

Secrets, Lies, and Online Dating: Three Generations Learn to Love Again (Women's Fiction)

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[Secrets, Lies, And Online Dating](#)
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Contents

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[Virtual](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Also By](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank You!](#)

[Sneak Peek](#)

[Also by](#)

[About the Author](#)

One Lie Changes The Course of Three Lives

When Marianne Larson uncovers a truth about her marriage, she sets out to change the course of her life, finding herself along the way. But that journey doesn't come easy as her mother and daughter decide to take a ride of their own—a ride that just might change all of their lives.

While discovering secrets, lies, and the truth about men & dating, three generations and three very different personalities recreate their lives and strengthen their female bond. But what they find might just be what they knew all along...

Reviews

“Three generations of women fight, love and laugh. If you are a mother or daughter you will love this book and not be able to put it down!” ANON

“This book was a very pleasant surprise for me in that it took me to places I wasn't expecting, and had me laughing out loud, wanting to go into the story and smack people on the back of the head to wake them up, and to just hug those ladies and be friends with them. When you can get into a story that way it is a rare experience.” Literature Lighthouse

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Secrets, Lies, and Online Dating

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Short Description: Can three generations recreate their lives, and learn that the bond between them is stronger than secrets, lies, and thrilling new loves?

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Chapter 1

Marianne Larson stood before the apartment door of her husband's latest fling with his two suitcases in hand, determined, scared, and mad as hell. Birds twittered happy songs in the early spring afternoon in North Dallas, but it could have been a death dirge for all she cared.

Like an overcooked steak, she felt fried, burnt to a crisp, and emotionally overdone. She had finally let go of the idea that marriage is forever. Each breath she took felt like a fifty-pound bowling ball resting on her chest.

Marianne dropped the two bulging suitcases onto the concrete walk and waited for the constable to step out of sight. She shoved her blonde hair away from her face, yanked back her shoulders, and lifted her shaking fingers to the doorbell.

Her new life was about to begin.

A shadow filled the peephole, and hushed, panicked voices echoed from inside the apartment. She recognized her adulterous, soon-to-be ex-husband's voice. The door opened as far as the security chain allowed.

A blonde woman peeked through the gap with a too-wide, fake smile. Marianne blinked in disbelief at the girl's thigh high boots, clinging thong, and bustier. A leather whip was still in her hand, the perfect accessory to her dominatrix outfit.

"Marianne! What a surprise."

For a moment, Marianne stared, stunned, before hysterical laughter bubbled up from deep within her. She recognized the girl from the company picnic, but leather? Whips?

At her laughter, the girl's russet eyes darkened.

"Yes, a surprise for both of us. I never knew Daniel was into..." Marianne stumbled over the word "...games." She gathered her wits. "I brought Daniel his clothes."

The woman's dark eyes widened. "Here? Whatever for?"

"Look, I know Daniel is inside. His BMW is in the parking lot. You're not the first one to climb on top of him while earning a promotion, though I see you have a unique way of securing your advancement."

Daniel's reddened face appeared in the doorway, his body hidden by his dominatrix. "Marianne, what are you doing here?"

"Bringing you your clothes."

Marianne gazed upon her college sweetheart, her heart void of the love it once held. Daniel shoved his lover aside, slid back the security chain, and yanked the door open.

"Honey, you know this means nothing."

The view of her husband with a leather choke collar around his neck and a leather thong clinging to his loins brought uncontrollable laughter spewing from her like a fountain. How could she not

have known that he was into sexual games?

The constable standing to the side muffled his snicker.

“You’re right. Your cheating means nothing anymore.”

Daniel flinched.

She handed the bulging suitcases to the man she’d once loved.

“Here are your things,” Marianne said, trembling from nerves, though she’d never felt more certain in her life. “And Constable Warren has something for you.”

The constable stepped into the breezeway. “Are you Daniel Larson?”

“Yes?”

The officer shoved the paperwork into Daniel’s hand. “Consider yourself served.”

“Marianne?” Daniel questioned, his voice rising as he tore open the envelope. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s called a divorce. You’ve cheated on me for the last time.”

His dark eyes widened as he scanned the contents of the document.

Daniel lifted his shocked gaze to her. “You can’t be serious! You locked me out of our home?”

“Yes. I’ll see you in court,” she said, wanting to escape before the scene turned ugly.

