

# Broken Vows

By

Mariella Starr

©2016 by Blushing Books® and Mariella Starr

All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,  
a subsidiary of  
ABCD Graphics and Design  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901  
The trademark Blushing Books®  
is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Starr, Mariella  
Broken Vows

eBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-283-0  
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

## Table of Contents:

Prologue .....	5
Chapter 1 .....	7
Chapter 2 .....	24
Chapter 3 .....	36
Chapter 4 .....	53
Chapter 6 .....	74
Chapter 7 .....	84
Chapter 8 .....	95
Chapter 9 .....	105
Chapter 10 .....	116
Chapter 11 .....	127
Chapter 12 .....	136
Chapter 13 .....	146
Chapter 14 .....	156
Chapter 15 .....	166
Chapter 16 .....	175
Chapter 17 .....	182
Chapter 18 .....	193
Chapter 19 .....	202
Chapter 20 .....	213
Chapter 21 .....	222
Chapter 22 .....	234
Chapter 23 .....	238
Chapter 24 .....	247
Chapter 25 .....	258
Chapter 26 .....	268
Epilogue .....	272
Mariella Starr .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Ebook Offer .....	281
Blushing Books Newsletter .....	282
Blushing Books .....	283

## Prologue

Emmie Grayson sat at the top of the curving stairs and hugged her oldest friend. Her puppy, Fuzzy, was soft and he always made her feel better even if he was not pretty and new. Gamma had tried to throw him away, but Emmie would not let that happen to her *bestest* friend. She hid him and protected him.

Words floated upward from below because Mommy and Daddy were fighting. They were not fighting like her boy cousins, rolling on the floor and pretending to hurt each other, but it was still fighting.

Mommy called it *discussing*, but the words hurt. She could see it in Mommy's face. She could hear it in Daddy's voice. They were saying bad words, words that hurt.

They were angry at each other—again—and Emmie didn't like it. She wanted things to be like it was before when they said good words to make each other smile, and laugh, and hug, and kiss. They didn't say good words anymore.

Some of the words Emmie understood, and some of them she didn't. It didn't matter if she understood them though because she knew the bad words hurt, the words made Mommy and Daddy unhappy.

Daddy said things like money, layoff, credit cards, and mortgage. He shouted, "We can't keep doing this! Something has to give!"

Mommy's words were tearful. She said things like always working, never home, I'm doing the best I can, and credit cards. She cried when she said, "This is not my fault and don't blame my mother!"

Daddy threw his hands into the air.

Mommy turned her back on him.

Then Daddy said the really awful words, "Do you want a divorce?"

Emmie sucked in her breath. She knew *that* word. *That* word meant her Daddy would go away and he would never come back. Emmie listened closely and then Mommy said a word that broke something inside Emmie.

Mommy said, "Yes."

Emmie hugged Fuzzy and rocked as large tears streaked down her face. She had heard that word before and she knew what happened when grown-ups said it. It meant her Daddy was going to go away.

She ran into her baby brother's room and pulled a chair over to the crib. She climbed in next to her sleeping little brother and hugged him. Baby Adam didn't hear the hurting words because he was asleep. She wanted to be like her baby brother. He couldn't talk yet, because he

was a baby. He didn't know and he didn't hurt inside. He didn't know the awful word that hurt so much.

Emmie did not want to hear the hurting words anymore. She wanted to go where it didn't hurt anymore. She wanted to go to a place that was not broken. She closed her eyes and hid in the silence.

# Chapter 1

Jenny Grayson woke to the morning cries of her son, Adam, through the baby monitor. She looked over the vast, empty expanse of the bed and felt her throat tighten with tears. Josh had spent the night on the couch in his office over the garage.

"He wants a divorce," she thought as her lips formed words, but she could not add voice to them. The ugly weight of the single word took away her voice and strength. She could not hold back the sob that caught and ached in her chest.

How had things gotten this bad?

All they did was argue about bills and the lack of money.

When had they stopped being the golden couple? They had been the couple all their friends envied. Living and working in Manhattan had been all about your image and their image had been golden. Whatever they touched, it worked and was rewarding and successful.

Josh and Jenny, their names had rolled off the tongue as a matched set. Josh was tall and handsome with a close-shaven beard and milk-chocolate brown eyes. His brilliance and award-winning architectural designs had taken him straight to the top. He had his choice of workplaces long before he finished his degree.

She had also been one of his choices. She was an artist who worked in textiles. The unknowing called it sewing or quilting, and some of her wall hangings were. However, then there were the pieces constructed with yarn and leather, and whatever else worked together to meld into her art.

The critics said her work encompassed ancient crafts brought into the new millennia. She had won the accolades of galleries and critics. She thought her future was secure.

When had their lives imploded? When had they turned the corner where they became unable to see each other, hear each other, and touch each other?

Josh said he would move into his office tonight after work. They could not afford for him to go anywhere else.

