Les Bonnes Fleurs

by Phoenix_Falls

Summary

A little Jemily meet cute in a bookshop

Emily dragged her index finger along the spines of the books on the shelf at eye-level gently; barely touching them as she quickly read their titles with her head tilted slightly. She wasn’t in any great hurry either to add to her book collection at home or leave the bookstore. She loved this shop; it was out of the way and had an amazing selection of new and used books. What they didn’t have, they could get. What they couldn’t get just wasn’t obtainable. She had initially been drawn to Busy Busy Busy by their name—a reference to a religion in Kurt Vonnegut’s book Cat’s Cradle—and being an avid Vonnegut fan, she of course had had to step in to take a look.

The place had delighted her and she came back frequently enough that at this point, she knew not just the staff, but the other regular customers as well. Since the shop was in the middle of a small through street, sandwiched between the back outdoor seating portion of a restaurant on one side and an apartment building on the other, it wasn’t exactly hidden but most of the time you had to know it was there to get to it. It didn’t hurt business at all, the place did really well, but it did weed out the gaggles of tourists wandering around the area in the spring and summer which was always a bonus.

Emily’s finger stopped on a book with a rough leather spine but no title on it. Pulling it out gently, the marbled cover announced that it was a copy of Les Fleurs du mal. Carefully opening the book to check the publication date, she gave a small smile at the 1909 printed at the bottom and wondered if she really needed another copy of Charles Baudelaire’s book of poetry. She hadn’t read something in French just for fun in a while so decided to let Baudelaire himself try to convince her by heading off...
to her favourite spot in the store to read a bit.

Her best friend Derek also had an appreciation for Vonnegut and so she’d brought him there a few times and liked to tease that of course her favourite section to ‘post up,’ as he called it, would be where the LGBT+ section started. He was convinced that she chose that spot to read because it was where all the romance and coming out books were. In Derek’s opinion, Emily was just making it easier to pick up women—either they were there to get a little romance in their lives, or there to—how had he put it?—explore. He couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Emily wasn’t on the prowl at all times unlike some people she knew, but she did tend toward meeting any potential dalliances in places she could keep going to after. Clubs, bars, events, places where if or when things went sour, she could still reasonably show up to and not get cornered into a conversation with a woman she wanted to avoid. Busy Busy Busy was a place for her to de-stress, it wasn’t her fault that the benched window seat that overlooked the pretty hedge and flower arrangement separating the restaurants property from the bookstore happened to be in the LGBT+ section. Derek never bought that even though in the six years she’d known him since moving there, she’d never once given her number out at the bookshop save for a few of the employees that she had a very platonic relationship with.

“Hey, Em!” a tall, heavyset employee with beautifully dark skin greeted Emily brightly as she emerged from the aisle she was in. “I didn’t see you come in!”

Emily changed direction from going deeper into the store to go to the checkout counter in order to talk to the woman. “Hey Nora.” Emily greeted, easily returning the warm smile the other woman gave her. “You were busy with someone when I came in and I didn’t want to bother you. How’s Pepper and Zee?”

Nora laughed and shook her head fondly. “I’m gonna tell Zee you asked about the dog before them again.” Emily smirked sheepishly but shrugged. “They’re both good. I’m the one you should be worried about.”

Emily leaned her hip against the counter and set her book down. “Is everything okay?” she asked with genuine concern. Nora was probably her favourite person who worked there.

Nora sighed loudly and tugged at the mass of cotton candy pink curls pulled back behind her head to tighten the ponytail. “Yeah, but remember I said Zee’s sister is coming for a week at the end of the month? Well now I find out this morning she decided she’s coming tomorrow and I am nowhere near prepared for Hurricane Kiana. Plus, Pepper’s mad at everyone because all his meals are smaller and spaced out further until he can learn to stop horking everything down in ten seconds and making himself sick.”

Emily nodded sympathetically. “You could always pick up more hours to get out of the house?” she teased.

“Believe me, I’m trying.” Nora scoffed with a roll of her eyes.

“Let me know if you need to escape for a while, you can always come to my place.” Emily offered laughingly.

The little set of wind chimes positioned in front of the door tinkled softly with the gust of air that blew in caused by the door opening, drawing their idle gaze. A svelte blonde woman who had somehow been able to accomplish perfectly beach waved hair in November returned Nora’s friendly greeting distractedly, declining an offer of help and meandering with purpose towards the back of the store; stopping every few aisles to read the list of genres and sub-genres on the sides of the row of
bookshelves. Emily couldn’t help but watch the woman as she walked by; she may not treat Busy Busy Busy like a potential pickup spot, but that never stopped her from looking. Especially not at a woman who looked like that.

“So,” Nora interrupted Emily’s daydreaming with an amused tone. “I’ll definitely take you up on that and you’re gonna be sorry you offered, but what’re you buying today?”