His tone became cajoling. “Marianne, honey, we’ve been married a long time. Because of me, you live a comfortable life. You *need* me to take care of you.”

God, no wonder Daniel was top salesman year after year. “You know, that line worked the first hundred times you used it, but not any longer. I’m done, Daniel.”

Marianne walked off, certain they’d said everything.

Daniel followed her, barefoot, his dog chain clinking on the ground. At noon, most people were at work, but a few stopped to stare.

“Don’t do this, Marianne. Think of our daughter.”

She kept marching, each determined step finishing what she should have ended years ago.

“I’ll end the affair. I’ll change,” Daniel promised.

Marianne whirled around to face him. “Why?”

He stopped, his chain rattling, his expression perplexed by her question. “Because – because you want me to.”

“Do I?” She paused, considering his remark for a few seconds. “And that would last until the next

pretty blonde in your office offered you a little booty, and then you'd cheat again."

Daniel stood half-naked in the open parking lot, a baffled expression on his handsome face. He didn't seem to know how to react.

"Don't do this," Daniel begged. "I won't give you a divorce."

"Fine. I wanted to make this quick and to protect our daughter from knowing the truth about her father, but we can do this the hard way. A long, drawn-out legal trial will force me to parade your extra-marital affairs through the courtroom. In the end, I'll be entitled to sixty percent of our assets instead of the normal fifty. And our daughter will know what a douche bag her father is."

His dark eyes burned her. "You wouldn't dare."

"And this little escapade will make for interesting viewing in the courtroom. Wave at the camera, darling."

The detective she'd hired moved from behind the van and waved at him, the red light of the video camera beamed as it recorded his stunned expression. Part of her felt despicable for being so brutal, but the rational part knew he deserved this and more. This time he would not brainwash her into believing she had no choice but to stay.

"You planned this," he said in awe.

"Yes, I did," she admitted, proud that she had pushed aside her fears and done what should have happened years ago.

Daniel gave her a pleading look that reached inside, igniting all the fear locked away. Never again would she return to being the same wife who had tolerated his cheating for at least three years.

"Marianne," his voice changed to the sweet seductive tone that normally convinced her to see things his way. "We've been married a long time, baby. You don't play these kinds of games with me. We have a good life together. We have a daughter."

"I want out."

"You've spent the last eighteen years a stay-at-home mom. Are you going to get a job?" He tried to take her hand, but she stepped out of his reach. "Who's going to hire an older woman with no skills?"

He'd gone for the jugular, and for a moment, her breath lodged in her lungs as bitter bile filled her throat. Wasn't this how he always lured her back? Reminding her of her faults, how she couldn't take care of herself, how she depended on him for her easy life.

The constable cleared his throat, reminding her he was still there.

"You got pregnant so that you wouldn't have to finish college. You need me, honey," he said, his voice soft and persuasive, like a preacher trying to coax a sinner to return to his faithful flock. The words left her feeling like a giant lizard had just licked her, leaving behind a coating of slime.

Was it true? Had she been afraid of flunking out and deliberately gotten pregnant to keep from finishing college? Maybe she couldn't take care of herself and Katie. Maybe she...

“Stop!” Marianne commanded as much for herself as for him. She drew a deep calming breath, and her nostrils filled with the sweet scent of roses. Slowly she released the frozen air in her lungs, her armor once again firmly in place. “I deserve a man who is faithful to me.”

“You *need* someone to take care of you,” Daniel corrected. “And I need to have a little fun every now and then.” He waved his arm toward the blonde’s apartment. “This isn’t serious. You’ll come back to me, you’ll see,” he said with enough confidence to rattle her.

Marianne gave a strained smile and dug deep within herself to find a well of resources to bolster her courage. “If you don’t want our daughter to know the truth about her father, you’ll give me a divorce.”

Marianne walked away with the constable following her. Underneath the pain, she felt stronger than she had in decades. Until today, she’d had no plan for what to do with her life once Daniel was gone. Now she would go back to college and finish what she’d started years ago. Now she had a plan.

Brenda Jones glanced around the country club pool, gazing at the rich old cows that bobbed in the water, waiting for class to start. Steam rose from the heated pool, and the scent of chlorine saturated the air, like the constant prickliness that permeated Brenda. Damn George for dying and leaving her alone!

Since the death of her husband, Brenda’s life appeared as empty and alone as that old house she rattled around in. Thirty minutes, three times a week at the pool, was hardly time to reconnect to the outside world.