As Jenny passed the mirror in the bathroom, she winced at her reflection. She was losing weight again and her eyes were puffy from crying the night before. She needed an overhaul, at least a haircut. The dark brown mahogany mass Josh loved was almost to her waist again. When her hair got this long, it was easier to keep it in a French braid and out of the way. She needed a facial and a manicure too, but they were not happening anytime soon unless she did them herself. Unfortunately, she was too tired or too busy to make the effort, and it took money to have others do it for her. She had neither the energy nor the money.

Why should she bother when Josh was too busy to pay her attention anyway? His moving to his office would not make much of a difference to their current situation. He was always working. Besides his day job, he took in freelance side jobs, which kept him working most evenings late into the night.

After the second impatient cry from her son, Jenny trudged into the baby's room. She found Emmie in Adam's crib again. She had removed their five-year-old from the crib twice during the night scolding her, but she was back.

"Emmie, wake up, honey," she said gently shaking her daughter. "I told you, you can't sleep with Adam. Go get dressed for school. I'll be down in a minute to fix breakfast."

Emmie didn't answer her but padded down the hall to her room.

Jenny attended to her one-year-old son. She realized Adam was not wet, which meant Emmie had wet his bed in her sleep. She had been doing this lately, a recent regression along with sucking her thumb. She was clinging to Fuzzy, her favorite stuffed toy, again too. Fuzzy was Emmie's version of a security blanket.

She carried Adam to Emmie's room, stripped her daughter, got her into the tub and into clean clothes. It was all too much, without so much as a cup of coffee for a jolt of energy. She glanced down the hall to the connecting door of her husband's office. He was probably already gone. He went to work early and came home late. Even when he was here, he wasn't here for her.

She rushed both of her children to the kitchen for breakfast.

With one child in a highchair and the other in a booster seat, Jenny made breakfast amid her typical whirlwind of morning activity. The phone rang. It was her mother who Jenny put off as she was busy feeding the children. The phone rang again a short time later, and Jenny saw on the caller ID that it was her mother again. It was hard to get Denise Marsden off the phone when she wanted to talk, so Jenny ignored the second call letting it go to voicemail. She had enough to do without trying to listen to her mother's complaints at the same time. Adam knocked over his Sippy cup, which rolled off the table to splatter all over the floor. She made sure Emmie had her little backpack, double-checking to confirm her snack and lunch were inside. She hurried her daughter out the door and onto the bus for kindergarten.

\* \* \*

"Jennifer, you are not listening to me," Denise Marsden whined. "I asked you what you thought of this comforter."

Jenny looked up from where she was leaning over the stroller. "It's not your taste, Mom. The color blocking is too modern. Why do you want a new comforter? You redid your bedroom last month."

Her mother made a face. "It isn't right. I decided to try something different."

Jenny closed her eyes. "How about paying for the one you have now, Mom? You said it was perfect. You insisted you had to have it then because it was on sale, so I put it on my charge card. You haven't paid for it yet, and now you want to discard it already?"

"That is an extremely ungrateful thing to say," Denise snapped. "After all I have done for you, you would deny me a comforter set?"

"You promised to pay for it, Mom. It wasn't a gift," Jenny said beginning to feel the anxiety she felt every time she was out with her mother. She was so weary of these endless arguments.

"That is not you talking. That is Josh talking." Denise exclaimed pointing her finger at her daughter. "I told you when you ran off, marrying him was a mistake. You never listen to me. I have never met a bigger tightwad."

"You weren't even aware we were getting married, we eloped," Jenny said wearily. "Mom, we have to pay our bills. I cannot keep putting things you want on our credit cards if you won't reimburse us. You promised to pay for it." Jenny bent back over the stroller mumbling under her breath, "As you have a million times before, but don't."

"I cannot believe what I am hearing. Your life is a mess because this is what you made of it. If your husband were a better provider, we would not be having this discussion. Your father never denied me anything," Denise sniped.

Jenny closed her eyes at the untrue statement. Her childhood home had often been a battlefield of arguments, but her mother had a selective memory. The real problem was that Stanley Marsden had left his estate deeply in debt and Denise Marsden no longer had the excessive resources she had relied on during her marriage. The trustees were enforcing the spending restrictions allowed by her father's will. They had put her mother on a quarterly allowance based on what remained of her husband's previously wealthy estate. She was still far from poor and she had retained her mansion in the country club district of Waterbury, Connecticut.

Jenny swallowed a retort as her cell phone rang. It was Emmie's kindergarten teacher.

"Ms. Shaker, is Emmie all right?" Jenny demanded, frightened.

"Mrs. Grayson," the teacher answered kindly. "I was going to ask you the same thing. Emmie hasn't spoken a word all day. When I speak to her, she looks at me, but won't respond. As I said, she has not spoken a single word all day."

\* \* \*

Josh Grayson searched the company server and swore under his breath. He phoned his so-called partner on the Richfield Towers project, but Tristen Connors was not in his office. Of course, he was not there. Tristen was never anywhere he was supposed to be. Josh was sick of it. The deadline for their meeting was only two days away and he needed those reports.

Josh walked over to the company cafeteria where he saw Tristen sitting at a table with Christina Pugh, the daughter of the company president. Forgetting his need for coffee, he stormed over to the table.

