

A Favor 581

Chapter 581

“Alright, so tell me—what’s your boss’s attitude like with his employees? Is he like you, considerate and warm?”

I nearly choked on my juice at that. “My boss? Considerate? I don’t think so. Warm? Ha! The complete opposite.

“He’s like a walking ice sculpture every single day. No, actually—the right word is zombie. Cold, lifeless. There’s something off about him that I still haven’t figured out. He’s a man of few words. No, scratch that—one word. Honestly, he’s the exact opposite of the boss you’re picturing.”

“What do you mean, the exact opposite?”

“Well, he’s cold, a little rude, and arrogant at times. He doesn’t know the word ‘thank you,’ and he likes to yell—all the time, especially when he finds mistakes in your report. Tsk, tsk. He won’t give you a second chance. Either you brace your ears, or you start saying goodbye to your job.”

“Wow, that tough?” she asked, incredulous.

“Yes,” I said, drawing out the word. “But thanks to my skills and abilities, he’s never once yelled at me. Not until today, that is.” I said it with pride, raising an eyebrow.

“Pfft.” She rolled her eyes. “A cold, aggressive boss and a narcissistic assistant, working side by side? Honestly, I’m starting to wonder how the two of you even function together.”

“Me? Narcissistic?” I looked horrified, pointing at myself. “Of course not! I’m just stating a few facts about myself.”

“Exactly. That’s exactly what you’re doing.”

I didn’t argue. I just laughed and took another sip of my juice.

“Hmm, by the way—how would you describe him? Physically, I mean.” She had that mischievous glint in her eyes.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. How was I supposed to describe him?

“How would I describe him? Well... let’s just say he’s a walking Hercules. Happy now?”

“Oh, shit! Describe this walking Hercules from head to toe!” Her eyes went round.

“What? Seriously?”

“Yes! Because if that’s true, you’ve got yourself one hell of a hot boss! How cool is that!” She clapped her hands, and I just shook my head and rolled my eyes again.

“Alright, fine. He’s hot. Brown eyes, a perfectly sculpted nose, a well-defined jaw... and what else... broad shoulders, a toned, muscular chest, I think?”

“You think?”

“Yes.”

“You just think? Are you kidding me?” She frowned.

“Well, I’ve never seen him without a shirt, or in anything other than a suit. What do you expect?”

“My God, Madielyn, you’ve just set my imagination loose. And what about his shoe size? At least you’d know that—you see his feet every day!”

“Why on earth do you need to know his shoe size? Are you planning to buy him a new pair?” I tried to make it a joke, but I was the only one laughing. She just stared at me.

“You wouldn’t understand, because you’re a virgin!”

“What—”

“Just tell me his shoe size!”

“I don’t know his exact foot size, just his shoe size!”

“So what is it?” Her eyes went wide.

What was even happening right now?

Chapter 582

“Hmm... ten, eleven? Maybe twelve,” I said, bringing my half-empty glass back up to my lips.

“Oh, Jesus! He’s packing serious length down there!”

She said it loud enough that my eyes went wide too, and I spat juice all over her blouse, coughing hard. I coughed even harder at the look on her face. I would have laughed if I hadn’t still been choking.

“Yuck! You’re disgusting!” she complained, wiping her blouse with a tissue.

“Sorry, I’m trying not to laugh. But this is your fault. You can’t control your mouth, saying things like—”

“What? Saying vile, filthy words? Like huge, rigid, member, penis—”

“Noelle!” I swear, I am never discussing my boss’s body with you again. You have the foulest mouth I’ve ever heard!”

Now she was the one laughing at me. I gathered my signed documents into a folder and handed it over.

“My God,” I muttered, standing up and stretching my arms.

“Where are you going?” she asked, still laughing.

“I’m just going to take a walk around,” I said, heading toward the door.

“Suit yourself.”

This was my usual weekly routine whenever I visited each of my stores: a quick, informal check on the space and the staff.

I headed first to the kitchen, where my team was busy cooking and preparing orders. Since it was Sunday, the number of customers we saw was double the usual weekday crowd.

“Good morning, Miss Madi.”

I was greeted first by the group of waiters taking orders.

“Good morning, everyone. How’s your day going?”

I treated all of them like friends, not just employees. As they say, if you want to earn someone’s respect, treat them the way you’d want to be treated.