And these women were like trying to connect to a dead battery. No sizzle, no spark, and no battery operated bouncing bunny.

Brenda shoved her morbid thoughts aside as her friend Liz entered the pool.

“Hi,” Brenda called and jumped into the warm water, eager to visit with Liz.

A month had passed since she’d seen Liz at water aerobics, and every time Brenda phoned her, she only spoke to the answering machine.

Brenda made her way to the woman who had once been her best friend. “How have you been? I haven’t seen you lately.”

Her long-time friend turned to her, a small smile lifting the corners of her mouth, her bottled hair color 70B Plum Brown hairdo outshining her fake grin. “Dean and I just returned from France with Jane and her husband Fred.”

Liz had seemed distant since George’s death, as if she’d drawn up the bridge over the moat to keep Brenda at bay. But then, nothing had been the same since George died.

“That sounds like fun. I remember when we all went to France that year. We had a great time.”

The couples had been close, the very best of friends, until George’s heart attack. Then they’d disappeared along with her husband, leaving Brenda alone in her darkest hour.

Liz gave her a guilty little smile. “Yes. So what have you been doing with yourself?”

"Trying to stay busy. I don't see many of our friends anymore. It almost feels like my friends are avoiding me."

Liz pursed her lips and fidgeted.

"It's true," Brenda said, realizing her suspicions were correct. Her stomach clenched at the unfairness of their rejection.

Her friend shifted nervously in the water and refused to look at Brenda. "People are uncomfortable with George gone. It's just not the same."

A ripple of unease scattered through Brenda. "George didn't want to die. We had so many plans, and none of them included a heart attack." She paused, understanding dawning. "This is why I never see you and Dean anymore?"

"Maybe you should join that widows group at the club. The one where they all go to dances and out to dinner together," Liz said.

The ugly truth that her best friends no longer sought her companionship, when Brenda needed their friendship the most, left her reeling with shock. The warm water turned cold, giving her a chill.

"So who do you play cards with on Friday nights?" Brenda asked, and like lightening it dawned on her. "It's Jane and Fred, isn't it? You hate Jane."

"She's all right," Liz defended.

A woman that Liz had often called an old hag had replaced her. Brenda clenched her fists, anger skipping along her spine and slamming into her gut. She'd lost her best friend, George. Did she have to lose her other friends as well?

"We've been friends since grade school," Brenda said.

"Yes."

"But, because I'm no longer part of a couple, I'm being excluded?" Brenda asked in disbelief, the realization leaving a bitter taste in her mouth.

Liz released a heavy sigh, rolled her eyes, and faced Brenda for the first time. "Not really *excluded*. At dinner parties, it's always hard to sit a single. And I just can't bring myself to place you with another man. I mean, you and George were together for so many years."

"Yes, but I'm not dead, and I miss my friends," Brenda said, her voice rising with resentment that rose like a thermometer on a hot summer day.

"Brenda, it's not the same anymore," Liz said, growing agitated.

"So I should buy a gun and shoot myself," Brenda responded, beyond annoyed at the insensitivity of the person she'd considered her best friend. "Or could it be, I shouldn't inconvenience my friends by reminding them that their husbands might die and leave them alone?"

Liz's body stiffened. Her shoulders drew together in a rigid manner, horror frozen on her face, and Brenda knew she'd connected with the truth. "That's it. You're afraid. If my George could die

suddenly, so could Dean. You could be left alone with no one."

"Dear, you're overreacting and drawing attention," Liz said, glancing around at the other women in the pool.

Brenda realized the ladies were gawking at them with interest, but she couldn't seem to care. "Excuse me, I'm being kicked out of the married friends club."

Several women gave nervous twitters.

"Let me give you a piece of advice," Brenda told them all. "Don't outlive your husband because, if you do, your supposed friends will have to face their own mortality and they will kick you to the curb."

Brenda noticed Liz quietly moving away from her, and she followed, determined to get the last word in before she left this geriatric pool party. "And Liz, one more thing about our Friday evening get-togethers. The positives are I don't have to eat your awful crab salad. I don't have to listen to how wonderful your bratty children are. But best of all, I don't have to dodge Dean's sneaky hands patting my ass."

"Brenda!" Liz said, her mouth open in shock. "You've gone over the edge."

"You're damn right I've gone over the edge. Today, I learned who my real friends are. I'm dumbfounded that it's taken me fifty years to realize you're not one of them."

