



Country Dreams

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Natalie was country music's darling until her affair with married star Amelia Hart torpedoed her career when she was 25.

Now at 43, Natalie's left Nashville's drama behind, settling into small-town anonymity, any hopes of singing on stage again long gone.

Sienna's got the raw talent, but at 26, she's still waiting on her big break. And she's stayed in the closet since she was seventeen, fearing that coming out would definitely keep her from being discovered.

Their worlds collide when Natalie hears Sienna's raw, intimate performance at a county fair.

Natalie's spellbound. She can't believe this young woman hasn't hit it big yet.

Natalie knows her days in the music industry are over, but maybe she can use her knowledge and talent to help guide Sienna towards her dream.

Just as their friendship starts to develop into something more, Amelia crashes back into Natalie's life—freshly divorced and ready to rekindle old flames. Sienna's confidence crumbles as she inevitably compares herself to Natalie's glamorous ex.

Can Natalie rewrite her past? Will Sienna find the courage to pursue both Natalie and her dreams of being a country music star? Or will outside pressures once again keep Natalie from finding true love?

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Natalie Spencer stepped onto the county fairgrounds, the late summer sun shining down on her. She could already feel the excitement in the air as she took in the sights and sounds of the fair—crowds of people milling about, carnival games roaring with delight, the smell of sugary treats and fried food wafting through the air.

Natalie slid her hands into the pockets of her khaki shorts as she meandered along, following the crowds of families and teenagers moving from stall to stall, soaking up the atmosphere of the last day of the county fair. Sunlight shined through the trees, splitting rays of light through the green and yellow leaves as they fluttered in the gentle breeze.

The scent of freshly cut grass mixed with the sweet aromas drifting from the local bakery's stand, and Natalie couldn't resist the temptation of their cinnamon rolls, although the caramel apples looked heavenly.

The bakery owner, a woman in her fifties whose name Natalie couldn't remember, made small talk with her while she picked up a pair of tongs and plucked one of the cinnamon rolls out from the display. Natalie had only lived here for a month and a half, but she was already hoping that this could be the town she settled in, that she could finally stop moving.

She thanked the woman and took a bite as she made her way over to the picnic benches and took a seat, finding a spot that let her do some people-watching while she ate.

Natalie suppressed a moan as the rich, fluffy dough practically dissolved on her tongue, savoring the taste of the creamy vanilla frosting as she licked her lips.

The bakery alone was a good enough reason for Natalie to stay. Plus, she was tired of moving.

At first, it had been out of necessity. When she started seeing photographers perched at a park bench or sitting behind their steering wheel on the main street, waiting, trying to blend in but failing miserably, Natalie knew she had to go. The last thing she wanted was to see her photo all over the tabloids again.

And in the last few years, even though her days of being recognized on the street were long gone, she could still feel that shift, when residents of her latest small town somehow found out that they had a former country music star living in their midst.

It was subtle, but Natalie knew.

A few whispers and turning of heads when she went to her favorite coffee shop or farmer's market.

She could probably stick it out. Let it pass. But she'd just gotten so used to moving that it almost became second nature.

But as she got older, Natalie thought more and more about finding a place to call home for more than just a few months.

A young girl held her father's hand as she clutched a stuffed unicorn against her chest, an older boy catching up to them as they walked past Natalie. The sleepy little town she was starting to love was coming to life as the sun dipped casting a warm glow across the people strolling by.

She could still remember evenings like this at her own county fair when she was a kid, up on her father's shoulders, taking it all in. She missed him, even all these years later, but there was a part of her that was thankful that he never saw her downfall.

Looking back, Natalie wished she'd been more present during those two tours, but it had all happened so fast. She went from playing at fairgrounds just like this one when she was seventeen years old to touring the world at nineteen. And her father had been so proud of her, coming to her hometown concert, but he'd passed away three years later.

When Natalie got up to join the steady stream of people moving by, the lights of the Ferris Wheel in the distance shone against the pinks and oranges of the darkening sky.

She'd had a turbulent few years in her early twenties, from getting the call while she was on the road that her father had died to seeing her name all over the tabloids, blaming her for the affair.

Radio stations blacklisted her, and in just a few days, when she was twenty-five years old, she'd gone from living her dream and planning her third tour, to seeing the sales for her third album tank, her calls to Amelia going straight to voicemail.

Natalie was left completely heartbroken.

She spent her twenty-sixth birthday alone in a cabin in the woods in Canada, not giving anyone her location, because at that point, almost a week after the scandal broke, she trusted no one.

But Natalie had been naive to think that she could fall in love with Amelia, one-half of country music's hottest couple.

Mason was never going to let Natalie get away with it. He turned everyone against her, but Natalie never thought that Amelia would join him in that effort.

Natalie never could have imagined at any point during their seven-month affair that if or, more likely, when they were discovered, Amelia would have dropped her like that. With no warning. With such definity.

Natalie still didn't even know how it happened. She'd just woke up one morning to Amelia pacing the floor of Natalie's bedroom as the sun streamed through the tiny gap in her curtains.

By the time Natalie registered something was wrong, when the only thing coming out of Amelia's mouth as she stopped pacing and began darting from the closet to the bathroom and back, stuffing things into her purse that had been left there gradually over the last few months, was curses uttered under her breath, it was too late.

The front door slammed behind Amelia, and Natalie's worst assumption was that Mason was looking for her, that he'd come home earlier than Amelia had expected, and she wasn't there to greet him.

But that was the last time Natalie had seen Amelia. Her calls later that day went unanswered, and it was only when she'd been flipping through the channels that night, bored and alone, that she saw her own face on the entertainment section of the news.

And there was a photo of Natalie and Amelia from an awards night a few weeks ago. It was entirely innocent. They never would have been that stupid, but they had been standing close together, Natalie's hand on the small of Amelia's back as they mingled with other musicians and celebrities.

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Natalie exhaled now as she decided where to go next, towards the amusement end of the fairgrounds or to the stage where some local musicians would be playing. It had been a long time since she'd allowed that memory to enter her mind, and she usually didn't let it linger, but for some reason today, she almost felt like she was able to spend a while with it.

She could still remember that feeling of the remote slipping out of her hand, dropping to the wood floors, the batteries falling out and rolling across the boards, as she watched Amelia try to leave her own home, reporters shoving microphones in her face, all of them scrambling to get their questions out.

Amelia had looked like she was going to keep going and get into her car but she stopped suddenly, and one of the reporters shouted over the rest.

“Do you want to comment on the rumors that you're secretly gay and in a full-blown relationship with Natalie Spencer?”

Natalie could see Amelia's jaw clench, and she waited for Amelia to say something, but another reporter jumped in.

“Your husband has been caught cheating before. Is this marriage just a publicity stunt? Kept together for the sake of your careers?”

Amelia gripped the door handle and yanked it open, giving her some space before she said the words that Natalie would never forget. “I love my husband. There never has been or ever will be anyone else. Let alone a woman.”

And then Amelia escaped into the front seat of her car, shutting the door on the surge of reporters closing in on her, all shouting her name.

Natalie was crying before she even realized it, silent tears streaking down her face as the TV anchor moved on to the next scandal. She had no idea how long she'd stayed on the couch, in a daze, completely blindsided by the fact that people were speculating that they were together and simultaneously realizing that it didn't matter. They weren't together at all apparently. The last seven months had meant nothing to Amelia.

If only that had been the end of Natalie's problems.

More photos emerged. Natalie still had no idea who had hidden outside her home, waiting for Amelia to leave her place in the middle of the night, Natalie giving her one last kiss in the doorway before reluctantly parting ways like they did most nights.

It was hard to deny those photos.

But Amelia did.

And while Amelia and Mason were rebuilding their image, staging dates and romantic getaways, they were also erasing Natalie's career, telling anyone who would listen that Natalie had seduced the younger Amelia, feeding that angle to the press to run with.

Natalie had been twenty-five and Amelia twenty-one. Natalie thought that argument was ridiculous, both because Amelia had been the one to start their affair and because they were both adults, able to make their own decisions, whether they were right or wrong.

Natalie never gave an interview. Never gave her side of the story. She had nothing to

say. She wasn't going to out Amelia who had confided in her that she never should have married Mason, that her manager encouraged her, telling her that their careers would benefit from it. And Natalie was pretty sure that she was the only person in the world who knew that Amelia was gay.

Somehow she wasn't bitter. She probably should have gone to therapy at some point over the years, but she never did. Although she had written countless songs that must have helped her process everything, more than she could have realized. It was just second nature to her to pour her heart out into her lyrics.

Natalie's footsteps slowed, someone bumping into her shoulder, apologizing as they walked past. The faint melody drew her in, her feet carrying her toward the stage, and it took her a few seconds to register what she was actually hearing.

The melody was slower, with an acoustic guitar playing the intro rather than a dobro, but when the young woman started to sing the familiar lyrics, Natalie couldn't walk away.

Instead, she was weaving her way through the crowd until she was at the edge of the front row, her eyes locked on the beautiful blond-haired woman whose voice was so raw, so full of emotion, that Natalie might have assumed that this woman had written those lyrics.

Except they were hers.

This was the song that had made Natalie famous, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd heard it on the radio, never mind seeing someone cover it.

Natalie stood transfixed, tears coming to her eyes as a quiet came over the crowd. They were as mesmerized as she was, and they gave this woman their full attention as her fingers slid seamlessly across the frets, her voice even more powerful as she sang

the last chorus.

Natalie lost herself in that moment. It was almost like she was having an out-of-body experience. It was a fantastic performance, but she couldn't simply stand there and appreciate it as a lover of country music. It was her song, the one she'd written when she was sitting on her bed when she was sixteen, when she realized that she liked her best friend a little too much.

The lyrics didn't lay any of that out, and no one would ever have guessed that was what Natalie had been thinking at the time, but she knew, and never in the hundreds of times that she'd performed that song did it bring her back to that moment when she'd jotted down those lyrics as it did now.

Natalie felt her lips sliding into a smile as she clapped along with everyone else, a few whistles cutting through the night air from the crowd behind her. The woman on stage nodded, silently thanking the crowd, a grin on her face, and for a split second, Natalie felt like she was looking straight at her, like she knew who Natalie was, because there was an intensity in her gaze, but the moment was gone.

"Thank you!" The woman took a bow and acknowledged the audience for a few more seconds before walking off stage.

Natalie exhaled as the crowd dispersed, almost lightheaded from the array of emotions that she'd just had, going all the way back to reliving that night that Amelia broke her heart, but that was a distant memory now, her mind still in disbelief that she'd just witnessed someone performing her song.

And not just anyone. That woman had talent.

Natalie had to find out who she was.

Sienna Kent smiled at the crowd as she bent down to grab her bottle of water that she always kept beside the base of her microphone stand and took a long drink. She was nearing the end of her set, the warm glow of the fading sun was gone now, the string lights hanging over the audience providing the mood lighting along with the blinking of lightning bugs, flickering and glowing amongst the darkened edges of the field.

The crowd had certainly grown since she'd started almost an hour ago, and as much as Sienna wanted to be playing real festivals and going on tour, there was something special about playing at her local fair that she'd been going to her entire life.

The atmosphere was relaxed, a mix of families and teenagers, older couples too. They were mostly familiar faces, but there were always tourists who happened to be passing through this week, and Sienna continued to live in hope that somewhere out in that audience, there might be someone who thought she was talented. Someone who could introduce her to the right people.

She considered it a privilege to play here every year, but she still wanted more. And at twenty-six years old, Sienna was wondering if she needed to get a bit more realistic about her dreams of doing this for a living.

Surely, if she was talented enough, if her voice was good enough, she would have been noticed by now.

Sienna pushed those thoughts to the back of her head as she introduced her next song, losing herself in one of her favorites. As much as she wanted to play her own music,

she learned years ago that the best way to hold such a mixed crowd's attention at a fair like this was to play well-known songs, covers old and new.

Sienna did put her own spin on most of them though, using her guitar skills to change the rhythm or take a lively song down to a slow number with more emotion.

In the distance, smoke from a barbecue rose into the sky, and Sienna stood back from the microphone to get the audience to clap along with her, knowing they'd join in when she sang the chorus again.

Sienna couldn't keep the smile off her face as she stepped up to the mic again. What she wouldn't do to be able to sing for a living. God, she lived for this.

A light breeze lifted her blond hair away from her eyes as she held the last note, drawing it out as the audience burst into applause and cheers.

"Thank you!" Sienna knew her time was nearly up. "You've been an amazing crowd. Thank you for coming out. I've had a great time, and I hope you guys did too." She paused for a few more cheers. "So, I'm going to leave you with a favorite of mine. Maybe you know it too."

Sienna let her fingers glide over the frets. She'd been playing this song for so many years that she didn't need to think about it. She watched the crowd instead, soaking up the last of this show. Dark clouds painted the horizon, the evening air heavy, the threat of thunderstorms moving in, but thankfully, Sienna's set would be finished by the time that happened.

If she had her way, and she got the chance to record her own songs and go on tour, she'd probably never play here again. Even though it was her hometown, it was too small, too casual, and a logistical nightmare for a security team.

It was a problem she'd love to have.

She'd been singing here for the last ten years, and every time she played her final song of the night, she looked out at the crowd just like she was now, doing her best to commit this feeling to memory because maybe it would be the last time she played to just a few hundred people.

Sienna's eyes fell on a woman with dark hair moving through the crowd on the left, coming from the back up towards the front row, the deep reds and browns of her wavy hair vibrant under the glow of the string lights.

As Sienna went into the final chorus, making eye contact with as many members of the audience as possible, she found herself turning to find that woman again, and for a few seconds, Sienna only sang to her, drawn in by the intensity of her stare and the woman's stunning features.

The song was over far too soon and then Sienna was waving to the crowd, taking her time acknowledging them before leaving the stage.

She didn't have fans as such, but she did take a few photos beside the stage, mostly with local politicians and the event organizers, although a few family friends waited to take a photo with her, knowing they'd probably end up in next week's newspaper.

Her parents were there too, and she gave them both a hug.

"You were great," her dad, James said.

Her mother was waving someone over, and Sienna didn't have to look to know who it was.

"Caleb," her mother said, pulling Sienna's best friend from high school in for a hug.

“Always good to see you Mrs. Kent,” he said as he moved to shake her father’s hand.

“Pauline. Please,” she said with a smile. “You’re not sixteen anymore.”

Caleb had been the starting quarterback for the football team, and he fit that stereotype perfectly. With his dark hair always a little messy and a grin on his face, he was charming and funny, and just about every girl in high school wanted to be his boyfriend.

Except for Sienna, of course, and unfortunately for her, she was the only one he wanted.

“Honey,” Pauline said softly to her husband, “Let’s go get something to eat and let these two catch up.”

Sienna wished she could join them, but she forced herself to smile and give her parents a wave, leaving her alone with Caleb now that most of the crowd had left.

