



A Carolina Song

A
Carolina Girls
Novella

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Michelle Major



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CHAPTER ONE

MEGHAN BANKS HADN'T expected the school day to end with her crouched on a toilet seat, knees pulled up against her chest, locked in the bathroom stall outside the main office of Magnolia Elementary.

Wednesdays were typically uneventful, like most of Meghan's days. But unlike some people, she didn't mind. Boring simply meant she was staying in control, an aspect of her life she'd come to value.

It was the middle of October, and the school year so far had been a marked improvement over the previous year when she thought she was going to lose her job and after weathering the blow of her overbearing mother selling her late grandma's house with no warning and displacing Meghan in the process.

The principal who'd fostered so much trouble for her last year had taken a job in a neighboring school district, so she didn't have to deal with Greg Wheeler, or Principal Ferret, as she not so affectionately thought of him.

The new principal, Tally Ridder, was a decade older than Meghan and the best boss she'd ever had—at least until Tally made a fateful decision without consulting her first and changed everything.

The door to the girls' bathroom squeaked as someone opened it, and Meghan drew her knees closer and tried not to make a peep. She could manage a panic attack without her labored breathing giving away her presence.

"Meghan, where are you?" The lilting voice and clip of heels on the linoleum floor were familiar, but Meghan didn't answer. "Come on out now, honey. I know you're in here."

A rap of knuckles on the stall prompted Meghan to climb off the commode and press one hand to the door's cool metal. "I think I ate some bad chicken last night. You need to go away and leave me alone. I'll be out when I can."

"You'll come out now," her friend said, and Meghan recognized the commanding tone. Annalise Haverford had been the undisputed queen of the social bees in their small town on the North Carolina coast, at least before her spectacular fall from grace.

While her ex-husband's conviction for running a Ponzi scheme rocked the close-knit community earlier that year, Annalise had worked tirelessly to reinvent herself and helped Meghan discover a confidence she didn't know

she possessed in the process.

She didn't feel confident at the moment.

"Meghan, the first practice for the fall talent show is starting in five—make that three—minutes. You're in charge."

"Not with him involved," Meghan muttered, staring at the ground. "You do it," she said to the stylish leather slingbacks she could see facing the stall door.

"Are you going to let Walker Calloway run your life? Where's your sense of pride, woman?"

"I used it to sweep up the pieces of my broken heart after I was dumb enough to fall for a famous country music star." She blew out an indignant breath. "Even dumber to believe he'd fallen in return."

"Open the door."

Meghan did what she was told because newly found backbone aside, in times of stress, being amenable was her go-to survival mechanism.

"You weren't imagining it," Annalise said as the door swung open. "Walker liked you. The man wrote a song inspired by you that is now a number one chart-topper."

Meghan's heart thudded despite her resolve not to be affected by Walker's rugged good looks, soulful voice or the kindness he'd shown her last spring. "You don't know that."

But indifference wouldn't have her hiding in the girls' bathroom after the announcement that he was back in town for an extended period and volunteering to help coordinate the annual event for the school.

She and Walker had become close—or so she'd thought—after she and Gus, the nephew he was raising in his late brother's stead, had convinced him to volunteer as the music teacher for the final few months of the previous school year.

Now she wondered if she'd created the chemistry and the significance of the kiss they'd shared in her mind. She wouldn't be the first woman to lose her heart to Walker. There were multiple online fan clubs dedicated to him. She was not a member.

"I know," Annalise insisted. "Come out here so I can take thirty seconds to freshen you up. Then you're going to practice."

"How do you know?" Meghan stood dutifully still as Annalise took a few makeup items from her monogrammed purse and began working her Southern magic. "Did Jack tell you?"

Annalise's fiancé, Jack Grainger, was Walker's manager and best friend. He also ran Whimsy Farm, Walker's horse property outside of town. Meghan hadn't been back there since the benefit concert where Walker had debuted the emotional ballad, "*There's a Light*."

Meghan had been watching from the crowd with the third member of her trio of besties, Shauna Myer, and honestly believed the song might be about her based on her connection with Walker.

Then Danielle Griggs, the country music starlet who also happened to be Walker's ex-girlfriend, sauntered on stage and planted a kiss on him that left no doubt that she was his inspiration.

That was the last time Meghan had seen Walker.

But he was here and...

"I can't do it." She reached up and clutched Annalise's wrist. "No amount of makeup in the world will make me brave enough to face him."

"You'll face him anyway." Annalise dabbed gloss across Meghan's lips. "You don't need to be brave, just resilient, and you are that. You're stronger than you know, and I wouldn't blow sunshine up your skirt. If you can't find faith in yourself, borrow mine."

"I can't believe I thought you were a bitch," Meghan said as she hugged her friend.

"I acted like one often enough," Annalise laughed softly, then pulled back. "People make mistakes. Hurting you was a significant one for Walker, although I wonder if he even realizes how big."

Meghan shrugged. "He texted a couple of times from Nashville over the summer."

"What?" Annalise's doe eyes widened. "You never told us that. This changes things."

"Not for me. They were late-night drunk texts that don't mean anything."

"What did he say?"

Meghan took a step back. "He missed me."

"And how did you respond?"

"I left him on read."

Annalise wrinkled her perfectly pert nose. "Because?"

Meghan turned to gaze at her reflection in the hazy bathroom mirror. Despite the refresh, a familiar face stared back at her. She was what people called a girl next door, a code phrase for boring in all respects. Shoulder-length brown hair with eyes nearly the same color. Average build and

average height with nothing remarkable to make her stand out. Only Walker had made her feel special, and when he'd walked away, it hurt more than she'd admitted to her friends.

"He broke my heart," she blurted. There was no point sugarcoating it at this juncture. "We didn't even officially date, and I fell for him. Hard. He was sweet, kind, and I thought he liked me. I thought it might turn into more than like for both of us."

"Oh, honey." Annalise wrapped her in a citrus-scented embrace. "All the more reason for you to face him. Walker Calloway isn't all that and a bag of chips."

"He's kind of a whole truckload of chips," Meghan said, drawing in a breath.

"Chips are overrated," Annalise insisted. "Unless they come with salsa and guacamole. You, my friend, are guacamole."

The absurdity of the statement made Meghan smile. "Smooth and creamy?" she said, then laughed.

"With a little bit of spice. Come on, Megs. Let's show Walker what he missed out on."

Meghan wanted to argue that he probably knew and didn't care, but she wasn't that mealy-mouthed version of herself anymore.

Instead, she grabbed the lip gloss from Annalise, smoothed on another coat and air-kissed her friend. "You'll back me up, right?" It was easier to be brave with a friend at her side.

"Always," Annalise promised.

Meghan nodded. "Then the show must go on," she declared. "Especially the Magnolia Elementary talent show. Let's do this."

And together, they headed out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

“HEY, UNCLE WALKER. How did me and Trey do? I messed up a couple times, but we’ll practice every night until the talent show. Jack said if I get real good, he’s gonna let me use one of the barn bunnies for the grand finale.”

Walker patted his nephew’s head, accustomed to Gus’s rapid-fire manner of speaking when he was excited. Sometimes, Walker’s heart ached at how much Gus reminded him of his late brother. “I believe Ms. Banks discouraged using live animals in the talent show.”

Gus frowned, so Walker quickly added, “You and Trey did a fine job being magicians, although you also have a great singing voice. I’ve heard you playing your dad’s guitar up in your bedroom. I thought you might play a song for the talent show?”

At the way Gus’s shoulders deflated, Walker knew he’d messed up.