"Hey, Josh," Tristen said with an easy smile. "You know Chris, don't you?"



"We have met," Josh said tightly. "Where are the seismic analyzes reports, Tristen? They were supposed to be on the server this morning."

Tristen's smile faded. He instantly became angry and went on the defensive. "They will be there in an hour or two. Besides, the seismic reports aren't necessary at this stage."

"I have worked with Turner and Whiting Contracting before. They are sharp and tough. When they ask a question, they expect an answer and we had better have it. Both of them are perfectionists," Josh warned.

"I will have the reports on the server by noon."

Josh took a deep breath. "You said that yesterday and the day before. Damn it, Tristen, I posted it in your calendar a week ago. I have a meeting with a doctor at eleven today. I can't miss it."

"That is not my problem," Tristen snapped. "Maybe you should leave your personal life out of your business life."

"Oh, that is rich, coming from you," Josh snapped back. "Considering you are..."

"Hey, just the man I need to talk to," said Gene Lincoln, a fellow co-worker, as he stepped into the heated conversation. He put his arm around Josh steering him toward the coffee station. "Cool it, man."

"The worthless son-of-a-bitch," Josh growled.

"We all know he is," Gene agreed, shoving an empty cup at his friend. "We also all know he's trying to sleep his way up the corporate ladder. However, he is not worth losing your job over. There is nothing out there to replace it, man. I know because I search the job postings every day. We don't have a choice and this pays better than flipping burgers. It is here or the unemployment line and we have already been there. Come on, walk it off, talk to me. How are Jenny and the kids? How is Emmie?"

Josh heaved a sigh. "It has been a month and she is still not talking. We have gone through a gamut of doctors, who say she is in perfect health. She is still learning and if anything, is testing higher on the intelligence tests. We know she is smart. She has been sounding out words and reading since she was four. Today will be the fourth psychologist and so far, everyone we have spoken to presents us with a different opinion. One said she was autistic. She is not autistic. She is affectionate, loves being held, and she interacts well with other children. She had an advanced vocabulary before she stopped speaking. The problem is we can't figure out why she stopped."

"What about the other opinions?" Gene asked.

"That's the problem, they don't tell you anything. They want to set up these long drawn out sessions with no goal in sight. The last one said it was involuntary muteness probably brought on by some kind of trauma. When she found out Jenny and I had separated, she thought it might be the cause. We don't argue in front of the children."

"You don't have to, kids know when something is wrong," Gene said. "When my wife and I split for a while, the kids were in worse shape than us."

"We are separated, but living in the same house," Josh admitted. "Everything is as normal as we can make it. Emmie spends most of her evenings sitting on my lap while I work at home."

Gene shook his head. "I'm telling you, man. Kids don't miss a thing. I hope you two get back together. I like your little family. Have you tried marriage counseling?"

"We can't afford it," Josh answered honestly. "You are in the same boat as me, Gene. We are not official employees here anymore. We are *contract* workers who don't qualify for benefits. The only health insurance I can afford is crap and we go deeper into debt every time we take Emmie to another specialist. Marriage counseling is way down on our list of priorities."

"It shouldn't be," Gene said. "Let me talk to my minister. He offers marriage counseling and it won't matter to him if you don't attend our church."

\* \* \*

Josh logged onto his computer and searched the Pugh and Barkley Designs' server again, but the missing reports still were not there. He had done much of the preliminary work at home but did not have time to complete both his and Tristen's jobs. They were prepared to make a formal presentation to Tuner and Whiting. They would not make the deadline. It was that simple. He called and made an appointment to see David Pugh, the president of Pugh and Barkley. The Barkley part of the partnership had died the previous spring, after which Pugh sold the business to the billion-dollar international corporation of DQ&H.

When Josh entered Mr. Pugh's office, Tristen Connors was already there. Josh had not bothered talking to Tristen earlier in the day. It was too late.

"Come in, Josh," Mr. Pugh said. His tone was businesslike, but not overly friendly. "I assume you want to discuss the Tuner and Whiting presentation."

"Yes sir, I do. We are not ready for the presentation, you need to postpone it," Josh said bluntly.

Mr. Pugh looked over to Tristen. "I was under the impression from our meetings and progress reports that the Richfield Towers Project was on schedule."

"We were until about three weeks ago. I have been unable to get the assistance I needed in procuring the necessary reports. Let's not quibble here, Mr. Pugh. I have repeatedly asked for a change of personnel on this project and you have refused my requests."

"Those reports are not required for the second phase meeting," Tristen said.

"Tuner and Whiting Contracting won't even consider our proposal or designs unless they know the construction is feasible," Josh retorted. "They will have already hired a geologic engineering firm and will want to compare those results with ours. They will not view our lack of those reports favorably. I have explained this to you countless times. It is sloppy work to go in unprepared. Mr. Pugh, I have completed the designs, the costs, and the man-hour estimates. I

have completed the presentation except for the missing reports. However, without those reports, we are wasting our time."

"I realize you are an excellent architect, Josh, but I disagree," Mr. Pugh said. "I have also noticed in the last couple of weeks that you have been missing time, as a result of a family problem, I believe. I am turning this project over to Tristen. Your work here is valued, Josh, but I think Tristen will be less distracted and in a better position to follow through with it."