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Sienna put her guitar back in its case, knowing that she'd have to do something about this situation. She'd somehow managed it for the last ten years, and she really thought that when Caleb went away to play college football, that he'd meet someone, that if he did come back to their small town someday, he'd bring his girlfriend with him.

"Sometimes, I think they like me more than you do, Sienna," he said with a laugh, but it was the truth, and Sienna bit her tongue as he wrapped his arm around her waist.

Something had changed in the last few months.

Sienna had always been upfront with Caleb. He'd asked her out when they were sixteen, and she'd say she just wanted to be friends. There were a few more attempts while they were still in school, and then they only saw each other over Christmas when Caleb was back home from college for a week, but he was like a dog with a bone lately, and Sienna was seriously considering telling him that he really and truly was wasting his time.

But if she told him she was gay, he might not take it well and tell someone who would tell someone else, and then what little chance she had of being a country music star would disappear.

Sienna knew that window was closing anyway, but until she'd completely given up hope, she couldn't come out, and she wasn't going to let Caleb out her.

So, she had to manage this situation as best as she could.

"But at least I know that if we ever get together, they'll welcome me into the family,"

he said, his hand still on her hip, and Sienna slipped away, bending to pick up her guitar case and slinging it across her back.

“Caleb,” she said, unable to keep that warning tone out of her voice.

“I know, I know,” he said, holding up his hands. “Just friends. I got it.”

Sienna bit back a response, because did he really know? He never acted like he did. And the last thing that Sienna wanted to do was ruin their friendship, but she was starting to wonder. She was frustrated around him more often than not. Maybe, their friendship had run its course.

“Hey,” Caleb said, his eyes moving to someone behind Sienna. “Looks like you got a fan. I’ll see you later. I’ll be putting my cannon to good use,” he said, lifting his right arm to show off his bicep. “Don’t be shocked if I return with a gigantic stuffed bear for you.”

“Please don’t,” Sienna said with a smile. “Your niece would appreciate it so much more than me.”

“True. True. Okay, see you later.”

Sienna finally turned, glad that he was gone, but momentarily dazed when her eyes landed on that woman, the one who had made her way down to the front row. She was walking towards her now, and Sienna swallowed. The woman strolled up to Sienna with a smooth swagger, her posture upright and her gaze direct, her copper brown hair falling across her shoulders.

Volunteers wearing orange t-shirts took down the speakers and dismantled the small stage a few feet away from her, but the rest of the crowd had left.

“Hey,” Sienna offered, stuffing her hands in her pockets. She rarely got the chance to be nervous around a woman, but then again, Sienna couldn’t remember the last time someone this beautiful had stood in front of her.

“Hi.” Up close, the woman’s eyes drew her in, that intensity still there, and Sienna didn’t think she’d been this thrown by someone’s presence, those rich brown eyes locking onto her, the golden flecks almost shimmering in the low light. “That was quite the performance.”

“Thank you.”

“I couldn’t leave here without finding out your name.”

Sienna found herself swallowing again. Even her voice had this alluring quality that made her weak at the knees. “Sienna Kent.”

The woman extended her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too,” Sienna said as she shook it, ignoring the tingling sensation that crept up her arm as their fingers brushed, their hands falling away, and yet this woman hadn’t offered her name. Sienna could feel her lips tugging into a smile. “Aren’t you going to tell me your name?”

The woman smirked, a soft laugh bubbling up from her throat. “I’m not normally so full of myself, but I didn’t think I needed to.”

Sienna must have frowned or made some kind of a face, because the woman smiled again, and Sienna’s mind went into overdrive, trying to figure out who this woman was.

If she had to guess, Sienna would say she was about forty, and she wondered if they’d

met before, but Sienna was sure that she would have remembered her.

The woman's eyes danced, her laugh warm. "I don't know what to make of this, but I would have hoped that if you were going to sing one of my songs, probably my most famous one at that, that you'd recognize me."

And now Sienna was spiraling. What song...? She went through her set list, starting at the top, skipping past just about every song, knowing exactly whose they were. Until she got to her last song.

Sienna closed her eyes for a second, desperately searching her memory. She was sitting on her bedroom floor, opening the box of CDs that her mother had left in the donation pile when they'd been clearing out their house.

Sienna had kept it under her bed, curious about what her mother's tastes had been, and already at the age of eight, looking for songs to learn. She also couldn't understand why her mother was suddenly getting rid of albums that she'd regularly listened to. When Sienna asked her, her mother had said that she couldn't support a housewrecker like Natalie Spencer.

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At the time, Sienna knew not to question why her mother had been so definite about it, knowing that tone of voice, so Sienna had just kept the CDs hidden under bed, learning her favorite song from the album by bringing her guitar and portable CD player into the woods.

“Natalie,” Sienna said, that memory came out of nowhere. “Natalie Spencer.”

Natalie smiled shyly. “That’s me.” She studied her for a second. “I have to ask... Why that song? I haven’t heard it on the radio or anyone cover it in... Eighteen years?”

Sienna’s heart thudded in her chest, the realization that she was standing in front of the woman who made that song famous coming over her. “Did you write it?”

“Yes.” Natalie looked away for a second, her hair falling across her eye before she returned her gaze to Sienna, tucking her hair behind her ear. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

Sienna inhaled a sharp breath, full of some mixture of embarrassment and overwhelm, and as darkness set in, the constant chirps of crickets surrounded them, filling the silence that had fallen between them.

“I got a guitar for Christmas when I was eight, and I started teaching myself. I had lessons, but my teacher was only interested in scales and learning the most basic songs. I asked for a guitar because I wanted to be able to play the songs I heard on the radio, the songs I’d grown up hearing. And that was one of them. It was the second song I ever learned actually.”

A rumble of thunder in the distance had them both looking up at the sky even though it was pitch black now. A flash of lightning lit up the mountains in the distance a few seconds later, and cries came from the crowds who were already moving toward the exits, anticipating the rain, an announcement coming over the speakers at the fairgrounds to make their way to the exits safely.

“Where are you parked?” Sienna asked, knowing that most people’s cars were in the field beside the entrance, a twenty-minute walk away, while she got to pull right up to the empty field behind the stage.

Sienna felt the first few drops on her bare arms as another rattle of thunder cut through the muggy night air.

“Back at the entrance,” Natalie said with a bit of grimace. “Guess, I should start walking.” She pressed her lips together before asking, “Can I get your number?”

Sienna couldn’t stop her mouth from falling open, but then the sprinkling of rain abruptly changed to heavy drops as the skies opened up, and Sienna instinctively reached for Natalie’s hand. “My car’s just over there,” she said over the rain as they jogged over, Sienna’s case awkward on her back.

She flung open the backseat door of her modest navy Accord, sliding her case across the seats before hopping into the front, both of them pulling their door closed at the same time, a little out of breath and it didn’t take long for the windows to steam up as the rain fell even harder, hammering against the roof of the car and the windshield.

The fresh scent of rain mixed with Natalie’s perfume created an intoxicating mix. She was so distracted that it took Sienna a second to get the car started and the wipers going.

“Thank you,” Natalie said with a sigh. “I would be absolutely drenched right now.”

“No problem.” When Sienna could finally see and safely drive away, she drove across the wet grass, the car dipping with the slight hills and uneven ground. She got back to the main road and the traffic coming out of the fairgrounds was insane. If she drove back towards the entrance, they’d be there all night, joining the rest of the crowd trying to leave. “How about I drop you home and pick you up tomorrow to go get your car?”

“You don’t mind?” Natalie asked, running a hand through her damp hair.

“I’m off tomorrow, and I’ve got nothing planned. Beats sitting in that all night,” she said, waving to a man she recognized who let her into the line of cars.

“Okay.” The wipers whipped back and forth, the rain not letting up as they moved at a snail’s pace. “Thanks.”

“Where do you live?” Sienna asked as they came up to a junction.

“Are you from here?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m renting Bonnie Jenkin’s cabin. Do you know it?”

“Yeah,” Sienna said with a slight hesitation. She knew it. Her mother was friends with Bonnie and when she got married, she moved in with her new husband and put her cabin up for rent. They were practically neighbors if you cut through the woods.

But she couldn’t recall Bonnie or her mother ever saying that they’d rented it out. The last Sienna heard was that Bonnie was struggling to find someone who she felt like she could trust with her property.

And why had nobody mentioned that a former country star was living in their town?

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Natalie met Sienna's eyes as she parked the car in front of the cabin. They'd hardly spoken on the way here, because the rain never let up, and it wouldn't have been easy to talk over it. Plus, Natalie wasn't sure what to say. She'd had such a strange, yet enjoyable evening.

It had been almost surreal hearing someone perform one of her songs, especially one that meant so much to her for so many different reasons, but Natalie had embarrassed herself by assuming Sienna knew who she was. She couldn't remember the last time she did that, and she hated being that presumptuous, but when Sienna sang her song, Natalie really did think she was standing in front of a fan. And the thought of meeting someone who liked her music again was thrilling.

But it hadn't exactly worked out that way.

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“I should get your number,” Natalie suggested again as she released her seatbelt, the sound of the rain thumping against the car almost swallowing up her words. “To go get my car tomorrow.”

Sienna stared at her for a second, studying her. “Why did you ask me before?”

“For your number?”

Sienna nodded. “Yeah.”

Natalie took a deep breath. She didn’t know how to explain it without sounding desperate, so she just told Sienna the truth. “Honestly? I don’t know the last time I heard someone sing one of my songs, and so beautifully at that. I had no idea who you were. I suppose I could have asked around tomorrow, but I don’t know,” she said with a bit of a shrug. “I couldn’t walk away without asking. And it’s not all about me. I wish I’d seen your set. I just wandered towards the stage when I caught that familiar melody, even if it did sound quite different at the same time.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that,” Sienna said with a hint of a smile.

“Are you kidding? I love what you did with it. And, please, don’t apologize. I’m still just shocked that I got to hear my song again. But yeah, I just wanted the chance to maybe buy you a drink or... I don’t know.” Natalie made herself stop talking. She was being entirely honest, and in the process, she’d managed to make it sound like she was trying to ask Sienna out. Which was not her intention. Not that Sienna wasn’t a very attractive woman.

Sienna slid her phone out of the pocket of her shorts and passed it to Natalie. “Give me your number. And I have to apologize for all of that. About not knowing who you were. I’m so embarrassed.”

Natalie added the last few digits and saved her name to Sienna’s phone, handing it back to her to find Sienna’s cheeks a little flushed. “Why? Actually, hold on.” The rain hadn’t let up one bit. It was probably worse. “Why don’t you come in for a while? Let the rain ease up a bit. Unless you have somewhere to be?”

“No. Nowhere to be.”

Natalie took her keys out of her pocket and flung the door open, dodging the puddles as she jogged the few feet up to her front door and underneath the cover of her porch. She unlocked the door, holding it open for Sienna as she flicked on some lights, leaving her muddy shoes inside the door. Sienna did the same.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Natalie asked as she motioned for Sienna to take a seat on the couch. “I know you still need to drive home, but I have beer and wine, or I can put on a pot of coffee.” She turned on the floor lamp in the corner of the room, casting a warm light across the living area.

“A beer would be great,” Sienna said as she took a seat, throwing her arm over the back of the couch as she angled her body to keep talking to Natalie as she entered the kitchen. “Whatever you have is fine.”

Natalie took two beers out of the fridge and opened them, handing Sienna hers while she left hers on the wooden coffee table. “I just want to go freshen up,” she said, running a hand through her damp hair.

“Sure. Take your time.” Sienna took a sip of beer as Natalie climbed the stairs just off the living room and up to her bedroom.

Natalie checked her reflection in the bathroom mirror, surprised to see that her makeup was still intact, although her hair was a little unruly. She took her hair dryer out of the drawer and turned it on for a few seconds, thankful for Sienna's offer to drive her home, because she'd probably only be getting to her car now. She'd have been soaked through, and then have to sit in that traffic in her wet clothes.

Natalie took one last look in the mirror now that her hair was dry, stopping herself from touching up her makeup. Why was she being this particular about her appearance?

Natalie blew out a breath as she switched off the bathroom light. She couldn't remember the last time she was in the presence of someone who might appreciate her music. She probably just wanted to make a good impression. That was all it was.

She slid her hand along the smooth pine banister as she descended the stairs. Sienna's eyes were glued to her phone, and Natalie didn't think much of it, knowing how younger people were, always checking social media or messaging someone, but when Sienna looked up as Natalie padded across the carpet, Natalie knew something had changed.

"Everything okay?" Natalie asked, noticing how pale Sienna looked, and she was afraid of what Sienna might say. That maybe someone she knew had been in a car accident or something like that. She looked shell-shocked.

"Yeah." Sienna put her phone face down on the coffee table and took another swig of her beer. "Yep. All good."

Natalie studied her as she picked up her beer and sat on the loveseat, leaving Sienna alone on the couch. And then it dawned on her what might be going on.

Natalie took a sip of beer, waiting to see if Sienna would say anything, but she still

looked like she'd just seen a ghost, her eyes unable to meet Natalie's.

"You Googled me, didn't you?" Natalie asked softly.

Finally, Sienna's eyes met hers, an almost painful look on her face. "I had no idea," Sienna said with an exhale, shaking her head as she spoke. "None."

Natalie held her gaze, not entirely sure if Sienna was referring to the fact that Natalie was involved in a scandalous affair or that it had ended her career just when it was really taking off. That that was the reason why there had been no new music in the last eighteen years. "You had no idea about which part?"

Sienna visibly swallowed. "I had that box of CDs with your three albums in it, and I guess I never really thought about why there hadn't been more, why I never had a chance to go see you on tour as a teenager. And then I found other artists to listen to, to learn their songs." She sighed. "I had no idea about any of it. I had no idea why."

"And now that you do?" Natalie asked, curious to find out more about this very real, almost visceral reaction from a complete stranger.

Sienna's eyes glistened. "I can't believe your career ended like that. I'm just reading old news headlines, scrolling from one to the next... But was it true? In five minutes, I came across just as many articles with Amelia Hart denying all of it as I did of reporters claiming it was all real, backing it up with photos."

Natalie crossed one leg over the other. "What do you think?"

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“What do I think?” Sienna exhaled. “I mean... I hope it was true. Because then at least you had a few months of happiness, assuming that you were happy with her, but I still can’t get over the backlash. Guys cheat all the time.”

“I think it was the gay thing more than the cheating.” Natalie sipped her beer, her already strange evening turning even more surreal.

“That wasn’t that long ago.”

“Eighteen years. Things wouldn’t be much different now either, so if that hadn’t happened then...” Natalie shrugged. “It would have at some point. I don’t think I would have stayed in the closet forever.”

Sienna sat forward, leaving her beer on the coffee table, her elbows on her thighs, her hands clasped. “It shouldn’t be like this.”

