

Embers Left from Earlier Fires

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13739571) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13739571>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/F
Fandom:	Stardew Valley (Video Game)
Relationship:	Leah/Female Player (Stardew Valley)
Characters:	Leah (Stardew Valley) , Original Female Character(s) , Original Male Character(s) , Sam (Stardew Valley) , Elliott (Stardew Valley) , Sebastian (Stardew Valley) , Shane (Stardew Valley)
Additional Tags:	Romance , Pining , Flirting , Friendship , Fluff
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Spring's Invisible Law
Stats:	Published: 2018-02-19 Completed: 2018-11-27 Words: 11,592 Chapters: 2/2

Embers Left from Earlier Fires

by [kingpigeon](#), [ohsocyanide](#)

Summary

Leah Everett moved to Pelican Town in the hopes of finding the peace and quiet that had eluded her for years. Poppy Daniels arrived years later looking for new friends, fresh air, and a place to grow her business beyond what Zuzu City had to offer. Neither of them were looking to fall in love, but who's to say it wasn't looking for them?

This is a prequel story to the events of Literary Pursuits.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter by [ohsocyanide](#)

Poppy Daniels plonked two frosted mugs on a set of coasters and slid the pitcher towards the center of the table before dropping into her side of the booth.

“Poppers and a pepperoni and green olive pizza are coming,” she sighed. She rolled her neck, stretched her shoulders. Her body ached in the best way, muscles sore from stooping and digging and planting. It felt much like her high school days when she played gridball, the general wear and tear of practice leaving her muscles humming with a delicious ache that told her she was doing something right. Tonight, the tension in her back was unbelievable. She would’ve given virtually anything for a massage at her favorite parlor back in Zuzu right about now; with a jolt, she reminded herself that she wasn’t *in* Zuzu anymore.

If things went as planned—Poppies and Posies, that was—she would never go back to Zuzu.

“Perfect.” Micah gave her a grateful smile and reached for the pitcher. He angled the first mug and poured beer into it slowly, foam frothing at the top despite his best efforts. The edges of the liquid froze, frosted up and turned slushy; Poppy accepted it from her brother and took a long drag from the mug.

Poppy licked the foam from her upper lip and dragged a finger through the frost on her glass. “So, you’re leaving the day after tomorrow?”

Micah sprinkled salt on his coaster and set his beer back down. Picking up Poppy’s mug and doing the same, he said, “Yeah, I guess so. Spring break only lasts a week, and gridball signups will be starting soon. I’ve got grading to catch up on, anyways.” He exhaled loudly, eyes drifting around the room before settling back on Poppy’s face. “You sure you don’t want to just come home with me and put the place up for sale?”

Leaving their grandfather’s farm wasn’t difficult or painful for Micah because he *had* things rooting him to their hometown: he taught chemistry at their old high school and was head coach for the gridball team they’d both starred on. He had friends and hobbies that kept him there; Poppy did not.

Poppy soured her face into a grimace. “And do what? Keep operating my shop out of a one-room apartment? You know I can't do that.”

Micah pressed his lips into a thin line. “You *could*,” he argued. “Rent a shop downtown, use the profits from this place to build your business somewhere that people will actually come. The school would love for you to come on as an assistant coach for the gridball team; Yoba knows I could use your help.”

“Micah,” Poppy chided, voice soft. “There's nothing for me in Zuzu. You have your teaching and coaching; you don't want to live with your little sister breathing down your neck. No one would buy the farm, anyways. You said it yourself: who would want to move to a town as small as this?”

He rolled his eyes. “I said that hoping I'd change your mind about coming here in the first place; I wasn't planning on you using it against me in a later conversation.”

“Poppers?” At the sound of Emily's voice, Poppy and Micah looked up. She stood alongside the booth, tray laden with appetizers balanced carefully on one hand. Before they had a chance to respond, she set the basket of poppers beside their pitcher and gave them a smile. “Your pizza should be out in just a bit. Need anything while I'm here?”

Micah shot her a smile and a wink. “I think we're good, but thanks.” He kept his eyes trained on the swing of Emily's hips as she headed for the arcade room before focusing his attention on Poppy once more. “Something else you just said bothered me, too.”

Poppy dipped a popper in ranch and bit into it, chewing slowly. “What's that?”

Micah drained his beer and refilled it. “You said there's nothing for you in Zuzu, which isn't true. I'm there. Joel will be there once he's on leave—”

“Joel's made a career out of the military,” Poppy interjected. “Him coming home to Zuzu is a temporary thing.”

“—and there’s Cath, what about her?”

Poppy snorted. Cath was nice enough, but she was the *last* thing keeping Poppy hanging around in a city that offered her little more than cheap Thai food and sidewalks crammed with cranky tourists. “Cath was a *fling*; we dated for less than a month.”

“I thought you liked her!”

“I like all the girls I bring home! I wouldn’t bring them home otherwise, would I?” When Micah opened his mouth to argue, Poppy held up a finger and added, “Don’t even bring up Christine. That was a one-time deal.”

A laugh burst from his mouth; he spluttered and choked on his beer. “She was my prom date, Pops!”

“I was proving a point!”

“How was taking her home and fucking her proving a point?”

The noise level in the bar stuttered and died at Micah’s shout. A few of the patrons twisted in their seats to get a better look at the two of them; Shane Collins shot an irritated glance in their direction over the rim of his bottle.

Micah gave an embarrassed grin and tipped his beer in Shane’s direction as way of apology. Lower, to Poppy, he said, “I thought you were serious about Cath.”

“She and I spent a little over two weeks together, Micah. I would hardly call that a serious entanglement.” Poppy crunched down on a popper for effect and wiped her fingers on her napkin. “What about your love life?”

“My love life,” Micah said pointedly, “is none of your business. Why would I tell you about any prospective women in my life? You’d either snatch them out from under my nose, or you’d show up to our second date with an annotated list full of reasons why you didn’t like her.”

“I only do those things when it’s for your benefit. The only girls I’ve ever snatched out from under you are the ones who were obviously gay to begin with. Emily’s pretty cute, isn’t she?” Poppy teased. She watched as Emily bounced from table to table, blue hair gleaming beneath the lights of the bar.

Micah narrowed his eyes at Poppy. “We’re not doing this again. When I say my love life is none of your business, that includes your twisted matchmaking attempts.”

“My matchmaking attempts aren’t *twisted*,” Poppy argued. “I’ve got an eye for those sorts of things!”

“Poppy,” Micah sighed, “Going to the nursing home and setting senior citizens up on blind dates doesn’t actually count as matchmaking.”

Poppy drained her beer and swiped a hand across her mouth. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

Micah refilled Poppy’s mug, doubt written across his features. “You may have had *some* successful pairings, but they still banned you from the nursing home. They had to treat nine cases of chlamydia, Poppy. *Nine*, do you not remember that?”

“That’s what I would call a high success rate,” Poppy argued. “It’s important for senior citizens to have an active sex life! I was doing the nursing home a favor!”