Brenda made her way to the ladder, the other women in class silently watching her. She climbed out of the pool, turned, and faced the ladies with their mouths hanging open. "Ta-ta, ladies. There has to be more to life than water aerobics and I'm off to discover it without my married friends."

Marianne was surprised to see her mother drive up later that afternoon and realized the For Sale sign in the yard would end her peaceful interlude. It wouldn't take long for the fireworks to prevail.

"You did what?" Brenda asked, her maple-colored eyes wide with shock.

"I kicked Daniel out, Mom. I caught him cheating on me," Marianne said, quietly standing at the sink in the kitchen of her Highland Park home.

Cinnamon wafted through the kitchen from a burning candle on the granite countertop.

Two weeks had passed, and Marianne's life hadn't gotten any easier. Katie hated her, and today, her mother had shown up unexpectedly. Her mother's forehead wrinkled in a frown, her gray hair framing her oval face.

"Please tell me you cut his balls off, so his cheating is no longer an issue," her mother said in her commanding voice.

Marianne smiled. Maybe her Mom was going to be okay with the divorce. "He's still Katie's father."

"His only accomplishment in life," her mother acknowledged in her graveled sarcastic tone. "How are you going to take care of yourself and Katie? You've never worked."

"We'll get by," Marianne said. She'd balanced the checkbook that afternoon and knew that without Daniel's salary, her share of their bank accounts and home sale would not support her forever. The time to return to college was now. She required a career.

Marianne watched her mother draw a deep breath and release it slowly. Brenda walked to the kitchen table, sat down, and pointed to a chair. "Sit, Marianne. We need to talk."

Tears welled up in Marianne's eyes, but she obediently sank onto the nearest chair, feeling ten instead of forty.

"I understand you're hurt. I understand you're angry, but being alone is never easy. Starting over is hard. Single mothers live in poverty. Single men at this age are like forgotten leftovers in the fridge – cold, stinky, and rotten to the core."

Marianne had always known her mother was opinionated and judgmental, but today she'd expected comfort, outrage, and her mother to take her side. Disappointment ripped through Marianne at her mother's attitude. "A minute ago, you wanted me to cut his balls off."

"Yes. Serve them for dinner and make his life hell." Brenda pointed to the well-appointed kitchen with stainless appliances and granite countertops. "Daniel provides very well for you."

"So staying with Daniel and getting the clap would be better than getting a divorce?"

Her mother frowned, and Marianne decided that she needed to know the truth. "This is not the first time he's cheated on me. I have tolerated it for years for all the reasons you mentioned, but Katie's grown now, and I deserve someone who loves and wants only me."

"Good luck finding him," her mother stated. "You're not as young as you once were and men your age want young trophy wives."

"Mom!" With sudden clarity Marianne remembered why she never confided her problems to her mother. Right now she sought comfort, not a lecture on the lack of good single men at her age.

"What? It's true."

Marianne stiffened and briefly imagined a lifetime of never finding a man better than her horrible husband. She imagined herself always lonely, always empty, and it was tempting to crumble and retreat back to her safe, miserable marriage, but enough was enough. She had to do this.

"Then maybe I'm meant to be alone," Marianne sighed with a bitter twist to her lips. She reached out and grabbed her mother's hand, needing her approval, her reassurance.

Brenda bit her lip. "Marianne, I'm not disapproving of your decision. I just want to make sure you're aware of the hard facts of being single. You're still young enough to need companionship. Men my age want someone younger, and men your age will too."

"Not a problem, Mom," Marianne said. Living alone would be easy compared to her life with Daniel.

Brenda took a deep breath. "Soon you'll realize that women you deemed friends are nervous with a single woman coming around their husbands."

Her mother's maple eyes had a distant gaze to them, and with sudden realization, Marianne knew

her mother spoke about her own life.

"Mom, this is about me, not you. This is about Daniel fucking a skinny blonde with a..." she paused, the image startling her yet again. The DVD in her mind automatically switched on, replaying the horror show while shudders rippled like water through her. "Oh, Mom, if only you'd seen him."

Marianne buried her head in her hands, both embarrassed for Daniel and trying not to burst out laughing again.

"Oh honey, I'm sorry. You must be hurting something awful," her mother said, touching the top of her head and running her hand through Marianne's hair in a comforting gesture.

