

The Riveter: A Novel

JUNE

Carrell Hardware Headquarters

Monday, June 7

Lobby

9:17am

Her braid is in her face.

As annoying as it is, rogue hair is currently the least of her worries. She can simply push it back behind her left shoulder and leave her mind free to whirl through the possibility that she is in the wrong place, has come at the wrong time or has generally made some sort of wrong turn.

And it's her first day too.

Realistically, she knows she's needlessly anxious, but someone – he? She, maybe? The email didn't specify – was supposed to come for her at 9:00, and she's been waiting since 8:53. She thought that coming seven minutes ahead of schedule was a good idea, but, in hindsight, those seven minutes were just extra time that she filled wondering and worrying.

Maybe it's time for her to reassess her situation. She couldn't possibly be in the wrong place: the introductory email said her new manager would meet her in the lobby of Headquarters. The Carrell logo out front made it easy for her to identify Headquarters and her current location couldn't be anything other than a remarkably unremarkable lobby. Chairs are clustered in twos and threes around a few tables; the one in front of her has a fan of magazines, including "HOME & RECREATION," "HOME & HEARTH," and a third title which is mostly hidden under the previous two but whose only visible word does, also, contain the word "home." A security guard sits behind a circular desk on the other side of the room.

Maybe she should ask him whether he knows anything.

Maybe she should check to see she doesn't know anything herself. Maybe someone sent her an email to change the date or time or location. There were no new messages when she checked her phone, but she checks once more in case the world has altered itself in the past half-minute. Still nothing.

Maybe her manager is late and didn't have her email or phone number and couldn't contact her.

Maybe something happened to her manager who didn't have any way to contact her or who forgot about her in the heat of the moment, and now no one knows she's here, and she's destined

to sit, slowly becoming one with this chair, until someone sees her and asks who she is and what she's doing here.

Maybe her manager *died*. Maybe there was a car accident or a crash on the rail or a freak heart attack. Maybe, chances are small but not impossible, her boss was perfectly healthy people who, for some reason, dropped dead.

Now she's gone from anxious to morbid. She's not superstitious but she doesn't want to keep thinking of death on the slightest chance that, by thinking of an unfortunate, premature end, she might somehow will it into existence.

But maybe she's right and something did happen to her new manager. After all, the lobby clock is ticking towards 9:20 and there remains no sign of anyone boss-like or any word from anyone else. If something did happen, would someone tell her? Would there be an announcement? There probably would be a company-wide email – so how would she get the news then? She doesn't have a company email yet. And what if that event happened to be a death? Would she be invited to a funeral to someone whom she's never met: someone whose name she doesn't know, someone she doesn't know whether to refer to as a "he" or "she"? Would the entire company be invited to the funeral? Would everyone be given a day off? She hasn't seen anyone, besides the security guard, in the building yet. Maybe there *was* some sort of company tragedy, and no one is coming into work today.

She reminds herself again not to think of death and tragedy. What if she's jinxing not just her boss but herself and the career she's about to start?

In that case, maybe no one is here because of...some fun reason. Maybe today is some idiosyncratic company holiday. But would a security guard still be working if it were a company holiday? Wouldn't the whole building be closed?

She sees a movement from outside the door, and, although the guard in question doesn't lift his head, she lifts hers just as there is a sterile beep and the door to the lobby opens.

It's not a company holiday then, she concludes as this new person strides through the lobby, tucking his access-granting badge into his briefcase. Of course it isn't. And no one died and there's no company-wide absence due to a funeral. Thankfully. And obviously. Or, at least, that fact is obvious now that she's no longer left alone with only the security guard and her ever-expanding mental list of all possible reasons she would be left waiting for over 20 minutes. Her manager is probably caught up with something or is running late and will get to her as soon as possible; if not, someone somewhere in this building certainly has her contact info and would find her if need be. There's no reason for her to be worried, and there's certainly no rational reason for her to brainstorm increasingly ludicrous scenarios that only make her feel that she's forgotten something - or that she's the one who's been forgotten.

There is another beep, and a second man enters the lobby. The sight of the two men reassures her – but only slightly. Maybe the workday actually starts at 9:30 and not 9:00? Maybe she was told to be here at 9:00 for her benefit: in case something went horribly wrong on her end?

“That you, Paul?” the second man calls.

“Jim!” Paul, the first man she saw, stops and waits for the other to join him. The two look remarkably similar; the only difference is their face shape: one rectangular, one oval. “How you doing?”

“Couldn’t be better. You see how nice it is out there?”

“Definitely can’t believe this weather. You get a chance to enjoy it this weekend?”

“Took the grandkids out to golf yesterday.”

“Yeah? They stand a chance against their old man?”

“‘Old’ is the key word there,” Jim replies. “They can hit it a mile. Meanwhile, my own shots are somewhere between find-able and hit-able.” The two voices swell as the men pass her, unnoticed on her chair.

“Well, sometimes even a Ferrari needs a little time to warm up!” Paul chuckles at his own quip while Jim pauses. Maybe he doesn’t think of himself as a Ferrari.

“Guess it’s one of the downsides of getting old,” Jim answers. “Good think I can’t think of any others right?” This time, he’s the one who chuckles at his own response.

