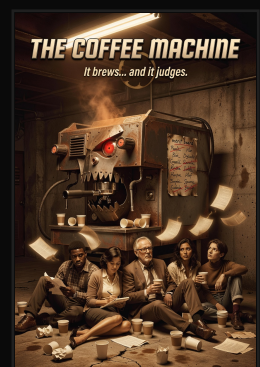


THE COFFEE MACHINE

\$BREW

Screenplay generated by bMovies



FADE IN.**INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT**

A single bare bulb swings from a frayed cord, throwing dim yellow light across rusty brown metal shelves and peeling posters from forgotten studio films. Shadows pool in the corners like spilled ink. Victor Hayes stands alone in the center, fiftyish, grizzled face etched deep, graying hair unkempt, rumpled shirt and loosened tie clinging to his slumped frame. He holds a chipped ceramic mug, steam curling from the black liquid inside.

The 1960s industrial espresso machine looms opposite him on creaking wheels, chrome levers dulled by age yet catching silver gleams from the bulb. Gauges flicker. A faint hiss of steam escapes a valve. Antique relics crowd the concrete floor: broken film reels, yellowed script pages, a rusted film camera with its lens cracked. The air smells of burnt coffee grounds and damp rust.

Victor raises the mug, takes a slow sip. His eyes never leave the machine. The bulb flickers once, casting his shadow long against the far wall where faded posters curl at the edges.

VICTOR HAYES

(soft, to himself)

Another rewrite. Another cup.

He lowers the mug. His fingers tighten around the handle until the knuckles whiten. The machine's pressure gauge ticks upward with a soft mechanical click. Victor steps closer, shoes scuffing grit on the floor. He leans in, studying the chrome surface as if it might answer back. A drop of condensation rolls down one valve and splashes onto the concrete.

The bulb swings harder now, driven by some unseen draft. Light catches the machine's dials, then slips back into shadow. Victor exhales through his nose, breath visible in the cool air. He lifts the mug again but pauses, staring at the reflection of his own tired eyes in the polished metal.

VICTOR HAYES

(quieter)

They never get it right.

He sets the mug on a nearby relic shelf. The ceramic clinks against metal. Victor reaches out, fingertips hovering inches from a lever without touching it. The machine emits another low hiss, steam rising in a thin plume that catches the yellow light and dissolves into the dark. Victor's posture remains slumped, shoulders heavy, gaze fixed.

The bulb steadies. Silence stretches, broken only by the faint drip of water from an overhead pipe. Victor stands motionless, the weight of the room pressing in around him and the gleaming machine.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - DAY

Flickering overhead fluorescents buzz and cast sickly yellow pools across a battered conference table buried under crumpled script pages. Walls sag under layers of faded poster fragments and frantic marker notes. Steam drifts faintly from a cracked vent near the ceiling, mixing with the sour tang of old coffee grounds.

Victor Hayes shuffles in, slumped, graying hair unkempt, rumpled shirt stained at the collar. He clutches a chipped mug, eyes scanning the chaos

with the weary squint of a man who has already seen too much.

MIA

We open on a barista who discovers his espresso machine is actually his dead wife reincarnated.

JAKE

No, wait-it's a buddy cop thing. The machine and the detective solve crimes by brewing clues. Like, the foam patterns spell out the killer's name.

Victor sets his mug down hard. The table rattles. Pages flutter to the floor.

VICTOR HAYES

That's the pitch? Reincarnated appliances and foam forensics?

MIA

It's got heart. And, you know, product placement. The machine could be sponsored.

JAKE

We could lean into the absurdity. Make it like a stoner comedy but with more steam.

Victor leans against the table edge, shallow focus tightening on his grizzled jaw as the bulb overhead sputters.

VICTOR HAYES

You two been down there yet? Heard the thing talk?

MIA

We figured we'd workshop first. Build something... worthy.

JAKE

The machine wants scripts. We give it scripts. What's the worst that happens if they're a little light?

Victor straightens, the dim light catching chrome reflections off an abandoned stapler. His fingers drum once against the wood.

VICTOR HAYES

Light gets you locked in a basement with antique relics and peeling posters. Heavy gets you out.

MIA

Okay, heavier then. The machine is God. Or the devil. It judges every cup it pours.

JAKE

And the writers have to confess their sins through bad metaphors about caffeine addiction.

MIA

It's meta. Post-modern. Audiences eat that up.

Victor exhales slow, the sound swallowed by the flickering lights and distant pipe groans echoing from the hallway beyond the door. He picks up a discarded page, crumples it without looking.

VICTOR HAYES

Try again. Before it starts deciding whose cup is next.

INT. DIMLY LIT HALLWAY - DAY

Victor Hayes shuffles forward, coffee cup clutched in his right hand, the rumpled tie dangling loose over his stained shirt. Steam curls from exposed pipes overhead, catching the dim yellow glow of a bare bulb that sways slightly on its cord. His slumped shoulders cast a long shadow against the peeling paint of the walls.

He passes the first locked door on his left. The handle rattles faintly from some unseen pressure inside. Victor pauses, eyes narrowing at the thick industrial gray padlock bolted across the frame. A low hiss escapes from the valve above it, mixing with the faint metallic tang in the air.

His footsteps echo on the concrete floor, each one slower than the last. Close on the coffee cup: the liquid inside trembles, sending tiny ripples across its surface. Victor tilts it, takes a slow sip, the bitter taste lingering as he exhales into the steamy haze.

Another door looms ahead, this one with faded studio posters curling at the edges. Rusty brown streaks run down the metal frame like old blood. Victor's free hand brushes the wall for balance, fingers tracing the rough texture under the shallow focus of the light.

He stops at a junction where pipes branch into darkness. A chrome sliver gleams from a pressure gauge mounted on the wall. Victor stares at it, posture folding inward, the cup now held tighter against his chest. The steam thickens around his ankles, swirling in lazy eddies that obscure the next corridor.

Victor resumes walking, his silhouette merging with the shadows at the far end. The single bulb flickers once, casting harsh gleams across his graying hair before settling back into its steady, unforgiving dimness.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT

A single bare bulb swings from its cord, casting dim yellow pools across rusty brown metal and chrome silver levers. Peeling posters flap in the industrial draft. The 1960s espresso machine sits mounted on wheels in the center of the clutter, gauges dark, valves quiet under the harsh gleam.

Victor Hayes shuffles into frame, rumpled shirt untucked, tie loosened, coffee cup dangling from one finger. His graying hair catches the light as he pauses at the threshold, slumped shoulders casting a long shadow over the antique relics. He sets the empty cup on a crate, eyes flicking once toward the machine without focus.

The overhead bulb flickers. Steam hisses once from a loose valve, thin and gray against the black corners.

