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## Chapter 1

Mom, can we go get the InCharge CD tonight? It's brand-new." Josh Brawlins flashed his irresistible smile, made even more charming by his two missing front teeth.

"Josh, we can't go out tonight. You have homework, and besides, we haven't the money for such things right now." Grace flipped a hamburger, searing it against the pan. "I just started this job. Things will be better when our steady paycheck starts again."

"Aw, Mom!"

"You know, I remember the days when you begged for more Barney videos. They had *those* for free at the library."

"Mo-om!" Josh whined as though he'd never heard anything so ridiculous. "Everyone at school has the new CD. Plee-ase!"

"Why don't you ask someone to borrow it?" Grace forced a smile as she put the finishing touches on their hamburger buns. "Is that enough mustard for you?" She placed the dish on the table in front of her young son, hoping to change the subject. Her son being a pauper among princes infuriated her and only caused her to harbor more resentment toward his father. What kind of man abandoned his boy? Especially Josh, who seemed to radiate joy from his very soul.

"Hamburgers, again?" Josh crinkled his nose.

"Yes, hamburgers, again." Grace wrangled her feet free from the torture of her high heels. Sensing her son's disappointment, she grasped his chin, pulling his dark brown eyes to hers. "Maybe you can ask for the new record at Christmas."

"Mom, records are from the Dark Ages. We have CDs now." He pulled free and grimaced at his dinner.

"Oh yes, the Dark Ages where I came from. I forgot."

"Mom?" The innocence returned to his voice, crushing the teenager that lurked within his six-year-old body.

"Yes, Josh."

"You know, we have the smallest house in the whole neighborhood. It's not even a real house. It's a guesthouse next to a real house. My friends call our house 'the rental.'"

Grace swallowed hard, slamming her plate on the table. *When did kids get so sophisticated? When did children begin practicing the latest dance steps at five years old? When did they notice and compare everything, including how many bathrooms one had?* Grace pondered the thoughts before answering Josh gently.

"We do live in a rental, Josh. That means we pay money to someone to live in his house. We're very lucky to live in this neighborhood. You're getting the finest education the public system has to offer." She sucked in a deep breath. Most kids in Josh's class had more spending money in their pockets than Grace had for the month.

"Yeah, but why do we live in a rental? Why don't we have a fancy car that smells like new shoes? Or a house with two doors in the front, like everyone else? Colton says it's because we got no daddy here."

"We have no daddy," she corrected. "Josh, sometimes families are just different. Our family is different. We have each other." Grace looked into his sad, brown eyes and tousled his sandy locks.

How long could she keep up this charade of living in the exclusive Los Altos Hills without a penny to her name? She hoped forever. At least until Josh got to college. Humiliating as it might be, she'd gladly be embarrassed every day of her life for Josh to have an education. He might not have the latest sneakers, but he'd leave with the same education. She smiled smugly. A little shame wouldn't hurt Josh—not in the long run—but it pained her now.

Josh fingered his fork until it flopped on the floor with a clang. "Mom, Jackson said my shoes were his brother's. That ain't true, right, Mom?"

Her eyes slammed shut, and she forced the lump in her throat down. She'd never planned to be a single mother. It wasn't right her son had to bear this burden! "Josh, would you please just eat your hamburger?"

"Don't cry, Mom. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Did I say something bad?"

"No, Josh. You didn't say anything bad. It's good you have questions. Always ask questions, Josh. That's how we learn."

"That's what Fireman Mike says, too."

Grace choked on her bite of hamburger. It went down like a rock. "I don't want you talking to that man. He's a nut, you understand?"

"Mom, he's not a nut. He's Miss Jensen's boyfriend, you know."

"Josh, where do you hear such things?"

"He comes to the school all the time, and Miss Jensen gets all funny around him." Josh covered his broken smile, giggling until he had to shove his hamburger back into his mouth.

"I don't want you talking to him, even when Miss Jensen is around."

"You just don't like him 'cuz he goes to church," Josh spat.

"I don't want him filling your head with stories. That's why I don't like him."