"I have done ninety percent of this work by myself! Any time I missed, I have come back and made up the hours. Look at your security badge check-in logs," Josh exploded. "This has been my project from the beginning. Yeah, I am only a contractor, and no, you did not officially announce I was the lead, but I have done the job of the lead. I have complained to you about Tristen's lack of work since the beginning. If you think for one minute I will turn over my work to an incompetent like Tristen Connors, you can think again!"

"My decision is final," Mr. Pugh said. "You will turn over the documentation for the project along with the final designs. We will have a dry-run of the presentation this afternoon and then Tristen assumes the lead."

"No," Josh said decisively. "Any documentation belonging to the company is already on the server in the project files. You will also find a detailed record of design changes requested by Mr. Whiting and the paper trail outlining my requests for work to be completed by Tristen Connors, most of which has not been done. What is not on the company server is the work I completed on my own time.

"Frankly, Mr. Pugh, your research databases are phenomenal, but your programs for the actual drawing of the designs are four upgrades behind. That was one of the reasons I used my current programs at home. There is also a paper trail of my requests for those software upgrades and your refusals. My designs, my drawings, the presentation and everything else, belong to me."

"Those designs are company property," Mr. Pugh barked.

"No, they are not, Mr. Pugh," Josh countered firmly. "According to my contract, a supervisor, and a first-line management head must sign off and pay for designs before they become company property to be used or presented to a client. I have no supervisor and you are the only first-line manager in the firm. I called and emailed you repeatedly to schedule meetings to obtain those sign-offs and final approvals. You have put me off for the last several weeks."

"If the work was produced during working hours, it belongs to the firm," Mr. Pugh blustered.

"You are not listening. What work I completed at the office is on the server. However, this job required a team of at least five men. Instead, you only assigned Tristen and me. Tristen did not pull his weight and you have a long string of complaints filed by me stating those facts.

"You can check your IT logs. I have not signed into company licensed design software since this project began. I created the designs on my time, in my home, on my computers. Those

designs belong to me, as does the presentation and the mock-up model. My time, my tools, my property. You are the one who failed to sign-off, approve, and pay for those designs."

"You can't walk out in the middle of this project and withhold those plans," Mr. Pugh bellowed, his face turning red. "This is unacceptable behavior. My lawyers will be contacting you!" He reached for his phone. "Darla, send for security!"

"Your company lawyers wrote the contracts, Mr. Pugh," Josh reminded him, realizing he was surprisingly calm. "In nearly every clause, it is written in favor of the company. You are the one who makes all the profits from the contractor's work."

"Don't do this, Josh," Tristen interjected. "Your reputation will be ruined."

Josh shook his head. "I don't think so. I have been stifled for two years under this company's lousy work policies and barely legal work ethics. It's the equivalent of working in a cage. No more, I am done.

There was a knock on the door and Mr. Pugh's secretary opened the door to admit a security officer.

"You will hear from my lawyers," Mr. Pugh said, getting to his feet and glaring at Josh. He turned his attention to the security guard, "Escort Mr. Grayson to his office. Make sure he does not remove any company property. Call the IT department and tell them to lock down his computer. He is to take only personal property with him. Search his car before he leaves. If there is a model in it, remove it, it belongs to the company."

"I can't do that, Mr. Pugh. You need a *search and seizure* warrant from the police to do that," the security officer said calmly.

\* \* \*

"I guess I won't be seeing you around any longer," Lamarr Winston, the security officer, said as he escorted Josh to his office.

"Probably not," Josh replied honestly. "If Marcus needs any help with his math, call me. If I am not available, talk to Gene Lincoln. We can't let a kid as smart as your son slip through the system simply because his teachers don't have the time to tutor him."

Lamarr nodded in a friendly manner, and then he grimaced and looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, but I have to do this."

"It's not a problem, Lamarr, do your job," Josh said, opening his briefcase. He watched as Lamarr rifled through his papers, handled his car keys, and looked at a small toy Darth Vader on a keychain. Lamarr peered intently at Josh. He knew what it was, but he handed the keychain to Josh who put it in his pants pocket.

"Cute." He ignored the fact that the *toy* was a flash drive.

"My daughter gave it to me for Christmas," Josh said, gathering several framed photographs of his kids and his wife, and putting them in his briefcase. "You know, I'm not sure if I just quit, or if I was fired. Mr. Pugh did mention sicing his lawyers on me. Where do I go from here?"

"Human Resources... if you didn't give them a letter of resignation first, you've been fired," Lamarr added while looking around the office. "Stack any books belonging to you, along with any other personal stuff from your desk, on this table. I'll get a box and while you are in HR, I'll pack your things."

Josh did as instructed and marveled at his calmness. For some reason, he was not in a panic. He should be terrified, but he wasn't. He was actually somewhat numb. He was sure it would hit him later.

"Be extra careful of what you sign in there," Lamarr said quietly as they approached HR. "I will go pack your stuff."