“I’m not—”

“Shut up!” Poppy hissed suddenly, kicking at Micah’s shins beneath the table. “There he is, do you see him?”

Micah peeked in the direction Poppy was staring. “Who? The blond at the bar, or the guy with the mustache?”

“The blond. Obviously,” she whispered. “And keep your voice down!”

Poppy and Micah watched as the blond, Sam, leaned against the bar to talk to Gus as he waited for his drinks. He was all arms and legs, wiry-limbed and awkward in a way that told Poppy he wasn’t entirely comfortable in his own skin. Poppy would’ve pegged him as being gay, but she wouldn’t be positive until she spent more time with him.

People and relationships were sort of her forte.

Not engaging in relationships, that was. Poppy loved setting people up, playing cupid, watching the relationship unfold and blossom like the flowers she so dearly loved. She’d gotten more than one wedding invitation from couples who’d gone on a first date at her urging; the height of her romance career had been seeing a couple she’d introduced welcome their first child into the world. Poppy knew all about introducing well-suited individuals to one another, and she’d seen enough of her pairings work out to know she had a knack for that type of thing.

She just... didn’t have a knack for that type of thing when it came to herself. When it came to actually *having* a relationship that lasted longer than it took for a pair of jeans to hit the floor, Poppy was fresh out of experience. The relationships Poppy had tended to short and sweet affairs that were over before they really even had a chance to properly begin. It wasn’t for lack of trying; Poppy had spent the better part of her life dating. It was simply that Poppy had yet to find a person she could see herself settling down with for the rest of her life.

Part of her was horribly, terribly afraid that perhaps she was like their mother, after all.

Things had gone well enough for their parents when just Micah and Joel were around. Dad always said that Mom wasn’t *unhappy*, not really, but she was never quite happy. She did the normal things a mother should do, but she was never all there for them. She was distant, too deep into her own head to ever really connect with the boys.

Poppy's conception had been both a surprise and a mistake.

Forty weeks later, a newborn Poppy was lying in the hospital nursery, her father had gone home to get the boys so they could meet their baby sister, and her mother had signed herself out of the hospital and slipped away as quietly as she could.

They never heard from her again.

A small part of Poppy wondered: what if, like the mother she'd never met, she was incapable of engaging in normal relationships? What if she never found someone to make her happy? What if she spent the rest of her life struggling with the restless tugging at her heart with nowhere to call home?

Poppy hated to admit it even to herself, but she was afraid of being too much like her mother.

"What about him?" Micah asked.

Poppy blinked past the haze in her vision and refocused on the task at hand. Sam was still standing at the bar. He had a beer in his hand; he was laughing at something Gus was saying. Eyes shifting to Micah, she said, "I'm going to ask him to help me on the farm once you're gone."

"Really," Micah said, voice flat. "You think he can help clean that place up?"

Poppy shrugged. "You've been helping me, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but... why him? He's a bit scrawny, don't you think? That Shane guy seems like a better bet."

Poppy paused, body half-out of the booth. Shane was nice enough, but he wasn't Poppy's idea of dependable. His drinking habits were worrisome, and he lacked the spark of creativity she wanted in someone working with her flowers. Poppy was wild and loud; she had a feeling he'd grow annoyed with her entirely too quickly. "He's got that little girl, plus he lives on the ranch with Marnie. He has a full-time job, too. He's got his own responsibilities."

Micah pushed the empty basket the poppers came in to the edge of the table. "Haven't they been taking care of the farm since Pap died?"

Poppy settled back into the booth, equal parts irritated and nervous. She didn't want Sam going back to the arcade room before she had a chance to speak with him. Being told no was one thing; being told no in front of his friends was another. "Yeah, they have been. There's a difference in maintaining the land and running a flower shop, though. I want someone capable of setting up floral arrangements, not someone who can mow the grass and deadhead the roses."

Looking unimpressed, Micah stated, "And you think this Sam guy is the one."

Poppy shrugged. Sliding out of the booth, she said, "It's worth a shot."

Poppy couldn't explain it to Micah. Sam wasn't exactly *built* for farm work, but the one time she'd spoken with him she sensed a kindred spirit. It wasn't just that Sam was bright and loud like Poppy was; she had a feeling there were a lot of things underlying his generally sunny demeanor. She saw the sunshine in his smile, sure, but there was something deeper there, something she felt she could relate to.

There was also the fact that Sam's dad was a military man and currently deployed somewhere unknown. Having a parent at war was a singularly isolating sensation; Poppy knew how it felt, and she knew that Micah would think her silly for wanting to befriend Sam based on that one connecting factor. Sam's dad, Kent, was serving in the very war Poppy and her brothers had lost their father to a little over a year ago.

Really, when it boiled down to it, she desperately wanted a friend in this town, and something in her gut told her Sam could use one, too.

She turned on her heel and headed for the bar. Her hands were sweating; her heart beat hard in her chest. She'd spoken with Sam once before and he was painstakingly kind and more than forthcoming with personal information, but she hadn't been asking him to work for her then.

She *hated* hearing the word no.

Poppy sidled up to the bar and shot Sam a sidelong glance. "Hey," she said, voice coming out a little breathless. "How are you?"

He grinned at her. "Hey, Poppy! I'm good. It's Friday night, so Seb's kicking my ass at pool, but I can't complain. How are you doing? Still surviving on that big farm of yours?"

"Well," Poppy drawled, "Funny you should mention the farm! I actually had a question for you about that."

Sam's forehead scrunched in surprise beneath the backwards baseball cap he had jammed over that ridiculous haircut. "Really? I mean, I can try to answer your question, but you might be better off talking to someone like Marnie. She's been the one trying to maintain it all these years."

Poppy twisted her fingers, sweat-slick palms sliding together. She pressed the toe of her shoe into a whorl in the wooden floor. "I was wondering if you had a job, actually," she hedged. She glanced up at Sam through her eyelashes. "My brother will be leaving on Sunday morning, and it's going to be hard for me to keep cleaning on the farm while I'm fielding orders and doing renovations. Wedding season will be coming up soon, and there's prom season, and I've brought a lot of clients from Zuzu with me. I can't do it alone," Poppy admitted.

Sam licked his lips and reached a hand up to rub at the back of his neck. His eyes shot from side to side as if he didn't quite believe that Poppy was asking him and not someone standing directly behind him. "You're asking me to work for you," he said, incredulity coloring his tone. "You're asking *me*."

Poppy made a show of looking around. They were alone in their own little bubble. No one was paying attention to them; even Micah was distracted by Emily leaning against the side of the booth to talk to him. She nodded. “Yeah, I’m asking you. Who else would I be asking?”

Sam gave a disbelieving little chuckle. “You have an entire town to choose from, and you’re approaching me? I’m probably not even qualified for the position, honestly.”

“Do you like working outside?” When Sam nodded, she added, “Can you work long hours with some weekends?” Sam nodded again, and Poppy shrugged as if that decided it. She wanted to ask *can you handle having a high maintenance friend like me?* but she refrained.