Natalie inhaled a shaky breath, a sad smile coming to her lips. “I’ve spent more time than I care to think about wondering how much easier my life would have been if I hadn’t fallen in love with country music. Any other genre... This isn’t an issue.”

Sienna lifted her gaze to meet her eyes, a wry smile on her lips. “I thought for sure you were going to say that you wondered how much easier your life would have been if you hadn’t fallen in love with Amelia Hart.”

Natalie’s smile grew. “Oh, that too, but like I said, this ending was always on the cards for me. It was just a matter of when.”

The rain drummed against the windows, the wind whistling, filling the silence that had fallen between them.

Natalie swallowed down the lump in her throat, her openness with a complete stranger taking her by surprise. “There was a part of me, in the years after that, that genuinely thought I’d done some sort of a service. That I’d saved someone else from the trouble of being out in Nashville. That maybe, in time, people would realize how crazy of a reaction that is, to be so willing to discard someone and their music for being gay, but...” She shook her head. “That’s not the way it worked out. I never did get a second chance, and I’m long forgotten now.” She laughed softly. “Even someone who covers my songs doesn’t know who I am.”

“Natalie...” Sienna’s eyes held her own.

“It’s fine.” Natalie pushed down the emotions that threatened to bubble up after all these years. It had been a long time since she’d felt this bitter about her career. “It’s ancient history at this point. And lucky for you, you won’t ever have to worry about any of these things. You’ll get your break eventually. I’m surprised you haven’t already. And once you’ve got a foot in the door... With a voice like yours? It’s only a matter of time until you’re topping the charts and selling out shows.”

Sienna stared blankly at her.

“Did I say something wrong?” Natalie asked, tilting her head as she searched Sienna’s eyes. “That is what you want, isn’t it? Someone as talented as you shouldn’t be playing their local county fair.”

4

Sienna felt like she was having an out-of-body experience. How was any of this real? Not only was she talking to the woman who wrote her favorite song, that woman was

gay? And her career had ended because of it? Because her relationship with another country star became public knowledge?

Sienna was struggling to process everything that had happened that evening.

Her mind flashed back to the way Natalie had made her way down to the front of the crowd. Sienna understood the intensity of her gaze now. Natalie was watching someone perform her song, so many years after being erased from the country music scene. No wonder Natalie had been so transfixed. It probably had little to do with Sienna's performance and everything to do with hearing that song again.

"Did I say something wrong?" Natalie asked, tilting her head slightly, taking Sienna away from her thoughts. "That is what you want, isn't it? Someone as talented as you shouldn't be playing their local county fair."

Sienna held her gaze. "Yes. I want it more than anything." She reached for her beer again, not believing that this conversation was even happening.

Natalie nodded. "It'll happen for you. I've seen a lot less talented people make it. I know I don't have any connections anymore, but I wonder if you were in the right place..." Sienna could practically see the gears turning in Natalie's head. "I know a bar in Nashville. If you got on their list, if you could play there for one or two nights, I'm confident that you'd have someone handing you a business card by the end of the night."

Sienna sat up straight, wiping a hand across her face. She should be over the moon right now, having someone like Natalie singing her praises, but all she could think about was what Natalie had said just a few seconds ago.

"I mean it, Sienna. You're extremely talented, both as a vocalist and a musician."

Sienna met Natalie's gaze. She must have taken Sienna's silence for disbelief. "Thank you for saying that."

"It's the truth. Plenty of people don't get discovered until they're in their early twenties."

Sienna's pulse swished in her ears. "Late," she murmured as she took another swig of her beer.

"Hmm?"

Sienna made herself hold eye contact. "I'm in my late twenties. I'm twenty-six."

Natalie flashed her a smile. "Either way, you're young, and you've got every chance of making this your career."

Sienna actually felt sick. "I should go." She rose unsteadily from the couch, her stomach twisting in knots. She made her way to the door as quickly as possible, slipping her feet into her shoes before she could give it any more thought.

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Natalie's beer hit the coffee table with a thud as she got up and joined her at the door just as Sienna was ready to open it.

"I hope I didn't say anything to offend you. I just..." Natalie folded her arms across her chest. "I've been away from the music business for so long. I've completely forgotten about the rush of adrenaline that takes over when you know you're rehearsing someone with so much talent, with such a beautiful voice, and that it's only a matter of time before everyone else gets that same privilege."

Sienna forgot to breathe, standing in front of Natalie and hearing her say such nice things about her.

Sienna knew she was good, but she'd been singing in front of her friends and family for so long. It was unusual for someone to be complimenting her like this, and it wasn't some guy telling her she had a pretty voice.

This was Natalie Spencer.

Someone who, even if it had only been for a few years, had been right where Sienna wanted to be.

And Sienna wanted to tell her. She could feel her heart pounding against her ribs.

She could say it.

She had no doubt that Natalie would keep her secret. But Sienna had a funny feeling that it would change things, that Natalie wouldn't be so encouraging if she knew the

truth.

Natalie might tell her to stay in the closet, although Sienna doubted that, so then what was the other option? Natalie could tell her to forget about her dream, to find something else to do with her life, because this was only going to end one way for her.

Sienna's eyes moved beyond Natalie to the acoustic guitar sitting on a stand just beside the TV. A wave of sadness washed over Sienna, the words Natalie had just said coming back to her with new meaning. How many people had been robbed of the privilege of hearing Natalie's music?

Sienna searched Natalie's caramel-brown eyes, not allowing herself to go down that road. "I better not let all this praise get to my head." She said it with a smile and a lightness in her voice, trying to keep Natalie from worrying anymore.

"Do you really need to go?" Natalie asked softly. "I was going to..." She shook her head. "You know what? Never mind."

"No, what were you going to say?" As crazy as this evening had been, it was never far from Sienna's mind how attractive this woman was, how drawn Sienna was to her, and maybe it was just a music thing, but Sienna couldn't leave here without knowing what Natalie wanted to say or do.

"It's silly." Natalie waved her off. "I'll let you get home." She opened the door, and Sienna turned to see the rain bouncing off the ground in the dim light, the fresh scent of rain filling the night air as a rumble of thunder almost shook the ground. "It's worse now than it was when we left the fairgrounds."

A moment ago, Sienna couldn't get out of here fast enough, overwhelmed with all of this, and even as bad as the rain was, sheets of it blowing across the driveway now,

she could have gone home. If she didn't want to drive back into town to her apartment, she could have gone to her parents' house, just a few minutes away.

But Sienna was beyond curious about what Natalie had wanted to ask her. "Maybe, I should give it another few minutes," Sienna said, sliding her feet back out of her shoes. "If that's okay?"

"Yeah, of course," Natalie said, closing the door and joining Sienna although she was still standing between the living room and the door even though Sienna had taken a seat once again.

"What did you want to ask me?" Sienna detected a hint of nervousness in Natalie. She just seemed unsure of herself, and Sienna had no idea what was bothering her.

"It is silly," Natalie said, her gaze focused on her guitar. "I still write songs. I never stopped. It doesn't really bother me anymore that no one's going to hear them. I've made peace with that. But since that day that everything blew up... I haven't once played one of my own songs."

Sienna looked up at Natalie with a mixture of heartbreak and awe, because she knew what Natalie was going to say, and Sienna had to swallow down the lump that returned to her throat.

Natalie's hands were on her hips now as she eyed her guitar, like she wasn't sure if she could really do this. "Hearing you tonight... I don't know. It kind of just came over me when we were talking here, but I just had this weird, almost itch, to sing that song, which is so strange, because out of all of my old stuff, that song should be the very last one that I'd want to play. It made me famous, but it gave me this false hope, that I could have both things. That I could be myself and still have this career."

Sienna held her breath as Natalie picked up her guitar, but she didn't sit down with it.

She was bringing it over to Sienna.

“I meant it when I said that I loved what you did with it,” Natalie said, her voice laced with emotion as she visibly swallowed. “Would you sing it with me?”

Sienna nodded, taking the guitar from her, already getting it in tune while Natalie sat on the other couch, on the end closest to Sienna.

For a few moments, it was just the sound of Sienna plucking each string, making a few last adjustments, the rain steadily hitting the roof, and the wind whipping occasionally that filled the room until Sienna cleared her throat, her fingers sliding over the frets as she played the intro before stopping again.

“It sounds so much more haunting like that,” Natalie said, her eyes on Sienna. “In a lower key. I wish I’d thought to do that. But it’s the way you played it too, lingering on certain notes.”

“I know it was an upbeat, almost anthem-style song about discovering your real passion, your truth, and everything, but I don’t know. I just wanted to lean on the emotion of it, take it down a key, strip it back. Plus, it suits my voice better,” Sienna said with a grin, trying to lighten the mood with Natalie’s intense gaze on her and the pressure of singing with this woman seconds away.

Natalie looked away as she took a deep breath. “Do you mind if I join you? If you go ahead and play it like you did earlier?”

Sienna nodded. “Sure.” The nerves fell away as soon as she made it through the intro, the muscle memory of playing that song hundreds of times taking over, allowing Sienna to close her eyes and let instinct take over, singing the first few lines of the song, her eyes fluttering open when Natalie joined her for the chorus.

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A tingling sensation swept over Sienna, goosebumps breaking out across her arm, as Natalie's voice danced with her own, both of them giving and taking, pulling back to harmonize while the other took the lead.

By the time they were on the third verse, Sienna was mesmerized, blown away by Natalie's raw talent, the way her voice could hold so much emotion, and how different this version was from the original, but this time with Natalie's powerful vocals instead of her own.

Sienna couldn't look away from Natalie as they went into the final chorus, letting Natalie take the lead. Natalie's eyes had been closed for the entire song, and Sienna had taken the opportunity to openly appreciate how gorgeous this woman was.

Natalie's waves fell across her shoulders, her jawline sharp, her foot tapping lightly with the rhythm of Sienna's guitar playing against the carpet as she delivered the last lines, her full lips quivering ever so slightly, and Sienna's breath stalled when she saw a tear streak down Natalie's cheek.

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Natalie brushed away the tear that had escaped, trickling down her face, hoping that Sienna hadn't noticed, but judging by the look on her face, she had. Sienna opened her mouth like she wanted to say something but nothing came out.

Natalie blinked back more tears. She would not cry in front of a stranger, as amazing as she was. "Thank you," Natalie said, a hint of a smile coming to her lips.

“I think I should be thanking you.” Sienna’s smile was warm, her arm draped across the polished wood of the guitar.

“I’m not sure where those tears came from.” Natalie took a deep breath, willing the rest of them away as she cleared her throat.

“That’s a long time not to have sung your own song.” Sienna studied her. “Not that I’m judging. I’m just saying that it’s only natural for it to be emotional.”

Natalie bit the inside of her cheek as she nodded. What was going on with her tonight? Maybe it was because she’d been alone for so long, that having someone in her home, sharing music with her had awakened her emotions and her ability to trust someone, even someone she’d only met a few hours ago.

“It’s funny that you arranged that song like that,” Natalie said, running her clammy palms over her shorts. “I really meant what I said about loving what you did with the song. I know it caught my attention at the fairgrounds, for obvious reasons, but singing it with you now, having the chance to sing it like that, slowed down, in such a haunting style...” She exhaled a long breath. “It’s just funny to me now. That that was the way you changed it.”

“Why?”

“Because it was never meant to be an upbeat anthem. It was designed to be a hit. I was too young to push back on it. I was just happy to be given the opportunity to get into a studio and record some of my songs, but when I wrote it originally, I was sixteen, and the lyrics were actually very personal to me. How I had played it back then wasn’t really that far off your version.”

Sienna’s eyebrows lifted, but she didn’t say anything.

Natalie didn't know where this honesty was coming from, but she felt like Sienna deserved to know, because she apparently liked to perform this song, but also because of the way she'd reacted to finding out what had ended Natalie's career.

"I deliberately toned down the lyrics," Natalie said, a little impressed with her sixteen-year-old self, that she knew enough not to tell her whole story in those lyrics. "But I wrote that song the day I realized I was gay."

Sienna's mouth fell open. "Shit," she murmured. Then she laughed softly to herself. "Fuck." She shook her head. "I don't believe it," she said so softly that Natalie nearly missed it, a hand on her forehead.

Natalie just stared at her. What a strange reaction to have. Sienna met her gaze then, her expression neutral again.

"Sorry," Sienna said. "I just had no idea."

"That was the point," Natalie said with a smile. "No one could have guessed the true meaning behind that song. People assumed just like you did that it was about discovering what you were meant to do, and I think a lot of people who reviewed my first album had it pegged as almost a love letter to country music." Natalie shrugged. "It wasn't that at all, but it helped to boost my sales. I just wanted to sing at the end of the day, and I let them take that song in a catchy direction. But what you did with it? That's so fitting."

Sienna blinked. "Who else knows the real meaning behind that song?" she asked softly after a moment, her voice barely audible over the low rumble of thunder.

"No one," Natalie whispered. She'd never even told Amelia what that song had meant to her, but she wrote it when she was sixteen, and nine years later when she'd been experiencing the closest thing to love that she ever had, Natalie probably should

have said it at some point to Amelia.

But then again, Natalie never could have foreseen how short-lived their relationship would be. Seven months. They'd spent so much time together towards the end, practically living together while Mason was on the road, that it had felt like years in some ways, but in others? That time had disappeared in front of them, like sand sliding through her fingers, and Natalie should have known how fragile the whole thing was.

"Thank you." Sienna had said it so softly that it took Natalie a second to come out of the fog, pushing those memories down again, unwilling to let them ruin what was, so far anyway, one of the better nights Natalie had had in... Years. She couldn't dwell on how alone she'd let herself become. Instead, she met Sienna's eyes.

"I should be thanking you," Natalie confessed. "Not once, in the last eighteen years, have I thought about singing one of my own songs. I feel like that was..." She bit her lip. "I don't know. An exorcism of sorts? Definitely therapeutic, anyway."

"What about another?" Sienna asked, her fingers already moving across the strings, expertly coaxing out the notes that transported Natalie back in time. Sienna's hair fell across her eyes as she played Natalie's third single off her first album with the same tempo and key as the original version.

"No changes to this one?"

Sienna shook her head, her eyes sparkling. "I loved it from the first time I heard it. I wouldn't change a thing about this song." She nodded in Natalie's direction, signaling her to take it away, and she did.

As Natalie's voice filled the room, her walls began to crumble as she let herself get lost in a song that she used to love performing, holding Sienna's gaze as she joined in

on the chorus, singing together like they'd been doing this for years.

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And then the living room was dark, the lamp flickering off as Sienna's fingers stalled. Natalie's voice was swallowed up in a gasp, the cabin plunged into darkness.

Sienna's phone lit up, and a bright light suddenly appeared as she turned on the flashlight, illuminating the room.

"Do you have any candles?" Sienna asked, keeping the light pointed towards the fireplace so she didn't blind Natalie.

Natalie used the light on her own phone to gather up the four jar candles she'd purchased in the last few weeks, always struggling to find that balance between making her latest rental her home, but also knowing that she'd be leaving it soon and not wanting to make moving any more of a chore than it already was.

