

## Chapter 39 No.

Caden arrived at the office at 9:30 AM on Monday. He was late.

"Coffee!" he yelled as he walked past Serena's desk.

Serena jumped. "Yes, sir! Coming right up!"

She ran into his office a minute later with a mug. It smelled... sweet.

Caden took a sip and immediately spat it back into the mug.

"What is this?" he roared. "It tastes like syrup!"

"It's... a vanilla latte?" Serena stammered. "With two sugars?"

"I drink black coffee! Guatemala Antigua! Pour-over! 195 degrees! Are you an idiot?"

Serena's lip trembled. "I didn't know... the manual was in Italian..."

"Get Eulalie on the phone!" Caden slammed the mug down. Coffee splashed onto his cuffs.

Serena scrambled to dial. She put it on speaker.

"Hello?" Eulalie's voice was calm. There was soft music in the background. Was she at a spa?

"Eulalie!" Caden shouted. "Get down here. Serena is incompetent. I need coffee."

"I'm busy, Caden."

"Doing what? Spending my money?"

"Actually, yes. I'm getting a massage."

"Come teach this girl how to make coffee. Now."

Eulalie laughed. It was a light, airy sound. "No. But I can offer a remote consultation. My rate is one thousand dollars an hour."

"What?"

"Consulting fee. Payable in advance. Wire it to the blind trust account I sent to legal. Jory Stark represents the entity."

"You are out of your mind!"

Serena started to cry. "I'm sorry, Mr. Holloway! I'll try again!"

Just then, Jared burst into the office, his face pale. "Caden, we have a problem. The stock. It's down 8% since open. Someone is shorting us. Hard. And the board is calling."

Caden looked at Jared, then at the crying girl, then at the ruined coffee. His world was fraying at the edges. He needed caffeine to deal with the stock crisis. He needed a win.

"Fine!" he snarled. "Jared! Wire the money!"

Three minutes later, Eulalie's voice came back on the line.

"Payment received. Okay, Serena. Listen carefully. Open the cabinet above the sink. The grinder is on the left. Set it to 3.5. Not 3. Not 4. 3.5."

Caden watched as Serena followed the instructions. Eulalie's voice was precise, commanding. She knew exactly where everything was. She knew exactly how he liked it.

"Wait for the bloom, Serena. Thirty seconds. Let the gas escape."

The smell of fresh coffee filled the room. It smelled like home. It smelled like the mornings Caden had taken for granted.

"Okay, pour slowly. Circular motion."

Serena handed him the new cup. Caden took a sip. It was perfect.

He felt a lump in his throat. Not because the coffee was good, but because the recipe was an act of intimacy. She had memorized his exact preferences. She had perfected this ritual for him. And now, she was selling it to a stranger for cash.

It cheapened it. It meant she didn't care about the act anymore; she only cared about the transaction.

"Is it good?" Eulalie asked over the speaker.

"It's fine," Caden grunted.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Eulalie said. "Oh, and Caden?"

"What?"

"Serena used tap water. You prefer filtered. That'll be another five hundred for the addendum."

Click.

Caden stared at the cup. He looked at Serena. He looked at the red numbers on Jared's tablet screen.

"Get out," he whispered.

Serena ran.

Caden sat alone in his office. The coffee tasted bitter.