“Course not. There’s obviously other explanations why my back hurts when I wake up in the…” the two men turn a corner, and she loses them.

But there are two more men to take their place. “Morning, Bill!”

“Morning, Bryan!”

“Can you believe this weather?”

“Great golfing weather.”

She has never met these men or heard them speak to each other before, yet their responses flow smooth and polished, one following the other in perfect cadence, like the answers were scripted or expected – though she can’t quite describe what exactly her own expectations were or why she finds herself nodding in agreement with Bill though she’s never golfed herself.

“Can’t beat it,” agrees Bryan. “I’ve always said June’s the prettiest time of the year. The wife loves it too.” The pale blue color of his shirt is the same as Jim’s which matches Paul’s which matches Bill’s.

She isn't wearing any blue. She reminds herself not to worry, and, as a distraction, turns back to the conversation in front of her.

"...really the weather? Or is 'cause schools are out, and we don't have any college kids around to remind us how old we're getting?"

"Speak for yourself. I keep telling myself..."

She thought she'd hear a reference to a Ferrari. Instead she hears "Rosalie?" This voice is a new one. A third man has entered the lobby from the other side and is heading towards her.

"Hey there, Joe," one of the two men says. She looked away from them for a second at the sound of this new man – Joe's – voice and now can't distinguish which one is Bill and which one is Paul. Not Paul – Bryan. All of them, though, appear rather similar to this newcomer: from their age to their blue shirts to their topics of conversation. "Long time, no see. How're things in your corner going?"

"They're going. Always plenty of work to do to keep 'em that way, right?"

One of the men nods while the other replies aloud, "That you are. But don't work yourself too hard, you hear? Or else you'll feel it in your bones when you get to our age!"

"Speaking of, we should probably get upstairs, Bill," the not-Bill man, Bryan, says. "Think we should call the team in for a quick huddle before the meeting starts?"

Bill nods in agreement and motions goodbye to Joe. "Work awaits. See you later, Joe. And remember: all work and no play makes Joe a very dull boy."

Bryan turns to Bill. "It's 'Jack,' isn't it?"

"He's Joe," Bill says slowly as if he doesn't know whether the question is truly a serious one. "Haven't you two met before?"

"I know *he's* Joe," Bryan motions. "But the saying. It's Jack, right? 'All work and no play makes *Jack* a very dull boy'?"

"I mean, yeah, but *he's* Joe so I said *Joe*, not Jack 'cause-

As the two turn the corner and move out of earshot, the remaining man – whom Bryan and Bill, without their quite realizing it, have agreed is named Joe – watches them go before he catches sight of her: once more the only one left in the lobby besides the security guard. Maybe there's another entrance somewhere? Maybe she was supposed to meet her boss there? Maybe she's the one at fault, and now her boss will think she's not prompt or reliable or -

“It’s not Rosalie, is it?” Joe’s talking again, but, this time, it’s to her. Before she can form a thought, he adds, “Is it Rosaria? Or Rosary? ‘Cause that I could probably handle, but I’m not good at ethnic names. I should tell you that right now.”

“It’s, uh, Rosie, actually. Just Rosie.” Is that an “ethnic name” to Joe? She wouldn’t have thought so - at least, no more than Rosary. Maybe that’s Joe’s “ethnic-name” example? Maybe he’s casually -

He probably just misspoke. Maybe he’s as nervous to meet her and make a good first impression as she is with him and he stumbled over his words.

She stands, brushing her braid out of her face once again. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Joe,” he gives her an enthusiastic handshake. “I’m your manager. Welcome to Carrell!”

“Thanks!” she replies. He was just running late of course. There wasn’t any crisis, much less one that involved something as morbid as death. But – he doesn’t act like he’s running late and that he made her wait. Should she say something?

He’s already heading back in the direction he came so she quickly grabs her bag and follows, catching up only when he glances at his phone screen. “Hmm, what’s...?” With a frown, Joe begins typing, and she stops along with him.

As the minute passes and he continues to type while she stands mutely, unsure of what to do, she can’t help running through a new list of questions: Should she ask Joe what’s going on and show she’s curious? Or, because he hasn’t said anything direct to her, would he think she’s prying? Should she take out her phone and pretend that she also has something to do so she doesn’t look as awkward as she feels?

“So, how’s your morning been so far?” Joe addresses her as he starts walking again. He’s smiling like he did when he first introduced himself, and his tone is so friendly that she wonders whether he really was intently focused on his phone moments ago or whether she spaced out and let her imagination fill in the silence.

But now he’s asking about her morning. Is he trying to see whether she’ll mention that the most distinguishing part of her morning – besides that it’s her first morning at her first post-college job – was waiting for over 20 minutes and worrying the entire time that something had gone horribly wrong? Maybe he’s trying to characterize her and decide whether she’s the type who will improvise and adapt or the one who will complain. Maybe he’s testing to see whether she’ll call him out for meeting her closer to 9:30 than to 9:00?

She decides to stall for time, giving him a chance to volunteer more information before she reciprocates. She sticks with the bland: “It’s been fine. Thanks for asking. I’m really excited to be here and to start-”

“No problems with traffic?”