And it wasn’t just with the boy. Meghan not only avoided speaking to him for the whole of the talent show rehearsal, but she’d also refused to make eye contact. Walker was used to feeling off his game while dealing with his late brother’s son. He did his best, but as the old song said, his best wasn’t good enough—most of the time, anyway

“I understand if you don’t want to sing, buddy.” Walker searched his brain for suitable parental pearls of wisdom to maneuver through this current emotional minefield. His brother would have known what to say, but they wouldn’t be in the situation if Nash were still alive.

Yet here they were. The past year ten months had been tough on the kid, and with Walker doing a few select shows and spending time in the Nashville recording studio over the summer, he felt disconnected from the boy. He wanted to find a way to reconnect. Gus was a quirky kid with awkward limbs and big owl eyes that sometimes saw too much. Walker loved him with his whole tarnished heart.

“I have a gig booked in Las Vegas in a few weeks, right around your Thanksgiving break. How about you fly out and we can see a couple of magic shows? Jack and Annalise can come and bring Trey and Margo.”

“Sure, Uncle Walker.” Gus scratched his chin. “That sounds great. I see Ms. Annalise gettin’ ready to leave. I’m going over to Trey’s so we can practice. She said she’d bring me home for dinner.”

“Sure, buddy. I’ll see you later.”

The back of Walker’s neck began to itch as Gus walked away, which he blamed on the moms he could feel staring at him from the far end of the elementary school gymnasium. Unfortunately, the one woman whose attention he wanted was on the other side of the room, doing her best to ignore his existence.

Walker had a healthy ego—a musician didn’t achieve his level of fame, selling out stadium tours and racking up music awards without one—but he was self-aware enough to admit he’d screwed up big-time with Meghan.

His lame text after the benefit concert and the paltry attempts at keeping in touch while he was away over the summer reflected badly on him. He wanted to blame his schedule and the pressure of recording new music for the first time since his brother’s death. Writing songs and playing them without Nash at his side, the one constant he’d relied on his entire life, was a shift he didn’t know if he’d ever come to accept.

Now he could see that those things had been issues, but the real problem had been his feelings for Meghan. In a span of a few weeks, she captured his heart in a way he hadn’t realized anyone could. She seemed to see him for the man he wanted to be, not the mistakes he’d made. They’d spent every day together at school, and he missed talking to her and the way she’d laughed at his corny jokes. But when he’d heard the crowd’s reaction to the song Meghan had inspired—the first one he’d written without his brother—it scared the hell out of him.

Walker hadn’t believed he could be happy in a world that didn’t include his larger-than-life brother. He went through the motions for Gus’s sake but felt like his heart had stopped beating in that terrible tour bus accident right along with his brother’s.

Meghan made him want things he hadn’t for a very long time, and that wouldn’t do. He’d run away, but she wasn’t that easy to get out of his mind and heart. So he’d started doing the work necessary to heal himself—he’d seen a therapist and now had better tools for handling his grief and survivor’s guilt.

He had hope for building a new life and longed for Meghan Banks to be part of it, which was why he’d volunteered to help with the talent show once he knew she was in charge. It would be difficult to convince her to give him a second chance if she refused to talk to him.

He rolled his neck, shoved his hands in his pockets and, with confidence he

didn't feel, started across the quickly emptying gym toward her. How was it that he could stand on stage and belt out songs for thousands of fans, but approaching Meghan made his palms sweat like he was a teenager asking his crush to the homecoming dance?

As he got closer, the woman Meghan was talking to, the new permanent music teacher Raina Rauth, took a small step toward him.

"Hi, Walker," she said as she smiled and fidgeted, looking nervous and enthusiastic. "Nice to see you. Thanks for volunteering your time. Everything's going great with those lesson plans you left to get me up to speed on last spring's curriculum. That was really thoughtful."

Those were also a lot of words strung together in rapid succession. People did that around him sometimes when they were nervous. Meghan used to get charmingly shy when they were together. At the moment, she looked irritated.

"My pleasure, Raina," he told his replacement. "Meghan taught me everything I know about lesson planning."

"Raina, you're doing fantastic," Meghan assured the new teacher. "The kids love you, and we need someone dedicated and reliable at the school."

Ouch.

"That's me," Raina chirped, her cheeks bright with color. "I love the new single, Walker."

"Thank you. We're excited about the album dropping next month."

"Me, too. So excited. I'll see you both later."

"Dedicated and reliable?" He winked at Meghan. "Sounds like how Jack describes a good working horse."

Meghan did not react to the wink or the smile he'd included. He missed her sweet blush and the moment of breathlessness she'd had every time she looked at him. He knew himself to be a charming man, but it was clearly going to take more than that to soften her sharp edges.

"When you say 'we,' does that refer to you and Danielle Griggs?" Her brown eyes snapped as she mentioned his ex-girlfriend's name.

His smile faded. "Dani and I don't have a relationship, Meghan. We haven't for several years."

"Right." She tapped a finger on her chin as she contemplated his words. "Because you go around kissing lots of women. It doesn't mean anything."

"Sometimes it does," he countered. "You and I—"

"Are nothing to each other," she interrupted, squaring her lovely shoulders.

She wore a simple pink cardigan over a white T-shirt paired with ankle-length dress pants. “I’m happy for your success. I wish you more of it and appreciate your help with the talent show. You always add a bit of star power to our little school. But you and I...”

She frowned as if the words were stuck in her throat. “I have a date this Friday!” she exclaimed after a moment.

“Is it serious?” he asked, disliking the way his heart clenched in response to that surprising bit of news.

“Not yet.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “It’s a first date. But it could be something. I’m an ordinary woman, as you well know.”

“There’s nothing ordinary about you, Meghan. To me, you are—”

“Please don’t feed me a line. I’m not made for bright lights or drama or...” She flicked a hand up and down in front of him like that explained everything. “My feet are firmly planted on the ground, a safe distance from the stars, because I don’t want to get burned.” Her gaze shifted away before she looked up into his eyes. “Again.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered because what else could he offer her in this moment?

“I am, too,” she said quietly, then turned and left him standing alone.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Meghan sat on the porch of her landlord and friend Shauna Myers's painted two-story Victorian home and stared into the golden liquid of her margarita.

"People make mistakes, you know," Shauna said as she topped off Annalise's drink.

Annalise nodded, then squeezed another slice of lime into her glass. "Shauna knows this from firsthand experience. Flynn made plenty of mistakes and praise the Lord for that since it's part of why we became friends."

Flynn Murphy was now Shauna's husband and the father of her twin boys, Timmy and Zach. They'd had a troubled love affair when they were younger but reunited when Flynn returned to town last spring. Their small wedding at Whimsy Farm over the fourth of July weekend had been charming and so sweet. Around the same time, Annalise and Jack bought a house together, although Jack still stayed at the farm when Walker was out of town.

Meghan had figured she'd lose the first two friends she'd ever made. But Annalise and Shauna continued to prioritize their friendship while Jack and Flynn treated her like a little sister, which she loved.

She'd never fit in with her overachieving biological family, so her found family was integral to her happiness. Shauna had also insisted that Meghan keep renting the first floor of the converted carriage house, although she turned the apartment where Annalise had lived into an art studio.

Annalise, who had once lived in one of the most ostentatious houses in Magnolia, had chosen a modest two-story with Jack, a few blocks from where Shauna lived. It had a large wraparound front porch, which, according to Annalise, had been nonnegotiable.

So now the three friends got together once or twice a week as their schedules allowed, either at Shauna's house or Annalise's. If the weather was bad, they would hang out in one of the cozy kitchens but preferred to spend most of their time gathered on a front porch.