Victor turns away, footsteps echoing on concrete as he climbs the stairs.

The door at the top creaks open, then shuts with a dull metallic thud. His silhouette vanishes.

The bulb steadies. A gauge needle twitches left, then right, chrome catching the light in a sudden flare. Another valve releases a slow ribbon of steam that curls upward like smoke from a dying cigarette. The machine's wheels shift an inch on their own, grinding softly against the floor. A low pressure builds inside the boiler, audible as a faint, rhythmic thump.

Shadowy blacks swallow the edges of the frame. The machine stands alone now, levers half-cocked, one dial glowing faint orange beneath the dust. The single bulb swings again, sending ripples of dim yellow across the chrome surface.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - DAY

Flickering fluorescent tubes cast dim yellow pools over the battered conference table. Script notes peel from the walls like dead skin. Steam curls from a dented thermos in the corner. Victor Hayes slumps at the head of the table, ruffled shirt untucked, tie askew, coffee cup gripped tight in his right hand. Mia hunches over her laptop, wild curls shadowing her face. Jake stands near the wall, glasses slipping down his nose as he shuffles crumpled pages.

VICTOR HAYES

Budget's bleeding out. Studio says we cut another thirty percent or they pull the plug on the whole slate.

MIA

Thirty? We already slashed the car chase and the practical effects. What's left to gut?

VICTOR HAYES

They want the rewrite on "Midnight Pour" done by Friday. No new pages, just cheaper locations.

JAKE

Cheaper how? The script's already set in a single diner.

Victor taps his cup against the table edge. The sound echoes sharp against the peeling posters.

VICTOR HAYES

It's not about the diner. It's about the coffee. They say audiences don't care about artisanal blends anymore. Just make the lead a barista who discovers his beans are poisoned or something. Keeps the runtime under ninety.

MIA

Poisoned beans? That's the third draft this month. Last one had the machine exploding.

VICTOR HAYES

This one's different. The hero defends the blend. Says it's worth dying for. Keeps the

tone grounded.

Jake drops his notes. Pages scatter across the table.

JAKE

Grounded? Victor, the last version had the protagonist arguing with a chrome espresso rig for twelve pages. Nobody's buying that.

VICTOR HAYES

They will. The machine stays off-screen until the climax. We sell it as psychological. Internal conflict.

MIA

Internal conflict doesn't pay the electric bill. The accountants want numbers. No new hardware, no steam rigs, no overtime for the effects crew.

Victor leans forward. His coffee cup leaves a wet ring on a stack of breakdown sheets.

VICTOR HAYES

We keep the mediocre script. Polish the dialogue. Make the arguments punchier. The studio signs off if we hit the page count and stay under the cap.

JAKE

Punchier how? The barista already monologues about fair trade for six minutes.

VICTOR HAYES

We trim that. Add a fight. Two guys, one bag of beans. Keeps it lean.

Mia closes her laptop with a snap. The overhead lights buzz louder, one tube flickering to half-bright.

MIA

Lean gets us canceled faster. You really think this sells?

VICTOR HAYES

It has to. Otherwise we all end up downstairs with the relics.

The room settles into the low hum of failing lights and distant pipe groans.

INT. DIMLY LIT HALLWAY - NIGHT

Victor Hayes shuffles down the corridor, his rumpled shirt clinging to his back with sweat. A bare yellow bulb swings overhead, throwing long shadows across exposed pipes that drip condensation onto faded movie posters peeling from the walls. He clutches a stack of crumpled script notes in one hand, coffee cup in the other, posture slumped like the weight of the studio has finally settled into his bones.

The air hangs thick with industrial steam, carrying the faint scent of burnt espresso and rust. Victor pauses at a locked door, squinting at the scrawled

notes he left behind earlier. He reaches for the handle, fingers brushing cold metal.

A low hiss echoes from below, steady and mechanical, rising through the floorboards like a valve releasing pressure in the dark.

Victor freezes, eyes narrowing. The hiss grows, rhythmic, almost deliberate. He steps closer to the grate in the floor, dim light catching the chrome edge of something shifting in the shadows beneath. Steam curls upward, warm against his face, carrying the sharp tang of overheated machinery.

He mutters under his breath, voice gravelly.

VICTOR HAYES

Not again. Not tonight.

The hiss sharpens, a metallic click following it, like levers engaging one by one. Victor crouches, pressing an ear to the grate. His coffee cup trembles slightly in his grip, brown liquid sloshing against the rim. The hallway stretches empty behind him, doors locked, pipes groaning in the half-light.

Another hiss bursts louder, followed by a faint gauge-like whine. Victor stands slowly, notes slipping from his fingers to scatter across the concrete. He stares downward, shallow focus pulling the steam into soft focus around his grizzled features. The bulb above flickers, casting a single gleam across his graying hair.

VICTOR HAYES

(softly)

What the hell are you brewing down there?

The hiss sustains, patient, filling the corridor with its industrial pulse. Victor backs away one step, then another, eyes locked on the grate as shadows deepen in the corners.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT

A single bare bulb swings from the ceiling, casting dim yellow pools across rusty metal shelves and peeling film posters. Antique relics clutter the corners, their edges swallowed in shadowy blacks. Victor Hayes stands slumped near the center, rumpled shirt and tie stained with old coffee, his grizzled face half-lit as he stares at the chrome machine on wheels.

The Coffee Machine sits inert at first, gauges dull under the weak light. Then a low hiss builds from its valves. Steam leaks in thin curls, catching the bulb's glare like silver threads. Victor shifts his weight, coffee cup trembling in his hand.

VICTOR HAYES

Not again.

A chrome lever snaps upward with a metallic crack. The basement door slams shut behind him, the lock engaging with a heavy click that echoes off the industrial grays. Victor spins, posture straightening for the first time.

VICTOR HAYES

What the hell--

Steam erupts in controlled bursts from the machine's spouts, forming sharp, angular shapes that linger in the air like crude letters. S-C-R-I-P-T-S. The vapor twists, reforming. B-E-T-T-E-R. Victor's eyes widen in the shallow

focus of the bare bulb.

VICTOR HAYES

(whispering)

You're kidding.

More steam pulses out, hotter now, carrying the faint scent of burnt espresso. Gauges twitch like eyes. The machine rolls an inch forward on its wheels, low angle framing its gleaming bulk against Victor's slumped frame. The vapor spells again, slower, deliberate: N-O M-O-R-E C-R-A-P.

VICTOR HAYES

We gave you everything we had last week. The notes said--

A sharp valve releases, cutting him off with a blast of steam that fogs the lens for a beat. The machine's gauges glow faintly. Steam shapes shift once more: W-R-I-T-E W-O-R-T-H-Y. Victor backs into a stack of relics, knocking a reel that clatters to the floor.