Emily reluctantly pulled her attention away from the blonde woman who was apparently on a mission and refocused her attention back on Nora, not shy about being caught checking someone out. She picked up the thin book from the counter and turned it to inspect the front and the back. “I’m not sure if I’m buying this yet.” She admitted. “I’ve got a copy somewhere at home, but I’m only half sure it’s even in French and this is definitely a much earlier publication, so.” She gestured with the book towards the back of the store.

Nora nodded understanding Emily intended to go read. “Don’t let me keep you, then! Jonesy should be here to give me a lunch break soon so if I don’t see you, tell him to give you my discount and give Sergio my love.”

Emily chuckled and gave Nora a small wave. “Will do,” she assured though they both knew that while she absolutely would pass along Nora’s affection to her cat, she would conveniently ‘forget’ to bring up any discounts no matter what she bought. The LGBT+ section in Busy Busy Busy was near the back of the store and Emily had to refrain from looking through the piles of books left by other customers on scattered seating she passed on her way back; knowing that if she weighed herself down with books right now, she wasn’t going to read anything.

Rounding the corner into the aisle where ‘her’ seat was, Emily stalled for a second on noticing the blonde woman considering a shelf level with her chest, one hand shoved in her back pocket and the other tapping on the spines of the books as she read the titles, one corner of her lower lip being worried between her teeth. The woman looked up on feeling someone else’s presence and offered a smile which Emily’s mouth fixed itself to return automatically.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Emily said, gesturing past her toward the window seat. It was one thing to invade someone’s space to read a book if you were there first but another thing entirely when you were the one intruding. Especially given the particular subject matter she had to have been looking at. Emily didn’t care about anyone’s queer erotica habits and mostly, anyone buying it didn’t care either, but there was a chance this woman was about to come out or newly out and Emily didn’t want to spook her; she knew how nerve racking that could be “S’kinda my spot.” She explained before pointing a thumb behind her “but I can sit someplace else if you,”

“Nah, by all means.” The woman replied, tilting her head towards the cushioned bench. “As long as you don’t mind? I might be here a while.”

Emily shook her head and made her way to the bench. “Overwhelmed?” she asked kindly, guessing that the woman was not there for the romance novels and hoping the simple question would let the blonde know she was safe.

The woman sighed and pivoted on her heels to face Emily as she sat down. “If only!” she scoffed with a laugh, surprising Emily.

Emily set her book next to her and made no move to get situated or open it, she could tell when someone wanted to have a conversation and far be it from her to ever deny a beautiful woman conversation. Especially not one who’d made it just as clear as Emily had that she was safe. “Yeah, I guess once you’ve read one gay bodice ripper, you’ve really read them all.”
The woman chuckled and moved closer to Emily in order to lean against the bit of bare wall between the window seat in front of her and the bookshelves behind her. “Oh, you’re a bodice ripper connoisseur then?” she asked with a raised brow.

“Gaybodice ripper.” Emily corrected with a chuckle.

The woman rolled her blue eyes toward the ceiling. “How foolish of me to forget!” she playfully chastised herself.

Emily lifted one shoulder and rested her weight on one hand behind her. “Personally, if it’s not gay, I’m not interested.”

The blonde woman grinned and flicked her gaze over Emily appreciatively. “What if ‘it’s’ bi?” the woman shook her head and spoke again before Emily had a chance to even process the blatant flirtation let alone respond to it. “I’m Jennifer,” she seemed mildly surprised that she’d introduced herself that way, made apparent when she corrected herself to add “everyone calls me JJ.”

Emily smiled, glad that she wasn’t the only one feeling flustered. “Emily.” She replied, resisting the urge to reach out and shake JJ’s hand. Growing up an Ambassadors daughter had made the impulse second nature and she frequently had to remind herself that she wasn’t expected to do that in casual social situations. Emily gestured to the shelves behind JJ. “The real good stuff is on the other side.” She assured.

JJ glanced behind her like she’d forgotten why she was there. “God, I wish I was just buying graphic softcore pulp.” She admitted. “At least then I’d know what I was doing.”

Emily raised her eyebrows with a smirk and JJ blushed prettily, seeming not to have intended that the way it sounded. “Maybe I can help?”

“Really?” JJ looked hopeful for a moment before shaking her head and rocking back on her heels. “I can just go ask up front, I don’t want to impose.”

“You’re not. I’m here so much I may as well work here and anyway, I offered.” Emily reasoned sincerely. “If you’re not over here for the smut, then for the coming out material? I hope I don’t offend you by saying so but you seem incredibly comfortable with yourself.” Emily remembered what a mess she’d been once she came out to herself and she had been just a teenager. JJ looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties and while Emily had been out pretty much since she accepted that’s who she was, in her experience with women who came out later, the uncertainty and anxiety seemed to be pretty inescapable no matter your age.

