

# Stepwives: Ten Steps to Help Ex-Wives and Step-Mothers End the Struggle and Put the Kids First

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### *Acknowledgments*

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### *Dedication*

*This book is dedicated to Evan, whose inherent sense of self-respect helped us always try to put him first (no matter how we felt about each other), whose sacrifices as a child of divorce and remarriage inspired*

*us to create the CoMamas movement, and whose generosity of spirit allowed us to open up our lives and share our story with the world in the hope of making life better for children everywhere. We love you, Evan.*

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## *Introduction*

*Stepmother. Ex-wife.* Just the words are enough to make anybody roll their eyes, take a deep breath, and offer their condolences. But no matter which one you are, stepmother or ex-wife, once you've assumed one of these roles, the two of you are in each other's lives, for better or for worse. What exactly is your relationship?

To date, no name has been given to this relationship that millions of women are involved in. To answer this need, we've created the word *stepwife*. And since you're reading this book, you are probably a stepwife yourself, trying to make sense of the confusion caused when two women have been married to the same man.

*We* are stepwives: the ex-wife and current wife of the same man, mother and stepmother to the same child, destined to drag each other through the happiest and saddest occasions life presents. We've even been cursed with the same initials.

Had you asked us even a few years ago if we would ever willingly be in the same room, let alone write an entire book together, our answer would have been a simultaneous, "No way!" We were two women who loathed each other, locked in an intense battle for power and position for over a decade. Even after Lynne married Paul, our situation still did not get better. There seemed to be no way out.

Through it all, somehow we managed to put our (step)son, Evan, first, rarely behaving badly in front of him. In fact, teachers and parents would continually remark on just how civilized we were, how well adjusted he was. Little did they realize it was a completely different story behind closed doors. Then we let each other know just what our true feelings were and how much we hated being in each other's lives.

The stepwife relationship is ongoing and inescapable. No matter what you do, your stepwife is here to stay. And although we cannot make her go away, we can help you figure out how to handle having her in your life, even if it feels hopeless, even if you've been embroiled in an ugly battle for many years. It is never too late for it to get better.

Our book looks at this life from both sides: two women struggling to raise a child together in two different homes. We've opened up our private lives and the lives of others like us. Any woman who has ever heard the word *stepmother* or *ex-wife* will find this compelling reading. As we share the dimensions of our conflict, from the anger to the acceptance, mothers and stepmothers will appreciate that although they too may collide, they need not shatter. In fact, they can move beyond life as they now know it into a whole new world: the world of CoMamas-women who have learned to co-parent in a healthy, respectful manner.

So how did we do it? The miracle happened when one of us called the other to apologize after another battle. In that brief moment of truce, we found we actually agreed on something: Our situation had become unbearable, and we needed to change it.

To confirm our suspicions that other stepwives were also battling, we developed a Web site. Thousands of women all over the world have visited our site and told us their own horror stories about their stepwives. Their stories helped us and psychologist and marriage/family therapist Marjorie Krausz develop our step-by-step program, the PRESCRPTON, and later consult privately with stepwives and their men, conduct seminars and support groups, and write this book.

As the book evolved, with Dr. Krausz's help, we began understanding more and more about what makes the step-wife connection so inherently difficult. To begin with, you're predisposed to dislike each other, and it's usually downhill from there. But no matter how bad your situation is, we encourage you not to give up hope, because even if you think your stepwife would never work with you, you can still work our program alone. When you change the way you respond to your stepwife over time, *you* will change the dynamics of your relationship over time.

We now feel grateful for the insights we have gained, for helping each other fit some very important missing pieces into the puzzle of our lives. As we continue to heal, we rejoice in the knowledge that rather than living with an enemy, we each have an ally, someone with whom we can cooperate rather than argue. We have become CoMamas. And when we look into the future, to that inevitable day when we both get to answer to that sweet little voice calling, "Grandma?" we know we don't have to be afraid anymore.

So whether you're a divorced mother with a stepwife, a mother contemplating divorce, a stepmother, or planning to marry a man who has children, we are confident this book will help you. Let us guide you as you attempt to navigate the bumpy road ahead, for we have traveled that very same road. And although we still encounter bumps along the way, they are now few and far between. Follow us. Our advice is sound, our directions clear, and, most important, our son, Evan, is happy and very well adjusted. If we can do it, so can you.

