

HELP WANTED

Also by Adelle Waldman

The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.

HELP WANTED

A Novel

ADELLE WALDMAN



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To all retail workers

What makes life dreary is the want of motive.

—GEORGE ELIOT, *DANIEL DERONDA*

TOWN SQUARE STORE #1512
TEAM MOVEMENT

BIG WILL

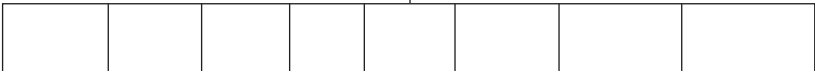
Store Manager

MEREDITH

Executive Manager, Logistics/Movement

LITTLE WILL

Group Manager, Movement



NICOLE RUBY DIEGO VAL MILO JOYCE TRAVIS RAYMOND CALLIE

Movement Team Members

1

THE FIRST HINT something was up was so subtle that it barely registered. Just before the start of Monday's 4 a.m. shift, the members of Movement were in the employee area at the front of the store, waiting to clock in. Everyone was there—everyone, that is, except Meredith, the person at the center of the plot that was soon to take shape, its reason for being.

Nicole turned to Little Will, Movement's group manager. "She's still coming back today?" Nicole asked. "She hasn't been, like, fired?"

At twenty-three, Nicole was the youngest person in Movement.

"Nope," answered Little Will. "She texted me last night."

As if Nicole had demanded proof, he fished his phone from his pocket, tapped its screen several times, and passed the device to her. *I'll be a little late tomorrow*, read the message from "Meredith, boss." *I need a little rest after vacay, you know how it is!* The words were followed by two emojis: a beach ball and a glass of wine.

Nicole rolled her eyes. She was about to hand back Little Will's phone when a new text bubble appeared on the screen. She couldn't

help but read it. *Hey man, I've got some news. Could be big for Movement. Coming in now, will tell you & M after the unload.* The text was from Big Will, the store manager.

"Huh," Nicole said. She gave the phone back to Little Will, then watched him as he read the text.

He was six foot one. He was only called Little Will to distinguish him from Big Will. Big Will was five eleven, but it was his grinning face, captured by a Polaroid, that sat at the top of the org chart taped to the wall of the break room at Town Square Store #1512 in Potters-town, NY. From Big Will's photo, seven spokes pointed diagonally down to the next layer of management, the store's executive managers. One of these was Meredith. Her photo, taken at a flattering three-quarter angle, showed her smiling coyly. Two months earlier, it had been pulled from the slot that said "Executive Manager for Sales—Hardlines" and reglued above the words "Executive Manager for Logistics (a.k.a. Movement)." A lone vertical line led down from Meredith's picture to Little Will's. His appeared to have been taken under duress. It had a startled mug-shot quality. As if to underline a point about his status, Little Will's title—group manager—wasn't capitalized. The rank-and-file members of Movement weren't pictured at all.

"Maybe Meredith really *is* getting fired?" Nicole said when Little Will looked up from his phone. She grinned hopefully.

She was pretty, in a fresh-faced, apple-cheeked, straight-from-the-farm way, the kind of dimpled white girl you could picture in ye olden days, in a gingham dress and braids as she milked a cow. To tamp down such associations, she slouched, wore baggy T-shirts and boxy pants that sat low on her hips, smoked constantly, avoided both the sun and foods that weren't heavily processed and/or white in color, and generally cultivated an air of boredom and free-floating hostility.

Little Will frowned. As a manager (albeit a low-level one), he

tried to adhere to certain standards. “Let’s not jump ahead of ourselves,” he said.

Nicole looked at him with something close to pity. It wasn’t only because he was too nice to talk shit even about Meredith. He’d missed multiple buttons on his shirt—a limp, faded, pill-covered flannel he kept balled up on the passenger seat of his car when he wasn’t working. Swatches of white undershirt were visible between buttonholes. Little Will would have been ridiculous if he weren’t so good-looking.

The digits on the two identical time clocks hanging on the opposite wall changed synchronously from 3:54 to 3:55. The text slipped from Nicole’s mind as she joined the others.

After clocking in, a few people went straight to the sales floor. The rest headed to the warehouse. Movement was responsible for unloading the trucks that came from Town Square’s corporate distribution center in western Pennsylvania and for getting the merchandise onto the store’s shelves.

Nicole, who was in the warehouse group, walked with the others through the quiet store to Aisle E26 (lightbulbs), all the way in the back. At the end of the aisle, they passed through a set of double doors, marked **EMPLOYEES ONLY**.

