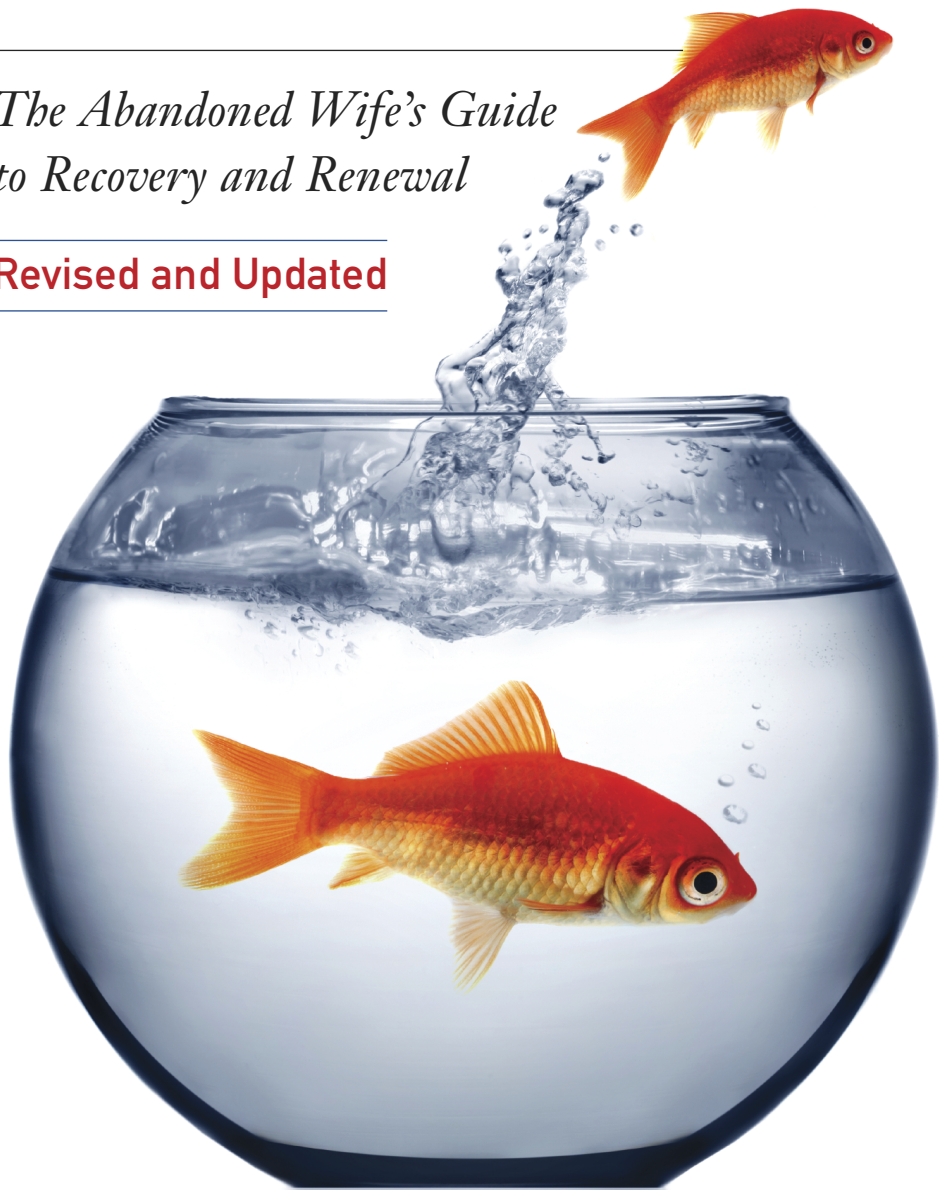


RUNAWAY HUSBANDS

*The Abandoned Wife's Guide
to Recovery and Renewal*

Revised and Updated



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C H A P T E R I

My Husband, the Hologram

The fall of 2006 should have been one of the happiest times of my life. My first book, *My Sister, My Self*, had just been published and I'd just completed a book tour speaking at bookstores and community centers across the United States about sister relationships, the subject of my book. Planning the trip, I'd envisioned how great it would be out there driving the open road alone, listening to local radio stations and getting the chance to talk with dozens of women about a topic dear to their hearts. Although the reality of driving three thousand miles across America proved to be much more challenging than I'd expected, at least I had backup. During our nightly phone calls, my husband of twenty-one years was cheering me on, telling me how proud he was, always encouraging me.