“Well... exhausting, as always. But we’re happy, since our lovely boss came to visit. Right, guys?” Tony winked at me—he was our head waiter.

“Yes,” they all answered in unison.

“Wow, thank you. Such a small thing, and you’re all still saying that? Nah, I already knew that.” I smiled proudly, giving my own shoulder a pat, as if dusting off invisible dirt.

They all laughed, a few shaking their heads.

“Yes, see? That’s exactly what we’re talking about. You always make us laugh.”

“Why? Aren’t I beautiful?” I joked, putting on a look of mock horror.

“Of course you are. You’re beautiful inside and out, Mrs. Madi. You just really enjoy carrying your own chair—not just sometimes, but always.”

They all laughed again, and I laughed right along with them.

We’d always been like this. I always found a way to squeeze in at least a small conversation with my staff. Even if it meant carrying my own chair sometimes, it was worth it if that was what it took for them to open up to me—not just as their boss, but as a friend.

The next area I checked was the dining hall, and yes, it truly was a busy day. Everyone was hard at work, serving and assisting customers.

Chapter 583

People rarely saw me around my restaurants, inside or out. I never called attention to myself. Most of the time, I checked in on reports and updates by phone or computer, and only showed up in person once or twice a week, or whenever something needed my signature.

Only a handful of people knew I'd taken another course after opening my first restaurant—my mother and a couple of close friends.

I'd studied Hotel and Restaurant Management in college. After graduating and starting my own business, I'd also enrolled in an online program for Office and Business Management, and finished that as well.

My first job as an “employee” had been as a department manager, though I resigned after a year. After that, I took a position as an HR assistant at a smaller company in the city. A year later, I saw a post on social media that WEC was looking for an assistant to the CEO.

I gave it a shot, and I got the job. I hadn't included my first degree or my business on my resume, so neither my boss nor the company I worked for now knew anything about it.

After my usual check at the restaurant, I said goodbye to Noelle and headed to another one of my stores.

I spent the rest of the day going from store to store, checking on paperwork that needed my attention.

I didn't get home until six in the evening. I lived in a small apartment with a roommate who worked as a bank manager. She knew about my business too, since we'd lived together for two years, which was actually part of the reason I still chose to live somewhere modest.

After dinner, we sat in the living room and watched a Hallmark romance movie. But since tomorrow was Monday, I headed to bed early.

Waking up early had always been part of my routine. Still, since I hated mornings, I let myself have one extra hour before heading to work each day.

Because honestly, that's how most of my morning went: the first five minutes, sitting on the bed, stretching, doing absolutely nothing. Ten minutes checking my phone—emails, texts from my managers, my mother, and of course, my boss. Another ten minutes picking out my clothes. Fifteen minutes showering and talking to myself in the mirror. And the last ten minutes getting dressed and putting on makeup.

Which meant breakfast, more often than not, didn't make the cut.

Walking into the office building, I found myself smiling without even trying. I was thirty minutes early, so there was no need to rush. I still had time to say hi and chat briefly with a few of the employees who greeted me.

Not everyone liked me, of course. There were a few who didn't, especially the ones who belonged to what I liked to call my boss's fan club.

The two most devoted members of that club were Ailene and Jenny. They hated me for being the boss's assistant, which really just meant they were jealous. They muttered something under their breath, and I simply ignored them, the way I always did.

As I stepped out of the elevator, they turned left, scowling.

Chapter 584

I hadn't even set my things down when Sandy, the CEO's secretary, appeared at my office door, frowning.

"I've been calling you from the lobby, and you completely ignored me!" she said, eyebrows raised.

"Ahh, I'm so sorry. I didn't hear you."

"Hmmp! It's fine. I just wanted to give you this." She set a brown paper bag down on my desk.

"What's this?" I asked, taking it from her.

"Just some chocolate cupcakes. I brought them for you, since I know you skip breakfast every single day." She rolled her eyes.

"Ahh, you're too kind. Thank you so much." I hugged her, and she gave my arm a pat. She had about four more months of experience at the company than I did, and like me, she'd suffered through her fair share of bullying from Jenny and Ailene when she first started.

"Wait—is the boss here yet?" Her eyes went wide.

“Relax, we’re both early. He hasn’t arrived.”