## THE CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS

*Adopted from Putting Kids First: Walking Away from a Marriage Without Walking over the Kids by Michael Oddenino, attorney for Children's Rights Council*

We feel that all children of divorce are entitled to these rights:

The right to be treated as important human beings and not as a source of argument for parents.

The right to a continuing relationship with both parents and the freedom to receive love from and express love for both.

The right to express love for each parent without having to stifle that love because of fear of disapproval from the other parent.

The right to know that their parents' decision to divorce is not their responsibility and that they will still be able to live with each parent.

The right to honest answers to questions about changing family relationships.

The right to know and appreciate what is good in each parent without one parent degrading the other.

The right to have a relaxed, secure relationship with both parents without being placed in a position to manipulate one parent against the other.

The right to have one parent not undermine time with the other parent.

The right to be able to experience regular and consistent parental contact.

The right to be a kid and be insulated from the conflict and problems of the parents.

Chapter 1

***The Same Shoes***

Nineteen years ago in the small town of Santa Monica, just northwest of Los Angeles, a baby boy was born. As his mother, Lynne, held him in her arms on that very first day of his life, seized by the most tremendous outpouring of love she had ever known, she experienced a premonition that took years to understand:

*As I gazed lovingly at my beautiful son, I knew, as surely as I knew my own name, that someday some woman would come between us. "Aha!" I thought "His future wife!" Feeling safe from this danger for many years to come, I tossed that nasty thought right out of my head and resumed marveling at the perfect miracle before me. Little did I know as I sat with my treasured newborn son that "someday" would come around much sooner than I had anticipated and that it would not be his wife that would cause the pain. It would be his stepmother, Louise.*

When Louise was a little girl she dreamed the dream most little girls dream: of a handsome prince who would someday make her a princess:

*I pictured our life together, just the two of us, living happily ever after, nothing marring our perfect existence. Oh, maybe one day we would have children, but that would only enhance our lives. How could I have imagined that the child in my life would be someone else's and that his mother would come as part of that same package, shattering my childhood dream?*

In the beginning, *enemies* was too kind a word to describe what we were to each other. Lynne is Greg's first wife. Louise is the woman who replaced her. Although we shared the care of Lynne's son, Evan, we were so threatened, resentful, and jealous of each other that it took two years after Louise came into the picture for us finally to meet.

It's still amazing to us that we ever ended our decade-long war. Very little that had come before gave any clue that peace was possible, or even desirable. Like meteors destined to collide, our fate was determined long before we actually met. We'd married the same guy, which meant he'd found something to love in each of us. And at the core, that was the problem. What if Greg went back to Lynne? What if the love they had shared was stronger than the love that had developed between Louise and Greg? For Lynne, Louise was the obstacle that stood in the way of her and Greg's making their way back to each other so they could be a family again. At any given moment, one of us felt like the victor, one the vanquished. Maybe the new relationship would turn out to be a mistake, a blip on the screen before true love reasserted itself. Or maybe the new relationship would take root, obliterating the past, and the role of stepmom would eclipse the role of mother. Either way, it was impossible to settle into our altered roles and just skate on with our lives. It was more like Roller Derby—each of us always conscious of the competitor trying to elbow us out of the picture.

Our history together starts with what we think of as the denial era. Although we knew, in some unacknowledged corner of our minds, that life was carrying us into each other's orbits, we chose to ignore it. When Louise came on the scene, it had been less than a year since Lynne and Greg

had split up, and Lynne was struggling to make sense of the mess her life had become. She was grief stricken over the loss of her family and the life she had known for fifteen years, and it was more painful than she had ever imagined it could be. At least as the mother of Evan, now 5 years old, she was still enjoying her position as the most influential woman in Greg's life, and when Louise and Greg started dating, nothing much seemed to change. After all, Greg had dated other women, and look who was still here: Lynne, Greg, and Evan.

For Louise, Lynne was a looming presence who seemed ready to pounce at any moment and reclaim her life. But when you really fall in love—especially when it doesn't happen until you're almost thirty years old—you become almost entirely single-minded. And since no one was rushing to make introductions, Louise did what any other normal red-blooded woman in love would do: she pretended Greg's ex-wife didn't exist. She managed to overlook one small detail, however: as Evan's mother, Lynne came along with the package, and Louise would eventually have to reckon with her.

