right, as usual. Why do you even like me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I love you, first of all.” You always said that whenever I tried to point out that I’d be emotionally dead without you. “So you’re stuck with me forever, silly girl.” You always said that, too. How much I wish that one were true. “And you, my friend, are the best damn mom I have ever met.”

And there it was, the gem, the pearl I never wanted to imagine my life without. All along the way—the good, the bad, and the hilarious—I never wanted to contemplate a time we’d be forced to go our separate ways. I finally understood you not wanting to live without Ken.

When it inevitably happened, it was a gut-punch. After years of unforgettable friendship, our husbands were given official new orders. They’d be deploying to Libya for a month before moving on to separate bases on opposite, but thankfully American, coasts.

We spent our last Sunday together gorging on barbecue, laughing, and relaxing on deck chairs as my sons played on their new swing set. It felt like any other get-together the four of us had had over the years, though it wasn't. We tiptoed around the subject of our impending separation. But it loomed large the entire day, till dusk and mosquitoes descended.

Jimmy left before dawn the following morning, and I was rendered wide-awake. I distracted myself with moving preparations, not wanting to think about missing my husband for yet another four weeks. I mostly tried not to imagine a life where I might go months, perhaps years, without seeing you. By mid-afternoon, exhaustion hit me like a tranquilizer dart, and I laid down with my boys for a sweet, overdue nap.

The sound of the phone ringing woke me, but when I whispered a groggy greeting into the bedside handset, I only heard a dial tone. My blurred reality was interrupted again. This time it was the doorbell. I slid from the bed and jogged down the stairs, not wanting the noise to wake my babies. Ever since Jimmy installed that swing set in the backyard, the neighborhood kids came over nearly every day to play. It was becoming a nuisance.

Before I could open the door, I was hit with a terrible smell. Sitting next to the front door was a garbage bag I'd asked Jimmy to take out before he left that morning. But there it was, and since we rarely used the front entrance, the malodorous pungency of old diapers mixed with rancid food detritus hung heavy. I was startled again by the doorbell, this time right next to me.

The neighborhood kids could wait; I had to get rid of the bag first. I grabbed the bag, and the smell followed like a shadow as I quickly made my way to the trash receptacle. As I lifted the large lid, I noticed a stack of crumpled newspapers. Sticking out from underneath the pages of print was a pair of white sneakers, pristine in every way except the many blue speckles of paint smattering both toes. My husband was hiding those shoes from me. I started to cry, but I knew you would somehow find humor in the whole situation.

Back inside, doorbell now incessant, I finally yanked open the front door expecting the familiar motley crew of youngsters or some salesperson, only to be greeted by something altogether different. Idling at the curb were two sleek black town cars with tinted windows and side doors displaying Department of Defense decals. For a split second, I was confused until the pieces quickly fell into place. The phone call combined with all of these uniformed officers crowding my doorstep was in line with DD193—my knees went weak because there was only one explanation. I would have to inform you that Ken was dead.

I grabbed the door frame for support. I'd prepared for this moment, certainly fixated on it more than most military wives. I stifled a sob; there was time to cry later. I took a deep breath. *I can do this for you.*

"What about my boys?" I was so busy being friends with you that I never bothered to be friends with anyone else. You were who I'd have called in such a circumstance.

The tallest of the men looked uneasy in his stiff dress-blues as he gestured to his right toward a uniformed woman. "Dr. Graham is a child psychologist. She'll stay as long as needed."

Reassured the boys were probably in safer hands than my own at the moment, I shifted focus. I gathered the strength to divulge what you had planned. *I know, I know, it's a huge betrayal of our promise*—but I didn't care. I knew the plan and I was terrified. I clamped my damp eyes shut and prayed this was just a bad dream. Unfortunately, when I opened my eyes, the officers were still there. I was about to speak when they slowly parted, as if on cue.

That was when I saw you.