“Whew.” She sighed, and I laughed.

“Thanks for these,” I said, picking up the paper bag.

“You’re welcome. Just let me and my new boyfriend eat free at your restaurant sometime.” She winked and raised her eyebrows, and I laughed again.

“Ah, so this is the price of a few cupcakes.”

“I’m just kidding!” She laughed along with me.

Besides my friends, she was one of the few people I’d let in on my secret, and she’d promised to keep it to herself until I said otherwise.

“No, seriously, just message me whenever you want to come by, and it’s on me. And if you want to bring your boyfriend out on a date, just let me know.”

“What? I’ll admit, that’s a tempting offer, Madi, but there’s no way I’m inviting him out and covering the whole bill. No way.”

I laughed at how firmly she said it.

“And why not? You know, for a relationship to work, there has to be give and take.”

“Are you saying you’d actually do that in a relationship?”

“Why not? Like I said, it’s about give and take. You have to learn that if you want the relationship to actually grow.”

I kept explaining, not realizing our boss had already appeared at my office door, watching. We kept talking anyway.

“But Madi, you’re a woman, and he’s a man!”

“So? What difference does that make?”

“He should be the one paying for your dates and taking care of your needs! He’s the one who should be working hard for the relationship!”

I couldn’t hold back my laughter.

“Sandy, why are we even talking about money here? We’re talking about relationships. Like I said, if you want yours to succeed, you have to learn to give and take. Man or woman, both people need to put in the effort. Being a woman doesn’t mean you can’t ask your man out on a date.”

“Ahh, so your generosity really has no limits.” I rolled my eyes. “I’ll set you up on a blind date!” She flashed me a devilish grin.

“A blind date?” I made a face at the idea.

Chapter 585

“Yes, a blind date!” she repeated, proud of herself.

I was about to complain when the figure standing in the doorway finally spoke and stepped toward us.

“No one is arranging any blind dates for anyone, especially not during work hours.” His cold voice cut through both our ears, and our eyes went wide.

“G-good morning, sir,” Sandy stammered, greeting him first.

“Good morning, Mr. Wilsons,” I said, chin held high. We still had ten minutes before official work hours, so there was nothing to worry about even if he’d caught us talking.

“Miss Aguilar, have you finished those papers I gave you yesterday?” he asked her, though his eyes were on me. I didn’t look away, just swallowed the lump forming in my throat. His cold gaze sent a shiver down my spine. Strange, really—but I forced myself to glance at Sandy instead, who was suddenly very interested in her own feet.

“Yes, sir. I’ll bring them to your office now.”

He ignored her entirely.

“Miss Davis, bring me my coffee and today’s schedule,” he said, still not taking his eyes off me.

“Yes, sir, right away.” I managed a smile and turned away to break free of his stare. Sandy excused herself and went to her office, right across from mine.

Wow.

I let out a breath once he’d finally left my office.

I headed to the pantry to prepare his first coffee of the day.

I knocked on his office door and heard his cold voice inside: “Come in.”

I took a deep breath before stepping through. The chill in his office, paired with the ice in his voice, sent a shiver through me all over again. There he sat behind his desk—the cold, heartless CEO, Gabriel Wilsons. Five o’clock shadow. A pair of lips I sometimes, against my better judgment, dreamed of kissing.

I shook my head, chasing the thought away.

“Mr. Wilsons. Here’s your coffee.” I set it down on his desk. He didn’t say a word. He didn’t even look up.

“Rude!”

This was my usual monologue whenever he said nothing. No “thank you,” no acknowledgment at all, after handing down another order. Like I said—he didn’t know the word “thanks.” It simply wasn’t in his vocabulary.

“Anything else, sir?”

“My schedule for today.”

“Ah, right, I forgot.”

I rolled my eyes internally and recited his agenda for the day.

“Anything else, sir?” I kept the smile fixed on my face.

“Not for now. You may go back to work,” he said, without so much as glancing at me, his eyes fixed on the papers in his hands.

I didn’t waste a second, turning for the door—only to be stopped by his voice again.

“Miss Davis?” I turned immediately. “Call Miss Aguilar in when you leave.” Then his eyes dropped back to the pile of papers.

And there it was—the second word missing from his vocabulary, right alongside “thank you”: please.

For nothing, said the voice in my head.

