

Sir, Yes Sir
Old-Fashioned Husbands Book 2

By

Dinah McLeod

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Chapter 1

My motto had always been “a watched pot never boils”. My grandmother used to say it all the time when we worked together in the kitchen. If I closed my eyes and let my mind drift back, I could still see her. She was a tall, formidable looking woman. She kept her silver hair wound up in a bun, though a few tendrils always pulled free while she was cooking. She rarely smiled and was a woman of few words. Maybe that’s why I could so easily recall the lessons she taught me. I also remembered how her counters always seemed to be lightly dusted with flour no matter how many times she had me wipe them down.

With my eyes closed, I inhaled deeply and I could almost smell it: her famous cornbread, mashed potatoes and fried chicken. My stomach rumbled at the memory of her delicious cooking. We’d spent long hours in the kitchen together as she tried to pass down recipes to me that had been passed down to her from her mother.

“Your mother,” she’d say, with just the slightest hint of acid in her voice, “doesn’t *like* to cook.” The way she said it indicated that she thought my mother belonged in an insane asylum, or at the least, prison. Surely not wanting to learn Nana’s recipes was a crime. Well, at least it was to her. She took cooking very seriously, but she was infinitely patient with me. She passed down more than her secret for perfect fried chicken; she also doled out a lot of wisdom in her swelteringly hot kitchen.

“Shelby,” she’d say when she caught me watching the stove, my lip pulled out in a pout. She knew how frustrated I got with the stubborn water that stayed flat and still despite the heat of the burner and my persistent stare. “Find something to do to keep busy. A watched pot never boils.”

I never really understood what she was trying to tell me. At the time, I’d thought it was just something she said to get me to wipe the sink or unload the dishwasher as we waited. Even as I grew older, when I knew the saying to mean exactly what the words said, I never gave it much thought. As I became older, though, I kept coming back to it again and again. In the oddest moments, when I found myself frustrated with a setback or unsure of what to do next I could hear her voice whispering those very words, “A watched pot...” Now it seemed to be full of the hidden wisdom for which my Nana was famous. Although it had taken me time to fully appreciate the little anecdote, I had fully taken it to heart.

Put plainly, nothing you wanted ever came about while sitting around waiting for it to happen. Everything that was worth having was worth working for. True or not, when I went through hard times whispering those words to myself was a comfort.

My husband seemed much like a pot these days, just waiting for the chance for all the anger to bubble to the surface. I could hear him in the bathroom right now, stalking around like a bear. He was slamming cabinets and I winced every time I heard one bang shut. When I heard his muttered curse I jumped to my feet and hovered outside the door. “Honey?”

“I’m fine,” he grumbled, sounding anything but. “Go back to whatever you were doing.”

“I’m going to take Morgan to school in a little bit, just—are you okay?” It was a loaded question these days, but I asked it anyway.

“Fine!” he snapped at me, poking his head out the door.

He was scowling at me, an expression that I feared might soon become permanent; it had been months since I'd seen him smile. I took in his snapping gray eyes, his dark blond hair dripping wet and spiked on top. Come to think of it, he hadn't had a haircut in a while, either. "Is something wrong?"

"It's this damn shower! It only has two settings—freezing cold and burning hot!"

I tried to look sympathetic, but his constant stream of complaints had begun to wear me down. "I'm sorry, honey. Maybe in a few months we can afford a—"

Dean waved an irritated hand at me and went back into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him. It was what he did these days when the subject of money came up. With a sigh, I shook my head at the closed door before reaching up to push my chestnut bangs off my forehead.

Dean and I had married young; in the last eighteen years we'd grown up together and had weathered just about everything a couple could go through. Or so I'd thought. For years, he had been the person I told everything to. The first few years of our marriage, we used to play a game at bedtime. Every night we'd lay facing each other, trading secrets back and forth in hushed voices. If you could have any superpower, what would it be? Do you believe in reincarnation?

I had thought I knew everything there was to know about Dean, but he had been giving me cause to wonder. He had been so moody and grouchy, so completely not the Dean that I knew, that I had to question my earlier assessment. Of course he had cause to be upset. I knew it and so did he—boy, *did* he! I knew that he was having a tough time, but he kept shutting me out, and I didn't know how to get in again. It felt like he had locked himself in a secret clubhouse with a "No Girls Allowed" sign on the door and I didn't know the password. I'd never had this problem before and I was at a loss. What did you do when the person who told you everything could barely say good morning anymore?