He didn’t need to know that she was targeting him to be her new best friend—not yet, anyways.

Sam took a swig of his beer. He glanced nervously in the direction of the arcade room. “I would have to quit Joja.”

“Yeah, you would. The farm is sort of a full-time operation, and I’m going to need as much help as I can get.”

“And... you’re asking me to work for you. Why?” Sam seemed genuinely confused by Poppy’s choice. It made Poppy sad in a way. Sam wasn’t any less qualified than anyone else she could’ve possibly asked.

Poppy beamed and leaned in conspiratorially. “Call it a gut feeling, but I think you’ll work well with my flowers and me.”

“Well, then, I guess I’ll have to quit Joja. Who am I to question a gut feeling?” Sam smiled. It was brilliant: relief and disbelief all mixed in with sheer happiness at the notion that Poppy was asking him over everyone else in the town to help. It tugged at Poppy’s heart and made her eyes prick; she knew then that she wanted to do everything she could to *keep* him smiling, because he deserved it.

He was going to be her best friend, she just knew it.

*

Micah's last day on the farm dawned bright and clear despite weather reports of rain.

Most of the difficult work had been done over the course of the past week: ground had been cleared of debris and hauled off, land had been tilled and planted, and the shop had been cleaned out and was awaiting Robin's initial renovations.

The farm looked like a completely different place. Perhaps the changes weren't so great—the watering system could use some improvements, and the greenhouse was still in a state of disrepair—but it felt like they'd accomplished a lot over the course of a single week. The rose bushes their grandfather had once planted for Nan had undergone a hard pruning and fertilization; orders had been placed for peonies, carnations, poppies, and lilies; and baby's breath had been sewn in the smallest of the southernmost fields on the farm. Other crops had also taken root over the week. They'd planted mint and lavender, basil and chamomile; Poppy's collection of aloe plants and lucky bamboo had made the trip from Zuzu to Pelican Town as well.

Poppy had set her mind to making this place her home, and it was feeling more and more like a real possibility with each passing day.

She could see it in the little row of cacti plants lined across the window in front of the kitchen sink. She smelled it in the gurgling of the percolator as she brewed coffee each morning. She sensed it in the friendly looks and thinly veiled attempts at neighborly nosiness stemming from the others in town. They were genuinely interested in what Poppy was doing on the farm, and they were excited to welcome someone new to the community. For the first time since she'd left Aunt Millie's house, she felt like she had found somewhere safe and stable enough to call home.

She had the farm and the shop, her book full of clients with pending orders, and she could call on Micah any time she needed. Joel would be harder to contact, she knew, but he was supporting Poppy and the rest of the nation in more important ways.

She had Sam, too, if the Snapchats and texts she'd been receiving since Friday night at the saloon were any indication of their newfound friendship.

Sam had texted her with increasing frequency on Saturday. He had plenty of questions; he wanted to know about the hours he'd be working, how things were going to be run on the farm, what Poppy's favorite flowers were, and if his allergies would pose a major issue. He ended up swinging by in the evening with pizza and a deck of cards; the three of them had sat up until the wee hours of the morning playing different versions of games they knew and swapping stories and personal information. Micah's initial unease at Poppy hiring Sam had dissipated as the evening progressed; by the time Sam left, Poppy had a feeling Micah wouldn't have been happy if she were to hire anyone *but* him.

Things were, in short, going as well as they possibly could be.

Poppy sat at the kitchen table early Sunday morning, knees curled up to her chest as she sipped at her coffee. Micah was still fast asleep; she'd poked her head into the spare bedroom on her way down the hall to count to the steady beats of his snoring.

Poppy basked in the newfound sensations of the slowly awakening house. The washer hummed as it ran on the rinse cycle; the curtains on the window above the kitchen sink fluttered with the slight breeze blowing in. She could hear the birds chirping and identify them by the sounds of their throaty warbles. It was a trick her aunt Millie had taught her; she closed her eyes and tried to distinguish between the songs of the blackbirds and the warblers in her backyard.

A knock at the door broke her concentration.

Poppy opened her eyes and unfolded herself from the chair, knees cracking. She took stock of how she currently looked. She desperately needed a housecoat of some sort; she was wearing one of Joel's ratty army t-shirts and a pair of sleep shorts. She ran a hand across her thigh and made a face. She needed to shave her legs; the thought hadn't even crossed her mind since they'd settled in that first night.

Poppy told herself that if the person at the door was going to judge her for her unshaven legs, that was their problem.

Poppy padded through the living room and unlocked the main door. Someone had jokingly told her that here in Pelican Town, she wouldn't need to lock her doors, but she couldn't bring herself to *not* lock them. Robberies and break-ins had been entirely too common in the city; she didn't think she'd ever get out of the habit of locking and deadbolting her doors.

Poppy opened the door to the single most breathtaking sight she'd ever laid eyes on.

The woman was, simply put, glorious. Her hair was twined into a loose braid that swung past the small of her back, strawberry blonde mingling with goldenrods and a deeper scarlet. Poppy's fingers itched to reach up and tuck the flyaway strands behind her ears. Her body was taut and trim, hourglass waist blossoming into a gentle curve of hips perfect for settling a pair of hands on. Her limbs were long and lean, trimmed with soft musculature; there were splatters of paint across her forearms. An artist—a painter, at that; Poppy didn't know much about art, but she found herself with the sudden urge to learn.

What *really* caught Poppy's eye was her choice of clothing: a sports bra and a pair of white spandex yoga shorts.

Poppy was pretty sure that she was going to spontaneously combust from the way the shorts clung to the woman's lower half. They were tiny, obscene things; Poppy would've considered them more as a pair of boyshort underwear than a traditional pair of shorts. They certainly looked nothing like what Poppy would've worn years ago to gridball practice. Then again, Poppy didn't practice yoga, and she *definitely* wasn't going to complain—not when she was so clearly enjoying the view the shorts allowed her.

“Good morning!”

That *voice*, Yoba help Poppy, it was—it was soft and melodic, painfully kind and gentle. Poppy wanted to hear that voice say her name so badly it ached in her bones. She wanted to hear every word in the dictionary spoken by that tongue because Poppy knew without a doubt that it would sound a thousand times sweeter coming from those lips.

Poppy was pretty sure she was in love.

The woman shot Poppy a concerned smile and took a step forward. She reached a hand out to touch Poppy's arm lightly. "Um, maybe it's... not a good morning? Are you okay?"

Poppy swallowed hard. Right, she was supposed to be talking. She needed to say something witty to catch her interest because Poppy was afraid that their encounter was the first step in this beautiful stranger's leaving, and that was the absolute last thing she wanted to happen. No one could withstand the Daniels charm; it was just a matter of turning it on.