Marianne raised her head and stared at her mother. Had she understood anything she'd said? Why did they always seem to talk to each other, but never connect? "No, I'm not hurting. I fell out of love with him years ago. I feel embarrassed for him...and kind of creeped out at catching him in a dog collar and leather."

Her mother gasped, her eyes wide in disbelief. "Oh God, you didn't."

"Yes, Mom, I did," Marianne said, wanting her mother to get the full image. "His dominatrix answered the door. Daniel wore a leather thong with a dog collar around his neck. Now do you understand why I'm divorcing him?"

Her mother laughed, the sound easing the strain in the room, and even Marianne chuckled. In so many ways she was glad that she had a video of Daniel parading around in his collar. He still didn't want the divorce, but at least he was working on the settlement. Without the video, she didn't know if he would have been quite so cooperative.

"That's an image I'll take to the grave. Seems fitting for the bastard. He deserved to get whacked across the butt hard. I want you to be happy," her mother said adamantly. She squeezed Marianne's hand. "My own recent experiences have made me realize what I lost."

"You still miss Dad?" Marianne asked, pushing back her blonde hair, knowing how difficult life was without her father.

"Every day. I never imagined I would spend my retirement years alone," her mother said sadly.

Marianne missed her father and the stability he'd brought to their family. The way he tempered her mother and kept her calm.

"What about Katie?" her mother asked. "How is she handling the divorce?"

Marianne sighed. Her daughter didn't understand what had happened to her loving family. Marianne and Daniel had created a happy family atmosphere for their daughter. Now that lie was working against her.

"Katie is angry at me. She doesn't know the truth about her father's indiscretions. She should never have to know."

"Like hell. Katie deserves to know what happened between her parents," Brenda replied. "She should know her father enjoys a good spanking with someone other than his wife."

"Certainly not, Mother," Marianne responded, a trickle of alarm skittering along her spine. "He's

still her father. Katie will not learn the truth from me, and you won't tell her either."

Her mother frowned. "What if I just hinted a little bit that he cheated?"

"Nothing, Mother. Don't make me regret telling you. Promise me you won't say anything."

Brenda sighed and reluctantly agreed. "I promise I won't tell Katie. But I think you're making a huge mistake by not being honest with her."

"Maybe, but that's my decision."

Brenda's response seemed less than sincere, and Marianne worried she'd said too much.

"So what are you going to do now?" her mother asked. "I was shocked at the For Sale sign in the yard."

Marianne wanted to keep the atmosphere chummy, and she knew the news of the move would send her mother into a nuclear meltdown. She didn't like Paige. Yet Marianne had delayed her own life for so long that she refused to wait any longer.

"Do you remember my good friend, Paige, from college?" Marianne said glancing at the clock, knowing Katie would walk in any moment.

"That trashy girl on her third marriage?"

"That's the one. I'm selling the house and moving to Fort Collins, Colorado to go to school. Paige lives there. Plus I'll be closer to Katie while she's at college."

Her mother sat with a stunned expression on her face, her body tensing. For the longest time, she didn't say anything and an uneasy nervousness fluttered in Marianne's stomach. Silence this long wasn't good! It could only mean her anger was building.

Brenda's maple eyes flashed, and her face looked pinched, like someone had stapled her lips shut. She took a deep breath, and Marianne recognized the danger signals of an impending meltdown.

The kitchen door burst open, and her innocent, blonde-haired Katie rushed in from school. Marianne's heart swelled at the sight of her beautiful daughter. Katie dropped her backpack on the kitchen floor, giving Marianne a momentary reprieve.

"Hi Nana," she said and hugged her grandmother. She kept her back to Marianne, deliberately ignoring her.

Sadness slapped Marianne, like a blow to the heart. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't connect with her daughter or her mother. And now the divorce had left a rift between them larger than the Grand Canyon.

"Did Mom tell you she kicked Dad out?" Katie said with a dramatic flip of her hair.

"Yes, she just told me," Brenda said, as if they were talking about the weather, not a life-changing event. Brenda's anger simmered in the air, like a gathering thunderstorm.

Katie snuck a glance at Marianne. "Did you convince her that this is some kind of mid-life crisis,

and someday she will regret kicking out Daddy?"

Marianne glared. "I may be at mid-life, I may even be going through a life crisis, but it's my crisis, thank you."

Katie marched to the sink and leaned against the counter and glowered. "Well he's my father, and you're dissolving our family. I mean, what more can you freakin' want from him, Mother? He's given you everything."