“No, none. It was pretty-”

“Good ‘cause you have to watch out for the 101 sometimes. It can get backed up.”

“Oh, okay. Good to know. What about the rail? I’ll be-”

“Of course, you’ll probably be here early enough to avoid the bulk of the accidents.”

“Yeah?” she drops her prior question to follow this new conversational lead. “I know someone told me during my interviews, but would you mind reminding me? When does the work day officially start here?”

“It’s a regular 8 to 5, except on your first day when the day kicks off at 9am. Get used to waking up early – no more college hours for you here!” Joe chuckles.

She smiles, ready to let a little bit of her personality come through. “Actually, most of my classes were in the mornings. I’m totally a morning person. I might even be here a few minutes before eight.”

When Joe hesitates, Rosie realizes she has made a mistake, although she’s unsure what exactly that mistake is. Maybe she was too enthusiastic? She wanted to show she was eager and willing, not off-puttingly agreeable.

I might even be here a few minutes before eight. That sentence sounds completely obsequious, even to her, when it was supposed to be well-meaning, friendly, an insight into her habits. She backpedals, away from anything idiosyncratic about her and into neutral territory once more. “Not if that’s going to be a problem, though. I’m fine with early mornings is really all I meant to say.”

“Well, the building’s open so you can get in as soon as you get your badge. Just be sure that you don’t need me; I’m not going to start my day that early!” Joe sounded a little reluctant at first, but, when he ends with a laugh, she thinks she’s recovered from her conversational slipup.

And yet, Rosie doesn’t feel completely at ease as she follows Joe around the corner of the lobby, trailing the footsteps of Jim and Paul and Bill and Bryan, and pass through a door that conceals a staircase. “So how long have you been at Carrell?” she asks as they climb.

“30 years.”

She’s not even 30 years old. “Wow! That’s awesome. Congratulations. Did you go through this same six-month post-grad training program too?”

Joe shakes his head. “We didn’t have a training program like that when I started here. Between you and me, I’m too old for that! I grew up around here, and Carrell is the biggest employer in town so it made sense I’d come here after I graduated.”

She smiles, glad the conversation is moving. “Yeah? So you grew up here too?”

“I did. I...” Joe continues to talk as he pushes through the doorway that leads out of the stairway and onto the second floor, but his voice turns into a hum while she tries to orient herself with her new surroundings.

In front of the stairwell, the hallway continues into three different directions: left, right, and straight. From what she can see, straight ahead, there are offices along the side of the building where the windows are and cubicles in the middle. When Joe takes the right fork, passing a conference room, she sees more of the same: the cubicles each have three half-walls to separate its inhabitant from neighbors while the fourth side is open to an aisle, which runs between every other vertical line of cubicles. The aisles culminate in offices, against the windows in this area of the building as well, on both sides. The first two offices that she and Joe pass are both empty.

“...we met State-side, as they say. Got married right after graduation.”

“That’s really sweet!” Rosie said, thankfully catching enough of the conversation to ask what she thinks is a relevant and non-controversial follow-up question. After Joe’s lukewarm response to her comment about being a morning person, she’s trying to stay on safe ground. “How long have you two been-?”

“I’ve always said Retail Science majors tended to do pretty well for themselves,” Joe makes a motion as if to elbow her, like they’re sharing some private joke. “But you know that, right?”

How would she know that? Did she mishear? She remembers bringing up her major during her interviews, but maybe it wasn’t communicated to Joe?

She shouldn’t correct him though, especially since he’s trying to form a connection with her.

Or maybe she absolutely should correct him. What if word got out somehow, like Joe happened to be sitting at the same lunch table as one of her interviewers?

“Maybe Retail Science would have been the right choice for me,” she tries to say casually. “I’m really excited about being here and being in retail, but I wasn’t a Retail Science major.”

“You’re not?” Joe’s studying her now. Maybe she’s made a mistake. Maybe he’s made a mistake: maybe there’s someone else, a Retail-Science-majoring, blue-shirt-wearing, not conversation-blundering, able-to-connect-through-inside-joking person in the lobby right now, and Joe is supposed to be that person’s manager. Maybe he picked her up by mistake.

But he knew her name.

At least, he knew some approximation of her name.

“No, my major was Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.”

“You studied – women?”

She doesn't want to give him the wrong idea, but she also doesn't want to come off as having a more-intellectual-than-thou persona, which she realizes, is precisely what it sounds like when she repeats, “Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.” This time, though, she tries to make a joke of it. “I know, it's a mouthful.”

“And you're from the State?”

She shakes her head, feeling like she's back in an interview but, this time, she's giving answers that are well-meaning but are still falling short.

“Oh. Gets cold there,” Joe nods. “But look at you, you're already tan!”

“Well, sort of. I'm Me-”

“Probably glad to leave that weather behind, right? What's out there?” Joe gestures to the windows of another empty office. “I bet it's better than anything you get East!”

“I heard it's...great golfing weather?” Rosie offers.

“You wouldn't believe it, it's – hey! Did you golf?” Joe asks excitedly. “You didn't tell me that!”

She messed up again. “Not exactly, but-”

“You don't golf?”