Natalie set them down on the coffee table and found the matchbox on the mantelpiece, lighting each one, hoping that the scents wouldn't clash, although they all had an autumn fragrance of either pumpkin or apple cider with hints of vanilla.

She turned off the light on her phone and caught the time before she pocketed it. It was coming up to 10:00pm, and a part of her hoped that Sienna wouldn't feel the need to leave, thinking she'd overstayed her welcome, because Natalie didn't want this night to end.

It was like she was remembering parts of herself that she'd long forgotten existed. While she wrote new music, it was always tinged with the past and the way her career had imploded right before her eyes. The songs that filled her first three albums were the purist material she'd ever written, back when she had the naivety to believe that

she could have it all.

“Will you tell me when you’re getting tired?” Sienna asked, her focus on the guitar in her lap, on tuning it again. When Natalie didn’t answer, Sienna lifted her gaze. “If you don’t tell me, I feel like we could still be sitting here at four in the morning,” she added with a hint of a smile.

“We might just be,” Natalie said, a smile breaking out across her own lips, a warmth radiating through her.

6

Sienna rolled over, away from the light peeking through her thin curtains. She reached for her phone, still half asleep. Her throat felt like sandpaper as she remembered all the singing she had done yesterday.

She nearly dropped her phone as she sat up in bed, her mind flashing back to last night and the reason she was only waking up a few minutes before noon.

Sienna’s heart hammered in her chest, and her thumbs flew across her phone. Yeah. There it was. Natalie Spencer’s name was in her contacts.

With trembling hands, she tossed her phone on the sheets, falling back against the soft fabric of the headboard, her eyes closing again as she tried to calm her nervous system down. She took a deep breath, her skin tingling.

Last night had really happened.

Sienna had that warm fuzzy feeling flowing through her, like when she woke up from that dream she occasionally had of singing on stage to thousands of people, and she just wanted to hold onto that sensation for a little longer, closing her eyes and willing

that feeling to stay with her for another few minutes before it faded away.

But last night hadn't been a dream.

The feeling of embarrassment still lingered. How had she not known what Natalie Spencer looked like? Why had she never Googled her at any point? See what she was to or find out if she was tour. And then Sienna would have known what had happened.

As shocking as last night was, getting to spend hours in the company of one of her favorite songwriters and singing those songs with her, the idea that Natalie Spencer was gay and that her relationship with another woman was what ended her career, that was truly shocking.

Sienna sucked in a breath as she slowly opened her eyes, knowing she should get out of bed and start her day even though it was technically the afternoon already, but she grabbed her phone instead, desperate to find out more about Natalie and Amelia Hart's affair.

Sienna found newspaper articles and blog posts on entertainment news websites, but because all of the social media apps she used didn't exist back then, there wasn't much about them, just the occasional flashback, remember when, style post.

She paused on the picture that had apparently started it all. Natalie and Amelia on the red carpet together. Natalie looked amazing in a red dress, her dark hair sleek and straight, a few inches shorter than it was now. Amelia's blond hair was pulled back in an updo, her blue eyes vibrant, her jawline chiseled. The black dress she wore hugged her slim figure.

A quick search told her that Natalie was forty-three now and that in those photos from the red carpet, she would have been twenty-five. While just about anyone would

have said that Natalie was a beautiful woman, the Natalie that she'd met yesterday was so much more attractive, and Sienna couldn't put her finger on why exactly.

Yes, Sienna knew she had a thing for older women, but it was more than that. Maybe, it was the casual way that Natalie had been dressed in khaki shorts and a simple black shirt, her hair falling in waves over her shoulders, such a contrast from the red carpet photos she was looking at.

Sienna couldn't find any recent photos of Natalie. There was one article from three years ago that had several photos of Natalie walking on a busy street in a black winter coat, a cup of coffee in hand, and a scarf wrapped around her neck. The headline was clearly clickbait. Former Country Music Star Still Alone For Christmas.

Sienna felt sick as she flicked through the photos, not even bothering to read the article before she put her phone on the nightstand and swung her legs out from under the sheets.

If she ever wanted this career, she knew that would be part of it. At some point, there would be a headline that was less than flattering, but seeing those words written about Natalie churned her stomach. It must have been because that was the first time Sienna had ever really seen someone in the public eye as just a person at the end of the day and not a celebrity for people to openly critique and judge whether it was their appearance or their dating life.

This was Natalie, the woman she'd spent hours just playing music with last night, and it was hard for Sienna to imagine how awful that year would have been for her. Being outed. Losing her girlfriend. Getting tossed aside by the industry.

Sienna picked up her phone now. She'd almost forgotten that Natalie was waiting on her to go and get her car. Unless she'd already asked someone else.

Sienna fired off a quick text.

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Hey. Sorry I slept in. I can pick you up anytime to go get your car.

Sienna went over to her dresser and took out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She took a shower and by the time she got out and got dressed, Natalie had replied, saying she was ready anytime.

Sienna blow-dried her hair and put on a light layer of makeup before grabbing her keys. Her apartment door fell closed behind her as she took the stairs down to the street. She paused outside the bakery, always wondering if it was a blessing or a curse to live above it, but through the large glass windows she only saw a few people sitting at tables with no one waiting at the counter.

The moment Sienna opened the door, the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee surrounded her. It was rare that she went this far into the day without a cup.

She smiled at the owner as she approached the counter, the sweet scent of pastries making her stomach rumble.

“The usual?” Kelly asked, her strawberry blond curls tired up in a messy bun today.

“Not quite. Would you double it for me?”

“Two coffees and two cinnamon rolls? To go?” Kelly asked as she tapped on the screen in front of her.

“Yes. Please.” Sienna had no idea how Natalie liked her coffee or if she’d already had three cups of it considering the time, but she thought it was worth a shot,

especially since she'd woken up so late today. Plus, everybody loves Kelly's cinnamon rolls.

"That's my last two," Kelly said with a smile, sliding the brown paper bag across the counter. "You left it late today."

"I had a late night."

Kelly's eyebrows shot up. "Oh...?" Her voice rose with interest.

"No." Sienna shook her head, feeling her cheeks heat up. "No. Nothing like that. You know what I'm like when I get into a flow and can't put the guitar down."

"Oh, speaking of you and your guitar. Don't forget to put up a poster on that bulletin board," she said as she put the lids on her coffees. "Assuming you're back after the summer break?"

"Yeah. I'm back to my Thursday nights. Thanks. I'll just double-check the time with Vinnie and then I'll make one up."

"Alright," Kelly said as Sienna paid. "Have a good day."

"You too."

Sienna went around behind the bakery, her car parked in an employee space even though she was Kelly's tenant. The sun was high in the sky, but the car had been in the shade all morning so it wasn't too stuffy.

Sienna slid on her shades and drove to Natalie's cabin, tucked away in the woods, just a stone's throw from her parents' house. She checked her playlist before she drove off, not wanting any of Natalie's songs to pop up, because that would be

strange, and she wasn't sure how it would make Natalie feel.

Although, Sienna had left her cabin feeling like Natalie had almost gone through a therapy session with her, like she'd come out the other side and felt like she could sing her own songs again. That made Sienna feel pretty good, even if it was just a coincidence really, that Sienna had played that song on stage, and that Natalie had been within earshot of it.

It's funny how things like that happen.

7

Natalie tucked her hair behind her ear as she got out of Sienna's car and unlocked her black Audi, the only car left in the field. Her shades shielded her from the sun reflecting off the shiny surface as she held onto her coffee cup, not quite finished with it yet. In the distance, workers were dismantling the stalls and rides, with trucks pulled up, ready to be loaded.

"Thanks again," Natalie said, hovering by the door, not wanting to open it and end their conversation, but there wasn't much else to say. The drive over had been short, and they'd spent most of it talking about how it should probably be a little worrying how dependent they both were on caffeine.

It was sweet of Sienna to think to bring her a coffee, and the label on the bag told her that whatever pastry was in it, it was going to be amazing. Everything from that bakery was, but apparently Sienna had great taste. She also loved their cinnamon rolls, and Natalie didn't think she ever enjoyed one more than she had on the ride over. It was an unexpected surprise, and maybe that made it taste even more delicious than usual.

"No problem," Sienna said, her window down. "Stay in touch?"

“I will.” Natalie smiled and gave Sienna a wave as she drove off, leaving Natalie alone with her thoughts.

She leaned against the side of her car, the metal warm even through her shirt, gazing out across the fields. It was hard to believe so much had been here just yesterday, with thousands of people coming and going, but that storm had ended things early, and now it was just the workers who remained, packing it all up, leaving bare patches of grass behind and deep tire tracks in the muddy parts of the field.

Natalie got in her car and drove to a lake about twenty minutes away. She’d found it online when she’d been looking for local trails, getting tired of taking the one that ran behind her cabin. She wasn’t ready to go home yet, and the four-mile loop would do her good.

Her power had come back at around ten o’clock that morning, and although they’d been up late, she’d slept right up until that point, when a few of the appliances in the kitchen downstairs whirled to life and beeped.

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She was surprised at how well-rested she felt, although the caffeine was kicking in now, and she somehow felt even better.

When she got there, the tiny parking lot only had one other car in it. The air had an earthy aroma to it, and the trail was soft and muddy as she started off to the right. Birds chirped and somewhere in the distance a woodpecker tapped its beak against a tree, the rhythmic sound echoing through the air.

As Natalie walked her mind drifted back to last night. She had so many emotions, so many thoughts. She'd only just met Sienna, but there was this strange familiarity between them that could only be explained by the fact that Natalie hadn't realized how desperate she was for that kind of a connection, that common love for music, and maybe Sienna was just that kind of person.

Sienna did have that almost indescribable quality that would at some point make her a superstar. She was beautiful but not in a Hollywood actress way. Sienna was more real. She was raw. She was passionate about music, but not in a way that was intense or standoffish. It was like she radiated that passion, and Natalie had been pulled right in.

She never spent too much time thinking about her old music. It still hurt too much, but a part of her wondered now what she'd be like if she'd pushed through that uneasy feeling years ago. Because that had to be the reason she felt so good today. It was like an invisible weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

She'd confronted her past. She'd sang those old songs, and maybe now they wouldn't haunt her anymore.

Natalie couldn't believe how freeing it was and also how that urge to sing those songs had come out of nowhere. She'd never had that feeling before. Those songs had so much negativity attached to them after everything that had happened, even if they'd been born out of so much love.

And the difference had been Sienna.

Hearing Sienna on stage, singing her song... Maybe it was hearing it sung so differently or maybe it was just hearing it for the first time in so many years. Whatever the reason, it had sparked something in Natalie.

By the time she got back to her car an hour and a half later, she had to spend a few minutes typing her thoughts into the notes app on her phone. Even though she'd been writing songs all along, she hadn't felt this inspired in years. There was just a lightness surrounding all things music for her right now, and Natalie had to take advantage of it.

8

The dim light in the bar cast a warm, amber hue across the stage. The faint murmur of conversations mixed with the clinking of glasses as Sienna made a slight adjustment to one of the strings, getting as comfortable as she could on the hard wooden stool. Sienna had been playing Thursday nights at Vinnie's since she was twenty-two, and it was still the highlight of her week.

Vinnie knew she was talented. Just about everyone in town had heard her sing at some point whether it was at the county fair at the end of summer or at the Christmas tree lighting most years, but he'd offered Sienna a spot on Thursday nights four years ago, and it had worked out nicely for both of them. Sienna loved having a regular paying gig, and Vinnie acknowledged that Thursdays were his busiest nights by far.

Sienna had worked there since she'd turned twenty-one, bartending three or four nights a week, so this place was like a second home to her, and she couldn't remember the last time she was nervous coming out for her set.

Tonight was a little different though.

Just as she was coming to the end of her second song, her eyes landed on Natalie as she came through the door. Her hair was down, falling across her shoulders in waves, the copper tones catching under the warm lighting.

Sienna had closed her eyes as she'd finished the song, not trusting herself. She could easily get distracted if she kept her eyes on Natalie and the way those dark wash jeans hugged her curves or how that black leather jacket suited her perfectly.

Sienna had only seen Natalie a handful of times in the last month, when they'd both been coming or going from the bakery, and they'd chatted for a few minutes, but neither of them suggested getting together to play music. Sienna still wasn't sure what to make of that, but she tried not to let it get to her, and she didn't want to be texting Natalie and maybe bothering her.

Natalie knew that Sienna was interested, and that was how they'd left it. Sienna had been sure that Natalie would want to spend an evening like that together again, but it just hadn't happened.

When Sienna's eyes fluttered open, she was met with applause and a whistle from somewhere at the far side of the bar. She thanked the crowd, noting that once again the bar was filling up nicely for a weeknight.

She never took that for granted. She knew she could walk in here one night and be playing to a handful of people. It still made her heart swell with pride knowing that most of these people were familiar faces who rarely missed a Thursday night at

Vinnie's.

As she tuned her guitar, she couldn't stop herself from scanning the bar, and she spotted Natalie making her way over to the corner booth at the back of the room, a bottle of beer in hand.

Sienna introduced the next song, moving through her set with minimal amounts of talking. She'd never been particularly witty, and she didn't want to bore the audience with the background to a song or the reason why she'd chosen to sing it, but when she came to her last song, she spontaneously decided to swap out her usual, easily recognizable cover for her newest song.

"I'll leave you tonight with one of my own songs," Sienna said, a slight tremor in her fingers as she adjusted the capo. "I think I've always been fascinated with the idea of serendipity and things happening by chance, but it's not until you experience something like that, that you realize how magical it actually is, and how it could potentially change the direction of your life."

Sienna had glanced in Natalie's direction several times during her set. She couldn't not. She was doing it before she even realized what was happening.

But this time, Sienna deliberately cast her eyes towards Natalie, holding her gaze as she introduced the song, a tingle chasing up her spine when Natalie didn't look away.

Sienna's interpretation of that night they'd spent hours playing music together might not really change the direction of her life. That was most certainly a reach, but something had happened that night. For both of them, she believed, and she'd just woken up with a line in her head about chance meetings.

The idea that Natalie had been within earshot of Sienna singing one of her songs, and that Natalie had stuck around to talk to her... If Sienna had sung that song earlier in

the set, Natalie wouldn't have heard it. If Natalie had been walking by ten minutes later, Sienna's gig would have been over.

There was just something that felt quite a lot like magic at play when people and events lined up like that.

And that wasn't the only song that had come to her without her even trying. It had been like that all month. This was the sixth song she'd written since she'd met Natalie, and in the year prior to that day, she'd written only ten songs.

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That night had definitely sparked something within her, unlocking her creativity, and she thought it had a positive effect on Natalie too.

“I hope you enjoy it,” Sienna said into the microphone as she began playing, the rest of the bar fading into a blur. She hadn’t intended to, but it wasn’t long before Sienna realized that she was only singing to Natalie, Sienna’s eyes locked on hers.