The warehouse was even more dungeon-like than usual. With sunrise still a ways off, its small, dirty skylights were useless. The half dozen or so bare bulbs that hung from the high ceiling only dented the gloom. The air was thick and warm. There was never any AC back here, but with the store closed to customers, the HVAC system was on eco mode: no occasional blasts of cooled air wafted in from the sales floor. The truck was parked ass-out in the first of the warehouse’s three loading docks. Every few seconds, high-pitched squeals tore through the dark space. The line—a long metal track that ferried merchandise through the warehouse—needed oiling.

Milo and Diego had arrived before the others, to set up. Milo

was already in position, standing just inside the truck, and was raring to go—rotating his arms in their shoulder sockets, like a pitcher warming up.

Milo was the thrower. His job was to transfer boxes from the truck onto the line, then push them to the next person, who scanned them. At store #1512, this was Nicole. If her scanner said a box held backstock, she drew a slash on its label with a Sharpie before pushing the box down the line. Downstream from her, Travis, Raymond, Diego, Val, and the old guys were spread out along the line. Each one was responsible for picking certain categories of boxes off the line and putting them onto pallets waiting by their feet. Boxes that weren't theirs, they pushed to the next person, until the truck was empty.

Without waiting for the old guys to get to their posts at the back of the line, Milo began pushing boxes down the track.

Nicole's scanner intoned dully—*beep, beep, beeeeeeep*—as it hovered over a microwave, a box of DVDs, a bundle of six swim noodles tied together with twine, which for some reason—who knew or cared—elicited a longer and higher-pitched squawk. Nicole fell into a steady, almost somnambulant rhythm as she scanned and pushed, scanned and pushed. There came a cordless vacuum cleaner, an infant car seat, several packages of paper towels fused together with shrink-wrap, a box containing tubs of protein powder, an office chair, a dollhouse, kitty litter, curtain rods, an air conditioner, a box of mixed HBA (health and beauty aids), a flat-screen TV, baby wipes, a box of individually packaged, microwavable bowls of organic mac 'n' cheese, two Blu-ray players, a convection oven, four Android cell phones, a crate of jarred pasta sauce, a box of DVDs, a stack of Monopoly sets wrapped in cellophane, a white-noise machine, a mixed box of Chemical (cleaning supplies), a bundle of shrink-wrapped lampshades, more kitty litter, several cases of flavored seltzer water in 12-ounce aluminum cans, tiny cans of gourmet dog food, deodorant, double-A batteries, even more kitty litter—for

decades, Potterstown had been hemorrhaging people, but judging by the fecal evidence, its cats were flourishing—dish soap, soap dishes, a drip coffeemaker, a Keurig coffeemaker, pots for planting, pots for cooking, rubber mats to put in the footwell of a car, crayons, laundry baskets, bookshelves, a half dozen bound American flags, shampoo, nail polish, wood polish, shoe polish.

When a pallet filled with boxes, Little Will used a jack to whisk it from its spot. Before taking it out to the sales floor to be unpacked—or “broken out,” as they called it—he swapped an empty pallet in its place so the movement of the line wouldn’t be interrupted, even for a moment. Corporate insisted the unload take no more than an hour. If they took even a minute longer, Meredith, as executive manager, had to submit a “failure report,” as she called it. Having to do this guaranteed she’d be on the warpath for the rest of the morning. One time, after it happened, she’d sent Raymond home early, on the grounds—dubious, in Little Will’s judgment—that Raymond was still drunk from the night before. (He’d just smelled of booze.) More recently, she’d gone off on Nicole, chewing her out and threatening to write her up for no reason at all.

Before taking a pallet of HBA to Joyce on the sales floor, Little Will glanced at his wrist. It was bare. He remembered that his watch battery had died a few days ago. He pulled his phone from his pocket: 4:09. *Shit.*

Although corporate permitted them to clock in five minutes earlier, Movement’s shift officially started at four. They had to finish the unload by five.

Little Will rubbed his cheek. It was already stubbly. His shift began at three, an hour earlier than the others’, and lasted eight hours and forty-five minutes. Then he went to his second job, landscaping. He showered and shaved at night, before going to bed.

“Jesus Christ!”

Back in the warehouse, Val’s voice rose above the screech and clang

of the line. Little Will turned to her. So did everyone else. With one hand, she held a large bag of kitty litter above her head, like the Statue of Liberty wielding her torch.

"This is soaked!" Val shouted, giving the kitty litter a little shake as the line came to a slow, whining stop. "C'mon, mofos! What's the use of kitty litter if it's wet?" With her free hand, she tapped the side of her head. "Think about it."

But she was grinning. There were few things Val liked more than an opportunity to display her competence.