Poppy tried for a grin; she was pretty sure it came out more like a grimace. "I'm—I'm good. This morning is good, too. Wonderful, actually," she managed breathlessly. She reached a hand up to fluff at her curls. They were squished and frizzy from sleep; she dropped her hand. "I don't think I've met you yet. What's your name?"

"I'm Leah. I should know yours, since a new arrival tends to overtake the town, but I'm afraid I've missed it."

Poppy shrugged, feigning casualty. "Most people call me Poppy, but you could call me tonight."

Leah's laughter rang out loud enough to scare the birds from a nearby tree.

Poppy wanted to bask in the sound of her laughter. It was high and clear like church bells on a Sunday morning; the sound was enough to send gooseflesh pebbling up Poppy's arms. Poppy wanted nothing more than to revel in the notion that she'd made Leah laugh—that the single most beautiful noise she'd ever heard was sounding on account of something she'd done—but she couldn't. This was one of those times, Poppy realized, that Leah wasn't laughing because she thought Poppy was being witty or sly. She was laughing because she thought that something Poppy had done was hilariously adorable.

Leah wiped at her eyes, face alight with laughter and happiness. "That was good! I'm probably going to stick with Poppy, but that was really good! Your delivery was nice and smooth; have you practiced that much?"

Poppy felt her cheeks pinkening up. She didn't want to say yes and make herself sound like a womanizer, but saying no felt a lot like telling a lie. She gave another careless shrug. "Mostly just in the mirror," she offered vaguely. "I've been keeping it in my pocket for a rainy day, waiting on the perfect opportunity to use it."

Leah crossed her arms over her chest; the slight line of cleavage disappearing into her sports bra deepened. Brows raised, Leah asked, "Well, I would hate for your skills to get rusty. Opportunity doesn't show itself much in a place like this, you know?"

Poppy had to force herself to look away from prominent peaks of Leah's nipples showing through her sports bra. Pressing a hand to her chest and gasping in mock surprise, she asked, "*What?* You're telling me that there aren't a bunch of local singles waiting for me to impress them with my pickup lines?"

Eyes twinkling, Leah said, "I guess you could say there are plenty of singles around here, but none of them are sitting around waiting for random strangers to lavish them with pickup lines. Most people wouldn't know what to do with them, but you're welcome to keep trying!"

Poppy winked. "It's a good thing I'm persistent, right?" She forked a thumb in the direction of the kitchen, body angling back toward the interior of the house. "Did you need something? You could come in for some coffee; there's a pot brewing now."

Leah made a face. "Thanks, but I don't drink coffee. I actually came up here for a reason, if you can imagine that." Leah flicked the braid over her shoulder and tucked the yoga mat closer into her side.

Poppy leaned against the doorframe, stung by the rejection but still holding out hope. She crossed her arms lightly over her chest. "Oh? And that reason didn't include getting hit on by a local single, I'm guessing?"

"It's hard to believe, but no!" Leah's eyes crinkled at the corners, face soft and happy with the early morning. She had the barest hint of half-moons below her eyes; Poppy had a cream for that somewhere in the house but knew that offering would only make her self-conscious. "I've been using the westernmost field to practice yoga in since I moved to town. No one's lived here for so long, and the view is just gorgeous. I wanted to come up and ask permission to keep practicing there."

Poppy cocked her head to the side, interest sparking at both the mental image of Leah doing yoga (and the flexibility that gave her) and the prospect of there being more land. “There’s a westernmost field?”

“You haven’t seen it yet?”

Latching onto the opportunity she sensed coming up, Poppy answered, “No, I haven’t. What’s out there?”

Leah narrowed her eyes slightly, assessing Poppy. After a few beats of silence, she said, “I can’t quite explain it. How about I show you, instead?”

Poppy felt herself warming up from the inside, a happy glow burning low in her belly. “I would love that.” She stepped into the sandals she’d left on the mat by the door and stepped out onto the porch. Gesturing to the steps, she said, “Lead the way.”

Leah’s lips curved up into a small smirk, but she said nothing. She knew why Poppy was letting her go first: sure, Poppy didn’t know the way to the westernmost field, but following Leah off the porch also afforded Poppy the chance to get a good look at Leah’s ass.

Poppy mentally patted herself on the back for being an opportunist and bounced down the stairs after Leah.

As they walked alongside one another through the fields in front of the house, Leah reached up with her free hand to tug lightly at one of Poppy’s curls. “I like your hair, by the way.”

Poppy lifted a hand to push some of her hair back behind her ears. She knew her curls were messy on a good day, and today was *not* one of those good days. She shot Leah an embarrassed smile. “Thanks. I like yours, too. I’ve always been jealous of people who could just braid their hair. Sometimes I do double buns or I push it all back with a headband, but I’ve never been able to do a braid.”

Leah shrugged. “That’s understandable. You have a lot of hair! I’d be happy to teach you how sometime.” She stepped carefully around a row of tomato plants and added, “I love those cute little double buns girls do, but I haven’t tried them before.”

Poppy paused and crouched down to inspect her herbs. Parts of the small garden were well-watered, but there were still dry patches. She’d need to hand water this morning and take another look at the sprinkler system today. Frowning, she stood back up. “Sorry about that. Why haven’t you done the double buns before?”

Leah kept walking. The trail leading to the westernmost field was just ahead; Poppy wasn’t sure how she’d missed it before. “I’m just so used to my braid, I guess. Before I came here I had a city job, so I never got in the habit of trying new styles. Kel always said—” She stopped abruptly, thoughtful expression shuttering closed at wherever her thoughts had taken her. “I just never thought to try it out once I moved here,” she finished lamely.

Poppy’s frown deepened. She didn’t like the hollow sadness in Leah’s eyes, the quick way she’d detoured from her original train of thought at the mention of Kel. She didn’t want to make Leah sad, so she didn’t press.

Poppy leaned in and bumped shoulders with Leah. The height difference made it so that she was bumping her upper arm more than she was her actual shoulder. “Hey, I’ll make you a deal. You agree to teach me how to braid my hair, and I’ll teach you all the secrets of mastering the double bun. I’ll even throw in using the field for yoga.”

“It sounds like I’m getting a lot more out of this deal than you are. How is that fair?” Leah shifted her yoga mat from one arm to the other and ducked into the pathway leading to the field. Poppy’s hair got caught on a branch; she pulled it loose and kept following.

“The way I see it, you get to practice yoga while you’re wearing double buns, and I get to enjoy the pleasure of your company while I’m learning how to braid my hair. Seems fair to me.”

“Would you want to practice with me in the mornings? Yoga is great for your mind and body.”

Poppy gave Leah's body an appreciative once-over. "I can tell." As Leah laughed and rolled her eyes, Poppy added, "Thanks, but I'm not big into yoga! Contact sports are more my style—lots of slamming bodies, sweat, that kind of thing. I'd be happy to watch you practice, though. As a friend, I would feel much better if someone was watching. What if you cramped and no one was around?"

Leah stepped aside and ushered Poppy forward. "Ah, I never thought of that. You'd take one for the team and watch me practice yoga just to make sure I didn't suffer a cramp? You really *are* a good friend."

