
A MATTER OF TRUST

Starting Over, Book Three

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

P*uff, the magic dragon lived by the sea, and frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honah Lee...*

Her tears turned to sobs as the lyrics drifted quietly from the small record player on Nickie's oak dresser. Holding desperately to her sleeping boy, she did her best not to wake him.

"I won't let you see. Mommy's got you, baby. I won't let you see me this way. Does it hurt you? Do Mommy's hands hurt? My hands are supposed to be safe..."

She cried harder as her silent thoughts pleaded with... was it her son that she begged to hear her or was it God? Maybe both. Ever since the pediatrician told her the diagnosis, she felt lost and broken. She held it together all day and now that her son was finally asleep, she had to let it out.

He lay in her arms, his blond curls brushing against her tank top as she rocked him gently so he wouldn't wake. Sweaty hair stuck to his forehead the way it always did when he slept and his plump baby cheeks made him appear cherubic.

She fought hard to keep her cries quiet, to not jostle him with each jerk of her body. Her thoughts drifted to when she first saw him in the neonatal unit after his birth—his traumatic

birth, both unexpected and terrifying. She looked at him as he lay in his incubator, an angel locked inside a glass box. He was so beautiful—the irony screamed it was so loud—she had been given a jewel that was too perfect to be touched. How could it be the baby she'd nurtured inside her for nine months was too sick to be caressed with her hand? As if the very body that gave him life was so risky a contact that it could also bring him death.

She kissed his forehead and placed him down on his pillow as he stirred lightly. Tucking him in, she did a once over of his room, shutting off the record player that had moved on to *Jimmy Crack Corn*, before turning and tiptoeing to the door, leaving it open just a crack.

After blowing her nose and splashing cool water on her face, she poured a drink and headed out to the front porch. Rob was working late tonight and she was anxious to have him home. She sent him a text earlier in the day after leaving the doctor's office.

'The doctor confirmed autism.'

She kept it plain and simple, not wanting to get into it yet. When her phone pinged, she ignored it preferring to pretend as if all were normal.

But now after giving in and falling apart, she needed him. She needed him in a way she hadn't since the birth of their son. She needed him to help her hold on... and let go.

The purring of the Harley grew louder as headlights turned onto the cul-de-sac and headed up the driveway.

Rob's shoulders slumped forward slightly as he brought the bike to a halt. He pulled off his helmet before climbing off and walked to the porch somberly. Ashley stepped forward and her face broke as he took her in his arms beneath the glow of the porch light. It had been so long since he'd held her this way, so

long since he'd seen her break down and cry but as she did, he realized how much she needed to feel his arms around her.

He rested his head atop hers, stroking her back softly as they embraced. He didn't say a word but wondered if she sensed what he felt—an obligation to fix this, a fear that he couldn't, anger and confusion, and a sense of hopelessness.

He pulled away gently and guided her inside the house to the living room, which was dimly lit, the way Ashley liked it. The glow had a soothing quality to it that made her feel safe. She wrapped her arms around herself as she sank into the rocker, knowing her husband would want to talk.

He walked to the closet and pulled off his jacket. Even on a hot summer night like this he always wore it along with his helmet. If there was one thing, he was firm on, it was safety. He wouldn't ever let Ashley on his bike without taking the same precautions, no matter how much she fussed.

Rob learned to ride a Harley before she'd known him and back in their dating years, she practically swooned when he'd arrive to pick her up on his bike—even with all his safety 'rules'. She'd always beg to be taken for a ride and back then he would call her his 'biker babe' and throw her over his shoulder tickling her. Those days seemed long gone now, ever since Nickie came along. When he came, everything changed for Ashley. She began to pour herself into the baby who needed her and she needed him back with a fierceness he never knew existed. Motherhood became her identity and there seemed no room left for him. All the special needs their baby had after birth and throughout his first couple of years consumed her and Rob began working late into the evening to pay for the therapies he needed. Truth be told, if he was honest, work also become an escape from Ashley and all the rejection Rob felt from her.

He knelt before her, taking her hands in his. His blond hair fell over his eyes casting a shadow across his face, which was drawn underneath the length of his beard.

“It’s been a long day for you,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry you had to go through it on your own and find out about Nickie by yourself. You’ve been through a lot and I know you have a lot on your mind and you’re tired— which is why I want you to rest.” He looked up at her.

“I’m taking the day off tomorrow so we can talk about everything, after you’ve had a chance to care for yourself and take a break.”

He looked at her with such a serious expression she was taken aback.

“Rob, I can’t just go to bed. We need to talk about Nickie’s appointment. Maybe you can take the day off tomorrow but I can’t. I need to watch Nickie and he has therapy in the morning.”