Is it any wonder we didn't want to meet each other? For Louise, meeting Lynne would mean coming face to face with Greg's past, a past that didn't really feel like a past at all, and it would be just one more reminder that she wasn't his one and only. What Louise could never understand, though, was why Lynne didn't want to meet her. Shouldn't a mother want to meet the woman who was going to be such a big part of her child's life? Something was definitely wrong here.

As for Lynne, she was in her own world of denial, hoping and praying that the inevitable would not come to pass—that Evan would not have a stepmother, that Greg would not have a new wife, that someone she didn't know and did not choose would be part of the family she had created. All she could think about was how Louise was pushing her way into her life.

These were the mind-sets that fueled the hundreds of small fires that had burned us repeatedly before we ever even met, twisting the other person's words and intentions far beyond recognition.

Lynne remembers one such incident this way:

*Everyone knows it never rains in California—at least it hadn't for many months. We were coming off a three-month drought, and early one morning I awoke to pouring rain, worried sick that Evan had no rain gear at his dad's. Since we had been sharing his little gray jacket and it was at my house, I called to say I would drop it off on my way to work. BL[Before Louise] this had been standard operating procedure, but the response that greeted me when Louise answered set me straight. Things had changed, and now I was no longer in charge of what went on in my own child's life, even though he was only six years old.*

Louise remembers the same incident this way:

*It was a cold rainy day—the kind Californians are completely unprepared for, and I was no different. The rain made everyone uptight and nervous—as if I weren't nervous enough. Greg had gone out of town on business, and for the very first time I would be solely responsible for getting Evan off to school. The shrill ringing of the phone startled me—the last thing I needed at 6:30 a.m. It was Lynne calling to notify me that she was on her way over to drop off a jacket for Evan. Was she kidding? Did she honestly think we would send Evan to school without a jacket on a rainy day? How insulting.*

We were prime examples of how stepwives can misconstrue any situation, never giving each other the benefit of the doubt and always assuming the other is intentionally trying to push you aside. We always brought out each other's lower selves—Lynne feeling like the ex-wife whose territory was constantly being trampled and Louise feeling insecure over what exactly her role was.

Two years passed before we ever met face to face, but we felt each other's presence in a million different ways. Against this emotional background we prepared for the showdown that was to be our first meeting—not that either of us really wanted to meet. But how could we avoid it? There was no escaping the fact that we were going to be raising the same child together for longer than either of us cared to admit. We were opponents in the truest sense of the word: wary, cautious, and extremely distrustful of each other. And when the day arrived, we played out the roles that came most naturally to us. Neither of us came in with a plan; we were driven instead by the fatalistic sense that both propelled and repelled us.

Lynne:

*When I arrived at the restaurant, I looked around the parking lot and didn't see her car. I knew it well because it had once been mine. My palms were sweating, and I was so nervous I could barely breathe. I felt my insides turn to mush. Positioned where I could see the door, I watched for her. I had never even seen a picture of her, but something told me I would recognize her when I saw her.*

As the customers filed in, I made mental notes. I waited and watched until I spotted her. Fashionably dressed. Thin. Long dark hair. And looking as nervous as I felt. When I noticed her hands shaking, I wasn't afraid anymore. Thinking about how vulnerable she looked and having been there first, I felt compelled to warn her of the pitfalls she would surely encounter once married. I let her know that Greg and I had once been very much in love and that she needed to be careful, because that was no guarantee: look what had happened to us. I listened as she spoke of her insecurities at not being his one and only, and that evening, for the first and perhaps the last time for a very long time, I felt what she must be going through. I remembered how special was the young love I had once shared with her man, and so by the end of that evening—for that one evening—I no longer hated her. I understood her. But the glow of the evening was not to last.