They stepped into the clearing where the field was, and Poppy's breath caught in her throat for the second time that morning.

There were sunflowers for *acres*.

Poppy stared out at the sea of yellows and greens, aghast. There were flowers as far as the eye could see. Where there were no flowers, there were new growths: small, infantile sprouts blooming up from the earth and reaching for the sky. It was quiet here save for the soft hush of leaves blowing in the breeze and the steady swaying of the sunflower stalks humming just below that.

"It's beautiful," she breathed. "I can see why you'd want to do yoga here."

Leah smiled. "It really is."

Poppy looked over at Leah. "Does someone plant these every year?"

Leah shook her head. "They crop up every spring, and they last until the first hard frost of autumn."

Poppy took another step forward and traced a finger down the stem of a sunflower. Brow furrowing, she murmured, “It’s a strain of the lemon queen sunflower, but... sunflowers don’t typically bloom in spring.” Poppy knew Pap had, at one point in time, dabbled in mixing strains of flowers. Had he grown a strain of perennial sunflower that survived almost three seasons out of the year?

“I don’t know anything about that,” Leah admitted. “Everyone’s always said this farm has a tendency to flourish, even when no one’s keeping it up. It’s something about the minerals in the land. There’s a guy in town who’s done some testing on the soil composition; you could talk to him. His name’s Demetrius. I just cut the weeds back and make sure there aren’t any bugs eating the petals.”

Poppy’s head snapped up; she turned her attention back to Leah. “You’ve been taking care of this field the whole time?”

“Not the whole time!” Leah corrected her. “Just since I moved here. I’ve had some help, too. It wasn’t anything! I just... hated to see all that beauty go to waste, you know?”

Poppy’s heart squeezed in her chest. “So many wild things have beauty,” she murmured, eyes roving over Leah’s face. “People just... forget to look for it, in lieu of things that are easier or more conventional.”

Leah chewed on her lower lip thoughtfully, throat flushing from the intensity of Poppy’s gaze. “Like roses.”

“Yeah,” Poppy said, “exactly like roses.”

Poppy swallowed hard and turned back to the sunflowers. She cupped a bloom reverently in one hand, admiring the sharp contrast of the brown center with the yellow petals. The field itself was a lot to take in. The sunflowers were an unexpected blessing; she was immensely grateful to Leah for showing them to her. She was doubly grateful to the woman for caring for them for however long she’d been living in Pelican Town. As Poppy admired the blooms and Leah began to unroll her yoga mat, something cemented itself in Poppy’s mind.

The perfect woman did exist, and Poppy was in her presence at that very moment.

Chapter 2

Leah Everett had never been much of a reader. She tried to become one throughout the course of her life, but it had never really clicked. She was too restless, too prone to letting her mind wander. Whenever she tried to get through a book, she could hardly make it past a chapter before putting it down and picking up a new project of her own. When she was a child, her parents had initially worried that it was an attention issue — or, Yoba forbid, an *intelligence* issue — and her teachers had simply written it off as a lack of drive. None of which was the case. Really, Leah just possessed a more tactile sense of creativity. The problem wasn't a lack of interest; it was just that there was nothing like being exposed to good art that made her want to defect and make some of her own. Sitting down and passively taking in someone else's work just seemed like a waste of time.

And so she and her brother had fallen into a happy compromise come high school. She was a restless artist who needed to expand her education, and Evan was a young honor roll scholar who needed to come out of his room once in a while. So a few times a week he would trot out to meet her in her studio (which was really just their parent's shed that they had long since surrendered to their daughter's interests) and read to her while she worked. It was nice. Her attention faded in and out as she pleased, happy just to listen while she mixed paint and tried to bring something worthwhile out onto the canvas.

It was on one of those evenings, with the shed's double doors swung open and a balmy heat pervading the air, that Evan said something Leah would never forget. He was leaning against the wall, legs kicked out in front of himself and turning through Dostoevsky's *White Nights*. Evan was partial to Russian novelists and had been taking his time with the reading. Leah was vaguely following along as always, but for whatever reason just happened to perk up as Evan got to a particular passage.

"For, after all," he read, "you do grow up, you do outgrow your ideals, which turn to dust and ashes, which are shattered into fragments; and if you have no other life, you just have to build one up out of these fragments."

Leah didn't know why, but that set of lines struck at her core in a way that no other pieces of writing ever had or would again. It made sense, really. As a teenager on the cusp of adulthood with no real goals in life beyond making art and being happy, the idea of having to grow out of her interests and values, of having her creativity turn to 'dust and ashes,' was wholly terrifying. It seemed like her greatest fear put to words; one day she would have to stop playing at being an artist, and she would look back at this part of her life like an embarrassing phase.

Of course, she didn't realize the depth of any of that the first time she heard the passage in high school. Back then, they were just words that stood out.

Still, she found herself unintentionally coming back to that passage—that concept—at different moments of her life. Moments when she could feel herself cracking under pressure and hoping desperately that she wasn't making a mistake that would break her into those fragments for good. She would remember those lines when she fell asleep on the couch for the fourth time in a month waiting for Ben to come home without any guarantee that he was going to. She would remember as she opened yet another rejection letter from the local gallery denying her request to display her art in an upcoming showcase. She would remember when Kelly shouted at her loud enough for their neighbors to hear for not taking that unwanted promotion at work. And she would remember as she sat down on the rickety train to Pelican Town and took a deep breath while she waited for it to pull out of the station.

One time, while having lunch in her cottage, Leah spoke to Elliott about *White Nights*. He'd read it, because of course he had, although he didn't remember the particular passage she was interested in. She pulled it up on her phone and read it to him, interested to hear what her author friend had to say about the words that had unintentionally followed her for years.

He thought about it for a moment before saying simply, "It's a nice sentiment."

"Nice," Leah repeated incredulously. "That wasn't my take on it."

"No?" Elliott shrugged before peering out of the windows in front of them. "Personally I find comfort in the idea that even when your life breaks apart you can still rebuild it. Maybe not as perfectly as you'd wished for, but still with the pieces of who you were before."

He didn't say 'just like you did,' but she understood it's what he meant. That, too, was a nice sentiment.

By the time her third spring in the valley arrived, Leah was happy. She was distinctly proud of that happiness, because she knew how much work it had taken for her to get it. There was probably a time in her life when confidence and inner peace came easier, but that part of her personality had long since been beaten down. Ben Langley had seen to that, with his calloused sculptor's hands and constant shroud of cigarette smoke. And then Kel had just piled on from there, always trying to push Leah into being a person she had never wanted to be and getting mad when it didn't take. Leah hadn't moved to the valley for a vacation; it had been a last-ditch, caution to the wind attempt to force herself into being happy. Into being alone with nature and her art and finally trying to see if she could really be the unattached and unencumbered person she'd always pretended to be.

And somehow, thankfully, it had worked.

