

## Chapter 8. The Coffee Cup

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I'm staring blankly at the coffee machine in the hospital lounge, trying to find the words to explain to Mila what just happened, when I hear rapid footsteps approaching. I look up, and my heart nearly stops, a gasp leaving my lips. It's Liam. His sudden appearance startles me so much that I drop my coffee cup, the remnants splashing over the sterile floor in a spittle of tiny drops.

Why is he here?

"Liam? W-What are you doing here?" I stammer, fumbling with my words, as I rise from the bench.

My gaze ickers nervously between him and the fallen coffee cup. He's breathing hard, as if he's been running, but his clothes are immaculate—neatly tailored and crisp. He looks completely out of place in the stark, clinical environment of the hospital.

"I went to your house," I hear him say as I quickly pull up tissues, crouch down and begin cleaning up the mess. Liam's voice is breathless but steady. "Your neighbour told me you were here. I came as soon as I could. How's your mom?"

He squats too, his gaze levelling mine. I hesitate, watching the lingering eyes of those who walk past us while trying to process his presence and the memories it brings back. The last text he sent me, the return of my car keys... why now? I take a deep breath, attempting to steady myself.

"She's stable," I say nally, scurrying across the room to discard the coffee cups and tissues. "But it's still serious. She's got pneumonia. It's not the contagious one though."

"Oh, Cassie, that's bad," he mumbles, his lips turning to a frown as he follows me with hesitant steps.

Sighing, I gather up the courage to put my thoughts into words. "Liam, I don't think you should be here right now. I know I owe you a better explanation for ending things so abruptly. Or maybe I don't, considering how clear I was since the very beginning about what I wanted out of this. But whatever it is, it can't be done here. Not with my mom like this."

Liam's eyes soften, and I can see genuine concern in them. It makes me feel a pang of guilt, but I push it aside. I don't need his concern. I can tolerate his anger but not his empathy. "Cassie," he says gently, "I'm not here as the man who asked you out. I'm here as a friend."

His words sting. They remind me of everything I've been trying to avoid thinking about. Anger bubbles up inside me, fueled by stress and fatigue. "I can handle this on my own, Liam. I don't need you here!" I snap, my voice echoing down the corridor.

For a moment, he just looks at me, pain ickering in his eyes. Without another word, he turns and walks away, his footsteps fading into the distance. I stand there, breathing hard, my chest tight.

As soon as he's out of sight, the guilt hits me like a wave. I lean against the wall, feeling the weight of my actions. Had I been too harsh? I'm just so overwhelmed. Everything is crashing down on me all at once.

I pull out my phone and text Mila, explaining what just happened. I need someone to vent to, someone who can understand the chaos of my emotions. Mila always knows what to say to calm me down.

Before I can put my phone away, another text comes in, this time from an unknown number. I open it, my eyes widening as I read the message.

It's from Rhys. It can't be from anyone else.

Unknown number: We need to meet and talk about our daughter.

Our daughter. The word ignites fury within me. Evie is my daughter. He didn't even know she existed until this morning. And now he has the audacity to assert his right on her.

I sink into one of the lounge chairs, feeling even more overwhelmed. First Rhys, then Liam, now Rhys again. Why does everything have to happen all at once? I close my eyes, trying to gather my thoughts.

I ignore his text, my thoughts drifting back to Liam. The look in his eyes when I lashed out at him is haunting me. He genuinely came to offer support, and I pushed him away.

I take a deep breath. My mom needs me, Evie needs me, and I have to keep it together. I can't afford to let my emotions get the best of me, not now.

The hospital is quieter now, the usual hum of activity subdued. I walk back to the room where my mother is admitted, the sterile smell of antiseptic filling the air. She's sleeping, her face pale but peaceful. I sit by her side, studying all the machines that are connected to her.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I whisper. "For everything. For not being stronger."

The door creaks open, and a nurse walks in, checking the machines and noting down numbers. She gives me a small smile, which I return weakly. I watch as she works calmly. "She seems a lot better now. Don't worry," the nurse says, making an effort to reassure me although she doesn't need to. "You should get some rest and come back in the morning. She's in good hands."

After she leaves, I pull out my phone again, checking for messages. It strikes me that time has moved unbelievably fast and it is now half past four. There are three new texts from Mila.

Mila: I'll get there as soon as my shift ends.

Mila: We'll work it out. Don't worry.

Mila: I'm here for you xx

It makes me feel a bit better already. But then I swipe back to the text from Rhys. And fury gnaws at me. I try to focus on the steady beep of the heart monitor, finding some solace in its rhythm. When that fails, I call Trish to check up on Evie. I'm satisfied when the call ends and I receive a picture of Evie busy painting something new with crayons, bundled up on the couch in Trish's house.

As the hours pass, I keep replaying my encounter with Liam in my mind. I can't shake the feeling that I've made a mistake. Maybe I've been too harsh. Maybe I should have let him stay, let him be there for me.

I stand up, pacing the room, my thoughts a tangled mess. Reminding myself that I'm under a lot of stress and that it's okay to feel overwhelmed, I decide to apologise to Liam.

Taking a deep breath, I pull up Liam's number and start typing a message. It's difficult to find the right words, but eventually, I manage to write a heartfelt apology.

Me: I'm sorry for how I acted earlier. I'm just really stressed out with everything going on. I appreciate that you came to check on me and my mom.

Me: Can we talk later?

I hit send, hoping he'll understand. As I put my phone away, I feel a small sense of relief. At least I've taken a step towards making things right.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of nurses and doctors. I stay by my mom's side, holding her hand and talking to her softly. But she's still dazed.

When evening comes, I receive another text from Rhys.

Unknown number: You can't ignore me forever.

A smirk forms on my lips, and I'm not entirely sure why. Maybe the anger has faded, leaving only amusement in its wake. Or perhaps I'm simply losing my mind from everything that's been happening. It could also be the fact that I haven't eaten anything since morning. I look at my mother, her chest rising and falling gently. "I'll be back soon, Mom," I whisper, kissing her forehead.

Leaving the hospital, I feel almost scared. I don't want to leave my mother here alone, but the nurse is right. They're here to care for her. And it's just for the night. And yet the thought sends my heart racing.

There's so much uncertainty in my life right now, but I know I have to face it head-on. For my mom, for Evie, and for myself.

As I walk towards my car, I check my phone one last time. There's a new message from Liam. My heart pounds as I open it, bracing myself for his response.

Liam: It's okay. I understand. Let's talk later. Take care of your mom.

I sigh in relief, grateful for his understanding. Tomorrow will be a new day, and I will face it with as much strength as I can muster. For now, I need to get back to my daughter and get some rest and gather my thoughts.