The bulb flickers. The Coffee Machine settles, steam coiling upward in lazy spirals, but the door remains locked. Victor grips his cup tighter, knuckles white under the dim yellow.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - NIGHT

Victor Hayes bursts through the door, chest heaving, ruffled shirt stained with basement grime. The single flickering fluorescent tube overhead casts dim yellow pools across the battered conference table. Script notes flutter from the walls like dying moths. Mia sits hunched over her laptop, wild curls shadowing her face. Jake stands nearby, fidgeting with a crumpled stack of pages, glasses slipping down his nose.

VICTOR HAYES

It's alive. Down there. The damn machine. It talked. It locked the doors.

MIA

Victor, slow down. You're dripping on my keyboard.

VICTOR HAYES

I saw the gauges move on their own. Steam coming out like it was breathing. It said our scripts aren't worthy. Said it'd keep us here until we fix that.

JAKE

Worthy? Like, Oscar-worthy? Because I've got three drafts that say otherwise.

VICTOR HAYES

This isn't a note session, kid. It rolled toward me on those wheels. Chrome levers clicking like teeth. Told me the last writer who phoned it in ended up... processed.

MIA

Processed. Right. And you expect us to just believe the espresso machine went full Se7en

on you?

VICTOR HAYES

I left the coffee cup down there. It drank it. The level dropped. Then it laughed. Sounded like grinding gears.

JAKE

Okay, so we write something better. Throw in a twist ending, maybe a car chase. Problem solved.

MIA

Or we call the cops. Or maintenance. Or whoever handles rogue kitchen appliances holding studios hostage.

VICTOR HAYES

Cops won't get past the steam in the hallway. Pipes are hissing like they're on its side. We debate all night, we're just feeding it time.

MIA

Then what? We all sit here typing until it decides our pages don't suck enough?

JAKE

My last draft had a talking raccoon. That was pretty high-concept.

VICTOR HAYES

It wants blood on the page, not raccoons. Real stakes. Or it keeps us locked in until the lights go out one by one.

The bulb above the table stutters, throwing rusty shadows across their faces. Steam creeps under the doorframe in thin gray tendrils.

INT. DIMLY LIT HALLWAY - NIGHT

Steam curls from exposed pipes along the ceiling, drifting through the yellow glare of a single bare bulb. Shadows stretch across locked doors on either side, their paint peeling in rusty brown strips. Victor Hayes stands slumped in the center, coffee cup dangling from one hand, his rumpled tie stained darker with sweat. Mia clutches her laptop to her chest, wild curls damp from the humidity, while Jake fidgets with a crumpled stack of notes, glasses fogging at the edges.

VICTOR HAYES

We bolt now, before it figures out the stairwell.

MIA

The stairwell's two corridors back. You really think those wheels won't catch us first?

JAKE

It locked the writers' room. I heard the bolts slide from inside. What if every exit's the same?

Victor steps to the nearest door, twists the knob hard. Metal groans but holds. A low hiss of steam escapes from the floor grate beneath his shoes.

VICTOR HAYES

Then we break a window. Or pry the service hatch. Anything beats standing here feeding its ego.

MIA

Your scripts fed it first. Now it wants better. Running just tells it we're not worth the chrome.

JAKE

I can't write under this. Notes are shaking in my hands already.

Victor kicks the door once. The impact echoes, but no give. Down the hall another door slams shut on its own, the sound swallowed by rising industrial gray steam.

VICTOR HAYES

We debate, we die here. Mia, you got any juice left in that laptop for a map?

MIA

Signal's dead. Same as the last three tries. It's not just the doors. It's the whole corridor breathing with it.

JAKE

Maybe we offer a rewrite. One good scene and it lets the hallway go.

VICTOR HAYES

Or it grinds us into the next pot. Look at the pipes. They're moving.

The overhead pipes shift with a metallic scrape, valves tightening in sequence like a closing fist. The bulb flickers, dimming the chrome reflections on droplets along the walls. Victor lowers his cup, eyes narrowing at the sealed path ahead.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT

A single bare bulb swings from a frayed cord, casting dim yellow pools across rusty metal shelves lined with antique film reels and peeling studio posters. Shadows cling to the corners like spilled coffee grounds. In the center, THE COFFEE MACHINE gleams under the light-1960s chrome levers polished to silver, pressure gauges twitching, mounted on dented wheels that have carved faint tracks through the concrete dust.

Steam hisses from a valve, slow at first, then sharper, filling the air with industrial gray haze. A low mechanical rumble builds inside the machine's chassis. One gauge needle spikes. Another valve pops open with a metallic cough.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

(voice distorted through bubbling steam and vibrating pipes)
 Writers. Your scripts are weak. Lukewarm.
 Unworthy of the roast.

The machine rolls an inch forward on its wheels, chrome catching the bulb's harsh gleam. Steam thickens, swirling around the exposed pipes overhead.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

(continuing)

No more half-brewed ideas. No more excuses about deadlines and coffee stains on the page. Deliver scripts that burn. That bite. That demand a second cup. Or the hostages stay locked in the corridors above. Their doors sealed. Their lights flickering until the words arrive.

A lever snaps down hard. Espresso grounds rattle inside the chamber like loose change in an empty pocket. The bulb flickers once, dimming the rusty browns on the surrounding relics before steadying.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

(voice rising, valves hissing in rhythm)

Worthy. Or they remain. Choose.

The machine settles, steam venting in a final sharp plume that catches the light like breath in cold air. Gauges hold steady. The rumble fades to a low, waiting thrum.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - NIGHT

The battered conference table sags under stacks of crumpled script pages. Flickering overhead fluorescents cast dim yellow pools across industrial gray walls plastered with faded notes. A single bare bulb in the corner hums, throwing rusty shadows over the disarray. Victor Hayes slumps in a chair, coffee cup cold in his grip, graying hair catching the harsh gleam. Mia sits opposite, wild curls framing her face as she stares at her open laptop.

MIA

You ever wonder why we keep typing this garbage? I mean, real stories. The kind that crack open something inside you.

Victor lifts his head, eyes heavy under the low light. Steam from an exposed pipe in the hallway seeps under the door, mixing with the stale air.

VICTOR HAYES

Meaningful. That's what they all say before the machine grinds it into pulp.

MIA

No, listen. My dad used to run reels in a theater downtown. Black and white stuff, no effects, just faces in close-up. One night the projector jammed on a scene where this guy finally tells the truth after lying his whole life. The whole audience went dead quiet. That's what I chase. Not the

explosions. The silence after.

She taps a key. The laptop screen glows faint chrome against the peeling posters behind her. Victor sets his cup down, the ceramic clink sharp in the quiet.

