Natalie’s Song

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Through my windshield, I stared at the sun sinking in the sky. It signaled the passing of time, every second marked by its slow descent. There were so few of them left until the moment I’d been waiting for for two years. Two years, three weeks, and two days to be exact.

All that time, it had seemed an eternity away, but now that it was here, every second seemed as long as each day had been before. My heart throbbed painfully, and I was so nervous, I was almost sick. And yet, swirls of excitement filled me, reminding me that I wanted this. I wanted to see him again. And any minute now, I would.

I had only been 17 when Justin had left to serve a full-time mission in Argentina. I hadn’t been mature, or confident, or wise. I had been careful though. I’d watched my sister Claire get her heart broken by a guy she’d waited for. She’d written to him, never dated, and patiently born a two year pause in her love life until the guy of her dreams got home – at which time he promptly told her he wanted to date other people. So, when Justin had been getting ready to go, and we were inconveniently being drawn together by the irresistible pull of attraction, I’d told him I didn’t want to go through what Claire had suffered.

I had very carefully not waited for him. I hadn’t even written to him very often – at least not letters that I’d actually mailed. I’d told him I didn’t want to distract him from what he was supposed to be doing, but really I was afraid that if we wrote each other too much, we might start to say things that were better said in person, when we could find out if our feelings were real. But my heart hadn’t been deceived. It knew what I wouldn’t admit to anyone – that it completely and irrevocably belonged to Justin.

My phone beeped at me from the depths of my purse on the passenger seat beside me. I dug it out and saw a text from my friend Deanna.

*We’re almost to the church. Where are you?*

*I’m already here.*

*Why didn’t you come to the airport?*

*You know why not.*

*He looked really disappointed not to see you.*

*Well, he’ll see me in a minute.*

I stared at that last message like I’d sent it to myself. He would see me in a minute. My stomach felt like a fiery pit. I flipped open the mirror on my visor and did a hair and makeup check. I smoothed my dark brown hair and wondered if I should have put some mascara on. I usually didn’t because my lashes were naturally long and dark, but tonight was special. I wondered if I would look different to him. I mean, I was nineteen now.

And he was twenty-one. We had both done some growing up since he left. So much time and so many experiences separated us. Would he still like me?

I finally realized that by not “waiting for him” I hadn’t managed to protect my heart. I’d only managed to cut off any communication between us that might have kept us from growing apart. I saw movement in my rearview mirror and looked up to see cars pulling into the parking lot behind me.

Justin, or rather, Elder Peterson, was coming to be released. While he was still an ordained missionary, I knew we couldn’t have the kind of hello I wanted to have. But soon, he would no longer be a missionary. How would he greet me? With a smile and a hug? With something more?

Slowly, trying to look like my world wasn’t about to begin or end, I got out of my car and waited to see him. Justin was the oldest of six kids, but it was easy to pick him out of the stream of people getting out of his parents’ van. For one thing, he was the only one dressed in a suit, and he was taller than all of them, even his dad. Mostly though, because I would know him anywhere – though he did look different.

My eyes ran over him, drinking in what I could see of him. He was turned mostly away from me, but I could see that his shoulders were broader and straighter. His jaw was more strongly cut and his skin was darker than I remembered. Of course, it was summer in Argentina.

Several other car loads of people had pulled up too and people were flocking around Justin, laughing and talking as they slowly filed inside the church, though he wasn’t able to move because of the people crowding around him.

I stood quietly by my car, not sure what to do. I tried to call out to him in my mind to turn around and see me, but of course he didn’t. Why was I such a coward that I couldn’t just walk up and say hi?

Deanna saw me though and called out, “Natalie! There you are!”

Justin’s head whipped around as he heard my name. I watched as in that brief, eternal second his expression showed excitement, relief, confusion, and longing. I’m sure mine mirrored his exactly.

I was frozen where I stood, still not sure what to do. I wanted to run to him and throw my arms around his neck, but I couldn’t while he was still a missionary – and while I didn’t know where we stood.

Justin didn’t seem to hesitate though before he walked towards me with a long, purposeful stride. He only stopped when he was less than a foot away. Energy vibrated between us, and though we weren’t touching, I had never been more aware of another person’s closeness. His eyes raked over me, studying me as closely as I was studying him – well, as closely as I could through the blur of tears in my eyes. Where did those come from all of a sudden?

“Natalie,” he said softly, like he was savoring the sound of my name on his tongue. Even the way he said my name was different as he spoke with the rounded vowels of Spanish.

“Elder Peterson,” I responded, teasing him with the formal use of his current title.