At some point her serenity stopped being performative. Her art stopped being a side hobby that she always felt the need to justify and became her everything; a day wasn't complete if she hadn't done some work on a painting or a sculpture. She was foraging and cooking for herself, not because Kel wanted a wife who would cook dinner every evening, but because it made her happy to walk outside and be in the fresh air and find food with her own two hands. And she had a friend now—one she never could have had before.

Ben and Kel never had much in common, but they both would have hated for Leah to be friends with Elliott. That thought amused her to no end. He was a bit too smooth and handsome for either of her exes to approve of, and Ben in particular had done everything he could to keep Leah from getting to know other artists. But no one got to tell Leah what to do anymore, and when Elliott arrived in the valley two years after she did, they fell into an easy friendship almost immediately. Leah suspected it was because the best company for an artist was another artist who respected your work with all their heart, and that's how it was for them.

Their schedules coincided with a natural rhythm—sleeping well into the morning, working throughout the day, getting outside when they had the chance, evenings always free. It only made sense for them to do those things together, then. Their frequent shared dinners in the saloon, joint walks through town, and Elliott's penchant for spending the night in Leah's cottage had certainly set some tongues wagging in town, but neither of them cared. They had moved out here in an effort to stop caring about what other people thought, after all. If Leah wanted to have a sleepover with her best friend, she was going to do it.

Which is why Elliott was already there when Leah returned home from the Daniels' Farm. He was asleep when Leah left for yoga, but it seemed that he'd since woken up and decided

that he was content to just wait for her to come back. He was seated by the window thumbing through a glossy hardcover collection of María Izquierdo's paintings. Water for tea was boiling on the stovetop. He looked up as Leah walked inside, flashing her with a quick smile before returning to the book.

"Welcome back."

"Thanks." She kicked off her sneakers and socks and dropped her yoga mat in the grass outside before closing the door. "When did you get up?"

"Maybe half an hour ago? I didn't even hear your alarm this morning; how you were able to wake up so early is beyond me."

Leah smiled and made her way to the kitchen. She glanced sideways at Elliott as she filled a glass up with ice water and took the kettle off the heat for him. "You know I like to catch the sunrise when I'm doing yoga. It's the only time I don't mind early mornings. How's your head?"

"Pounding," he said with a grimace. "Please stop me the next time I decide it's a good idea to drink and edit at the same time. And please destroy... that."

"Not a chance."

The 'that' which Elliott was referring to was a rather pathetic looking painting that was currently slumped against the wall. At some point last night—and about four drinks deep into a late-night writing blitz—Elliott had tossed his papers to the side, plucked Leah's brush from her hand mid-stroke, and declared that he was commandeering her painting and forfeiting his life as a tortured writer to become a tortured painter. Leah might have stopped him, at least for the sake of saving the project she'd been working on for the past few days, but she decided against it. She could never in good conscience pass up an opportunity to watch Elliott try to paint.

Clearly now regretting that decision, Elliott groaned and levelled her with a glare. "Really, Leah, keeping it around to make fun of me just seems cruel."

“Who’s making fun?” Leah insisted, picking up the canvas and inspecting it with a grin on her face. “I love it. I especially like this car parked on top of the mountain. What’s the symbolism there?”

Elliott let out a deep sigh before muttering, “It was meant to be a dinosaur.”

“And this stick figure with the gun standing in the middle of the lake?”

“...William Shakespeare.”

“Holding a gun?”

“*It’s a metaphor.*” He raised his voice to talk over Leah’s increasingly loud laughter. “What happened to not making fun?”

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” she sat back on the bed as her laughter petered out. “Does this mean that you’re abandoning your new mission to put Picasso’s legacy to shame?”

“Did I really say that?”

“Among other things.” Leah turned the painting to the side and cocked her head. “Although really this is more of a Magritte than anything else...”

“Please stop talking.”

Leah chuckled and set the painting down before heading back to the kitchen. “Wine hangovers always make you so grumpy.”

“All hangovers make me grumpy,” he corrected. “It’s the nature of a hangover.”

Leah waved away his attitude and set about the kitchen, getting breakfast ready as Elliott fell back into reading.

“Would pancakes help?”

Elliott grinned, not looking up from his book. “Pancakes have certainly never *hurt*.”

“Well alright then.” Leah turned and hummed to herself as she pulled ingredients and bowls and pans from her shelves, feeling warm and loose from her time in the sun.

“Will you get these going for me in a minute or so?” she asked after a few minutes, tipping the bowl of batter towards Elliott. “The skillet’s heating up, and I need to shower.”

“Of course, but I can’t promise that I won’t burn them.”

“I accept the risk.”

And with that, Leah left the kitchen and made her way towards the bathroom, shutting the door behind herself. She inspected her face and body as she undid her braid in front of the mirror. It was getting warmer out now that spring had officially begun, and there was some extra color pinking at her cheeks and the top of her shoulders from this morning alone. She didn’t tend to burn easily, not like Elliott did, but she would need to remember to put sunscreen on regardless. She was pleased to see that while her skin had paled over the course of the winter, her body had stayed more or less as toned as it had been before the cold hit the valley. Keeping up with her yoga indoors and going swimming at the spa had been worth it, clearly. Not that she was overly concerned with her appearance — the world wouldn’t fall to pieces if she gained a bit of weight. But still, it was nice to see her efforts at being healthy paying off. And it seemed that those efforts hadn’t been lost on someone *else* this morning, either.

Reminded of Poppy, Leah spoke up so that Elliott could hear her through the door.

“I met the new farmer today.”

“Oh? That’s exciting!” Elliott answered. A faint sizzling sound followed, meaning that he was cooking at the stove now. “I haven’t managed to catch her yet, although I met her brother yesterday.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I simply ran into him while he was out for a jog. We didn’t speak for long. His name is Micah, if I remember correctly.”

“I didn’t see him when I was on the farm this morning. Did he and Poppy move in together?”

“No, from what I understand he teaches at a high school in Zuzu. He was only helping her get situated.”

So Poppy was living alone, then. Just like Leah. She wondered what had pushed Poppy to make a move like that; plenty of people thought about packing up and uprooting their lives for a more rustic setting, but very few of them actually did. Leah had done it, but even then she’d only settled into a small cottage, not a sprawling farm. Poppy’s property was huge, almost undoubtedly too large for just one person to fill. Just as a first impression, Poppy seemed like the kind of person who tended to keep herself busy however she could, but she was bound to get lonely sometimes. It would be hard *not* to, with all that space and no one to share it with. Leah would need to make a point of visiting her when she could. It was the neighborly thing to do, anyway.

Elliott opened the bathroom door and reached past Leah to grab a scrunchie. He leaned against the doorway as he pulled his hair back away from his face. “So, this new farmer. What did you think of her?”

“I thought she was nice,” Leah said noncommittally. “Funny. Very gay.”

Elliott stifled a laugh and looked at Leah with newfound interest. “Is that so? And how did you pick up on that?”