Rosie shakes her head for the second time. She can't help thinking that she's making a terrible first impression and will now have to work extra hard to undo it – if she can ever undo it. “I don't, but maybe I can learn here? It seems like-”

“Yeah, I guess you can.” Joe responds, enthusiasm drained, and, when he points to a closed door and says, “That's my office,” she wonders whether the change in subject is natural or whether he may have hurried it along. Joe gestures to the cubicle directly outside his office on the right side of the aisle. “That's Maggie's cube. She's probably not here yet. It's still early. Frank's across from her. Meet your CULT!”

“I'm sorry? Did you say my – CULT?”

“Your Contained Unit Leadership Team. Your CULT. Each CULT has a Financial Analyst, Product Analyst, and Account Analyst to cover all the SKUs in their specific area. Take Frank for example. He's your Financial Analyst; he covers the financials and buy-plans and monthly financial projections for the SKUs.”

“And Maggie?”

“Product Analyst. She’s in charge of product assortment: what we buy, which vendors we use, what price we pay for it. Those sorts of things.”

“And I’m the Account Analyst?”

“You got it.” Joe’s answer makes her feel more confident than she has up to this point. Small talk has never been one of her best skills, but she knows how to learn and do her work well. Besides, she reminds herself, her first conversation with Joe – the first of countless conversations to come, no doubt – isn’t symbolic of anything. It certainly isn’t the sole representation of her success in her new role. “And you know what an Account Analyst does?”

“I think so. Basically, I’ll be responsible for the merchandise: managing the different vendor accounts, knowing which SKUs are coming from each one, getting the optimal quantities from the warehouses to the stores on time.”

“Right. And your CULT is Kitchen Appliances so all those SKUs and vendors you’re managing will be for kitchen appliances. Fridges, microwaves, freezers, you know.”

“Okay, Maggie and Frank and I are a team – um, CULT. Got it. Do we all report to you?”

“You report to me,” Joe said and the way he says it makes her want to jump in and explain: she was asking about her new teammates because she knows she reports to him. And she was finally feeling like she wasn’t blowing it when it came to answering his questions and talking with him!

She keeps her mouth shut, though. She wants him to think of her as a good, loyal, careful, and successful worker – not someone who constantly argues or always has to defend herself.

“I manage the Account Analysts. Craig manages the Financial Analysts, and Clay manages the Product Analysts. Each group, Accounts, Finances, Product, also has their own senior manager and director and senior director and so on. But you don’t have to worry about that!” Joe grins. “All you have to remember is that you report to me, Maggie reports to Clay, and Frank reports to Craig. That way, nothing is confusing!”

“And they, Craig and-they’re...Managers, like you?” Rosie asks, not quite confused but slightly overwhelmed with all the names and the titles. She’ll have to make an organizational chart as soon as she has a few free minutes.

“Exactly.”

“And you report to a...Senior Manager? Is that what you said?”

“Nicolette.”

“Nicolette?” After a train of Jim, Paul, Bill, Bryan, and Joe, the woman’s name – and a three-syllable name no less – catches Rosie’s ear. Plus, if a woman is a Senior Manager, there’s hope another woman, like Rosie herself, could also ascend to a leadership position as long as she works hard and shows her worth. “I’ll introduce you to her when she’s back in the office,” Joe lowers his voice. “She’s not coming into Headquarters today because she said she was feeling only 97%, not the full 100. But you’re lucky, really, because you get to work with Frank and Nicolette thinks highly of him.”

“She does? That’s great then that we’re on the same team – CULT,” she corrects.

“Yeah, he really takes the initiative! If you copy what he does, you’ll be in great shape. Remember though, he’s been around here for a long time and knows Nicolette well.”

“Okay...” Rosie responds apprehensively not knowing whether Joe was giving her critical or vaguely threatening advice. Maybe both?

“So no need to go to Nicolette directly like Frank does. Or, you know, kind of...talk the way he does. Or work. You’ll figure it out. Come on, let’s go meet him.” Rosie follows Joe to Frank’s cubicle. The one across the aisle, Maggie’s, is empty. “Hi Frank!” Joe says, upbeat. “How’s it going?”

“It’s Monday,” Frank replies without looking away from the two computer monitors on his desk. “And it’s early.”

“You can go back to a regular schedule tomorrow. This morning, I want to introduce you to your new Account Analyst.” Did Joe’s voice change from friendly to extra chipper? And has she known her new boss long enough to make those kinds of judgements?

Frank turns and looks at Rosie. His head is bald, his face is red, and, under the fluorescent lighting, his eyes look dark, like they’ve swallowed all other colors. He and Joe are also both wearing jeans, and Rosie, in her dress, feels completely out of place once more.

“Hi,” Rosie ignores the feeling, shifts her backpack to her other shoulder, and offers her hand. “I’m Rosie.”

“I hope she’s better than the last guy,” Frank says, surveying Rosie but addressing Joe. Rosie withdraws her hand. “That what’s-his-name. I didn’t like him. Ed.”

“Nate,” Joe corrects. “His name was Nate.”

“I didn’t like the one before him either,” Frank crosses his arms. Besides his wispy mustache, which seems to hover somewhere between growing in and giving up, he reminds Rosie of a vulture.