Josh nodded and entered an office full of people he had known for years. They refused to meet his eyes and acted as if he were a total stranger. He took the time to read every single piece of paper they put before him. He refused to sign several disclaimers. One stated he would not discuss the terms of his dismissal with anyone. Another relinquished all rights to anything he worked on since he had joined the company. Even without a legal background, Josh couldn't believe these were standard or even legal. He folded the two unsigned forms and put them in his coat pocket.

Mrs. Johnson, the HR supervisor, glowered at him. "Those are company property. You must sign them to receive your last check."

"You are wrong and you will not threaten me. I want copies of everything I have signed before I leave. You will hear from my attorney, Henry Grayson, or one of his sons, Tyrell or Hank, Jr."

Mrs. Johnson stared at him from across the desk. She was startled at the name familiar to anyone who read the newspapers or was interested in Connecticut politics.

"My father and brothers," Josh informed her with satisfaction and a bit of smugness. He was bluffing, but he had taken on his Dad and brothers for years in poker, and he was good at bluffing.

He enjoyed the look of shock on her face. Mrs. Johnson knew his last name was Grayson, but she never had reason to connect him with Henry Grayson, Congressman, and Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus. Josh had taken his adopted name of Grayson at sixteen after living with the family as a foster child for five years.

Lamarr escorted Josh from Human Resources to the lobby, where several of his co-workers had gathered having already heard of his dismissal. They wished Josh well as he turned in his badge. Lamarr walked him out to the car, carrying a cardboard box.

"Do I have your word nothing on the flash drive belongs to the company?" Lamarr whispered.

"I swear to God, everything on Darth Vader belongs to me," Josh assured him. "Someone gave me an excellent piece of advice when I returned here as a contractor. He told me not to put

anything on the company server unless the company signed and paid for it first. I owe you for that, and I thank you. Desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Good enough," Lamarr agreed with a nod his head. "This used to be a decent place to work before Mr. Pugh sold out."

"I'm not sure the parent company is responsible for what is happening here. These problems seem homegrown."

He shook hands with his friend and drove out of the parking lot. Waiting at a red light, he swallowed as his gut twisted with anxiety.

He was in debt to his eyeballs, his home mortgage was underwater, and his daughter had emotional problems. He and his wife were living separately, although by a mere fifty feet in their own home, and he had not had sex in almost three friggin months! Two days ago, he had not thought things could get any worse. Today he was unemployed.

\* \* \*

"Will they take you back?" Jenny asked holding her breath.

"I am not going back!" Josh snapped. "Thanks for the support."

"I didn't mean it that way," Jenny exclaimed. "You looked for a job for six months before Pugh and Barkley called you back. Architecture firms took one of the biggest hit in this recession. No one is building and no one is hiring."

"They did not *call me back*," Josh corrected her. "They waited past the six-month period when they would have had to reinstate me with my old title and salary. Then they hired me as a contractor. They laid-off twenty of us, Jen. They only offered eight of us jobs again at half our previous salaries without benefits. They have worked us like dogs ever since. Maybe it is time to change careers, to start over, again. What I've been doing for the last five years isn't working."

"Start over with what?" Jenny demanded.

"I don't know," Josh said wearily. "Jen, I am tired of living from paycheck to paycheck. I am sick of borrowing from Peter to pay Paul. We lived better while we were in college, struggling to pay tuition, and living off Ramen noodles. All we had then was a crappy little apartment with used furniture, but at least we owned it outright. We are so underwater and in debt now, I don't know how we can ever get out from under it. We will probably have to file for bankruptcy."

"This is not all my fault," Jenny exclaimed. Before he could respond, she went on the defensive. "What is wrong with wanting nice things? What is wrong with wanting more than we had before?"

"Nothing, if we can afford it." He started to walk away, but instead went to her and sat down on the coffee table in front of her. He took her hands in his, "Jen, we are drowning and it started with this house."

"You have never forgiven me for buying it!" Jenny accused. "You said you did, but you didn't."

"No, I haven't," Josh admitted. "We agreed on which house to buy, and it was one we could afford. I came home from a business trip to find this albatross strung around our necks. It has been choking us to death ever since. You spent our down payment on furniture, and then took money for the down payment from your mother! Our marriage was based on honesty, but then you destroyed it."

"It was a gift," Jenny said, pulling away.

"No, it has been a curse," he snapped. "A gift is given freely. It does not come with strings and constant reminders. There hasn't been a day since you took her money that she has not reminded us of it. She will not let us forget. We have been in bondage to your mother for the last five years. I've heard her call you ungrateful and exploit your guilt so often I have wanted to strangle her. How many times has she reminded us how much we owe her and that we live in this house thanks to her generosity? I can live without her kind of help because it is a life sentence! Every time I see her, I choke on self-contempt. We owe her and she won't let us forget it!"

"She's my mother," Jenny exclaimed pulling away from him and bursting into tears.

"Denise has become our jailer, it has to stop!"

"Josh!"

"I mean it, Jen, we have allowed her to take us hostage. I don't know how, but I will get us out of this mess, starting with the sale of this house. You have to make a choice. We can't fix this if you continue to sabotage us."

