### Summary

Sebastian’s outgrown Pelican Town. Socially, mentally, professionally. He just needs to figure out how to take the plunge and move away. But the new girl in town offers him something he never expected and suddenly the Valley doesn’t seem like such a bad place to be.

### Notes

Alright guys, so I was putting together all the one-shots I have outlined and realized that like maybe half of them are from Sebastian’s perspective, so I thought I might as well combine them into one thing.

It's not going to be just a rehashing of The Way through the Woods from his perspective (though there will certainly be scenes from the original story), but more of a series of interwoven one-shots about Sebastian in general.

Updates on this are probably going to be extremely inconsistent. I've got some original projects that are taking precedence right now (or at least need to be lol), but I can't get enough of this damn fandom lol.
Two Meetings

It’s the kind of shit night only Sebastian likes. Chilly, his breath billowing out in front of him even though it’s already late April. Damp, the clouds heavy with rain, threatening but not following through. The moisture hangs in the air, not moving, not even the hint of a breeze

Nights like these always seem especially dark to him, like the stars have been swallowed whole by the sky. Like the stillness in the air has stopped time completely. He feels like he could become part of them, nights like these, sometimes imagines his hair like dark strings pulling him up toward the sky. It might be so easy, to disappear into the darkness. He could go anywhere then, any place the sky touches he could go.

Sebastian can hear Sam and Abigail's voices through the crack under Sam's bedroom window and wonders how long he can drag this cigarette break out before they come looking for him. It makes him feel old, to think like that. These are his friends for fuck's sake. But he is old, older than them at least. And lately, it's been feeling like that's more of an issue than it ever used to be. Like the few years between them have suddenly grown, swelling with the experiences they don't have yet, the feelings they don't seem interested in processing yet. Big, adult feelings. Feeling like look a lot like despair. Ennui. He can't seem to manage to crawl out from under them these days.

He saw Shane on the way over, coming off his shift at Joja and looking like the kind of beer-bellied, alcoholic nightmare they’d all feared in high school. Looking very much like the Valley had gotten the best of him. His jacket frayed at the edges, a couple days of unkempt stubble on his cheeks. It made Sebastian want to run home and check his own face in the mirror. To look for signs that this godforsaken town had gotten its hooks in him too.

They're the same age, him and Shane. Birthdays so close they used to share them. Big parties in the town square. Evelyn's cakes and colorful balloons from Pierre's when Joja was just a company that sold soda. Shane would always dive in first, dragging his fingers through the soft, white shelled border of frosting on the cake, eager and laughing. Sebastian would watch him quietly, separate out each sprinkle by color, eat them in groups. In the background, his mother would be watching, arms crossed, looking so worn and tired. He would later come to recognize that look on his mother’s face. See it mirrored back every time he receded from conversation at the dinner table, every time he went off to the city for a few days. Concern. Possibly despair.

So, yeah, he hadn’t wanted to see Shane tonight. He'd backed up on the path when he saw him, dreading the idea of forcing a conversation. What would they even talk about? Definitely not their jobs, hell. Their love lives? Not fucking likely. The whole thing is making him feel depressed just thinking about it.

He ashes his cigarette in the grass beside Sam’s back fence and is debating whether or not to light another when he hears a pair of voices coming from the Saloon. It’s no surprise when Emily comes barreling out of the bar, all swirling color and loud laughter, but he’s never seen the girl who comes down the steps behind her and that, in a town this shit and this small, is news. With a quick backward glance toward Sam’s window, Sebastian lights another cigarette and slips past the fence toward the public garden, careful not to make too much noise. Not that he could compete with Emily. The girl with her seems slightly overwhelmed, strung along behind her. Shell-shocked. That’s the word he’s looking for. She looks shell-shocked. Not that he can blame her. Sebastian can hang with most things but listening to Emily go on and on about her esoteric flavor of the month is sometimes too much for even him.

Emily says something Sebastian can’t make out then throws her arms out like she’s hugging empty
air. The girl beside her now nods a little loosely and the sight makes him chuckle. He knows all too well the strong tide she’s caught in with Emily. A new friend then. Probably someone from those music festivals Emily’s always going to in the desert, though the girl doesn’t exactly look that type. And as he watches them head west out toward the bus stop it occurs to him that this might be the new girl everyone’s been talking about.

She certainly isn’t what he expected. He’d been imagining a younger Marnie type. Stout and substantial. Maybe a little corny. Who else would be hardy and naïve enough to take over a dead farm in a dying town? But she’s a slip of a thing, this girl, at least in silhouette. A few inches shorter than Emily. Willowy, he amends, when he gets a better look at her. Not quite scrawny, but like a strong breeze might blow her away. Definitely not like a girl working on a farm.

He catches her profile when the two of them duck under a street lamp. The shadows fall into the hollows of her cheeks, her delicate cheekbones catch the light. Pretty, he thinks, even though he can’t see the finer details of her face. And sad. The thought surprises him. He takes a few long drags of his cigarette and turns back to face Sam’s house. What kind of creep is he? Skulking in the shadows. He doesn’t fucking know her. Sad? Yoba, where does he get off? He flicks his cigarette into the darkness, its glowing tip carving a trail of light before it hisses in the wet grass. When he turns back to look at them, the street light is catching on the curve of her back. She’s in a thin dress that hangs low off her shoulders, it skims the tops of her long, pretty legs. It’s a summery dress on an almost wintery night. She looks freezing.

“Yo!” Sebastian nearly jumps out of his skin. Sam’s hanging out of his window, hair a wild mess, grinning like an idiot. “Whatcha lookin’ at?”

“Hell, you’re gonna give me a fucking heart attack.” Sebastian brushes his hair from his face, his fingers trembling.

“Sorry old man, just wanted to know if you’d bolted.”

Sebastian stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “What? A man’s not allowed to take a smoke break?”

Sam taps his watch. A bright, plasticky thing he won in an arcade the last time they all went to Zuzu together. “Been 45 minutes.”

Sebastian runs his palm heavily down his cheek, massaging his jaw. “Alright, alright. I’m coming.” He glances back over the fence. The town square is empty, like they were never there. Just the crickets out now.

*                                 *                                   *

It’s exactly the kind of weather Sebastian loathes. So hot even the birds can’t be bothered. He’s sweated through his button down, heat just rolling off his body in waves. The shade he’s found at the edge of the meadow is meager protection against the blazing sun.

Sebastian shifts on his feet. His socks are wet, the soft soil underneath giving under his shoes, wet and muddy from the rain all last week. He wishes, at least a little, that it would swallow him whole. It’s been a hell of a day already. He’s finally, at the age of 27, managed to dodge the actual flower dance. Hiding on the periphery while Lewis searched furiously for him. Now he’s three glasses of sticky punch in and trying to figure out why the hell he wasn’t brave enough to just ditch the whole event entirely.
Abigail’s been shooting him mournful looks from the snack table since the dance broke up, her
dad hovering too close for her to break away and make her escape. Sam’s disappeared completely.
Penny with him. Sebastian cannot imagine fucking in this heat, much less fucking anywhere near
this shit show of a festival. Sebastian scans the meadow again, fumbling in his jeans for his
cigarettes. Lewis is gonna give him a hell of a lecture, he can practically feel it in the energy in the
air, and he sure as fuck isn’t in the mood. If he can just hold out for another hour, he can slip away,
dodge Lewis for a few days until the old man forgets all about it. No harm, no foul.

He’s so laser-focused on keeping Lewis in his peripheries that he doesn’t clock her approach,
doesn’t notice her until she’s right in front of him. The new girl. Shit. He’d pretty much forgotten
about her, but now, weeks later, the night he first saw her comes rushing back. Sebastian’s first
impulse is to flee, like a skittish preteen boy. He scratches at his neck and nods when she says hello,
trying to keep it the fuck together. She looks different here than she did that first night. Like the sun
has warmed her up from the inside. He figures that chilly night out by the Saloon was a one-off, that
he’d projected his own malaise onto her. Maybe she is the bubbly, corny girl he’d imagined she
would be, just in a smaller package.

Even if she is, though, there’s something at least a little appealing about it. She has a big smile,
the kind that brightens her whole face. It’s practically contagious, his own lips betraying him as she
speaks. Yoba, he could look at her smiling at him for fucking hours. He’s so busy looking that, at
first, he doesn’t hear what she’s saying. It takes him a beat to piece together what she’s asked him.
“Not much of a dancer?”

She’s got a fleck of goat cheese stuck to her bottom lip. They’re pretty lips. The top one thicker
than the bottom, prominent cupid’s bow, like she’s pouting even when she smiles up at him. She’s a
mess of faint freckles and long lashes. Cute, actually. Very cute and Sebastian feels suddenly out of
place. He doesn’t do this, not here. Not in Pelican Town. Here he’s watered down, a thornier, sadder
version of himself and it feels, terribly, like his two worlds are colliding as she stands here in front of
him. He can tell immediately that she’s from the city. Her slang, the upturned lilt in her voice. The
way she holds herself, the easy way she teases him. Even her name. Joni. Like some seventies rock
star. She must think he’s some kind of hillbilly, a real fucking local. He never could wash that
backwoods twang out of his mouth completely, no matter how many hours he spent practicing in the
mirror. Some of his exes thought that was charming. And he can usually play it off that way, but he
needs a different backdrop. If he’d met her in the city, this would be different. Easy. But the same
hokey music is playing on Lewis’ old record player, the same faces he’s seen his whole life milling
around the same goddamn table cloth they’ve had since the seventies, since he was a kid. All his
charm goes right out the window.

He lights a cigarette. “I don’t see you out there.” He winces. That was harsh. Why does he always
have to be so harsh? But it doesn’t seem to faze her and that sits oddly in his chest, just a pinprick of
something off. He takes a better look at her as she settles in beside him. He didn’t notice the circles
under her eyes before, so deep they look almost like bruises. The rest of her face is so bright, so
pretty, it’s a shiny lure, drawing attention away to the obvious fatigue hanging over her. The corners
of her mouth twitch down when she looks off into the distance. She’s looking, but not really seeing.
Her shoulders slump, almost imperceptibly.

He wonders what this all looks like to her, all these things he’s chaffed under for so long. Does it feel
like freedom? Or a trap? It sure as hell must feel new. She notices him watching and pulls herself
back into a smile, back upright. He should say something. He wants to say something. Where is she
from? Why is she here? He’s about to open his mouth, when Lewis’ familiar silhouette appears by
the table, his features blotted out by the sun. “I, uh,” he ashes his cigarette. She’s watching him
carefully. She’s got quick, clear eyes; their color hard to pin down in the bright afternoon light. “I’ll
see you around.”
He’s gone before she can even respond, heading quickly down the narrow, rocky path to the beach, stopping only when his shoes hit sand. When he looks back up at the meadow, she’s watching him. He can’t imagine what she’s thinking. Fuck, she probably thinks he’s such a dick. He is such a dick. When she waves, just a sad limp little gesture, his chest hurts. Hell, she probably just wanted someone to talk to. He raises his hand. A peace offering.
Ink

Chapter Summary

Sebastian tells an old friend about the new girl on his mind and his plans to flee Pelican Town seem suddenly complicated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim’s shirtless next to the chair. He killed the air-conditioning when the shop closed and now it’s sweltering, condensation rolling down the front windows. It’s just them. The rest of the artists left hours ago. The light at Tim’s station a solitary beacon in an otherwise dim tattoo shop. Every so often, the shop’s sign will blink neon, casting a column of red light right down the middle of the concrete floor. It’s a good quiet in here. Just the steady hum of the tattoo gun, the soft lull of the radio, his own breathing. He’s bent over Sebastian’s thigh, a few beads of sweet roll from his forehead onto Sebastian’s bare skin, staining where they meet the rolled up edge of his jeans. “Like Joni Mitchell?”

“What, the singer?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess. Hadn’t really thought of that, but sure.” It had just slipped out when he sat down. The new girl. The one he couldn’t really seem to avoid. He’d been chewing on it the whole ride into the city, the wind whipping him raw, his hands stiff by the time he pulled up to the shop.

Tim wipes his brow with his wrist, the black medical gloves he’s wearing riding up on his palms. “She look anything like her?”

“Joni Mitchell? Um, I mean not really?” Sebastian wracks his brain, trying to remember the face on the records his mom used to love to play for his dad when he was young. “Yeah, no, not at all. Listen, that’s not the point.”


“Hey! Focus.”

Tim chuckles. “I am focused. I am pouring all my focus into your thigh right now.” Sebastian settles back against the chair, fingers knit behind his head. Tim rolls his neck and gets back to work. Sebastian grits his teeth when he rolls over a particularly sore muscle, closing his eyes, and breathing hard through his nose. “So you like her?”

Sebastian opens one eye. “I don’t know if I like her. I just…she’s interesting. More interesting than anyone else in that shithole town, at least.”