“She wasn’t subtle.” Leah grinned as she remembered the conspicuous way Poppy’s eyes had lingered on her body. Poppy hadn’t even made an attempt to hide her staring.

“So she’s interested in you, do you think?”

Leah combed through her hair with her fingers. Her normally straight locks were a bit wavy from the braid, sun, and her sweat. “I don’t know about *me* personally. I get the sense that she’s a generally flirty person.”

Elliott nodded, although he didn’t look entirely convinced. “Micah may have mentioned that, actually.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Not that I’m looking to gossip about a woman I haven’t met yet, but yes. He warned me that she’s a bit... enthusiastic when it comes to pretty women. And there was something about a prom date? I’m not sure. Regardless, he made it seem that she has the capacity to be quite charming with her prospects.”

Leah stripped her sports bra off and pivoted to start the water for the shower. Elliott was still there when she turned around, watching her passively.

“Something I can help you with?” she asked, peeling off her shorts and tossing them into the hamper with her bra.

“I’m just curious to see if worked.”

“If what worked?”

“Her charm,” Elliott said with a smirk. “Your morning session took longer than normal, at the very least.”

Leah rolled her eyes and took a small step into the shower, testing the temperature of the water before getting all the way in. She made a show of sniffing the air. “Pancakes are burning, Elliott.”

“Wh—unbelievable!” Elliott spun around towards the kitchen, closing the bathroom door behind him.

Leah settled into the shower, rolling her shoulders and head underneath the heat of the water. She knew that after stretching her body out this morning and decompressing in the shower now, her whole body would feel completely blissed out afterwards.

And body aside, she felt generally lighter now, having met Poppy.

Morning yoga in the sunflower patch had become such a part of her routine over the past few years, and she’d genuinely worried that Poppy’s arrival would mean the end of that little tradition. Most people might think twice about letting a random woman wander about their property unsupervised, and Poppy would have been well within her rights to tell Leah to find somewhere else to work out. Leah had even feared that the farm being revamped would mean that the sunflower patch was in danger of being mowed over completely—it was Poppy’s property, after all, and she was under no obligation to keep things the way they’d been when her grandfather was still alive. She might have been planning on using the field for planting new crops, grazing space for animals, or even a new building.

After their talk over yoga, however, Leah wasn’t worried anymore. Poppy had been moved by the sunflowers and was more interested in how to take care of them than how to get rid of them. She had come to plant flowers, she told Leah, not weed them out.

Leah was glad that someone was around now to take care of the farm. Marnie and Shane both knew Poppy's grandfather and had kept the place from falling into disrepair in the time since his death. Taking in his animals, doing occasional home repairs, keeping up with the fruit trees—that sort of thing. But looking after all the flowers that he had left behind was something that neither of them had the experience nor time for, which is something they both readily admitted. Leah hadn't thought much about the farm when she moved into the valley, but she had fallen in love with the place almost immediately. Other than Shane and Marnie's weekly walkthrough of the land, the farm was completely abandoned, which Leah had found incredibly alluring. She liked to walk the property to clear her head or use the landscape as inspiration for her art.

And then one morning her wanderings took her to the sunflower patch. Soon afterwards, she bought a beginner's guide to gardening and was on the farm every few days to try to help with the upkeep however she could. No one had asked her to, and she hadn't told anyone she was doing it. It was just something she felt drawn to do, like in her own small way she was honoring the memory and legacy of a man she'd never gotten to meet. Most of the farm's flowers had dried up before she got the chance to work with them, but the sunflowers were made of sturdier stuff. Leah spent the next three years treating the sunflower patch like it was her own: checking for mildew, repairing the wire barriers to keep deer away, buying bamboo stakes to keep the drooping growths upright. She had done her best, but she was well and truly out of her league.

Poppy, however, seemed to know exactly what she was doing. She'd rattled off names of sunflower species like she knew them all by heart, and Leah had noticed that there were already new flowers being planted on the property, despite Poppy only having been here a few days. The farm was no doubt in much better hands with her than with Leah. Although she would miss looking after the sunflowers.

*

The next few days came and went uneventfully. Leah had a number of commissions with approaching deadlines coming up at the end of the month, and getting them done in time kept her cooped up far more than she would have liked. It meant no trips to the saloon, no meandering walks to the beach, no sunrise yoga. Elliott stayed with her for the most part, keeping his head down and working on the novel, but other than that she didn't see anyone.

If she'd been hoping for a visit from a certain curly haired farmer, then she'd gone disappointed.

Not that it mattered, really; it was just past two weeks since Poppy had moved in, and both she and Leah were apparently here to stay. They'd have plenty of time to get to know each other well in the weeks and months and years that followed, so going a few days without some small talk wouldn't kill either of them. Right *now* what really mattered was the fact that Leah was finally done with her commissions. She was job free for the next few weeks, she was out drinking to celebrate, and she had a whiskey-drunk and increasingly dejected best friend sitting across the table from her who required her full attention.

Elliott's frown deepened as he swirled the whiskey in his glass and picked up where he'd left off before Leah had gotten herself distracted. "I just don't know," he sighed. "Maybe I should consider it. I did love her. The only reason the relationship failed was because of me. I could probably love her again if I let myself."

Gisele again. It always came back to Gisele when Elliott was feeling nostalgic and lonely. Leah both could and couldn't relate. She and Elliott came out to the valley for similar reasons—work on their art and move past broken relationships—so she understood the instinct to look back and try to dissect what had gone wrong in your life before. The difference was that Leah didn't once miss Ben or Kel, and Elliott still found himself haunted by Gisele and their broken engagement. It was a reoccurring autopsy of a dead relationship, and Leah couldn't do much for him when he got like this. Just listen and let him ride his emotions out.

"But is that what you want?" Leah scanned his face, sad to see him conflicted like this.

"I want a lot of things," he muttered.

"Okay, but you still ended things for a reason, didn't you? You came out here to be alone and put her past you."

"I came out here to write. And look where that got me. I'm still a shit writer with no book and I'm still lonely. The only difference is now I'm poor and I don't have a fiancé. So what *do* I have?"

Leah didn't mention that Elliott was cursing now, which meant that he had crossed the line from tipsy to all the way drunk. She knew that would only make him more self-conscious.

She also didn't mention that he wasn't likely to ever be *really* poor—not with a family as well off as his was. But that wouldn't actually help either. So instead she pulled her stool around until they were sitting side by side and brought her hand to rest on Elliott's arm. She knew that touch helped to ground him when his emotions were getting the better of him.

“Well you've got a nice beachside view, for one,” she offered. “And you've got me. I'd say that's a pretty good deal.”

“Of course,” Elliott said quickly, “I don't mean to sound ungrateful. It's just this damn letter she's sent me has me all mixed up and—”

Just then, a high peal of laughter cut across the regular clamor of the saloon and drew both Leah and Elliott's attention. Looking up, Leah caught sight of Poppy and Sam Underhill at the bar. They must have been in the arcade room the entire time, or else Leah would have seen them walking through the main entrance. They were leaning against the bar and having a laugh with Emily—the laughter Leah heard had been Poppy's, and Sam was in the middle of saying something that had her wiping away tears.