Louise:

*I'd been dreading the meeting all week, yet I was filled with a sort of morbid curiosity. What would she be like in the flesh? I'd heard so much about her (hardly any of it good), yet couldn't quite get a handle on what she would actually be like. As I entered the restaurant, I could feel beads of sweat slowly trickling down my back—and then I spotted her. I had seen her picture, but I would have known her anywhere.*

*We looked each other over. She began right away: "You probably want to know all about the woman Greg had been in love with." Now why would she think that? I felt my heart slowly start to sink, and by the time she was through with me, I thought I'd have to pick myself up off the floor. I heard it all How they'd met in college, children of the sixties and sooo much in love. In fact, they hadn't had so much as a single argument for the first five years of their marriage. As if that weren't bad enough, somehow she managed to shift gears, and things got even worse. I got the lowdown on what I could expect from my future with Greg, and it wasn't exactly pretty. She had been there, she warned, and felt the need to share her experiences as the older, wiser first wife, almost as if she were doing me a favor.*

*Well, if I didn't like her before, I liked her even less now. Was she trying to ruin my life? As we said our good-bys, I hoped I would never have to lay eyes on her again. But what was I thinking? I'd be seeing her plenty. After all, she was Evan's mother.*

Each of us tried to shake off the raw feelings of pain and get on with things. What good would there be in staying stuck in the confusion of what we were feeling? It wasn't that either of us thought that the other had personally intervened to ruin our dreams of what life was supposed to be like. It was more circumstantial: feel the pain, look up, and the tracks lead back to you know who. For Lynne, it was a short hop from "I gave up everything" to "I blew it." And for Louise, there was the complex feeling of having gotten more and less than she bargained for. The freshness of

her start with Greg, of love at last, was somehow tainted by the fact that his ex-wife came along as part of the deal.

Louise shares the news of her proposal with Lynne:

*Every unmarried girl who is still breathing longs to hear the words, "Will you marry me?" And if you're the second wife, you can't wait for wife number one to know that her reign is officially over.*

*Thinking this might be a good time for Lynne and me to put our bad feelings aside and start over, I called her. But she couldn't have been any clearer. She wanted nothing to do with me, now or ever. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. What I couldn't understand, though, was why she was so upset to have me in her life when she was the one who had wanted out of her marriage. As distasteful as it was, there was no changing the fact that I was stuck with her now.*

According to Lynne, it happened this way:

*Of course, everyone in my life knew who the infamous Louise was. She had been the topic of many a late-night phone call, early-morning coffee klatch, or evening cocktail party. And now, here she was on the phone, calling on a Sunday morning ... perhaps to discuss the weather?*

*"Hello, Lynne," she said in that voice of hers. "This is Louise. I know we've had our problems in the past, but I was just calling to see if we couldn't try and patch things up between us, because," she said, hardly containing her joy, "Greg and I are getting married! And now I'm gonna be around for a long, long time."*

*A fate worse than death! I couldn't possibly imagine anything worse than being sentenced to having this woman in my life one day longer, let alone 'til death do us part.*

As the wedding approached, Lynne's feelings of powerlessness increased. Her deep fear of being replaced was becoming a reality, and it compounded the force of her negative thoughts toward Louise. And in the midst of prenuptial bliss, Louise was having intermittent feelings of panic and anxiety over marrying a man with so much baggage. Lynne had robbed her of her dream of a perfect life, and she couldn't ignore the fact that Lynne would indeed have an impact on her.

We couldn't help but be full of "if onlys," and every "if only" was filled not only with regret but consternation as well. Even for the most evolved human, it's not all that easy to face questions like, "Have I ruined my life?" and "What have I done?" And we weren't exactly evolved in our thinking toward each other.

If only Lynne had stayed married to Greg. If only Louise had met him first. If only Lynne had met him when she was older. If only Louise had met him when she was younger. The truth, of course, is that things happened exactly as they were meant to. Meeting the right person at the right time is something most of us hope destiny will provide. It just so happened that our destiny was with the same man, albeit at different times.

. . .