"Drama queen," Milo muttered from the truck. Only Nicole heard.

She didn't respond. Nicole thought the idea of Milo calling anyone, even Val, dramatic was laughable. After three years of working next to Milo on the line, Nicole's precise level of irritation with him ebbed and flowed, but it rarely dipped below a six on a one-to-ten scale.

Val tossed the kitty litter into the Damaged pile (which, to Milo's point, she could have done immediately, without stopping the line). Boxes started to move again.

Nicole scanned and pushed three tightly bound tiki torches, an electric kettle, a box of Hawaiian Tropic sunscreen. Then items began coming faster, one right after the last, with barely an inch of space between them. Nicole scowled. She guessed Milo was timing himself, trying to see how quickly he could throw. *Dumbass*.

Nicole refused to be pressured. Ignoring the line of boxes that began to form behind her, she continued to work at the same pace as before. Why not? Meredith wasn't here to yell at her to go faster, screaming "Push, Nicole, push! Push like you mean it!" like some kind of demented midwife.

What did Nicole care if they missed the unload time? When it happened, Meredith disappeared into the ladies' room only to emerge fifteen minutes later with red eyes. "Allergies," she'd say if anyone asked. On the other hand, last time Meredith had taken out her disappointment

or whatever on Nicole. In front of everyone, she'd called Nicole "slow," as in retarded, and imitated the supposedly imbecilic expression on Nicole's face. She also threatened to write her up, for a bad attitude. (Which really made no sense when you thought about it: if Nicole *were* retarded, then her slowness wouldn't be the result of her attitude, would it?) Still, Nicole was counting on her raise this year. She didn't want to get written up. And it had been horrible, being singled out like that. The worst part was that everyone had seen her take it, stand there stupidly while Meredith insulted her.

Reluctantly, Nicole began scanning and pushing a little more quickly. Then a phone alarm trilled.

"Forty-three!" Milo grinned triumphantly. "Tied my record for number of boxes pushed in a single minute."

Nicole knew it, she fucking knew it.

Nicole glanced at him. Tall and skinny, with hands and feet that looked too big for the limbs that sprouted them, Milo had a narrow, almost elfin face dominated by pink cheeks and a long, pink-tipped nose that twisted at the bottom, like a caterpillar executing a turn. On the back of his head, a glabrous, quarter-sized spot of pale white skin was surrounded by dark, spiky hairs, like a column of ants marching in a spiral formation. His bald spot was important symbolically. It was the only indication that he was, technically, a grown-up.

Nicole gave him a look so withering that his smile vanished. He slumped a little as he turned back to the boxes.

But Milo didn't stay down for long. A minute later, grocery items came rolling down the line: boxes of peanut butter, cereal, granola bars, single-serve Styrofoam cups of soup. They were followed by toilet paper. In spite of herself, Nicole grinned. When he wasn't trying to break his own records for speed, Milo amused himself by choosing boxes deliberately, to tell a "story." This was a classic: what comes in—food—followed by what comes out. Milo called his box stories "performance

art.” Milo was a dumbass, but Nicole had to admit she felt some affection for this aspect of his dumbassery.

She was still smiling as she pushed packages of toilet paper to Travis, who pushed them to Raymond. Raymond was responsible for Toys and Big D—large-scale domestic goods, i.e., furniture, mirrors, wall art, lamps, etc.—as well as Paper. Paper referred to disposable kitchen and bath products, including toilet paper. (Actual paper, for writing, was Office.)

Raymond was short. Soon, he had to stand on his toes and stretch his arms over his head to get the packages of Charmin and Scott onto the top of his rapidly rising stacks. The blue Town Square T-shirt he wore was too big for him, nearly knee-length, like a little girl’s nightgown, and he hadn’t shaved for several days—his beard was coming in unevenly, in scraggly, unhygienic-looking tufts. Raymond was a nice enough guy—at least he wasn’t actively annoying like Milo—but he was runty and unfortunate, one of those people who give off an unmistakable whiff of loserishness.

A gigantic white cube careened down the line: twenty-seven packages of Quilted Northern toilet paper, each made up of sixteen individual rolls, stacked three rows deep and three rows high, the whole edifice held together with bands of shrink-wrap. It was like a moving snowbank. Raymond opened his arms wide and nearly dove into the ivory mass, pressing the side of his face into its only moderately pillowy surface while his outstretched arms hugged the cube. His short khaki-clad legs did a sort of shimmy as he attempted to set the giant cube gently next to the Paper pallet. He bungled it, knocking into one of the stacks on the pallet, sending small packages of toilet paper tumbling to the ground.