Elliott perked up as they watched the bar. “Oh, is that the new farmer?”

“Poppy,” Leah corrected. “Yeah.”

Poppy was wearing a pair of form-hugging dark blue jeans and a white tank top that didn't leave any cleavage to the imagination. Her bright red curls were piled on the top of her head, held in place by a floral-patterned bandana. She wasn't wearing a jacket, and Leah couldn't help but admire the toned muscles of her biceps. Poppy clearly hadn't been kidding when she said that she used to play gridball; for a woman that barely cleared five feet tall, she could probably pick Leah up without any real effort.

Leah got a hold of herself as soon as she realized that both Poppy and Elliott were watching her. Poppy winked and waved before elbowing Sam in the ribs and pointing to something on the menu. Elliott, however, only kept regarding Leah with an incredibly self-satisfied grin.

Leah sighed, already knowing what was coming next. “Yes?”

“You failed to mention that the new farmer was pretty.”

“Is she?” Leah asked, playing her tone off casually. “I hadn’t really noticed.”

“You don’t think she is?” Elliott gave Poppy a once-over again before looking away when Sam caught him staring. “She certainly seems like your type.”

Leah laughed despite herself. “And what does that mean?”

“I thought you said you liked women who were—what was the term? *Thick?* ”

Leah choked on her drink at that, and had to wipe away the wine on her bottom lip before responding. “Yoba, please never say that again. Just say curvy.”

“Curvy, then!” he said, louder than was probably appropriate. “Anyway, she saw you looking over there. Now you have to go say hello.”

“Says who?”

“I do. And the laws of neighborly convention.”

“You’re a neighbor. Are you coming, too?”

Elliott shook his head, gesturing vaguely at his empty whiskey tumbler. “I think I’d rather hang back and watch. I’d like to preserve at least some of my dignity and I’ll only fall over like an ass if I get up now. Besides, given my general shitty mood I’m not quite in the mood to mingle right now.”

“Language,” Leah sang as she plucked Elliott’s glass from his hands. “I thought writers were supposed to be able to handle their alcohol.”

Elliott tucked some money into Leah’s pocket for another drink. “ *Good* writers, maybe.”

Leah rolled her eyes before hopping down onto the ground and making her way to the bar. Emily saw her approach and skated past Sam and Poppy, trademark red dress swishing at her knees.

“Another round, Leah, or are you closing your tab?” she asked brightly as she took the empty glasses from Leah’s hands.

“Another whiskey for Elliott and one more glass of red for me, I think.” Leah held out her money as well, which Emily happily pocketed. “After that we’re good to close.”

“Sounds good! I’ll have that for you in just a sec.”

Leah watched her go and leaned against the bar as she waited. She chanced a look over at Poppy and saw that she was already on the way over, leading Sam by the sleeve of his shirt. Leah smiled at them as they walked up.

“Hey there,” she said.

Poppy beamed and pulled Leah into a hug immediately. Her quick movements ended up spilling some of her beer on Leah’s shoes, but she didn’t notice. She smelled like shea butter and lilacs, and Leah resisted the urge to touch her curls like she had the first time they met. “Hey yourself! What are you doing here?”

Leah nodded at the rows of alcohol lining the wall behind the bar. “Oh, you know. Nothing special. Elliott and I just felt like going out; we’ve been cooped up in the house the past few days and we tend to get a little stir crazy.”

Poppy peered across the saloon and looked Elliott up and down. She pursed her lips and took a sip of beer before looking back at Leah warily. “Is he your husband?”

Leah laughed in surprise, although it was hardly her first time being asked about the nature of her relationship with Elliott. Between the mayor, the people in town, and even her own brother hounding her for information, she was more than used to deflecting the question by now.

“No! He’s a friend.”

“You’re sure?” Poppy insisted. “I asked Sam about him when I saw you two over there and he couldn’t tell me *anything*.”

Sam nudged Poppy in protest. “That’s not even true. I told you he was a writer.”

“Yeah, but that’s all you said!”

“That’s all I know! He lives on the beach and writes stuff. I don’t know the guy.”

Poppy shushed Sam and returned to Leah. “Anyway, I just need to make sure. You didn’t mention having a husband when we met, and I’m going to be so mad if you’re married—even if that guy *does* look like a male model.”

“I promise I’m not,” Leah said, trying her best not to smile at how seemingly frustrated Poppy was getting over her nonexistent marriage.

Poppy frowned and adjusted her bandana. “Okay because I want to keep flirting with you, and if you have a husband it’s just going to complicate everything.”

Sam snickered, watching Leah's face as if he was trying to see if she was finding Poppy's line of questioning funny or irritating. "I'm pretty sure she's telling the truth, boss."

Poppy wrinkled her nose. "Gross, I'm not your boss after six." She got up on her tiptoes to flick one of the excessively gelled strands of Sam's hair before turning back to Leah. "Do you know Sam, by the way? He's my best friend."

Leah did know Sam, although she was hard pressed to remember a time that they had ever had an actual conversation. Leah and Elliott tended to keep to themselves, and Sam generally ran with the younger crowd in town. He seemed perfectly nice, but Leah wasn't sure if they would have anything in common to build a friendship on. Her knowledge of skateboarding and punk rock was clearly worlds behind his, and she doubted he had much of an opinion on the pros and cons of working with suar wood.

"Just a friend?" Leah teased, noting the red flush on Poppy's cheeks and chest—she, like Elliott, was well past tipsy. "He's not your husband?"

Poppy thought about what Leah had said for a split second before doubling over in a fit of giggles. So she was a happy drunk, Leah mused.

"No way," Poppy said, stepping away from Sam to stand next to Leah. She dropped her volume as she leaned into Leah's personal space, suddenly serious again. "I'm super gay. Like, really gay. For all women in general and you specifically."

Sam quickly put his arm around Poppy's shoulders and pulled her back from Leah. "Pops, you might want to stop talking." Looking back at Leah, he flashed her with an apologetic grin. "She gets honest when she drinks, I guess."

"That's a good quality."

"You would know. You've got *plenty* of good qualities," Poppy said smoothly, making a point of brushing her fingers against Leah's as she reached for a coaster to set her beer down on.

Leah laughed again and meant to say something in response, but got distracted by the sight of Emily winding her way towards them with drinks in hand.

“Well, looks like that’s my order,” she said as she pushed away from the bar. “It was good to see you both.”

Poppy looked disappointed, but Sam said goodbye cheerily. Leah grabbed her drinks from Emily’s tray and pretended not to hear Poppy loudly whispering to Sam that she was ‘totally gonna tap that.’

If she was blushing when she got back to her table, Elliott didn’t mention it.

End Notes

The only love story better than Poppy's and Leah's is the love story between the two fic wives writing this.

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