Lynne's journal entry from October 21, 1990:

*The weekend Louise and Greg got married were the two worst days of my life ... up to that point, anyway. The wedding was the last thing I wanted to think about, but I kept seeing them in my mind: she in a beautiful long white gown and he in a tux.*

*When their wedding day dawned bright and sunny, it felt as if Mother Nature had conspired against me. I tried to hide my emotions but just couldn't prevent myself from feeling I'd lost everything that had ever been important: my husband, my family, my friends, my home, my possessions, my security, my position in life's pecking order. And the minute they said I do, she would be in my life forever. Leaving Greg had been my choice, but I was devastated that he had found someone else so soon.*

*As the hour approached the fateful moment, I withdrew further into my own thoughts, picturing her there at the altar ... with my husband. My precious son would be up there with them, sharing in their happiness. Evan wouldn't be part of my grief. They had more to offer him. I was just a single mom now, struggling to make ends meet, fighting to build a new life with little emotional support from anyone. I felt at that moment as if I had lost my son to her too. And I was powerless to stop yet another torrent of tears.*

Louise's wedding day memories:

*My wedding day had finally arrived—and it was a perfect day. The sun was shimmering on the ocean, which was that indescribable color somewhere between dark blue and deep green. A harpist was playing in the background, champagne was flowing, and all our family and friends were there.*

*Evan, the best man, walked down the aisle first, followed by his dad, the groom. As Greg made his way toward the altar, all our guests, as if on cue, stood and began to cheer. Suddenly, it was my turn. As "Here Comes the Bride" began to play, I felt a tingling sensation throughout my entire body and practically ran toward them. And when I said "I do," standing next to Greg and Evan, I was filled with the most powerful sense of elation I'd ever known.*

*When I entered the reception room, the party was in full swing. I walked out onto the dance floor and immediately looked for Evan. As I stood in the midst of my wedding wearing the most exquisite wedding gown imaginable and feeling like Cinderella at the ball, I finally spotted him. I opened my arms wide for him to come and dance with me—and he wouldn't. I found myself rooted to the spot, devastated, willing myself not to cry. In that instant, the reality of marrying a man who had been married before came crashing down on me. Maybe we wouldn't be one big, happy family. Maybe my new life wouldn't be so perfect after all.*

The lines had been drawn for real now, and there was no way out for either of us. You'd think we would've reached a neutral peace by then, but things had gotten worse over the last three years instead of better. It's not as if we hadn't tried, over and over, to get along. We'd met, we'd talked, and we had tried to figure out how to make room for both of us in the confining space being stepwives had relegated us to. But the truth was that we brought out the worst in each other and didn't know how to get along.

Lynne didn't feel depressed or self-pitying all the time—far from it. But Louise was a trigger, a mood changer. One look at her face, and Lynne suddenly felt like an outsider in her own life. So what if she'd built a great new life for herself? Louise had the magical ability to make her ache for what she'd lost.

Louise was thoroughly enjoying her new life. The role of wife and stepmother fit her to a tee, and at times she almost forgot about Lynne—that persistent dark cloud that hovered over her life, threatening to rain down on her whenever she least expected it.

Our relationship was built on thousands of difficult moments that stung like sand in the face. Sometimes the pain was intense, sometimes just a quick stab, but the undercurrent of feeling was always the same. Someone got there first. Someone snatched away what you wanted. Someone dragged her hand across the perfect picture you'd had for your life and smeared it into something unrecognizable. And all we wanted was for that someone to go away. But of course that was not to

be.

The question everyone asks us is: How could we possibly have put aside so many years of bitterness, envy, and fighting to finally begin the healing process? It was the Shoe Incident, in Year 10 of our standoff, that finally helped us push open the doors we'd slammed shut in our relationship.

Lynne: \*

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Stepwives: (n) (1) ex-wife and current wife to the same man, mother and stepmother to the same children; (2) women destined to battle for the love and control of their families...until now!

Lynne and Louise were stepwives for ten years. While they managed a barely civil relationship, each was seething with anger on the inside. It all boiled over in an ugly scene on the day Lynne saw that Louise was wearing shoes identical to her own favorite pair, and then they knew they had to find a new way of being a family.

With the guidance of marriage and family therapist Marjorie Vego Krausz, Lynne Oxhorn-Ringwood and Louise Oxhorn developed a ten-step program that has helped thousands of women begin to go from sworn enemies to CoMamas. You don't have to follow the program together with your stepwife; even if only one of you follows the plan, your stepwife relationship and the happiness of your family will improve. Learn how to:

*Establish a good working relationship with your stepwife*

*Put the children first*

*Understand your husband's/ex-husband's role and how he can help*

*Handle vacations, holidays, and other big occasions*

Packed with quizzes, lists, and other helpful tools, *Stepwives* can show you how to *step into her shoes* and have a peaceful, cooperative relationship with your stepwife.

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