“Whatever happened to uh…”

“Amy?” Sebastian offers.
“Yeah, Amy. I thought you guys were a thing still.”
That had been an easy breakup. Barely a breakup at all, just a few halting phone calls and then
nothing. “Not for like almost a month. Do you even pay attention?”

Tim laughs. “To your women? No, not really. What happened with Amy? Did we talk about
that?”

“Not really, no.” Sebastian sighs. “It just, you know, kind if fizzled out.”

“Long distance is a bitch.” Sebastian winces, exhaling loudly when Tim hits a sensitive spot on
his thigh just so. “You good? Need a break?”

“Break would be great.” Sebastian grits out. He sits up and stretches, his neck popping when
he releases his shoulders. Tim sets the gun back in his tray and wheels his chair backward to fish
around for some beer. He tosses a can to Sebastian and the sound they make when they both crack
them open is immensely satisfying. A clean sound. Sebastian turns on his hip to get a better look at
the tattoo in progress. It’s a hand. Simple clean, just a black and white outline. Slender fingers
pointing down toward his knee, two arrows shot clean through the palm. He likes its look. It fits
nicely next to the pinup just a little higher on his thigh. A mermaid, her thighs joined in a shapely tail,
her hair a tangle of seaweed. Bedroom eyes, motioning with a single finger to come closer. His first
real deal tattoo. The first one Tim ever did on him. Kind of corny, when he thinks about it.

“So when are you moving up here anyway?” Sebastian just shrugs, mussing with his hair. "I
mean, shit, you're here enough. You put so many fucking miles on that bike it's no wonder you're
always having to tinker with it."

"I like to tinker."

"Yeah, yeah, but come on." Tim rolls his chair down toward Sebastian's knee, changes the angle of
the gun. Sebastian grunts at the change in sensation. "There's a half dozen people just in this
neighborhood who'd be more than fucking happy to let you squat at their places for a while. And
I know that tech shit you do has you pulling more than enough cash to find a room."

"Wow, very tempting. And maybe even a couple of those places don't have bed bugs."

"Don't you live in a basement? In your mom's basement?"

"Oh, fuck off."

"Just saying, man. You're lucky you're so damn handsome." Sebastian frowns, remembering a
lumbering, hunched Shane making his way through the darkness toward Marnie's ranch. Is that what
Joni sees when she looks at him? Just another Pelican Town stereotype. His mom's basement, holy
fuck. "So Joni."

Sebastian kneads the bridge of his nose. "So Joni."

"What's she like?"

"Pretty."

Tim snorts. "Your soulmate. I'm sold already."

Sebastian sneers at him, but mostly he's just trying to buy himself some time. He doesn't really know
how to describe her if he's honest, or the strange way he can't help but be drawn to her. It's her
energy, chaotic, simmering just underneath a barely placid surface. Sometimes when he looks at her
she seems almost stoic, unbothered, other times she seems on the brink of crumbling completely. But he'll sound like Emily if he starts talking about energies. He'll sound fucking crazy. "Honestly, I can't even tell if she's interested."

"So why are we talking about her?" Sebastian's mouth snaps shut. Why is he talking about her? "What about girl you hooked up with last weekend? You're welcome, by the way. Got fucking no sleep on my shit couch while you pounded her into my mattress."

"Holy fucking Yoba. You are such a-"

"I'm just saying! Sounded fun. Sounded like she was especially enjoying herself."

"You're such a pig."

"Hey now!" Tim laughs, feigning offense. "I was generous enough to grant you the use of my humble abode for your carnal needs."

"Yeah, well thanks, but it's not like I could've taken her back to fucking Pelican Town."

Tim points his tattoo gun at Sebastian. "The crux of the problem, no?"

Sebastian huffs. "I'm working on it."

"I'm sure you are. So what about her? She was cute."

"I'm not talking about her."

"No, you're talking about some girl you met in a town you've been trying to leave for years." Sebastian frowns. That's true, isn't it? True and dumb. "She stuck in your craw then? Figured something was up. You only ask me for these big pieces when something's eating your lunch."

"That's not true."

"I can tell the story on every tat I've given you."

"So you do listen." Tim winks. "She's just interesting. I find her interesting."

"A good lay?"

Sebastian's cheeks feel suddenly hot. "We haven't...it's not like that."

Tim pauses. "What, seriously? You waiting to ask her to prom?"

"Oh fuck off, for real."

"She must be really interesting then."

"I'm not a scum bag."

"No, you're not, but you're not exactly saving yourself for marriage." He frowns. "Wait, is she or something?"

"No, no definitely not. I heard through the grapevine that she was hooking up with someone else in town." Tim shoots him a look. "It's done now. I checked."

Tim rolls Sebastian's legs a little over, changing the angle. "So what's the deal with this girl?"
It's hard to explain to him, really. There's no easy shorthand for the wild way Joni's moved into the Valley, the way she'd yanked it up from the roots. It's a small ecosystem, even the smallest ripple can upset the balance. But Tim's from Zuzu. Tim's never even been to Pelican Town. He can't imagine how wild it was that Joni didn't have a clue Robin was his mom. That she was there, right there in front of him on that well-worn back path and she knew nothing, nothing, about him. But he tries to convey that feeling. Best he can. Tries to convey the way her cheeks went pink when she fumbled over offering him iced tea, like she knew she was supposed to do that but didn't know exactly how. The way the field in front of the farmhouse looked thoroughly manhandled with absolutely not one single living plant in sight. The way she watched him as he worked, watched his fingers on the spokes of her bike. When she asked him if programming was woodworking. He'd felt like he was playing a part. The handy country boy come to save the wayward city girl's day. The role chaffed him and yet...

When she'd found him out in the rain a few weeks later, he'd felt like he could set the record a little straighter. Be a little more like the man he'd been cultivating in the city. But she'd still kept him off balance., watching him quietly in the cool darkness, shivering and soaked. She'd looked so small in his coat, blushing silly and embarrassed when she confessed she was out looking for clams. I don't even like clams, she'd said, a little self-deprecating, a little wry. When they'd split a plate of fries at the Saloon, she'd taken him apart piece by piece with her gaze. For what? To find out what?

"So, she's a mystery, then, your girlfriend."

Sebastian comes so hard back to the room that Tim puts a warning hand on his thigh, needle still buzzing away on his skin. "Cut it out. It's not like that. We've barely even talked. It's not a thing."

Tim scoffs. "Not a thing? You just spent two hours telling me about her?" Tim kills the gun's power, runs a cloth across Sebastian's tender skin. The hand has taken shape nicely. Rimmed in red now, but clean. Should heal up good. Tim leans back and takes a long pull from his beer. "Not a thing, my fat ass."

Sebastian sighs and takes a few stalling sips from his own beer. "She's just...there's two sides to her, I think. And I'm just trying to figure them out."

"So she's fake?"

"No! No, not that at all. I just..." He considers for a moment what he's trying to say. Tries to figure out if even he knows what he means. "She's kind of dark. Sort of. Like sometimes she'll just say something and it will be so grim. Which like, if you'd gotten one look at her, you'd understand why that's shocking as shit to hear come out of her mouth."

"Oh yeah?"

"She's like sunshine, man. Absolutely bottled sunshine."

"Ho-ly shit. Are you in love with his chick or something?"

"What?" Sebastian shakes his head. "No, cut it the fuck out."

"I'm being serious. Like sunshine? What the fuck are you even talking about? Come on."

Sebastian sits up, flustered. "She's got fucking freckles across the goddamn bridge of her nose. Who has that!? You come on!" Tim's laughing now, leaning back in his chair. "Whatever, laugh all you want, man. She's just so sweet looking, but when she opens her mouth it's like...and sometimes she
just gets this look in her eyes...I don't know, shit, I don't know what I'm saying." He slumps a little in the chair.

"You sound fucking smitten, my dude."

"You would be too, shit!" Sebastian sits back up, suddenly heated. "Her hair does this like," he wags his fingers vaguely, "this like flip thing."

"Like what? Like curly?"

"I don't know, no. Like wavy, I guess. But loose. I don't know what they call it." He sighs, rubbing his temples. "She's got fantastic legs. Don't know if I mentioned that."

"Ah ha! Now I get it." Tim pulls his legs up in the chair, a mischievous look in his eye. "She's a mysterious pair of legs. Your dream girl."

Sebastian practically growls at him. "Stop." Then he sighs again, all the energy bleeding out of him. "It's not even about the way she looks."

"What's it about then?"

"I think she's like kind of fucked up. Like pretty clearly."

"Ah, there it is. Your type. Now he's honest." "No, stop." Sebastian fumbles in his jeans for his cigarettes. "I shouldn't have even said that." His fingers are clumsy with the lighter and it takes him three tries before it springs to life. "I don't know that about her. It's just...who moves from the city to fucking Pelican Town?"

"Someone who's running away."

"Yeah, exactly."

"So what? You gonna swoop in and rescue her?"

Sebastian scoffs. "No, no. Fuck that. She doesn't need me to swoop in. I just...I've never met somebody like her, okay? She's just...she's fucking layered."

"Everybody’s layered."

Sebastian deflates, taking a long drag from his cigarette. "I know. I know, okay. Maybe I’m losing it."

"Maybe you are. Let’s drink about it." Tim pauses, then points at Sebastian with his beer. "Even better, Let’s eat about it."

Sebastian smiles, shaking his head. What a fucking idiot. What a carefree, wonderful idiot. He feels released. Like maybe all he needed to do was laugh about it, get some fucking sense talked into him about it. He looks out at the street beyond the shop's glass storefront. Across the way, a laundromat, a Chinese place, a bodega. All neon and fluorescence. Buzzing loudly with light. People sit on stoops, swapping beers and smoking cigarettes. A few groups head hurriedly down the street, onto places even more interesting. This is what he wants. *This. This is what he's wanted for as long as he can remember.* "That pizza by the slice place a block down closes in thirty. You in the mood?"

"Yeah," Sebastian stands and rolls the leg of his jeans back down, "yeah, I'm in the mood."
Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading you guys <3.
The Long Sleep

Chapter Summary

Surprise! Joni isn’t the only messed up motherfucker in Pelican Town.

Chapter Notes

TW: description of violence, description of death, grief, implied self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are more words for grief in Greek than there are in English. It’s the first thought Sebastian’s had in two days that’s stuck. All the others have fallen soundlessly into the pit that’s opening up inside of him. A brutally effective black hole. Why are there more words for grief in Greek than there are in English? Is that even true? It’s a question he’d ask his dad and, for a moment, he glances at the casket. He imagines himself crossing the distance and knocking gently on it’s hard, shiny top. Papa? Papa? I have a question. He was just here, really. They just talked. The breath from his lungs is probably still hanging in the air around them, the heat of his body still radiating from the seat of his truck.

The priest makes a sweeping motion with his hands, says something that Sebastian can barely hear over the roar in his own ears. Suddenly, everyone is standing. Sebastian watches them blankly, head swiveling around on his neck to take everyone in. The whole town is here. His mother reaches down to tap him on the shoulder, to help him to his feet. He follows weakly as they file out of the temple, the sky too bright when they come out from under the awning. It’s so big and so perfectly white, like a sheet of ice. A few tufts of grass poke their heads out of the melting snow, green somehow, still alive even though they’ve been buried. Sebastian finds them reassuring. They all form a circle outside the temple and wait, until, like the guest of honor, the casket rolls slowly down the path. When it rolls past him, the priest stops it and his mother’s hand lays flat between his shoulders, cold and clammy. “Say goodbye to your father, Sebby.”

All the blood is his body screeches to a halt. He looks up at her like she’s gone insane, swivels around to look at everyone else. You’re all insane! The buzzing in his ears has become an incredible roar. He wants to duck under the casket and run onto the road. Race beside the river until the forest rises to meet him. He can hear the calls of winter birds, of the ice on the river cracking, that sharp, clean sound. And there, there, he’ll find his father. His real father, not whatever they’ve stuffed this box with. You shouldn’t just run off like that, Sebastian, his father will say to him, it isn’t polite. His accent is so thick and dark, so different than anybody else in town. He’ll smile, but since you’re here, and then he’ll reach out. His fingers warm, still moving, still good for holding and grasping and keeping Sebastian’s hand safely in his. Sebastian’s heart aches, it aches. He wants to topple the casket, wants to pry it open with his bare hands. It’ll be empty, won’t it? This was a trick! A lie!