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 586

I let out a long sigh as I made my way to Sandy’s desk.

“Sandy.” She looked up at the sound of my voice. “Mr. Wilsons wants to see you.”

“Oh... alright.”

I laughed at how startled she looked. I still couldn’t understand why she hadn’t gotten used to our boss’s cold, strict demeanor by now.

“Relax, he’s not going to eat you,” I teased.

“Yes, I know. I just don’t understand how you manage to stay so calm and composed in front of him!”

I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing.

“Maybe it’s because I’m a boss too,” I whispered, glancing around us.

“Oh, right, I forgot. How silly of me.” She huffed, grabbed the red folder off her desk, and headed for his door. I walked her to the exit.

“Good luck,” I said, teasing her on the way out.

“I hate you!”

I laughed even harder before heading back to my own office.

Ouch. Fortunately, the coffee in my hand didn’t freeze from the chill in her voice.

Madi’s point of view

Taking calls and going over new schedules took up almost half my day.

I hadn’t realized how quickly the time had gone, and now it was already lunchtime.

Sandy appeared at my office door with her usual eager smile.

“Is everything alright? Do you prefer working over eating?”

My lips curled into a smile. “It’s fine. I just hadn’t noticed it was already so late.”

“Hmmp! You say that every single day,” she retorted, rolling her eyes.

“Really? I never noticed,” I replied, smiling broadly as I tidied my desk.

I grabbed my phone and my purse, and we headed for the elevator down to the building’s café.

“Want to hear something? I’ve got a great story.”

I glanced at her as we stepped into the busiest part of the building at this hour.

“What story?”

“It’s about our boss.” She covered one side of her mouth with her hand, making sure no one but me could hear. Her whole manner intrigued me, and I raised my eyebrows.

“That’s gossip!” I said, even though I was dying of curiosity.

“There’s a reason behind that cold, distant attitude of his,” she whispered, ignoring my comment entirely.

“What?”

“I heard he was betrayed by his ex—someone he was completely head over heels for—and she left him. Just walked away.”

I don’t know why, but hearing that he’d once fallen for someone else gave me a strange pang in my chest. Still, I pushed the feeling aside and focused on her story.

“How did you find out about this?” I asked, giving her my full attention.

“I overheard it in the finance department this morning. And you know what else? He only agreed to take over as CEO of WEC—the position his father offered him—after she left.”

I turned to her, curiosity fully piqued now, wanting to know more.

“They also said that once his ex betrayed him for another man, that’s when he turned cold and heartless.”

Chapter 587

“Hey, did you hear all this from people gossiping behind his back?” I asked, looking straight at her.

“Yes, but that wasn’t my intention. They were already talking when I walked by. And don’t tell me you’re not interested, because everyone in this building loves gossiping about his life.”

“I’m not the least bit interested,” I lied outright. “I’m just intrigued.”

She laughed behind me as we kept moving toward the end of the line.

“Friend, that’s the same thing. It’s a synonym for interested.”

So he’d been betrayed. I wondered if the way he acted now was really so different from before, if the betrayal had actually reshaped his personality. Wait—what kind of ex had done it? A girlfriend? A wife?

“Neither. His ex-fiancée.”

I was so startled by that piece of information that I immediately turned to look at her.

“You heard that?!” I asked, eyes wide. “I was just thinking to myself—”

Sandy burst out laughing. “Of course I heard it, silly! You were thinking out loud!”

“Ahh,” was all I managed, biting my lip in embarrassment. I hoped no one else had caught me talking to myself, aside from her.

“So this is what you call ‘not interested at all,’ huh?”

She wore a huge grin, and I just rolled my eyes.

“Hi, Madi.”

I was saved, in that moment, by Troy from HR, greeting me from his spot in line, two people ahead of us.

“Hello, Troy.” I gave him a smile.

“Hmm, and so the flirting begins,” Sandy muttered, as if to herself, but I just smiled. She was convinced Troy had a crush on me, and I was equally determined to ignore the idea.

Honestly, I didn’t see anything wrong with him liking me, even if that were true. It wasn’t a good enough reason to avoid him. As far as I was concerned, unless I gave him a reason to think his feelings had any chance, there was no need to keep my distance. Besides, I considered him a friend.

