

7 - Community College

(Willia)

The next day I set off, taking the car that was parked in a clearing behind our cottage. It made getting groceries back a nightmare but we also started to garden and make as much as we could from the land to help limit the trips.

I wondered if I could find a place with a garden for Emmett in the future. I knew better than to think I could find a place by myself with any outdoor space starting out. That thought made my stomach clench, I hoped I was doing the right thing for him.

I didn't really know where I was going, how did you even go about finding a job and an apartment in the real world?

All I knew was the address of the community college in the city. The classes were cheap enough, compared to a four-year university and I could start there. Maybe take two or three classes over the summer to dip my toes into different things and then hopefully have a better understanding of what I liked.

It was as good of a place to start as any. If I could sign up to some classes then at least I knew the area where to start looking for a job without any qualifications, and an apartment, without any money because I didn't have a job.

I took a deep breath, one thing at a time.

I found parking and checked myself in the mirror, I can't remember the last time I wore makeup, and even with wearing mascara it seemed to brighten my face in a way I almost didn't recognize.

I knew it didn't matter, they wouldn't reject me because of how I looked. My grades spoke for themselves and it was open enrollment after all.

The building was on the West side of the city, old red brick would have been more stately if it wasn't faded with age. The buildings around it made it look even older. They were taller and outlived in the same grays and massive windows that the rest of the city seemed to favor.

I decided I liked the way this building stood out, and I would take any sign, however small, that I was making the right choice.

Walking in, the fluorescent lights felt jarring. A group of people, younger than I imagined were sitting behind a table covered in a thin plastic tablecloth. Bright yellow and blue brochures and pamphlets lined the table.

"Hi," My attention snapped to a girl that couldn't have been older than me with sandy blonde pulled back into a ponytail. Her smile was wide and seemed genuine. "What can I do to help?"

"I'm just here looking to see if there are any classes that might be a good fit. I, uh, I took some time after high school and I'm not sure what I'm interested in," I admitted honestly, walking across from where she sat behind the table.

"Then you've come to the right place." She handed me a few things, and a thicker course book. "I would recommend starting with a class you think you would be interested in and then one you don't. I know it sounds weird but you'd be surprised how many people think they dislike something just because they did in high school." She shrugged, her infectious smile never leaving her face.

"I think I love that idea," I smiled back at her.

"Good, you can talk to some of the professors. They are holding open hours for the next two hours." She motioned to a hallway to her left. "Come back if you need anything."

"Thank you," I clutched the papers to my chest and walked away, wanting to read through them first.

"Well, she was peppy." A red-headed girl fell into step next to me, I almost jumped not noticing her before.

I smiled, "She seemed nice."

"I wish I could have that enthusiasm, for, well, anything," She shrugged giving me a wry smile that felt familiar.

"Same," I admitted, I felt my enthusiasm for things differently these past few years.

"Cali," She put her hand out, "My mom named me Calista, for no apparent reason." She snorted, I liked her, "So I chose Cali, partially out of spite." She gave me a half smile.

"Willia," I grasped her warm hand in mine. "You want to hear something worse than Calista?"

Her eyebrow shot up.

"Willhemia, that's my name."

She stared at me, warm Hazel eyes studied mine laced with gold and green before she barked a laugh.

"Okay, okay, you win," She motioned to a bench behind us and I followed her lead as she sat, tucking her red curls behind her back.

We both flipped through the course catalog, she handed me a pen after seeing me dog-ear some of the pages.

"Is this your first semester?" I asked her after going through the courses three times.

"Yeah, sure I would try something different. I had a bit of a situation during high school and finally completed my GED," She looked at me, "Years later," She added deadpan but with a half smile.

"Same, kinda. I took some time away after graduating and wanted to figure out what I want. I was hoping today would give me some clarity, but it just confused me more. Everything sounds interesting, I want to do it all."

"I wish I had that problem, all of this bores me. I've been working at this diner, okay, they don't want us calling it that, but it is what it is," She rolled her eyes leaning back. "I just want something more stable, I have a daughter, she's almost four and it's for her."

I studied her, something in her face seemed to soften at the mention of her daughter. I understood the reason she didn't finish high school.

"I'm sure you'll find something you like to do and makes money,"

She snorted, "That's the dream." She collected her things standing up, "Do you live near here?"

I shook my head, "This is the first step, then have to figure out the whole job, daycare, and living situation." Not to mention choose a career, study for that career, and get a long-term job in said career.

She looked me over once more, "I'm not sure about any apartments going but I might be able to help you with the other two."

A week later everything was packed up and Emmett and my things were loaded into my dad's car. They would come back for the rest of their boxes once I was fully established, or as much as I could be.

I looked back at the cottage one last time. It was a shell of what it was only a week before. The windows were closed up and boarded shut, making the bright cottage seem dark.

All of the small personal touches we added over the years were in boxes leaving the bare bones of the space left.

It reminded me of when we got here when I was broken and pregnant. Over the months and years we made this place home and I, along with the cottage, grew into something new and less hollow.

I shut the door behind me, taking one last look, not wanting to memorize this moment.

"Mama," Emmett's little voice made me turn and I scooped him up, "Where are we going?" He asked for the hundredth time.