"What choice?" Jenny demanded.

"Your marriage or your mother," Josh said bluntly. "I will not deal with her anymore. I will not continue to pay for her arrogant lifestyle when it jeopardizes the welfare of my children. Listen to me, Jenny, and for God's sake... hear me. I don't want to walk away from you, but I will. I will NOT walk away from my children; they go with me."

Jenny swallowed as a ripple of fear washed over her. She knew he meant it. Josh would never abandon his children as his mother had done to him. He would not leave them. He would fight for them. She knew him and had always admired his commitment to their children. She gazed into his eyes where she saw dread and fear. He expected her to choose her mother over him, but she wouldn't. No, she would not!

"Where will we go and how will we live?"

Josh stepped over, drew her into his arms, and held onto her tightly. They were both shaking. "I don't know yet, but we will survive, if we stick together. I know we can."

\* \* \*

Josh received several threatening calls from Mr. Pugh and his attorney. They claimed his designs and drawings belonged to the company, while at the same time belatedly offering to pay him the standard fee for them. He guessed their lawyer had pulled his credit record and thought he could bully Josh. He knew many things could intimidate him, but them screwing him out of his work was not one.

He was through with Pugh and Barkley Design. He was through with people pushing him around. If he landed in court, at least he had two brothers, two sisters-in-law, and a father who were attorneys.

Josh knew he could settle their financial problems with a single phone call to his father. He was not willing to take that step yet, though. Circumstances had battered his pride to the point where he did not think he had much pride left. Still, he was not willing to take the final humiliating step.

He was playing a game of *Mermaid* with Emmie, finding all the lost treasures on the computer screen. It hurt him every time she looked at him with her large trusting eyes and smiled, yet she would not speak. She had Jenny's blue eyes, beautiful and now haunting.

The knock on the outside door to the garage office surprised him. Very few people knew he was living in his office. He and Jenny had agreed not to spread the word about their difficulties. He put Emmie down in his chair and answered the door to an old friend.

"Brice! I haven't heard from you in a while! Come in, have a seat. Hold on a second." He bent down and kissed Emmie on the forehead. "Honey, we can finish the game later. Go play with Mommy or Adam, I will come down later after I talk to my friend."

While Emmie left through the connecting door to the house, Josh went over to his old college friend and pulled him into a manly hug. "What brings you to Connecticut?"

"Business, I was already in the area so I thought I would look in on you," Brice Haroldson answered. "We are going to do it. After all these years, we are doing it. Bill Gabriel, Matt Johnson, and me, we have decided to open a firm together. You were in on our plans back in college, so we decided we couldn't leave you out even if you are an Easterner."

Josh shook his head and laughed. "Did you fight it out on where this mythical business would be located or did you flip a coin? My vote never counted much against the three of you. Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, who won?"

"None of them, we decided on Montrose, Colorado. The location is close to all the ski areas and is where the big money is located. Everyone wants a mansion overlooking a mountain lake and close to the slopes. It will probably take us another six months to jumpstart into a real business, but we wanted you in on the ground floor if you are interested. By next spring, we should be taking on clients."

They talked business, old friends, and college days. Josh admitted he did not have the funds needed to invest in a start-up business. Brice didn't push it. He did look disappointed and promised to send Josh their business plan, in case Josh changed his mind. Brice admitted all three of them were going into debt to make their dream happen. They were on a *do or die* mission and were going for it. Several hours later, Brice said he had to leave if he was to catch his plane. Josh took him into the house to see Jenny and the kids for a few minutes before he left.

"What a blast from the past," Jenny said smiling. "They seem to be doing well and are successful."



"Thanks for reminding me I am a failure," Josh said bitterly.

"I didn't mean it like that," Jenny exclaimed, but her husband was already going upstairs to return to his office.

Josh came back when it was Emmie's bedtime, read her a story, played with Adam, and apologized to Jen.

"I was snarky earlier and I am sorry. I didn't mean to take my bad mood out on you."

"It has been a couple of weeks. I'm worried. Mom knows."

Josh closed his eyes. "Jenny!"

"I swear I did not tell her," Jenny protested. "It's going around the country club that Mr. Pugh is suing you. She was asking questions today. I told her it was our business, not hers. You can imagine how well that went over."

"Do not tell her anything!" Josh warned.

"I promised I wouldn't and I won't." Josh gave her a steady look until she had to turn away. She had broken promises to him before.

"I still have some freelance work," Josh said. "My final paycheck came today. Were there any bills in the mail?"

Jenny shook her head no, but her eyes widened in concern. Her husband did not go to the stairs as she had expected, but instead went over to a small desk and pulled open several drawers.

"What are you looking for," she asked.

"Pens, every pen I pick up is out of ink or..." Josh's words trailed off as he removed envelopes from a drawer. He gave her a furious look, slid the flaps open, and took out the statements.

"God damn it, Jen!" he exploded.

"I..."

"Damn it to hell! I paid these cards off only two months ago. I sold my watch, the Rolex I won in the Skyline Architecture Competition. I paid off these damn credit cards and canceled them!" Suddenly, Josh turned and stalked into the kitchen where he grabbed her purse and took out her wallet.