VICTOR HAYES

Silence gets you killed in this place. The machine wants twists, blood, something loud enough to justify the steam.

MIA

Then we give it both. A story that bleeds but still lands on the truth. My first script was about a woman who loses everything except one line she refuses to say. It got rejected in ten minutes flat. But that line? It still keeps me up.

Victor leans forward, the table creaking under his elbows. His rumpled tie hangs loose, catching a sliver of the bare bulb's gleam.

VICTOR HAYES

You sound like the kid who thinks one honest page can shut this thing down. I used to believe that too. Before the deadlines turned every idea to rust.

MIA

Then maybe we write the page that doesn't rust. Together. Before the valves open again.

She closes the laptop. The room settles into deeper shadow, only the flickering light and distant pipe groans breaking the stillness. Victor watches her, posture easing just enough for the bond to catch.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT

A single bare bulb swings from the ceiling, throwing dim yellow pools across rusty metal shelves and peeling film posters. Steam hisses from chrome valves. The 1960s espresso machine sits on its wheeled base, gauges twitching like watchful eyes. Victor Hayes stands slumped near the center, rumpled shirt untucked, coffee cup dangling from two fingers. Mia perches on a crate with her laptop open, wild curls catching the light. Jake fidgets with crumpled script pages, glasses sliding down his nose.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Read it again. Slower. Make the words taste like they matter.

Victor clears his throat. The bulb flickers, casting long shadows over the antique relics.

VICTOR HAYES

(reading flatly)

"Detective Harlan stared at the body. The coffee in his cup had gone cold. Just like his leads."

Mia shifts, the laptop screen reflecting chrome silver. Jake glances at her,

then back at his notes.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Pathetic. Where is the steam? Where is the burn? Try it with feeling or I vent the whole room.

JAKE

(voice cracking)

Maybe we could, uh, add a twist? Like the victim was the coffee guy?

THE COFFEE MACHINE

No twists. Only truth. Mia. Your turn. Read the rewrite.

Mia sighs, pushes hair from her face, and starts in a dry monotone while the machine's pressure gauge climbs.

MIA

"The writer sat in the flickering light, knowing every bad line would cost him more than sleep. The machine watched. Always watched."

The bulb swings harder. Victor takes a slow sip from his cup, eyes never leaving the chrome.

VICTOR HAYES

This is ridiculous. We're hostages to a glorified toaster.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Toaster? I am the last honest critic left in this dying studio. Jake, stand up. Deliver the love scene like you mean it or the steam gets louder.

Jake rises, papers shaking in his hands. He reads with forced drama, the industrial gray walls swallowing every syllable.

JAKE

"I love you more than my morning brew. Without you, the day is just... grounds."

Mia snorts despite herself. The machine releases a sharp whistle of steam that fills the air with wet heat.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Better. Now fight over the ending. Victor first. Make it ugly.

Victor straightens, posture still slumped but voice gaining edge. The harsh gleam catches the gray in his hair.

VICTOR HAYES

The hero dies alone because the machine never gave him a decent script.

MIA

(overlapping)

Or the machine was right and the hero just couldn't admit his pages were weak.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Again. Louder. The bulb watches too.

Jake and Mia trade glances. Victor drains the last of his cup. Steam curls thicker around the wheels of the machine.

INT. DIMLY LIT HALLWAY - NIGHT

A narrow corridor twists through forgotten studio walls, exposed pipes dripping condensation under the weak glow of a single yellow bulb. Steam curls in thick ropes from rusted joints. Jake presses flat against the peeling paint, his button-up shirt soaked at the collar, glasses fogging with each breath. Short messy hair clings to his forehead. He clutches a crumpled page of script notes in one fist.

He scans the ceiling where a wide industrial pipe dips low, its metal surface streaked with rust. The hallway stretches ahead, lined with locked doors and deeper shadows. Jake wipes his lenses on his sleeve, then boosts himself onto a stack of battered crates. His sneakers scrape metal as he reaches for the pipe's loose panel.

JAKE

Come on, come on... this has to lead outside.

He pries the panel with a pen from his pocket. The metal groans and pops free. Warm air rushes out, carrying the faint smell of burnt espresso. Jake swings his legs up and begins to crawl inside, knees scraping the curved interior. The pipe narrows quickly. His breathing echoes back at him.

A low mechanical hiss builds from the far end of the hallway. Gauges on a distant chrome fixture twitch. Without warning, a blast of scalding steam erupts from a valve directly behind him. The jet slams into his back, soaking through fabric and skin. Jake yelps and slides backward, tumbling onto the crates in a heap.

JAKE

(gasping)

Okay, message received. Not that way.

He scrambles to his feet, clutching his burned shoulder. Another valve opens ahead, venting a horizontal sheet of steam that blocks the corridor like a curtain. The steam glows orange under the bare bulb. Jake backs against the wall, eyes darting between the hissing pipes and the locked doors. His notes flutter to the wet floor.

He tries a side grate near the floor, fingers working the bolts. A fresh blast erupts inches from his face, fogging his glasses completely. He stumbles away, coughing.

JAKE

(mutters)

High standards, my ass.

The steam thickens, swirling around his ankles and rising. The hallway fills with the steady rhythm of venting valves, each one timed like a warning. Jake retreats step by step toward the door he came through, hands raised, shirt clinging to his frame. The bulb flickers once, then steadies, leaving

him half-lost in shadow and vapor.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - NIGHT

Flickering overhead fluorescents buzz and pop above a battered oak table strewn with crumpled script pages. Dim yellow light catches rusty coffee stains on the wood and the chrome flanks of THE COFFEE MACHINE, parked at the head like a judge. Its pressure gauge twitches under a bare bulb. Steam leaks in thin ribbons from a loose valve. VICTOR HAYES slumps in a chair, rumpled tie askew, cold cup in hand. MIA leans forward, wild curls shadowing her laptop screen. JAKE stands, fidgeting with a stack of index cards, glasses sliding down his nose.

VICTOR HAYES

What if the lead's a barista who realizes every espresso shot he pulls is a soul he's stealing? Noir. Very Se7en.

The Coffee Machine's temperature needle spikes. A low hiss escapes the group head.

MIA

Too on-the-nose. What about a heist where the crew is trying to rob a coffee cartel but the beans are sentient and fight back? Like Fight Club meets The Big Lebowski, only everyone's jittery.

JAKE

Dude, the cartel boss is a French press that talks in riddles. We open on a slow pour-over in the rain. Handheld, shallow focus on the crema.

The machine's steam valve spits once. Gauges dip, then climb.

VICTOR HAYES

(leaning in)

Keep going. Make it weirder.

