

Introduction

*It's a nasty word, **BITCH.***

*It's one thing if you're standing up in the face of injustice to do the right thing—who cares if anyone thinks you're a bitch? But being thought of as bitch **in general** is another thing altogether.*

No one wants that.

*And yet, here's the setup between ex-wife and stepmother: The other woman, no matter which side you start from, is **automatically** a bitch. You'll find plenty of ammunition to lob from friends, family, and coworkers—heck, from people you barely even know. Start out any story about “the ex-wife” or “the stepmother” and people have already helped you pull the pin, ready to take her down. The land stretching between mother and stepmother is littered with such landmines. Good luck tiptoeing around them.*

And isn't it irritating to know the other side is almost certainly calling you a bitch?!

WHO WE ARE

We've figured out a way to do it otherwise. We don't know everything, but we *do* know a few things. And we'd like to tell you about them, because when we were first starting out, we sure could have used a book like this, and it was nowhere to be found.

We're a mother and stepmother who've cultivated, first, a working relationship, then a friendship, and now a partnership as coauthors. We've been at it for nine years and have seen the two children we both raise stretch out from very small people to now one very tall person and one medium-size, both of whom will probably leave us all in the dust, height-wise. Three years ago, a brand-new baby boy (hi, baby!) was added to our version of an extended family. And so, with wide-eyed wonder, the stepmom became a mom, and the ex-wife became, proudly and gratefully, an honorary aunt.

We've navigated some really tricky territory to get to this point. And we fully realize it's not all pancakes and roses from here on out. When you first meet your ex's beautiful new girlfriend getting off the back of his new motorcycle, her curly hair cutting through the air in slow motion like a model's, you're not exactly set to like her. When the only way she's gotten to know you is through tales of your bad behavior told to her by her perfect romantic partner, well, she's not so sure she's ever going to find one single thing to like about you either.

There are issues of territoriality, competition, jealousy, anger—and grief, loss, and sadness from both ends. Throw money and some legal elements into the mix and you have the perfect combustible material for a really . . . bad . . . family barbecue.

HOW WE GOT HERE

If you were to see our journey thus far from a bird's-eye view, you'd first see two strangers walking separately but concurrently, eyeing each other suspiciously. Then you'd hear some cautious mumbling directed at the other person (*What? I can't hear you! Speak English!*). This would be followed by a few half-hearted attempts at meaningless, polite chit-chat. Still climbing the low hills, you'd see us maybe veering a little closer to each other's path, as we found (surprise!) we actually had some things in common (the children).

Then we'd get distracted by something hard that we had to do together, like deal with a swarm of jungle flies (kids), cross a rushing river (kids), run from wild, howling boars (hungry kids), or construct an intricate, weight-bearing puzzle made solely out of cooked noodles (getting kids to clean up after themselves).

Somewhere along the line, you'd see us letting our guard down ever so s-l-o-w-l-y, and, yes, sometimes it would go right back up, but by the end of the path, we'd have gone through enough stuff together and spent enough time together that we'd be sitting at a coffee shop (in Europe, alone, just us two girls, with lots of money and no men . . . just kidding!) talking over ideas for our book.

Our book, about how we learned to get along.

OUR GOAL

We're not hoping to get every one of you potential Stepmother/Mother pairs out there to the point of writing a book together (too much competition), but we *are* hoping you can get to a place where you can actually sit down and have coffee with the other woman. Not “the bitch” anymore—just the other woman. (No, not that Other Woman.)

We're hoping we can help you eventually create what we have—a *partnership* where you can discuss issues of parenting—the things that pull and tug at your heart and keep you up at night—with the other person also mothering the children in your life. We're hoping you can bond over shared issues of pride as you watch the little people in your life grow and fall, and get up again, and blossom. That you can both *give and get* sympathy as life gets rough and the parenting inevitably falls by the wayside. But at least you know you won't be judged by the other person, who, luckily, is not waiting around anymore to pounce on your faults like a stealthy mountain lion.

WHAT TO EXPECT

For each chapter of the book, we'll tell you a bit about what it was like for us before, we'll cover some juicy truths that people might be reluctant to talk about, and we'll give you some ideas you can experiment with. We'll talk about the influence of the ex-husband/husband, and we'll mix things up with a variety of fun quizzes and interactive elements to vary the pace. All along the way, you'll have opportunities to journal about your own thoughts and experiences.