As she watched Raymond scramble after the fallen rolls, it occurred to Nicole that when she was in high school, she wouldn’t have hung out with Raymond any more than she would have hung out with Milo. Not that she’d been in the popular crowd—not by a long shot. To be

popular, you pretty much had to be rich or an athlete or both. Usually both. And pretty or not, Nicole had crooked teeth, wore the same black hoodie day after day, scowled constantly, and had acquired, due to a single fight, a reputation for toughness that made her scary to the rich kids in their college-track classes. Still, among Nicole's people—the stoners and summer school regulars—she had had a kind of status. That would not have been true of either Milo or Raymond, Nicole was sure, even if she hadn't gone to Potterstown High at the same time as either of them. (Raymond was twenty-seven, four years older than she was. And she wouldn't even have been in *kindergarten* when Milo graduated. Hard as it was to believe, Milo was thirty-seven.)

Nicole wondered now if working with them, hanging out with them—albeit mostly at the store—represented some sort of comedown, a gradual loosening of standards that she hadn't been fully conscious of until this moment, when it was too late to do anything about it. This bothered her. Nicole preferred to see her life as a success story, in which she advanced ever closer to achieving her goals. Since high school, she had moved out of her mother's house, gotten engaged, had a baby. She had a steady job, one she was good at. At her last performance review, Big Will had told her she was “very smart” and “smarter than she knew.” He'd given her the highest raise allowed by corporate. Only 3 percent, but still. It was the highest anyone got. Hopefully he'd do the same this year—if Meredith didn't write her up.

Nicole sighed.

A Balloon Time home helium tank came down the line. (Milo had finally run out of toilet paper.) Nicole scanned the tank and pushed it to Travis. Then she scanned and pushed a glossy box bearing the image of the printer inside it. Three more printer boxes followed, like a family of ducks waddling single file. Travis collected the printers in his arms—the stack of boxes came up so high that he had to tilt his head to see around them—then jogged them to the cage.

As the new guy—he had only been on the job for a couple of months—Travis had naturally been stuck with the worst categories, Bulk and Softlines as well as Electronics, which, to prevent theft, had to be taken to a metal shelving unit that would be locked after the unload, a.k.a. the cage. Bulk items, like Electronics, couldn't just be dropped onto a pallet at your feet: they had to be taken to a designated area next to the fire exit, a kind of staging area for cribs, strollers, reclining chairs, and large, plastic storage containers. The problem with Softlines—clothes, shoes, and accessories—was just that the store got so many damn boxes of them. Nicole would know. After the unload, her job was to break out Softlines on the sales floor with Ruby.

As he ran back from the cage, Travis flashed Nicole a wry, close-lipped smile.

He was missing several top front teeth and made a point of keeping his upper lip pressed down over the gap where his teeth should have been. It worked. Not only were the missing teeth less noticeable than you'd think, but his perpetually close-lipped expression—combined with a reserved, ironic manner—lent him an air of cool, as if he were watching everyone at a remove. It jibed with the confident way he stood and wore his clothes. Unlike Raymond's, Travis's oversized T-shirt looked purposeful, stylish.

Travis, Nicole realized, was *exactly* the kind of person she would have been friends with in high school. This thought filled her with something like pride. But when she glanced at Travis again, she had the distracting sensation—not for the first time since he'd started working here—that she'd seen him somewhere before. She was trying once again to call up the memory when a Softlines box fell off the line. T-shirts spilled onto the floor by Travis's feet.

Little Will hurried over. Getting down on his knees—something almost no one else was willing to do (they saw it as undignified)—he began picking up shirts. He paused over a white V-neck, began rubbing

at it, trying to remove some grime it had picked up on the ground but only managing to make the dark streak larger.

Little Will looked up at Travis. "I hope the people who shop here wash the clothes they buy before they wear them."

Travis merely raised an eyebrow, conveying by this means some sort of judgment, whether on Town Square for selling dirty clothes or on the people who shopped here, Nicole couldn't say.

Of course Travis didn't shop at Town Square himself. Almost no one who worked here did. Even with the employee discount—10 percent—the mass-produced knockoffs of trendy, boutique-type items Town Square sold were cheap only to people who shopped at actual boutiques. For some reason, these people got a kick out of imagining that they were shopping at a real discount store. The people who worked at Town Square shopped at Walmart, in the next shopping center over.

Little Will finished stuffing the shirts back in the box. When he stood up, Nicole realized something. He would have been in the popular crowd in high school. He would have been the nice one, the one always apologizing for the shitty things his asshole friends did, but still: he would have been popular. He'd played hockey, after all, and he was tall and well built with a Ken-doll face and thick, light brown hair only a few shades darker than his skin. (Because of all the time he spent outside landscaping, he was always tan.) Even Val—who wasn't into men, who was married to a woman—agreed that Little Will was "fucking hot, for a dude."