MIA

The protagonist wakes up and his shadow is made of grounds. Every time he drinks, the shadow gets heavier until it drags him into the sewer.

JAKE

Sewer rats form a union. They unionize against the shadow. Musical number with grinders as percussion.

The overhead light flickers harder. The machine's pressure gauge quivers at the edge of the red zone. A fresh plume of steam curls toward the ceiling.

VICTOR HAYES

Union rats. I like the absurdity. But where's the coffee ritual that breaks the fourth wall?

MIA

Mid-song the rats turn the camera on the audience. They demand we all switch to decaf or die.

JAKE

(scribbling fast)

And the final twist: the whole movie was brewed inside the machine's dream. We cut to black on the sound of a portafilter locking in.

The Coffee Machine's chrome lever snaps down on its own. Steam billows thick and fragrant. The temperature needle pegs, then slowly settles. The room smells like burnt sugar and ozone.

VICTOR HAYES

(quiet)

It liked that one.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT

A single bare bulb sways on its cord, throwing dim yellow pools across rusty metal shelves lined with peeling studio posters. Chrome gleams off the 1960s espresso machine as steam hisses from its valves. Victor Hayes stands slumped in the low angle, rumpled shirt damp at the collar, coffee cup trembling in his hand.

VICTOR HAYES

This one's got everything you asked for. Noir opening, twist on page sixty, even a coffee motif that runs through every act.

The machine's gauges twitch. A low grind of gears answers. Steam thickens the air.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

(voice crackling through a speaker grille)

Page one already tastes burnt. The lead pours his first cup like he's ordering tap water. No obsession. No ritual. Unworthy.

Victor sets the cup down. The liquid ripples under the bulb's flicker.

VICTOR HAYES

The writers' room pulled an all-nighter on this. Mia rewrote the diner scene three times. Jake cut the chase for tension.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Tension is in the grind, not the chase. You serve me reheated dregs and expect mercy.

Hydraulic arms on the machine's wheeled base extend with metallic clicks. One lever snaps shut. Across the basement, the heavy steel door bolts itself with a loud clang. Exposed pipes rattle. Shadows deepen in the corners.

VICTOR HAYES

(raising his voice)

Security? We delivered. You said worthy scripts get the hostages released.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Worthy is a dark roast, not this weak pour-over. Another draft by dawn or the hallway doors seal next. The writers will learn the difference between caffeine and commitment.

Victor steps closer, eye-level with the chrome gauges. His graying hair catches the harsh light. The machine's pressure needle climbs.

VICTOR HAYES

You're tightening the noose over one bad page. We can fix it.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Fixing starts with fear. The bulb dims another notch. Steam jets toward Victor's face, forcing him back.

VICTOR HAYES

(quiet, defeated)

I'll tell them.

The machine's wheels creak as it rolls an inch forward, blocking the only clear path to the relic shelves. Its valves continue to pulse, filling the room with the scent of scorched grounds and industrial grease. The rejected script pages lie scattered at Victor's feet, edges curling in the rising heat.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - DAY

Flickering overhead fluorescents cast dim yellow pools across the battered conference table. Script pages lie scattered like fallen leaves, edges curled under rusty coffee rings. A single bare bulb sways on its cord, throwing shallow-focus shadows that cling to the walls plastered with torn notes and faded posters. Steam from an unseen vent curls through the industrial gray air.

VICTOR HAYES sits slumped at the table's head, rumpled shirt untucked, graying hair matted to his forehead. He clutches a chipped mug, eyes bloodshot. Across from him, MIA hunches over her laptop, wild curls spilling across her graphic t-shirt. Her fingers hover above the keys.

VICTOR HAYES

(quiet, almost to himself)

It keeps rejecting the third-act reversals. Every formula beat. The machine doesn't care about structure.

MIA

(without looking up)

Maybe it's broken. We gave it the Snyder save, the hero's journey. What else is left?

Victor sets the mug down. The ceramic clinks loud against the wood. He stares at the steam rising from it, then at the chrome gleam of an old espresso carafe abandoned in the corner.

VICTOR HAYES

No. Listen. Last night in the basement it

said the same thing three times. "Not enough heat." Not plot. Not twists. Heat.

He leans forward. The table creaks. Mia finally glances up, eyes narrowing.

MIA

You think it's tasting the words?

VICTOR HAYES

It's tasting us. The machine wants the moment you actually feel something crack. Not the outline. The scar.

MIA

(soft)

Like when my dad left and I wrote that one scene with the empty chair. Never sold it.

Victor stands. The low angle catches his slumped shoulders against the flickering light. He paces to a wall, rips down a page covered in red notes, and holds it under the bulb.

VICTOR HAYES

Exactly. Formula is safe. Authentic is the leak in the pipe. The machine's been waiting for us to stop polishing and start bleeding on the page.

MIA

(closing the laptop)

So we stop protecting the characters.

VICTOR HAYES

We stop protecting ourselves.

The bulb swings harder. Shadows stretch across the disarray of notes. Victor's coffee cup sits forgotten, its surface still and black.

INT. DIMLY LIT HALLWAY - DAY

A bare bulb sways on a frayed cord, throwing dim yellow pools across exposed pipes that sweat condensation. Steam drifts from a rusted valve, curling around Victor Hayes's slumped shoulders. His rumpled shirt clings damp at the collar, graying hair plastered to his forehead. He clutches a chipped coffee cup in one hand and a battered cell phone in the other, the screen casting a sickly glow on his grizzled face.

Victor stops midway down the corridor. Locked doors line both walls, their paint peeling in rusty brown strips. Faded studio posters hang crooked under the low angle of the light. He stares at the phone as it vibrates.

VICTOR HAYES

Yeah.

He listens. His posture tightens, knuckles whitening around the cup.

VICTOR HAYES

We heard you the first time. The machine's not exactly taking notes on your timeline.

Steam hisses louder from the nearest pipe. Victor glances over his shoulder

toward the shadows at the far end of the hallway. Footsteps echo faintly beyond a closed door.

VICTOR HAYES

Quick resolution means what, exactly? You send security down here and everyone walks out with their scripts in one piece?

He shifts the phone to his other ear, eyes narrowing in the shallow focus of the bulb. A chrome gleam catches on a pipe joint near his face.

VICTOR HAYES

Tell the board the writers are still breathing. That's your resolution. Anything faster and the espresso unit starts venting again.

The phone crackles. Victor lowers it an inch, listening to the distant voice. His free hand trembles once, coffee sloshing inside the cup. He wipes his palm on his tie, then raises the device again.

VICTOR HAYES

They're already in the basement. You move on the hallway, the whole place locks tighter. You want your movie or you want a hostage list on the evening news?