"You don't have a right..."

"Fuck my rights," Josh snarled as he pulled out credit cards and systematically removed every plastic card from her wallet and threw them down on the kitchen counter. "You went behind my back and ordered new cards!"

"I needed them," Jenny snapped.

Josh snatched the credit card statement and read it. "You needed something you couldn't live without from *Bloomingtondale's*? You needed something from *Macy's*, and *Bed, Bath and Beyond* and a half a dozen other places. This house is full of stuff we don't need or use. How much of this crap is in your mother's house?" He yanked a pair of kitchen shears from a drawer and began cutting up all her cards.

"Not that one, it's the ATM card!" Jenny protested.

With several slices, the ATM card was also shredded. "You will never need any of these again," Josh yelled. "I am selling off everything I own of value in an attempt to pay our bills, and my wife is going behind my back racking up more charges. As of right now, you are out of the buying business. It is strictly cash and carry. It is pretty damn sad when I can't trust my wife!"

"I'm sorry," Jenny cried. "Mom needed..."

Josh's arm swept across the counter sending the ragged cut pieces of plastic flying across the floor. "Your mother's *quarterly* allowance is twice what our family of four has been living on for the past year! If that narcissistic bitch can't live within her means, to hell with her. God damn it, Jenny, you are not that stupid!"

"What am I supposed to do?" Jenny exclaimed. "She's my mother!"

Josh's eyes were furious and dangerous. "I am your husband and I am telling you, I will not put up with any more of this. No more deceit, Jenny! What I want to do is blister your damn ass!"

Josh stormed up the stairs and she heard the door to his office slam.

\* \* \*

Jenny swept up the pieces of plastic, put her wallet back together, and tucked it away in her purse. She knew she had been in the wrong, but she was so tired of the constant battle between pleasing her husband or her mother.

She tried to read, to watch television, but her eyes kept straying to the top of the stairs and trailing off in the direction of his office. She would rather have yelling than silence from Josh. She was glad their children were asleep. Once asleep, they rarely woke during the night.

She finally gave up the pretense and went to their bedroom... her room now. It was too large for two people, now with only one person, it felt cavernous and solitary. The room, like the bed, was too large and too empty. She understood Josh's dislike for the bed. He was a man who liked to touch and hold her close. In the early days of marriage, they had shared a single bed without complaint. In the last few years, the vast, empty expanse of bed became a daily reminder they were drifting apart and failing. He stayed on his side. She stayed on hers.

\* \* \*

Josh furiously tossed the credit card bills on his desk. Something had to give. He was almost at his breaking point and he could not reach Jen anymore. She didn't hear him, couldn't seem to hear anyone beyond the voice of her bitch of a mother. He fumed, and he paced, and at last he came to a decision. He decided enough was enough.

Jenny was curled in a ball, too upset to do anything except wallow in her misery. Suddenly, the bedroom door opened and Josh stood there. He closed the door and flipped on the stereo to loud music. "What?"

"I changed my mind," Josh said tightly, picking up a hairbrush as he walked past the dresser.

Her eyes widened and she was halfway across the king-sized bed before he caught her foot. He dragged her back and tossed her over his lap. He pulled down her panties and smacked the brush hard across her bottom.

"Josh! We don't do this anymore!" Jenny wailed, trying to squirm off his lap.

"Yes we do," he growled. "Love, respect, and *obedience*. You agreed to those vows, and you agreed to this. Hands on the floor!"

Jenny resisted his command, so he applied the hard wooden surface on her backside in several breath-taking wallops.

"Hands on the floor or I do the entire spanking with the brush," Josh warned, backing up his threat with several more punishing smacks.

Jenny flattened her palms against the carpet burying her face and tears in a thick pillow he dropped on the floor. It had been a long, long time since Josh had spanked her this hard. It had been way back when they were first setting up the rules of their marriage that had to be followed.

Josh placed the hairbrush on the bed and went to work with his hand. Those smacks were not much easier to endure. He knew exactly what he was doing. This moment had been building for months, maybe years. Jenny had earned this spanking.

Maybe she had forgotten the foundation they had set for their marriage, but he had not. They had begun their marriage based on honesty. She had not been an honest person when he first met her. However, she soon learned honesty exactly this way, over his knee. If she had forgotten how he felt about lies and deception, he was going to remind her and reteach those lessons.

He was not walking away from his family, his children, and his beliefs without a fight. He was taking back his family.

Jenny was now sobbing into the pillow.

When her entire bottom was a flaming red, he picked up the brush again.

"Are you listening to me?" Josh demanded. He saw her nod her head. "This is our reality, Jen. I am the Head of this House. I will not take any more. No more lies. No more deceit. If it takes discipline to make you understand, I will provide it. This additional punishment is for the damage you have caused by lying to me."

He deliberately landed several hard, stinging smacks to the underside of her buttocks, exactly on her sit spots. She would feel this for the rest of the night. She would feel it in the morning when she tried to sit.