The thought of Little Will as popular bothered Nicole. She had thought the popular kids were rich, spoiled shits. Yet if Little Will had so much as looked at her back then, she knew she would have given him her virginity. She'd been a sucker for a certain kind of all-American guy.

She was still thinking about this when Milo bellowed, "Four twenty!"

This was Milo's idea of wit. Nicole's level of irritation rose to a seven.

Little Will also groaned. Twenty minutes in, he thought, and the

truck was significantly more than two-thirds full. And even if they made the unload time, what did it signify? They still wouldn't have time to break out all the boxes on the truck—nineteen hundred today—let alone make progress on the backlog that had built up over the last few weeks.

The warehouse was in terrible shape—overcrowded, untidy to the point of being dysfunctional. Hundreds of boxes that should have been taken out to the sales floor and unpacked had been stuck back here for weeks because the people of Movement hadn't had time to break them out. As a result, whole sections of the store were depleted, nearly empty. When Little Will's mother had stopped in the other day, she'd said the store reminded her of those pictures they used to show on TV of grocery stores in the Soviet Union with nothing on the shelves. "Funny how things come back around," she'd said.

But what could they do? The team was working as hard as they could. They simply didn't have enough hours for the workload. They needed money, a budget big enough for Little Will to schedule all thirteen members of Movement each truck day and schedule them to work longer, beyond their standard 4 a.m.-to-8 a.m. shift, at least until they were caught up. Unfortunately this wasn't Little Will's call to make. It was Meredith's.

Little Will told himself that he'd talk to her—again. Reason with her.

When Little Will left to take a pallet of Softlines boxes to the sales floor, Milo began dramatizing the human life cycle. He pushed out boxes of baby food and powdered formula, a crib mattress, a baby stroller. Then: a toddler car seat, a play kitchen, a stack of six sets of Candy Land bound together with cellophane, a children's bike with training wheels. For the teenage years, he chose a Nintendo Switch, a pair of speakers, motor oil, cans of Red Bull, and a box of condoms. Adulthood—a letdown in Milo's estimation—was a set of pots and

pans, a box of Tide Pods, an alarm clock, a rake, dental floss, garbage bags, and heartburn medicine. Then for old age: cartons of denture cleaning tablets, an electric blanket, a deluxe walker. He looked around for his finale. He was forced to settle, somewhat anticlimactically, for a box of adult diapers. If only Town Square sold coffins.

By then, Milo was sweating, both from the heat—worse inside the truck than in the rest of the warehouse—and the pressure of performance. The others laughed when he tried to explain, but his “shows” were a lot of work. He had to think and act quickly, picking boxes from the limited selection accessible to him at any given moment. It required both mental and physical agility.

“Can I get a fan, Will?” he called when Little Will returned to the warehouse. “It’s got to be ninety-five degrees in here. I’m, literally, dying.”

“Sure thing.” Little Will headed for the storeroom. “I guess summer’s finally here,” he said to no one in particular.

“Then why we not getting summer hours?” Diego asked. His tone made Little Will wince.

A compact black man from Honduras, Diego stood with his feet set apart and his shoulders pushed back, making himself as wide as possible, as if to compensate horizontally for a slight vertical deficit.

Little Will knew why Diego was mad. They all did.

Summer was the store’s busy season. Potterstown was two hours north of New York City and tucked between the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River. In the last few years, it had become an increasingly popular summer destination for a certain type of city person (the kind who eschewed—or was priced out of—the Hamptons). Starting around the end of May, city people began arriving with their wallets open—eager to stock their second homes and Airbnbs. This usually meant that store #1512’s employees got as many hours as they wanted, at least up to thirty-nine a week (busy season or no, overtime was a no-go—“challenging time for retail,” yada yada yada).

It was now mid-June.

"I can't remember the last time I got more than twenny hours," Diego continued. Because he was upset, his accent—Honduran, but with a lilt that made a lot of people think he was from one of the Caribbean islands—was even more pronounced than usual. "My phone got shut off. I can't get it turned on till we get paid on Friday."

Little Will looked down. "*I know*," he said to the floor. He looked back up at Diego. "I'm sorry. I'm going to talk to Mer—"

Before he finished, the warehouse doors were flung open with so much force that they banged against the walls on either side, the sound reverberating through the long, cavernous space. From between them, a slim, blond figure appeared, flouncing and smiling, as if the doors were stage curtains and this, her grand entrance.

"Hellooo!!!"