She reminds herself not to think any negative and, thus, possibly career-threatening thoughts.

“You’ll like this one,” Joe says encouragingly. “Look, she’ll be sitting in the empty cube behind you.”

Frank doesn’t look convinced that he’ll like Rosie, and Rosie doesn’t exactly feel convinced herself. But, unlike Frank, she tries not to show it. “I’m-”

“Oh, hi!” Interrupted, Rosie turns and finds herself face-to-face with a woman who, unlike Frank, is smiling.

“Hi, I’m Rosie,” Rosie tries offering her hand again.

“Yeah, I thought you were coming Friday afternoon.”

Unsure of how to respond, Rosie looks at Joe, simply because she has known him for about five minutes more than she has known either Frank or this woman, who has to be Maggie. Was she supposed to come in on Friday afternoon? Was Joe late this morning because he was actually waiting for her on Friday and he was too polite to say anything to her -

“You know what?” Maggie slides into her cubicle and wakes up her computer. “It doesn’t matter that much. Let me show you - see? I keep getting this loading error. I thought the guy I talked to said a techie would be here by the end of the day. And that was Friday.”

“Oh!” Rosie says, hoping she understands what’s going on so that she gives an appropriate response. “I’m actually the new Account Analyst for Kitchen Appliances. Not IT.”

Sitting, Maggie probably comes up to Rosie’s neck, but Rosie nonetheless feels Maggie is looking down at her. “You’re not a techie?”

As Rosie shakes her head, she sees Maggie’s smile stays on her face while fading out of her eyes. When Maggie does speak again, all she says is, “Oh.”

“Sorry,” Rosie says. Not until her last year of college did she learn to fight her instincts and not apologize unless she truly was at fault. Here, though, an apology is a sacrifice she’s willing to make in exchange for a good first impression: not one where Maggie feels as if Rosie deliberately embarrassed her.

“Guess I’ll call again then,” Maggie mumbles before spinning in her chair so she’s facing Joe more than Rosie. “Hey, isn’t she, like, our third new person in a year?”

“I don’t keep track of them,” Frank says, his eyes running across a column of numbers on one of his monitors. “Ask Joe.”

“I was,” Maggie replies. “Did you hear me say ‘Isn’t she our third new person in a year, Frank?’”

“You looked at me while you were asking.”

“I was looking at Joe ‘cause I was talking to Joe.”

“You should be asking me. I had to cover Accounts after what’s-his-face left.”

“Nate,” Joe supplies, but he is irrelevant to the current conversation.

“We were both covering Accounts.”

“I did a bigger piece than you did, though.”

“I did allocations, which she’ll spend 95% of her time doing,” Maggie gestures to Rosie. “And I did vendor relations too. That’s like, another 2 or 3% so really…”

Rosie didn’t expect everyone at her new job to get along, but it feels like Maggie and Frank actively and noticeably dislike each other. Maybe she’s being oversensitive? She has been a student, not an employee, for most of her life, but she didn’t come across these kinds of interactions in any of her summer internships. She wonders why Joe’s not saying anything to cut down this argument— though maybe Joe’s not saying anything because this argument isn’t really a problem. Joe would know too because he’s been in the professional world longer than she has.

“Look!” When Joe does say something, his voice is slightly too loud as if he wants to direct her attention away from the argument ping-ponging between Maggie and Frank and instead to the cubicle behind the Financial Analyst’s. The desk has only the essentials: an office phone, keyboard, mouse, laptop in a charging station, and two monitors at the desk corner. The only color in the cubicle comes from a line of laminated green paper circles, each carrying a different message, which cascade from left to right across the cubicle’s back wall like bubbles: Values of Carrell. Be respectful. Be diligent. Be honest. Be a team. Remember: Carrell is a family.

The whole cubicle is nondescript, relatively bare, completely impersonal, and she loves it immediately. She has heard of cubicles’ symbolism, of how occupying one cements your status as a drone in the corporate hive, but she’s never had a cubicle to herself before: her summer internships always had her sharing a desk with two or three others. Her new cube even has three half-walls to give the introvert in her a defined space to call her own.

“This cubicle is yours. Anything you want, Carrell will have!” Joe exclaims. “You’ll have to get your own notebook, though. And maybe a pen. And there’s a cafeteria downstairs, but you have to pay for food. You can send up an account, though, to deduct any expenses from your direct deposit automatically.”

“No worries, I have a notebook and pen in my backpack,” Rosie replies. “And I packed lunch today. I wasn’t sure-”

“I can’t talk to you if you’re like this!” Frank throws up his hands in disgust, and Rosie watches her two new CULT members push their chairs away from each other in a huff.

Joe waves his hand, unperturbed. “They’re all good. Just don’t let Nicolette overhear. She hates when anyone’s not aligned, especially with Frank. But I know I won’t have to worry about you. I know you’ll be able to help your CULT.” He says those last few sentences in that loud voice again, and Rosie notices that he glances around to see whether he’s successfully caught anyone’s attention. In their cubicles, Frank and Maggie are both steadfastly ignoring each other – and Joe in the process. As Joe’s smile fades, Rosie suspects his show of confidence wasn’t for her benefit.

