

## The New Order

Jennifer clenched her fist, paper crackling and crunching in her grip. She glared – though not at anything in particular. Body shaking, jaw clenched, fists trembling.

“Fuckers,” she growled. “Assholes!”

She caught herself. Stopped herself.

Anger – while justified – wouldn't do anything to help her right now. She had to be calm, calculated. She had to be rational.

Even if the rest of the world had lost its fucking mind.

Her muscles relaxed, and the grip she had on the crumpled letter softened. She moved her hand, dropped the paper onto the desk in front of her, right next to the envelope it'd come in.

She could only bare to stare at it for a few moments before looking away in disgust.

Around her, framed newspaper pages and magazine entries lined the walls. Diplomas and qualifications in journalism and women's studies and sociology and more. Her very first article – written as a teenager for her middle-school's newsletter – was front and centre, right next to her first article in a major, world-famous publication.

She liked to do that; surround herself in her accomplishments, great and small. An ever-present reminder that she could do whatever she dreamed of. That she wouldn't bow to the world, it would bow to her.

Here, at home, in her office, she was in charge.

And today's letter would *not* be going on the wall.

Rejection. Yet another rejection letter.

Most of the others had been courteous enough. Some a little colder than others. But none of them had been *this* bad.

“Mental illness?” Jennifer muttered. “Seek professional help? Since when did supporting women's right become a mental illness? A year ago, they'd have *begged* me to come work for them...”

She shook her head.

So much had changed in so little time. It was like someone had hit 'rewind' on a video tape. All the progress she and others had made, all those years of sacrifice and endurance, was being undone piece by piece.

All in the name of 'traditional values'.

It made her want to vomit.

But what could she do? How could she be a voice of reason when no-one was allowing her to speak?

Journalism, thanks to recent laws, was restricted solely to people who worked at government recognised institutions. Big news organisations and smaller news networks that all towed the government line. Independent journalism of any kind was stomped out in the name of 'ending fake news', to the point that even setting up a *blog* to talk about the problems in society would have her labelled as an extremist or agitator.

Every organisation Jennifer applied to had rejected her.

Women, they all claimed, did not belong in the workplace. Especially not women like Jennifer, who'd been a powerful voice against the patriarchy before the world had lost its mind.

It was to fucking *backwards*.

And there was nothing Jennifer could do about it.

“I need a job,” she sighed. “Soon.”

Rent was due and her savings were all used up. No job meant no income, and no income meant she was about to lose everything.

“But women aren't *allowed* to have jobs,” she muttered to herself. “It's fucking ridiculous.”

She shook her head.

"Calm," she reminded herself. "Gotta stay calm."

Looking for a job was supposed to be easy. She was a highly qualified woman, dedicated and bright. Businesses should've been lining up to hire her. And yet, no matter how hard she tried – no matter where she applied – not a single one was willing to give her a chance.

In the end, it all came down to one thing. The vagina between her legs. The mounds on her chest. Her gender.

If she'd had a dick, finding a job would've been a breeze.

Even before the world had gone insane, finding a job as a man had been easier. Now, it was straight impossible for her to get one.

That was, until she saw it – the government announcement.

A new plan to give working women employment. Something about a work visa for females. There was a requirement – some training course or another – but, if all went well, Jennifer would be given the opportunity for 'full-time employment' and a 'long-term guarantee of work'.

Many of the details were vague. But what choice did she have?

It was either do the training and accept the government-issued job, or homelessness and squalor.

Head held high, she logged into the site and applied.

The very next day, she had her reply.

An acceptance letter.

She skimmed it, looked for a time and date and location. And, sure enough, she found all three. A government building in the morning, a few days away.

And those days? They passed by *slow*.

Lots of worrying, lots of stress. All building in anticipation of whatever 'training' she was to be given. Probably, knowing the laws her government had passed lately, it'd be some 're-education' scheme to teach women 'their proper place'.

She'd play along, pretend to accept it all. Do whatever it took for her to get that job and income.

"Welcome," an older woman smiled, looking over the class.

The room was filled with women like Jennifer. Professional women who'd been screwed over by sexist, moronic laws. All of them forced to come here in the hopes of gaining a job and income.

"I'm sure you're all wondering what it is exactly you'll be learning here," the woman said, beaming brightly. "Some of you will have guessed, others will have suspicions. But you'd all be wrong."

Jennifer glanced around, looking at these other professional women as her allies. Her equals.

"You are here," the woman said, "to find happiness."

Jennifer's eyes turned back to the older woman, narrowed at that too-big smile. A woman in a floral dress, smiling happily as if she wasn't living in some sexist dystopia.

"You are," the woman continued, "the *educated* ones. The girls who went to school and university, who sought to change the world and make it fit your views and beliefs. You are the *ambitious* ones. The go-getters. The busy bodies."

