



The Wife

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THE WIFE

I AM THE SECOND MRS. ROBERTS. THE FIRST ONE WAS RETURNED. I'M NOT SURE IF I HAVE BIG SHOES TO FILL, OR IF SHE FAILED SO CATASTROPHICALLY THAT MY JOB WILL BE EASY.

My Training involved how to support a man so their work productivity stays high. Us Wives are extremely important to keeping society and commerce going. They told us it had been tried — women working — and society had nearly collapsed. I can't imagine wanting to spend every day away from home like that.

Mr. Roberts has been kind to me, so far. I watch as he completes his morning routine before leaving for work. He wears a brown suit, typical of a working-class man. He sets his brown leather briefcase by the coat stand. Adjusts his tie in the mirror — today it is dark brown, matching his shoes, which he puts on with a long shoe horn so he doesn't wrinkle his suit. Brown overcoat on top, though the spring weather is warming. Finally, his hat, a beautiful wool fedora with a cream feather stuck in the ribbon, matched to his shirt. He picks up his briefcase, turns to me and tips his hat, then walks out the door.

I sit on the arm of the living room couch until his sedan pulls out of the driveway and rolls away. It has been a week of living with Mr. Roberts. A week of performing Wifely duties and patiently supporting a man I know only in theory, based on my preparatory lessons. They gave us each a packet at the Training Center describing our Assignments. Mr. Roberts plays tennis on the weekends with the neighboring men. Mr. Roberts prefers steak over meatloaf (which was just as well — I hate cooking meatloaf). Mr. Roberts works at a very important manufacturing firm which is a thirty-five-minute commute from home.

Mr. Roberts had reported being worn down each day when he comes home from work. The former Mrs. Roberts should have been able to support him enough that he would have all the energy he needed for work. I can infer that, at least, as part of her failing.

I rise from the couch, brush off my full skirt, and go to the laundry room to retrieve my dusting supplies. It is Tuesday; that means dusting, cleaning the bathroom, and rump roast for dinner. I pull out the blue bucket with cleaning supplies inside. Spray bottles and rags protrude from its top. I carry it back into the living room and pull out the yellow gloves that will protect my nails from the chemical cleaners. Rag and spray bottle in hand, I begin to wipe the coffee table, end tables, mantle, and photos.

There are several photos of Mr. Roberts on the mantle. Mr. Roberts with his brother. Mr. Roberts playing tennis. Mr. Roberts receiving his promotion. The last frame on the mantle is empty, its cardboard backing a framed match to the suits my new husband wears. It is waiting for me to add the photo of our Uniting which arrived yesterday from the photo studio. Mr. Roberts flashed the blue and white envelope at me when sorting the mail and smiled. "It has arrived, my dear." His words sent butterflies into the depths of my belly. "Will you place it in the empty frame tomorrow?" He left the envelope on the mantle.

I carry the envelope and empty frame to the couch and sit. I remove my gloves, leaning forward to lay them on the coffee table with the frame, and open the envelope. I gently remove the photo, avoiding touching the gloss with my fingertips, and hold it out to admire. I wore a cream dress, fascinator, and red lip. Mr. Roberts wore his brown suit, standing behind me with his arm around my waist. It was a pleasing photo. I was proud of finally receiving an Assignment. And Mr. Roberts was handsome, or handsome enough to have garnered a few nudges from the girls at the Training Center. I make a mental note to schedule a celebratory photo shoot for our six-month anniversary. That will be a nice addition to the mantle.

I pick up the frame and turn it over and back again. Ordinary. A tasteful silver frame with a black felt back and stand. It is clean, but not new. Had it held the former Mrs. Roberts before she was Returned?

I gingerly work my thumbnail under the little tabs of black painted metal holding the felt backing to the frame. A little wiggle and the felt releases from the frame. I set the backing on the table next to my gloves, then work my fingernail under the cardboard while pressing the glass from behind to give it rise.

Why, there are two cardboard backings! A wisp of paper is revealed pressed between the two cardboard panels. An additional spacer, perhaps?

I peel it away to find a brief inscription on its front.

"Underside of your nightstand drawer. Burn this."