9

Natalie had only had two beers during Sienna’s set, so she couldn’t blame her lingering gaze on that. Maybe it was hearing Sienna sing, seeing her perform again, that brought her right back to that first night, to the way neither of them had wanted it to end.

Natalie didn’t know what it was, but she’d felt Sienna’s eyes on her more than once during her performance, and Natalie had even held that eye contact, daring herself to, because what was the harm in it? Sienna wasn’t interested in her. Not like that.

It was just a musical connection, and that thought kept bubbling up this last month, especially after any of the times she saw Sienna at the bakery. That Natalie shouldn’t ignore that. She should have gotten in touch these last few weeks.

And Natalie wanted to do something for Sienna. Just about all her contacts in the music industry were gone, but there was one person who might be able to help, and if she got a chance to talk to Sienna tonight, she had to bring it up.

Natalie finished her beer, getting ready to slide out of the booth and order another,

but Sienna was coming towards her with a hint of a smile on her lips carrying two bottles of beer.

“Hey,” Natalie said, staying right where she was.

“Hi.” Sienna’s smile widened. “Can I join you?”

“Yeah. Of course. And thanks.” Natalie lifted the bottle, lightly clinking it against Sienna’s. “That was a great set.”

“Thanks.” Sienna sat across from her, her blond hair glossy and straight, falling across her shoulders.

“I didn’t know you played here every Thursday or I wouldn’t stopped by sooner. I just happened to notice the flyer in the bakery yesterday morning.”

“Yeah, it’s been the only steady gig I’ve ever had. This is my fourth year doing it. I take the summers off, but other than that and maybe Christmas, I’m here just about every Thursday night.”

“You played a lot of your own songs tonight, right?” Natalie asked a sip of beer, the condensation wet against her fingertips.

“Yeah. I usually do a mix, but I’ve been writing a lot more lately, so I had three new songs tonight that I’d never played live before. I think it went well, but I’ll see what ones I’ll keep for next week or the week after.”

“What about that last one?” Natalie asked. She’d been absolutely transfixed during Sienna’s last song. The way her voice hit those low notes. The emotion. It hadn’t felt like an original song. It had felt like a classic, like a song that had been well-worn, that was timeless.

“Yeah, that was a new one.” Sienna took a drink, her eyes falling to the bottle as she left it back on the table.

“Have you ever recorded any of them?”

Sienna looked up. “Other than on my phone? No.”

“I have a friend.” Natalie swallowed, hoping Frank would actually come through for her. “He’s retired now but he converted his garage into a recording studio. Even though he’s not producing records, he still likes to fiddle with his own stuff and get people in if they want some lowkey studio time without anyone listening in.”

“Where’s that?”

“He’s about a two-hour drive away. Look, I can’t promise anything, but I think I should see if he’ll give you some time. He’s probably the only person left in this business that still cares about me.”

Sienna sat forward, her forearms resting on the table. “Do you really think I could? Even when he doesn’t know me?”

Natalie nodded. “He’s always been kind to me, and he worked on my last album with me. We actually co-produced it together. So, can I reach out to him? Arrange something before the end of the year?”

“Yeah,” Sienna said, her eyes lighting up. “That would be amazing. I wouldn’t even... I mean, I’ve never been in a studio. I can’t actually imagine how fucking insane that would be.”

Natalie’s lips slid into an easy smile. “I’d love to make it happen and to help you if you want it. Not that you need it. But I’ve been on both sides of the booth, and I’ve

been giving vocal lessons online for the last ten years. Again, not that you need any help in that department. I'm just saying that I'm interested in getting the best out of someone, and I would love to help you, however I can."

Natalie took a swig of beer to stop herself from rambling anymore.

"I don't know what to say." Sienna propped her chin up on her hand. "I love the sound of all of that. I definitely would need to get my shit together though. To get the most out of the time there."

"We should get together a few nights a week. Whatever suits your schedule. I assume you'd want to record some of those new songs."

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“Yes,” Sienna said softly. “And they still need a lot of work.”

“Well, if it was any of the ones I heard, I wouldn’t say that, but I know what you mean. You want to nail it.”

“Definitely.” Sienna sat back against the leather booth. “Other than playing here on Thursday nights, I do bartend four days. But I’ll talk to Vinnie about getting a few days in a row off. If I tell him what I’m doing, it won’t be a problem.”

“We’ll figure it out. I’ll give Frank a call and see what his schedule is like.”

“Thank you.” Sienna’s eyes were bright, and she was looking at Natalie as if she’d just made her day.

Natalie gave her a nod as she reached for her beer and took a drink. “I just hope it works out.” Out of the corner of her eye she could see someone approaching their booth.

“There you are.”

Natalie turned to see a young man, probably Sienna’s age, and he looked familiar, but she wasn’t sure from where.

“Caleb,” Sienna said with a slight edge to her voice, but it was barely recognizable. Natalie had only picked up on it because she’d never seen Sienna be anything but warm and inviting in the way she interacted with people.

“You were great as always,” he said with a lop-sided grin. “Hey, me and some of the guys have a table outside if you want to join us.”

“I’m good. Thanks though.” Sienna gave him a smile and took another drink, and then he was gone.

“Fan club?” Natalie asked, forcing herself to smile when she actually felt a little sick at the thought that this guy might be Sienna’s boyfriend which made no sense at all.

“Something like that,” Sienna murmured as she took another drink.

It struck Natalie that made Sienna did want to go outside and sit with her friends and that maybe she’d declined the offer so as not to be rude.

“I’ll let you go enjoy your night,” Natalie said as she finished her beer, reaching for her jacket.

“You’re leaving?” Sienna’s eyebrows rose.

“Uh, well. I’m sure you’d rather be with your friends.”

“No. No, not at all.”

Natalie stayed where she was, trying to decide if Sienna was just being polite. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll get us another round. Same?”

Sienna nodded. “Thanks.”

* * *

Natalie hadn't felt the last two hours go by. She was definitely enjoying herself, but she couldn't shake the feeling that this was a date, even though it very clearly wasn't, and she had no idea why she would think that.

Yes, they were in their own little bubble in the back corner of the bar, the conversation flowing naturally, and for a long time tonight, Natalie had forgotten that Sienna was only twenty-six. It wasn't just how easily the night was going, with no awkward pauses or missed references due to their age difference, it was Sienna's performance too. It had been so solid that it was hard to believe that Sienna hadn't been doing that for the last twenty years.

Natalie's eyes drifted towards the bar to where Sienna was ordering them another round. She should probably have said no when Sienna asked if she wanted another. She was tipsy, but nowhere near being drunk.

It should have bothered her that she couldn't bring herself to leave, and maybe it was, because Natalie couldn't shake that gnawing feeling, of guilt almost, growing inside her.

What even brought it into her head that this felt like a date? What did that say about her? Never mind the age difference. Sienna had given her no reason to think that she might be interested.

Natalie had never felt like she had gaydar, and as she let her gaze linger on Sienna's back, her blond hair tossed over one shoulder, Natalie hoped for Sienna's sake that she wasn't gay.

She was about to look away when that guy was back, his hand sliding around Sienna's waist, but it nearly threw him off balance. He was definitely more drunk this

time.

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It hit Natalie where she knew him from. He'd been talking to Sienna after her gig, when Natalie had been hovering, waiting for a chance to talk to her.

Maybe he was her boyfriend?

Natalie was no body language expert, but Sienna gracefully slid out of her grasp, moving a few feet over to talk to the bartender and get their drinks rather than waiting for him to come back to her.

Once again, Natalie was questioning her reaction to this. What did it matter if they were together or not? It was none of Natalie's business.

* * *

An hour later, they were both ready to call it a night, and Natalie just realized that she had her car with her. Sienna mentioned that she was within walking distance of her apartment, but she'd gone to the restroom now, so Natalie went up to the bar and found a few business cards for taxis left in the corner.

She dialed the first two numbers, but there was no answer, and when it started getting louder in the bar with some of the people coming in from the back, she slid on her jacket, getting ready to go outside, to try the last number she had.

As Sienna was coming back from the restroom, Caleb tried to talk to her, his hands on her waist as he attempted to stop her.

Natalie thought about interfering, her jaw tight, but she reminded herself that it really

wasn't her business and stepped outside, the air instantly cooler as she dialed the last number.

A man answered in a gruff voice as if she'd just woken him up, and when she asked about a taxi, he said he was out of town tonight and hung up.

Sienna emerged, her guitar case on her back, the noise flooding out of the bar before the door closed again, her cheeks flushed. "Get a taxi?"

"No. I can't believe I really thought I would just have two drinks."

Sienna flashed her a smile. "That was entirely my fault, but I can offer you a couch."

Voices drifted out as the door opened again, a shout rising above the clinking of bottles and laughter. "Just do it, Caleb! You got this!"

Natalie watched a wobbly Caleb come outside, on his own, his eyes locked on Sienna.

"Sienna, you know how I feel," Caleb said, in what sounded like a continuation of a conversation they'd already been having. He sounded somewhere between exasperated and heartbroken. "I'm asking you one last time."

"Please don't," Sienna said with a sigh. "You know what the answer's going to be."

Natalie wanted to start walking towards Sienna's apartment, to give them some privacy, but she had no idea which way it was, and part of her didn't want to leave Sienna alone.

Caleb staggered as he turned so that he was facing both of them. His eyes moved between them. "You know there's rumors about you, Sienna," he said to her.

“Caleb, I don’t care what people say about me.”

“You might not,” he said, pointing his finger at her now. “But I know you’re not stupid. You’ll never get to Nashville if there’s even a chance that you’re a dyke.”

Natalie flinched, but Sienna’s gaze turned cold, her fists balled at her side, and she felt this strange sense of protectiveness take over, nearly stepping between Sienna and Caleb before something could happen, but she kept herself from potentially making things worse, biting her tongue as she waited to see what Sienna would do next.

“Where is this sudden fascination with my sexuality coming from?” Sienna asked.

“Because we’re perfect,” Caleb fired back. “Everybody thinks so. Especially your parents.”

“And because I don’t want you, I’m gay? Is that it? Get over yourself, Caleb.” Sienna shook her head as she turned to Natalie. “Let’s go.”

Natalie fell into step beside Sienna, not looking back, not entirely sure what to make of what had just happened, but her heart was pounding in her chest.

10

Sienna unlocked her apartment door, flicking on the lights before propping her guitar up beside the coat rack in the corner. She extended her hand to Natalie as she shrugged out of her leather jacket, and Sienna hung it up for her.

They’d hardly spoken on the way home. Sienna had stuffed her hands in her jacket pockets as they made the short walk here. She felt awful. Some terrible combination of fury and embarrassment coursing through her veins.

She hung her jacket up, wishing Natalie hadn't witnessed that. The only positive was that no one else had. The sidewalk had been empty.

Sienna didn't even know what to say.

"I had no idea you lived above the bakery," Natalie said with a bit of a smile, probably trying to lighten the mood. "No wonder I kept bumping into you there."

"Yeah. That and the amazing coffee." She bit her lip. "I'm sorry you had to see that," she said softly, knowing she had to at least acknowledge what had happened. "He's normally much more polite than that."

"Have you known each other long?" Natalie asked, following her into the kitchen.

"Since we were fourteen. He was my best friend in high school." Sienna opened the fridge. "Do you want another beer?"

"Sure." Natalie leaned back against the counter, her arms crossed over her chest as Sienna handed her a beer. "Thanks." She took a sip before speaking again. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Sienna took out a beer for herself and twisted it open. "That's a long time coming really. I just would have preferred it not to happen in front of a bar, standing on the street. In front of you," she added quietly.

Natalie tilted her head slightly. "You said to Caleb that you don't care what people say about you, so why are you worried about what I'll think?"

"I don't know." Sienna took a long drink. She did know why she cared about what Natalie thought of her.

It had hit her so hard on stage, when she'd sang her last song, when she'd practically sang it to Natalie. Sienna had more than a crush on this woman.

Yes, Sienna had been a huge fan of her music, of her songwriting skills, but she was pretty sure that not a day had gone by in the last month where Natalie hadn't popped into her head at least once.

It had started off innocently enough, hoping that Natalie might text her or that Sienna might bump into her someday in town. Then Sienna was wondering what Natalie would think about a particular lyric or the melody she'd chosen for the chorus of a song she was working on.

But tonight?

Something had changed. Sienna had to remind herself more than once tonight that they were just friends having drinks. That tonight wasn't a date, because it sure as hell felt like one.

"Is there any truth to what he said?" Natalie asked, taking her away from her thoughts.

Sienna choked out a laugh. "Well, my parents would be happy." She exhaled when she met Natalie's serious face. "But that's not what you're asking, is it?"

"No," Natalie said, barely above a whisper.

"Why don't we sit down?" Sienna suggested, leading them into the small living area, with just a loveseat across from a TV with a glass coffee table in between them.

She'd been living here for the last three years, but she'd yet to make any changes, happy with the basic off-white paint and gray suede couch, a black and gray

geometric rug beneath the coffee table. All she'd added were three potted plants, the greenery brightening up the space.

Sienna slid her phone out of her pocket as Natalie sat down, putting on a soft, acoustic covers playlist in the background, already feeling the weight of the silence between them, that maybe Natalie was starting to see that they had more in common than she might have thought and what that would mean for them going forward.

Would Natalie still try and arrange studio time for her if she knew that Sienna was gay? Would she think that there was any point? That nothing had changed in country music in the last eighteen years? That Sienna would never catch a break if she was out?

Sienna sat down beside Natalie, with only a few inches between them on the loveseat. "You want to know if what Caleb suggested has any truth to it?"

"That's the question that I've been thinking about on the walk here, but it's none of my business. I shouldn't have said anything." Natalie took a drink and leaned forward to place the bottle on the coffee table. "Forget I asked."

Sienna inhaled a deep breath. To say it or not? It would be so much easier if she didn't, but it felt wrong not to.

Sienna took a swig of beer. "I wanted to tell him. All along. In high school. When he came back from college and I thought he'd have a girlfriend but he didn't. I've lost track of the amount of times that I've said no to him, and I wish I could tell him why."

"Why don't you?" Natalie asked, her voice gentle, without any judgment.

Sienna exhaled. "I feel like he'd tell people. And then I'd be out. And I'd probably

have to give up on my dream of being a country music singer.” Sienna bit the inside of her cheek. “That sounds so unbelievably stupid when you say it out loud.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not true.” Natalie turned to face her fully, draping her arm across the back of the couch.

“Sorry.” Sienna swallowed. “I didn’t mean it like. I just wish it wasn’t the case. That you didn’t have to go through all that.”

“No, it’s okay. I know what you meant, but it doesn’t change the reality of it. Maybe, things would be a little better now, but there’s no question that you would be treated differently, that you wouldn’t be given as many opportunities. You might miss out on an award nomination. You might not get as much air time.” She shrugged. “But only you can decide what you want. If it’s worth that uphill battle.”