"I'm not sure Walker understands how badly he hurt you and how careless he was with your heart," Annalise told her. "Famous men often aren't held to high standards by the women in their lives, which is an issue and not any

excuse.”

“I’m not in his life any longer.” Meghan’s voice was steady despite the emotion she felt inside. “I don’t want to be either.”

“Are you trying to convince yourself or us?” Shauna asked.

Meghan honestly wasn’t sure, and there was no point pretending any different with two women who knew her so well.

“Let’s not talk about Walker.” She stared at her margarita.

“Okay,” Shauna agreed. “Let’s talk about your date on Friday.”

Meghan took a giant drink. “Letting you two convince me to join a dating app was not one of my smarter moves. I don’t know why I agreed in the first place.”

Annalise inclined her head. “That was the night I made the pitcher of piña coladas to celebrate the end of summer. I think the coconut rum had something to do with it.”

“For sure the rum is to blame,” Meghan grumbled. She shook her head. “Nope. That’s not true. I’m excited about meeting...”

What was her blind date’s name again? She blamed Walker for this lapse in memory, as well. The man left her entirely too senseless.

“Jeremiah...no, Jeremy. Jeremy Blevins. He’s an engineer and lives in the town of Smoketree. He’s outdoorsy and has a full head of hair. I’m excited.” She was definitely trying to convince herself on that one.

“You also have good hair,” Annalise said carefully. “Seems like a good match.”

There was a beat of silence, then all three women burst into giggles.

“I only agreed to go out with him because he happened to message me the day Gus told me his uncle Walker was back in town for an extended period. I’ve avoided the confounded man since the start of the school year. I can handle two weeks of working together after school. It’s not like I ever have to be alone with him.”

Shauna leaned closer. “But do you want to be alone with him?”

“Where Walker is concerned, I stopped wanting when he left town after the concert.”

Shauna handed her a basket of chips. “Have something to eat, sweetheart. It makes the lies go down easier.”

Meghan took one, dipped it into the guacamole and shoved it into her mouth. Shauna made the best guac she’d ever tasted, but she wasn’t sure anything could make forgetting Walker Calloway easier.

Still, she was bound and determined to try. There was no other way to protect herself. Walker was out of her league, and she needed to remember that.

* * *

WALKER WAS GOING to convince Meghan to give him another chance, although he had absolutely no idea how to go about doing it or if he even deserved one.

That last bit wasn't exactly true. He knew he didn't deserve one. Nash would have smacked him upside the head for the way he'd retreated like a coward at the beginning of the summer.

Jack did his best to be stand-in brother figure but preferred to let Walker dig himself out of his own mistakes, and there were plenty.

Topping his list of mistakes waiting so long to finally put a stop to Dani and her gossip leaks to the tabloids about them having rekindled their romance.

He hadn't even remembered her kissing him at the benefit concert when she walked on stage to join him for the chart-topping duet that had added to his fame and made her a household name two summers earlier. He'd been so lost in the moment and grateful beyond belief that he'd been able to perform without Nash next to him.

He'd assumed Meghan knew that. Hell, he'd been singing directly to her, but then he'd been swept up in the adrenaline rush. Jack had been working things out with Annalise at the time so he'd taken his eye off the ball, or in this case, Walker.

Despite the fanfare surrounding his return to the stage, Walker didn't feel like much of a big shot knowing that he'd allowed himself to be carried away—immediately heading into the recording studio to lay down Meghan's song. "Strike while the iron is hot," the record company told him. Without Nash or Jack to assure him he could do things on his own time frame and in his own way, he'd gone along with what other people wanted.

He wanted to change because it was time to be more than what people expected of him. It was time to go after a life that would make him happy.

He'd been traveling back and forth between Magnolia and knew Jack was worried he'd announce he was staying in Music City. He'd preemptively explained that while he respected Walker's ability to choose, Magnolia was

Jack's home now.

But Jack was more than a manager and a stand-in big brother. He was Walker's best friend and the man he admired most in the world.

"She's going on a date," he complained the following morning, feeding the horses in the barn. Jack did that deep, knowing chuckle that alerted Walker he was about to be highly annoyed.

"Did you expect her to sit around twiddling her thumbs and darning socks 'til you pulled your head out of your pants?"

"I don't think you can twiddle thumbs and darn simultaneously," Walker countered, tossing a bucket of oats into the feeding trough with more force than necessary. Orion, his late brother's horse, whinnied in agreement.

Walker immediately reached out a hand to soothe the animal. "Sorry, boy."

Orion had fallen into a deep depression without his beloved owner, but he'd eventually accepted the change and found his joy again. It was a lesson Walker desperately needed to learn.

The horse leaned into Walker's touch. "This guy forgives me. Why won't Meghan?"

Jack laughed again. "First off, I don't think I'd go around comparing a woman to a horse."

"I love this horse." Walker cursed under his breath when Jack's eyes widened. "I'm not saying I love Meghan."

"But do you? Could you?"

"I can't do anything if she starts dating another guy."

It wasn't an actual answer to the question because Walker wasn't ready to admit his feelings. But he could no longer deny them to himself. Hell, when the new album came out, it would become apparent. He'd written almost every song for her. But unrequited love was lonely, and he didn't want to be lonely anymore. Was it truly too late?

"I don't know what to do, Jack. I volunteered to help with an elementary school talent show to be near her, and she still manages to ignore me."

"You're not used to being ignored." Jack sounded amused by the concept of it.

"That's not the point."

Jack gave the last of the feed to the horses and then turned to face Walker. "If you want her for the right reasons, don't give up."

"The right reasons?" Walker scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "Are there wrong reasons?"

“Come on, Walker. Don’t play dumb. You’re many things, but stupid isn’t one of them, despite some of your behavior.”

“Don’t sugarcoat it.”

They started to walk back toward the main house. The sun was high in the bluebird sky, and the temperatures had cooled to a level that made Walker want to spend all his time outdoors.

“Meghan isn’t a woman to be toyed with. She’s got a big heart, and you were careless with it.”

Jack held up a hand when Walker would have argued. “I’m not saying I have a lot of advice to give in this area. It took almost losing Annalise to pull my own head out of my shorts, but that’s what it’s going to take for you, as well. This will be a commitment to her and a life you haven’t led before. A life that’s stable and filled with hard work and compromise.”

Walker swept out his hand. “I own a horse property in a sleepy Southern town.” He pointed to the area that had begun to be cleared where he was building a new state-of-the-art recording studio, more extensive than the one they’d created in the small guest quarters behind the house. “I’m raising a kid. I’m stable. I work hard. I may not be Nash, but I’m doing my best.”

“Your brother was a good father and friend,” Jack said. “Not perfect. You are just as solid of a man as Nash.”

“Don’t say that,” Walker shot back, his chest clenching painfully.

“You need to know it. You need to believe it.”

“What if I can’t?” What if he needed Meghan to help him?

“I have faith in you, Walker. I have faith that you can work things out with Meghan. I wish I could tell you it would be easy.”

“Nothing worth having is,” Walker murmured, repeating one of his late brother’s favorite sayings.

Jack patted him on the shoulder. “Let’s get some coffee and bacon in us, and then we’ll devise a plan.”

“Thanks, Jack.” Walker had to believe he could find a way. He wouldn’t accept anything else. Meghan meant too much to him, and he refused to lose another person he...cared about.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEGHAN HAD BEEN on her date for fifty-five minutes, which was fifty-four minutes too long.

The Fall Festival was in full swing with local music performances, a beer garden, food vendors and a children's carnival.