He came to sit at our table, the way he did every day. And, of course, he always chose the seat right next to me.

"I love the chicken sandwich here," Troy said, unwrapping his second one.

"I noticed," Sandy replied with a smile.

I twirled my fork through my spaghetti and took a bite.

"Troy, where are you from originally?" Sandy asked out of nowhere.

"Me? I'm originally from Florida," he answered, and Sandy and I exchanged a glance.

"You're from Florida too?!" I asked, looking straight at him.

"I am. I lived there before trying my luck out here in Chicago. Why? Don't tell me you're from Florida too!"

"Well, yes, I am." I shrugged. "I was born there."

"Wow, that's great!" Troy and I both looked over at Sandy. She just shrugged and took a sip of her juice without a word. I recognized that look on her face.

"It's fate," Troy said.

My eyes widened in surprise at his words, and they widened even further when Sandy spat out half her juice, coughing.

Chapter 588

"Sandy!" I shot her a look. "Good thing I was already done eating!"

"Sorry!" she said, still coughing.

"You did that on purpose!" I accused her.

"What? Of course not! Can't you see I'm choking? Blame him!" She pointed her chin at Troy.

"Calm down, would you? Why me?" Troy asked, confused.

"Because you said the word fate!" she shot back instantly.

“And what’s wrong with that? Maybe it really was fate that brought Madi and me to the same city,” he said, his voice rising.

“Exactly! So this is entirely your fault!” she replied, just as loudly, if not louder.

“Cut it out! I don’t see how any of this is my fault! What’s so wrong about saying fate brought Madi and me here?”

“Oh my God.”

I bit my lower lip and rubbed my temples. The whole argument was starting to give me a headache. Glancing around, I realized every eye in the cafeteria was now on us—including a pair of brown eyes belonging to Mr. Wilsons, staring straight at me with an unmistakable chill.

“Hey! Enough, both of you! Stop arguing during lunch. You’re making a scene, and everyone’s staring!”

They both glanced around the table and gave awkward smiles to the people raising their eyebrows at them. Neither of them noticed the cold look our boss was giving us from a table not far away.

Sandy went back to eating, and Troy scratched the back of his neck, embarrassed. Once lunch was over, Sandy and I headed back to our desks, and Troy went off to his own department.

I couldn’t find Mr. Wilsons in his usual spot.

I checked the clock and saw it was five minutes to one. Time to head to the pantry and prepare his next cup of coffee. I also grabbed my notepad, ready to remind him of the 1:30 meeting.

Five minutes later, I was knocking on his office door again, coffee in one hand, notepad in the other.

“Come in!”

Wow. Thank God the coffee didn’t freeze over from the chill in his voice.

Why did he have to be so cold all the time?

I pushed the door open and found him on the phone. I didn’t say a word, not wanting to interrupt his call. I set the cup on his desk and waited patiently for him to finish.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion on this matter!”

I swallowed hard as he yelled at whoever was on the other end of the line.

“I’m paying you to have her investigated and monitored, not to interrogate me. Understood?”

He clearly hadn't expected a response, because he hung up the moment the words left his mouth.

Wow. You really shouldn't be so arrogant and rude, I thought, raising my eyebrows.

"Your coffee, Mr. Wilsons," I said, waving toward the cup, pretending I hadn't heard a thing. What a liar I was.

"What's next on my agenda?" he asked, settling into his chair. I stayed on my feet and opened my notepad.

Chapter 589

"You have a meeting with Cordova's Marketing at 1:30. Their COO is coming with his assistant to present a product they'd like our company to start purchasing." I answered without hesitation, and once I finished, I looked up from my notepad to find my boss staring off into the distance, his gaze fixed on the bookshelf to his left.

I waited for some kind of response, but minutes passed and he didn't move a muscle. Then his phone buzzed with a new notification, and his thumb swiped across the screen almost without thinking. Since it was lying flat on the desk, I caught a glimpse of the photo that popped up—a woman with a man's arm draped over her shoulders.

I quickly dropped my gaze back to my notepad, Sandy's story flashing through my mind. I stole a glance at him through my lashes and noticed his jaw tighten, his knuckles going white around the phone.

Poor phone, I thought. I feel for you and whatever you're carrying.