After three sometimes very lonely weeks on the road, I took the red-eye back east from California, stumbled off the plane and fell into my husband's arms in tears. I was so relieved to be home, so happy to see him. There was only one more event on the book tour later that week, and it was the one I was most eagerly anticipating—my official book launch in Montreal where I live. All my friends were coming (some flying in from New York), as were the press, my colleagues and many of the women who participated in the Sisters Project that formed the basis of my book. We were expecting close to a hundred people. It was to be my triumphant return—the best day in my life!

When we returned from the airport, my husband dropped me at home and rushed right off to work, which I found a bit odd; usually he loved to stop for coffee and reconnect whenever one of us returned from a trip. I took a shower and noticed a long dark hair in the bathtub but thought little of it. Later, however, when I was on the phone with my longhaired daughter, I asked as an afterthought, if she'd been at the house recently. She said no, not while I was away. Then I forgot about it.

I spent the day unwinding from the trip and enjoying the anticipation of the upcoming book launch. That evening, when my husband arrived home from work, I threaded my arm through his, gave him a squeeze and said, "I bought fish." He looked at me rather strangely and said, "It's over." I stared at him and asked, "What's over?" vaguely thinking that that was a weird way to say that he didn't want to eat fish anymore. He answered, "The marriage. It's over. I'm leaving you. I'm moving in with my girlfriend." Horrified, I watched the words take shape in slow motion as they left his mouth and hung in the air before they crumbled to the floor. Pow! Shock! I'd spent twenty-three days on the road only to be hit by a Mack truck in my own living room.

My husband had *never* mentioned that he was unhappy or thinking of leaving me. During the previous months, he'd signed greeting cards with endearments like, "I love you with all of my heart," "Thank you for the myriad joys you bring me" and "You are the rock of my life – then, now, always!" Until the moment of his revelation, I was deeply in love and believed him to be, too. Had you tapped me on the shoulder five minutes earlier and asked me to describe my marriage, my eyes would have misted up as I rhapsodized about how my husband was the most loving, attentive, and trustworthy man any woman had ever married and how lucky I was to have found him. In other words, *I'd had no idea!*

I'd trusted him completely not only because of how bonded I thought we were after the many difficult life events we'd weathered so well together (my mother's Alzheimer's, his health problems and liver transplant), but also because he had always presented himself as the personification of morality and decency. Integrity—that's

what everyone believed he stood for. It was inconceivable that he'd been lying and betraying me for what I soon learned were six long years.

He went on to tell me details that I neither wanted nor needed to hear. He said he'd broken up with his girlfriend five years earlier when he learned that he needed a transplant because he wanted me to take care of him, but he got back together with her as soon as the wound healed. Two years later during his sabbatical, she was with him in South Africa although in his phone calls he'd constantly declared how much he missed me and how lonely he was. The "solo" Vermont hiking weekend that he'd excitedly described to me in such detail while I was on the road had actually been a romantic getaway. His girlfriend had been at my house, cooking dinner in my kitchen and sleeping in my bed, while I was out there on the book tour.

Being a therapist, I knew right away that the marriage was truly over. I didn't fight or challenge him. I sat quietly as my husband revealed all this to me in the most brutal way possible, with no preparation, no logical explanation and no remorse. He made no acknowledgment of the magnitude of what he was doing or of the life we'd shared. I hate to sound dramatic, but it felt like he'd stuck a knife in, turned it and then watched dispassionately as I sat there bleeding. I'd always been the one to protect and comfort him when he was hurting. Now, I was on my own.

I was completely traumatized. My body was thrown into an uproar; the emotional pain was physical and almost unbearable. My mind jammed as I struggled to redefine the happily married reality that had been a fact of my life for decades, and integrate a new vision of my husband. It was as if he were a hologram. His face looked familiar, but the man standing before me was in reality a stranger.

He wanted to leave immediately, but I asked him to stay until I had a little time to process what was going on. He spent the night on the sofa. The next day he threw all his belongings into garbage bags and bolted from my life directly into the arms of his girlfriend.