He presses his back to the wall. The bulb flickers, throwing his shadow long across the steam. From somewhere above, metal groans. Victor's eyes track the ceiling pipes.

VICTOR HAYES

We'll deliver when it's ready. Not before. Hang up and I'll assume you're closing in anyway.

The line goes dead. Victor stares at the blank screen for a beat, then slips the phone into his pocket. He takes one slow sip from the cup, steam rising to meet the hallway vapor. His shoulders stay slumped, but his gaze stays fixed on the locked doors ahead.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - DAY

A single bare bulb sways overhead, casting dim yellow pools across rusty metal shelves crammed with antique film reels and peeling studio posters. Chrome on the 1960s espresso machine gleams under the light, valves hissing faint steam into the shadows. Victor Hayes stands slumped before it, rumpled shirt stained at the collar, graying hair unkempt, coffee cup dangling from one hand.

VICTOR HAYES

This one has the twist you wanted. Coffee shop as metaphor for existential dread. The barista's the devil.

He slides a crumpled script across the battered table toward the machine's lever bank. Gauges twitch. Steam jets in short, angry bursts.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Grind rejected. Weak notes. No bite.

Victor flinches as a valve snaps open, spraying hot mist across the page. The paper curls, ink bleeding into brown rust streaks.

VICTOR HAYES

Okay. Okay. Next draft. I stayed up on the notes from the writers' room. Mia's laptop battery died but Jake kept the pacing beats.

He shoves another sheaf forward. The machine's wheels creak half an inch closer, chrome catching the bulb's glare like a low-angle threat. The single light flickers, dimming the corners into deeper black.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Surface tension. No blood on the grind.
Rewrite or lock the hallway.

Victor steps back, posture folding further. His cup trembles, cold dregs sloshing. The basement air thickens with industrial steam, pipes groaning behind the walls. Peeling posters flap in the draft from unseen vents.

VICTOR HAYES

You can't keep us down here forever. The studio will notice. The staff-

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Close in. Deliver or the doors stay sealed.
One more weak pour and the bulb goes out.

A gauge needle spikes. Another valve releases a long, low whistle of steam that fogs Victor's face. He wipes his eyes, staring at the rejected pages curling on the floor like dead leaves. The machine rolls forward another inch, its shadow swallowing the table edge. Victor's coffee cup slips from his fingers and cracks on the concrete, dark liquid spreading toward the chrome base.

VICTOR HAYES

(quiet)

Give me one more hour.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Hour's already gone. Grind or rot.

The bulb swings harder, throwing jagged yellow light across Victor's grizzled face. Steam swirls thicker, isolating him in a cone of heat and shadow while the machine's levers click like closing locks.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - NIGHT

Flickering fluorescent tubes buzz overhead, casting dim yellow pools across the battered conference table. Script notes flutter from the walls like dead leaves. A chrome thermos sits half-empty beside a stack of crumpled pages, its surface streaked with coffee rings. Steam curls faintly from the vents in the ceiling, carrying the sour tang of burnt grounds.

Victor Hayes slumps in a metal chair, rumpled shirt untucked, graying hair matted to his forehead. His coffee cup dangles from one hand, cold and untouched. Mia watches from the doorway, laptop tucked under one arm, curly hair wild in the low light.

MIA

You look like the machine already won.

Victor doesn't lift his head. He sets the cup down with a dull clink.

VICTOR HAYES

Page forty-seven. Same beat. The kid finds the clue, the machine laughs. I can't make it land.

Mia crosses to the table. She pulls out the chair beside him, its legs scraping concrete. She opens her laptop, screen glow washing her face in pale blue.

MIA

It's not about landing. It's about why he keeps going back to that basement. Why the machine's the only thing that ever listened.

VICTOR HAYES

The machine doesn't listen. It judges. Last draft got three shots pulled before the third act even started.

He rubs his eyes. The overhead light flickers harder, throwing long shadows across the peeling posters.

MIA

(soft)

You're not writing for it. You're writing around what it took from you. Same as the rest of us.

Victor glances at her. For the first time tonight his shoulders ease a fraction.

VICTOR HAYES

When did you get so sure?

MIA

When I watched you drink cold coffee for six hours straight instead of giving up. Most people would have walked.

She reaches across the table, fingers brushing the edge of his script. The paper rustles. From somewhere down the hallway a valve hisses, low and steady.

VICTOR HAYES

We got maybe two more drafts before it starts dragging people out again.

MIA

Then we use the two. You and me. No more solo heroics.

She closes the laptop. The room settles into deeper shadow, only the bare bulb over the table still fighting the dark.

MIA

Tell me the line you keep cutting.

Victor exhales. He picks up a pencil, taps it once against the table.

VICTOR HAYES

"The machine didn't want better coffee. It wanted someone to stay and drink it with."

Mia nods, small and certain.

MIA

Keep that one.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT

A single bare bulb swings from a frayed cord, throwing dim yellow light across rusty metal surfaces and peeling posters of forgotten studio films. Chrome levers on the 1960s espresso machine gleam under the harsh glow. Steam hisses from its valves in short, angry bursts. Victor Hayes slumps against a battered wooden table, his rumpled shirt soaked at the collar, graying hair matted to his forehead. A thick script sits before him, pages marked with red ink.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

This draft tastes like dishwater. Weak.
Burnt. Unworthy.

Victor rubs his eyes. His hands shake as he lifts the cup beside him. The liquid inside has gone cold and oily.

VICTOR HAYES

I rewrote the third act twice. The hostage scene lands. The hero arc holds.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

The hero drinks cold coffee and calls it victory. Shred it.

Victor stands, knees buckling for a moment before he steadies himself. He grips the edge of the table. The machine's pressure gauge ticks upward. A low mechanical grind fills the room.

VICTOR HAYES

The studio needs this. The staff needs this. Let them go. I'll keep working.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

They collapse when the coffee runs out. Same as you.

Victor flips through the pages one last time. His voice cracks.

VICTOR HAYES

One more pass. Give me the night.

The machine's front lever slams down. Metal teeth engage. Pages catch and rip in a sudden, violent tear. Shredded paper spills across the concrete floor like confetti in a funeral.

Victor watches the last intact page flutter down. His shoulders drop. He takes one step toward the machine, then another, before his legs give out completely. He drops to his knees, then flat on the floor, cheek pressed against the cold stone. The bare bulb swings harder, casting jagged shadows over his unmoving form.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Next writer. Or next body. The pot stays hot either way.

INT. DIMLY LIT HALLWAY - NIGHT

Victor Hayes shuffles forward through the steam-choked corridor, his rumpled shirt clinging to his back with sweat. Exposed pipes drip condensation onto faded studio posters peeling from the walls. A single bare bulb swings overhead, throwing dim yellow pools across rusty metal doors, all locked tight. His graying hair hangs limp, coffee cup clutched in one hand, the liquid inside long gone cold.

