

# As the Coffee Cools

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The apartment was still. Pale light filtered through the kitchen window, soft and cold, casting long shadows across the counter. The city outside hadn't fully woken up yet—no sirens, no chatter from the café downstairs, just the hum of the fridge and the occasional creak of pipes behind the walls.

Mara stood barefoot on the tiles, peeling an orange with careful fingers.

The rind came off in one long spiral, her thumb pressing into the pith like she could control the shape of the silence around her. The citrus scent clung to her hands, sharp and bright in the still air.

Behind her, down the hall, Leo was still asleep. She could picture the way his hair curled messily at the back of his head, the way he curled inward now when he slept, like a child or someone trying not to take up space.

She placed the orange on a plate. Left the peel in the sink, the spiral intact.

Then she reached for the coffee tin. Two mugs. His favorite—the blue one with the chipped lip—and hers, the white one with a faded constellation printed on the side.

She boiled the water, scooped the grounds, moved like ritual. Like muscle memory.

Like love trying to disguise itself as routine.

When the kettle clicked, she poured, stirred, waited. The smell filled the room, warm and familiar.

She heard his footsteps before she saw him—soft, dragging, still half-asleep.

He shuffled into the kitchen in worn sweatpants and a stretched t-shirt, rubbing his eyes.

“You're up early,” he murmured.

“Thought I'd surprise you,” she said, her voice bright. She gestured to the mug waiting for him.

He blinked at it. “Thanks.” He picked it up and took a sip, then winced—just barely, but she saw it.

“You used the new beans?” he asked.

“Yeah. You don't like them?”

“They're... fine,” he said, setting the mug down on the counter.

She watched the steam rise and curl, dissipate. The mug sat there, full and untouched, growing colder by the second.

He leaned against the counter and yawned, pulling out his phone like it was instinct.

Mara turned back to the sink, washed her hands. The orange peel was still there, coiled like a question she didn't want to answer.

She spoke without looking at him. “Do you remember when we used to make breakfast on Saturdays? Music too loud, pancake batter everywhere?”

Leo chuckled, but it was thin. “Yeah. That was fun.”

She nodded. “I miss that.”

He didn't say anything.

She turned off the faucet. Dried her hands on

a dishtowel she didn't remember buying. When she faced him again, he was staring down at his screen, thumbs moving slowly.

The mug sat untouched beside him. Her throat tightened.

"Leo," she said quietly.

He looked up.

Her voice faltered for a second, then steadied. "Are we okay?"

He stared at her for a beat too long. Then blinked. "Yeah. Why wouldn't we be?"

"I don't know." She tried to smile. "You didn't finish your coffee."

"I'm just not in the mood for it," he said.

She nodded. Tried to make that answer enough. It wasn't.

He moved past her, heading back toward the hallway. "I'm gonna lie down for a bit."

She watched him go.

The apartment settled again. Still, quiet, familiar—but no longer warm. She picked up his mug. The heat had faded. She poured the coffee down the sink, rinsed the cup, and placed it gently back on the hook.

The orange peel stayed.

She left it there.