

9 - Coffee and Cream

(Willa)

I stumbled back, thankful I wasn't holding anything or it would have shattered on the oor. I bumped into the counter behind me, not able to back up any further.

The chatter of the diner resumed around us and the servers started moving again. Did I just imagine the pause in the world?

"Willa?" Cali's voice sounded far away.

"I need-," My throat closed as I pushed past her out the back door.

I didn't know what I needed. To run, to get out of here? I needed to latch onto something that made sense once I muddled through this complete shock.

My wolf was whining in my head, wanting to get back to our mate.

I tried to shush her but it was no use.

I never thought about a second chance mate, it hadn't crossed my mind in the past ve years when I dwelled on my anger rage and then committed myself completely to Emmett.

One thing I knew, is that I didn't want one.

Not right now.

A cool dread settled over me and I wasn't sure if it was coming from my wolf or me.

Why would the Goddess be so cruel to gift me with a second chance at the worst possible time? Right when I was getting on my own two feet for once in my d.arn life she wanted to upend everything for me to belong to another man?

Don't reject him - Iris whined

I shook my head, that thought didn't even cross my mind. But he could reject us, I don't know if I could live through that pain again.

I heard a door open and I didn't move from where I was hugging my legs. I didn't care I was sitting in the lthy side alley that was only used for smoke breaks and to hold the dumpsters. I didn't care about anything remotely logical at the moment.

Cali stood over me her hands on her hips, "He's gone," She said as if she knew, reaching down a hand for me I reluctantly took it.

"What was that about?" She leaned against the building, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but if he was an ex or someone you never want to see again I'll make sure he never comes a block from the diner, no questions asked."

I shook my head, I didn't know how to explain that I didn't know him, had never met him, but that he was fated to me. I almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

"No, he's okay. I just didn't expect him." She studied me her jaw hard as if she didn't believe me, "Seriously, it was just a shock. He hasn't done anything to hurt me, I swear." Not yet at least, I sighed internally.

The rest of the shift I was on edge, constantly looking toward the door hoping that he wouldn't come back, or maybe I was hoping he did.

It was hard to concentrate but I made it through. Cali and I counted our tips after our shift and I pocketed them making a note to open a bank account this week while my parents were still here.

"Look Mama look!" Emmett ran out of his room minutes after we got home. He pulled my hand and I followed him to where my parents were.

There was a small bed that matched a bedside table in the middle of the room that smelled like fresh pain.

I looked around the small space, the stark white walls were now a dark blue.

My dad smiled at me crossing his arms, "It still needs to dry a bit. Tomorrow I'll hang the curtains. He chose the blue, I know it's a bit dark but," He shrugged.

"And look!" Emmett shouted tugging on my arm bringing my attention to a box that had a picture of a constellation lamp, "Grandma said that it makes stars on the ceiling."

"Thank you," I whispered to them, emotions clogged my throat.

Knowing that he had a space that he loved all to himself made this move so much easier. I would get him a few books and toys this week if I made enough.

"It's perfect," I let Emmett lead me around the small space, and my parents left the room to give us space, "You chose this color?"

He nodded with a wide smile, "Grandpa let me look at all the paint papers, chips," He furrowed his brows.

"Paint samples?" I suggested.

"Yes! The paint samples on little papers. I chose this one," He looked so proud.

"It is perfect, tomorrow we can get it all set up," I promised, "We can have a sleepover on the couch tonight while it dries. How does that sound?" I rued his hair.

We sat around the kitchen table that they got today promising to nd me a bed and table for my room before they left. I didn't want to think about the fact they were leaving at the end of the week but I would be forever grateful for their help. I don't know how long this would have taken me to get all this furniture, or how I would have even gotten it home.

They asked about my day but I couldn't bring them to tell me that I met my second-chance mate. Saying it out loud felt too real and I didn't know how to feel about it other than slightly angry and confused.

I laid on the couch with Emmett in my arms and for the rst time since we moved here I didn't fall asleep from exhaustion. Thoughts swirled through my mind but no matter how long I lay there I couldn't make sense of them.

"You good?" Cali asked when I must have stopped talking when we neared the diner, I nodded but I knew she wasn't convinced. I knew she wasn't going to let it go.

I was determined to have a calmer shift than yesterday, no matter what fate threw at me. I set about getting my section ready, the counter again, wiping it down, making coffee, and folding napkins to prepare for the lunch rush even if it was a few hours away.

I almost lost myself in the work until I felt my body tense before I even smelled his scent or saw him. I forced myself to not run, I wasn't even sure if I could with my body locking up.

I didn't notice the other patrons or servers this time but focused on him, actually letting myself look at him for the rst time.

He had dark hair, black, that matched his immaculately trimmed beard. His dark features made his churning blue eyes a stark contrast.

He seemed to be someone that commanded respect, he had an authority around him that I couldn't describe.