He grinned and surprised me by gripping my hand. “Not for long. Come on.”

He pulled me along behind him as he strode back towards the large glass doors of the church, where his parents were waiting for him. About half-way there, he seemed to become aware that he still had my hand in his and let it go with obvious reluctance.

As we went inside, with Justin’s dad holding the door for us, I became overwhelmed with shyness. I hadn’t wanted to get in the way of his family’s time with him, and I certainly hadn’t wanted our first moments together to be watched and judged by the dozens of people who were here to welcome him home. Many of them, like his parents and Deanna, knew that there had been something between us before he left, but only he and I knew exactly how strong that something had been.

So many people had come that there was no way everyone was going to fit into the high council room where they were going to do his release, so as we made our way there, I started to hang back. I wanted to be in there, but I wasn’t going to force my way in. Justin got caught up in the doorway by some of our friends. The girls showed no hesitation in throwing their arms around him in big, friendly hugs. Justin good naturedly bore it, but I could tell from his expression that he was a little uncomfortable and very overwhelmed by all the attention. I wondered how many people he’d hugged so far. But he hadn’t hugged me. Yet.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. Not yet. But soon.

Justin disappeared into the high council room, and the door began to shut on the crowd outside. I was about to go find somewhere quiet to wait and collect myself when the door opened again. Justin’s brother, Mark, stuck his head around the door, clearly looking for someone. His eyes stopped on me.

“Natalie, Justin wants you in here.”

“Oh,” I said, brilliantly. I was thrilled and immensely relieved that he had noticed I was gone, even with all the people in there and everything that must be going through his head. I followed Mark in and looked around the room. Justin was at the other end of the room, standing next to the stake president. He mouth quirked up in a smile and his shoulders relaxed when he saw me, but his expression quickly grew solemn again.

I knew he was thinking about what was about to happen, trying to absorb and cope with it. Being ordained as a missionary in our church was a significant experience. It required a great deal of sacrifice and obedience, but it brought with it a life changing joy and self-awareness. Right now, he truly thought of himself as Elder Peterson, but he was about to lose that identity and become, once again, Justin Peterson.

The stake president, President Hill talked for a moment about the letter he’d gotten from Justin’s mission president in which he’d described him as a hard-working and obedient missionary. Then he gave Justin an opportunity to bear his testimony.

As soon as he opened his mouth to speak, he became choked up with emotion and had to pause a moment to get it under control. Seeing his sincere feelings so close to the surface made it difficult to keep my own in check. Tears began to flow down my cheeks. I wiped them away ineffectually with my fingers and the back of my hands until someone handed me a tissue.

Justin was wiping his own tears with the sleeve of his suit coat. Nothing was more beautiful to me than seeing him overcome with emotions he felt so deeply.

“I have thought about this day for the last few months, knowing I would have to stand here and account for the time I was given to serve the Lord. I determined that I would work so hard, that I would not have any regrets. There were many reasons that I wanted to come home, more than almost anything. But, one thing that I wanted just as badly was to continue to serve the people of Argentina, to teach them the gospel, and bring them to knowledge of their Savior. It became difficult to think about leaving them. Especially since a family I was teaching is going to be baptized next week and I won’t be there to see it.” He paused again, as his voice grew thick with tears. “But I know that I have done what I was called to do and that the Lord has other plans for me now. And I know that my life will be blessed. I want to bear my testimony, but I’m finding it a little difficult to speak in English after speaking Spanish for two years. So, if you don’t mind, I’m going to bear my testimony in Spanish.”

As he spoke, I only caught words and phrases that I recognized from my smattering of high school Spanish. But I didn’t need to understand him to hear the sincerity and conviction in his voice. My heart swelled with pride, and with love. He had left as a young man, earnest and excited, but nervous and untried. He stood before me now as a man who had been tested and become strong and sure.

Then, Justin was officially released. As he shook President Hill’s hand, I could see new tears brimming in his eyes. I smiled as I wondered if they were tears of sorrow or happiness. Perhaps they were both.

Justin gave his dad a big hug, and then his mom. When he pulled gently away from her though, he looked straight at me. Before I realized what was happening, he had walked across the room to me and wrapped me up in his arms. I could feel everyone in the room watching us, and distantly heard whispers and happy laughter around us. But I was mostly absorbed in feeling Justin’s warmth around me, listening to the deep breaths he was taking as he pressed his face to the top of my head, and enjoying the all-encompassing sense of home that I felt with him.

“Finally,” he whispered into my hair.