He starts to wail, can’t help it, screaming like a wounded animal, his hands fist at his sides. He doesn’t sound like himself, doesn’t sound like anything he’s ever heard in his life. His mother is stony with shock beside him, like she’s been for days, and it’s Caroline who swoops in. Shane told
him once that she was a witch, her blonde hair just a little green. She always smells faintly like chlorine. Caroline straightens her jacket and kneels in front of him, pulling her tightly against her chest. *It’s alright, she coos, it’s alright little one.* That only makes Sebastian cry harder. Everyone has been talking to him like this, their voices so soft. Everyone seems too upset; no one seems to be as upset as they should be. Suddenly, from across the path, Shane starts crying. Like crying is contagious. Big, fat tears roll down his cheeks, his chest stuttering. Sam is crying too now. He’s just a baby, grasping for Jodi’s hair, his face twisted up in a way that makes Sebastian feel even worse, feel even sorrier for himself. Soon, Abigail starts to sniffle, toddling over and pulling at the hem of her mother’s skirt. All these people he’d forgotten were here. The walls around him for days shattering as the Valley comes back into clear focus, all the people who’d looked at him differently just days ago now staring with those sad, sad faces. He hates them, in this moment, hates their pity. That they are here at all worse than the casket in front of him. He pulls away from Caroline, scrambling back onto the cold ground, sobbing open-mouthed and all the rest of them match his pitch. They sound like a pack of dogs, all yowling. Robin has her fingers so tightly on her temples that it looks like she’s trying to hold her head together.

“This is my fault,” he tells his mother quietly on the drive home. The words have been rolling around inside of him for days, but now that he’s said them out loud he feels even worse. Worried suddenly that his mother will agree and then…and then…and then what? He glances over at her. She’s motionless, face betraying nothing, and he keeps talking just to fill the horrible silence that’s sitting thick in the truck. “If I hadn’t asked him to go…” Then what? The tears come easily, like he’d never stopped crying to begin with. He wipes his running nose on the sleeve on his dress shirt and his chest lurches. He feels like he’s tipping over, like he’s on the downswing on a rollercoaster, and soon the tears become sobs. He’s choking on his snot, chest heaving, voice choked with emotion. “If we just stayed home, if we…if, if-“ Robin kills the engine right in the middle of the road. Sebastian has to brace himself on the glove box to keep from hitting his head, but it has the desired effect. He’s stopped crying, stopped gasping for air. He sits frozen with fear in the passenger’s seat, hands clutched at his chest.

Robin lets out a long, slow breath and scraps her hair back a little too hard with her fingers. “Seb.” She takes another deep breath then closes her eyes. “Sebastian. None of this is your fault. Sometimes…sometimes…” She pauses, hands back firmly on the wheel. “Sometimes bad things happen and…” She sighs. “This is stupid. I don’t need to fucking tell you this. You’re fucking living it.” Sebastian flinches. He can’t remember if he’s ever heard his mom say a bad word before.

He tells her so and she sighs again, resting her head softly on the steering wheel. “Mom?” His voice sounds so small, like he’s a baby. She doesn’t reply, just taps her head lightly on the wheel once, twice, then she sits up, eyes clear and very blank. The engine sputters and when it finally roars to life Sebastian feels like he’s falling, feels like he’s crested over a very steep drop, his stomach flipping all the way down.

Sebastian wakes up freezing and, for a moment, he can’t move. His breath sits shallowly in his lungs. His blanket is in a pile at the end of his bed. His shirt is caught around his neck like he’d tried to wrestle his way out of it in his sleep. When feeling returns to his arms, he runs his hands down his body, trying to make sure he’s all in one piece, making sure he hasn’t just dreamed the last 22 years. He half expects to feel the body of a little boy, is almost surprised when his hands find the tender skin of his newest tattoo. Just a dream. A hell of a fucking dream though. Yoba. A slow stream of memories.
Every joint in his body cracks when he stands. He’s brittle like an old man, still in the dream’s chokehold. Sebastian feels blindly for the carton of cigarettes on his bedside table. He lights one before he shrugs his shirt back on. He takes a few long drags, shuffling toward the room’s single narrow window, high up where the wall meets the ceiling, and presses his forehead against the room’s cool, stone wall. The smoke from his cigarette wafts out into the night air. He won’t be able to get back to sleep now, not under his own power at least. His heart is thumping high in his throat, his skin chilled and clammy. He stubs his cigarette out on the wall and throws a sweater over his shirt, feeling his way through the darkness up into the hall.

Sebastian nods to Maru as he pads into the kitchen. She’s rubbing the sleep from her eyes at the kitchen table, pushing oatmeal around in a bowl. She’s already got a pot brewing and Sebastian leans against the kitchen counter, taking a few deep breaths. The oven clock blinks four in the morning. “You up working?” She asks between mouthfuls.

“Had a nightmare.”

“Oh.” She blinks owlishly at him through her glasses. “Do you, uh, want to talk about it?”

“Nah.” The maker dings and Sebastian scrounges a couple of mugs from the cabinets. He hands her one. She accepts it with a small smile. “Thanks though. You heading to work?”

“Yeah, full shift today. Off at three.” She sighs. “Harvey’s got me on the desk.”

There’s something in her voice that catches his attention. “Oh yeah?”

Maru doesn’t take the bait. She just shrugs, frowning a little. “Will you be home around dinnertime tonight?”

Sebastian takes a few sips of coffee. It burns his tongue. “Should be, yeah.”

She smiles, just that soft, dreamy smile she’s had since she was a baby. It makes him feel soft too and for a second he almost asks her to play hooky, to just spend some time together. But she’s already got her purse swung over her shoulder. “Cool. I’ll see ya.” Maru adjusts her uniform, tosses her half-finished bowl into the sink.

Sebastian follows her out, stopping on the porch as she piles into her shitty, little red Datsun. They wave at each other and he watches as her taillights disappear toward town. He takes another deep breath, trying to wake his body up, to shake off the last remnants of the dream. It had been so vivid. So true to life. He lowers himself down onto the top step and hangs his head. His mouth feels dry and cottony; the food he ate last night feels like it hasn’t digested at all, feels like a rock in his gut.

Alex’s grandfather was the one who dragged Sebastian’s father out of the woods. Mr. Mullner. Before his wheelchair. Another life changed in an instant. Isn’t it funny how everything is so goddamn fragile? Sam’s dad helped him. He was probably the age Sebastian is now. Wild to think about it like that. They’d pulled him out by the arms, hands under his shoulders, his father’s feet dragging behind him. His shirt was dark and wet from the blood pouring out of his mouth. In Sebastian’s memory, his jaw looks only half-hinged. A weak spray of crimson leaves the gaping hole of his mouth as he tries to speak, or maybe breathe. In his memory, his mother is running down the path toward them, screaming. In his memory, someone scoops him up and hides his face. He can’t remember who, their face lost in a rush of sound. They smelled like cinnamon and vanilla and faintly like cigarettes. Sebastian decided a long time ago that it was probably Evelyn, but he’s never asked her. Sometimes, when Robin asks him to run an errand down to the Mullner house, he’ll stand at the
threshold, biting his tongue. If he speaks it, it’ll become real again. All of it. Real for them. For him. Sometimes, in that doorway, he’ll catch a whiff of that scent and his stomach will turn.

He doesn’t remember what happened. The hard parts. The real shit. Not really. Just a noise. Loud like a firecracker. A smell like burning, then metallic like sucking on a coin. And then he remembers running. The forest stretching on forever, his little legs pumping harder than they ever had, his chest burning with cold air. He remembers landing hard on his knees in the middle of the town square, looking down at his snow pants, caked with ice, heavy with blood. He remembers screaming, howling, the world slowing to a stop around him. Demetrius told him once that he should go to therapy, that it might help him unearth some of those memories, make them clearer. It was during one of their forced, halting father-son chats, if Sebastian remembers correctly. Probably their last, actually. Why the fuck, Sebastian had said, young and angry. One eyebrow pierced with a safety pin, a frayed jean jacket heavy with patches. Why the fuck would I want to remember that. Demetrius had sat totally stunned, mouth gaping. Sebastian was always so hard on him. Too hard on him. He was just a guy in love with his mom. Just a guy trying to fill shoes he couldn’t even begin to understand.

Sebastian can hear him fiddling around in the study they’d converted into his lab all those years back. He won’t come out onto the porch now, not with Sebastian out here. They give each other wide berth. Hell, Sebastian gives almost everyone in this town wide berth. He smokes one cigarette, then another. A line of light has begun to rise over the treetops. His head hurts. His sinuses, really. Like his whole face is going to pulse off his head. It's going to be one of those days, he can tell. Blue days his mother started calling them when he was a teenager, after her own blue days had faded away. He has two websites on the docket. One nearly done, the other just bare bones. He can put a dent in them until the sun rises, take a few sleeping pills to keep the dreams at bay, and wake up when it’s dark again. Maybe then he’ll feel better.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading and commenting guys <3
Joni smells like grass. Grass and soil and the faint funky sweetness of flowers crushed underfoot. And she fits so well against him, the crown of her head just at his collarbone. It’s only when she wriggles in his grip that Sebastian realizes that he’s holding onto her, that he’s touching her for the first time. He pulls away from her like she’s burned him and the town square comes back into focus. It’s a bright summer day. Not a cloud in the sky. His groceries are on the cobblestones, spilling out from the plastic bag. He looks back up at her, trying to piece together what the fuck just happened. His words die on his tongue and he reaches out, almost on instinct. She seems unsteady, weaving a little as she ducks out of his reach. “Whoa hey.” She flinches at the sound of his voice, a disturbing development, so he tries to soften it, leans down so they’re a little more level. He doesn’t want to loom. “Hey.” Joni wipes furiously at her cheeks, a sweet little blush blooming across her cheekbones. He frowns deeper when he notices how red and puffy her eyes are. The soft waves of her hair are flying around her face, disheveled and messy like she’s been worrying them with her fingers. And she’s shivering, somehow, goosebumps racing up her arms, even though the day is comfortably warm. He takes a few experimental steps toward her, finger twitching. He wants to touch her again, wants to brush her wild hair from her face. He shoves his hands in his pockets instead. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Her voice is hoarse, like maybe she’s been shouting. She sniffs, a pathetic sound that hits him right in the gut. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She turns quickly away from him, nearly tripping over a loose cobblestone as she goes.

He reaches out, fingers grasping air. “Hold on, Joni! Hey!” But she doesn’t hear him, or decides not to, stumbles off toward the bus stop. His hand hangs in the air, pointing toward her, until he brings it roughly to his side. He watches her head down the path, holding herself tightly. Like a child might. Her long legs poke out of the bottom of a shabby raincoat she has draped over her shoulders. He narrows his eyes to get a closer look. Is that Marnie’s jacket? It envelops her. Wait, why the fuck is she even wearing a jacket in this heat? Sebastian shields his eyes from the sun, looking hard at her, dread roiling in his stomach. He can see a couple dark bruises on her shins. They could be from anything, hell they’re probably from farm work, but seeing them makes his heart hurt. Sweet girl like that shouldn’t feel the way she’s feeling. Holy motherfucking Yoba, what the hell is doing thinking like this? Tim’s face flashes in his mind. What a dumbass smitten fool he is. He doesn’t even know this girl. He glances back up. The light catches on her hair as she walks, bright and splendid in the sun, and he can’t bring himself to look away. Zuzu seems suddenly a whole
world away, vague and distant. He watches her until she disappears over the crest of the hill, them
whistles to himself, like the sound will clear the air. Goddamn, he’s thankful the square is mostly
empty, that there wasn’t an audience for whatever the hell this was. Sebastian crouches down to
gather up his spilled groceries, putting them gingerly back in the bag. He wants to run after her,
wants to tell her she doesn’t have to go home alone, that he’ll walk her and then…then what?
Sebastian kneads his temples. Shit, he has a headache. Running into Joni had, weirdly, soothed some
of the tension in his neck and shoulders, eased the pounding in his head, but it’s come rushing back
now that she’s out of sight. He’d been up all night, working. Watched blearily as the sun rose,
smoking one cigarette after the other, feeling like the biggest, gloomiest piece of shit in the Valley.
Sebastian wonders, as he swings his bag of groceries over his shoulder, if maybe Joni was up all
night too. If that’s why she’s so unsteady. It’s probably wishful thinking. That would mean they have
something obvious in common, something they could talk about. Fuck, he’s mostly just wondering
what made her cry.

His mother’s voice startles him. “Sebastian?”

He sits up straighter, eyes sweeping the table. All three of them are starting at him. “Sorry, um,
I was just, uh…” he swallows hard. “What were you saying?”

“I said did you hear about Shane?” His mother has a tone of voice reserved specifically for bad
news and she’s laying it on heavy now.

Sebastian braces himself, an old reflex. “What about him?” Everyone at the table seems to be
holding their breath. A look passes between Maru and Demetrius. “Shane’s in the hospital. The big
one out in Moonsilver.” Robin shakes her head, taking a few bites of her food. “I can’t believe you
hadn’t heard. It’s been all over town.”

“What? Why?”

Maru cocks her head at him. “Are you still friends?”

“Shane and I? No, I mean, no really.” Sebastian sets his silverware down. “Wait, I’m sorry, did
you say he’s in the hospital?”

Robin frowns, picking at her food with her fork. “He tried to kill himself.”