The Sudden Wife Abandonment Project

That's my personal account of what took place at the moment of my husband's dramatic departure from our marriage. But although I was in the throes of the most traumatic event of my life, a part of me was also standing back, observing from the vantage point of a trained professional. I'd been a marriage and divorce counselor for over twenty years and in the course of my practice had witnessed a number of marriages dissolve. As a matter of fact, around the time that my husband said he had started his affair six years earlier, I had just co-founded a counseling center dedicated to helping families cope with divorce.

I was measuring what I'd observed with clients against what I was experiencing in my own life, and I just didn't get it. Most people assume that it's impossible for a person to have an affair without the partner having some knowledge—that the injured spouse is always either complicit or purposefully blind. However, that was not my case. Under even the closest scrutiny, I was unable to discern any trace that could have tipped me off that things were not hunky-dory in the marriage. On the contrary, few wives could boast of a more devoted mate, and, oddly enough, until the revelation of his infidelity and subsequent heartless flight from the marriage, he was the ideal husband!

I just couldn't wrap my mind around how a man who genuinely appeared so committed to our marriage could morph overnight into an angry stranger. In the midst of my suffering, I knew that there'd be no rest for me until I could figure it out. So as days stretched into weeks, I started researching wife abandonment. Through reading and speaking with other women, a remarkable picture slowly started to take shape; my husband's bizarre behavior seemed to fit into a pattern exhibited by other men who suddenly bolted from apparently happy marriages and then turned against their wives. The similarities were uncanny! I defined this pattern and named it Wife Abandonment Syndrome (WAS).

Time and again, the women I spoke with recounted the same details in describing their husbands' flight from the marriage, from the exact words spoken to announce the end and his post-separation behavior to the type of woman he chose as an affair partner. So, as I'd done for my *Sisters* book, I decided to conduct a study to learn more. I established a website, www.runawayhusbands.com, on which I provided information, a community bulletin board and a questionnaire about WAS (a copy is located in the back of this book), and also started interviewing women face-to-face. Soon the stories started pouring in.

Before I knew it, the Sudden Wife Abandonment Project (SWAP) was off and running! I'd heard from over four hundred people by the time I stopped collecting interviews. SWAP participants were mostly women who'd been left, but I also received questionnaires from children whose fathers had fled, men who were abandoned by wives and even some of the runaway husbands themselves.

Women who visited the website were deeply relieved to know that someone could shed some light on the nightmare they'd been going through and were eager to help in any way they could. Here are some of their comments:

- “I went to your website and wept when I read some of the posts and the pieces of advice. I'm not sure people have truly understood what I have been going through until I read some of the information on your site.”
- “Your website has been a source of support to me during this time. I never believed my husband would ‘run away’ and felt so demoralized when he did. It's helped me to know that other women have gone through what I'm going through now. It's comforting to know that I'm not alone.”
- “It made my day to read about your research and to hear your take on WAS—so familiar to me. So many people cannot believe that this can just happen without obvious signs—and it does. It happens even *with* signs that lead you to believe your marriage will last forever. It is such a confusing

and devastating event—I hope that your book will be of help and lessen the feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy that can prevail for so long.”

- “I was really shocked when I read the article in the newspaper [about WAS] as it perfectly mirrored my story. I hope that by telling my story I can help you to help us understand this, grow and move on.”

I Will Be Your Sherpa

Wife Abandonment Syndrome is a pattern of behavior that begins when a husband leaves his wife out-of-the-blue without ever having told her that he was unhappy or thinking of leaving. Following his dramatic revelation, he replaces the tenderness he'd typically shown her with anger and aggression. He often moves directly in with a girlfriend, leaving his bewildered wife totally devastated. This will undoubtedly be the defining event in her life, and although recovery is a struggle, many women find that it forces them to reinvent themselves in positive and enriching new ways.

You picked up this book, most likely, because at some point in your life, the same Mack truck that hit me hit you, and you want answers. Not only do you need to know what happened, but, more importantly, you need to know *what to do* about what happened. Whether your husband left last week or ten years ago, you yearn to put that chapter of your life to rest, once and for all. That doesn't mean that you won't think about him with emotion—you're human after all. It just means that you won't think of him as often and, when you do, it so won't hurt so much. Once you've worked through your recovery process, thoughts and feelings about your marriage and former husband will lose their power to disturb you as profoundly. You will be able to reflect on it without getting the sick feeling that you had in the months after your husband left.