She smiled as Jeremy Blevins told another story about his ex-girlfriend, detailing the year they'd won first prize in a Halloween party costume conference dressing up as a wall socket and plug.

"Denise was so crafty. She could sew, plus she made her own soap and lotion." He gave Meghan a hopeful nod. "I assume you're crafty, too, since you're an art teacher."

"I don't sew," Meghan said slowly.

"Do you compost?"

"Yes," she lied. "Not really. Not at all," she amended, wondering why she felt the need to lie to impress a man she never planned to see again after this night. Getting along was Meghan's superpower, and how she lived before her grandmother's death changed something inside her.

Meeting Shauna and Annalise had given her the courage to be herself—or at least begin to discover that person. Walker had also been part of her transformation. The way he listened to her ideas and treated her like she mattered had bolstered her confidence. Seeing herself through his eyes had made a world of difference in her life.

Jeremy popped a handful of caramel popcorn into his mouth. He chewed with his mouth open, which might not be as egregious a sin as failing to compost, but it was yet another deal-breaker for Meghan.

"I support composting," she said, then cringed at how dumb that sounded. Was there anybody against composting in theory? "I recycle every week."

He gave a brief nod of acknowledgment, although she could feel his disappointment with her.

Not enjoying the date was at least one thing they had in common, or so she assumed.

"Have you thought about trying to work things out with Denise? It sounds like the two of you had a good thing going." This might be a new low.

Meghan wasn't a hugely experienced dater but counseling a man on

getting back together with his ex-girlfriend should receive an honorable mention in the Lousy Date Hall of Fame.

“She took the water regulator out of the showerhead when she moved in with me,” he said as if Meghan was supposed to understand the significance of that. She didn’t have to wait long for him to explain it.

“I thought she and I were on the same page regarding our values.” He tipped the popcorn bag up to his mouth and then polished off the final kernels without once offering her a bite.

It was too bad because they’d left the potential for dinner after the Fall Festival open, and now she was sure she would be making an excuse then going home to heat leftovers or have a bowl of cereal in front of the TV.

“Yes, someone who shares your values and respects you is important.” Her mind went to an image of Walker before she could stop the blasted thing.

“Denise had both of those,” Jeremy said, almost morosely. At the start of the evening, they’d established that this their first match with someone on a dating app.

Meghan wasn’t even angry or disappointed. She might not be waxing on about Walker, but she couldn’t stop thinking about him and comparing the fun and laughter they’d shared to this night, filled with neither.

“There’s give-and-take to relationships,” she said, squeezing Jeremy’s rather soft arm. No comparing his to Walker’s muscles, she silently counseled herself. “It sounds like Denise cared about you. But she also likes powerful water pressure. Maybe you could suggest shorter showers as a trade-off?”

Jeremy seemed to consider that, but before he could answer, Meghan felt someone hug her from behind.

“Hi, Ms. Banks!” Gus Calloway exclaimed.

Meghan turned to smile down at Gus, who remained one of her favorite students with his quirky sense of humor.

“Hi, Gus. Are you enjoying Fall Festival?”

“Uncle Walker and I were talking about you.”

“We were talking about the talent show,” Walker said, approaching in Gus’s wake. “Not exactly about you.”

“Yes, we were.” Gus wrinkled his nose. “You were just saying—”

“Why don’t we head over to the funnel cake booth?” Walker interrupted. “Ms. Banks—” Was it Meghan’s imagination or did he emphasize calling her by her last name like they hadn’t been friends? “—is on a date,” he finished

darkly.

Gus snorted. “With you? I thought the two of you—”

“Gus, this is my friend Jeremy.” Meghan turned and was almost disappointed to see the man still standing a few feet away. She’d nearly forgotten about him, but he wasn’t looking at her. He stared with starstruck wonder at the man looming behind her. It was a look Meghan had seen before on many faces. She certainly hadn’t expected Jeremy, who took everything seriously, including the environment and himself, to be a country music fan.

“You’re Walker Calloway.”

“Guilty as charged.” Walker deepened the Southern twang and held up his hands like they were in an old Western shoot-out.

Meghan rolled her eyes even as she smiled. Being recognized was nothing new to him, so she knew he laid it on thick because Jeremy was her date.

“I hope you’re showing our Ms. Banks a proper good time. She’s awfully special.”

Meghan’s cheeks colored then heated even more when Jeremy stared at her blankly.

“My last name is Banks,” she reminded him.

“You’re friends with Walker Calloway? I thought you were just a teacher.”

“You know I’m an art teacher,” she explained. “His nephew is one of my students.”

“Hey, Uncle Walker, grown-up talk is boring.” Gus tugged on the sleeve of Walker’s Western button-down. “I see Margo and Trey. Can I go say hi?”

Meghan looked to where the boy was pointing and saw Annalise and Jack standing with Annalise’s children and Margo’s best friend, Violet Atwell.

Annalise gave a half-hearted thumbs-up, then made a face, clearly understanding that standing between Walker and her date for the evening was not the most comfortable position for Meghan to be in. She figured Walker would use Gus’s request as an excuse to leave, but no such luck.

“That’s fine, Gus. Stay with the group and I’ll be right over.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on the heels of his scuffed work boots. “So Jeremy, tell me what you do to make a living.”

“I’m an environmental engineer.”

“You must’ve been real good in school, huh?” A shiver ran the length of Meghan’s spine. Something about the casual lilt to Walker’s tone gave her pause.

“Yes. I have a master’s degree from NC State.”

“Then I’m surprised to hear you use the phrase ‘just a teacher.’ You must understand how important they are in our world. I am not a learned man myself. But I can tell you without a doubt that Meghan has had a considerable impact on my nephew and—” Walker drew in a breath then finished in a tone so sweet it felt like a caress “—me.”

If Jeremy realized he’d been schooled, he showed no signs of it.

“Yeah.” Jeremy nodded. “Teachers are great—Meghan’s great. The reason I clicked on her profile is because she reminded me of my ex-girlfriend. Denise is a high school biology teacher. I’ve been telling Meghan all about her.”

Walker looked genuinely surprised as his gaze darted between Meghan and Jeremy. “That must be fascinating conversation for a first date.”

“We’ve been having a lovely time,” Meghan lied.

Walker raised a brow, calling her on it without saying a word, and her skin tingled with awareness. She tried to give herself a break. Before things went wrong, she’d felt he knew her better than anyone. That didn’t change overnight, despite how much she wanted it to.

“You know that new song?” Jeremy leaned in like he was sharing a state secret. “The one that’s been all over the radio since summer?”

Walker nodded and stopped rocking. Tension shimmered through him before he made an obvious effort to tamp it down. Had she told Jeremy that she suspected he’d written “There’s a Light” about her?

“I feel like it’s me singing the words to Denise. Like you climbed into my heart and wrote exactly what I felt.”

Meghan bit down on the inside of her cheek to stop herself from bursting into hysterical laughter. She couldn’t even catch the attention of an average guy—how could she have ever allowed herself to believe she’d captured Walker’s?

“My brother taught me everything I know about playing guitar and songwriting,” Walker said easily. “That’s a compliment to his memory as much as it is to me. You might have been able to relate but let me assure you, I had someone particular in mind when I wrote ‘*There’s a Light*.’”

Jeremy nodded. “Someone who made you feel like Denise.”

Walker was back to rocking on his heels and appeared to be enjoying this conversation far more than Meghan. “Well, now, Jeremy. I don’t rightly know Denise, but the woman who inspired the song…” His voice dropped to that gentle croon again. “She’s special.”

Meghan registered Jeremy's hand on her arm but couldn't feel his touch, not with the way Walker's gaze made her feel like they were alone instead of standing in the middle of the town's busy central square.