"He says Jesus is real, Mom. He told me—"

"I don't want to hear what he told you. God never helped us, Josh. We've done it all on our own. Don't forget it. If you want to live in a big mansion like Mr. Traps, you work hard in school."

Josh looked to the ceiling. "Naw, I don't want a big house like Mr. Traps. Then you gotta have people cleaning it and stuff. I want a little house, but I want two front doors. Oh, and a big stereo so I can play my InCharge really loud." Josh

stood and whirled about as though starring in his own rock video.

“Then we’d best get to your homework. Finish up.”

“I wish you liked Fireman Mike, Mom. You should at least meet him. He’s really cool. He has this big truck. He said it’s midnight blue. I couldn’t tell you because I never stayed up that late, but it’s dark, all right.”

“Clear your plate, okay, honey? Here’s your homework sheet. It’s counting—your favorite.”

“Mom, Fireman Mike likes cool music, too. He—”

“Josh, what is the deal? Why are you so enamored with this fireman?” Grace dropped her hamburger, her appetite now completely gone.

“Because I knew you’d say no on InCharge, and Mike said he’d buy it for me.”

Grace’s eyes slid shut with a great sigh. “Joshua Blake Brawlings, we do not take charity. We are not destitute.”

“It’s not that, Mom. It’s a present. He’s bringing it over tonight.”

“What? Joshua, get in your room. You know better than to give our address to strangers.”

“Mo—om! He’ll be here any minute. After dinner, he said.”

“Get in your room, Josh.”

Josh scampered to his room and slammed the door with vengeance. Grace rubbed her throbbing temples. The doorbell rang.

“Who is it?” Grace asked.

“Michael Kingston.” He paused. “Fireman Mike.”

Grace could hear the smile in his voice, and she mumbled under her breath that Josh was going to pay for this one. Opening the door, she nearly fell backward at the sight. A wall of a man filled her doorway. Well over six feet, he looked like a weightlifter. *One of those men who has more brawn than brains*, she thought wryly. Still, it wasn’t the vision she was expecting. She thought all zealots wore short-sleeved, button-up shirts and carried a Bible. Fireman Mike obviously carried something heavier than Bibles.

“Look, I don’t know what Josh told you, but—”

The wall raised a solid hand. “He told me he wanted the new InCharge CD, and I got it for him.”

“Why?” She eyed him warily.

“Well—” he stammered, holding out the CD.

Grace ignored the gift, crossing her arms. “Because you thought we couldn’t afford it?”

“Yes, actually.” Mike made no apologies for his appearance at her door. He didn’t try to pretend he was here for anything other than charity. For some reason, Grace looked at him with new eyes. Interested eyes. What kind of single man concerned himself with a poor kid? It wasn’t natural.

“Maybe I don’t want my son listening to that garbage. Did you think of that?”

He listened intently, but apparently didn’t buy her story. “I grew up without a

father. My mother didn't have the money for—well, for extras." Mike's blue eyes clouded. "I thought maybe I could help. I don't want anything in return. I promise." He thrust the CD toward her again. "You can throw it away if you want, but I promised Josh, and I wanted to fulfill my promise."

Grace looked to the floor. Calculations tumbled through her head. How could she afford something like this for Josh? Oh sure, he didn't need it, but Grace knew its importance to her son. She knew this CD was just one more dividing line between her son and the other children. Another stamp, *the poor kid*, across his forehead.

"I can afford five dollars a week. I would have it paid off in a month."

"I don't want your money, Mrs. Brawlins. I want Josh to be happy. This is not like everything else on the playground, Mrs. Brawlins. Music speaks to Josh, and I really felt the desire to get it for him."

"He doesn't need this, you know."

"Of course I do. Just like I didn't need the skateboard someone once bought me, but it changed my life."

Grace laughed. "A skateboard changed your life?"

"Not the skateboard. The man who gave it to me."

"Mr. Kingston—"

"Call me Mike."

"Mike, I really do appreciate what you're trying to do, but I don't want you filling Josh's head with fairy tales from church." Grace felt a pang of guilt at the denial of her childhood faith, but she forced it away. "Josh has had to deal with enough in his short lifetime. I don't want him living with false hope."