2

MEREDITH'S CHIN-LENGTH HAIR was freshly blow-dried, with only the tiniest bit of dampness clinging to its dark roots. Her lips were coated in pink gloss, and her eyes lined with pencil. She wore a close-fitting baby blue T-shirt and khaki-colored skinny jeans. Even executive managers had to adhere to the store's dress code.

As she made her way toward Little Will, the heels of her suede ankle boots tap-tap-tapped against the concrete floor. Little Will clutched the handle of his jack.

"How was—uh—Lake George?" he asked.

"Lake Placid," Meredith corrected. "Lake George is kind of, I don't know . . . ?" She scrunched up her face.

Before his dad's business went under, Little Will's family went to Lake George every summer. "Right," he said. "Right."

"So." Meredith smiled. "Talk to me about what?"

The guilty, panicked look that appeared in his org chart photo flit across Little Will's face. This was not the moment he would have chosen for the conversation he wanted to have.

“Will?” Meredith prodded.

“Sorry,” he said. He smiled unnaturally. (He looked like a revived corpse, Nicole thought.) “It’s, um, about our, um, hours.” Then, buoyed by the strength of his conviction, he began to speak more fluidly. “The store has been getting busier. Which you know. So of course the trucks are getting bigger. While you were gone, all five were upwards of eighteen hundred pieces. Two had more than two thousand. But we’re working with the same budget we had all winter and spring, when we were dealing with thirty or forty percent fewer boxes. There’s no way to get through a June workload on a March budget.” He gestured at the warehouse’s packed shelves and the overflow boxes, stacked on the ground, clogging up what should have been open arteries. “We need more money, to schedule more people each day and for longer hours.”

Meredith’s smile made her small, deep-set gray eyes become even smaller. “*Wiiiiiill*,” she said. “I’ve told you, it’s a matter of priorities. I wish we could do it all, but it’s not in the cards right now. Our number one priority is staying on budget. That means working harder and smarter with the hours we have.”

“I hear you,” Little Will said. “It’s just—well, the effect on the store?” He looked at her pleadingly. “Whole sections are empty. People can’t buy what’s not on the sales floor. We could be losing thousands, maybe tens of thousands of dollars in sales each day.”

The boxes that came in off the trucks were disproportionately full of the store’s most popular items—the things they’d sold out of, for which they needed replacements from the distribution center.

The implication that she was causing the store to lose money made Meredith’s upturned nose quiver slightly.

“The store’s sales are up for the month,” she said. “And they’re up this June from the same period in June last year. That’s what matters—the trend, not the raw number. As long as sales are up, we’re good. Okay?”

Little Will was about to point out how hard it was on the team, not

getting the hours they counted on this time of year. “Besides, we have Callie starting tomorrow,” Meredith said before he could.

She had, it was true, agreed to bring a new person on, to help Nicole and Ruby break out Softlines.

“Even so—” Little Will began, but he was speaking to the stripy blond highlights on the back of her head. She had already turned away.

Little Will wondered for perhaps the thousandth time why Meredith had asked to transfer from Sales to the warehouse, to Movement or Logistics or whatever you wanted to call it. (Several years earlier, on the advice of management consultants called in to help with hiring, corporate had changed the name of the department known as Logistics to Movement. Movement sounded more fun and modern and would appeal more to potential rank-and-file employees, the consultants said. But executive managers shrank from the change—for themselves. They felt that being executive manager of something called Movement sounded dinky, as if they worked for a yoga studio or a laxative company, and successfully lobbied corporate to retain their original titles.)

In attitude as well as appearance, Meredith was so clearly a front-of-the-store person. And though the transfer was technically a lateral move for her, Movement was at the bottom of the store’s informal pecking order. It wasn’t “customer-facing,” it was where Irina from HR put people whose social skills were, in her words, “not ready for prime time.”

While Little Will was absorbed in these thoughts, Meredith began walking toward the truck. She was almost there when the line began emitting a series of clanks and moans, the volume and complexity of which were at a pitch unusual even for such a sprawling and poorly cared-for apparatus. The noise called to mind a dying animal—or several, as if an extinction-level event were being visited upon a rabbit warren or fox den. For a moment, everyone in the room was transfixed—it

seemed as if the entire line was on the verge of collapse, as if its many constituent parts were about to declare independence from one another, causing the whole thing to come clanging to the ground in a useless heap. Then, just as suddenly as it began, the cacophony ceased. The problem had apparently righted itself.

Meredith tittered uneasily, then began clapping her hands. “Okay, guys,” she yelled, “we’re all good here. Let’s get back to work. It’s four forty. Twenty minutes to go. So—game on! Let’s crush this truck! Woo-hoo!”