Rob took a deep breath. He hadn’t expected her to go along with his plans willingly. Up until this point Ashley made up her own mind on how to do things and, little did she know, he intended to change that. Her argument was expected on his part and he had already mentally prepared himself to counter it.

“I’ve already arranged for my mother to come by and watch Nickie. I’m taking you out so we have a chance to talk without any distractions.”

She looked at him in exasperation. “That won’t work, Rob. I need to be here while he has therapy.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m his mother!” Her voice rose an octave before she reminded herself to hush it for their sleeping boy.

“And because I need to discuss the doctor’s diagnosis with Maria.”

“It won’t hurt anybody for you to miss one session,” he replied pointedly. “My mother is perfectly capable of filling in for you this one time.”

“Your mother doesn’t know anything about Nickie’s diagnosis. I haven’t talked with her about it yet.”

His face was stern but she was growing hotter with anger by the minute. The day had worn her out and yes, she was tired and cranky, and just plain stressed with worry. So why did he cross her?

She stood up from the rocker shoving past him slightly and flounced across the room. Turning a glaring gaze back at her husband, she began to spout, “You can’t just walk in here and decide to step in and change everything. Your job is at work, Rob, mine is here.”

She pointed a finger to the ground in emphasis.

Rob stood up and faced her, keeping a safe distance between the two of them. The woman was like an animal locked in a cage. He spoke carefully, doing his best to keep his voice calm and non-threatening. If only he could show her that he was concerned for her well-being.

“Ashley, you are my wife and I am trying to care for you. As your husband I feel it my duty to make sure your needs are met and that’s all I’m trying to do. It won’t do anyone any good for you to be stressed or burnt out, especially Nickie.”

Something inside of her snapped when he said this but she couldn’t put her finger on exactly what it was. Before she realized what she was saying, she retorted and shocked them both.

“My needs? You’re never even here. Since when have my needs made any difference to you? Why don’t you just go to work like you always do, Rob? Just make your escape like you always do.”

Her voice broke and she began to cry. Why was she being so hurtful to him, especially after he’d shown her such concern and kindness? She didn’t know. Something triggered her and made her angry with him but she didn’t know what it was or why she felt so upset. All she knew in that moment was she needed to lash out and be heard. Was it all the times she’d been alone and dealt with things herself? Did she feel he wasn’t worthy of challenging her after she made it this far without his

assistance? Or was it something else... something she'd closed herself off to?

She folded her arms across her chest and placed a hand over her mouth to try and keep her cries tamed and avoided his stare. Although she deeply wanted his attentiveness it was also a little too late in coming.

His eyes grew fierce as he glared back at her.

"Excuse me?" he sneered taking a step towards her. He pointed a finger in her direction and spoke sharply.

"I ignore you? I go to work to provide for Nickie's therapies. That money has to come from somewhere, Ash. And before you go off on me for not being here, take a look at yourself and how you respond to me when I am. The only one you seem to have time for nowadays is Nickie."

He took a breath and ran a hand through his hair in an attempt to calm himself. His intentions for this moment had been good and he didn't want to say anything he'd regret.

"Look, I get it, you're a mother—a good mother. You need to care for Nickie and I would never compete with that. But would it be so damn hard to acknowledge me once in a while? Would it be so fucking hard to acknowledge that I'm even in the room?"

His hand fisted at his side in aggravation. He was not one to get angry often and Ashley felt uneasy knowing he was. Not because he would hurt her. She knew he would never do that. But tension of any kind made her nervous.

She stood there torn between apologizing and waiting him out to hear what else he would say. Would he say something she needed to hear and if so, what would it be? Did she need to hear that he loved her? Did she need to hear him say he would fix all this? Did she need to hear that everything would be okay? She didn't know. But inside she pleaded, not in words but in longing—a longing for something she didn't understand.

The room remained uncomfortably quiet and she began to doubt him. If he were going to say more wouldn't he have done

so by now? His silence felt like a slap, as if he purposefully denied her what she needed of him. No reasoning in the moment could persuade her otherwise, the hurt being magnified as it was. She could reason it out and make peace but she'd rather hang onto her grief and be right. Though it hurt, it was her hurt and she had a right to feel it. He had a right to make it better.

She looked up at him in disgust, daring him with her expression to remain quiet.

'Go ahead,' she thought, 'It'll just prove how right I am.'

Seeming to read her loud and clear, Rob did what she feared he would. The very thing she hoped with all her heart he wouldn't. He turned on his heel and walked away from her. She had driven him away with her ugliness and, though she knew it to be true, her heart seethed with the notion he could be so cruel. She crumpled to her knees, tears trickling down her cheeks as she heard him exit and the front door click shut.