

Chapter 1

Katie looked up at the clock and frowned. Mr. Ian Stokely was late again. Her glance drifted to the five-year-old boy sitting at his desk, clutching his book bag, staring out the window. Her heart went out to him.

Kyle Stokely twisted around when the sounds of foot treads sounded down the hall. He jumped up as the door swung open and his father stepped into the classroom. His father knelt and held out his arms. Kyle barreled into him and held his dad tight.

"I'm sorry I'm late, son."

"It's okay, Daddy. I'm just awful glad you're here."

Ian Stokely stood, holding his son, and turned toward Katie. "I apologize to you as well, Ms. Holston."

"I'm sure you have a good reason for being late. I must tell you, your son was getting quite anxious." Katie added the last with a small smile to take some of the bite out of her words. Ian dropped his gaze. "I'm sure he was." He held his son close and peered down at him. "It's Christmas break now. I plan to spend more time with him."

Kyle lifted his head from his father's shoulder. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean that."

A wide smile crossed Kyle's face. "I'm hungry. Do you think Ms. Holston could go with us to get something to eat? She's been real nice staying with me. She didn't leave me alone."

Ian's light blue gaze slid back to her. She could see the hesitation in his eyes. Kyle and she often talked when waiting for Ian to pick his son up from school. He spoke with the candidness of a child. His mother died in a car crash two years ago. Kyle didn't speak of him missing his mother, but of how much his father missed her. After all, he said, he was

only three at the time. He had confided his biggest wish for Christmas. He wanted his father to be happy again.

Katie dropped her head to hide the tears glistening in her eyes. How could such a request not touch someone's heart?

"Ms. Holston, we would be delighted if you would join us."

Katie stood. Her gaze roamed over him quickly, and her heart fluttered. He had to be the most alluring man she had ever met. He had to be at least six two. There wasn't an ounce of fat on his lean muscled frame. His dark hair, cut in a stylish design, curled at his collar. His day growth of beard and his full masculine lips drew her attention. She forced her gaze away from him.

She brushed a strand of her long dark hair behind her ear and turned her green eyes toward him. "Thank you, Mr. Stokely, but I don't wish to delay you. I'm sure you have better things to do than take your son's teacher to an early dinner."

"Kyle would like you to come." Ian shrugged. "So would I. It's a small way of saying how much I appreciate you not leaving Kyle alone."

Katie couldn't help but grin. He knew she wouldn't have left him. She couldn't very well walk out and leave Kyle sitting alone in an empty schoolhouse.

"How could I refuse then?"

Secretly, going out with Ian Stokely thrilled her. Since the first time she saw him drop Kyle off at school at the beginning of the year, he fascinated her. Of course, at the time, she hadn't known he was a widower, so she had stilled her wanton daydreams. Now, she had no reason to, except she was setting herself up for a broken heart. Ian Stokely wouldn't normally look at someone like her. After all, he was the CEO of a multi-billion dollar construction company. She had to admit, had she not known who he was, it wouldn't have

been apparent. His easy manner and friendliness at each of their parent teacher meetings didn't fit her idea of a corporate image.

Katie picked up her purse, and Ian set Kyle down. She led them out of the small classroom. After locking the door, she walked beside them down the quiet hallway, her heels clicking on the tile floor. She was five nine, and her two-inch heels gave her enough height that she could look comfortably in his eyes. Once she did it, though, she looked quickly away. She didn't want him to see the interest in her eyes. Why? She didn't know. At twenty-seven, she'd only had a couple of serious relationships. She sighed inwardly. Whom was she kidding? They weren't serious. It was too easy to walk away from them.

They arrived at a four-door, black pick-up. Ian opened the door and removed Kyle's child seat. As she settled herself in, Ian strapped Kyle in the back seat.

"Where to pal?"

"Can we go to Bernie's? I like their chicken strips."

"Bernie's it is."

Katie smiled. Bernie's was a favorite of the locals.

Katie watched the scenery as they headed to downtown Milledgeville. Christmas lights wrapped around street lamps and stretched across store windows already blinked in rhythm. Santas stood by kettles, shaking their bells. Nutcrackers stood at attention on each street corner. There was nothing as beautiful as historic downtown Milledgeville, Georgia, decorated with the town's Christmas finery. Katie let out a laugh as a young man dashed down the sidewalk dressed as a reindeer.

"Did you see that, Kyle?"

“Yes, he looked funny.” Kyle leaned forward and pointed an arm between them.

“Look, Daddy, there’s a Santa by Barnie’s. Can I put some money in his kettle?”

“Do you have any money to put in the kettle?”

“Ah, Daddy, you know I don’t. You can lend me some, can’t ya?”

“No, I won’t lend you some, but I will give you a few dollars to put in the kettle.”

Ian found a parking spot right in front of the Santa. Kyle impatiently jumped in his child’s seat as his father released his straps. When he slid to the ground, he held his hand out.

“I need some money.”

Ian reached in his jeans pocket and pulled out a five. “Here.”

Kyle snatched the money and headed for the kettle. Katie stared at Ian as he watched his son in obvious pleasure. His smile lit his eyes. She couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like to have that smile aimed at her.

Ian glanced at Katie standing beside him. What had possessed him to ask her to join them? He could have easily told her and Kyle that he had things to do and it would be better if she joined them another time. She had been standing there, looking so adorable, he didn’t think before he spoke. She looked as good now. Her dark hair glowed in the afternoon sun, her green eyes sparkled as she peered around at all the Christmas decorations. He remembered her laugh in the truck. She had a beautiful tinkling laugh.