“Okay, down to business. First, you’ll need to call the tech team. They’ll make sure you can log in and access the internet, your spreadsheets, and your Chat Box. When I need to tell you something, I may Chat you. Or email you. Or come tell you in person.” His sentences are short and tight, and his tone has shifted from friendly to...annoyed? Has she annoyed him already? Maybe he’s the kind of boss who is usually personable but is no-nonsense when it comes to work? That type of approach wouldn’t bother her – as long as she knew to expect it.

“Internet, spreadsheets, Chat Box,” Rosie repeats.

“You can find the number on the tech team on our website somewhere. When you call them, ask for Carrell’s network info too. You can’t get online without it.”

“Got it. Wait,” she says as she reviews his words: Joe couldn’t have possibly told her that she needs to get onto the Internet to access the information she needs to get onto the Internet? “Did you say-?”

“I have an early lunch today and won’t come back to Headquarters until tomorrow. Make sure you’re ready to hit the ground running then. If you run into any trouble beforehand, ask Frank or Maggie. They might help you.”

And, suddenly, her boss is gone, leaving her with her new teammates. As she glances behind her and sees only sour-looking faces, Rosie decides not to bother them. Somehow, she’ll get through her first day herself.

Carrell Hardware Headquarters

Monday, June 7

Rosie’s Cubicle

5:01pm

Rosie shakes out her hand, cramped from typing, and glances at the clock. It’s 5:01, and the cubicles around her – Frank, Maggie’s, and a few of her neighbors whom she hasn’t officially met yet – are already dark.

Though no one’s around, her sense of victory isn’t at all dampened. She set up her computer, including the Internet, without any help, from Maggie or Frank or Joe, who, true to his word,

didn't appear in the office for the rest of the day. At some point, she'll have to talk to her new team members and get to know them. Maybe she'll invite them out for lunch: then she would know that she would have someone to sit with too. After setting up her workstation independently and successfully, she's feeling confident, even willing to give the benefit of the doubt: maybe Maggie and Frank aren't morning people. Maybe they had to come in earlier than usual today and that change in their schedule threw them off, made them irritable and grumpy. But if she works hard and doesn't cause any trouble, they can't not like her, can they? Maybe they won't like each other, but she has to worry only about her individual relationship with each one.

Feeling optimistic for the first time all day, she powers down her own computer, slings her backpack over her shoulders, and retraces the path she and Joe took this morning: going up the aisle that separates the cubicles, following the hallway past the empty offices and the equally empty conference room to the fork in front of the stairwell door. This morning, she and Joe took the hallway that led right out of the stairwell. She takes a few steps down the left fork, which leads to an area of cubicles and offices that is a mirror image of her own area.

She knows from this morning that the path continuing straight is more of the same, but she turns to it anyway, feeling free to explore a little now that the building is deserted.

At least, she thought it was deserted. It looks like a light is still on in one of the offices directly in front of her: the one at the end of the hall.

She takes two steps towards the light and one step back as she changes her mind. Maybe she shouldn't go down that hallway. Maybe she shouldn't go walking around Headquarters after working hours. Maybe she was supposed to leave at 5:00. Maybe everyone leaves by 5:01 because they know the building gets locked shortly after, and, if she stays too long, she'll get locked inside. Would people notice if she gets trapped in Carrell overnight? Would they notice she'd be wearing the same clothes tomorrow that she was wearing today? She was going to change: most of the people she's seen at Carrell wear jeans, not dresses.

The building couldn't possibly get locked exactly at 5. What if someone had to stay late or is running a few minutes behind schedule? If anything, the building would get locked a few minutes after 5: 5:10, maybe, or 5:15. Either way, it shouldn't take her more than a few seconds to turn off the light someone accidentally left on and to close the office door someone accidentally left open and be on her way.

She glances behind her and only after confirming for the second time that no one else is around, she heads to the back office, trying to keep her footsteps light, as if not to draw the attention of the shadows.

The offices in this corner of the second floor are identical to the ones on the Kitchen Appliance's side. Behind a closed door, each office has a desk equipped with a swivel chair, two-monitored computer, laptop in a charging station, and an office phone with the green VALUES OF CARRELL bubbles between the windows and shelves that share the office's back wall. There are

two non-swivel chairs between the desk and the office door in case of visitors, who would be treated to the sight of a map of the United States on their left and a whiteboard to the right.

When she gets close to the lit office, one of the last in the row, she slows. With measured footsteps, she inches to the door, trying to get close enough to see inside without being seen herself – just in case.

“What’s happenin’?”

It’s no accident the light is on. Someone is still in the office.

What was she thinking? Why would she think a light would accidentally be left on? Why did she think it was her responsibility to turn it off? Why did she think that she was the only one left in the office?

For a second, she considers fleeing back to the stairwell, not letting the office’s inhabitant see her face or hear her name and pretending she wasn’t the one creeping around after hours. But she’s not a coward. Rosie takes a step forward into the threshold and into the blue-grey gaze of the man behind the desk. There is no expression on his face.

“I’m sorry,” she says, realizing as she says it that an apology is the most used phrase of her career at Carrell thus far. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. I didn’t realize someone was here.”