"But you do want him living without hope." The wall's deep blue eyes narrowed. He wore a rugged pair of torn Levi's and a stretched, navy T-shirt—or was it midnight blue, like his truck?

"I don't mean you any offense, Mike. But Josh's dad isn't coming to rescue him and neither is any invisible god, so I'd appreciate it if you left the matter alone."

"I'm sorry about your husband. I really am, and I'm not trying to be anything more than a friend to Josh." Mike looked her straight in the eye. "People will always let us down, but God won't. I believe that with my whole heart, Mrs. Brawlins, because I've seen it with my own two eyes."

This guy just didn't give up. *Enough with the heavenly realms already.* Sometimes she wished she'd never heard about the Bible. Right now, she wished she could childishly cover her ears and remove all of the doubt. This was how she was raising Josh, not under harsh law or a bunch of rules, but with love and encouragement. Why couldn't people understand it was her choice? Maybe part of it had to do with the fact that it was the opposite choice her mother would have made, but she wouldn't think about that now.

"It's Miss Brawlins, not Missus. It never was Missus. Does that shock you?" She eyed him harshly, seeing if her words sent his morally upright body

to trembling, but he remained steadfast.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know, Miss Brawlins. I'll remember that."

Grace clenched her teeth. For some reason, it bothered her that he wasn't annoyed. "Josh is very vulnerable right now. I'd really appreciate it if you didn't fill his head with your beliefs. He doesn't have a man in his life, and he really respects what you say—"

"Maybe there's a reason for that." Josh splayed his fingers across the doorjamb.

She looked into the sincere blue eyes; the strong facial features were enough to weaken her resolve, but she held firm. "I'm raising my son on solid ground."

"You're raising him on sand."

"What?" Grace questioned.

"Nothing, Miss Brawlins. You're right. Josh is your son, and it's your business to guide him." He held out the CD again, and Grace ignored it. "I can't help but feel a kinship to him. He reminds me so much of myself as a young boy. I don't want anything from you or Josh. I just want him to know I'm here if he needs someone."

"I'm here, Mr. Kingston. He's my responsibility." Grace began to close the door.

"Wait!" He stuck the CD through the crack. "It's not like I'm buying you groceries, Miss Brawlins. Please, don't be so proud. It's just a CD. It doesn't mean anything. I know my mom wouldn't have had the money for it. That's all. Besides, every other kid at Los Altos Elementary had it yesterday. I just want Josh to feel he belongs."

Grace opened the door a little wider and blinked her tears away. "Thank you," she managed. She grasped the CD and looked into the wall's brilliant blue eyes. They were the color of exquisite cornflower sapphires. She didn't see pity or even pride in his gaze, simply concern. Mike turned and headed toward his truck, and with a roar of the engine, he was gone. Grace's heart pounded, and she wondered at her feelings. Why should it bother her that a total stranger just drove off?

Josh came running toward her, a bundle of energy. "Is that it? Is that it? Give it to me!"

"Joshua Brawlins, where are your manners?" Grace held the gift high above her head. "Now, since I have your attention, this CD is available to you when your homework is finished each evening. It doesn't go on until you've finished. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, Mom!" Josh jumped up and down, trying to reach the coveted music. "I told you Fireman Mike was cool."

"Yes, you did." Grace had to agree, handing him the present. Josh was off like a skittering squirrel. Mike Kingston was definitely cool. The question was, how big a threat was he to their way of life?

She sighed aloud. It would do her no good to fight the virtuous fireman. Josh thought highly of the guy, and as long as he was supervised when with him, what harm could he do?



“Well, she let him take it.” Mike settled into the driver’s seat and looked to Emily Jensen, his girlfriend of two months and Josh’s teacher. “I’m glad she let him take it. I wish I could let her know that I really don’t want anything from her. She appeared a bit suspicious.”

“I think it’s great what you’re doing, Mike. She *ought* to appreciate it. I mean, why wouldn’t she?” Emily’s voice carried a tinge of disapproval.

“Because she’s been taught she has to do everything on her own, that’s why. You have no idea what it did to my mom.” Mike shook his head, remembering. “Miss Brawlins was never married to Josh’s dad, and who knows if she’s ever been able to trust anyone.” Mike watched the quiet little house with melancholy.