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“What do you think?” Sienna asked, her pulse swishing, drowning out her own voice.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. But if I was in your shoes, knowing what I know...” Natalie’s voice trailed off. “I actually don’t know.” She slid her hand through her hair as she rested her elbow on the back of the loveseat, propping her head up. “I never really thought about the way my life unfolded. On one hand, I could say that if I hadn’t stayed in the closet, if I’d done something else with my life, that maybe I would have been happier, but I never would have met Amelia. Our paths never would have crossed. Maybe, I would have been happy with someone else. I’ll never know.”

“Do you have any regrets?” Sienna asked softly.

“I’m glad that I got a chance to record three albums and tour the world. I can’t regret a second of that time in my life. But I guess, looking back now... I should have fought for Amelia.” Natalie visibly swallowed. “I never challenged her. I just let her tell anyone who would listen that she was happy with Mason and that nothing had ever happened between us. I think I should have met her. Had her say that to my face.” She blew out a breath. “There were a lot of years spent dwelling on that... On how easily she’d tossed me aside. I would have at least liked her to acknowledge what we had. Even if it didn’t change the outcome.”

Any bit of jealousy that Sienna might have felt hearing Natalie talk about her ex was overpowered by the desire to protect her, to somehow keep her from feeling like that again.

“It’s her loss,” Sienna said, the words out of her mouth before she realized that she was speaking rather than thinking.

Natalie raked her hand through her hair before she shook her head, a wry smile on her lips. “It was a long time ago. And looking back on it now, I don’t know how I ever could have thought that it might have gone another way. Those two, Amelia and Mason... They were, and still are in some ways, the poster couple for country music and living a happy, wholesome life. It was insanity to think that she would have left all that for me, especially back then, when she was only twenty-one. She would’ve had to have given up so much to be with me.” Natalie looked away. “I can’t blame her for making that decision.”

Sienna’s throat was tight. She wanted to tell Natalie that she would, that she’d give up her chance at a career to be with her, but it would have been too over the top. Sienna didn’t even think Natalie had any interest in her, beyond music, but she still wanted to say it.

Natalie spoke instead. “That last song you sang tonight...”

Sienna’s pulse tripped. “By Chance?”

Natalie nodded. “You wrote that recently?”

Sienna couldn’t read Natalie’s expression. Those caramel-brown eyes searched Sienna’s face. “I’ve been writing a lot more lately.”

“Me too.”

Sienna could see the questioning look on Natalie’s face. She wanted to ask Sienna, but maybe she was too afraid to. “I know it’s a bit dramatic, but it’s how I’ve felt this last month,” Sienna admitted. “I don’t know how it happened. How you were walking by just at the right time or that I chose that song at that moment. By Chance was probably the easiest song I’ve ever written. It just flowed out of me.”

Natalie looked away, a hint of a smile on her lips, and when her eyes returned to Sienna's, they were misty. "When you were singing that song tonight, that was all I was thinking about. How crazy that day was. About how lucky I was to have been walking by at the right time. To have caught that familiar melody floating through the air, that I wasn't on the phone at the time or distracted by something else going on around me."

Sienna's breath caught as she listened to Natalie, her heart hammering in her chest as she tried not to read too much into this. There was every chance that Natalie would never see her as anything more than a friend, a struggling artist she could help.

"It's a beautiful song," Natalie said with a hint of reverence in her voice. "And it needs to be recorded."

Sienna reached for her beer, all kinds of emotions running through her. She wanted to tell Natalie more, about how she could feel herself falling for her, but she kept it to herself, accepting Natalie's compliment. "Do you still think we should? Go to your friend's studio I mean. You know, if he has time."

"Yeah. Why wouldn't we?" Natalie asked, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Because you know that I'm gay now."

Natalie closed her eyes for a second as she shook her head gently. "That's not a concern right now. You should have those songs professionally recorded. What happens after that? I don't know. But you are so fucking talented, Sienna. You have to at least try."

Sienna blinked. She didn't think she'd heard Natalie curse up until now. She didn't care. She swore more often than she'd like to herself, but it was the time she'd chosen to swear. Did she have that much belief in Sienna?

Natalie finished her beer as Sienna came back with a pile of sheets and plaid pajamas folded on top.

“I’m just leaving these here,” Sienna said, placing them on the edge of the coffee table. “I’m not trying to call it a night or anything.”

“Thanks,” Natalie said, looking up at Sienna.

“Do you want another beer or are you tired?”

Natalie pushed herself up off the loveseat. “Thanks for those. I’m just going to use the bathroom, but yeah, I’ll have another if you are.”

On the short walk to the bathroom, Natalie discovered she’d crossed the line from tipsy to drunk. She still felt in control, but the effects of the beers she’d been drinking all evening were catching up with her. This next one would definitely be the last.

On her way out, she paused in front of the mirror, tousling her hair. It might just be time to start putting herself out there again. Tonight had been fun. She should probably find the nearest gay bar and make it point to go once a week.

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It had become more and more apparent over the years just how much time moves on. She got recognized maybe once a year, and that was from a true fan who had nothing but good things to say about her and asked if they could get a photo with her if it wasn't too much bother. The haters never recognized her.

It was really just an excuse now, at this point in her life. She was forty-three and lonely, and she could change that if she wanted to.

She turned off the light and headed back into the living area, sitting down on the loveseat, a beer on the coffee table waiting for her. "Thanks."

"No problem." Sienna took a drink. "I know we don't know each other that well, but thank you for being so honest with me. I did want to tell you that first night. That I was gay. But you've been really open about everything, about what happened. I just wanted to say that I'm glad you feel like you can trust me. Because you can."

Natalie nodded. "I'm not sure why, but I did feel like I could trust you. Right from that first night." Her lips tugged into a smile as she brought the bottle to her lips and took a sip. "But I did wonder. About your reaction. Not about you. I have no gaydar whatsoever. But I did find it strange that you had such a strong reaction to reading those headlines."

"I was in complete shock. I had no idea you were gay, although I do normally trust my gaydar, but yeah, I was just so thrown."

For a second, Natalie wished she was a few years younger. Aging had never really bothered her. She'd embraced all the little changes. But right now, she kind of wanted

to be ten years younger, because maybe then, she could lean in. Maybe then she could kiss Sienna.

But the reality was that Sienna hadn't known about Natalie's downfall, because she'd been eight at the time, and that was like throwing a bucket of cold water on top of her head. It was so hard to fathom that Natalie had been twenty-five and seen the world when all that had happened while at the same time, Sienna had just received her first guitar.

"Where did you just go?" Sienna asked softly as she put her beer on the coffee table. "You looked so sad."

Natalie forced herself to smile as she shook her head. "I just hope things work out for you. That's all. You deserve someone like Caleb. Well, you know, a female version. Someone who will fight for you. Who really cares about you."

"As do you," Sienna said, her eyes focused on Natalie, her expression sincere.

"Thanks." Natalie inhaled a sharp breath. "I think I might finally be ready to put myself out there again. I've spent too long letting my past dictate my future."

"What if there was already someone interested in you?"

Natalie fiddled with the label on the beer, almost afraid to ask if one of Sienna's friends had a crush on her.

Did Sienna really think that she would go there? Unless it was someone else. The bakery owner, Kelly, was always happy to see her, and to spend time chatting when there wasn't a line. But that was normal for a business owner.

Natalie took a drink and leaned forward to put it on the table, knowing that she would

have to ask who this person was, but as she sat up straight, without warning, Sienna was in her space, her eyes fluttering shut as her hand came to Natalie's cheek, and she guided their lips together.

Natalie gasped into the kiss, completely taken by surprise, and while she knew she should be putting some space between them and telling Sienna that this was a bad idea, she couldn't do it.

She opened her mouth to Sienna instead, reveling in the feeling of Sienna's thumb lightly brushing over her cheek, her lips parting softly against Natalie's in a slow, sensual kiss.

Natalie sighed, her heart jumping against her ribs, her fingers gliding through Sienna's silky hair as she deepened the kiss, a ragged moan leaving her throat when Sienna's tongue skimmed across her own.

This was such a bad idea.

And yet, Natalie couldn't bring herself to pull away.

Sienna matched Natalie's intensity, kissing her back harder now, knowing that she wasn't crossing a line, and that, for the moment anyway, Natalie was a very willing participant.

And that was because Natalie was too stunned to process what she was doing.

She'd never imagined that Sienna was attracted to her. She'd assumed it was all about the music, that Sienna was a fan of her songwriting abilities, and that maybe they were on their way to becoming good friends.

But the way that Sienna was kissing her right now told a very different story.

Sienna's fingers were splayed against Natalie's cheek, a tiny groan escaping Sienna's throat when Natalie's tongue darted into her mouth, dancing with Sienna's, teasing, and it was when Natalie's fingers played with the hem of Sienna's shirt, almost making the move to lift it over her head, that finally snapped her out it.

Natalie pulled away, her eyes fluttering open, her heart racing. She swallowed. "We have to stop."

Sienna quirked an eyebrow, the faintest smile on her gorgeous lips. "Why?"

Natalie sighed, hating the way Sienna would have to challenge her like this, like she knew exactly how much Natalie wanted this even though it was never going to work.

"Why?" Natalie echoed. "Because I'm sixteen years older than you. And because we both know that this can't happen. Not now. Not when you're chasing your dream. I can't ruin your chances. You deserve a shot at this, Sienna. I can't take that from you."

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Sienna opened her mouth and closed it again. She reached for her beer and took a long drink. “Is that it?”

“Is that not enough?” Natalie wet her lips. There was no anger in either of their voices. And it was probably for the best that they were talking this out now and not in the morning with both of them in Sienna’s bed.

“I’m just wondering if you have any other arguments?” Sienna took another drink before setting it back on the coffee table.

Natalie tilted her head, somewhat perplexed by Sienna’s semi-confident, almost casual approach to this conversation. “Well, I’d also say that since your mother threw out my CDs and called me a home-wrecker, I doubt I’d be welcome for Thanksgiving dinner.”

Sienna grinned, a gentle laugh bubbling up as she spoke. “Okay, that’s true.”

“Why are you taking this so well?” Natalie asked, searching Sienna’s eyes. She expected Sienna to be angry with her, to flat out tell her that she was wrong, that they could work.

“Because you didn’t push me away.”

Natalie rolled her eyes as she got up, unable to sit still any longer, not with Sienna that close anyway. She didn’t know what to do now that she was standing, with Sienna looking up at her, that smirk still on her lips.

“You’re too confident for your own good,” Natalie said, raking a hand through her hair.

Sienna stood up. “I was listening to what you said.” She came into her space, her hand finding Natalie’s at her side, Sienna’s thumb delicately caressing the inside of her wrist. “And on paper? Yeah, this probably doesn’t make much sense. But when we’re together?” Sienna held her gaze, lifting her other hand to brush Natalie’s hair behind her ear, the sensation sending a jolt of electricity through her entire body. “This last month has been...” Her voice trailed off. “I’ve never felt like this before. I know it doesn’t make sense. But whenever we’re together, neither of us wants the night to end. Time is irrelevant when I’m with you.”

Natalie’s breath caught in her throat. It didn’t make sense. But it was undeniable.

Natalie brought her hand up to Sienna’s neck, her thumb lightly stroking the soft skin beneath her hair. “I know,” she said in just above a whisper. “I feel the same way.” She searched Sienna’s eyes. “But I can’t get in the way of—”

Sienna silenced her with her lips, and Natalie could feel her resolve evaporating as her other hand slid underneath Sienna’s top, her palm gliding over her hip and around to her back, their bodies pressed together now, their kisses growing more heated.

This was insane.

Natalie still fought with that voice in the back of her head telling her she could still stop, but then another thought jumped to the front of her mind, and she did pull away, just far enough to still share the same breath, for their noses to be touching.

“Sienna,” Natalie breathed. “I haven’t...” She swallowed. “It’s been a really long time since...”

“Hey,” Sienna said softly, her thumb running along Natalie’s jawline as she leaned back far enough to meet Natalie’s eyes. “We can take this slow. And also, it’s been a while for me too.”

“Really?”

Sienna nodded.

Natalie had made assumptions. That even though Sienna wasn’t out, she surely had a friends-with-benefits situation or a long-distance off and on again kind of relationship going on at some point in the last year.

Natalie almost countered her, that however long it had been for Sienna, it had been much longer for her, but she swallowed down those words. She was done fighting this. Her whole body was on fire, and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this alive.

Natalie’s hands were on Sienna’s hips now, knowing that Sienna was waiting for her to determine how this night would go. Were they going to pause this now or give in?

Her hands slid down to Sienna’s ass, the fabric of her white wash jeans smooth beneath her fingertips, and before she knew what she was doing, she was leaning in and kissing Sienna again.

12

Sienna flicked the switch for the accent lights, keeping the lighting low and warm as she closed her bedroom door behind them, and any thoughts of taking this slow were thrown out the window when Natalie backed her up against the door, her hungry eyes raking over her before she pushed Sienna’s hands above her head and kissed her thoroughly.

Sienna moaned into the kiss. Natalie's body pressed against hers, and Sienna lost herself in the kiss, in the urgent and all-consuming way that Natalie had taken over.

When Sienna felt the weight against her hands lessen, Sienna slid them out from underneath Natalie's, giving into the desire to touch Natalie. She let her hands roam over Natalie's jeans and up along her sides as Sienna took charge of the kiss now, eventually backing Natalie up against the bed.

Sienna gently pushed her back, and Natalie sat on the edge, her palms resting on the sheets behind her as she leaned back a little, looking her up and down.

"I have to say, this is unexpected," Sienna said with a slight grin as she took off her shirt, loving the way that Natalie was looking at her right now. "Not that I spent much time imagining this. But I never would have guessed it'd be like this."

"How do you know what it's going to be like?" Natalie asked, sitting up to run her hands over Sienna's skin, sliding up her sides to palm her breasts through her bra. "We haven't been together yet," Natalie said as she groped Sienna's breasts, her fingers toying with Sienna's nipples through the thin fabric.

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Sienna shuddered, a moan escaping her lips. “Fuck.” She threaded her fingers through Natalie’s hair. “I thought we would be taking things slow.”

“Is that what you want?” Natalie asked, gazing up at her before she lowered her head to place an open kiss along the swell of her breast.

Then her mouth moved lower as she tugged the cup down enough to reveal Sienna’s already hardened nipple.

“Oh fuck,” Sienna groaned when Natalie’s tongue battered over it, her other hand massaging her breast, and Sienna’s clit twitched with want as she swayed into Natalie, unable to hold herself up.

Natalie’s lips trailed lower, her kisses hot against Sienna’s abdomen, and the sound of Sienna’s zipper being lowered filled the space between them.

Sienna’s hips jerked forward as Natalie’s hand slipped beneath the waistband of her panties, finding the heat between her legs.