"Would you mind if we cut this evening short?" Jeremy asked. "I need to..."

"Go ahead," she told him with a genuine smile. "I hope you and Denise are happy together."

"You're a peach." Jeremy squeezed her arm, then grabbed Walker's hand and enthusiastically shook it. "You, too."

Then he was gone, and Meghan and Walker were left standing together with the crowd milling around them. Meghan realized she was in big trouble because at Walker's side was the only place she wanted to be.

CHAPTER FIVE

WALKER WATCHED JEREMIAH—or Josiah or whatever the guy’s name was—walk away, thinking he must be a colossal fool to ditch Meghan in the middle of a date.

He slowly turned his attention to her, wondering if she would be angry that he’d supplied much of the motivation for the desertion, only to find her surreptitiously wiping her cheeks as she glanced away.

“Don’t cry, Megs. I’m sorry. The dude was a loser, but I didn’t mean—”

He broke off when she returned her gaze to him and realized she wasn’t crying tears of sorrow but of laughter. In fact, she was nearly bent over with it.

His heart did a funny little dance in his chest, and he immediately heard the start of another song in his head—one more inspired by her. He’d always disregarded the notion of a muse, but his feelings for Meghan drove his creativity more than anything ever had.

“I’ve been on some memorable dates,” she told him when she finally seemed to be breathing normally, “but Jeremy and I will go down in the all-time low record book.” She shook her head. “You have no reason to apologize, although if he and Denise work things out, I’m pretty sure they’ll play your song at the wedding.”

“It’s your song,” he said. “Is there any question about that?”

Her smile faded, but she held his gaze, which was a huge improvement over the past few days.

“I’m happy for your success, Walker. You’re talented and deserve every accolade you receive.”

“I would trade all of it if you forgave me.”

She looked startled, and he wasn’t sure if he shocked her with his words or the sentiment behind them.

Success was fine, but it didn’t bring happiness. Before Meghan, Walker hadn’t considered happiness as a worthy goal to achieve. He’d followed in his brother’s footsteps, happy to skate through life while Nash took the lead. His brother had always seemed to be striving for something out of reach. Maybe it had been peace and contentment.

If Walker had it to do over again, he would have asked those questions. He

would have paid more attention. There was no do-over with his brother, but he prayed Meghan would give him one.

“There’s nothing to forgive. But there’s a reason I didn’t answer your texts this summer. As I’ve told you—”

“I was wrong and stupid. Texting wasn’t anywhere near what you deserve from me. I should have come back sooner. I should have fought for you. For us.”

“Come on, Walker.” Her smile looked resigned. “We were never meant to be.”

“How can you say that?” He ran a hand through his hair, trying not to panic at the calm finality in her words. “There’s something special between us. I couldn’t have been the only one to feel it. That kiss we shared meant something.”

“It did,” she confirmed. “But we come from two different worlds.”

He held out his arms wide. “It looks to me like we share this world. Is it Gus? I know a child is a lot to take on, even for an amazing teacher who cares about kids. It’s not the same as—”

She cupped his cheek with one soft hand, and his knees almost buckled from the pleasure of her touch. Just as quickly, his heart sank at the look of resignation in her eyes.

“I adore Gus. I…” He hoped she would tell him she adored him as well, but she shook off whatever she’d been about to say. “We were friends, right?”

He momentarily closed his eyes and fought to regain control of his emotions. When she drew back her hand, he reached out and held it. “Other than Nash and Jack, you were the best friend I’d ever had. And those two don’t really count. Nash was my brother, so he had to put up with me and Jack is like family. You’re the friend I chose, Meghan.”

She was so much more than a friend, but he was afraid of saying anything that would widen the distance she seemed determined to put between them. “My feelings haven’t changed despite my uncanny ability to be a jackass.”

She laughed at his self-deprecating joke as he’d hoped she would then offered him a gentle smile. “I think we can be friends again. I’d like that.”

“Me, too,” he answered. It was the truth, if not the whole of it.

“Okay.” She bit down on her lower lip, and his body went on high alert. “What do you think about two friends getting a funnel cake?”

Walker nodded. “I’d love a funnel cake,” he told her, grateful for a second chance, even if it started with baby steps.

CHAPTER SIX

WALKER WAS POURING a cup of coffee into his mug the following Tuesday morning when Jack walked into the kitchen from the back patio door.

“Morning. I didn’t expect you here so early,” Walker offered as a greeting. “I told you Carl and I could handle the horses for the early feeding. He’s already out there and doing a bang-up job. Even you wouldn’t be able to find fault with his work ethic.”

Carl was the older man Walker had insisted on hiring, so Jack didn’t feel he needed to spend so much time at the farm. Now that his friend and manager had Annalise and her children in his life, he should be free to prioritize the things that were most important to him.

That’s what Walker planned to do. It had been disappointing when Meghan had friend-zoned him at the festival Friday night, but he had to believe friendship was a step in the right direction. They’d had a great time eating and drinking, playing games and then watching the kids compete in a dance contest.

It was easy to be with her, but he wouldn’t make the mistake again of thinking it could be effortless. He would take it as slow as she needed, but he’d also determined he wanted to do a little wooing in his own way.

He’d sent her flowers on Sunday morning, signed “From a friend,” and then had her favorite menu items from the bakery in town delivered to the school yesterday. She chided him at the talent show, but she’d smiled and blushed slightly as she told him his efforts were unnecessary. He would take her smile any day of the week.

Jack frowned as he shut the door to the back porch behind him. “I’m not here about Carl.” Jack rubbed a hand along the back of his neck. “Have you been on social media this morning?”

Walker gestured to the container of flour, carton of eggs and the mixing bowl in front of him. “I have more important things to do with my morning than scroll the newsfeed. I’m making pancakes. Gus will be down in a few minutes. I like having breakfast with him.”

“You know there’s a country music showcase at the Ryman Auditorium this weekend.”

“I declined to participate in it.” Walker picked an egg out of the carton and

started cracking it on the side of the mixing bowl.

“You were announced as a special guest star just this morning,” Jack told him.

The egg splattered on the counter.

“I said no,” he repeated.

Jack nodded. “I called the event organizers this morning, along with the record company. Apparently, they were told by Dani that you would be joining her on stage for your duet and you’d be willing to encore with ‘*There’s a Light*.’”

“Why would anyone believe Danielle when I explicitly said no? I’m not doing it.”

“They posted the announcement two hours ago, and it’s already gotten a hundred thousand likes. They’re going to record a special on the history of country music and want to feature you as one of its brightest stars. I hate to say it because I’ve told you to do things on your own terms, but this would be a smart move career-wise.”

Walker was about to tell Jack that he didn’t give a damn about his career, but that wasn’t true. He didn’t want success only for himself. He wanted to honor his brother’s legacy and what they’d created with the Calloway Brothers band.

Two kids from a broken home without enough money for bus fare between them had risen to the top. He didn’t want to let that go, but he needed balance.

He sure as hell didn’t appreciate his ex-girlfriend manipulating him.

“They also want to do a tribute to Nash during the showcase,” Jack added quietly. “It’s a big deal.”

Walker grabbed a wad of paper towels and began cleaning up the egg that was sitting useless and cracked on the granite counter.

“Next Saturday is the night of the talent show,” he said as if Jack didn’t realize it.

“You’ll be here for the rehearsals, and I’ll videotape the show so you can see it.”

“Are you saying I have to do the Nashville event?”