I think he might have held onto me forever if I hadn’t stirred and reminded him of where we were. President Hill wasn’t done with him yet.

Justin went back to the seat he’d so recently vacated and turned his attention to President Hill as he said, “Well, I was going to give you some advice about dating, but I think you’ve got that one covered. That is, unless that’s one of your sisters.”

Everyone in the room burst out laughing, even Justin and I. He managed to say firmly, though, “No, she’s definitely not my sister.”

“I didn’t think so,” President Hill said teasingly.

The room resounded with more laughter, as I blushed and Justin grinned, his eyes stealing towards me again.

“Well, then, since there are so many people here to see you, what do you say I leave the advice up to your parents – since they’ve obviously done a good job so far – and get you out of here?”

After a quick prayer, it was done, and people converged on Justin, all wanting to hug and congratulate him *again.* This time, I was determined to go find a quiet place where I could sort through everything that had just happened.

As I tried to sneak out of the room, I was surprised at how many people wanted to hug *me*. I guess it was contagious. I wasn’t much of a touchy feely person though, so as soon as I could, I broke free of the crowd and I hurried towards the chapel. I knew it would be empty, and that was exactly what I needed right now.

I opened the doors, relieved to see that it was in complete darkness. I knew the room well though and quickly found the switch that turned on a few lights over the podium. They didn’t do much to light the large room, but I preferred it that way. The low lights comforted me.

I had often come here to work out my struggles, and had always found peace. It had been my refuge during a time of loneliness and upheaval. Not only did I feel close to my Heavenly Father in here, but there was a piano. Music healed me in ways nothing else could.

I moved over to the baby grand piano and sat down on the bench, moving it slightly so that I could reach the pedals comfortably. I opened the lid over the keys and ran my fingers lovingly over them before positioning my fingers. The keys were smooth and cool beneath my fingers as I began to play them softly, warming them as I played. At first the notes were shockingly loud in the vast silence of the empty chapel, but my ears soon grew accustomed to it. I played louder, sure that this was what I needed to calm the turbulence inside me.

I fell back on some of my favorite hymns, the ones I had played so often I knew them by heart. The chords of “Be Still My Soul” and “Where Can I Turn for Peace” soothed my nerves and quieted my racing heart. Finally able to relax, I began to play “Abide With Me, Tis Eventide.”

Memories of the last few years began to play in my head. I had moved here just a few short months before Justin had left. In fact, he had just turned in his papers my first Sunday in the ward. With his mind fixed firmly on his prospective mission, the last thing he’d wanted was to have anything to do with girls. I certainly hadn’t wanted anything to do with a boy who was going to be gone for two years, and since my Dad moved around so often with his job, I knew we probably wouldn’t be here when he got back anyway.

We just hadn’t seemed to be able to help ourselves though. Whenever we were around each other, we were drawn together like magnets. It was impossible to deny the attraction between us, so the best we’d been able to do was avoid anything that resembled a relationship. The way we felt about each other was like a secret we were trying to keep from ourselves.

A few people noticed and teased us constantly, pushing us to go out on dates. We only went somewhere alone once, a few days before he left. He picked me up at my house and we walked together to a nearby park. I’ll never forget what we said to each other that night.

“Natalie, I can’t leave without telling you how I feel about you,” he’d said, pausing under an oak tree in a quiet corner of the park.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I’d asked.

“Positive. I’m afraid that I might lose any chance with you if I go without making it clear. If I weren’t leaving on my mission, there’s nothing that would keep me from pursuing a relationship with you. Part of me wishes that I hadn’t met you yet, because it’s making it so much harder to leave, but then I wonder what would have happened if you’d only moved here after I’d left. I may not have ever known you as anything but someone one of my friends married.”

This had completely surprised me. “What are you talking about? I’m only seventeen.” Marriage seemed forever away, like another lifetime.

“I know, but you’re so beautiful. And so sweet and talented. There’s no way you would have still been single when I got back. I mean, for all I know, you still won’t be, no matter what I say tonight.” He’d stopped then and pressed his fists into his forehead. “I know I can’t ask you to wait for me. We aren’t even dating. Oh, my gosh, I feel so stupid right now.” Then he’d stepped close to me and put his hands on my shoulders and said, “I guess I’m saying, that I’m hoping more than anything that you’ll still be here when I get back and that we can figure out what this is between us. I think it might be something really special.”

There’d been only one way I could answer him. “Justin, I watched my sister get hurt by a guy she waited for, and they had been dating for forever. I don’t want that kind of pressure or heartache.” His face had fallen then, and he’d looked so disappointed, that I hurried to continue, “But I … I honestly don’t see how I could ever want anyone else but you, so it doesn’t really matter if we put a label on it, does it?”