Nicole pretended to shoot herself in the head, then quickly dropped her gun hand when Meredith turned toward her, on her way to the loading dock.

Her boots clattered like horseshoes on its metal surface.

By now, Milo was deep inside the truck. He’d worked his way through more than half the merchandise. Nicole had wheeled in additional sections of track to extend the line so that it reached the boxes in the back. At Meredith’s approach, Milo began working faster, trying to replicate, or even improve on, his performance from earlier, when he’d been timing himself. He twisted, reached for the next box, pivoted, set the box on the line, swiveled back in a rapid but graceful, almost balletic motion. He wanted the boxes to come out in a continuous line, with no space between them.

Meredith watched him for a minute, then turned around and left the truck, without giving any indication she was impressed. On her way out, she approached Nicole, getting so close that Nicole could see the flakes of the pencil she had used to line her small eyes and smell the chemical whiff of her face powder. The only “beauty product” Nicole had used that morning was toothpaste.

Meredith thrust her hip toward Nicole’s, tapping Nicole’s khaki pants with her own, in a cross between a dance move and a lewd gesture of friendship. “Hi, love,” she said. “How *are* you?”

When Meredith wasn't in one of her bad moods, Nicole's youth and good looks appealed to her. Nicole reminded her of herself when she was younger (albeit with better bone structure and worse grooming).

Nicole gave Meredith the smallest, coldest smile she could get away with, then turned to a large box—a mini fridge, for a college dorm room—rolling toward her. Nicole yawned as she scanned the fridge and nudged it to Travis. It had only traveled a few inches when Meredith bent forward and gave it a big, theatrical shove. “Boom chicka boom!” she called gaily.

She turned to Nicole. “See?” she said. “Just because a box is heavy doesn't mean it won't move fast. That's what the rollers are for. A little energy is all it takes.”

She snapped her fingers twice, right up in Nicole's face.

Unable to slap Meredith's hand away, Nicole instead thought about quitting. But it wasn't exactly a good time. Her fiancé Marcus was currently between jobs, and her food stamp card hadn't refreshed at the beginning of the month like it was supposed to—in the past two days, she had tried it at three different grocery stores, to no avail. She had to go to Social Services right away—as in today—to get it fixed. Besides, where would she go? Town Square actually paid a bit better than most retailers.

Nicole scanned and pushed a stack of three chaise longues, held together by a plastic band. When they reached him, Travis lifted them over his head. Their weight made his body droop. His wiry torso formed the shape of a question mark as he ran the chairs to Bulk. When he returned, his face was shiny with sweat.

“You're working hard,” Meredith said. “I like it!”

Travis smiled. It was a real, wide smile that briefly revealed his missing teeth and displaced his air of ironic detachment. It lasted only an instant. Then he closed his lips and looked at the ground. If Nicole hadn't been turned to him at that very second, she would have missed

it entirely. But it was clear to her that Meredith's compliment pleased Travis. Nicole was surprised. Too-cool-for-school Travis didn't seem like he'd give a fuck.

Meredith walked over to Raymond. Leaning toward him so her nose was a few inches from his cheek, she inhaled deeply. She was trying to determine if he smelled of alcohol. Apparently she was satisfied that he did not, because she moved away, just as mini gas grills began coming down the line, dozens of them, entombed in their boxes.

Little Will had warned Diego they were coming—they were part of a display in Seasonal. Diego had set up a special pallet in anticipation.

Standing next to Diego, Meredith watched as he transferred the grills to the pallet. Under her hawklike stare, Diego felt his heart rate rise. Did she think he was going to steal one—slip it under his T-shirt? They weren't *that* mini.

Only after all the grills had been unloaded did Meredith turn to Val, who was hoisting a forty-pound bag of dog food over her shoulder.

The Pet pallet was crowded. Val dropped the bag on top of a large, plastic-covered dog bed. A rush of air farted from the mattress. Meredith's mouth formed a prim O of disapproval.

"Try to put the heaviest pieces on the bottom," she told Val. "It's more stable that way."

A few months earlier, Val had lost her temper in Big Will's office. She'd been written up as a result. Now, her cheeks—windows onto something, her mood, if not her soul—turned diaper-rash pink. But Val didn't tell Meredith that she was wrong. She didn't say anything at all. Meredith was sensitive about her ignorance of the warehouse—she wouldn't appreciate Val explaining that the line moved too fast to worry about arranging items perfectly. If you didn't want to miss any boxes, you threw everything on your pallet as quickly as possible and waited to organize the items until the line had stopped—which it did fairly frequently, when a box fell off or Nicole had to wheel more track to Milo.