I flopped, fully dressed, back onto the bed I'd just made. I closed my eyes, trying to shut out all of the thoughts and emotions that competed for my attention. I thought about drifting back to sleep for a minute when I heard the sound of something hitting the floor. I cracked an eye open and saw that one of the bags from our Black Friday shopping had fallen to the floor. I should have put them away by now, but every time I looked at them it brought that unsettling day to the forefront of my mind. Dean and I had had a pretty big fight.

It had been humiliating, arguing with him in front of a massive line of strangers. There had been a woman behind me that I could swear kept shooting me looks. We'd been fighting about money—nothing new there. Normally, I did the Black Friday shopping by myself. I wasn't even sure what had made him decide to tag along this year, although he hadn't been very happy about it. Somehow he'd gotten it into his head that the reason I shopped the Black Friday sales was because we couldn't afford Christmas presents otherwise.

"Honey, that isn't true," I'd told him, my voice pleading. I'd shot a look at the woman in front of us, trying to see if she was listening while pretending not to.

"It isn't? Then what the hell are we doing out here at six in the morning?"

"You'd be up either way," I'd reminded him. That hadn't helped end the argument, as I'd hoped and it had only gotten worse when we got inside. Dean had gotten caught up in the frenzy and began dropping box after box into our cart—things that I hadn't even planned on getting. I'd tried to talk to him, tried to get him to put some of the things back, but he wouldn't budge. And, used to obeying him, I didn't push the issue. I'd practically staggered out of the store after our tally came to over three hundred dollars. We'd bought things that I didn't think would ever be gifted. I'd made the mistake of pointing that out to him when we got into the car. I should have

known better, with everything that he had been dealing with, but I was used to sharing everything with my normally composed husband.

“What do you want to do, Shelby?” he’d asked, in the voice he normally reserved for yelling at the men under his command. “Do you want me to let everyone else down just because the Army threw me out?”

I’d wisely kept silent after that, but by then, it was too late. The damage was already done. His mood had completely soured and it would stay that way. It had stayed the same for the last two weeks, in fact. He snapped at everyone, slammed doors and barked orders to the point where I had to wonder if things would ever go back to normal.

The Army hadn’t thrown him out, of course. He’d opted to retire after a back injury left him unfit to go into the field with the troops he’d trained. To Dean, though, it was the same as being tossed in the can, which was what he felt had been done to his career. They’d offered him a desk job and numerous other options. There were numerous other ways for a Colonel in the Army to serve, but only one that he wanted to do and it was the one he was no longer qualified for.

Dean was career Army and had been practically from birth. He’d grown up on post and loved the structured environment. He loved all of it; the traditions, the order, the codes of chivalry and honor that were very much alive and well in the Army. He loved traveling and seeing new places and, strange as it may have sounded, he loved training soldiers, taking them out into the field and bringing them home safe again to their loved ones. It never made much sense to me, since I was left at home sitting on pins and needles every moment of the day, dreading every phone call, every knock at the door. Still, anyone could see that it was what he loved to do and as long as he was happy, at the end of the day I was, too.

Which I supposed was part of what made him so hard to live with right now; he was miserable, so everyone else was forced to come along for the ride. It had been a hard transition for me, too. Like Dean, I had grown up an Army brat. I also enjoyed the timelessness of the Army’s core principals. In certain respects, we lived as if in a bygone era. People of our community, especially the wives, came together to help and support one another. That had been the hardest thing to give up—all the friends I’d made during Dean’s eighteen years of service. We’d both been thrust into a world that was completely unfamiliar to us. Neither one of us had the first clue how to live as a civilian. I completely identified with Dean’s lack of enthusiasm as of late—it felt like we were two fish out of water, but instead of turning to me and letting me help him he kept pushing me away.

I’d been shocked when they called to give me the news. Dean had only gotten back from Kabul three weeks before, and we’d just started to get settled back in and reacquainted, the way you had to do when your spouse was away for months at a time. My nerves had just begun to settle and I’d stopped jumping every time the phone rang. The day that I’d learned about his injury I’d been rushing out the door, late to an FRG tea when I heard the phone. I’d debated letting the answering machine get it but decided to reach for it at the last minute.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Davies? Colonel Davies' wife?”

“Yes,” I’d answered, my heart in my throat. No one ever confirmed my husband’s rank on the phone, not unless there was a problem.

The conversation had been brief, informing me that an accident had occurred on post where my husband had been performing training exercises with his men. With my heart already in my throat, the soldier on the other end informed me that Dean was now at the hospital. After

the word *hospital* I don't remember what else was said. In fact, the next month seemed like a blur whenever I tried to recall it. It had been a flurry of doctor's appointments, physical therapy and two surgeries. All I remembered with clarity was staring down at my husband, whose face was pale and drawn. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his face set in a grimace of pain. It was every soldier's wife's nightmare and finally, my turn had come. When the doctors told me that he wouldn't be permanently injured, I was so relieved I didn't even hear the unspoken *but*.