“I’m not going to tell you to do anything. As your manager, I recommend it. As your friend, I—”

“You’re just like Daddy!” Gus shouted as he entered the room from the hallway, small fists clenched at his sides. “Work always comes first. He

didn't want to be a dad, and you're no better."

Walker's mouth dropped open at the vehemence in the kid's voice. Gus thought the sun rose and set by his exuberant and bighearted father. Yes, Gus's upbringing had been out of the ordinary. Before he started school, the kid spent most of his time on tour buses or playing in the makeshift nursery Jack set up at every venue.

But Nash had always made things fun. It had been an adventure and so much better than the childhood the Calloway brothers endured.

"Your daddy loved you," Walker said, and even to his own ears, his tone sounded too forceful. Although he knew Nash was human and made mistakes, it was still difficult to fathom anyone speaking ill of his late brother, especially the son who adored him.

"No one is prioritizing a career over you, Gussie. But as Jack said, this one night would mean a lot to your father's memory. I know it's not what we planned, but sometimes we have to make the best of the circumstances given to us."

"Why am I always the one who has to make the best of it?" Gus demanded, his angry gaze swooping between Walker and Jack. "Jack gets to go off with a new family, and you pop in and out whenever you feel like it. I'm always here. Why don't you just send me to boarding school? It would make things easier. That's probably what my dad would have done if he was still alive."

"Your father never would have sent you away. He loved being with you."

"When I fit in his schedule," Gus muttered, then stomped to the refrigerator, opened it and grabbed a yogurt container and one of the blueberry muffins Annalise had brought over the previous day.

"I'm making pancakes so we can eat breakfast together." Walker tapped a finger on the edge of the mixing bowl. "I'll even put chocolate chips in them."

"I don't have time," Gus said, his eyes flashing. "I got to keep practicing for the talent show. I'm sure plenty of parents want to watch their kids."

"I'm here, Gus. You know that. It's one night."

"A couple of nights," Jack clarified. "They'll need you in Nashville for a sound check, but I can put them off until Friday."

Walker sighed, feeling torn. He didn't want to disappoint his nephew, but how could he pass up an opportunity to attend an event offering to honor his brother?

One of his biggest fears was that Nash would be forgotten—a gone-too-early footnote in the story of their career. The success of the new song and the buzz his solo album had garnered added another layer to the guilt he felt over living when Nash had died. This was their dream together, but Walker was the only one reaping the rewards of it. He couldn't turn his back on Nash's memory and his role in Walker's success.

Kids were resilient, right? He had to believe Gus would come to understand his decision.

Gus heaved a similar sigh, then rolled his skinny shoulders. "It's okay, Uncle Walker. You did a lot to help with the talent show, and Daddy is important. I know he loved me, but I wish he were here."

"I do, too, buddy."

"That makes three of us," Jack said and ruffled Gus's hair. "How about you practice in the kitchen while your uncle makes breakfast? I'm a good audience and never say no to pancakes. It's a personal rule I think you should follow as well."

For about the millionth time, Walker felt grateful he wasn't in this parenting thing alone.

"All right." Gus handed the muffin and yogurt to Jack. "Me and Trey are getting a lot better."

"Trey and I," Walker corrected.

"That's what I said." Gus turned and ran down the hall to collect his magic supplies.

"Will missing the talent show scar him forever?" Walker cracked another egg, this one straight into the mixing bowl.

"He'll be fine. You do a good job of trying to balance it all. So you know, Nash struggled with the same kinds of worries. I think all parents do. Even Annalise, who is as confident of a woman as I've ever met, questions herself when it comes to her children."

"Thanks, Jack. I needed to hear that." Even if the other man was blowing sunshine, Walker could use the light to guide him at the moment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“GUS, IS EVERYTHING OKAY?” Meghan stared at the boy slumped in his seat, his thin shoulders drooping and his gaze downcast. She was used to him joining her in her classroom for lunch and recess since the timing coordinated with her free period, and he liked to draw more than he liked being with the other kids on the playground.

Gus was working on an original comic book he wanted to give Walker as a Christmas present. She had promised to help him have it bound once he was finished. Most afternoons, he talked while he illustrated, explaining to her the nuances of the characters and storyline, or offering up random tidbits of scientific and music history facts.

Gus in a glum mood was rare and bothered Meghan, especially when she'd been feeling so buoyant the last few days, like she was walking on a bed of champagne bubbles.

Walker was the reason for her mood. He didn't seem bothered by her suggestion of friendship only. But she suspected his thoughtfulness, attentive manner at rehearsals and the flirty texts he was regularly sending meant something more.

A second chance for a deeper connection, which she also longed for, despite her claim to the contrary. Her feelings for the man hadn't changed and allowing him back in her life only reminded her how sweet he could be. He listened and shared his thoughts like she mattered, which made her feel special and valued. Meghan had grown up not feeling like she mattered to anyone in her family, so it was the quickest way back into her heart.

“It's nothing.” He frowned at the paper he'd been coloring for the past half hour, wrinkled his nose and then crushed it between his hands.

“I don't believe you, but I'll respect your right to privacy. I'm here if you need to talk, and I know your Uncle Walker would also be happy to listen.”

“Too bad he isn't gonna be here to listen or watch me and Trey in the talent show.” He paused, then amended, “Trey and me. I don't even want to do the stupid magic act anymore.”

Meghan folded herself into the child-sized desk next to Gus's, her heart thudding in her chest. “What do you mean he's not going to be here?”

Yesterday afternoon at rehearsal, Walker had offered to have all the

participants and their families back to Whimsy Farm for ice cream after the show.

“That stupid Dani Griggs signed him up for a concert in Nashville Saturday night.” Gus crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t like her.”

“I don’t either,” Meghan agreed, “but we don’t call people stupid.” She would have called Danielle Griggs a bitch, but not out loud.

“Your uncle didn’t mention the concert to me.” It sounded like he’d just found out, but Meghan still felt disappointment slice through her.

Feeling like she was valued, respected and cared for, which she wanted from Walker, included him talking to her even when the conversation was difficult. That had been part of the problem in the summer. He’d left when things got complicated, and she’d been stuck dealing with her bruised heart alone.

“They’re giving some award to my dad or making a speech about him or something. I wish nobody in my family played music. If Daddy hadn’t been on the tour bus, he wouldn’t have been in the accident. He’d still be here with me.”

Meghan ached for the pain she could feel coming like a wave off the sweet boy. She understood loss and grief but hadn’t experienced it at the level Gus and Walker had by losing Nash.

“I wish we could know that were true. It’s easy to blame your father’s career, and I know it’s hard when the demands of the job take your uncle away from you. But there is no way of rewriting the past. You had a daddy who loved you. Your uncle loves you, as well. Even if he can’t be here sometimes, that doesn’t change. You know other parents can’t be around for everything because of their jobs or other circumstances.”

“I know. Trey’s dad is in the clinker so he can’t come either.”

She tried not to grimace. “I don’t think I’d compare Walker to Trey’s dad.”

Gus nodded. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Yes, and I promise to do my best to honor whatever you tell me.”

“I like playing guitar and singing. I like it better than drawing or magic or most everything else.”

Meghan let out a relieved breath. “That’s wonderful, Gus. Musical talent runs in your family.”

“But it makes me scared. I want to have a normal life.”

“You can have the life you choose, and your uncle and Jack will support you. Have you played for either of them?”

Gus shook his head and pulled out a blank sheet of paper. “Uncle Walker said he’s heard me in my bedroom, but I don’t want to disappoint him if I’m not as good as Daddy was when he was my age.”