He walked towards me without pausing, his eyes never straying from mine until he sat across from me, his face almost level to mine.

"Coffee," He more said than asked, I raised an eyebrow at him, "Please," He added and I turned to grab a mug and poured him a cup from a fresh pot sliding it back to him.

"Cream or sugar?" I asked and he shook his head.

"You're going to want something, the coffee is c.rap," I added honestly, a shadow of a smile crossed his features but it was gone before I could really be sure.

"Some cream then," I waited, "Please," He added.

I nodded and grabbed him some. The normal conversation was so strange to have. The air seemed to charge between us, every part of me was drawn to him. I wondered if he felt the bond the same way or if this was a uke.

He didn't seem to.

"Thanks," He took it from me, his ngers brushing mine and I pulled them back at the jolt. His eyes went to where my ngers had touched his. He must have felt it too.

I nodded thankfully another customer sat at the other end of the counter and I went to help them. The sense of awareness of him didn't leave me no matter that I was physically further away.

I walked back to where he sat, he looked up before I even got there, seeming to sense me too.

"Can I get you anything else?" I asked, hoping my voice sounded even.

"No," He shook his head, "No thanks," He added and I smiled.

"Okay then," I turned.

"Wait," His voice seemed gravelly in a way that made my stomach dip.

I turned back to him slowly. He took a breath his brows bunched and then his face went back to the cool neutrality I'm sure he wore often.

"Yes?" I asked.

"You're my mate," He lowered his voice, there was no question in his statement.

I nodded slowly, closing the space between us so no one would overhear, his breath seemed to catch in his throat. "You're my second chance," I admitted and his eyes widened slightly before realization seemed to settle in.

He nodded once.

"I don't know how to feel about this. I wasn't even looking for anything, I didn't know this was even a possibility for me," I needed to get straight to the point, "Do you even want a mate?" I asked, not sure if I wanted to know the answer.

His face changed in a way that was imperceptible and I wondered what he was thinking.

"You don't?" He nally asked me.

I swallowed. It didn't escape me that he didn't answer my question.

"I'm not sure anymore. I just got out of something, I feel like I need some time to be alone..." He blinked once.

"I understand." I studied him but his face gave nothing away, "Can I take you out on a date?" He asked.

That shocked me, I wasn't expecting that to be the next thing out of his mouth.

"I said I needed time to be alone," I gave him a half smile, "That's not being alone."

He shrugged, "You didn't answer the question."

"I don't think so, not right now." I shook my head, "I'm sorry, I have too much to sort through personally to even think about this." I admitted.

His face fell for a second and it made me want to take it all back. I felt selsh, but at the same time I needed to be selsh, I deserved it.

"Friends?" He asked.

I studied him, "You don't seem to be the type to have many friends." My bluntness surprised me, and so did the ease of talking to him. I didn't feel nervous at all, even with Nolan it took me weeks to be able to really form a sentence in front of him.

That whisper of a smile came across his face again and he shook his head once.

"You're not wrong. But the friends I have seem to tolerate me." I smiled back.

"Fine," I reached my hand to him, "Willa Balfour,"

His large palm wrapped around mine and warmth and sparks sent through me, reminding me of the rst time Nolan claimed me and wrapped me in his arms.

I pulled back maybe too fast, cradling my hand in the other. I wasn't expecting this to bring back those memories, but I guess it was natural that they did.

He looked worried for a second, "Caspian," I looked up at him, "That's my name," He added.

I smiled at him, "I gured that much."

"Well, Willa. I'm glad to meet you, and I look forward to our friendship." One of his eyebrows raised and it sent a small burst of d.arned p.Jeasure through me.

There was too much to sort through. I had a child, I was rejected and now I was a single mother working at a restaurant so I could pay to take a few classes. There wasn't anything about me that screamed 'catch'.

My smile faltered, I knew better than anyone that the mate bond wasn't infallible. That the initial sparks and attraction weren't enough.

Not that I even wanted a mate, but I was scared as hell of falling for this guy and then him rejecting me after nding out more about me.

He pulled out a wallet and put a twenty on the counter, "No change," He said as I went to grab it.

"I have a child, he's four and I'm a single mother. I'm taking classes at a community college because I have no idea what I want to do with my life and hadn't ever really thought about it." I rushed out, not looking at him.

He paused for a second, clenching my sts, waiting for the hurt of rejection.

"Okay," He said after a too long moment.

He turned to walk away and warring feelings swept through me. I was glad he didn't reject me but worried that what I said would make him not want me, but I didn't even know if I wanted him.

He paused in the doorway looking like he was going to say something but then walked out.

"What was that?" Cali said as I was left stunned.

"I have no idea," I pocketed the money and took the mug to the kitchen, she followed me.

"Who was that?" She asked.

"Caspian?"

"You really don't know him," She breathed.

"I said I didn't,"

"Hm," She turned on her heel and I really wished I knew what she was thinking.