“Great. Another out-of-wedlock mom—just what I need to deal with in the classroom every day. Single moms aren’t doing me any favors as a teacher. Is it too much to ask that people get married before they bear children?”

Mike let out a short laugh. “It might help to remember behind every single mother is a father who didn’t do his part.”

“Women get themselves into those situations, Mike.”

“I’m sure Josh’s mom would have taken your opinion into consideration if she knew she was going to be abandoned.” Mike tried to keep the anger from his voice. “We all make mistakes, Emily.”

It was so easy to judge, so easy to stand outside and blame—but he’d been there. As if it were yesterday, he remembered his mother clinging to his father as the burly man tried to shake her from his large frame. The last picture he’d ever have of his father. And the echo. The fury of the slamming door as his mother sobbed.

Emily frowned. “Mike, I didn’t mean—”

“Let’s just drop it.”

“I only meant I’ve dealt with Miss Brawlins. She’s not exactly the warmest woman in the world. I can’t imagine her appreciating much of anything, much less a favor from a stranger. I just think your charity might be better spent elsewhere.”

“It’s not about if she appreciates me, Emily. It’s about Josh. The boy doesn’t know how to play football, basketball, or even soccer. All the kids at school are friends from outside activities and play dates. Tell me how the kid is supposed to make any friends or be successful if he doesn’t have the simple boyhood pleasure of sports or an invitation to any parties.” Mike shook his head.

Emily stared at him, her mouth agape. She snapped it shut. “I don’t know, but quite frankly, I don’t think it concerns you. Lots of boys don’t play sports.” Emily shrugged. “I don’t mean to sound coldhearted, but just because you grew up without a father, it doesn’t mean you’re responsible for every fatherless boy out there.”

“It’s different with Josh.” Mike wondered at his own words. Why was it different for Josh? Probably because Mike couldn’t erase the boy’s image from his mind. Josh was everything Mike had once been: tentative, clumsy, and starving for a father figure and male attention. Mike couldn’t explain his feelings or

motives, but he needed to be there for Josh. He felt it as intensely as he'd ever felt anything.

"Mike, they have programs for kids like Josh—after-school basketball leagues, Big Brothers, lots of things. I think you're taking this too personally. You have enough worries at the firehouse. Risking your life every day is not exactly a stress-free lifestyle. No one expects a single man to take on this role." Emily smiled at him, placing her hand on his.

Mike shook his head. "God does, or He wouldn't have sent me the heart I have for Josh. It's really easy for us to ignore the needs we see around us, Emily, but I don't think I can just let this one go."

Emily pulled her hand away abruptly and tightened her arms around her chest. "She'll just sue you for something ridiculous." She turned to stare out at the dark night. "I think it's great you bought Josh the CD, but leave the rest to God and to Josh's mother."

There was nothing hard-hearted or mean-spirited about Emily. She just obviously didn't agree with Mike's latest ministry.

Mike subconsciously clenched his jaw. "That's the way Christians seem to operate in this town. No one looks after anyone else or cares." Mumbling to himself more than speaking aloud, he softened his tone. "Church is just a consumer product where you pick the best programs rather than a heart for the Lord. Well, I expect more. Jesus expects more."

## Chapter 2

Grace tucked Josh into bed, kissing his warm, round cheek. He was still a baby. *Her baby.* Josh still giggled at childish cartoons, built towers with blocks when he thought no one was watching, and made car noises with his Hot Wheels on the bathtub ledge. Yet, he also studied the InCharge videos that came on during cartoon commercials and practiced the dance moves in the mirror. When had *image* become a part of his little life?

She shook her head and wiped away her tears, wishing she could hold him back. “You are so cool, Josh. If you only saw yourself as I see you. You wouldn’t have to prove a thing.” She rubbed her sleeping child’s forehead. “Your father missed the best thing he could have ever been a part of.” *Probably the only thing he ever did right*, she added silently.

The telephone broke her reverie, and she pulled it off the hook before it woke Josh. “Hello.”

“Gracie?”