Meghan reached out and squeezed the boy’s arm. She might be hurt by what she assumed was Walker’s disregard for her feelings, but she knew how much he loved his nephew. “There’s nothing you can do that will disappoint Walker if it makes you happy. Have a little faith in him.”

“Do you have faith in him?”

Meghan’s heart started thudding once again. If only she knew how to answer that question. “I have faith that he loves you very much.”

Gus seemed to consider that for a moment, then nodded. “He does.” He glanced up at her. “I think I’m going to go outside and find Trey to work on our act for the rest of lunch. Is that okay?”

“Of course.” Meghan smiled and tried to pretend it wasn’t wobbly at the edges.

When she was alone in the room, she grabbed her phone from the desk drawer, wondering if she’d received a text or call from Walker.

Nothing.

She understood what that meant. He didn’t care enough to alert her of his plans. Flowers and baked goods were easy enough to order, she supposed. Tricky conversations were part of genuine relationships, the only kind she wanted. If Walker couldn’t handle that, it was his loss. At least, that’s what she told herself.

She half expected him not to show up to the afternoon rehearsal. Today, they were running through the acts from kindergarten to grade three, so Gus and Trey weren’t part of the lineup.

She was speaking with Raina when Walker entered the auditorium, a fact she knew because of how her body tingled with awareness. As he approached, Raina quickly excused herself to herd a group of kids playing Duck Duck Goose on one side of the stage.

“You don’t seem to be having a good day,” she said, proud of how steady her voice sounded.

Walker looked like he was coming off the tail end of a monthlong binge, his skin pale and his eyes exhausted. His hair was rumpled like he’d been tugging at the ends, and he nervously shifted from one foot to the other.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked, his tone despondent.

“Is it about missing the talent show for a concert?” she chirped. “It’s no

biggie.” Maybe she was getting the hang of faking it after all.

He looked surprised by her cheery tone but nodded. “They’re honoring Nash, but only because I will be there. I don’t want to go. I promise I’d rather be here. If you want me to stay, I’ll say no.”

She wanted him to stay, but more importantly, she wanted him to choose that. To choose her.

“You should go,” she answered. “It’s fine, Walker. I understand why honoring your brother is important.”

“I didn’t say yes.” He rubbed one hand against his jaw. “I wouldn’t have committed to the talent show knowing I couldn’t be here for the performance. I don’t want to let you down, Meghan. I’ve done that before.”

Maybe they weren’t meant to be, despite what her heart longed for. Yet she could see the decision weighed on him and didn’t want that.

“Magnolia will still be here when you get back. We’re even having the show professionally recorded. It will be like you didn’t miss a thing.”

That wasn’t true, and they both knew it.

“If it wasn’t for Nash’s tribute…”

“Walker, stop.” She placed a hand on his arm. “You’re making the best decision for you, and I appreciate you telling me about it instead of simply leaving.”

“I wouldn’t do that. You mean—”

“Miss Banks, Joey Minner puked backstage!” one of the kids shouted, running toward her.

She immediately turned to deal with Joey and his sick stomach but glanced over her shoulder. “We’re *friends*,” she told Walker, emphasizing the word. “That won’t change.”

It seemed that nothing would where Walker was concerned. But as the old saying went, the show must go on. One way or another, she’d remember that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MEGHAN ARRIVED AT the elementary school early Saturday morning to set up the talent show stage backdrop and ensure all the last-minute details were in place.

This was the biggest student event of the fall semester, and as part of it, she'd arranged to have sixth-grade volunteers at the doors to staff a canned food drive. She hoped they'd be able to help stock the local community center food bank with donations before the upcoming holiday season.

Her principal was excited and grateful for Meghan's leadership. Meghan knew deep in her heart that despite some of the challenges she'd faced, staying in Magnolia after her grandmother's death was the right decision.

She was doing her best to focus on the positive aspects of her life, of which there were so many, and ignore the dull ache of disappointment that Walker wasn't here to share this day.

He'd texted several times from Nashville and asked if she'd consider visiting the city that had been his home for many years over the holidays.

She hadn't answered, which wasn't exactly fair. But it was still difficult to believe that a man like him would choose a woman like her. She was coming to see that even though he hadn't handled things well after the spring benefit concert, she'd also made mistakes. Fear and insecurity kept her from telling him how she felt. It was water under the bridge now, but maybe if she'd had more faith in the connection they shared, things could have been different before now.

"Meghan, are you here?"

"I'm backstage," Meghan called out in response to Annalise's familiar voice.

She straightened some of the props left behind after the dress rehearsal the previous afternoon and turned—only to stop short at the look on her friend's face. "What is it? What happened?"

Annalise shook her head, a few wisps of golden blond hair falling out of her messy bun. Meghan figured something must be terribly wrong because even though Annalise had changed quite a bit about her life, she still dressed to the nines most days. This morning, she wore a baggy UNC sweatshirt and black leggings, with her feet shoved into a pair of sneakers.

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing horrible. Well, it’s horrible for me because my kid is sick. Trey felt a sore throat coming on last night and woke up feeling awful and running a fever. I took him to the pediatrician’s after-hours clinic, and he’s been diagnosed with strep throat.”

“No,” Meghan murmured.

“Unfortunately, yes. Jack is staying with Gus while Walker’s in Nashville, so I called him on the way over, and he’s breaking the news to Gus. You were next on my list, but I passed the school on the way to the pharmacy and saw your car. I figured I’d stop in instead.”

“Poor Trey! I feel terrible for Gus, but these things happen.”

“I’m sure Jack is calling Walker. I wish he were here. He can always make Gus feel better when he’s upset.”

“I wish Walker were here, too,” Meghan said softly.

Annalise studied her for a moment. “How are you?”

“I’ve been doing some thinking.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“Maybe,” Meghan sighed. “I’ve told you my parents were both doctors and worked a lot. I didn’t fit the mold they’d created the way my older brother and sister did, and they were both in college by the time I was Gus and Trey’s age, so I was left alone. A lot. Whenever my mom and dad chose their careers or social lives over me, it felt like a rejection. I thought that if I’d been more interesting, prettier or smarter, I could have held their attention. I could have earned their love.”

“Kids shouldn’t have to earn their parents’ love,” Annalise told her.

Meghan nodded. “But I kept trying anyway.” She breathed out a sad laugh. “Trying and failing. Trust is hard for me because I still feel like I’m not enough, especially with someone like Walker. He’s not only successful at a level I can barely comprehend, but he’s also famous and has women literally throwing themselves at him. How can I compete with that?”

“I don’t think he expects you to.”

“Exactly. He makes me feel like I’m important just for being me, and that’s scary, at least for my heart.”

Meghan gestured to the autumn scene behind them on the stage she and Walker had created together, talking and laughing as they worked. She’d painted the canvas backdrop while Walker had used cardboard, PVC pipe and colorful tissue paper to make the trees that brought the fall setting to life. “He tries. He’s been trying with me, and I haven’t given him a chance. It stinks

that he's not here to help Gus feel better, but he's a good man. I think he likes me, but I don't know how to trust him. I'm not sure how to trust myself with him."

Annalise grinned. "Girl, he more than *likes* you. But giving your heart to someone is a risk. You might think it's safer not to try, but you're missing out on the good stuff if you don't."

"I want the good stuff," Meghan murmured. "I want it with Walker."

"So what are you going to do about that?"

Nerves fluttered through Meghan's stomach as she thought about the action she wanted to take. It would leave no question of her feelings for Walker. As much as it scared her, she knew it was time to be brave for herself and him.

"There's an early flight out of Raleigh to Nashville. I'm going to book it and surprise him tomorrow morning." She squeezed her hands together. "I want to see his world there. I want him to know he's important to me."