He looks from Robin to Maru then back, trying to read their faces. This has to be some kind of
fucked up inside joke. His mouth is bone dry. “What?”

“Hung himself, actually.” Demetrius offers, quickly backtracking. “Er, um…sorry that was…”
Robin softly pats his hand. He swallows hard.

“Marnie found him.” Robin pushes her plate away from her and leans back, arms crossed.
“Swinging from the rafters in the barn.”

“Fuck.”

“No kidding. Thank Yoba his little niece didn’t find him. Heard Marnie sent her outside to play
after she found him, then tried to cut him down. Can you imagine? Horrible. Just awful.”

“But he’s okay?”

“He’ll live if that’s what you mean.” Robin crosses her leg, bouncing her foot. “Sounds like it
was a brutal thing to stumble upon.”

No shit. He tries to imagine it, but each time his mind shakes the image off. Awful, just fucking awful. And of all people. Sebastian’s pretty sure their graduating class would have pegged him to be the most likely to swing from a high beam, not Shane. Though when he remembers the way Shane shuffled home all those weeks ago maybe this isn’t all that surprising. That night feels like ages ago. Almost another life. It’d been the first time he’d ever laid eyes on the new girl. Wait. Joni. Sebastian does the mental math, tries to remember how far the farmhouse is from Marnie’s ranch. Not far, he doesn’t think. He flexes his stiff fingers, his dinner all but forgotten. “Was Joni there?”

Robin furrows her brow. “I’m…not sure. Why?”

“Um,” Sebastian wipes his lips with his napkin and stands, “no reason. I’m gonna, um, I have some work, so…” He picks up his plate and nods in their direction, “thanks for dinner.”

“She passed out.” Abigail’s whispering over the phone, probably worried her dad can hear through the thin walls of their house. “Just,” Abigail whistles like a falling missile, “whomp. Landed in a raspberry bush, so I guess she wasn’t like hurt hurt, but…”

“So she was there? At the ranch?”

“Yeah, yeah. Like after the ambulance shows up.”

“So, she didn’t find him?”

“I don’t think so?” Sebastian exhales, a little relieved.

“Wait, the new girl?” Sam’s connection is noisy. Sebastian imagines him sprawled out on his bed radio playing, tv going, phone laying loosely on his ear. “Is that who we’re talking about right now?”

“Yeah dude, so shut it.” Sebastian lights another cigarette. He’s been pacing since he picked up the phone, the cord wrapped tightly around his arm. “How do you know all this?”

“Leah told me.”

“Oooh, talking to Leah.”

“Sam, fucking shut it. Abi, what happened?”

“Yoba, you’re wound tight.” Abigail hisses into the phone.

“I don’t know why you guys aren’t. Someone almost died.” They both go quiet. Fuck, he didn’t mean it like that. Didn’t mean to make it about that. “Abi, just, what did Leah tell you?”

Abigail clears her throat, sounding a little like she’s treading carefully. “Well, I mean, you know that Joni and Shane were like, I don’t know, doing a thing, right?”

“Well, it’s definitely over now.” Sam snorts.

“Dude, what the fuck.”
“Yoba, Sam, not cool.”

“Sorry, sorry. Just trying to lighten the mood, shit.”

Abigail clears her throat. “Anyway, they haven’t been a thing for like a month or so, I think. I don’t even think they were like a thing thing actually.”

“Who cares.” Sam yawns.

“I do. Now can it.”

“Ouch. You’re mean when you’re lovesick.”

Sebastian huffs, putting his cigarette out in the little ashtray on his bedside table. “I am not-“

“God stop it! Both of you, fuck. She’s fine alright. Why are you even asking?”

Sebastian scrapes his hair back with one hand. “Did Leah say if she was home now? Back at the farmhouse?” His mind is winding up. What had she seen? Yoba, did she need anything?

“You’re not gonna go see her are you?”

“No, no, I…” He drops his cigarette into the ashtray and spots a book on the end table. One he just finished. One he liked. That would be thoughtful, wouldn’t it? Something to keep her mind occupied. That would be nice, right? His mind snaps back to what Abigail’s just said. “Wait, why shouldn’t I?”

“You holding out on us, Sebby?” Sebastian hears Sam open a chip bag close to the phone.

“Yeah, wait how well do you even know her. I thought you’d just hung out a couple times?”

“I’d hardly call it hanging out.” Sam crunches, mouth full. “They just like stand next to each other sometimes..”

“We’ve talked.” Sebastian says defensively. “And shit she’s probably out there all alone at the farmhouse. When I saw her she looked-“

“Wait you saw her.” Abigail’s voice is a little louder now, he can tell she’s moved over to the window or maybe Pierre’s gone out for a smoke.

“Yeah, today. Out in the square. She’d been crying.”

“Poor girl.” A pause. “And she’s probably not alone. I bet Leah’s there. They’re pretty close.”

“Well, still…” He chews his thumb. He glances at the book. It’s long. Something to really dig into. He tries to remember if anyone kills themselves in it. He doesn’t think so. “Listen, I’m gonna go.”

“Sebastian are you seriously going to-“

“Ha! Go get ‘em, tiger.”

“Fuck off.” Sebastian cradles the phone with his shoulder, pulling on his sneakers, “I’m just gonna go check on her is all. Just, you know, be neighborly.’

“Be neighborly.” Abigail sounds incredulous. “What kind of small-town bullshit is-“
“Listen, I’ll see you guys tomorrow at the Saloon okay?” He puts the phone down a little too hard on the receiver. His room seems suddenly very dark and very quiet. He weighs the book in his hand, chewing his lip. What the fuck is he doing? What the actual fuck is he doing? His keys jingle as he picks them up.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys <3 <3 <3
Chapter Summary

16-year-old Sebastian is a terrible babysitter.

Chapter Notes

I know that Maru has been way, way in the background in this universe, but I just wanted to explore the relationship between the two of them a little bit. I'm thinking she might factor in a bit more in later stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“What are you watching?”

Sebastian leans back until his neck strains over the arm of the couch, looking at Maru upside down. On screen a man is buried in sand to the neck, the tide inching closer. He’s screaming, but not convincingly. “Something scary. Not for you.” A steady rain hits the windows, distant peels of thunder sound, drowned out mostly by the tv.

Maru frowns. “Why not for me?” Sebastian slumps back down onto the couch. He takes a long drag from the joint he’s been nursing, then feels blindly for the ashtray on the coffee table to put it out. “What’s that?” She comes around the couch until she’s blocking half the tv. Her glasses magnify her eyes, they make them look too big for her face. Her Rainbow Brite shirt is too big too, hanging down past her knees. She nods at the joint. “What’s that?”

“Not for you.”

This time a little angrier. "Why not for me?"

Sebastian groans as he sits up and clasps his hands between his knees, eyeing her. Puberty had hit him like a train six months ago. Shot up nearly a foot so quickly he now has the faintest silvery stretch marks beside his knees. He's growing muscle too, fast and easy, completely rearranging his lanky, scrawny sense of self. He's still wary of it all, wary of the parties he finds himself invited to. Wary of his newly minted driver's license and his mother's certainly guilt-induced permissiveness when it comes to his social life. Wary especially of the girls who suddenly want to talk to him. Who maybe don't even care if he can't string two words together without stuttering and losing his cool because they just want to touch him. To be touched by him. He'd been with a girl only a few hours ago, a cheerleader from his high school, lives just the town over, and he's still feeling that sort of rush of guilty panic that comes after every time he fucks. Still the newest, most exciting, most terrifying part of him. He still smells like her body spray, chemically fruity, almost metallic. Sebastian feels suspiciously and uncomfortably like a man. At least Maru still treats him she did when he was still an elementary schooler, doubling down with her frown. "I said why not for me?"

"You asked." He corrects. "And because you're a kid."
"I'm not a kid! I'm seven!"

"Seven is a kid."

She narrows her eyes at him. Backlit by the tv, she looks tiny. "You're not that much older than me."

"I'm a lot older than you. Shouldn't you be in bed?" It's an idle threat, one she doesn't even acknowledge.

Maru glances back to the television set. On screen, the same man is underwater, gasping for breath, his head rimmed in hokey red. "I won't tell mom that you let me watch."

He grins. "I know you won't tell mom, because you're not a snitch, right?" She nods vigorously. "Exactly, but you still can't watch. It'll give you nightmares."

Her nose twitches. "I'm not chicken."

"It's too scary for you."

She puffs up her chest and blocks the whole tv with her body. "If you let me watch I won't tell mom that you had that girl over tonight."

He cocks his head and presses mute on the remote. "Oh yeah?"

"I won't tell her what you were doing."

"You don't have a clue what we were doing."

"Yes, I do!" She shouts, offended, "you were kissing and I saw it!"

"Alright, alright. You got me. We were kissing. Don't tell mom." He makes room for her on the couch, patting the spot next to him. "You're a regular politician. Just don't come crying to me when you have nightmares." She scrambles up, overly pleased with herself. Maru sits up rod straight, hands folded almost politely in her lap, watching the show intently. Sebastian leans back, he can't hide his grin.

By the time the credits roll, Maru's fast asleep, cheek pressed hard into Sebastian's arm. An episode of Tales from the Darkside is up next and Sebastian mutes the theme song, all organ music and screeching bats and cackling. He lifts her up carefully, trying not to jostle her, and heads into the hallway. Mom and Demetrius won't be home until the early afternoon, and Sebastian hopes that the pizza he ordered will hold him and Maru over until then. It's congealing in its box on the kitchen table.

Sebastian's toeing open her bedroom door when Maru stirs. She pushes away from his chest, wriggling in his grasp. "Bed." He says sternly.

"Wait, wait. I want to show you something."

"It's midnight, kid."

"I want to show you something." She whines. "It's cool." She looks up at him and then pouts.
"Come on."

He sets her down and takes a few steps away from her. "Okay, show me."

"We have to go outside."

He looks over his shoulder down the dark hallway. The only light the blinking tv screen, it flickers coldly on the hardwood floor. "It's raining, Maru."

"Not anymore."

She sounds so sure that he goes to the kitchen window to check. She pads barefoot after him. The night looks clear. The sky filled with stars. He glances back at her. She has her hands clasped in front of her, pleading. "Fine, fine, okay."

"It's called a globular cluster." She looks excitedly up at him. "I read that this one will only be visible for another month."

Sebastian squints up where she's pointed. "It's a star."

"It only looks like a star because we can't see it right. If we had a telescope you would be able to see it better."

"What would it look like?"

"Like thousands of stars all packed really tight together."

"That sounds..." he squints up again at the little speck of light, "really cool actually."

"I think your dad’s up there."

Sebastian looks slowly over at her. "What?"

"Why wouldn’t he be?"

Sebastian laughs. "I guess that’s true." He plops down on the porch’s top step and Maru does the same, mirroring him.

"Do you talk to him?"

Sebastian nearly chokes. He looks at her from the corner of his eyes. "My dad?" He frowns, shifting a little on his legs. "Maru, my dad…” He purses his lips. She knows, right? Yeah, he remembers these conversations. All four of them around the kitchen table. Sebastian sulking beside his mother, Demetrius looking like he might like to bolt. Maru had cried a lot when she found out and that had made Sebastian love her so fiercely the force of it had scared him at first.

She interrupts his thoughts. "I read a book about energy in the stars. There's also energy in people. Did you know that? Have you thought about maybe if he’s there or not? Like as energy, I mean.” Sebastian stays quiet. “It’s something to think about.” His heart feels swollen, his throat tight. These are all emotions he wants nothing to do with and he tries his best to swallow them whole.

“You’re smart for a kid.” He rummages in his jeans for a pack of cigarettes. "Don’t tell mom I’m smoking and um…” he angles his head away from her as he exhales, “don’t breath in.” Maru laughs. She sounds older than she should. Older than he sounds sometimes. “You’re too smart for your own
good.” That doesn’t seem to register with her, she’s too busy looking at the stars. Had he ever been like that? So weightless? So easily distracted? He takes a few long drags. Probably not. He’s been fixated since the day he was born. On anything and everything. Brow furrowed and frowning even in his baby pictures. He rolls his shoulders. He's done enough thinking for tonight. “Do you know all the constellations?”

“Yeah, of course.”

He smirks. Yeah, of course. Sebastian leans back. The air smells clean, like the rain washed everything away. The moon seems dwarfed by all the stars out tonight. “Do you want to tell me about them?”

She smiles. A dreamy big smile that he couldn’t mimic even if he tried. Even here on the porch, he’s in shadow, the porch light spilling over her little form. "You're too old."

He chuckles, despite himself. “You should go inside. You should get to bed.”

She looks at him dead on and he angles himself away, blowing smoke out of the corner of his mouth. “Are you going to make me?”

He laughs. “No,” He leans back onto one of the porch’s columns and closes his eyes. “I’m not going to make you.” She pulls her knees up to her chin and scoots over until she’s leaning hard into his side. He opens one eye to look at her. She’s so serene, looking out at the night sky, out at its emptiness, with wonder.