“Lyle?” Grace’s stomach turned, and she fell against the kitchen wall at the sound of her past. “How did you get this number?”

“I heard you were working for Holmby and Falk. I got your number from one of the secretaries.”

Grace tried to still her trembling hands. “If you’d called my lawyer, I’m sure he could have helped you.” She lowered her voice. “Does this mean you plan to help support your son?” Grace’s heart pounded like a steel pole driver.

She heard Lyle take in a deep breath of air and give an exasperated sigh into the phone. “This again? After six years, that’s all you have to say to me? Listen, Gracie, I didn’t call about that illegitimate kid of yours. I thought we had that squared away. I’m back in town, and I thought—”

Grace had to keep herself from becoming sick. One night. If she could take back one night in her life. *No.* She forced away the thought, shaking her head. *Then there would be no Josh without that one night.* For all her mistakes, all her sins, she was still blessed. Allowed to be called a mother when she deserved nothing so gracious.

She’d known better. Raised in a Christian home, she’d been taught right, but this man. . . this charming snake of a man said so many beautiful words. He wrapped around her with his pretty talk until she became constricted. How could she know he would bite her like a cobra, draining her of romantic emotions for good?

“I don’t want to hear what you thought, Lyle. I’m not quite so naïve anymore.

I'm not interested in seeing you. Ever. Unless you're ready to talk about financially contributing to your son's education."

"It's no use holding a grudge, Gracie. We were younger, more passionate. I guess I got carried away thinking about the past, coming back here. I transferred from the Chicago office. If you don't want to see me, you don't want to see me, but let's not start this again."

"The only thing I want to see from you is money for our son." She heard Lyle talking to someone in business tone, and her hands began to sweat. "You don't even have to see us. You can simply deposit it in an account for his college." She tried to keep the desperation from her voice. "I think I've been more than fair."

"Unless you have DNA evidence that kid is mine, you'll never see a dime from me. It was a mistake to call. You're still as whiny as ever." The phone slammed in her ear.

She looked at the handset for a moment and placed it back in the cradle. "It's your loss, Lyle. I'll raise this fine boy and work three jobs if I have to, just to prove you had nothing to do with his greatness." She would never submit Josh to a demeaning test to prove that snake was his father. They were better off alone.

"Mom?" Josh rubbed his brown eyes, squinting to avoid the kitchen light. "Who was that?"

"It was no one, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart." Grace grimaced and took her son into an embrace, squeezing as tight as she could.

"Mom, you're smooshing me."

"That's because you are the most smooshable, lovable, gorgeous little kid any mother has a right to call her son." She loved moments like this, when Josh would let her baby him just a little bit. The stress of the phone call evaporated in her son's hug.

"I'm sorry about the CD, Mom."

"I know." She nodded.

"I have an idea for us," he said brightly. "I want to talk it over with you."

Grace glanced at the clock. "It's a little late for discussions, Josh. Can we talk about it in the morning?"

"Well, yeah, but. . . I just wanted you to know I think you should marry Fireman Mike. He'd make a way cool dad, and then we wouldn't have to live in the rental."

Grace laughed, thinking a fireman's salary was probably not much better than hers. "I bet he would make a cool dad, Josh. But don't you think Miss Jensen might have something to say about that?"

Josh shrugged. "She can find a new boyfriend."

Grace lifted her eyebrows. "But I can't?"

Josh crossed his arms. "You'd probably pick some doofus who wore a business suit and walked around with a cell phone in his ear. Like the kids at school. Their dads. I don't want *that* kind of dad." Josh wrinkled his face in disgust. "Yuck."

Grace had to snicker. That's exactly who she had picked, and look how it had turned out. Too bad she didn't have Josh's discernment when she was twenty-one years old.

"So Josh—if I can't get you Fireman Mike as a dad, what is it about him you like?" Grace crossed her arms. "You know, just for reference sake."

"Well." He bit his lip, bringing a finger to his mouth. "He has to be strong so we can play sports, and the other kids gotta want him as a dad so they can be jealous."

"Anything else?"

"He should like cool music and drive a cool car. Not one of those fancy SUVs with the classical music and news blaring. A real car, like a truck."