His gaze doesn’t falter, and his expression – or lack thereof – doesn’t change.

“All the other offices are dark, so when I saw the light was on here, I thought it was an accident. I didn’t realize someone was still here. I’m -I’m new.”

“And I’m old,” he says neutrally. Is he serious? He certainly isn’t as many years ahead of her as the other men she’s seen at Carrell. “Other than that, though,” he continues, and she thinks she sees the corner of his mouth turn up slightly, “we might have something in common. Come in. Sit down. Give me a sec.”

His legs were stretched out under the desk with his feet resting on the visitor’s chair on the left, but he pulls them off and motions to the seat of the chair on the right. Although she wants to apologize again, return to the anonymity of the hallway, and hope Carrell’s corporate headquarters is big enough that she never has to see this man and relive this awkwardness again, she has no other choice than to sit. The man’s focus returns to the two screens in front of him, but she already has a hunch that he’s watching her too and will know the moment her gaze turns to him.

She looks around the rest of his office instead. A slim backpack leans against the wall under the whiteboard, straps facing her. All-caps notes, MY/YE PLANS, EVALS, INTERVIEWS-NEXT MONTH? CHNA, are on the whiteboard. The shelves behind his desk hold a printer, an empty aquarium, several stacks of papers including an unopened package of printer paper, a couple binders, and a coffee mug turned in such a way that she can only read “SITY.”

“...the remaining ones.” The sudden sound makes her nearly jump out of her chair. She hopes the man in front of her didn’t see her startle.

He doesn’t react one way or another, though; he merely continues to narrate the words he had previously been typing silently: “‘Please send back to me by tomorrow, end of day.’ That’s not how you spell ‘tomorrow’...” he trails off as he backspaces and rewrites. “‘Thanks,’ and send. Okay,” he minimizes his computer window and turns to Rosie. “So. You said you’re new.”

She nods.

“How new?”

“I started today.”

“Right out of college?”

She nods again.

“You have that look about you.”

“Thanks.” Rosie tries to make her reply sound assured, like she’s not trying to figure out whether she’s been complimented, insulted, or some combination of the two.

“From the State?”

“No, I’m not from here.”

The man crosses his legs, left foot resting on right knee, and leans back in his chair. “Duly noted. If you were, you would’ve known I meant the State University, not the actual state.”

Rosie looks down at the desk between the two of them.

“Or-” he hypothesizes. “You could be incredibly literal. Is that the case? Has anyone told you that before?”

He can’t be serious this time. She takes her gaze from his desk to his face, looking at him square on for the first time, although she has a feeling that his face won’t betray anything. What she notices instead is that his eyes are two different colors: one is blue, the other grey.

When he raises his eyebrows as if not only waiting for a response but also expecting one worth his time, the response comes to her immediately and she says it without thinking: “If I said you were the first, would that be answering your question too literally?”

Why did she say that? She doesn't know this man, certainly not enough to be – teasing him? Is that what she's doing? It didn't feel like he was teasing her as much as testing her, trying to see whether he could get a rise out of her.

“That would seem to be the case,” he doesn't smile but slight grooves appear at the edges of his eyes as if to show a smile can be earned – and soon. Maybe it was some sort of test...and maybe she passed? Either way, she's going to remain polite and professional and neutral for the rest of this conversation. She doesn't want to try her luck again. “How'd Day 1 treat you?”

“There are a lot of empty offices,” Rosie replies seriously. “I didn't expect that.”

“The CEO had to step down recently. No one expected that.” Is he making fun of her?

“They didn't?”

“He had cancer.”

“Oh my God. I didn't know that!” Was that something she was supposed to know? She probably was. Did she say anything to anyone today that revealed her complete and utter ignorance about the leader of her new company? The only person she talked to was Joe this morning and she's positive that the company's CEO wasn't a topic of conversation. Almost positive, that is. Was it? Did she miss it? “Is he okay? Do you know?”

“I do. He went through chemo and is currently in remission-”

“Oh good! That's really good.”

“-but he's also no longer CEO: a point that leads back to your observation about the offices. Once a new CEO is hired, there'll be a whole new rotation in leadership. Those empty offices? They'll be filled soon,” he pauses. “Or later. One of the two.” He picks up a pen lying by his mousepad and clicks it, utterly unconcerned.

“Is filling them a priority for the company?” Maybe she should be asking Joe these questions because he's her manager and this man is...she doesn't know actually. He hasn't even introduced himself yet. But he is answering her questions in a way while Joe might or might not; it's hard for her to tell given she hasn't seen or heard from her new boss since about 9:30 this morning. Joe seems nice, though. She can't believe that, this very morning, she considered the possibility he might have died.

The stranger behind the desk shrugs. “It's been talked about. But you can't believe the rumors.”

“What about you?”

“Well, I'm no rumor,” he answers without hesitation. “But that doesn't necessarily mean you should believe me.”

From this composure and confidence, she suspects he is well-aware of his own quick wit, and any admiration or acknowledgement of it on her part would be redundant. She chooses a different approach. “Why are you all the way back here then? There are a lot of open offices,” she adds hastily. “You could probably take your pick. At least temporarily.”