Marianne glanced at her mother, fearful of her revealing the truth. Brenda was all but eating her lips to keep from talking. Marianne was tempted to tell her daughter exactly what she expected from Daniel, but she had vowed to stick to the high road, no matter how much she was provoked. Katie loved her father, and Marianne was going to protect her daughter from Daniel's indiscretions.

"I have explained myself once, twice, three times to you, and I'm done. I'm sorry you're hurt, but this is between your father and me."

Katie's eyes were as green as her father's and spewed emerald fire as she faced her grandmother, her hands on her hips. "Convince her she's making the biggest mistake of her life, leaving Dad, selling the house, and moving to Colorado. Tell her not to throw away eighteen perfectly good years of marriage—"

"Katie, you're old enough to realize that sometimes things are not as they seem," Brenda hesitated, glancing between them. "But moving to Colorado...did either of you stop to consider me? I've not only lost my husband, but now my daughter and granddaughter are moving over a thousand miles away?"

Seconds could be heard ticking slowly by in the quiet of the room. Her mother stood, and threw back her head in a way that elongated the length of her neck, giving her a regal appearance.

"I'm sixty years old, lonely, and bored out of my mind. My married friends act like I have the plague of death on me, and if they get too close, they might become the next widow on the block." Her voice climbed steadily higher. "And now my daughter and granddaughter are moving away. Leaving me more alone than ever."

Marianne had known this was coming, but she'd never considered that her mother had lost everything and now it sounded like everyone. But for once she had to lead her own life.

"Mom," Marianne tried to interrupt.

"Oh, sure, you'll come home for Christmas and holidays. There will be the once a week phone call and occasional birthday visit. In the meantime, what am I supposed to do?"

Brenda walked towards the door, her body stiff like a queen making her grand exit. At the door, she turned and gave them one last parting glare. "I'm not ready for the nursing home. I'm not ready for the grave. Damn George! I didn't want to be a widow."

"Mom," Marianne jumped up, her voice rising, not wanting her mother to drive in this agitated state. "Don't go. You know you can always visit us."

"No! I'm sixty years old and alone. Maybe my mid-life crisis is just twenty years late in arriving. Maybe it's my turn to act a little crazy."

Running behind her like a small kid chases after its mother, Marianne followed her to the door.

“Mom, you’re overreacting!” Marianne resisted the urge to say, ‘like you always do.’

“No, Marianne, I’m not. When do I get to run away and act crazy? When do I get to do something besides sit in front of the TV and wait for a phone call?”

“Nana, you’re scaring me,” Katie said, softly, her voice quivering.

“No, Katie, I’m making you stronger, so that you’ll know what to do when your daughter and granddaughter abandon you.”

Marianne gasped. God, her mother had a way with words that plunged a dagger into your heart. Between her mother and daughter there was always a lot of drama. Now more than ever.

Brenda stormed out the door, slamming it shut before Marianne could stop her.

Marianne met the icy green of her daughter’s glare.

“Well, Mom, you certainly handled that well. I think you’ve just about run off everyone who loves you – except for your friend, Paige. Call up that home-wrecker.”

Did no one ever think she could do something without being influenced by someone she knew? She’d made this decision after Daniel chased her in the parking lot. It was time for her to create her own life.

“Katie, stop it. Paige didn’t cause your father and me to end our marriage. And you know how your grandmother can act.”

“Yeah, a lot like you. Go call Paige so she can convince you, even more, that the single life is so much better. You two deserve each other.”

Katie whirled around and ran up the stairs.

“You’re acting like your grandmother!” Marianne yelled. The resounding slam of Katie’s bedroom door her only response.

Marianne sank down onto the kitchen chair. She hadn’t been the one to cheat, yet she bore the brunt of everyone’s anger. Without Katie knowing the truth, Daniel escaped all the drama.

The phone rang, and as she picked up the receiver, she recognized the number. Daniel. Just what she didn’t need. Another promise-the-world, sucking-up, begging call.

Katie answered the call and then opened her door to yell, “It’s Dad, and he wants to talk to you.”

God, Marianne couldn’t escape Daniel. She hit the button on the phone. “What do you want?”

“Dinner and a movie tonight?” he said, his voice cajoling. “Or I could get away from work for a few days, and we could fly to Cabos San Lucas. You loved it there.”

