



# *Starting Over*

*Zinnia Hope*

*Red Rose Publishing*

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*By*

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I carefully take the dress out of its cover. "Do you like it?"

"No," Ashley, my niece, replies sullenly.

"Why not?" I ask. "Maybe, you'll like it once you try it on."

"It's ugly! I hate it," Ashley shouts and rips the bridesmaid dress out of my hands. She throws it across the room; it lands behind the bed with a soft whisper of pale lavender silk. She stomps out of my bedroom. In her hurry, she nearly plows over Sam, my fiancé.

"Come back here and apologize to your aunt, young lady," he yells.

"You're not my father," Ashley shouts at him from down the hall, followed by the slam of her bedroom door.

Sam sighs and crosses his arms. "She's our maid-of-honor and behaves like a two-year-old."

I brush away a tear, nodding.

Ashley is like a daughter to me. When my sister died, I soon discovered that she had appointed me as Ashley's legal guardian. I was happy to welcome the child into my home, especially since I'm unable to have children of my own, but since I passed the forty marker in my life, I had reservations about raising a child with so little experience. Sam and I met about the time Ashley came to live with me. She

was twelve then, and Sam won her heart instantly, but six months ago, when we announced that we were engaged, her entire disposition changed.

“Look, Bonnie,” Sam says. “Ever since we made our engagement official, she’s turned into an argumentative thirteen-year-old.”

“I know,” I answer as I put Ashley’s dress away.

“Is that all you have to say?” Sam snaps.

On the verge of bawling, I wonder why he always puts me on the spot. “What do you want me to do? I’m both her aunt and mother now. I’m doing the best I can.”

“You never cease to remind me of that fact,” he replies.

“You’re not being fair.”

“Why don’t you send her to stay with someone until our wedding is over?” he asks.

“Shh! She’ll hear you!”

His expression softens. “I’m sorry.”

“Even if I did want to send her away for a while, there’s no one who will keep her.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asks. “She has to have a relative somewhere.”

I give Sam an irritated look. “You know she doesn’t have any surviving relatives except for me.”

Shaking his head, he tries to mask his frustration. “So what’s the kid’s problem?”

“She’s terrified you’ll leave and hurt both of us.”

He shakes his head. “Bonnie, if her attitude doesn’t change soon, she’s going to tear us apart. Can’t you see that? Do you really want to choose between your niece and me?”

I gasp. “You’re being selfish.”

“Ashley is the selfish one.”

“I won’t choose.’

Sam whirls and stomps out of the room.

“Sam!” My heart seizes in panic. “Where are you going?”

“OUT!”



Sam and I make up, so tonight, he’s taking me and Ashley to our favorite restaurant. I’m amazed at how hard he’s trying to work things out with her, but she remains reticent and subdued. Sam keeps shooting me pleading looks. I know he wants me to talk to her, but there is nothing more I can say to her that I haven’t already said. I can only pray that Ashley doesn’t cost me my future with Sam. I love my niece more than anything, but I love Sam too.

“I have something for you,” Sam says to me. “You know how that phrase goes? Something old, something new, and so on?” I smile as he pulls an item from his shirt pocket. “It’s a shiny new penny. Just like our future is going to be, Bonnie. I thought you could keep it in your shoe when you walk down the aisle.” He looks pointedly at Ashley. “I’ve got something for the maid-of-honor too.”

He hands Ashley a small box with an exquisite mother-of-pearl comb inside, but his eyes dull at her lack of excitement. “I thought the rainbow colors would look pretty in your black hair. It’s my way of saying I’m sorry and that I want to be friends again.”

I use my napkin to wipe away my happy tears. Ashley begins crying too. Finally, Sam has proven himself to her, and they’re mending their relationship.

“He feels guilty because he’s going to ditch us!” the words explode from Ashley’s mouth.

Sam looks as if he’s been sucker-punched. I reach for his hand, but he rudely shakes me off.

“Please, Sam,” I plead. “She doesn’t mean it.”

“Yes, I do,” Ashley gasps tearfully. “He’s going to walk out on us.”