JJ laughed, sharp and surprised and Emily found herself smiling simply because she loved the sound. “Oh not me.” She explained once her amusement was under control. “Half the town knew I was bi by the time I was starting high school. I couldn’t have avoided coming out even if I wanted to.”

Emily’s expression softened. JJ had said it jokingly, but she could tell there was real pain and resentment there. “That can be rough.” She sympathized.

“I definitely love that after 21 years everyone’s mostly given up on still calling me GayJ.”

Emily cringed. “Low hanging fruit.” She agreed. “So who are you looking for coming out materials for?”

JJ crossed her arms and huffed, pressing both her shoulders to the wall but turning her head so she could still look at Emily. “This is going to sound ridiculous.”
Emily raised her eyebrows expectantly and motioned with her free hand for JJ to continue.

“So I have this friend,” JJ started after considering for a moment whether or not she wanted to elaborate. “He’s more like a brother really, and he’s bi too, right?” she waited for Emily to nod that she was following. “It’s been pretty obvious to literally everyone but him though. You know, at first I thought that he was just really shy about coming out, but sometimes, okay a lot of times, he way overthinks things so the obvious sometimes escapes him. Last week, finally after years knowing him, it dawns on him that he’s definitely not as straight as he previously assumed.”

“Little bit of panic?” Emily asked genially.

JJ chuckled and shook her head. “Not even a little; he’s more annoyed he hadn’t been analyzing himself often enough to come to that conclusion earlier. But he’s very much the type of person who has to research everything. He’s got all the facts and figures down, those are like a comfort blanket to him so he goes to those first but I feel like he should at least have some humanities approach. So I’ve been trying to find him some coming out stuff that’s, you know, not academic but also not geared towards teenagers or parents. I’ve probably been to thirty bookstores between last week and now.” She exhaled forcefully and uncrossed her arms to make a helpless gesture. “I remembered seeing this place once when I was at the restaurant next door so I figured it couldn’t hurt to look.”

Emily nodded, smiling as she stood up and needlessly invaded JJ’s personal space to move past her to the bookshelf, squatting slightly to get at one of the lower shelves. “You should try this one.” She suggested, pulling a book out and handing it to JJ as she righted herself.

“The Bi-ble.” JJ read amusedly from the purple and white cover. “Cute.”

“The woman up front,” Emily started to explain while JJ flipped interestedly through the book. “Nora, said someone ordered it a few months ago but never came to pick it up. I haven’t gotten the chance to look at it myself, but Nora says it’s great and she’d know better than I about good bi materials. She said that she’d wished she’d had that kind of access to the experiences of bisexual people when she was coming out and at least one of the contributors is a medical professional so hopefully there’ll be some technical language your friend can connect with too.”

JJ smiled brightly as she closed the book. “This is perfect, actually. Thank you so much, I totally owe you one.”

Emily smirked to cover up the fact that she was suddenly very nervous. “Can I hold you to that?”

JJ bit at her bottom lip, seemingly trying to stop herself from grinning as she pulled out her phone, unlocked it and handed it to Emily with the new contact screen already pulled up. “Put your number in and I’ll make sure you do.”

Trying to repress her own grin, Emily entered her name and number, checking thrice that she hadn’t somehow forgotten her own cell number before handing the device back to JJ. “Can’t wait.” She said softly, watching JJ stare at her phone for a moment like she was trying to unnecessarily commit the number to memory before slipping it back into her pocket.

“Thanks again, Emily.” JJ said, holding up the book and now fully grinning. “I’ve got to get going, but I’ll talk to you later.”

Emily nodded, not quite trusting herself to not say something embarrassing so she gave JJ a small wave and watched her disappear around the corner to the front of the store to pay. She sat dazedly on the window seat, picking up her forgotten book and looking through it distractedly before the nervous energy settled in her stomach and she became engrossed in poems she hadn’t thought of in
Emily had just decided that she was going to buy that copy halfway through the poem “À celle qui est trop gaie” when her phone buzzed quietly in her pocket. She set the book down carefully and checked to see what the alert was about; smiling and quickly opening the message when it was a text from a number she didn’t have saved.

“It’s been about thirty minutes,” the text read. “so I’m pretty sure this counts as ‘later.’ You were probably thinking coffee or something like that, but I’d love to take you to dinner. Are you free on Saturday? –JJ”

Emily was giddy as her fingers skated across the screen forming the reply that she would be available and asking what kind of food JJ preferred. Derek was never going to let her hear the end of this as he was undoubtedly going to take the encounter as confirmation of his teasing assessments of why Emily stuck to the window seat, but it would certainly be worth it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!