Abruptly, Meredith began clapping again.

“Come on, people!” she shouted. “It’s four fifty-one. Keep it up. This isn’t the time to start slacking. Don’t take advantage. You’ll have your break soon enough.”

Break was at six, more than an hour away.

Still, they began pushing faster. It worked for about a minute. Then an open-topped crate of pickles fell from the line. Glass shattered against the concrete. The smell of brine rose through the warehouse. There was silence—the sound of ten people not saying “I told you so.”

Even Milo knew that pushing too aggressively was counterproductive, causing bottlenecks and making boxes fall off the line. Milo worked fast to entertain himself; he knew the line would eventually get backed up and he’d have to wait for the rest of them to catch up. Meredith alone didn’t get that the line naturally moved at the fastest sustainable pace. It was a pride thing. No one wanted the others to point to them as the person slowing everyone down. Even Nicole, who didn’t like to look as if she were trying hard—it felt embarrassing—worked at the same pace as everyone else.

Little Will mopped up the pickle juice.

A small box filled with 2-ounce tubes of Astroglide personal lube rolled down the line. It was followed by a long procession of diapers: pull-ups, newborn-sized, organic, ones with Sesame Street characters, ones with princesses. One after another, they began rolling down the track. Milo had gone back to performance art. This was a concise morality play, about the outsized, years-long consequences of one small mistake.

Diapers were usually one of the first items loaded onto the truck at the distribution center, which meant they were among the last boxes to be unloaded. Their appearance generally signaled that the truck was nearly empty. Meredith perked up.

She didn't realize that Milo had been performing. To render his long stream of diapers, he had deliberately ignored many other boxes.

When Meredith peered into the truck, she saw how many boxes were left. Her nose began to twitch. Like a rabbit on the scent of carrots, Raymond had said of her once. Like a rabbit on coke, Val had corrected. Meredith began to pace.

"Rabbit in distress," Val whispered to Diego after she walked past for the second or third time. He suppressed a laugh, but a croaking noise came out instead.

Meredith turned to him. On her face was the feral look she got right before she lashed out at someone. Diego felt a flash of anger toward Val for putting him in this position. He really didn't want to get written up. He needed his raise.

"*Really*, Diego?" Meredith began. "Really? You choose right now, when we're behind, to be disrespectful, that's just terrific—"

But a loud bang reverberated through the warehouse. It was Milo hitting the truck's side wall with the palm of his hand. Two more identical bangs followed. This was the signal that he had thrown the last box.

Only then did Diego's body unclench, his anger at Val recede.

Short and squat with red stripes on its sides—it contained books, from the publisher Penguin Random House—the last box seemed, in proportion to the number of eyes that turned to look at it, almost comically insignificant, like a limp penis overpowered by pubic hair.

The time was 4:59.

Meredith's face broke out into a wide, childlike smile.

Milo had said once that Meredith had a mind like an Etch A Sketch. With the equivalent of a shake, her moods changed, leaving no trace of what had been there before. (Even Nicole had chuckled at this. She allowed that Milo could be smart, funny even—when he was stoned. Weed lifted his thoughts from the mire of his self-involvement.)

Meredith turned to Nicole. Still smiling, she raised her hand to give

Nicole a high-five. Pretending not to see, Nicole immediately looked down at her scanner, began tapping furiously at its screen.

When Meredith realized she'd been left hanging, her face reddened. Her arm fell limply to her side.

A pale cone of green light from the device in Nicole's hands illuminated her pretty, wan, vitamin-starved face as she willed herself not to smile, at least not outwardly.

3

THE SALES FLOOR was dimly, almost romantically lit. Also quiet. The cleaners, Jesus and Maria, didn't arrive until six, and Plan-O, short for Plant Operations, not until seven. For now, Movement had the place to itself. Even with a thin, tinny stream of R&B playing from the speaker of her phone, Ruby—standing in the precise middle of the store, at the intersection where Women's, Baby, and Boys met—could hear the gentle whir of refrigerators all the way in Grocery.

Ruby was surrounded by ten blue Town Square shopping carts. Like spokes on a wheel, the carts pointed inward, with Ruby at the center. Next to her were several stacks of Softlines boxes. These had come off previous trucks. Ruby used the surface of an upturned box as a makeshift table on which to refold clothes that had gotten messed up in transit, then sorted the items by type into the carts arrayed around her.

She was folding a pale pink onesie when voices from the back of the store signaled that the people on the line had emerged from the warehouse. At the sound, Ruby reflexively smoothed her T-shirt and adjusted the rhinestone-studded reading glasses that were propped up on her head.