"On an adventure," I smiled at him kissing his nose.

"Are we leaving forever?" A small frown crossed his face.

"No, baby. We can always come back. We're going somewhere new to make friends and meet some new people. Doesn't that sound good?"

He shrugged and buried his head into my chest, he was getting so big, and carrying him was sometimes a struggle but I savored these moments when he still felt like a baby.

I rubbed the back of his head and held him to me, wanting to protect him from everything, and knowing I couldn't.

"This is it," My dad pulled up outside a building that was to be our new home.

I was able to get the keys with a security deposit that my parents gave me. I fought them on it but I knew I couldn't do it without their help. The small amount of savings that I had went to admission fees but I still had to pay for my classes.

Cali helped me get a job at the place she worked, I didn't even have to go in I was hired, apparently, they were desperate for help and my lack of skills didn't matter.

The apartment wasn't nice by any means, but it was cheap enough because of the area. 'Up and coming' my dad so affectionately put it. Two small rooms and one bathroom were more than enough for Emmett and I. The apartment used to be a warehouse of sorts and I liked the open floor plan, it reminded me of the cottage.

It felt modern even though it wasn't. I knew that leaving the place more open was because it was cheaper than putting up new walls and insulation.

"This place is going to get cold in the winter," My dad walked up to the windows and tapped on one, "I'll come back and see what I can do before then."

My mom looked around, a mix of sadness and pride on her face.

"Well, this isn't bad, this isn't bad at all," She frowned at some of the patches of exposed brick that obviously wasn't a style choice, but I kinda liked it. It made the place feel industrial, something people would pay to imitate.

"I'll make it cozy, add some nice things so it's not so stark," I looked at the plain white walls.

"Emmett," I called to him, he was busy running around the kitchen and living room, "Want to see your room?"

He halted before rushing to me, "I have my own room?" His eyes were bright.

"You do," I nodded holding out a hand that he took immediately, "It doesn't have anything in it yet but I thought that you could decide what you liked. Maybe even paint it." His eyes were wide and it made me feel like I was doing something right.

I was excited for my first shift at the restaurant, diner, whatever, but also annoyed that it took me from furniture shopping. My parents were taking Emmett around to find some thrived pieces to fill the space. I didn't care what it looked like, but it felt like a moment that I should be there for.

"Ding dong," Cali knocked at my open apartment door.

"How did you even?"

"You texted me your address, and you left the door unlocked" She smiled walking it surveying the place with her hands on her hips, "Great space, really big for this area." I couldn't tell if she was joking.

"Come on," She nodded her head to the door. "Don't want to be late for your first shift." She sauntered out in front of me. I grabbed the keys fumbling with the unfamiliar lock.

The diner was a few blocks away. Cali showed me where she lived a few blocks further past it, where Emmett would go when I was at work. She had a sitter for the summer and her daughter ended school already. Splitting the cost would be way cheaper than daycare if I could have even found one with an opening.

I took it as a sign, Cali was my fairy godmother, a bit of a dark fairy godmother maybe, but she came in and not only offered a job but a solution for Emmett. I hoped that I was maybe The Moon Goddess was telling me that didn't completely forget me, and I wanted to believe that she hadn't.

It was a miracle everything was within walking distance. My college was about thirty minutes, the diner, ten, and Cali another ten after that. Public transportation was great to an extent, but Cali warned that it wasn't always reliable and I didn't mind walking anyways.

My first shift at work was a whirlwind. I didn't think it would be that hard to keep up with everything. It was a lot of running around, and then running back, and trying to carry things and remember everything. I felt physically and mentally exhausted after it.

"It's not always like this, during the week we have a breakfast and lunch rush, but besides that, it's pretty dead." Cali dumped some plates in the kitchen as I brushed past her, "Go ahead and sit down I'd say you're done for today."

I took off the pink apron, thankful that I was allowed to wear anything black underneath. Cali wore a knee-length black dress but I was nervous something like that would ride up my ass so I shed out a short sleeve shirt and black jeans that I packed away another lifetime ago.

"Here," Cali slid over a brown envelope and I opened it up my eyes wide. She leaned back on the counter in front of me, "It's not much, part of my tips for helping out, and technically you get paid hourly training but," She shrugged.

"Thank you," I shoved it into my pocket. The money, even if she didn't think was a lot, was more than I expected.

If I could keep this up for five or six shifts at least then I could afford the apartment and my classes. It would be tight but I could do it.

"Our shifts will be the same for now, I made it a requirement with the boss man. Most of them are during the day after the breakfast rush. Drop Emmett off at mine and we can walk here together." I nodded but looked away.

"Look, I get it. It's going to be hard to have him away from your parents when it's all he's known, but he has to get into a routine." My eyes snapped back to hers as I chewed my lip. She was right.

It would be hard, harder than I think I ever thought it would be. But I was doing this for him, for us, and that would make it all worth it.

I tumbled into bed, well the couch.

My parents surprised me with new mattresses for Emmett and me. I was elated, honestly. Sleeping on Goddess knows what mattress didn't sit right with me, especially for my son.

Emmett was fast asleep on his, and they were sleeping in my room, I insisted but my mom still set up the couch with fresh sheets and new pillows.

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.