Dean knew right away. He could see it in the doctor's face, in the apologetic manner that he'd used to deliver the prognosis. I had felt my husband stiffen beside me and he hadn't managed to relax since. Sure, he'd gone through the physical therapy, he'd had the two suggested surgeries, but the doctor rarely said anything we hadn't heard before. Dean's chances of being able to return to active duty and assume his command were slim.

"What about another surgery? You mentioned that before," Dean had said the last time we'd been in the office.

"I did, but..." Dr. Richford had taken a deep breath, set down the file on his desk and looked my husband right in the eye. "You haven't progressed as far as we would have liked. We can certainly schedule the procedure, Colonel, but honestly I wouldn't expect much better results than what we saw with the previous two."

My head had spun at his words. What did it mean for us? If Dean couldn't lead his troops, what would he do? That very night Dean had brought up the one word that would change our lives forever: retirement. He'd announced his decision bitterly, spitting the word out as though it left a bad taste in his mouth. I'd heard him out and had given my agreement, which was what I'd always done: I supported my soldier, no matter what. Sometimes I couldn't help but wonder if we'd be going through this if I'd refused, if I'd insisted that he take the teaching job they'd suggested. Maybe things would have turned out differently if I had. Maybe he would have landed on his feet, eventually. Maybe the bitterness would have faded—we still would have been in the Army. But there was no going back now, and it didn't feel like we would ever turn the corner of his crushing disappointment.

I shook my head to clear the thoughts; I couldn't look back. Nothing good ever came from speculating on the past. I knew that we had to make do with what we had, but it was admittedly hard to do on my own. I was used to having Dean gone for long periods of time, used to being a wife and mother with an absentee husband; I knew how to assume that role, it almost felt like a second skin by now. What I'd never been prepared for was having to pull my family together when he was around, but not really present.

There was no denying that the injury had changed him. It was more than the pain, more even than leaving the Army. Dean seemed lost somehow and I didn't know how to find him. He'd been withdrawn and morose from that first day in the hospital but it only seemed to get worse with time. The only thing he would talk about—indeed, the only thing he seemed to think about—was the fact that his dreams had taken a bullet when he'd gotten one in his back. He'd always hoped to be a General one day and all that seemed to matter to him any more was the fact that he'd never get those stars. Everything else was background noise.

And I couldn't help feeling guilty that I was the just the tinniest bit happy—okay, maybe even more than the tinniest bit—that he would be with us, safe at home from now on. For over eighteen years I'd been sending him off to war, our lines of communication revolving around infrequent letters and phone calls, wondering every night when or *if* he would be coming home. Plenty of the soldiers he'd served with hadn't. How many times could you tempt fate and live to tell about it? I knew it was selfish to have those thoughts, but I couldn't help it. Surely he'd done

enough for our country—we both had. We'd given up so much of our time together and we'd never get those years back. All there was left for us to do now was to focus on building our future together, but it seemed I was the only one who wanted to move forward.

If anyone could understand how Dean was feeling, it was me. My dad had been in the Army; I'd been born on post and spent my entire life as an Army brat. I knew how intoxicating the family feel of the military could be. I loved the people I met, the places we visited and I knew how courageous and dedicated our men in uniform were. I also saw a side to it that my husband didn't: the long nights spent by the phone, waiting for it to ring. Checking the mailbox every day hoping, just hoping for a letter. Tossing and turning in bed, unable to get to sleep from the imagined dangers that lurked around, waiting to become reality in your nightmares. I saw weeping widows and fatherless children. I'd baked enough casseroles in my nearly two decades of the FRG to fill a restaurant. I'd helped pack boxes for women who could no longer stay on post. I'd given more hugs and offered condolences to more widows than I could even start to count.

Yes, I loved the Army, but I loved my husband more. I'd never intended to marry a soldier—most of us military brats didn't, having seen firsthand the suffering our mothers endured. I'd never wanted to be an Army wife, as much as I loved the Army, but when the time came I wanted to be with Dean, living whatever life we could together rather than be without him. It was the reason that, after only three days and one goodnight kiss I'd said yes when he'd asked me to marry him. I was seventeen at the time, only seven weeks away from eighteen when he told me he was deploying with his unit.