She notices that he’s looking, he can tell by the way she rustles her shoulders, but she doesn’t take her eyes off the sky. “That show didn’t scare me, Seb.”

“No?” He ashes his cigarette. “You’re braver than me then.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading <3.
Spooks

Chapter Summary

Sebastian thinks Spirit's Eve might be the perfect time to try and make his move, but fate intervenes.

Chapter Notes

TW: vomit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s on his way to Sam’s when he sees her, just out of the corner of his eye, and he slows down just a little to get a better look. She’s next to the banquet table, dressed all in black, looking every bit the willowy, mysterious girl who’s been on his mind for days. Sebastian ducks away from the square, keeping close to the fence, the shady trees. A cold breeze rustles the leaves still clinging to their branches. The glow from the square casts eerie, orange-y shadows on the lawns as he passes.

He’s been trying to figure out a way to talk to her for days. The phone call had been his last, and best, idea, but he’d shot himself in the foot. The book release wasn’t for a few weeks, so he has no real reason to call her before then, not without putting himself way out on a limb. He could return the book she lent him, of course, but he keeps returning to it, can’t seem to put the thing down. Maybe most of all because it confirmed all his suspicions about her. *Stasis in darkness. Then the substanceless blue.* He’d read the lines over and over, trying to figure out why the fuck he’d never thought to read Plath before. You don’t read poetry like that, you don’t *recommend* poetry like that, if you’re not just a little bent. If you haven’t gazed, at least once, toward the abyss. Yoba, the abyss? Get a fucking grip, Sebastian. Shit. Everything he wants to say to her is inappropriate and personal. Too effusive, too much, especially for their relationship. Which is, right now, completely shapeless. Barely even a friendship. He has zero idea what she actually thinks of him. Not really. Getting a read on her is near impossible and the only person in town who seems to really know her is the equally elusive artist down by the river. He’s starting to feel a little desperate. Hell, after a few beers at the Saloon this past Friday, he’d nearly asked Emily to help him out. Sebastian tries not to imagine what an absolute disaster that would have been.

He keeps his head down, tries to focus on the issue currently at hand. Which is, namely, finding Sam’s drunk ass before he burns his already tenuous relationship with Penny to the ground. He’d found her tearful down by the entrance to the maze only a few minutes ago and Abigail had stayed back to do some damage control. Holy fucking Yoba, leave it to Sam to lose his shit right before Sebastian’s big party. He slows his walk. The party. Yeah, of course. He can invite her to that. All of his Zuzu friends are coming. He can show her he’s not just some country bumpkin. That he’s cool. Hopefully cool enough for her. Damn, he thinks, you really do sound like one lame motherfucker.

Sebastian glances back toward the snack table, just to get another passing look, but what he sees stops him in his tracks. Joni’s got this expression on her face that he’s never seen on her and
immediately doesn’t like. She looks almost meek, definitely on edge. He backtracks toward the square and then he sees him, looming in front of her. *Son of a bitch.*

He’s crossing the lawn before he even realizes what he’s doing, fists clenched and fuming. Fucking goddamn Elliot. That creepy piece of shit had cornered Abigail in the Saloon almost nine months ago. Wouldn’t let up until Sebastian and Sam had to physically get between them. Elliot kept his distance after that, only coming to the Saloon every few weeks and never staying long. Motherfucker *cannot* take a hint and now he’s moving in on Joni. Hell no. *Fuck* no.

Elliot spots him before Joni even knows he’s there. Motherfucker obviously remembers their last encounter because all the color drains from his face the moment they lock eyes. He practically cowers away and then Joni notices, whipping around. At first, she looks relieved, then she crooks a single brow, looking suddenly alarmed. “Can I talk to you?” It comes out harsher than he meant it to and Sebastian immediately doesn’t like the way she averts her eyes from him, the way she lets him take her wrist, her hand hanging limply in his grasp. He can feel her fingers trembling softly against his hand. His thoughts are firing off a million a minute. He has no idea what the fuck is happening, or if he’s just burned the fragile bridge between them, but he just wants to get both of them out of sight.

She’s recovered some by the time they reach the river. She still looks a little rattled, but she’s pulled it together. Still holding herself like a scared kid, but she has just the ghost of her wry smile on her lips. “Everything okay?”

He looks down to light a cigarette. “Looked like you needed an assist.”

“I appreciate it.” Sebastian glances over at her, really taking her in. Her hair spills out from under a dark, paper hat pulled hard down onto her head. A witch’s hat, he can see on second look. She’s dressed as a witch. Goddamn, that’s so cute. He’s suddenly self-conscious that he didn’t wear a costume. He must look like a total Scrooge to her. He should say something witty, but his heart is pounding too loudly in his ears for him to even try to form a coherent thought. She scuffs one shoe against the grass and he can’t help but trace the long lines of her legs, the way her black dress skims over her hips. His fingers twitch. He wants her, holy fucking Yoba, does he want her. His thoughts drift away from him, imagining the smooth expanse of her body laid out in front of him. Fuck, it would be so fun to figure out how to make her cum, so nice to feel her relax under his touch. He scratches nervously at his neck. Does this make him some kind of creep? No better than Elliot? But she’s smiling up at him, blushing just a little. They have something, right? They’ve exchanged books for fuck’s sake. He needs to invite her to the party now or he’s not going to. They’re talking again. About what, he has no fucking clue. *Invite her to the party.* He’s making her laugh. She’s looking up at him through her long lashes, adjusting the witch’s hat on her head. * Invite her to the party.* She’s passing his cigarette back, looking over her shoulder like she’s going to make her exit. * Invite her to the fucking party.* “So, uh, what are you doing tonight?” His voice sounds whiny to his ears. Fuck, *fuck.* God, when did he get so bad at this? He hasn’t been like this with women since he was a goddamn high schooler.

Joni looks a little surprised at his question, taking a cautious look around the town square. “Um, this?”

He clears his throat. “I mean after this.” She’s saying something about scary movies and sitting around at home and he has the sudden urge to tell everyone he’s invited to this party to fuck right off and ask if he can go home with her. But now she’s looking at him expectantly and he can barely breathe. “There’s actually a party tonight. After this. At my place.” His brain is on fire. “Wanna
come?” Her smile is so big and pretty that he actually doesn’t even care if she agrees. He can console himself with the memory of this smile for at least a couple days.

But, to his surprise, she does. “Yeah, cool.” He exhales.

He likes Leah, decided that on the walk up to his place, but when he sees her on approach through the crowd, he nearly chokes on his beer. Sebastian rises up to his tip toes, now a head over the rest of the party, to try and see if Joni’s beside her. She isn’t and suddenly worry settles in his chest. Where is she? But Leah’s in front of them before he can follow that train of thought. “What up?”

Tim nods at her, tipping his beer in her direction. Sebastian clears his throat. “Hey, you all good?”

“Yeah, yeah, totes. Just heading out I think.” She smiles. “I’m a fucking grandma.”

“Nah,” Tim says with a grin, “Sebastian probably wishes we all would have left hours ago.” Sebastian scowls at him but Leah seems to find it funny.

She nudges Sebastian in the arm "Look after Joni, yeah? She's on the porch."

"Of course." That feels nice, actually. He’s trying to figure out it means. Joni must have said something to Leah about him, right? Or she wouldn’t just leave her here with him. That’s good, right?

Tim watches Leah weave through the crowd then turns to Sebastian. “She’s cute.”

Sebastian snorts. “Barking up the wrong tree.”

“Oh shit, really?” He shrugs “Easy come, easy go, I guess.” Sebastian drains the rest of his beer and when he looks back up Tim has the most shit-eating grin on his face. "So, hold up, your girl's here? And you haven't introduced me?"

"Not my girl and do me a huge fucking favor Tim and be anybody but yourself tonight."

Tim cackles. "Haven't made your move yet, huh?"

"Fucking trying to." He sets his beer down and winds his way through the crowd.

This isn’t exactly how he’d hoped to be touching Joni tonight, but she’s on a crash course headed straight for the ground, and he’s the only thing standing between her and the floorboards. At first, he tries to keep her upright, lead her back into the house with him as support, but she’s out like a light and he quickly realizes that he’s going to have to carry her. He hefts her up, her legs dangling over one arm, hair cascading over the other. There’s really nothing to her. She’s feather-light in his arms, even as dead weight. The monster mash is playing maddeningly on a loop in the background and some guy in a Freddy Kreuger mask sits up from his spot on the porch and retches. Yoba, what a night.

Joni groans against his chest and he runs his thumb along the exposed skin of her shoulder to try and soothe her. His touch seems to settle her, a development he doesn’t have the energy to even begin to process. She smells a little off, the sweat and smoke from the party mixing with the sour tang of her own vomit. She’s gotten a little on his shirt, but weirdly, worryingly, it doesn’t really bother him.
Sebastian winds through the party, making sure her head is tucked close to his chest, making sure no one’s jostling her. He pauses at the mouth of the hallway. Where the hell is he even planning to take her? His room? Yoba no. How the hell would he explain that to her when she wakes up? But the couch in the living room is too impersonal, feels too much like discarding her. Maru’s room! Yes, perfect. No one will accidentally stumble in there and maybe it won’t be so disorienting when she wakes up. He spots Abigail and nods her over.

“Shit, is she okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. Had too much to drink.” He shifts her weight in his arms. “I’m gonna put her up in Maru’s room. Do me a favor and look for her hat?” Abigail gives him a knowing, teasing look then nods, heading off toward the garage.

He lays her down gently on Maru’s bed. She exhales, fingers moving blindly against the sheets. She looks so peaceful like this. Safe and still and relaxed. He scrapes his hair back with his nails, trying to figure out what to do. Should he take her tights off? No, fuck, no definitely not. Big no on her dress too. It’s got a little vomit on it, but he figures it’s better to leave her in that than to try to explain why she’s woken up in one of his sister’s NASA shirts. He settles on her shoes. Only an asshole would let her sleep in her shoes. He works them off her feet and sets them carefully by the door.

Abigail pops her head in. “Found her hat.”

“Thanks, dude.” He nods toward her shoes. “Just put it there.”

“Not exactly your Casanova moment, huh?”

“Yeah, not exactly.”

“Hey, at least you can say you swept her off her feet.” Abigail teases. Sebastian shoots her a look and she heads back into the party with a wink. When the door softly shuts it’s just the two of them. Maru’s thick walls mute the party outside. Sebastian positions her carefully on her side, scooting Maru’s little trashcan to the edge of the bed. He tries to remember everything Maru taught him about what to look for when someone’s passed out. Her breathing is steady, lips and fingers are a good color. She’ll feel like shit in the morning, but she’s probably okay. He’ll come check on her every few hours, leave some water on the bedside table. He brushes some hair from her face then feels immediately guilty for touching her like that. He pulls the blankets up over her shoulders and takes a few steps back. The urge to lay down next to her is ferocious, he wants so badly to keep her warm in his hands, to assure himself that she’s alright every single second for the rest of tonight. Instead, he travels around the room, turning off Maru’s lights one by one. He leaves the dimmest one on, so Joni doesn’t have to wake up in the dark. He makes his way to leave, but lingers in the doorway. “Sleep good,” he tells her sleeping form, “I’m just outside if you need me.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading you guys!

Update on this universe: Apparently I’m completely insatiable because I have a couple proper sequels planned for The Way through the Woods. Don't expect to see them before I finish this little project, but know they're coming.
City Slicker

Chapter Summary

Sebastian asks Joni to come with him to the city.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Beth answers on the very last ring, like she always does. And she doesn’t say hello, just hums to let him know that she’s there. Sebastian almost says he misses her, even though he doesn’t, not like that, but it’s habit. “Hey,” he says, leaning back in his desk chair, curling the phone cord around his ring finger, “it’s Sebastian.”

“I know. I got caller id last week.”

“Oh. Huh.” He taps his pen on the pad of paper beside his phone. It’s full of wandering notes from work, bits of code, a few keywords devolving into abstract, swirling doodles. “What’s that like?”

“I feel clairvoyant.”

“I bet.” Sebastian clears his throat. He pauses, gathering his courage. “I need a favor.”

Sebastian met Beth at the first party he ever went to in the city. His junior year of college. Freshly twenty-one and feeling like an entirely new man. Like he was on the precipice of becoming something totally different, something just out of reach.

He’d taken the bus down from the university with a couple of his roommates, crashed in the sort of crust punk pad that lingers on your skin for days after you’ve left it behind. A friend of a friend of a friend, you know how it goes. He did his first bump of coke that night off a tv dinner stand, buzzed like a hummingbird all night long. It kept him awake while his roommate fucked two girls on the bare mattress beside him. He’d pretended to be asleep even while the coarse energy running down his whole body made it almost impossible to even shut his eyes.