“Why do you think today’s answer will be any different from yesterday’s when you called? The answer is still the same. No. No. No.”

"I'm not giving up on us."

"You gave up a long time ago, when you cheated. It's over." She took a deep breath, relishing the news she had to tell him. "By the way, I have a buyer for the house."

"Damn it, Marianne. I don't want to sell the house. You're fucking everything up!"

"Goodbye Daniel."

She hung up the phone and sighed. She should call her mother and make sure the older woman made it home safely, but right now she didn't have the energy.

The phone rang again. She glanced at the caller I.D. It was Katie's boyfriend, Matt. Marianne laid the receiver down. The kid was nice, but hormones exuded from him, and she could see that he so wanted in Katie's pants.

Marianne couldn't move them to Colorado quick enough.

Chapter 2

Matt's lips locked around Katie's like they were glued together. His hand slipped beneath her shirt and bra to caress her breast. Forbidden pleasure had her blood racing through her veins to her pounding heart. Music played from her phone, and candles flickered, creating the perfect romantic set-up. It was a great day to lose her virginity.

Doubts fluttered through her mind like nervous butterflies and she batted them aside and tried to relax. Today was the day she became a woman.

Desire spiraled through her as he kneaded her nipple, causing her to moan. His mouth trailed down her neck and he laid her against her bed and raised her shirt.

With a click, his fingers unhooked her bra and pushed the material out of the way. His mouth covered her nipple and she groaned from the pleasure of his touch.

They had been experimenting for the last month, fondling each other through their clothes, but they'd never had the luxury of being alone like they did today.

"Did you bring the condom?" she asked him between kisses.

"You're certain your mom isn't going to come home soon?" he asked, his voice low, his breath spreading goose bumps across her skin.

"Yes," she gasped as his fingers traced a path across her breasts. "She and my Dad will spend hours arguing while they sign the papers on the house. We have at least an hour."

Katie needed this diversion. She needed this time with Matt to forget all the changes in her life. Graduating and going to college were more than enough to deal with, but her family breaking up and her mother's determination to move to Colorado had her completely freaked.

"Great," he said sitting up. He shucked his shirt, his chest smooth, and his abs tight and rippled. He rose to remove his pants, while Katie removed her clothing a little slower. She'd chosen tall, dark Matt for her first lover, and when she left for college, they would call each other every day. Their life together started now.

The gorgeous, blue-eyed prom-king stood naked before her. She smiled. Today, he was all hers. She lay back on the bed, her body shaking as she waited for him to join her.

Matt sank onto the bed. His lips covered hers as their naked skin met for the first time, catapulting desire through her. An intense ache built between her legs, needing, wanting something she had yet to experience.

Wouldn't her mother be surprised when she learned she was no longer a virgin?

His fingers trailed down her thighs as he gently spread her legs, his gaze lingering on her, melting her overheated skin.

"Condom?" she gasped.

"Baby, we don't need it," he said, positioning himself between her legs.

Her breathing sounded raspy to her ears and for a second she was tempted to just let him. The chances of her getting pregnant were slim, but a spark of fear swept through her. Since she was a child, her mother had preached about the dangers of unprotected sex.

"Stop. You've got to put a condom on," she said, not wanting to spoil the mood, but fearful just the same.

His lips thinned into a frown, but he hopped off the bed. With the rip of the foil wrapper, she breathed a sigh of relief.

She watched him endure several attempts before he rolled the condom down his penis. When finished, he turned and hurried back to bed. He crawled over her, his lips pausing at her neck, his touch reigniting the desire that held her captive. She moaned and slid her hands down his back, preparing herself for the shock of his entry.

The door to her bedroom swung open and her mother shrieked, "Aghhhhh...Katie! What the hell is going on here?"

Matt jumped off the bed, his hand covered his privates as he faced her mother, his erection wilting.

"Shut the door!" she yelled.

"Oh, my God! Damn it, Katie! You two have exactly one minute to get dressed and downstairs."

Her mother slammed the door.

"Fuck," Matt exclaimed. "I am not talking to your mother," he said, jerking off the rubber and tossing it onto the floor. He yanked on his jeans and t-shirt.

"So, you're going to just leave and let me face her alone?" Katie asked, jumping from the bed and pulling on her underwear.

"She's your mother!"

"But she caught the two of us," Katie said, a wave of disappointment and disbelief rocketing through her. A shaft of pain pierced her heart at the realization this was the boy who promised to

make it good for her.