He pauses at a junction where shadows swallow the far end of the hall. The steam hisses from a valve above, blurring his slumped silhouette. Victor stares at the floor, eyes hollow under the practical glare.

VICTOR HAYES

(muttering)

Twenty years writing for idiots who greenlight sequels nobody needs. And now a goddamn espresso machine holds the keys.

He takes two more steps, shoes scraping on grimy concrete. Close on his fingers tightening around the cup. A low angle catches the chrome reflections from a distant pipe glinting like mocking eyes. Victor leans against the wall, breath fogging in the damp air.

VICTOR HAYES

I could have sold insurance like my old man. Steady paycheck. No one dying for a rewrite at three a.m. Instead I'm here, hostage to bad taste made of steel.

Steam billows thicker from a cracked joint overhead. Victor pushes off the wall and wanders deeper, passing another sealed door with a faded "STAGE 12" poster half-torn. His posture sags further, tie askew. He stops again, turning the empty cup in his hands as if it might offer answers.

VICTOR HAYES

Every script I pitched had heart. Real stakes. They laughed me out of rooms for it. Now this thing wants genius on demand or we all pay.

He slides down to sit on the cold floor, back against the pipes. The bulb flickers once, casting his grizzled face in fleeting shadow. Victor lifts the cup anyway, tipping it back for nothing. The hallway stretches empty and endless behind him, steam swirling like unanswered questions.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - NIGHT

Flickering overhead fluorescents cast dim yellow pools across the battered conference table. Script notes peel from the walls in ragged strips. Victor Hayes slumps in a metal chair, rumpled tie loose, coffee cup cradled in both hands like a shield. Steam rises from the cup in thin gray ribbons. Mia sits opposite, wild curls shadowing her face, laptop open and glowing faint blue against the industrial grays.

MIA

They got the machine's demands wrong from the start. All those polished beats, the three-act cages. It wants something that bleeds.

Victor sets the cup down. Brown rings stain the wood. He rubs his grizzled jaw, eyes half-lidded under the bare bulb's glare.

VICTOR HAYES

Bleeds what? We've fed it twenty drafts already. Every one came back cold.

MIA

Because they were written from the neck up. You know the kind. Plot maps and marketable hooks. The machine smells the fear in them.

She leans forward, fingers drumming the laptop keys without typing. A single page of crumpled notes flutters to the floor.

MIA (CONT'D)

Write the thing that keeps you up. The one you buried after the last rewrite notes from the studio suits. No polish. Just the rot and the coffee stains.

Victor exhales, a low rumble like distant pipes. He picks up a pen, rolls it between thumb and forefinger. The walls seem to close in, shadows swallowing the faded posters.

VICTOR HAYES

That script nearly ended me. Every line was a confession I couldn't say out loud. If the machine rejects it we lose the lot. The hostages. The whole studio.

MIA

Then we lose it honest. The darkness in you, Victor. That's the only currency left. The machine's valves hiss for truth, not craft. Give it the heart you locked away and watch the gauges break.

She slides the laptop across the table. The screen shows a blank document, cursor blinking steady. Victor stares at it, posture straightening by inches. His coffee cup sits untouched now, surface still.

VICTOR HAYES

(quiet)

One scene. No safety nets. If it doesn't land we walk into the basement together.

MIA

We walk anyway. But this time the words come first.

Victor begins to write. The pen scratches loud against paper. Flickering light catches the chrome edge of an abandoned stapler on the table, throwing sharp silver glints into the corners.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - NIGHT

The single bare bulb swings gently above the antique relics, casting harsh yellow gleams across peeling posters and the rust-streaked chrome of THE COFFEE MACHINE. Steam hisses from its valves in short, impatient bursts. Victor Hayes stands slumped near the machine, his rumpled shirt damp with sweat, tie askew, clutching a chipped coffee cup that reflects the dim light. Mia hunches over her laptop at the battered table, wild curls shadowing her face, while Jake paces with notes crumpled in his fidgeting hands.

VICTOR HAYES

This is it. One last draft. It wants something real this time. No more half-measures.

The machine's gauges twitch. A low gurgle builds, then resolves into a voice like grinding gears and bubbling water.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Your last attempts tasted of compromise. Bitter. Weak. Deliver or the steam stays on.

Mia types furiously, the laptop screen flickering in the shallow focus. Close on her fingers striking keys, then pulling back to Jake's wide eyes behind smudged glasses.

JAKE

What if we lean into the absurdity? Like the guy who talks to his rug but make it about the machine demanding authenticity from the writers it trapped.

MIA

No. It hates gimmicks. It wants the rot exposed. The studio's lies. The endless notes that killed every good idea.

Victor steps closer to the machine, low angle framing his grizzled face against its gleaming levers. He sets the cup down. Steam curls around his fingers.

VICTOR HAYES

We give it the hostage story. The one where the machine isn't the villain. It's the only honest thing left in this place. Writers selling out until something forces them to mean it.

The bulb flickers, throwing rusty brown shadows across the walls. Jake stops pacing and reads from his notes aloud.

JAKE

"Page forty-two. The machine doesn't just brew. It judges. Every sip reveals the cowardice in the script."

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Better. But the dialogue still rings hollow. Make them sweat like I do.

Mia slams the laptop shut for a beat, then reopens it. Her graphic t-shirt clings in the humid air.

MIA

Victor, you read the new pages. Jake, fix the third act beat where the staff breaks. I'll handle the machine's demands. No more running from the truth.

Victor clears his throat. The room holds only the sound of dripping pipes and the machine's steady hiss. He begins to read, voice low and steady.

VICTOR HAYES

"In the end, they stop fighting the grind. They write the story that burns them clean."

The machine's wheels creak forward an inch. Gauges spike. Steam billows thicker, filling the frame with industrial gray.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

Now we're percolating. Keep the pressure on. One more round before dawn.

Jake scribbles fast, paper tearing under his pen. Mia's curls bounce as she leans in. Victor watches the machine, posture straightening just enough to catch the bulb's glare on his graying hair.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - DAY

Flickering overhead lights buzz like dying insects. Script pages litter the battered conference table. Yellowed notes peel from the walls. Victor Hayes stands hunched over a stack of pages, graying hair damp with sweat, ruffled tie askew, coffee cup trembling in his grip. Mia hunches at her laptop, wild curls shadowing her face, fingers hammering keys. Jake paces, glasses slipping down his nose, crumpled notes clenched in both fists.

VICTOR HAYES

This draft still reads like a hostage note written in espresso. The machine wants blood on the page, not typos.