Jennifer rolled her eyes, fought down the urge to groan.

"Over the next few weeks," the older woman said, "you will be shown the error of your ways. This program – the 'Start A New Job, Start A New Life' initiative – will help you unlock your *true* potential. It will help you discover your one true calling in life."

Twenty three years old, and back in the classroom.

Worse still, a class that went against *everything* Jennifer believed in.

Everything she was being taught here – it was an insult to who she was. A pure mockery of female empowerment. Sure, they masked their sexism through colourful language – she was supposed to be the 'heart of the household', the 'glue that held families together' – but, when all that colour was stripped away, it was obvious what their instructors wanted them to become.

Housewives. Mothers. Women with no freedom at all.

From lectures to proper feminine attire – dresses and skirts were 'ideal', while pants and trousers were 'inappropriate' – to full-on courses about cleaning products and how best to use them.

And Jennifer had no choice. She *had* to play along. *Had* to study all the bullshit they were teaching.

Every week, there was an exam on topics discussed during that week. Fail the test, and she'd lose her place on the program – and everything else along with it. But, if she succeeded, if she got to the end and got her 'female worker's permit', she'd be free.

So she did what she had to. She studied it all.

When her 'instructors' wanted essays on the biological superiority of men, she wrote them – even if the words made her want to vomit. When they wanted her to write about the importance of stay-at-home parenting, she did so without complain. Hating every second, but continuing all the same.

And, when they started handing out vitamin supplements – supposedly to help their 'inferior female brains' absorb the lessons being taught – she swallowed them without question.

Whatever it took to get her old life back.

She stood in a line with the other girls, back to a cold wall and eyes forward. Wearing a polka-dot dress and well-applied make-up, heeled shoes and styled hair.

The room she was in was new to her. In all the time she'd been studying at this government building, she'd never been brought here before. A cold, concrete room with no decoration and no furniture. Plan tile floor, and a dull ceiling with a bright florescent light.

Jennifer didn't move. Not an inch.

Her teachers had told her not to, and so she wouldn't. She was obedient. A good woman. She'd do *exactly* what she was told. No matter what.

Time ticked by. Minutes and minutes passing slowly.

Then, just as Jennifer was beginning to wonder if she'd done something wrong and was being punished for it, the room's door opened and a group of men walked in.

They were an interesting group. All different shapes and sizes, all wearing different clothes with different haircuts. Some clean, others dirty. Some handsome, others not. A group of about twenty men, led by one of Jennifer's instructors.

Jennifer saw one business man among the bunch. A tall man in a sharp suit, a strong jawline and a charming smirk. Next to him, a man in casual clothes – t-shirt and jeans. And, next to him, a man in a long, white coat – the kind doctors wore.

"Mr Holbrook," the instructor said, "you're up first."

One of the men – a short, sturdy man in denim overalls and a worn-out shirt – stepped forward. He was grizzled, dirty. Not handsome by any stretch of the imagination. He looked like he'd spent his life on a farm; uneducated and simple.

Mr Holbrook stepped over to Jennifer, eyed her up and down like an animal at auction. He nodded his head.

"This one," the weathered man grunted. "I want her."

"Ah, yes!" The instructor walked over, a wide smile on her face. "Jennifer. Very intelligent and eager, she's fully educated and open to learning-"

“She has a pretty face,” Mr Holbrook grunted. “And nice tits. I’ll take her.”

Mrs Holbrook. It had a certain ring to it. Maybe that was why no-one had called in Jennifer in almost six years – ever since she married her soulmate and moved to the countryside to live with him. Or perhaps it was the new name they’d given her.

She wasn’t Jennifer any more. Hadn’t been in a long time.

No, she was Mary Holbrook. Wife to Mr Holbrook. Mother of his children and keeper of his home.

She looked out over the farm, hand resting on her round belly.

Her fourth child on the way.

Vaguely, Mrs Holbrook remembered a time when she didn’t like children. Thought they were noisy, smelly complications. Not worth having. The person she’d once been would’ve seen four kids as an unimaginable burden. And, in some ways, they were.

But they were happiness too. They were her joy.

While Mr Holbrook was out there tending the farm, she was here. Tending to her own duties.

If she was honest with herself, Mary didn’t really remember much about the time before becoming Mrs Holbrook. It was an inconsistent blur. She’d been unhappy – she knew that. But beyond that one fact, a lot was left hazy.

Not that it mattered. That past was gone.

All that mattered now was the future. Her future, her husband’s future, and the future of their children.

Mrs Holbrook would have to teach them well. Make sure the boys grew up to be strong men, and the girls grew up to be dutiful women. It was her place, her duty.

She looked out at the horizon, eyes on the setting sun.

And she smiled.

This was it. Her home. Where she belonged.

This was her *purpose*.