He gave her one final whack, her entire bottom was flaming red and she was sobbing uncontrollably. Her tears were hard to ignore, but they would not deter him. Not this time! He pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she swayed against him, powerless to fight anymore.

Then, he let her go. This was another rule they had established a long time ago. Discipline could not be followed by sex. There had to be a cooling off period.

"No more, Jenny," Josh said firmly. "We do things my way now."

\* \* \*

More threatening phone calls came in the next week from Pugh's attorney. Josh expected a court summons any time.

He and Jenny were walking on eggshells around each other. She was still angry because he had spanked her. He also had closed out their joint checking account. Which action had upset Jen more, Josh didn't know or care. He opened a new bank account in his name only. Maybe it was wrong, but he knew of no other course of action to keep her from spending what they didn't have. They were running out of money fast, his freelancing and side jobs wouldn't begin to pay for the overpriced mortgage they had hanging over them.

Josh was buried in bills, most of them not of his making. At least half were a result of his mother-in-law and her influence over his wife. He was balancing, rebalancing, and trying to figure a way through the mess. When there was a knock on the inside door, he expected Jenny. He did not expect to see her leading his father into his office.

"Dad," Josh jumped to his feet to hug his father.

"I'll see you later, Henry," Jenny said, closing the door.

"What are you doing here?" Josh asked. "You never leave Washington when Congress is in session."

"Sit down, son!" Henry Grayson said gruffly, motioning to the two chairs in front of Josh's desk.

Josh recognized his father's tone of voice. Despite being thirty-three, disobeying it was not an option.

"I got a phone call from Denise Marsden a couple days ago. I don't mind telling you, son, I never liked that woman, not one bit. I also don't like it when my son hides things from me and it takes someone like her to tell me he is in trouble!"

"Dad," Josh interrupted.

"Don't *Dad* me," Henry bellowed. "I already know. I am a man of power and influence, son. If you don't think I can pick up the phone and find out what is going on, you don't know me very well. I want to know how you let your finances get this much out of control. After that, I want to know how in the hell you lost your position of authority in your home and marriage! I raised you to be the man in your household!"

"I'm handling it."

"Not very well, son." Henry lowered his voice and put his hand on his son's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Now, start talking and explaining."

"Dad, this has nothing to do with you," Josh protested.

Henry Grayson reared up in his chair. "Since when doesn't a father have a right to know? You are wrong son. What affects one of us, affects all of us. If your momma finds out what is happening, she will blame me for not keeping better tabs on you. You and I know that woman can make my life a misery! So open your mouth and start spewing."

Josh spilled it all. "I'm a failure, Dad. I never thought it could happen to me. I was the one who landed on his feet, no matter what."

"You are not a failure," Henry Grayson denied. "None of my children are failures! Your only failings were not asking for help when you needed it. Cross those college loans off your list and give me the paperwork. I put every one of my children through college except you, only because you would not take the money from me. That was a failure of mine, for not kicking you in the ass and making you take the money. You not managing your marriage caused the rest. The ultimate responsibility lands squarely on you and Jenny, but mostly on you. It's a husband's job to be the head of his household. I admit this mess with our current economy has not helped, either.

"The first thing to do is destroy every damn one of your credit cards. God knows how much of your mother-in-law's closet is filled with expensive junk you are paying for."

"There is a lot of truth to your suspicions," Josh admitted. "I have already destroyed the cards."

"You need a new start, son," Henry said firmly. He handed over an envelope and pointed a meaningful finger at Josh in warning. "Do not get that prideful look in your eye! You are taking this and I will not listen to any backtalk. I helped all my children get a start in life, except for one prideful son... *you*. Tyrell and Hank, Jr. did not start those fancy law firms without my help. Vanessa did not get through fourteen years of medical school, residencies, and fellowships without my financial assistance. I am proud of all my children, including you."

"I know you see yourself as different from the rest of the family, son. Hell, you would be colorblind if you didn't. Being different and being separate, though, are two different things. Social services were a bit desperate when they put you in our home as a foster kid. Putting a white boy in a black family was highly unusual in those days, it still may be. I don't know. They only meant it as emergency housing until they could come up with a permanent placement with what they called a *suitable* family. All I know, son, is it was not a mistake. Your Momma took one look at you and told me, '*Henry, this child needs us,*' and that was that. We took you in and fought social services to keep you. We fought with you, disciplined you and learned to love you, despite you being a hardhead. You are our son, the same as the others. We take pride in pointing at you and saying, 'There goes our son.'

Henry grinned. "It also tickles us, because we like to shake people up and give them something to think about.

"You don't have to worry about this business with Pugh and Barkley, either. I already have Tyrell looking into it. Since he reviewed your contract before you signed it, there should be

no problem, except maybe for them. We are a family, son, and we are here for you. Straighten out all this financial business and be done with it. Start over with a clean slate. More important, set your marriage straight. I want you to get back to basics. A man cannot be a man if he is not the head of his home and family.

"One more thing, I won't tell your momma about this business. There is no sense in getting her stirred up. We can tell her later after it is all over and only a bad memory. Now, put the envelope on the desk and worry about it later. I want to play with my grandbabies."