That was his opener, that story, when he met Beth at a punk show the next night. At the time he thought it made him sound cool and edgy, but it really made him sound green, way out of his depth. But that’s what Beth was looking for. Authenticity. Naivete. She scooped him up and he let her, flowing easily in her current.

They didn’t talk much when they were together, that would come later, long after the breakup. They fucked. A lot. The sex was always wild. Acrobatic, semi-public, exhausting. So intense that sometimes it would feel like she’d sucked all the energy out of him. She had that effect. A whirlwind, a great big sun, everyone in her orbit, him most of all. He cared about her, cares about her. Deeply. He’d do anything for her, still, even now, but he never loved her. That realization had come quickly after the breakup, a stunning, sort of earth-shattering thing that he’d pushed down, marked for later. Maybe that’s why it ended so softly, so easily. Maybe that’s why they’d been able
to stay so affectionately in touch. She was the only one who never ribbed him about running back to Pelican Town after graduation. The only one who could understand, even just a little, why he needed to go back to try and collect all the pieces of himself.

“I think this is technically a long distance call.” She sounds almost bored, but he can hear the teasing in her voice. “A dollar a minute.”

Sebastian kneads his temples. “Shit, sorry.”

“Zoning out?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

She laughs lightly, a twinkling sound. “You know you don’t have to ask my permission to bring someone to the book release party, right?”

“No, I know that. I just wanted to give you a head’s up.”

“What? She have like a third arm or something?”

Sebastian chuckles. “I was hoping you could make her feel welcome.”

“When don’t I?”

He scoffs and Beth giggles. She waits a few beats and then asks, “are you a thing?”

Sebastian pauses. “No.”

Beth laughs, almost bawdy. “But you’d like to be. I get it, Sebastian. I won’t blow your cover.”

Joni seems nervous at the bookstore. It surprises him. He expected her to be more outgoing, chatty, but when he comes down from the attic office, he finds her practically cowering in the corner of the store, looking at Beth like she’d just told her something horrifying. She comes down a little when he shows back up, laughing nervously, nails scratching a little spot above her collarbone raw. He wants to pull her hands away, soothe the redness with the pads of his fingers, with his lips. He feels like the world’s biggest scumbag when he has thoughts like these.

On the train to the party, she settles back into the person he knows. Or thinks he knows. Bubbly, chatty, easy funny. But as soon as they start up the building’s worn stairs, the carpet frayed and dirty, he can feel a change in her. She balls her hands into tight fists and when they enter the apartment she does a quick scan of it, only relaxing, and just barely, when she’s looked over every face. He remembers what Tim said, about running away, and wonders who she’s worried she’ll see.

He’d had a vague idea that they might hook up tonight, had hoped that the night might end with his face between her legs, but tension is wafting off her. Joni looks brittle, like even the gentlest touch might make her crumble, and Sebastian’s trying to figure out what the hell happened. He’s doing a thorough inventory of everything he’s said to her since he picked her up outside the farmhouse, every errant touch. Not that there’d been many, just gently on the shoulder as they switched trains, their knees bumping as the train took a sharp turn. Had he overstepped? Had he completely misread her? Fuck. He’s not even going to try to push it. And he’s trying not to dwell on the sick, heavy feeling forming in his gut. Yoba, he really had liked her, hadn’t he? Sebastian’s so lost in his own thoughts, weaving listlessly through the stifling crowd in the apartment that he has no idea how much time has passed when he looks up and realizes he can’t see Joni anywhere.
Sebastian heads into the kitchen. There are fewer people in there than in the living room, but it looks like a train hit it. He treads carefully, trying to avoid crumpled beer cans and discarded fast food wrappers on his way toward the refrigerator. Someone’s rummaging without much luck through the pantry. Another balancing on a chair to try and disable the ancient looking smoke detector on the ceiling, a long, glass bong cradled in the crook of their arm. Joni’s not here. Sebastian scratches his neck. He shouldn’t feel panicked like this. She’s a grown ass woman. But he feels responsible. For bringing her here, maybe for putting her in this precarious mood. He nearly smacks into Beth on his way back toward the hall. She frowns at him. “You okay?”

“Yeah, uh,” he glances around, “just for looking for Joni, actually.”

“She’s really pretty.” Beth hands him a beer, always just a little distracted. “But I bet everybody says that about her.” Sebastian shrugs, eyes scanning the room. “Let me guess: that’s not why you like her right?”

“Let’s skip the psychoanalysis.”


Sebastian flips around to look at her. “Why didn’t you come get me?”

“She didn’t look sick or anything. Just kind of wigged out, I guess.” He sets the beer down on the counter, heading quickly toward the bathroom.

He knocks, no answer. Knocks again. More of the same. But he can hear someone inside, hear the sound of someone trying and failing to take deep breaths. He bites his lip, debating what he should do. He can’t just leave her in there, even if she wants to be left alone. He slowly opens the door. Joni’s sitting on the counter, nails digging into the linoleum. The fluorescence makes her look pale and sallow and very cold. She flinches when he shuts the door behind him, her whole body shuddering away from him, and that stops him in his tracks. He glances around the bathroom, trying to figure out if he’s missed something. Nothing jumps out. “It’s just me.” He’s trying to sound reassuring, but his voice seems to make her even more tense. She nods and shuts her eyes. He can see them darting behind her closed lids. She looks like she’s trying to hold her body perfectly still. He almost retreats, but then she opens her eyes and looks right at him. She looks relieved and then a little embarrassed and he would kill to know what she’s thinking. Sebastian settles against the opposite wall, hands tucked behind his back. There’s a run in her thin, black tights and he follows it up her legs. The dress she’s wearing slips off one shoulder and he can see the faint red mark on her collarbone from the way she’d scratched at it back at the bookstore. Joni turns, the bathroom lights casting long shadows on her profile. She’s wearing her hair up in a clip, long strands fall free down her neck. She looks suddenly like she might cry, like something awful has dawned on her, and he wants to run his hands down her arms, soothe away the goosebumps, stop her shivering. But he stays put, how little they actually know each other suddenly painfully clear. “You alright?”

She deflates, closing her eyes again. Joni looks so tired. Like she hasn’t slept well in months, years. Those dark circles are so deep, like bruises, and he’s sure she’s going to start crying. But the moment is brief. She pulls herself quickly together, working out a kink at the base of her neck. “Yeah, all good. What’s up?”

He wants to tell her to stop it, that she doesn’t have to pretend with him. That he’s not one of the smiling villagers back in Pelican Town. That he can get it, if she lets him. But, Yoba, who the hell does he think he is? He tries to slip back into nonchalance and shrugs. “Just saw you wander off. Figured I’d…you know.”
She nods and without a word, starts to slide off the counter. On reflex, he offers her his hand and, to his surprise, she takes it. Her narrow fingers are cold against his palm.

He wants to ask her where she goes when her eyes go blank like that. She’s right beside him, but still so far away, looking out at the city, her face unreadable. Sebastian can follow the clues she’s left him, little breadcrumbs leading him back to the darkness he’d seen in her that first night outside the Saloon. Her surprise at his amicable relationship with Beth, the way her eyes dart around a room like it’s second nature. And holy shit, that question she’d asked him on his own front porch the gloomy morning after Spirit’s Eve. When she’d asked him, in so many words, if he’d taken advantage of her while she was out. He doesn’t even want to think about it, but it’s been haunting him. He’d even called Abigail, desperate to know if she thought Joni’s reaction was a fear or a trauma. She hadn’t known, of course, couldn’t know. It’s hard, looking at her shivering on the porch, not to imagine something awful. Joni shouldn’t have to worry about shit like that, shouldn’t have to deal with any of it. He wants to pull her into his arms, rest his chin on her head and just hold her until she stops shivering, until she’s as calm as she had been asleep on Maru’s bed. Instead, he just offers her his coat, draping it carefully over her shoulders. She laughs at his joke, that wry smile back on her face.

The energy between them has settled when some drunk idiot slams into the porch door. Joni nearly jumps out of her skin. The guy laughs as he propels away from the door, back to the party. It’s standard dumb shit at these parties, but it’s spooked Joni. Her eyes go dark and she recedes further into his coat. The feeling in his chest is so foreign. This weird protective impulse he can’t shake is so far from his usual shit. He usually goes for girls like Beth. Confident and brash. Joni’s an entirely different animal. She seems as fragile as she is aloof and he has no idea what to do with it, just knows that he wants to do something with it. She’s slyer than the girls he’s been with before, more mysterious by a mile. More likely to bolt. Probably. Sebastian asks her if she wants to get out here and she looks up at him with that startled, doe-eyed look he’s seeing more and more of. Like she’s forgotten where they are, what they’re doing. “I could go.” She shrugs like it’s no big deal, but he can tell she’s relieved. His kindred spirit.

Joni knows the train like the back of her hand. Weaving through the echo-y, cavernous station like she’s in a trance. She doesn’t check the map before she hops onto a northbound train. He can tell it’s like second nature. He wants to ask her about it, her time in the city, but he’s gotten the distinct impression that the topic is off limits.

She’s quiet the whole way back to the truck, his coat enormous on her frame, and he’s sure he’s fucked this up in some big way until she sidles up close to him as they walk through the parking lots, arms just barely touching. She tucks herself up under his shadow, practically hiding under his arm and that strange protective feeling roars up in him again. “Sorry I don’t drive stick.” Her voice is barely above a whisper.

Sebastian falters, not sure what she’s even talking about. “What?”

“It’s just such a long drive back.” She shrugs, looking almost self-conscious. “I didn’t really think of that when I agreed to come out here.” She glances up at him. “That you’d be doing all the driving. I’ve just never driven stick in my life and…I kinda doubt you want to give lessons.”

“I wouldn’t mind giving you lessons.” She raises a single eyebrow and he clears his throat. “I mean, maybe not tonight, you know, but…” He shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans. Without his coat, the chill in the air has started to bother him, seeping through his thin shirt. “It’s really no
trouble.”

“You’re sure?”

“Definitely.”

He helps her up into the truck, fingers lingering on her hips. She lets him, leaning a little into his touch. The night drifts endlessly out beyond the narrow beam of light the lonely street lamp casts around them. It feels like they’re the only two people in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading <3.
A trip to a tech conference leaves Sebastian unsure about his future.

"So you don’t live in Zuzu then?" The breeze comes rolling off the sea, through the soft fronds of the palm trees, and into the open bar, rustling the awning and the paper lanterns bobbing beneath it. Sebastian adjusts the collar of his shirt, suddenly too tight in the tropical heat. He fumbles blindly for his drink, fidgeting with the little paper umbrella, damp now from the contents of the drink. It’s a livid, sunset color, tastes like sour candy. He’s had three and they’ve made his lips feel numb. The woman sitting beside him at the bar is at least a decade older. But she’s in shape and he can tell by the way she’s surreptitiously unbuttoned the top two buttons on her shirt, her suit jacket discarded on the back of her chair so she can accentuate her toned arms, that she knows she looks good. And she does look good. Alluring in a way that's zapped his focus completely. She smiles, probably guessing that she's disarmed him. The crow's feet around her eyes make her look distinguished, like she's always been beautiful and aging is just something she's weaponized to make herself even more so. He reminds himself, before he gets even more carried away, that she's the only reason he's at this conference at all. Some big executive at a tech firm in Zuzu who scouted him out after a local gridball club had him set them up a website. Her nephew, apparently, plays on the team. So she is, literally, all his dreams personified. Is that why he's so attracted to her? Because she's the future he so desperately wants? He scratches at his neck.

"No, uh, I work from home, actually." Then, not wanting to shut doors he doesn't even know are open yet, quickly adds, "for now, at least."

She runs a finger around the lip of her cup, legs crossing and uncrossing, looking out toward the ocean just beyond the bar. She cocks her head back in his direction, just barely making eye contact. "So where's home?"

Sebastian swallows thickly, looking out at the ocean to buy himself some time. The waves roll softly onto the moonlit beach, only a few people lingering on the sand. The bar is mostly cleared out too, only a few people still at the scattered tables. He and this woman are the only two sitting at the bar. "Kind of a nowhere town, honestly. You've probably never heard of it."

She squints at him. "Young guy like you? What's he doing living in a place like that?" He purses his lip and looks hard at his drink, stirring and stirring. He can see, out of the corner of his eye, her hand crossing the distance between them. She puts the barest pressure on his knee.

Each ding of the elevator, each floor, fills him with a churning cocktail of dread, excitement, guilt. What the fuck is he doing living in a place like Pelican Town? What the fuck is he doing right now, right here?

They're standing side by side, not even looking at each other, not saying a word, but when they
reach his floor, he nods toward the open door. She has a tight, sort of intimidating smile when she exits the elevator, waiting almost impatiently for him at the mouth of the long hallway. Sebastian's taller by about a foot, maybe more, but he would bet she could take him down no problem. She has the narrow body of a woman who spends a lot of time on the treadmill, muscles that can't be hidden even by her prim skirt suit. Her hair might be dyed blonde, but it's a good dye job and when he reaches out to run his fingers through it, fumbling with the key to his room, it's soft in a way that surprises him. He takes a deep breath before he pushes open the door, says a quiet prayer to whatever god is listening to not let him fuck this up, to fuck everything up.