His eyes had blazed with happiness when I’d said that, but I’d only had a second to see it before he’d crushed me to his chest. We’d just stood there, holding each other for so long, I’d lost complete track of time. And then he’d pulled back a little. When I lifted my head to see why, he took me by surprise and kissed me.

Remembering the pure magic of that kiss had been the only thing that had kept me going the last two years. It hadn’t just been a kiss, it had been a promise - a commitment to things we couldn’t say out loud. But as wonderful as it had been, it had also been heartbreaking because it had been a goodbye.

My fingers had long since stilled on the piano keys, but as I shook off the wisps of memories, I purposely began to play our song. Of course, Justin didn’t know it was our song, but I had written it for us. I’d sent him a cd with a recording of me playing it, but I hadn’t told him what it was. I hadn’t even sent him the lyrics, what few there were.

One of the doors on the other side of the chapel opened and a beam of light stretched across the floor. A dark figure stood silhouetted in the light, and I immediately stopped playing, feeling exposed.

“There you are Natalie.” It was Deanna. “Justin’s been looking for you everywhere.”

“Well, here I am.”

“Well, yeah. Hold on, I’m going to go tell him where you are.”

My moment of peace had gone. Nervously, I began to play again, telling myself that I wished I’d had a few more minutes to get control of myself. But it was useless. Every part of me was anxious to see him, wishing he would hurry, wondering what was taking him so long. I was shaking with impatience now that I knew he would be here any moment, and my eyes looked constantly towards the door that had closed behind Deanna.

That was how he managed to surprise me. When he came in, it was through another door, the one behind me so that I didn’t immediately know he was there.

But then his deep voice, at once so familiar and yet somehow different, spoke over my shoulder. “Are you hiding from me?”

I turned and looked up at him. My smile shook a little, but I wanted to reassure him. “No, from everyone else.”

“Well, I can understand that. Man, there are a lot of people here. Too many.”

He was speaking slowly, deliberately, like he had to think about every word. I studied his expression and saw lines of tension there. He looked tired. “How are you doing with all of this?” I asked him, concerned.

“I don’t know. It’s all so crazy. It doesn’t seem real yet - like I’m going to wake up from a dream any minute now.”

“It’s real, because we can’t be having the same dream.”

He smiled and began to take off his suit coat. He carefully draped it over the back of a chair, saying, “Maybe if I stop looking like a missionary, I’ll stop feeling like one.”

I laughed and watched as he also took off his tie, unbuttoned the top button of his white dress shirt, and rolled up his sleeves. He even pushed his fingers through his dark hair and messed it up a little.

“I bet it is weird for you. Is that why you look so tense?”

“That’s probably part of it. Right now though, it just feels wrong to be alone with a girl. Especially in such a dark room, and especially with you.”

“Well, you aren’t breaking any rules now, so you can relax.”

“I doubt it.” He came over and leaned against the piano. “Natalie, I…I don’t know what to say to you. With everyone else, it’s weird, but normal to see them again. With you, I don’t know where we are. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

There wasn’t just a piano between us. There were two years of feelings and questions we had left unspoken. We’d both changed and everything between us had been so tentative when he’d left. One of us had to make the first move, but we were both hesitant to take a wrong step. I stood up and moved away from the piano. I walked towards him saying, “Well, you already hugged me in front of I don’t know how many people. You might as well finish the job.”

I lifted my arms to him and his came around me as naturally as if this had happened a hundred times before. And yet, it was so new to have nothing between us – no looming time apart, no rules, no one watching. I felt his warmth through the fabric of his shirt and caught the spicy scent of his skin as I pressed my face into chest. My breathing moved in time with the heavy rise and fall of his and in that moment, we seemed like one person – inseparable and indistinguishable from the other. His head was pressed firmly to the top of mine, and we just stood there taking in the perfect rightness of being in each other’s arms.

Something hot and wet slid down my forehead, surprising me, and I straightened up to see what it was. I brushed it away and realized it was a tear. Justin stepped back, wiping at his eyes with closed fists. It was so sweet that I choked out a laugh and realized I was about to start crying too. Gently, I pulled his hands away and wiped his tears myself, enjoying the smooth warmth of his skin beneath my fingers.

 “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know why I keep doing this. I’m not normally such a cry baby.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m glad you’re so happy to see me.”

“Happy to see you? Natalie, that doesn’t even begin to describe what I’m feeling.”