"Mr. Wilsons," I said, trying to get his attention. His head snapped toward me, and something in his eyes made me shiver for a second. When he registered that it was just me standing there, his expression softened slightly, and he let out a tired sigh.

"What's next on my agenda?"

"Huh?"

My jaw dropped. Had he not even registered I was there before? Had I been invisible this entire time? I mentally rolled my eyes and repeated what I'd already told him about his upcoming meeting. As if I had a choice.

"Okay. Be ready at that time."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"No, nothing."

I nodded and left his office.

Walking back to my desk, I couldn't stop thinking about the photo on his phone. Sandy's story about his past kept replaying in my mind. I didn't want to pry into anyone's personal life, but I couldn't help being curious. Maybe there was some truth to the gossip about his coldness. Was that woman in the photo the reason he'd become the way he was?

Did he even remember how to smile? Since I'd started working here, I'd never once seen him laugh, or even smile. He never returned his employees' greetings, and his face was permanently locked behind a mask of seriousness and cold detachment.

My thoughts were cut off by a text from George, one of the managers at my second restaurant. We'd been friends since college.

George: Madi, can you stop by before heading home? We just need your signature for the restaurant's license renewal. Thanks.

Me: Alright. Thanks, George, I replied right away. I checked my watch—five minutes left before the meeting. I gathered my things and headed for the door.

As soon as I stepped out, I saw Sandy coming from the elevator, most likely having just checked on the conference room.

"The meeting room's all set," she said with a smile.

“Thanks, Sandy.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck!”

Before I could respond, the CEO’s door swung open, and out walked what could only be described as a Greek god—or rather, Mr. Gabriel Wilsons, wearing his usual icy demeanor.

“Let’s go,” he said, walking past me.

Sandy shot me a wink as I glanced back at her.

Chapter 590

I’d always thanked God for giving me the ability to walk fast. I’d been a track athlete back in school, and that came in handy keeping pace with this giant of a man.

He stepped into the elevator, and I followed close behind, pressing the button for the meeting room floor before the doors closed.

Nearly an hour passed once the presentation started. I always paid close attention during these meetings, since my boss occasionally asked for my opinion.

The presentation ran until 2:45, which meant the whole discussion had taken exactly an hour and fifteen minutes.

Throughout the meeting, one pair of eyes never seemed to look away from me—Mr. Emerson Solivan, the assistant to Cordova’s COO. Since I was focused on the discussion, I just ignored his staring and pretended not to notice.

Once everyone stood, I started gathering my things along with the clutter left on the table.

The COO and my boss exchanged a handshake, trading a few closing pleasantries.

I was reaching for the next chair to grab a folder that had been used during the meeting when someone bumped into me. Unfortunately, it wasn’t just the folder that ended up on the floor—I did too. Caught off guard, I lost my balance on my heels and went down.

“Ouch,” I groaned, not sure if I’d said it out loud or just meant to. Luckily, several people had already left the room, so there weren’t too many witnesses to my humiliation.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Ms. Davis, I didn’t see you!” Mr. Solivan said, trying to explain himself. As if I’d actually believe that. I was fairly sure he’d bumped into me on purpose, just to have an excuse to talk to me, given how much attention he’d been paying me throughout the meeting.

“It’s fine, Mr. Solivan,” I managed, forcing a smile. I was wearing a skirt, and I noticed he seemed a little short of breath as his eyes lingered on my legs. I tried to get up on my own, but he bent down to help—only to be stopped cold by a sharp voice behind me.

“Don’t touch her, Mr. Solivan. Touch her, and I’ll break both your arms.”

Mr. Solivan swallowed hard, clearly nervous, as Mr. Wilsons stepped in front of me, staring him down. My eyes went straight to my boss, who was already offering me his hand.

Once I was sure he meant it, I took it without hesitation. As soon as I was back on my feet, he turned to Solivan, whose face had gone pale, sweat beading at his temples.

“I saw exactly what you did. I watched your eyes undressing my assistant the entire time we were discussing your company’s proposal. And as if that weren’t enough, you bumped into her on purpose just so you’d have an excuse to ‘help her up.’”

“N-no, sir, it was just—”

“One more thing, Mr. Solivan—I swear this will be the last job you ever have if you’re still standing in front of me in the next five seconds.”

“I-I’m sorry, Ms. Davis,” was all he managed to stammer before bolting for the door.