She pushes him down onto the stiff, hotel bed and that feels familiar, letting someone take charge. She straddles him, mussing his hair with her fingers. He winces when she pulls a little too hard, bringing her lips down to touch his for just a moment before she's back up, grinding against him. It feels a little porny. Like she's trying to put on a show for him and he wonders, a little unnerved, if she does this a lot, with other boys just like him. But she doesn't really give him time to think too much, shifting her hips over his cock, and before he knows it, he's fumbling with the buttons on her shirt. His hands feel heavy and swollen and, finally, impatient with him, she rocks back and slips her shirt over her head.

The bra she's wearing ages her. Very 1970's but Yoba does it look good on her. His hunch was right, she definitely works out. He runs his palm down her hard, cut abs. She laughs like it tickles, then squeezes his hips with her toned thighs. She's making quick work of his pants, freeing his cock before it even has the decency to get hard. Sebastian closes his eyes, leaning all the way back. This'll be nice, he thinks, this'll let him take his mind off the thousand things that have been roiling around inside it, but when he hunts his fingers up her inner thighs, Joni flashes suddenly in his mind. She's standing in the dark, swallowed up by his coat, a wry smile around a borrowed cigarette. Longing rises up so quickly in his chest that it gives him vertigo. He jolts, propping himself up on his elbows. The woman looks up at him questioningly, one hand still wrapped around his half-hard cock. Sebastian gulps. "I'm sorry." He moves her easily from his lap, scrambling off the bed. "I think I'm going to be sick." He barely makes it to the bathroom in time.

The drink is worse coming up than it was going down and his potential future boss, though if he's honest he's probably definitely screwed the pooch on that one, is not in the mood to play caretaker. She leaves him a glass of water on the nightstand, her business card tucked underneath it. The first four digits of her phone number are smudged by the condensation on the glass and Sebastian wonders if that was on purpose. His stomach feels fine now that she's gone. Nerves, he thinks wiping his eyes with his palms, just his fucking nerves. He settles down on the stiff mattress and closes his eyes, breathing deeply. When he opens them again, he sees the book still on the bedside table where he left it the night before. Joni's book. He's been holding it quietly hostage for weeks now, waiting for her to ask for it back. She hasn't yet. He reaches over for it and guilt shoots through him. He feels, weirdly, like he's cheated on her. Yoba, that is so unnecessary. They've barely touched, sure as fuck aren't together. Sebastian still can't even get a proper read on the girl, can't figure out if she's even interested. He flips through the book, its now familiar pages, then brings it to his nose. It smells like her. Like her little farmhouse, all warm and woody. Like the skin of green apples, like macerated fruit. Fuck. Fuck! This is bordering on ridiculous. He should call Tim. Set himself fucking straight, but he can barely get out of bed. He feels glued to the mattress. With a groan he leans over, fumbling for the tv remote. It blinks on. The evening news hums quietly in the background.

He's nearly dozing when the weatherman starts talking about the Valley. He perks up at the mention
of Pelican Town. Oh shit, of course. The first snow. All this tropical weather has fucked with his equilibrium. The lights are probably tonight. He feels a little nostalgic when he thinks about them, and then his nerves kick right back up. If he knows her at all, Abigail will probably invite Leah to the festival and Leah will probably invite Joni and they'll all be standing on Pierre's rickety porch a thousand miles away from him now and a thousand miles away from all of his dreams and looking so warm and alluring it makes him feel like he wants to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading <3.
Sebastian stops only once, as he’s swinging one leg over his bike, helmet clutched in his hands, to ask himself what the fuck he thinks he’s doing. The thought doesn’t stick. It slips away easily. There’s pretty much nothing on the planet that would stop him from going out to the farmhouse tonight, not with Joni calling him out of the blue like that. Yeah, it’s freezing. Yeah, it’s practically two in the fucking morning. But he moves like he’s in a trance, practically out the door before he even hung up with her. Sebastian can’t remember the last time he just kissed someone, just kissed and stopped. It’s making him fixate, he thinks, that they just kissed. Just barely more than a peck. Like he used to when he was a teenager, when every step along the road felt thrilling. “Don’t be a pig,” he mutters to himself as his bike revs to life, “this isn’t a fucking booty call.”

He tells himself that again when he swings off his bike in front of the farmhouse. She’s waiting for him out on the top step, the porchlight ringing her head in a golden glow. Joni’s wearing shorts even though it’s cold enough that he can see his breath, but motherfuck do they do wonders for those long legs of hers and he’s so busy looking at them that he doesn’t immediately clock that she’s got a kitchen knife clutched in one hand. He pauses, trying hard not to laugh. “Is that…?”

“I heard a noise!” Joni scrunches up her face like she’s trying to be serious, but she can’t keep the smile from her lips either. She sighs, looking off to the side, clearly embarrassed. “I’m glad you’re here.” Sebastian swallows hard. His chest constricts and he tries to brush off how anxious it makes him that just her voice can make him feel this way, tries not to think about what Tim said, what the woman at the conference said. It’s easy when Joni brushes her hair back, revealing the long line of her neck. She scratches a little nervously at her collarbone. “I just…I heard a noise down by my bedroom window and then, um, I don’t know, I guess it moved over back…” She glances over her shoulder, darkness passing over her face, her muscles tensing up again. When she looks back at him, she has her lip caught in her teeth, looking a little sheepish. “I would just appreciate it if…”

“I’ll go take a look,” he says, trying to look casual, hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Don’t you worry your pretty head about it.” It comes out with a thick twang, a phrase he’s heard so many times but never used. He nearly claps his hand over his mouth. Who the fuck even is he right now? But Joni seems charmed by it, settled even, so he does his best brave country boy impression and heads around the side of her house. He pulls a flashlight out of his coat pocket. It flickers, the light steadying only when he hits it a couple times with his palm.

It’s kind of a mess actually, the back bit of Joni’s farm. It’s clear once he rounds the corner that Joni hasn’t shoveled any of the snow and wide, uneven drifts obscure the path, hard and dark with dirt after last month’s long cold spell. He wants to offer to shovel some of this snow, dig her out a
little, but that makes him feel…trapped. Like he’s fulfilling some creepy, pre-destined role in this godforsaken town. He tries to push the thought aside.

Joni’s bedroom window is covered in a thin, almost ornate looking layer of frost and Sebastian stumps around, looking for anything that might have caused the noise. He stumbles over the remains of a shattered icicle, just under the windowsill and crouches down to get a better look, running his fingers over the jagged pieces. This must be it. Mystery solved. Kind of cute actually, but there’s something a little sinister about how spooked she is. Maybe he’ll ask her about it. Maybe tonight is the night, right? She did call him. She must, at least on some level, trust him. Right? He gets to his feet with a groan and is about to head back out to the porch when he spots a line of fresh footprints heading off away from the window. They’re big, almost as big as his own. A man’s footprints certainly and, for a moment, an icy fear settles in his chest. He follows them with the flashlight. They end at the shed, then head back toward the front porch. They’ve got to belong to Joni right? Maybe she was wearing her grandfather’s boots earlier in the day. She would have noticed someone right in front of her on the porch, right? Yeah, he decides, they’ve got to be Joni’s.

Still, he heads over to check out the shed. It’s old. Shit, might even be older than the farmhouse. He forces open the shed’s door, coughing a little when he steps inside, a cloud of dust rushing out into the cold, night air. Joni’s obviously never been out here. Or, no, there’s some footprints in the dust, some clean areas in the back of the shed. So she has been back there. He takes a few steps inside, shining his flashlight in all the dark corners. Nothing in here now.

He finds the second icicle when he’s securing the shed doors. Big as the first and just as shattered. He crouches down again to get a better look and, suddenly, his feet fail him, slipping out from under him on a dark sheet of ice. He lands hard on his back, exposed mud squelching under his weight. The fall knocks the air clean out of him. “Fuck,” he says when he can start to take deep breaths again. He sits up, feeling down his body to make sure he’s all in one piece. His left calf’s a little tender and when he slides his gloved hand under his jeans, he can feel that he’s broken the skin. It stings, but he’ll be fine. Very nice Sebastian, he scolds himself, you’re a real knight in shining armor. He works to untangle the arm of his coat from the sharp brambles of a bare salmonberry bush. When he finally manages to get free, the light from his flashlight catches on a clump of gingery hair tangled up in the branches. He runs a couple gloved fingers over it. It’s long and fine, brilliantly red. Leah’s, he figures. Maybe even from this past Autumn. He’d heard she was up here a lot.

Sebastian’s hard as a rock in her shower and, goddamn, that makes him feel like a complete dirtbag. His dumb ass cock probably though he was going to get laid tonight. Maybe his heart was hoping that too.

When he walks out into the front room and sees her laid out on the rug in front of the tv, both of them get their hopes up again. He watches as Joni gives his body a long, hard look. She lingers on his chest and he flinches. Oh right, his tatts. She doesn’t know about them, another strange thing in this town. Man, what a summer that had been, his junior year of high school, the first time he’d debuted the scratchy stick and pokes down at the community pool. The town about fucking imploded. He stiffens suddenly. Would this be a deal-breaker for her? The tattoos? But the thought quickly dissipates, because Joni’s got that far away look on her face again. This time, though, he can see anxiety bleeding back into her and maybe it’s how warm the house is, all that soft, golden light, but he opens his big, dumb mouth and says something that sounds an awful lot like he’s criticizing her. She should relax more? Holy fucking Yoba, what kind of piece of shit is he? But it seems to stick and suddenly they’re talking about meditation and then even more suddenly he’s down on his knees in front of her and they’re kissing again. All lips and teeth. And then she’s pulling away, pulling his hands firmly off her waist. She doesn’t want to fuck tonight, says it in a stuttering, timid
way that immediately makes him think she expects him to fight her on it and then he’s thinking about what she asked him on Spirit’s Eve all over again. So he tries to be gentle when he tells her that it’s cool, of course they don’t need to fuck tonight.

She looks at him a little stunned and then pulls him into another kiss, this one hotter, heavier. She’s stuttering between kisses, her hand firm on the back on his neck, trying to tell him that she wants him but stumbling over her words. *It’s okay*, he tries to tell her with his body, *it’s okay, I’m flexible. We can do whatever.* And when she says that yes, yes he can touch her, he’s on her so fast his brain barely has time to catch up to his body.

She’s so responsive. More responsive than any other women he’s been with in his whole life, like even his breath, just the barest touch of the pads of his fingers, is enough to make her pant. So he experiments, dragging his fingers up her sides, blowing softly against the shell of her ear. Sebastian tries not to think about how well, how *nicely*, she fits up against his chest and instead on how fucking erotic it is when she sighs at his touch. Her thighs are chilled, but they warm quickly under his hands. He tries to knead the tension out of her muscles. And Yoba, when he slips his fingers between her legs, she *shudders* against him, holding on tight. “Come on,” he whispers in her ear, “cum for me, come on.” And she does, thighs shaking in his grip, nails digging into the tender skin of his knees. He rests his head on her shoulder, brushing his thumb gently over the lips of her pussy. “God, you’re beautiful.” And she is, radiant under his touch.

He’s still trembling, hand curled against her scalp, cock resting half-hard against her cheek, when the urge to hold her crashes over him. Sebastian wants to pull her tightly against his chest, stroke her hair, stay with her all goddamn night, but she’s on her feet in an instant, pulling her panties and shorts back on, body stiff and rigid again. “I’ll make us some coffee.” She heading toward the kitchen before he can even tell her that it’s cool, she doesn’t need to impress him. That she’s *already* impressed him. And that he can catch her, he can hold some of what’s making her so stiff, so afraid. She doesn’t have to hold it alone. Holy fucking Yoba, does he hear himself right now? Fuck, he’s sunk. Hook and line. It feels suspiciously like he’s falling down a black hole, suspiciously like he’s happy to be. He watches her duck into the kitchen and feels like he’s being pulled helplessly forward, into her orbit. The farmhouse is so warm, feels so out of time, like nowhere else in the Valley.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading <3. I love comments and kudos. Y’all keep me going.
Planetside

Chapter Summary

Sebastian is torn between the life he always imagined and the life that’s landed in his lap.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So that’s it then, huh?” Sebastian has the phone cord twisted so tightly around his fingers that the tips have turned a muted shade of purple. A cigarette burns down in his other hand, a long, flimsy column of ash perched on the glowing tip. He can’t be assed to get up and turn the lights on even though the darkness in his room is thick around him. He’s been on the same solitaire move for the past twenty minutes, the screen reflecting dull green on his face.

He raises the cigarette to his lips, the ash crumbling in a thin trail on his desk. “What do you mean?”