"I don't have to deal with her," Matt said picking up his jacket. "I'm out of here."

"Thanks a lot," Katie said, not liking his attitude. A true boyfriend would have faced her mother's ire with her. "You're a coward."

"For not staying? I don't need this crap," he said. "You promised she wouldn't be home for hours."

"How was I supposed to know she'd get home early?"

"Well, she did."

"Just get the hell out. And don't bother calling me. I can't believe you are such a jerk!"

Matt gazed at her. "No problem. You are not worth the hassle."

"Just go," Katie insisted, opening her bedroom door for him. As he hurried down the stairs, she followed him. "And don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out!"

The door slammed, and Katie whirled to face her mother who stood in the hallway. "Don't worry, I'm still a virgin."

"What the hell were you thinking? Has nothing I've said to you over the years gotten through? Do you want to get pregnant?"

"We had a condom," Katie said, crossing her arms across her chest. She couldn't look her mother in the eyes for fear of what she'd see there. Humiliation spread through her, rising up to flush her cheeks. She'd just learned her supposed boyfriend was nothing but a pansy, all because her mother came home early. Thank God she was out of school. This would have been so much more embarrassing.

"Condoms break!" her mother exclaimed. She paused in the doorway to the family room, gazing at Katie. "Look, we both know you're going to lose your virginity someday. But this is not the time, and definitely not in my house. That kid didn't even care enough about you to speak to me."

Katie bit her lip until she could taste blood as she battled the tears that threatened to spill. Furious, she squeezed her eyes shut. Never had she been so angry and downright embarrassed. How much more mortifying could it get than her mother walking in when they were naked and about to have sex? This was so humiliating.

"I'm eighteen," Katie said, defiantly giving her hair a shake to reign in the explosion she knew lay just below the surface.

"I know," her mother said calmly. "I was there for your birth. You're out of high school, you're on your way to college. You'll soon be on your own."

"So why did you barge in?"

If she knew she was an adult, why hadn't her mother just let them finish before she'd gone all postal on them?

"You're still living under my roof. I don't want to know when you have sex. I don't want to hear it and, God, I definitely don't want to see it."

"So, it's okay for me and Matt to have sex as long as we don't have it here?"

Her mother's face scrunched up into the expression she always got when Katie goaded her too far. Her voice came out sharp. "No. I'd like to be naïve and think my daughter would remain a virgin until she married."

There was no way she was going to wait until she was married. Over half of the girls in her class were not virgins. She was not going to be the last one to experience what everyone was talking about. But she didn't want a baby right now either.

"It's my decision," Katie said calmly, liking the way she'd managed to rile her mother.

"Yes, it is." Her mother inhaled sharply and Katie steeled herself for the coming lecture.

Mother Lecture #929 about the virtues of going to college and how not to get pregnant. That your first time should be with the man you love and not just a boy who wants sex. She steeled herself to hear the words again.

"Look, Katie, we're both going through a lot of changes right now. I've told you since you were little that I got pregnant in college with you. I don't regret having you. I love you with all my heart and I'm so glad you're in my life, but I want more for you. I want you to get your college degree before you're forty. You deserve someone who loves you and makes that first time special."

Katie's stomach clenched in pain and she blinked back the tears. This was not what she'd expected, and inside she rebelled against liking her mother right now. She refused to accept that her mother was right.

Katie wanted to hate her for what she was doing to their family. She wanted to lash out at her and make her hurt like Katie was hurting.

"I'm going to have sex before I leave for college and there is nothing you can do to stop me."

The pain that crossed her mother's face didn't bring the satisfaction Katie wanted. It only made her feel worse.

She watched her mother take a deep breath. "You're at a turning point in your life. You're in charge of decisions about your future. The mistakes you make will be yours to live with."

"I know, Mother. I know all about your unwanted pregnancy. How it kept you from finishing school. How you had to marry my father. How it ruined your life."

"You're wrong. I loved your father. I wanted to marry him. I wanted you with all my heart."

"I'm supposed to believe this when you're divorcing him?"

She'd known kids whose parents had divorced, but she'd never expected it to happen to their family. Her mother was single-handedly *destroying* all of their lives!

"Yes. When I married your father, I loved him fiercely. But people change. He changed. I changed, and now it's not possible for us to remain together. So as much as you may dislike this divorce,

you're going to have to accept it." *

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