Grace nodded. "Okay, I think I got it. Cool, muscular, and with a truck. Now get to bed. It's nine o'clock."

"Really, Mom, I'm serious."

Grace bent down, looking her son directly in his bright eyes. "Son, there's a good chance we might never have a dad in our house. We have to make the best of it, okay?" There was a very good chance, for Grace would never trust herself to select a man. Clearly, it was a skill that eluded her.

Josh nodded, looking resigned. "Night, Mom."

"Good night, sweetheart. I'm sorry the phone woke you."

"That's okay, Mom. You're the bestest ever." Josh kissed her on the cheek and scrambled back to bed.

The phone rang again, and Grace reluctantly answered it. "Hello." She swallowed hard, waiting for the voice to respond. Knowing it might be *him* again.

"Miss Brawlins?" A low voice with a hint of friendliness replied, and Grace released her breath.

"Fireman Mike?"

"Yes. Listen, Miss Jensen gave me an earful on the way home, and I think I might have made a mistake giving Josh that CD without you knowing about it. I'm really sorry if I offended you. It wasn't my intention."

Grace blinked a few times. Was this a man showing humility? She narrowed her eyes. What could he possibly want from her? She'd never heard a man apologize unless he had an ulterior motive. "Right, well, is that all?" Grace stammered.

"Miss Brawlins, that's all. I just wanted to say I was sorry."

Grace instantly thought of Josh's request for a father and wondered at the man on the other end of the line. Although he was incredibly large in size with hulking shoulders and massive biceps, she could not believe the gentleness she heard in his voice. He mystified her. She chose to change her tone for Josh's sake. There was no sense pushing away the only man who showed interest in her son.

"We appreciate it, Fireman Mike." Grace paused. "I'm sorry, I don't remember your real name all of a sudden."

He laughed, and she followed suit at her treatment of his name—as if he was

a public television character. “It’s Mike Kingston. Michael when I’m formal, which I never am.”

“Well, Mr. Kingston. You really made Josh’s day, and I’ll be sure to get you the money as soon as I can.”

“Miss Brawlins—”

“We’re not destitute, Mr. Kingston. We’re not on the welfare rolls yet, and we have a nice roof over our heads so—”

“But there’s no money for extras.”

“What?”

“There’s no money for extras like CDs or designer shoes. Am I right?”

“Mr. Kingston, I don’t think that’s any of your business. We are not Los Altos’s charity case, and we are certainly not yours.”

“No, you’re not. I work with the charity cases during the Marines’ Toys for Tots drive. You have it far better than many.”

“What are you trying to say, Mr. Kingston? I’m afraid I don’t follow you.”

“I like Josh. He’s a good kid, and I just wanted to do something nice for him. I’m not trying to make you look bad. I promise.”

“Why Josh?” She leaned against the kitchen wall, waiting for his answer.

“Because one day I saw this little boy sitting on the playground alone, and I started talking to him. He told me all about his awesome mom, his love of everything InCharge, and just generally stole my heart. It was like stepping back twenty-five years. He’s just the kind of kid you want to be around.”

“I agree.”

“I’m not trying to take anything from you, Miss Brawlins. I’m just trying to be some type of male role model for your son. I know it’s not something you asked for, but can’t you appreciate it for Josh’s sake? Miss Jensen is always with us. I’m never alone with him, if that’s what you’re worried about. And Josh likes me. We have some sort of connection.”

Grace bit her lips to hold back her cry. She liked him, too, as much as it pained her. Any man who saw the special warmth in Josh could not be all bad, and Josh did need a role model.

“Miss Brawlins, you still there?”

“Uh-huh, I’m here.” Grace didn’t know how to tell him, she wanted Josh to spend time with him. The request wouldn’t form on her lips.

“Come to church with us on Sunday and see. Josh is interested in things of the Lord. He’s a very perceptive child.”

The back of Grace’s neck bristled. “No. Look, you might be a great role model for my son, being a fireman and all, but no religion. Okay?”

“It’s not religion, Miss Brawlins. It’s faith. Josh asked me about it. I never brought it up.”

“Josh asked you about religion?”

“He asked me about God, yes. I told him what the Bible says.”