It's hard to recover when you've been betrayed by the person you trusted the most. You were seared to the bone and have to fig-

ure out how to rebuild your life, starting with your self-esteem. There are few people who really understand what you're going through or can counsel you, even within the therapeutic community. It will take all your resources to move beyond the pain, obsessiveness, anger and general misery to the next part of your life. This book will guide you through the stages of recovery so that you don't get stuck, and it will give you a vision of how, in spite of it all, you *can* have a much better future than it's possible to imagine right now.

The crisis of abandonment is first and foremost a crisis of identity. Much of what you took as a "given" about yourself and your world has been thrown into question. Feeling loved by your husband gave you a sense of self-worth as you saw yourself reflected in his appreciative eyes. When he rejected you, your first reaction, rather than anger at him, was probably to feel badly about *yourself*, internalizing *his* vision of you and tallying up the ways in which you weren't the wife he wanted. But when you regain some perspective, you will see, if you haven't already, that a woman doesn't have to be perfect to be a good wife. If he was unhappy, he owed it to you to include you in a discussion of his feelings.

Now that the marriage is over, you'll need to stop taking your husband's assessment of you as the right one. You'll need to learn to value your own view of the kind of wife you were, and the woman that you are. That takes courage. It's much easier to depend on others to inform you about yourself than to trust your own opinions. You need to learn that just because someone else believes something about you, it doesn't necessarily make it true.

Like it or not, you will have to change in many ways in order to adjust to this new reality. Here are some of the emotional tasks you'll need to complete:

- Revise your beliefs about human nature. You now have learned that some people are capable of deception.
- Believe in your self-worth. You must stop feeling discarded, empty and less valuable than the woman who has taken your place or than married women in general.

- Get accustomed to being self-reliant and independent.
- Expect good things in your future. Don't assume that you will always be alone or miserable.
- Stay positive! Stop yourself from becoming bitter or developing a victim mentality.

I know you can turn this traumatic event into an opportunity for growth and change. Once you understand what happened to you and accept the fact that your life is not going to unfold as you'd planned, new doors will open and you will realize that your future is in *your* hands. Hearing the stories of SWAP participants, I was astounded to learn how many of them bounced back, redefining their lives and launching off in new, unexpected directions. In spite of the hurt, anger and sense of loss, in spite of the injustice of it all, in the final analysis it's up to you to decide what to do with the new life you have been given. But first, we have some work to do to bring you to that point.

Here's what Elizabeth Gilbert wrote about happiness in *Eat, Pray, Love*:

Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it, you must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into that happiness forever.

As you embark on this journey, I will be your Sherpa. I will carry the supplies and do the heavy lifting, but you must walk with me along the path. We'll stumble. We may have to double back sometimes. But in the end, we can enjoy the view from the top of the mountain with the satisfaction of knowing that we fought hard to get there.

Hallmarks of Wife Abandonment Syndrome

- 1 Prior to the separation, the husband had seemed to be an attentive, emotionally engaged spouse, looked upon by his wife as honest and trustworthy.
- 2 The husband had never said that he was unhappy or thinking of leaving the marriage, and the wife believed herself to be in a secure relationship.
- 3 The husband typically blurts out the news that the marriage is over out-of-the-blue in the middle of a mundane domestic conversation.
- 4 Reasons given for his decision are nonsensical, exaggerated, trivial or fraudulent.
- 5 By the time the husband reveals his intentions to his wife, the end of the marriage is already a *fait accompli*, and he often moves out quickly.
- 6 The husband's behavior changes radically, so much so that it seems to his wife that he has become a cruel and vindictive stranger.
- 7 The husband shows no remorse; rather, he blames his wife and may describe himself as the victim.
- 8 In almost all cases, the husband had been having an affair. He typically moves in with his girlfriend.
- 9 The husband makes no attempt to help his wife, either financially or emotionally, as if all positive regard for her has been suddenly extinguished.
- 10 Systematically devaluing his wife and the marriage, the husband denies what he had previously described as positive aspects of the couple's joint history.