“I probably could,” he agrees. “But this one was my choice.”

She was planning only on turning off the light and leaving Headquarters. She didn’t plan to be, nor does she want to be sitting in the office of some smug, smart-mouthed stranger who is giving her these ambiguous answers without any expression in his face or in his voice to give her any hints into what he’s really thinking. Why did she tell him she was new and today was her first day? Maybe he invited her to sit down only because he was looking for a fresh victim. Maybe he’s some sort of conversational sadist and her confusion is his amusement.

She won’t give him that satisfaction. She’ll follow his lead: as long as he won’t show her what he’s thinking, she won’t give away anything going on in her head. “Really?” she asks neutrally.

“Potentially,” he counters. “Being back here, surrounded by empty offices, may help me get work done. It also may have been suggested that I’m better off here: operating in the background so to speak.”

“You can’t believe the rumors,” she replies immediately. The words – the complete opposite of the professional tone she wanted to have – come out before she can stop them, censor them. Before she can take them back, though, and apologize for saying them and for being in his office and for trespassing in his space and for anything else she can think of which might merit remorse, he grins for the first time.

That smile completely changes his face too, opening it, brightening it, deepening the lines below his eyes. He no longer looks like a formidable impassive yet brash stranger; he looks like a young man who really isn’t that much older than she is. Rosie, once wary, relaxes and smiles too. She still has no idea who this man is or what he does at Carrell or why he’s here when the rest of the office has cleared out for the night or when the office gets locked for the night or if it even gets locked for the night, but, for the first time since she’s started at Carrell, she knows she has said exactly the right thing. The feeling of confidence she had at her own desk, just a few minutes ago, has returned.

“I’m Trinity,” he introduces himself.

“Rosie,” she says automatically. She hasn’t met anyone named Trinity before. She hasn’t met most people in this office actually, though she could’ve sworn that, from her desk, she heard two different people be addressed as Chris.

“Where’d you come from then, Rosie?” the man named Trinity asks, twirling the pen between his fingers. “Since we’ve established you’re from neither state nor State.”

“I just graduated from Yale.”

“All the way from the East Coast? What brought you here?”

“Carrell’s six-month post-grad training program. Someone I knew told me about it: how it’s meant for new grads and how, if you catch on and do well and prove yourself, the company’ll give you a full-time role after the six months. I liked the idea of a merit-based program and decided to apply.”

“Who was it?” he asks. “The person who told you about the program.”

“She’s not here anymore. Her last day was about three weeks ago.”

“She bring you in to be her replacement?”

Rosie lifts her gaze, bringing herself eye-to-eye with him once more. “Maybe she brought me in to be yours.”

He grins again. It seems like he’s enjoying her company. Come to think of it, she could say the same thing about his. Maybe. “Keep at it, you might get there someday. And I could use an early retirement. Until then, though, I’ll be right here in this office. Let me know how things go, Rosie. My door’s always open,” he hesitates for a beat. “Except when it’s closed.”

He is definitely aware of his own wit.

“Are you always behind your door when it’s open, though? That’s the important part.”

Trinity winds his pen through his fingers to make its tip point at her instead of at the desk between them. “See? Too literal.”

Rosie raises her eyebrows slightly, not enough to be outright defiant but enough to let him know she’s no pushover. In the process, she reminds herself of the same: she’s well-educated and hardworking, and, while she might be new to Carrell and junior to people like Frank and Maggie and Joe, she does know how to stand up for herself.

He rewinds the pen so the tip faces the desk once more and clicks it. The tip disappears. “But, to answer your question: if you need me, I’ll be here,” he tucks the pen behind his ear and swivels his chair away from her and towards his monitors. The movement is slight but is nonetheless indicative that the conversation is over and his attention is elsewhere.

Silently, she stands and pull her backpack over her shoulders. She’s almost on the other side of the door threshold when she hears him again.

“That’s a serious backpack.”

Her first impulse is to disagree. When she graduated, she retired her beloved but bulky school backpack for one that has a young professional, not student, look. Maybe he’s saying something because all the other women she’s seen have had purses instead of backpacks?

She wants to say something to defend her choice, to explain she hates the feeling of a purse constantly slipping off her shoulder, but she remembers that confident feeling of setting up her computer on her own, facing down this strange man, and standing up for herself.

She turns back to him, hoping her expression is as unreadable as his first was. “I was a serious student.”

Trinity deliberately studies his own backpack, which is definitely smaller than Rosie’s, and lifts his blue-grey eyes to her once more. “I was more of a pass/fail kind of guy,” he remarks dryly. He gives her a wink to let her in on the joke before returning to his computer screens, saying no more.

Back in the hallway, Rosie smiles to herself. Maybe she is in the right place after all.

Carrell Hardware Headquarters
Tuesday, June 8
Hallways
7:48am

She was planning on getting to Headquarters almost exactly at 8:00. But there weren’t any delays on the rail, and she didn’t want to sit in front of Headquarters without anything to do for 12 minutes so she finds herself in a dark and empty building, her footsteps echoing across the lobby, on the stairs, in the hallway. Before she turns to the Kitchens section of the second floor, she looks down the hall in front of her. The office that belongs to the man named Trinity already has its light on.