“Oh god, Sienna. You’re so wet,” Natalie murmured as she looked up at her, her fingers drawing slow circles over her clit.

Sienna was already so turned on. She knew it wouldn’t take much to send her over the edge, but just as she was going to say that out loud, Natalie withdrew her hand.

Natalie stood up, finding her lips again, their tongues dancing as she reached behind Sienna’s back to pop open her bra, sliding the straps down her arm.

Sienna let the fabric fall away, a chill awakening goosebumps on her arms as she stood topless in front of Natalie.

“You’re so beautiful,” Natalie said as she lifted her hand to Sienna’s neck, bringing her back for another heart-stopping kiss.

Sienna needed to touch Natalie, and as much as she was enjoying that kiss, she had to pull away. “You’re overdressed,” Sienna said, reaching for the hem of Natalie’s top.

It didn’t take long for them to get rid of the rest of their clothes, and Sienna didn’t know where to start. She guided Natalie back onto the bed, covering her body with hers. A surge of desire ran through her when their bare breasts pressed together, and Sienna lost herself in another deep, passionate kiss, their hands roaming, their hips gently rocking.

Sienna let Natalie roll her onto her back, switching their positions, their legs tangled, and the pressure of Natalie’s thigh against her clit was driving her crazy.

Natalie’s fingers teased and played with Sienna’s nipples while Sienna’s hands cupped Natalie’s ass, needing that weight on top of her, her hips moving with more urgency now.

Sienna’s orgasm came out of nowhere, her body trembling as she came, clinging to Natalie as she rode it out.

Natalie shifted her weight until she found the right spot, her hips grinding down against Sienna’s sensitive clit.

Sienna reached up to roll Natalie’s nipple between her fingertips, and a throaty moan left Natalie’s mouth as Sienna moved to the other.

Natalie's hips gradually moved faster, and she lowered herself down to kiss Sienna, their tongues exploring until Natalie couldn't stay quiet anymore, a string of curses on her lips.

Sienna's arms were around her, one hand on her ass, the other on her hip, encouraging her, pushing back against Natalie as her second orgasm built rapidly.

"Right there," Natalie cried out. "Don't stop. Fuck." A light layer of sweat covered their bodies as Natalie came first with Sienna right behind her, panting against Natalie's neck as they both tried to catch their breath.

Sienna lazily ran her hands over Natalie's soft skin, her pulse pounding in her ears. She closed her eyes as she recovered, the muscles in her legs quivering.

Sienna glanced over at Natalie as she got comfortable beside her, and she wasn't sure she'd ever seen anything as sexy as Natalie, her arm thrown above her head, her hair mussed, and her cheeks flushed.

13

Natalie had just about caught her breath when she felt the bed dip beside her. She looked up to see Sienna moving further down the bed, easing Natalie's legs apart as she settled down between them on her stomach.

"Is this okay?" Sienna asked softly.

"Yes," Natalie managed to say without sounding desperate, although her hips betrayed her, lifting as Sienna's tongue lightly skimmed over her sex, not even parting her folds.

Natalie threaded her fingers through Sienna's hair as she added more pressure this

time, her tongue connecting with Natalie's clit.

A groan left her mouth as she threw her head back against the sheets, and Sienna's tongue started swirling over her, alternating pressure and speed, driving Natalie into a frenzy until she was begging Sienna to let her come.

“Fuck. Sienna, please.”

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“What do you need?” Sienna asked before her tongue returned, her touch lighter and less frequent, and it was making Natalie crazy.

“Fingers,” Natalie gasped. “Please.”

Sienna pushed herself up, planting a hand beside Natalie’s shoulder as she trailed her other hand up along the inside of Natalie’s thigh before parting her lips.

“You’re so wet for me,” Sienna murmured, lowering herself down to capture Natalie’s lips in a searing kiss.

Sienna slipped her fingers inside, and Natalie saw stars.

Sienna somehow knew exactly what she needed, her strokes long and hard, her thumb hitting her clit, but when her fingers moved faster, curling just when Natalie needed them to, she struggled to breathe, her whole body pulsing as she came.

Natalie held onto Sienna, her hips pushing back against Sienna’s hand until she was completely spent, her arms falling against the sheets.

When Natalie was able to open her eyes, Sienna was sitting up, straddling Natalie’s thigh as she brought her glistening fingers to her lips.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Natalie murmured.

Sienna got comfortable between Natalie’s legs again. “Now, where was I?”

Natalie inhaled a sharp breath as Sienna's tongue caressed her, wrapping around her clit and slowly bringing up right back to the edge again as if she had all the time in the world.

Natalie gripped the sheets, one leg on top of Sienna's shoulder now, her hips searching for more until Sienna had to hold her down, her hands on Natalie's hips while her tongue swirled and teased, bringing Natalie to the edge only to keep her there.

"Sienna," Natalie moaned desperately. So desperately that Natalie couldn't take it anymore, reaching for Sienna and pulling her up, silently guiding her hand between her legs.

Sienna's eyes darkened with desire, acknowledging her request and giving her exactly what she needed, sliding two, maybe three fingers into her.

Natalie palmed Sienna's sex. She was soaking wet, and Natalie easily entered her.

Natalie didn't know who came first or whose moans were whose.

It was an intoxicating mix of being so close to ecstasy and riding that high of being able to bring someone else there, to give them that kind of pleasure.

Natalie buried her face in Sienna's neck as she came, her fingers digging into Sienna's skin, while her other hand worked to get Sienna her release.

Natalie drifted off in Sienna's arms as they gave in to exhaustion, her muscles sore, her heart full.

In the three days since Natalie had woken up in her bed, Sienna had felt like she was floating on air. She hadn't seen Natalie, but they'd arranged to practice for a few hours today, and she honestly didn't know what she was looking forward to more. Kissing Natalie again or playing music together which they still hadn't done since the night they met.

And maybe, Natalie might stay tonight.

Sienna spent the morning cleaning her apartment before showering and getting dressed in her favorite pair of jeans and a button-up navy and white plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

They hadn't spoken about what they were doing. Sienna had woken up before Natalie that morning, and for twenty minutes, the fear that Natalie would regret sleeping with her and tell her that it wasn't going to happen again kept her from falling back asleep, her mind playing out that worse-case scenario on a loop.

But Natalie had woken up with a stretch, snuggling further into her side, her arm draped over Sienna's stomach, and they'd had a lazy morning together, with Sienna going downstairs to get breakfast and coffee at the bakery.

They might not have officially said that they were dating, but Sienna had to believe that this was the start of something. And as she checked her watch now, knowing that Natalie would be here any minute, she could feel the nerves bubbling up again.

What if in the last three days Natalie had changed her mind?

Sienna hadn't exactly rebutted all of Natalie's arguments. She'd just kissed her.

And Sienna had spent the last three days wondering what she could do to give them the best possible chance of making this work.

A light knock on her door took her away from her thoughts, and when she pulled it open, her breath stalled. “Hey,” she managed to say, her eyes sweeping over Natalie.

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Her hair was tied back in a ponytail and her long-sleeved white top hugged her body perfectly. Natalie's familiar perfume drifted into her space as she said hello and came inside, her guitar case in hand.

Natalie left it against the wall as Sienna closed the door, and then Natalie wrapped her arms around her waist, her head tilting as their lips met in a slow kiss that Sienna felt in every cell in her body.

Sienna sighed as Natalie's lips parted against hers, her hand sliding up Sienna's side. She could kiss this woman for hours.

Sienna guided Natalie towards the wall, barely breaking the kiss as she pressed Natalie back against it, her thigh slipping between Natalie's legs eliciting a low moan.

"We're supposed to be working," Natalie murmured between kisses, her voice throaty.

"I can be quick." Sienna's hands grabbed Natalie's hip, the other finding her ass, pulling Natalie down against her thigh, and Natalie's hips rocked as she brought her hand to Sienna's cheek, bringing their lips back together in a hungry kiss, their tongues swirling, their breathing ragged.

Natalie had grinded against her thigh last night, but she'd been straddling Sienna, and an image of Natalie above her, her hand on Natalie's breast as she rolled her hips sent Sienna's pulse into overdrive.

“Oh fuck,” Natalie moaned now, her head falling back against the wall before she buried her head in Sienna’s neck, clinging to her, grinding against Sienna’s thigh until her entire body shook, a string of curses muffled against Sienna’s skin.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Natalie said with a smile, her eyes still closed.

Sienna’s heart swelled in her chest as she held Natalie up while she caught her breath. She was so crazy about Natalie. She knew it wasn’t good to be falling this hard this fast, but there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Natalie’s eyes slowly opened. “I’m going to need a minute.” Her cheeks were flushed, and Sienna slipped her arm around Natalie as they went over to the couch.

The doorbell rang, and Sienna had no idea who it would be. Anyone who wanted her just sent a text. But she glanced through the peephole and saw a delivery man holding a bouquet of roses.

Sienna opened the door, signed for them, a smile coming to her lips as she took them, letting the door fall closed behind her. She went into the kitchen and found a vase that would hold the flowers.

She returned to the living room with them where Natalie was leaning back against the cushions her eyes closed.

“I mean, I knew you were a romantic,” Sienna said, and Natalie’s eyes slowly opened. “Your lyrics make that clear, but it’s another thing to be on the receiving end. Thank you.”

Natalie’s eyebrows rose. “I didn’t send those.”

“What?”

Natalie just looked up at her. “I would have just brought them with me today.”

Sienna sucked in a breath, embarrassment threatening to darken her cheeks. “Oh.” There was only one other person who would send her flowers.

“I’m guessing they’re from Caleb,” Natalie said, voicing Sienna’s own thoughts.

“Yeah.” Sienna brought the flowers back into the kitchen, not sure what to do with them now. She came back with two glasses of water and got her own guitar, ready to get down to work.

15

Natalie had gone for a hike just about every day in the last two weeks. She wanted to take in the stunning foliage, the way the leaves had transformed from brilliant greens to rusty oranges and reds, but she also needed that time to think.

Today, she was on the trail that ran behind her cabin, knowing that Sienna would be stopping by within the hour to spend an hour or two practicing before she had to go to work. The fallen leaves crunched beneath her boots, and the rustle of squirrels scurrying up and down trees mixed with the chirping of birds as the afternoon sun shone through the branches.

Natalie knew she should be happy, but she just couldn’t allow herself to be. Well, she was when she was with Sienna, but the second she was gone, doubts started to creep in.

In a month, they were going to be recording Sienna’s songs in Frank’s studio. They’d both been working towards that date, practicing three or four times a week, which usually led to falling into bed together.

It was frightening how much Natalie's life had changed in the three and a half months since she'd moved here. She'd only been here a month when she'd started to think this might be a place she could call home, but now that was a given.

And it was harder to believe that she'd only met Sienna two months ago. In some ways, it felt like they'd known each other for years, but then something would come up, like Sienna's aversion to pickles when Natalie had been making burgers one evening that reminded them that they still had a lot to learn about one another from food tastes to favorite movies or tv shows to what an ideal vacation looked like.

That always scared her. The fact that she'd fallen so hard and so fast while not knowing so many things about Sienna yet.

When the trail brought her back to her cabin, she was surprised to see Sienna's car in the driveway.

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“Hey,” Natalie said, giving her a wave. Sienna was sitting on the bonnet of her car, her hair pulled up into a messy bun.

“Hi.”

“Sorry, I must have lost track of time,” Natalie said, coming over to her, and standing between her legs, kissing her softly.

“No. I’m early.”

Natalie stood back as she fished her keys out of her jacket pocket while Sienna got her guitar from the car. “Everything okay?” she asked as they went inside. Sienna was unusually quiet.

“Yeah.” Sienna exhaled a long breath, her cheeks rosy. “I told Caleb.”

“What?” Natalie’s mouth fell open as she hung up her coat and reached for Sienna’s to do the same.

“Yeah. This morning. I just sent him and text. I should have done it right after the roses, but I don’t know. I kept doubting myself.”

“How’d it go?” Natalie searched Sienna’s eyes, her own heart beating fast, wondering if Caleb had gotten angry or hurled accusations at Sienna for leading him on.

“He actually laughed.”

“What?”

“And not because he thought I was making it up or joking with him or whatever. He laughed with relief.”

“Really?” Natalie sat on the arm of the sofa as she looked up at Sienna.

“He thought there was something wrong with him.” Sienna shook her head. “So I obviously felt awful, but he was actually really kind about it. And of course, joked about who would let my parents know that we were officially never going to happen.”

“Yeah. They’ll need to be let down easy. Your dad sat with him last week at Vinnie’s. I’m sure you noticed.”

“Oh I did,” Sienna said with a half-smile. “But that got me thinking... Why not just tell them?”

“You mean you want to come out to your parents?” Natalie swallowed the lump that had come out of nowhere.

“Yeah. Except I already did.”

“What?” Natalie’s jaw really dropped this time. “When?”

“Just now. An hour ago. That’s why I’m early. I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh my god. How did they take it?” Natalie’s mind was a jumbled mess.

“Well, they were shocked,” Sienna said as she came over to stand in front of Natalie, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear as she spoke. “And honestly? I think they were

more devastated about the whole Caleb thing. But I did tell them that I was seeing someone. I hope that was okay.”

Natalie blinked. “Yeah. Yes, of course.” She looked up at Sienna. “I’m so proud of you. I had no idea you were going to tell anyone.”

“People are going to start to notice us. And I want them to. I know it could fuck everything up with my chances of making it, but that all seems so irrelevant right now. I mean, I want that. But I want this more. And there’s always other genres. The stuff I’ve written... They wouldn’t necessarily be considered country. It’s the covers that I’ve grown up playing that had me thinking I wanted to be a country star.”

Natalie just stared up at Sienna, pushing herself off the couch, her hands on Sienna’s cheeks. “I’m so proud of you.” She pulled Sienna into a deep kiss, a throaty moan escaping Sienna’s lips as she matched Natalie’s intensity.

“You’re incredible,” Natalie whispered between kisses. “Absolutely incredible. And brave.” She parted her lips against Sienna’s. “Braver than I ever was.”

“You make me want to be brave,” Sienna murmured before running her fingers through Natalie’s hair, taking control of the kiss.

“We’re supposed to be practicing,” Natalie said after a while.

“I have two hours,” Sienna said as she leaned back to meet Natalie’s eyes. “Do you really want to spend them listening to me sing?”

“I feel like this is a trick question.”

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“Or would you rather go upstairs?” Sienna asked, her lips brushing across Natalie’s.

Natalie fistfisted Sienna’s shirt, keeping her close, her body humming with desire as she pulled Sienna in for a passionate kiss before eventually leading her up the stairs and pushing Sienna back against the bed.

16

It took Sienna a while to settle into the reality that she was a recording studio. The contrast between the very ordinary-looking gray exterior of the garage and the impressive and professional setup inside was almost unbelievable. Soundproofing panels lined the walls, and on Frank’s side, there was a mix of modern recording equipment and more vintage pieces with lights glowing from the screens and the mixing board.