I had felt a cold vise of fear grip my heart. "When?" I'd asked, barely daring to breath.

"Seventy-two hours," he'd replied without so much as blinking his soulful gray eyes.

"How long?" My tone was clipped, used to this particular game of Q&A.

"Six months, maybe longer."

My mouth had gone so dry it felt packed full of sand. "I see."

"It's not forever, Shelby," he'd replied, taking my hand, his tone earnest and pleading.

"And you know I'll come back for you. I just need you to promise to wait for me."

"I can't do that," I'd replied automatically. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

It was hard to watch the pain my words inflicted on him. I could see it ripple throughout his whole body. "I love you, Shelby."

I'd sucked in my breath; neither of us had ever said the words, although I'd known how I felt after thirty minutes alone with the man. He was funny, witty, charming and had integrity. He was one hundred percent the kind of man I'd always known I'd marry. "I love you, too."

"Then say you'll wait for me!" he'd exclaimed, ducking his head to kiss me.

I had taken a step back and tried to pull my hand away, but he held it tight. "I can't wait for you, Dean. I can't wait to be with you."

Emotion played on his handsome, strong features as I watched. His bright gray eyes shimmered with love for me and my mouth fell open when he suddenly dropped to a knee. "Marry me then."

I had to giggle. "Why, how very romantic," I teased him.

"I mean it, Shelby. Do me the biggest honor of my life and say you'll marry me."

"Yes," I accepted with quiet conviction. In an instant Dean was on his feet and I was hauled into his strong arms. He twirled me in the air, hooting in excitement until I was dizzy. When I thought I couldn't take any more, he stopped and brought his lips to mine, crushing my body against his hard, muscular frame. He kissed me with a possessive fierceness that excited me

and made me dizzy in an altogether different way. I'd run my hands through his short, close cropped blond hair whispering "yes" again and again.

My parents had signed the papers that would allow us to get married before he shipped off, however disappointed they might have been. They'd both thought we were too young and my mother had always hoped that I'd find a nice civilian husband to settle down with. She wanted me to have a man to raise kids with, who would work nine to five and come home at the end of the day. But none of that stuff mattered to me. Dean had been the only thing I thought about since the first time those startlingly gray eyes of his had met mine, and I never looked back.

Thinking of our wedding day made me turn to the nightstand where I'd kept a framed photo of us for the last eighteen years and change. No matter how many times we moved, it always went on the nightstand. It was the only photo we'd had taken after we went to the courthouse, but both of us looked positively bursting with happiness. Taking in our young, exuberant faces, I knew that those kids had never imagined we'd have landed, where he and I were now.

I shook my head at the naiveté. Of course, who got married expecting trouble? When I looked at the fresh-faced girl I'd been then, with my long legs, tiny waist and slender hips, it made me want to curse the years that had changed me. I still had the same long, wavy brown hair and dark brown eyes. I still had the smattering of freckles on my nose.

Dean, curse him, still looked mostly the same. He still had the same broad shoulders, taunt biceps and a muscular physique of a man much younger. He still turned heads, even at almost forty. He had close-clipped blond hair and amazingly beautiful gray eyes.

The first thing I'd noticed about him was his eyes, but the second would have to be his quick, devilish grin. It set my pulse to racing every time I saw it. Even now, after almost nineteen years of marriage my heart still skipped a beat when he turned that smile on me. It was impossible not to smile back and nearly as impossible for my thighs not to moisten with my own juices as I did.

It had been quite some time since I'd seen that smile. I was beginning to think that at this rate I might never see it again.

"Isn't breakfast at 0700?" Dean asked, jarring me out of my thoughts.

"Hmm?" I glanced at my watch. It was already seven. "I'm sorry, honey. I have to be at work in an hour and I don't really have time to make anything. Could you just grab some cereal?"

You would have thought I'd asked him to roast his own kidneys over a fire from the withering look he shot me. Dean was used to having eggs, sausage or bacon and wheat toast every morning. I didn't think I'd missed more than a single morning in our eighteen years, so I was prepared for the shock he'd feel. I was even prepared for the anger that I knew would come, even though it wasn't something I could help. Like it or not—and he certainly didn't—things had to change around here. I knew it was hard for him to accept, especially when things had changed so much already, but as I was the only one working at the moment, he would have to get used to fending for himself a bit more around the house.

I opened my mouth to try to say something, anything to comfort him, but he didn't give me a chance. He marched out of the bedroom without a backward glance. Sighing to myself, I slid out of my robe and headed for the shower. Something had to give, but I didn't have the faintest idea of what that was, or what I could do so that we'd all be happy again.