He thought back to the first day of school when he dropped Kyle off. He had glanced up to see those arresting green eyes staring at him. She had immediately smiled and turned away. It happily surprised him to find out that afternoon she was Kyle’s teacher. Why he cared was a mystery to him.

He had looked to see if she had a wedding band, and was delighted to see she didn't.

That had been months ago. He found her attractive, so why hadn't he acted on it? If he asked her out, the worst he would get was a no. A picture of his dead wife's face popped in his mind. That was why. He couldn't let his beautiful wife go. Two lonely years had passed. There had been meaningless one-night stands during the last two years, but he wanted more. He wanted what he'd lost.

Kyle bounded toward them after placing the money in the kettle. "Let's go eat." He grabbed his father's hand and led him to the restaurant.

A Christmas tree stood in a corner of the room, decorated with tied ribbons and red, white, and blue balls. Empty packages sat wrapped under the tree.

College kids practically filled the place. There were only two booths left empty. Kyle sprawled on one side, so Ian had to nudge him to sit up and move over. Katie took the seat opposite. A waiter appeared and took their drink order.

Kyle tucked a napkin in his shirt collar. "Can I have some pizza too?"

"Eat your chicken fingers first. If you're still hungry, I'll get you some pizza."

"Daddy, what do you think are in those boxes? Who are the presents for?"

Ian chuckled. "They aren't for anyone. There're empty. Businesses do that sometimes to make their tree look better."

"Oh." Kyle sounded a bit disappointed. It didn't last. "When is the real Santa coming to the mall?"

Katie answered when she saw the confused look on Ian's face. "Next Saturday, Kyle."

"I want to see him to tell him what I want most for Christmas. Will you take me, Daddy?"

“Sure.”

The waiter appeared with their iced teas, and they placed their orders. Katie leaned toward Ian. “Would you mind if I asked you a question? It’s a bit personal, so if you prefer not to answer, I’ll understand.”

Ian’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “What’s the question?”

“The Stokely name is well known in the south. I was just wondering why you moved your headquarters from Atlanta to Milledgeville. I would think Atlanta would be better suited for such a huge corporation.”

Ian shook his head. “Atlanta didn’t suit me. My wife died there. Shortly after her accident, my father died and left the company to me. I decided I wanted a quieter place to work. Besides, I was born here. After my father’s passing, my mother wanted to move back.” Ian took a sip of his tea and turned his light blue eyes on her. “How did you end up in Milledgeville?”

“I needed a job. The school where I worked closed. Savannah is a great town with a lot of history, but there weren’t any jobs available as a teacher. I didn’t want to waste my degree. I saw an advertisement for a kindergarten teacher and applied.” She smiled. “I’ve learned to love this town as much as I ever did Savannah. I love the history here as well. I took a trolley tour of the town’s old mansions and it was amazing.”

Ian sat back. “Yeah, it’s a great place for a child to grow up.”

The waiter arrived with their dinner. The talk fell to the history of the city. Kyle ate his chicken fingers, then leaned against Ian, yawning.

Ian smiled at Katie. “I guess we better get going. Kyle needs a nap.”

The drive back to the school was relatively quiet. The only sounds came from Kyle, who had fallen asleep. Katie told Ian where she parked, and he pulled up into a parking space by her car.

Katie turned to him. "Thank you for dinner." She gripped the door handle and turned back when she felt his hand on her arm.

"Look, ah, I know this is very short notice, but I was wondering if you're doing anything tomorrow night. There is a Children's Christmas Benefit Dinner at the Water Edge Lodge. I'm a big supporter, so I usually go. I'd appreciate some company."

Katie tried not to gape at him. Never in her wildest dreams had she seriously ever thought Ian Stokely would ask her out. She stared at him for a moment. He could have any woman he wanted. Why ask her?

"I would love to go."

Ian smiled. "Great. I need your address."

Katie caught her breath at that smile. She hurriedly opened her purse, looking for a pen and some paper. Her hand trembled as she wrote down her address and phone number.

Ian slowly took the paper from her hand. His eyes glued to hers as he slid his fingers across her palm.

"I'll pick you up at seven."

"I look forward to it."

It took momentous effort to turn to her car.

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Other Books by Joy Brooks

King's Heir - Blurb

Raised from infancy to be ignorant of his birthright and duty, Rayden is caught unawares when eventually forced into his role as king of seventeenth century Ruar. Rayden intends to refuse that unwelcome responsibility, but his most beloved and loyal companions aim to see destiny fulfilled – no matter the cost to comfort, dignity, or liberty.

Book One in a Three Book Series

King's Reign – Blurb (EPIC Awards 2017 Finalist)

Rayden is forced to live a life he never intended. As King of Ruar, he finds it is not easy to side step his responsibilities, there are too many injustices to stamp out. Not only must he strive to help the kingdom, he must face his foes, who are determined to stop him from getting what he desires most, his freedom. When turmoil between the parties escalates, Rayden's fight to forge his own destiny becomes paramount.

Fourth Son – Blurb

Twenty-One year old Grayson has been chosen to be the next Jewell and Master of the Green Stone. The Stone imparts power to control the dragons – all the dragons. As Master of the Stone, Grayson will live for 7 centuries. Bonding with the Green Stone is a torturous and necessary process. Grayson fights to escape that bonding torment and he flees from the certain anguish of losing everyone and everything that he loves over the course of 700 years.

Coming Home – Blurb

While Europe faces the ensuing Battle of Waterloo, Gabrielle Anderson travels to her brother's best friend's estate. Lord Marshall Hampton opens his home to her but Gabrielle also wants his love. Gabrielle is determined to show him how she feels, but her time is shortened when Marshall is summoned to the war front. Will Gabrielle win the heart of the only man she has ever loved?