“Did you know you say my name with a Spanish accent now?”

He chuckled thickly, still trying to control his emotions. “Do I? I’m not surprised. I’m having to translate everything I say into English before I say it. Do you mind?”

“No. It’s sounds pretty, just strange.

“Why weren’t you at the airport?” he asked, his voice troubled.

I looked down at the floor. I felt terrible, because I’d clearly hurt his feelings. I had to make him understand. “Justin, it wasn’t because I didn’t want to be there. I just didn’t want the first time we saw each other again to be in front of so many people. Maybe if you were my boyfriend, it wouldn’t have been such a big deal. But I didn’t know what we were – are. If you weren’t going to be interested in me anymore, I didn’t want to figure it out in front of your family and everyone else. I was just scared, I guess.”

“I understand. I can’t even tell you how nervous I was. Though, not nearly as nervous as I was when I realized you weren’t there. My mom told me that she’d made a point to tell you when I was getting in. I thought it could only mean one thing, that you didn’t want anything to do with me after all.”

“I’m so sorry. If I’d known you would think that, I would have made myself come. I just hoped that what with seeing your mom and everybody, you wouldn’t notice so much.”

“Clearly I need to spend some time proving my feelings to you.”

“Well, we have plenty of that now. We have all the time in the world.”

“By the way, thanks Natalie.”

“For what?”

“For staying here when your family moved away. I know it couldn’t have been easy for you. Maybe it was just because you had already started at the college here, but I know how close you are to your family. I was so nervous after you wrote and told me they were moving that I probably drove my mom crazy begging her for news on what you were doing. I knew that at any time, you might decide it wasn’t worth it and move closer to them.”

“I miss them, but I wanted to be here. Not because of college. Because of you. I wasn’t going to go anywhere until I saw you again.”

Justin’s expression was hard to read, but I could feel the strength of his emotion in the grip he had on my waist. “Natalie, would it be wrong to kiss you in the chapel?”

“I don’t see why.” I laughed a little, “We probably shouldn’t make out or anything, but…”

I didn’t finish what I was saying though because his kiss cut me off. It was firm and demanding, but after a few mind-blowing moments, it eased into the sweetest, most tender kiss possible. When Justin pulled away, he stared down at me, searching my face like he couldn’t look at it long enough.

“You’re sure getting the hang of not being a missionary quickly,” I teased him.

“Yeah, well, this part is easy. It was hard wondering what would happen when I got back. But I knew that if I did what I was supposed to and threw myself into the work, Heavenly Father would make sure everything would work out the way it was supposed to.”

“And you think this is how it’s supposed to work out?”

“I’m positive. And every second I’m with you I’m more sure. How do you feel?”

I thought about how to tell him what I felt for him, and knew that there was only one way to get it right. “Do you remember that song I sent you?”

“Of course. I almost wore out the cd. You were playing it when I came in a minute ago.”

“Would you like to hear the words I wrote for it?”

“Sure. Of course.”

I turned to go to the piano, though Justin kept a firm grip on my hand until I sat down. He only let go because I needed it to play.

The opening notes hovered around us. I played them slowly as I contemplated the way I was about to reveal myself so completely to him. But from the look on his face and from the way he had kissed me just now, I knew it was ok. My words would be a reflection of how he felt as well.

My voice trembled a little as I began to sing, but grew stronger with every word.

“Mornings dawn, one by one

And you’re still far away.

Once again, I stand alone,

To face an empty day.

So many words unspoken,

Our love not yet begun,

One shining hope to pull me on -

Our morning in the sun

Glowing bright, it slays the night

Uncertainty departs.

No more fear, my love is near,

Forever in my heart.”

As I sang the last words of the chorus, I let the chords fade away into silence and lifted my fingers from the keys. I looked up at Justin, who was leaning on the piano. I questioned him with my eyes.

“Why are you stopping?” he asked. “That’s just the beginning.”

“I know. That’s the point. The other verses still have to be written.”

Justin smiled and came around to sit beside me on the bench. I moved over to make room for him, and he put his arms around me. “Well then, I can’t wait to get started on the second verse. I have a feeling that by the time we’re through with it, we’re not going to want to let anybody else hear this song. It might make them blush.”

“You mean, like I am now?”

“Exactly like that, mi novia. Wow. I have a thousand things I want to call you. Mi amor. Mi corazon. Mi reina. Mi amante.”

“I caught most of those, but what were those last ones?”

“I’ll tell you when we’ve finished the second verse, querida. By then, they’ll be true.”