“When did he ask you about God?” Grace had never heard Josh mention any interest in the heavenly realms. The fact that he’d discussed it with a stranger made her heart quicken.

“About two months ago when we met on the playground. He wanted to know if his grandpa was in heaven.”

Grace moaned. “His grandpa is in Modesto.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Look, I don’t mind if you spend time with Josh. I’d actually appreciate it.” The words came easy now that she wished to avoid a different topic. “Just no church, okay?”

“Agreed. Can I take you both to dinner Sunday, then?”

Grace’s hand flew to her chest. “What?”

“I’d ask Miss Jensen along, but I think being Josh’s teacher, she might make him a little uncomfortable. What do you say? Just a simple dinner. . .Chili’s?”

Instinctively, Grace smoothed the back of her hair. This was too close to a date for her comfort. “No, no. I don’t think so.”

“I just want you to be comfortable with me, Miss Brawlins. For Josh’s sake?”

Grace shivered. Was there suddenly a chill in the room? “We’ll see.”

“Oooh,” Fireman Mike clicked his tongue. “I know what that means. When my mom said that, it was a nice way of saying no. Plee—ase—that’s what I used to whine to my mom. Of course I was a lot cuter back then.”

*I doubt that*, Grace thought to herself. “Very well, dinner. For Josh’s sake.”

“I hope I won’t be *that* bad of company. But you can endure me for one meal.”

Grace doubted Fireman Mike would be anything other than charming, and that’s what scared her silly. “Good night, Mr. Kingston.”

“Mike.”

“Good night, Mike.”

“See you Sunday.”

Grace hung up the phone, a wide smile breaking across her face. “Sunday.” She sighed.

## Chapter 3

Mike's head jerked up at the sound of the alarm, and his heart pounded against his chest. The adrenaline rush—it was as fresh today as it was ten years ago when he started training. Every time the bell sounded, his heart started that powerful beat, making him feel like Superman. Adrenaline was his friend. It fought the fear. It pushed away thoughts of flames and tragedies and allowed him to focus on his mission.

Mike raced to the truck and got in while the crew followed suit. After they drove a block or two, he flipped the switch, and a wail of sirens and lights animated the massive, red engine. He listened to the call on his earphones: Los Altos Elementary. Josh and Miss Jensen's school. He pushed away his fearful thoughts. He muttered his usual prayer; only this one was more insistent.

"Punch it!" Mike yelled, and Kyle did just that.

As the engine pulled in, all the children and teachers were lined up neatly on the grass. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight. He sniffed the air. It was absent of smoke, and there were no flames in sight. He looked at his partner, Jared, and they nodded in a silent acknowledgment.

As though guided automatically, the firemen searched the school thoroughly. Mike scanned his quarters with a skilled eye and nose and returned to meet his partners. A simple nod from all the men in uniform led their captain to the principal.

"All's clear. You can send the children back in," the captain announced.

The principal motioned to his teachers, and the giggling parade of children started.

Mike's attention rested on the principal, who held Josh by the back of his striped shirt. Josh had great tears rolling down his cheeks, and Mike forced down his own emotions.

"Is there a problem?" Mike asked the principal.

"This is the boy who pulled the fire alarm. He's coming with me, and we're calling his parents." The principal's eyes were narrowed and his scowl ready. Clearly, this was a man who knew how to intimidate six-year-olds. "I'm sorry to have caused the department any trouble." He grimaced at an obviously frightened Josh.

Josh looked up at Mike with a pleading expression.

"Would you mind if I had a word with the boy?" Mike asked. "Sometimes the uniform can show the importance of playing pranks."

"Be my guest." The principal released Josh with a slight push.

Mike held Josh's trembling shoulders, and the rush of emotion came pouring out of the child. Racking sobs shook Josh's little frame. "Not yet, Josh. Not yet. You just wait until we're out of earshot, okay?" Mike whispered.

Josh nodded, sniffing.

Mike walked him over to the playground and sat him on a platform. "What's this all about, partner? You didn't pull that alarm, did you?"

Josh nodded again.