“I mean my boy Sebastian’s all accounted for. Wrapped up, bow on top.”

Sebastian flexes the fingers tangled in the cord. They’ve gone a little numb, tingling that’s spreading down onto his palm. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, man.”

“Was the sex really that good?”

Sebastian sighs, leaning back in his chair. He kneads the bridge of his nose with one hand, trying to work out a headache that’s been settling in behind his eyes. “We didn’t fuck.”

Tim makes a noise somewhere between a scoff and a gulp. “Are you fucking kidding me? Is this girl some kind of nun? Is that why you’re into her? Like some kind of weird, masochistic shit you’ve got going on.”

“She fucking deep-throated me, dude. She’s not a fucking prude.” Sebastian rocks backward, feeling immediately guilty that he’s told Tim that. He lights another cigarette, fingers trembling. He frowns at them, like they’ve betrayed his nerves, his thick confusion.

Tim whistles. “Well, alright then.” A beat of silence. “So why no fucking?”

“I’m not really pushing it.” It feels slightly insulting to think of her as fragile, but it’s the only word he can really use. Brittle might be better, he decides, remembering the sort of flippant way she’d told him about her own grief. He could see the well of sadness inside of her because it mirrored his own and he could see her skirting the edge of it, the same dance he does every morning. She is fragile, though, in a way different from him. The fragility is from somewhere else, though he isn’t sure how he knows that. He just does, can tell by the things she asks him, the things that surprise her.

“So, I’m never gonna see you again, huh?”

That snaps Sebastian out of his own head. He blows smoke out of the side of his mouth and sits back up. “What are you talking about?”
“Like this is it right? You’re gonna marry her and then just start popping out kids or whatever shit they do in tiny towns along the coast.”

“Now you’re just being an ass.”

“I’m just trying to understand, man.” He hears Tim take a few swigs of beer. “You’ve been dragging your feet about this years, but now you’re shacking up? This takes the cake.”

Sebastian goes tense, suddenly defensive. “Shacking up? Come on, please, I just let her suck my dick, okay?” He immediately feels guilty for being goaded into saying that, feels like the biggest scumbag for even thinking it. He wants to tell Tim that it’s not like that, even though Sebastian doesn’t have a clue what it is like. But he wants, even more, to be off this fucking topic. “Dude, you know what, let it go okay?”

“You really like this chick, huh?”

“Did you not just hear me say to let it go?”

“You sound happy.”

“Oh yeah? Fucking do I? I sound happy right now?” Sebastian’s kneading his temples hard, his nostrils flared. He doesn’t get overwhelmed like this, doesn’t let his feelings rush up unadulterated like this. What the fuck is happening to him?

“I don’t think you know what makes you happy?”

“Oh, okay, you enlighten me then.”

Tim sighs. “Come on man, I’m just trying to figure out what the fuck is going on with you. You haven’t come to town in like a month dude.”

Had it really been that long? He tries to remember what the fuck he’s even been doing in town. “I’ve been busy.”

There’s a long silence on the other end of the line Sebastian’s about to try and clear the air, when Tim speaks again, sounding more serious than Sebastian’s ever heard him. “Can I level with you? For real.”

Sebastian swallows hard. “Do I have a fucking choice?”

“Dude, I’m being real with you. I just want you to focus.”

“Focus on what?” He sounds like a little boy, caught and defenseless.

“On your fucking career dude. I know you don’t wanna be making these websites for the rest of your life. Hell, you’ve told me that exact thing. And you know, and I know you know, that no one’s gonna hire a programmer who can’t come into the office.”

“I’m fucking working on it.”

“No, you’re not.” Sebastian scoffs. “If you were ‘fucking working on it’ you’d move up here.”

“I don’t have a place.”

“Get a place! You can stay with me! I just don’t…” Tim makes an exasperated sound in this throat. “I don’t understand what the fuck is keeping you in that shithole.”
Sebastian takes a long, deep breath. “I gotta go, man.”

Tim scoffs. “What? Mom calling you down for dinner?”

“I gotta go.”

“Listen. I’m sorry. I just—” The phone lands in the receiver with a hard clunk. Sebastian keeps his hand on it until his cigarette burns out.

The house is dark. Mostly. Just the hanging light above the kitchen table on, spilling out into the hallway. It’s quiet too, without Demetrius and Maru banging around in the study, almost deathly quiet. Winter is still heavy in the air, the mountains still, waiting patiently for spring. His sister and stepdad will be back in a few days, but until then, it’s just him and his mom. It feels out of time when they’re not here and he always feels, horribly, like he’s a little boy again. The empty chairs around the table have ghosts when it’s just the two of them.

“So,” Robin swirls her spoon around her clean plate. Sebastian braces himself. “You’ve been down at the farmhouse a bit, haven’t you.”

Sebastian rocks his head noncommittally. “A couple times, yeah.”

Robin grins “She’s cute.”

Sebastian’s boring holes into his plate. “Sure.”

Robin laughs. “Alright, I’ll drop it.”

“Nothing to drop.”

She laughs again, a little breathy. “Seb, I know I don’t have to tell you of all people how small this town is.”

His stomach tightens. He reaches across the table for the salt, never taking his eyes off his plate. “I don’t really want to hear what the town is saying about me, if that’s alright with you.”

A heavy silence hangs between them until, finally, Robin clears her throat. “You can bring her around you know. I think it’s cool that you’ve found someone here.”

He looks up at her for the first time, eyes blazing. “I haven’t ‘found’ someone here, okay. I’m just… we’re just hanging out.” He chews the mushroom casserole she’s made almost aggressively. “I’m still moving to Zuzu, probably by the end of next summer.”

“That’s great too.” She stands, collecting both their dishes.

“I can do those.”

She waves him off. “No, take the night off, huh?”

Sebastian stands out by the river, the darkness so thick he can barely see past his own hand. It’s a nice feeling, to be enveloped like this. His thoughts feel stuck, his body stuck too, and he can live with that. For now. The ice groans and cracks on the water as it warms and, in the darkness, the sound comes from all sides. He smokes an entire pack of cigarettes, one after the other, until his
mouth is so dry it feels like cotton. Deep, deep fatigue has settled into his body and he tries to remember the last time he’d slept through the night.

All he wants, all he wants in the entire world – more than Zuzu, more than that apartment with the big windows a block down from the tattoo shop, more than the job the conference had teased for him – is to call Joni. It feels devastating.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading guys! I’m wrapping up this little project pretty soon (but may add more eventually!) and should soon start posting the sequel to Way through the Woods.
Chapter Summary

Sebastian comes to a decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He’ll make this work. The decision comes so easily it barely feels like a decision at all, but like something he’s unearthed. Something that was there all along. True and right and terrifying. And it does scare him, to feel suddenly so sure about something he’d been so against his entire life. But she’s curled up against his chest, her breath soft as she sleeps. It’s hard to be scared in a position like this, hard to be scared when she’s this close to him. Sebastian presses his palm against the smooth plane of her stomach and settles in behind her. There’s more of her now, he notices for the first time. Or at least articulates to himself for the first time. More muscle, less bone – her body softer and warmer under his touch – and he wonders if he’s undergone a similar change, if just being this close has altered him in some fundamental way.

Sebastian rolls onto his back, resting his head on one arm. Joni follows him like a cat seeking heat, her hands pressed firmly over his heart, like she’s checking to make sure it’s still beating. When he closes his eyes, he feels enveloped like he used to out alone on those dark nights, standing out in the rain near the beach. Joni settles in the crook of his neck, her hand searching for his jaw, nimble fingers finding his lips. Sometimes she does this, fumbles in her sleep for him, like she’s trying to memorize parts of his face. There’s a fearful energy to her ministrations, almost manic. She always gets a little agitated like this, like she’s caught in the throes of a nightmare.

He practically coos at her, an instinct he’s never had before in his life before he met her, or maybe just one that he’d never thought about before. He smooths back her hair, unkempt from the pillow, a little damp from the humid night. A soft breeze wafts through the open window, ruffling the gossamer curtain, cooling his skin. Fireflies bob in the crystalline dark, the not quite night of high summer. He was supposed to be gone by now. By the end of next summer, that’s what he’d said, what he’d told everyone. It’s slipping through his fingers. He’s letting it go. It’s a quiet heartbreak, buffered by the woman beside him, nearly blotted out entirely.

Goose jumps from his spot on the sill, a dark mass in the room, pacing round and round on the floor. He lets out a single, mournful whine. Sebastian sighs and untangles himself from Joni. Goose is needy in waves and this week has been a typhoon. And Sebastian’s up. He might as well.

The moonlight skitters over the floorboards as the two of them pass down the length of the farmhouse. The place feels out of time, imbued with a heavy magic, whatever that means. But Yoba, it feels more like home than any other place ever has. Or maybe it’s her that feels like home. Yoba. What a crock of nonsense. True, true, painfully true nonsense.

Goose paws at his bare ankles and Sebastian leans down, letting him climb him like a tree. Goose perches easily on his shoulder, batting at a few stray curls that have fallen over his ears. He scratches under Goose’s ears, lingering at the window beside the television. He’s looking but not seeing, lost in the quiet flow of his own thoughts. Goose climbs down into his waiting arms, wanting to be held. And Sebastian does, rocking him slowly like he’s a baby. Like he used to with Maru. He’s full of
odd thoughts tonight, feeling protective and wise, older now. The night is a wide, churning mess of stars as he looks up into it. There must be something celestial, some pull of the planets that’s letting his thoughts run wild like this. He tries to count back the months since he’s known her, tries to remember what he felt like before he met her. If things were always this murky, always this brilliantly clear. They’d been excavating for weeks, even if neither of them knew it, opening up until they were just ruins laid bare for each other. It feels like freedom. Two sick puppies in love. Is he in love? Shit, probably.

Sebastian wanders into the dark kitchen, not needing a light to find his way. He sets Goose down carefully on the counter, watches as he rolls languidly onto his back, looking at him upside down. Sebastian pours leftover coffee into one of Joni’s worn, metal pots. It takes two tries before the gas ignites on the stove and the coffee sloshes a little over the side as he sets it over the heat, the flame fizzling. He’s been in the house for two days now. Has barely gone outside much less even thought about heading home. He’d seen Joni at her most fragile, her most bare and he doesn’t want to leave. Maybe ever again. He’s as raw as she is, as fragile, even though she maybe doesn’t know it. Both of them have been branded by tragedy. Hers is just fresher. Yoba, so fresh. He’d had to practically carry her home from the Saloon as she gulped air, hands flexing into terrified nothing. Her panic is still hanging off of him.

The coffee burns his throat on the first sip. Sebastian closes his eyes, leaning into the sensation. He tries to imagine what kind of man he’d have to be to hurt her like that. The way they did. Not even the physical pain she’d surely felt, but the way they’d used and discarded her. She’d been so worried, panicked even, that knowing these things about her would make him see her differently. But instead, they’d just filled out pieces of her he’d already seen the vague outlines of. Her darting eyes, the way she’d flinch and then settle under his touch. He understands now why she was such a ghost when she landed in Pelican Town. Sebastian’s never seen the inside of a mental institution, but he imagines it could zap the color right out of you? How much had his time in the basement zapped out of him? Is that why they’d ended up like this, braided so tightly together?

Her footsteps are so quiet that she startles him. She’s got a sleepy smile as she leans in the doorway to the kitchen, wiping her eyes with her palms. Her hair is a wild mess of waves, honeyed around her face. His t-shirt hangs loose on her, slipping down her shoulders. Yoba, she’s pretty all over. From the crown of her head to the bottoms of her feet. Like a dream. She’s like a dream. “What are you doing up?” Her voice is still heavy with night and she doesn’t wait for his answer before she wraps her arms tightly around him. She’s half-asleep, maybe more than half-asleep, and she leans into him like he’s the softest, nicest thing in her life. And Yoba he wants to be that for her.

“What are you doing up?”

She fists her hands into the back of his shirt, inhales long and deep like she wants to breathe him all in. “Looking for you.”

He can live here. It’s the only thought in his suddenly blank mind. He can live anywhere if she’s there with him. Yoba, it’s a terrifying realization, to hinge on another person. It’s a shock clean down his center and he holds her tighter against him to try and regain some equilibrium. “There’s this fruit market. Way out of town.” His mouth is moving on its own, uncertain of the path it’s following. “Out by the desert a ways.” Joni mumbles something into his chest. “I used to go there with my dad.” Her fingers trail down his spine. “I want to take you there. I think you’ll love it.” She’s writing something on his skin, something he can’t make out. I love you. She holds one wrist in her hand, locking her arms even tighter around him. I love you, I love you, I love you. Yeah, he can stay here. He can figure it out.
Thank you so much for reading, guys. Like I said in the last update, I may add to this from time to time, but most of my attention will be focused on the sequel(s). Thank you so much for sticking with me as I expand this universe. You guys really are the best <3.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!