Annalise gave her a quick hug. "A grand gesture. I love it. I think Walker will, too."

"What if he doesn't?" Doubt bubbled up inside her, trying to suffocate her excitement at the anticipation of finally going after something she wanted.

"You won't know unless you try. You're stronger than you think, my friend. You can handle whatever comes next."

Meghan embraced Annalise once more. "Thank you for that reminder. I might be borrowing your faith in me one more time."

"I've got more than enough," Annalise promised.

CHAPTER NINE

MEGHAN'S NERVOUS THOUGHTS regarding her plan to surprise Walker took a backseat for the rest of the day, as preparations for the talent show kept her blessedly busy.

Thirty minutes before curtain time, the auditorium was nearly standing room only and Raina reported they'd collected over forty boxes of canned goods for the food pantry.

The student performers were gathered backstage in small groups and the excitement shimmered in the air like elementary-school fairy dust. She glanced at her watch and thought about Walker. He'd be at the Ryman getting ready for his big night, and she wondered if the anticipation she felt compared at all to his emotions before a show.

She'd get the chance to ask him tomorrow morning. The uncertainty of her plan still frightened her, but the risk would be worth the potential reward. An ordinary life might be enough to satisfy her, but she wanted something more in her heart. She wanted Walker.

"Miss Banks?"

She turned and smiled as Gus approached her, holding out her arms for a hug. He gave her a tight one, and she realized he was holding a bulky guitar case in one hand. "I'm so sorry about Trey and the magic act, sweetie."

He pulled back and held up the case. "Yeah, but I was wondering if I can still be in the show with a different act? I want to play a song."

"I would love that," she said, emotions making her heart clench. "I think everyone would enjoy hearing you play." She smoothed away a lock of hair that fell over his big brown eyes. "And we're recording the show so your uncle will get to see it, too."

"I think I'd rather watch in person."

The din of the voices surrounding them faded away as Walker approached from the back door of the auditorium. Her heart flung itself against her ribs like it needed to be closer to the man who made it pound.

"Uncle Walker came home," Gus explained as if she didn't realize it, which was fair since Meghan felt like she must be imagining his presence.

Then he was close enough to reach out and take her hand, linking their fingers. "I came home," he repeated, his voice soft and low.

Gus glanced between the two of them. “I just said that. Grown-ups are weird. I’m gonna tune my guitar,” he announced, unaware of how overcome with emotion Meghan felt at this moment.

“What about the concert?” she asked.

“It wasn’t important,” he said with a shrug. “Not like Gus.” He lifted her hand and grazed a light kiss across her knuckles. “Or you.”

“No.”

Pain flashed in his bourbon-hued eyes. “Meghan, please.”

She held a finger to his lips. “I don’t want you to make yourself smaller for me, Walker. I’m glad you’re here, but I know how much music means to you. Honoring your brother is important. I’ve made myself small for too long. I’m an ordinary schoolteacher—”

He wrapped his free hand around her finger. “There is nothing ordinary about you.”

“Because you make me feel special, and I’m trying to believe it. I want to have faith—in both of us. I want to love big, Walker.”

“With me?” he asked and the uncertainty in his gaze had her heart melting.

“Fifteen minutes to showtime,” Raina announced from the far side of the stage.

Meghan turned, still holding Walker’s hand and rushed down the hall that led to the main part of the school. When she got to her classroom, she opened the door, pulled him inside then turned and pressed her mouth to his.

It was different from the kiss they’d shared months earlier because now she was sure—not of the future—but that she could be brave enough to go after the one she wanted.

The kiss flooded her senses, making her nearly delirious with longing, and it took all her willpower to pull away. “I bought a plane ticket,” she said, her voice breathless.

Walker blinked then frowned. “Where are you going?”

“I was coming to you.” She felt a blush rise to her cheeks at the way he grinned in response. “I was going to surprise you tomorrow morning.”

“That would have been a hell of a way to wake up.” He leaned down and kissed her again, his lips gentle like he wanted to savor her. As if they had all the time in the world.

“Having you here is better.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I think I’m falling in love with you, Walker Calloway.”

“I know I’m falling for you, Meghan Banks,” he answered without

hesitation then made a funny face. “The whole world is going to know it, too. I probably should have called the new album Ode to Meghan.”

By now, her heart was racing so fast she felt like it would never slow down. Even when things went back to normal, she knew her feelings for Walker would be there, steady and true. She had faith in him—and herself.

She leaned in to kiss him again, but her gaze snagged on her watch. “We need to go,” she said, pulling away quickly even though she wanted to stay wrapped in his arms. “It’s time.”

“Let’s put on the best talent show this school has ever seen.” He dropped a final kiss on her forehead then they hurried back toward the auditorium. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”

Time for love and to live a life Meghan had only dreamed of—with this man at her side.

* * *

THE AFTER-SHOW ICE CREAM celebration was in full swing when Walker realized his nephew had disappeared. He found him standing near the edge of the horse pasture, petting Orion’s soft neck.

“Did you need a break from the party?” he asked as he came to stand next to the boy.

“I heard Orion whinny,” Gus explained, “and I wanted to tell him about playing guitar. Sometimes talking to him makes me feel closer to Daddy.”

“I know what you mean,” Walker agreed, his chest squeezing at the wistfulness in Gus’s tone. “Your father would have been so proud of you tonight.”

Gus looked up at him, his feathery brows furrowed. “I was worried I wouldn’t be good enough, like everyone expected me to be just like him.”

Man, could Walker relate to that. “It doesn’t matter what other people expect, Gus. You should be the best version of you. That’s all your dad would want. Mainly, he’d want you to be happy.”

“I’m happy you came back,” Gus answered. “Are you upset about missing the concert? I guess they didn’t say nice things about Dad since you weren’t there.”

“They went ahead with the tribute,” Walker told his nephew as Orion strolled away toward the rest of the herd. Even Nash’s horse seemed to be recovering from the grief of losing his owner. “But I realized your father

wouldn't have cared about a bunch of industry people honoring him. You are his legacy, Gus. I know the music pulled him away from you at times, but he loved you with his whole heart. I do, too, buddy."

"I love you, Uncle Walker." A soft breeze kicked up, ruffling the boy's hair the way Nash used to. Memories flooded Walker's mind, but they were sweet instead of filled with sorrow and guilt. "I want another scoop of ice cream. How about you?"

Walker smiled, amazed as always at how blessed he was to have this kid in his life. Gus was a constant reminder of the best parts of Nash, and Walker was determined to finally take Jack's advice and begin living a life that made him happy. One he created on his terms.

Meghan met them halfway back to the house, and Gus ran ahead after giving her a quick hug.

"His performance gave me goosebumps tonight," she said, rubbing her bare arms. She wore a long, floral-patterned dress in some silky material that Walker could imagine pooling at her feet as he took it off her.

He looped an arm around her shoulder and kissed the top of her head. "That's how it was with Nash from the start," he revealed. "Gus inherited his father's talent."

"And his uncle's," she added, wrapping her arm around his waist.

He turned to face her. "I'm sorry I was stupid when it came to us."

She nodded. "I'm sorry I was scared."

"I can't promise I won't be stupid again, but I'm going to try like hell to be the man you deserve, Meghan. You mean the world to me, and I'm so damn grateful for another chance to prove it to you."

She kissed him in response, and he knew he'd never take the way she made him feel for granted. He'd found the happiness he'd always wanted and knew without a doubt that love was the most precious gift of all. He'd spend their whole lives making sure she understood that she held his heart in her hands and that he would cherish hers in return.

* * * * *



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A Carolina Song

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