Mike's shoulders slumped. "Josh, you know better. As firemen, we think someone's hurt when we hear an alarm. I've seen a lot of people hurt. It's not something to tease about. Do you understand that?"

Again the little bobbing head agreed.

"So why would you have pulled the alarm?"

Josh looked around him, then finally directly at Mike. "My fifth-grade student buddy, John, told me to do it."

"You know better than to do what other kids tell you when it's a bad thing. That's no excuse."

Josh sniffled. "He said he'd beat me up if I was too chicken, and he'd tell his teacher he didn't want to be my buddy in class. He said I was a worm and made fun of my pants. I don't like him." Josh looked to the wood chips that lined the playground. "I told Miss Jensen I didn't want to be his buddy. He's always yelling at me and stuff."

"You know he can't beat you up at school, and now you're going to be in trouble with the principal. Do you see that this was not a smart thing to do?" Mike gently patted Josh's back. "From now on, you tell Miss Jensen if someone threatens you. Don't try and handle it yourself."

Josh shook his head. "He's mean, Fireman Mike. He acts all sugarlike to Miss Jensen. She'll just think I'm a baby, too."

"No one thinks you're a baby. Come on, I'll go with you to meet with Mr. Walker."

"Are they going to call my mom?"

"I think so, sport. It's a pretty serious offense to pull a fire alarm when there's no fire."

"I'm sorry, Fireman Mike. I didn't mean to scare nobody. Are you mad at me, too?"

"I'm disappointed you listened to that older kid, but I'm not angry with you, Josh. Let's go see what Mr. Walker has to say." They walked to Mr. Walker's office. The building's brightly decorated walls and modern office equipment belied its tender shape.

Most alarm systems were now equipped with fire alarm annunciators to show if there was a fire and in which zone. He looked to the wall in disgust. This one had probably been installed when the school was built. Of course the wealthy parents of Los Altos had provided everything else a private school might acquire. The

walls might crumble around them, but they'd be painted in the latest fashionable color.

"Mr. Walker?" Mike stuck his head into the man's office. "Josh Brawlins is here, and he has an apology."

Josh looked up at Mike before speaking. "I'm sorry, Mr. Walker. Someone told me to pull the red handle, and I did it. I knew it was wrong."

Mike nodded proudly at Josh, clutching the little boy's shoulder.

Mr. Walker looked sternly over his glasses. "Well, son, I've called your mother. She should be here soon."

Mike saw Josh start to shiver again, and he winked. "It's okay, buddy," he whispered.

"Please don't make my mom come here, Mr. Walker. She just got this new job, and she told me she can't afford to be away from it."

Mr. Walker laughed. "Well, that's a new one."

Mike failed to see any humor in the situation and spoke up for Josh. "Josh just has his mother, Mr. Walker. Her job is very important to them."

"Well, then Josh shouldn't pull fire alarms and call the fire department here. Isn't that right?"

Josh nodded. "Yes, sir."

"As a fireman, I must agree, but I also think we need to look at Josh's age and his accomplices."

"Thank you for your help, Mr. . . ."

"Kingston."

"Yes, well, I appreciate your trying to scare our young friend into not doing this again. I'll handle it from here."

Mike nodded, taking one last look at Josh. "Of course, Mr. Walker." He couldn't resist a final blow. "It might be wise to talk to the district and update that alarm system. If there were a real fire, we would have had to sniff it out. Antiquated systems can harm children."

"Yes, well, thank you. I'll be sure to speak to the taxpayers about it."

Mike shook his head. "See ya, Josh. You hang tough." Mike offered a thumbs-up sign as he exited.

His fellow crew waited in place with all their earphones and equipment ready for departure. Mike quickened his step when he saw Grace Brawlins get out of her car. He looked at his engine, then back at her. He held up a finger to the other firemen and jogged toward the young mother.

"Miss Brawlins."

"Oh, Mr. Kingston, is everything okay?" Grace's pretty blue eyes sparkled under the sunlight, and he suddenly forgot the words at his lips. Grace Brawlins was a portrait of beauty. She had a small ruby-colored mouth, a turned-up nose, and the most flawless skin he'd ever seen. His mouth went dry as he scanned her delicate facial features.