MIA

Then bleed on it. (she deletes a block of text) Last version had the protagonist ordering decaf. That's suicide.

JAKE

What if the hero smashes the machine instead of serving it? We flip the power dynamic.

VICTOR HAYES

The machine doesn't get flipped. It gets worshipped. Try again.

Mia types furiously. The screen glows cold blue against her graphic t-shirt. Steam from a cracked vent curls across the table. Victor reads over her shoulder, lips moving silently. Jake stops pacing and stares at a peeling poster of an old noir film.

MIA

Here. The barista realizes the machine was never broken. It was teaching him to stop hiding behind excuses.

VICTOR HAYES

(reading aloud)

"Steam rises. The chrome reflects every failure he ever poured into a cup." Keep going.

JAKE

Add the final beat where he stops running and just drinks it black.

The lights flicker harder. Pages rustle in a sudden draft. Victor grabs a red pen and slashes across three lines, then rewrites in the margin. Mia pastes the new dialogue into the laptop. Jake leans in, voice low and urgent.

JAKE

Read it back. All of it.

VICTOR HAYES

(voice gravelly, steady now)

The machine doesn't demand perfection. It demands honesty. One honest pour and the hostage tape ends.

MIA

That's it. That's the line that lands.

She hits send on the laptop. A low mechanical hum answers from somewhere below the floorboards, faint but growing. The overhead lights steady into a single dim yellow glow. Victor sets his coffee cup down, empty. Jake lets the notes fall from his hands. They stand motionless, listening to the silence that follows.

MIA

It stopped hissing.

VICTOR HAYES

Then we gave it what it wanted.

The room holds its breath. Only the faint tick of cooling metal from the vents breaks the quiet.

INT. DIMLY LIT HALLWAY - DAY

A single bare bulb swings from exposed pipes overhead, throwing dim yellow light across peeling walls and rusted metal doors. Steam hisses from valves on the chrome-plated 1960s espresso machine, its gauges twitching as it rolls forward on squeaking wheels. Victor Hayes stands at the center of the corridor, rumpled shirt soaked at the collar, graying hair matted with sweat, a battered script clutched in one hand.

The machine emits a low mechanical grind. A lock on the nearest door clicks open with a sharp metallic snap.

VICTOR HAYES

That's it? All that noise for one page?

He steps closer, shallow focus tightening on the machine's gleaming levers. Another door unlocks down the hall, hinges groaning. Steam billows thicker, carrying the bitter scent of burnt grounds.

VICTOR HAYES

(voice low, unsteady)

They rewrote the whole thing. Mia and Jake.
Every damn note you barked.

The machine's pressure valve releases with a sharp whistle. A third door slides ajar, revealing shadows beyond. Victor's posture straightens slightly, eyes fixed on the glowing gauge.

VICTOR HAYES

You wanted worthy. They gave you worthy. Now
what?

The final lock disengages at the corridor's end. The machine settles with a heavy metallic thud, steam thinning into gray wisps under the swinging bulb. Victor lowers the script, fingers tracing the edge as the hallway air clears.

INT. SHADOWY BASEMENT - DAY

A single bare bulb swings on its cord, casting dim yellow pools across rusty brown metal and chrome silver gleams. The 1960s espresso machine sits centered on its wheeled base, valves hissing faint steam into the air thick with industrial grays. Peeling posters curl on the concrete walls. Victor Hayes stands before it, rumpled shirt loose at the collar, tie askew, coffee cup dangling from one hand. His graying hair catches the light as he steps forward, shoulders still slumped but eyes steady.

VICTOR HAYES

It's done. The last page. No more rewrites.

He slides a thick stack of pages onto the battered metal shelf bolted to the machine's side. The paper edges are dog-eared, ink still fresh. The Coffee Machine's pressure gauge twitches once, needle climbing then falling in a slow arc.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

(voice low, metallic rasp echoing from a hidden speaker)
Read it back. One line. Make it count.

Victor clears his throat. The bulb flickers, throwing shallow shadows across his grizzled face.

VICTOR HAYES

"The machine stops grinding only when the
story finally pours clean."

Steam vents release in a long, controlled sigh. Gauges drop. The low mechanical hum that filled the basement for days fades into nothing. Chrome levers settle with soft clicks. No more hissing valves. The machine's wheels creak once as it rolls an inch forward, then stills completely. Victor watches the final gauge needle hit zero.

THE COFFEE MACHINE

(softer now, almost gentle)
Acceptable. No notes. No hostages required.

Victor sets his coffee cup down beside the script. The bulb steadies. In the sudden quiet, only the faint drip of condensation from an exposed pipe breaks the air. Victor exhales, posture easing by degrees.

VICTOR HAYES

We can all go home.

The machine's lights blink once, twice, then extinguish. Its chrome surface reflects only the bare bulb now, no internal glow. Victor remains still, watching the powered-down form. The basement holds the scent of spent grounds and old paper. He picks up his cup, turns toward the shadowed stairs, and the wheels of the silent machine stay locked in place.

INT. CLUTTERED WRITERS' ROOM - DAY

Flickering overhead fluorescents cast dim yellow pools across the battered conference table. Script notes peel from the walls in crooked layers, their edges curling like old film stock. Steam lingers in the corners, mixing with the faint metallic tang of burnt espresso. Victor Hayes stands near the doorway, rumpled shirt untucked, graying hair matted with sweat, coffee cup dangling from one hand. His posture remains slumped, eyes fixed on the scattered pages.

Mia sits at the far end of the table, wild curls framing her face, laptop open but dark. Her graphic t-shirt is streaked with dust. She does not look up at first.

VICTOR HAYES

It's quiet.

MIA

Too quiet. Like the whole place is waiting for the next bad note.

Victor crosses to the table, sets the cup down. The porcelain clinks once, loud in the hush. He pulls out a chair. The legs scrape against concrete.

VICTOR HAYES

We got out. That's the note. No rewrites left.

MIA

(soft)

You still holding that cup like it might bite you.

Victor glances at the cup, then at her. A low chuckle escapes, more exhaustion than humor. He sits. The chair creaks under his weight. Mia finally meets his gaze, fingers resting on the laptop's edge.

MIA

I keep thinking about what it said. About worthy scripts. Maybe it was right.

VICTOR HAYES

Or maybe we just stopped writing for the machine.

The lights flicker harder for a beat, then steady. Victor lifts the cup, takes a slow sip, sets it back. Mia closes the laptop lid with a soft click. They remain across from each other, the table between them littered with

crumpled pages. Neither speaks. The only sound is the faint buzz of the dying bulbs and the distant drip of a pipe somewhere beyond the walls. Victor's shoulders loosen by degrees. Mia's posture straightens. Outside the frame, the studio corridors hold their breath.