“That’s enough.” Shock registers in her teary eyes. Never before have I dealt with her so harshly.



“I’ll call a cab for you, Bonnie.” Without a backward glance, Sam leaves the restaurant.



Our wedding is just two hours away, and fear squeezes my heart.

My home is decorated in pink and gold for the wedding. I sit in my room and wait nervously for the minutes to tick away so I can finally walk down the stairs adorned in paper bells and streamers. A knock on my bedroom door startles me.

“Sam called on his cell phone,” my co-worker, Sally, says quietly. “He said he’s caught in traffic, but he’ll be here soon.” She’s quiet a moment before adding, “I don’t want to alarm you, Bonnie, but no one can find Ashley.”

“You look through the house again,” I say as I jerk open the door. My heart feels as though it’s hammering in my throat. “I’ll look outside.”

In the back yard, the wedding party and a few close friends begin moving the cake and food into the house. I pass through the gate out to the street. The wind whips my gown around my feet, making it difficult to walk.

I spot the lavender hem of Ashley’s dress as she turns the corner. An awesome crack of thunder follows a blinding flash. I call to her, but she doesn’t hear me.

Attempting to run, my heavy skirt slows me down. The wind snatches my veil from my head. I barely pause to look at it as the slippery white material lands in someone's satellite dish atop their roof. I race on and spot Ashley running into the park, and at that instant, the sky opens up.

With our gowns soaked, we meet beneath a canopy of branches. A gray squirrel titters down at us.

"I'm so sorry," Ashley wails.

"What are you trying to prove?" I ask, hugging her.

She sobs against my shoulder. "I never meant for this to happen. He didn't show up because of me. I've been so terrible to him, to both of you."

Laughter bubbles out of me. "Sam got stuck in traffic, Ashley. He called to say he'd be late."

The most bewildered, comical expression settles upon her face. We lean against one another for support, laughing. Lightning streaks across the sky and a big tree limb crashes down near us. We sober instantly, realizing how serious our predicament has become. Seeking refuge under an arched walkway, we huddle together for warmth while the storm transforms into a screaming, limb-snapping beast.

Gradually, the thunderstorm disperses and white wispy fog billows over the landscape. Water rushes everywhere, gurgling through gutters and pipes, down

the sidewalks and storm drains in miniature raging torrents. Finally, birds begin chirping and singing again.

Ashley raises her head from my shoulder. "What's that?"

I listen intently. "Bonnie! Ashley!" someone desperately cries.

"We're over here, Sam!" I holler over the sound of water.

Footsteps grow closer, and suddenly Sam is scooping us into his arms. He smells of minty aftershave and his own special body aroma.

"I'm so glad you're both okay." A shudder passes through him and he relaxes. "Why would you run out into a storm? I was terrified for both of you." Sam brushes the wet hair from my face and kisses me tenderly.

"I'm so sorry I wrecked your wedding." Ashley starts crying again.

"It's okay, Ashley," Sam says gently. "Because of you, I realized that I have nothing if I can't have you *both* in my life. We're a family."

Ashley nods and kisses his clean-shaven cheek. "We can all start over."

"That's the most wonderful wedding gift of all," I say, happiness filling me until I think I'll burst with it.

"As long as we're together, that's all that matters," Sam adds and buries his face in my damp hair.

Ashley begins the walk home, but Sam takes me by the arms and stares deeply into my eyes. "I love you both. I was a fool for not seeing that sooner."

All I can do is smile at him and hope my eyes convey my feelings.

We kiss as the sun floods the park with golden warmth and tiny rainbows  
dance a celebration around us.

*The End*

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SHORT AUTHOR BIO: Zinnia Hope has been writing professionally for over 20 years. She uses several *nom de plumes* for her steamy work that have appeared in national men's magazines. Z also writes e-novels, some of which are available in print. Her favorite genres to write are: magic realism, paranormal suspense, horror, fantasy and the sub-genres of romance. She has written more novels than you can shake a stick at and has several more in progress. Currently, her agent is peddling her latest novel to NYC publishers.

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