It was like a dream come true for Sienna to be here, and once she’d gotten over the shock of it all, she got in the zone and the hours flew by.

At times, she forgot that Natalie and Frank were even on the other side of the glass. It was only when either of their voices came into the booth, slightly distorted, giving her suggestions and tweaks she could make, that she remembered that she wasn’t on her own.

During one of her breaks, Sienna suggested that Natalie join her for *By Chance*. It had taken a little bit of persuading, but Frank was all about it, asking her what was the harm? They’d already recorded Sienna’s vocals. This would just be an added bonus.

“I’m rusty,” Natalie had said between takes.

But it wasn’t long before they got into a flow, and just having Natalie beside her made Sienna want to give her best performance, any nerves falling away.

As they both sang the chorus, their voices harmonizing, Sienna’s confidence soared. Natalie frequently held her gaze as they sang, and Sienna could feel the buzz in the room with this added connection. It was euphoric, and by the time they reached the last line, goosebumps had broken out across Sienna’s arms.

The applause sounded louder than it should have been and Sienna looked through the glass, her eyes widening as she registered who that woman standing beside Frank was, her blond hair styled in loose waves that fell across her teal blazer.

Sienna glanced at Natalie as they both took off their headphones.

“What’s Amelia doing here?” Natalie asked no one in particular, her voice barely audible.

Sienna followed Natalie back into the control room, a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Frank congratulated them on another great recording. “I can’t wait to mix it. You two together... It’s a beautiful thing.” He turned to Natalie. “I hope you don’t mind, but Amelia got in touch a few weeks ago asking if I ever saw you, so when I knew you were coming to town... I let her know.”

Natalie nodded.

Frank glanced between them. “Sienna, this is Amelia. Amelia, Sienna.”

Sienna politely smiled before reaching for a bottle of water and taking a long drink.

“You have a gorgeous voice,” Amelia said to Sienna.

“Thank you.” Sienna shifted her weight from one foot to the other, feeling the tension in the small space.

“Can I have a word outside?” Amelia asked Natalie, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Yeah. Sure.”

Sienna sat down in now of the chairs, listening as Frank played back that last chorus and making a few adjustments.

“You know,” Frank said, fiddling with a few of the sliders, “she’s never actually done a duet before.”

Sienna turned to look over her shoulder, through the window panes of the garage door. Amelia and Natalie were standing in the middle of the driveway, between two cars.

“How do you know Natalie?” Frank asked, forcing Sienna to turn back around.

“She heard me singing at my county fair a few months ago.”

“It’s a shame about what happened,” Frank said after a moment, nodding towards the door. “When Amelia called me a few weeks ago, she said she’d been trying to track down Natalie for years. I hope it’s to apologize. That’s the only reason I told Amelia that Natalie would be here. If they were still on good terms, Amelia would have had her number.”

Sienna’s stomach did a somersault. There was no way that Amelia was here to

apologize.

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The chilly November air swept the dry leaves across the paved driveway, sending them tumbling along. Natalie suppressed a shiver as she stared at Amelia, hardly believing she was standing in front of her.

“What are you doing here?” Natalie asked when Amelia wasn’t saying anything. “This is hardly a coincidence. Unless you’ve been recording here.”

Amelia pressed her lips together. “I called Frank a few weeks ago to see if he knew where you were. I didn’t know who else to call. I’ve been trying to find you for months. You’re a hard woman to track down, Natalie.”

Natalie could feel her jaw clenching as she tried not to get angry. The reason she’d never owned a home was because she could never feel safe in one place, always fearing that the paparazzi would find her. Even though it had been a long time since that might have actually happened, it didn’t mean that that fear wasn’t still there, lingering in Natalie’s subconscious.

“I’ve never stayed in one place for too long,” Natalie said, managing to keep her voice level.

A heavy silence fell between them, and it was Amelia who broke it.

“You look great,” Amelia said softly.

Natalie just looked away. “Why did you want to find me?”

“I wanted to see you.” Amelia sighed. “You might not believe me, but I have thought

about you so many times over the years.”

“I do actually find that hard to believe. You broke my heart, Amelia.” Natalie surprised herself with how detached she was from this interaction, with how little she cared.

Amelia’s hand was warm on her forearm. “You have no idea how much I regret the way I handled it.” She searched Natalie’s eyes as she dropped her hand. “Have dinner with me tonight.”

“We’ll probably be going late here.”

“I’m glad you’re getting back into music,” Amelia said with a hint of a smile.

“No, I’m not. I’m here for Sienna.”

That silence was back, and Natalie had to wonder if Amelia thought their relationship was purely professional. Natalie could almost see the gears turning.

“Look,” Amelia said. “The main reason I wanted to see you is that I’m filing for a divorce.”

Natalie shouldn’t have cared, but hearing Amelia say those words eighteen years too late knocked the wind out of her.

18

Sienna left her bag on the kitchen counter of the rental apartment Natalie had found before sitting down and putting her feet up on the coffee table. She was exhausted after getting up at six to get ready and be at Frank’s for nine o’clock. Then they put in almost eight hours in the studio. They had breaks for lunch and a pizza in the

afternoon, but it was still incredibly tiring.

But Sienna was more emotionally drained than anything else. She'd spent the Uber ride back here realizing that as amazing as the last few weeks had been, neither of them had defined what they were doing.

They'd never said that they were officially dating. It certainly felt like they were. They spent three or four nights together every week.

"Amelia wants to have dinner with me tonight," Natalie said, hovering on the edge of the living area.

Sienna pursed her lips. "Okay."

"Do you mind if I go?"

"No. Not at all." Sienna actually felt physically sick at the thought of the two of them having a candle lit dinner in some fancy restaurant in Nashville, but she couldn't stop Natalie from going.

"Okay." Natalie looked like she wanted to say something else, but she pointed over her shoulder. "I'll just go get ready then."

Sienna sat frozen on the couch for a few seconds, but when she heard the shower turn on, she decided to go and get changed into her pajamas and at least be comfy. She grabbed her black leather journal and a pen from her bag on her way back to the living room.

She sat down and flipped to the page she'd last written on that morning. She'd jotted down a song idea when they'd stopped for gas on the way, but reading over the words now, they made little sense. She was probably still half asleep when she wrote them.

Sienna tapped her pen against the page. She didn't really feel like racking her brain trying to decipher her own words, but she needed the distraction. Otherwise, she'd just think about how good Amelia looked in her designer clothes today.

Sienna would start comparing herself to a woman that Natalie had once loved, and there wasn't even any competition.

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Amelia was successful. She had an amazing voice. She was stylish. She was just a few years younger than Natalie, and the two of them already had so much history.

If Amelia wanted her back...

What chance did Sienna have?

The click of Natalie's heels coming down the hallway took her away from her thoughts.

How long had Sienna been spiraling?

Natalie appeared in a black blazer over a red satin top paired with black pants. Her hair was styled in waves that fell across her shoulders, and her makeup was light, but even from across the room, her smoky eye makeup brought out the honey tones in her brown eyes.

"Wow," Sienna breathed as her eyes raked over her.

19

Natalie took one last look in the mirror hanging from behind the bedroom door, tugging at the lapels of her blazer. She felt guilty about agreeing to meet Amelia, but she didn't even know if she should. She had asked Sienna, and she seemed okay with it. But as Natalie left the bedroom, she couldn't ignore the heaviness in the pit of her stomach, like she was about to make a mistake.

Her heels clicked against the hardwood floors as she strode down the hall to find Sienna relaxing on the couch, already in her pajamas. She was tapping her pen against the journal in her hands, lost in thought, but when she looked up, her mouth fell open.

“Wow.”

Natalie stared back at Sienna. There was so much in Sienna’s gaze. Admiration. Lust. Longing. But there was a touch of sadness there too.

“You look stunning,” Sienna said softly, a hint of reverence in her voice.

“Thank you.” That heaviness was in her chest now, her throat seeming like it might close up as she tried to relieve some of this guilt. “You know you have nothing to worry about, right?”

Sienna nodded. “Yeah. I know.”

Natalie wasn’t convinced.

Sienna held her gaze. “She wants you back, doesn’t she.” She hadn’t even asked it as a question.

Natalie sucked in a breath. “Yeah. I have to assume so. She told me she was getting a divorce.”

Sienna visibly swallowed as she closed her notebook and left it on the couch before she got up. “I’m going to go take a shower. Enjoy your night.”

Natalie caught her wrist as she walked by, and she couldn’t miss the tears in Sienna’s eyes. “I’m not interested.”

“I know,” Sienna said, blinking back those tears.

“You know what?” Natalie was thinking out loud. “I’m not going to go. I don’t even know why I agreed to. I guess, I wanted closure? I don’t know, but whatever I was looking for, I don’t need it. I’ve got everything I need right here.”

Natalie held Sienna’s hand, her other coming up to cup Sienna’s cheek, her thumb lightly swiping over her skin, brushing away a tear that fell.

Sienna wet her lips. “I wouldn’t blame you...” Her voice broke before she could finish her thought.

“Please don’t say what I think you were about to say. Sienna,” Natalie said, dipping her head to find Sienna’s gaze, “I’m crazy about you. Yes, I was caught up in what might have been with her for far too long, and I know we’re still pretty new, but I’m telling you I’m all in on this.”

Sienna took a quick, sharp breath. “I was so afraid that it was just me. We never said what we were doing. And I know that you were concerned about the age difference.”

“I was just trying to be sensible.” Natalie searched her eyes. “And I also wanted to protect myself.”

“How do you mean?”

Natalie sighed. “I could feel myself falling for you, and I guess, I just couldn’t understand why you’d pick me. Look, I don’t want to be in a situation like this again. I’m saying this out loud and as clearly as I can. My life has changed so much since that night at the fair. For the better. And I’m tired of overthinking this. These last few weeks have been the best of my life. And it’s because I met you.”

Sienna's eyes grew wide. "I don't know what to say. Other than that I feel the same way. And I was so afraid that you didn't. You said you've moved a lot."

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“I’ve never stayed longer than a year in one place.”

“And I think I filed that away, knowing how bad of an idea it would be to actually fall for you, but it’s happened anyway.”

“Hey, I’m not going anywhere,” Natalie said, gulping hard, holding back her own tears. “And if you want to keep this low key, until you see where you land with your music, I’m okay with that. We’ll figure it out.”

As Natalie waited for Sienna to say something, the only thought that was running through her head was, ‘How long have I been in love with her?’

Sienna shook her head. “I’m not hiding this from anyone,” she murmured as she encircled her arms around Natalie’s waist, leaning in to kiss her, neither of them holding anything back, and Natalie melted into her, into the warmth of Sienna’s body and the intensity of her kiss.

EPILOGUE

Sienna leaned against the deck railing, her hoody keeping her warm as she surveyed her parents’ backyard and the long shadows stretching out from the trees, the sun casting a golden-orange hue across the lawn as dusk quickly approached.

She turned when she heard soft footsteps on wooden planks. Natalie had gone back inside to get her jacket, and the scent of the cookies that Sienna had put in the oven a few minutes ago drifted outside.

“I’m so full,” Natalie said as she joined her, her hair falling across her eye as she gazed out at the two deer that had appeared at the edge of the woods. “But I need to try these famous cookies. Why am I only hearing about them now?”

“Because I only make them when I’m here?” Sienna said without really knowing why that was the case. “I don’t know. I don’t bake in my apartment, and I like to help my mom out with the cooking, so it’s just something small when she’s always taking care of the turkey and everything else.”

“That dinner was amazing,” Natalie said with a contented sigh.

“And what did you tell me about coming here for Thanksgiving? That time you wanted to stop this before it even started?” Sienna teased.

“I said...” Natalie propped her elbow up on the flat wooden railing. “That since your mother threw out my CDs and called me a home wrecker that I didn’t think I’d be welcome here for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“And?”

“And it turns out I was completely wrong,” Natalie said with a smile as she turned to meet Sienna’s eyes. “Your mother even apologized.”

“Really?”

“Hm.” Natalie nodded.

“And my dad has no idea who you are, so I don’t know if that’s a great or disappointing,” Sienna said with a laugh.

“It’s great. As is he.” Natalie’s eyes held her own. “You’re lucky, Sienna.”

She nodded, knowing how true it was. She never could have anticipated how well things had gone with her parents after she'd come out. And then even after that, she'd been nervous about introducing Natalie to them today, but it had gone really well.

"Do you think your dad would have accepted you?" Sienna asked softly.

"I'd like to think so, but..." She shrugged. "I don't know. My mother didn't. Doesn't."

Sienna's phone chimed in her pocket. "That's the cookies."

Natalie followed her inside, and Sienna wrapped her arm around her shoulder. "You've got this family now," Sienna said as they entered the kitchen, the sweet aroma of melted chocolate filling the room, and through the oven door the golden-browned dough looked delicious. "No more Thanksgivings alone."

Pauline nodded as she refilled her glass of wine. "Yes. Absolutely. You're stuck with us Natalie."

Sienna glanced over her shoulder as she pulled the tray out of the oven, Natalie and her mother still not entirely believing that this was her life. How did she have a girlfriend like Natalie?

Sienna hadn't said those three words out loud yet, but they'd been on the tip of her tongue so many times since they got back from Nashville. Those two nights away with Natalie had been a turning point for them. It wasn't until Sienna saw Amelia with Natalie that she realized how hard she'd fallen.

Once the cookies were out of the oven, the heavenly scent brought her father in from the living room.

“They’re hot,” Sienna warned. “They just came out.”

“They look good,” her father said, hands on the counter top, trying to be patient.

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“While you’re all waiting to sample these, I have a bit of news,” Sienna said, three pairs of eyes on her. Natalie must be wondering what she had to say, judging by her quirked eyebrow. “You know how I went to Nashville to meet up with one of Natalie’s friends, Frank?”

Her parents nodded.

“Well, Frank and his son are actually starting an indie record label. They don’t have a huge budget. Far from it. But they’re passionate about music, and... They want me to be their first signing,” Sienna said, unable to keep her smile from turning into a grin.

“What?” Natalie’s mouth fell open before she covered it with her hand.

Sienna swore her father was holding back tears, but her mother had blocked her view when she came over and pulled her into a hug.

“That’s the best news,” Pauline said, her voice full of emotion.

“You deserve it,” her dad said. “You’ve worked so hard. I’m so happy for you. Come here.”

Sienna stepped into her dad’s arms, blinking back her own tears.

It wasn’t just the good news, it was the fact that Sienna had never allowed herself to imagine that a day like this was possible.

For a while, she thought she might never tell anyone she was gay, never mind her

parents, and now, here she was, standing in her childhood home, in her kitchen, surrounded by so much love, and when she went to Natalie, hugging her for a long while, Sienna didn't think she her heart could possibly be more full.