We're going to ask you to take a good look around you and get to know where you are, this classically, stereotypically hostile Badlands. We're going to ask you to take a good look at your own crap and own up to all the ways that you've been adding fuel to that big, nasty bonfire. We're going to help you imagine how good it can be and give you something to shoot for.

Whew. Exhausting, huh? You're tired just reading about it, aren't you?

Why slog through so much mud, you ask? Wouldn't it just be easier to grit your teeth and bear the misery? To say, look, face it, no—really, *this* particular other woman really is a total bitch—it's hopeless! You don't know my situation!

The answer to those questions is in school right now, or perhaps sleeping, or maybe playing with blocks or outside on the swing set, or maybe, like most strapping, young American children, is online or watching TV. That's why. The kids. The whole reason you have to deal with the other woman in the first place.

As tired and frayed as this phrase has become, please, *do it for the children.*

Do it so that they don't have to feel stuck in the middle between two warring women (perhaps quietly, but don't kid yourself, you know what children's little radars are like). Do it so that they can have happier birthdays and holidays, more fluency between the stuff that's forever traveling back and forth between their two houses.

Do it so that they can feel like they're not going to be forever damaged for coming from a "broken family"—hey, their family is just wider, spread out over a larger geographical distance. Do it so that your energy and time and wisdom and obsessive compulsions can go where they really should be going—toward giving them the best upbringing you can, with love, consistency, and an eagle eye for the small, but all-so-important details.

Wouldn't you rather pour yourself into that?

WHAT YOU STAND TO GAIN

On a purely selfish level, you'll feel a lot better if you work on cultivating a friendly relationship with the other woman, instead of hating her. Your stomach will feel calmer, your head will feel clearer, and your heart will feel cleaner. And there's something to be said for just generally creating less bile in your life, wouldn't you say?

Your romantic relationship will benefit from the lack of gossip and snide comments and negativity, and that's also good for the kids. You'll be a better mother or stepmother. Your friendships won't sag under the weight of obsessive harping and one-upmanship.

Most important, *you stand to divorce-proof the stepfamily*, and this matters, whether you're the stepmother or the ex-wife. Divorce is an even greater threat for stepfamilies, compared to nuclear families. And it puts the children at risk of going through an additional divorce if traditional acrimony between the two women is not resolved, or at least made manageable.

We'll invite you to think about how you can strengthen and fine-tune your extended family, to create the best possible worlds for your children or stepchildren, to help them develop to their highest potential. We'll set you to brainstorming about how to create a "soft place to fall" for them, a healthy nest from which to grow out into the world.

And all along the way, we hope you'll celebrate and acknowledge your efforts and any progress made, however small, so that you can take little pit stops of rest in the reinvigorating pride of accomplishment.

Not only that, but you're going to be doing something really forward-thinking and important here, you'll be pioneers! Ground-breakers! You're going to be at the forefront of a new, absolutely called-for movement in our culture to create a totally workable extended family. Divorce and remarriage isn't going to go away soon—let's not only make the best of our situations, let's choose to *thrive* in them.

So join us as we walk through this landscape and see how you can improve your own situation, *wherever you may be*. No one has to be the bitch. And it's worth it. You'll see.

A special note

There are some stepmother/mother teams out there who may not *ever* get along. Why are we telling you this *now*? Aren't we trying to convince everyone to be the best of friends? The chummiest of pals? Actually, no. Honestly, some situations are simply beyond the capabilities of any one single person to change or improve.

So how will you know if this situation applies to you?

First, we'll help you see, with razor-sharp accuracy, what you're contributing to the acrimony between you, and we'll give you some techniques for breaking through it. And all along,

we'll give you suggestions for what to do if you meet with resistance from the other side. Then, if you work hard to improve the relationship, and after sincere, honest efforts fail, you'll still be in a stronger position after reading this book. You'll be clearer and more grounded in the face of challenges because you'll understand yourself, the other woman, and the entire situation much better. That can only be a good thing and will ultimately help you create peace, security, and stability for yourself and your family.