I stare at the paper. It is barely the length of my finger, yet delivers such a shock that I

am hardly breathing. I should tell Mr. Roberts. He will know what to do. It isn't my place to be snooping around, especially based on cryptic messages. I know my training backward and forward. I believe in our motto, "Honor. Love. Service." I even aced my exams. Being a Replacement was a challenge, and they'd chosen me because I was up for the task. I am not going to fail my Trainers after only a week. My place is to support my husband, and that is what I am going to do.

I place the paper on the table, frame our photo, and continue my chores.

Mr. Roberts arrives home just after 5:30 pm. We were taught that not all husbands come home directly from work, but to be ready regardless, and never complain if they were late. So far, Mr. Roberts has been prompt. I admire that about him.

"Good evening, my dear," he calls from the entry. I emerge from the kitchen, hands wrapped in my apron, as he hangs his hat on the coat tree.

"Good evening, Mr. Roberts," I smile with a peck on his cheek. I watch for any signs of stress on his face, hoping he had a good day at work and will take the mysterious note in stride. "How soon would you like to eat?"

"Now would suffice," he sighs as he pops his shoes off his feet, cream stockings disheveled from a day of office work. I nod and swish to the kitchen to set the table.

"How was your day?" I ask as he enters the room. I again watch his face, his shoulders, for any sign of tension. We have been Trained to notice even the slightest detail, taught that men will often hide a hard day out of propriety.

"Just fine," he replies. His tone is even. His shoulders relaxed. I believe him. "We pushed through a major proposal," he continues. "Could be a big deal, if we're lucky. Will you be my good luck charm?" He smiles at me.

How sweet, I think. I nod, placing the plate, napkin, and silverware in front of him as he sits down at the table. "Yes, of course. Best of luck. I'll keep it in my thoughts."

He catches my wrist before I can move to the other place setting. My breath stops in my throat and I look into his hazel eyes. "Thank you," he says. We hold each other's stare for a beat, then he releases me. I take a deep breath, smile, and complete the table setting. I glance at him as I bring out the steaming roast.

"Looks delicious."

"Why thank you," I reply.

"Do you..." he trails. "Where did you get the recipe?"

"From the Center," I reply. He offers a curt nod. Was he looking for something more

interesting?

I serve us, remove my apron, then sit across from him at our little dining room table. I watch as he arranges a cutlet of meat on his fork and takes a bite.

“It’s good,” he says, noticing my eyes on him. I smile at him, though I wasn’t waiting for a compliment. I was waiting for the right time to show him the note. Perhaps once he has a full stomach.

I watch him clear his plate, using the last piece of meat to soak up the juices. *Might as well go for it before he gets too settled in his evening routine.* I take a deep breath to gather my nerves. “I found something peculiar, today,” I broach.

He looks up at me. “Oh?” He wipes his mouth with his napkin.

“Yes,” I say, fiddling with my silverware. Best to not avoid his gaze. I don’t want to implicate myself in any wrongdoing. It wasn’t my fault. I look into his eyes. “While I placed our Uniting photo. There was a note in the frame.”

He is very still. I think my heart might fall out of my chest while I wait for him to reply. “A note?” he says, finally.

“Uhm, yes. Or so it seems. Shall I get it?”

“Yes, please, Mrs. Roberts,” he says. He folds his napkin and pushes away his plate, clearing a place in front of him. I go to the living room and retrieve the note from the coffee table, placing it in front of him before sitting back down. He fingers its edges, taking it in. He sighs, deeply. “I’m sorry, my dear,” he says, looking up. My chest tightens. Is he going to reject me? I’ve done nothing wrong. “You’ve stumbled upon a bit of my baggage, I suppose. I’m sorry you had to see this. Would you mind waiting here while I see what is beneath your nightstand drawer?”

“N-no, that would be fine,” I gasp. Okay, I’m not in trouble. Or, not yet. So far, Mr. Roberts is proving honorable. Aligned with my vows at the Training Center. If I serve well, he will care for me in return.

I hear his footfalls upstairs, the floorboards creaking while he investigates my nightstand. Will he find it? Is it all a hoax? He is gone for what seems an eternity, finally returning to the kitchen with a folded letter in his hand.

“So, it seems there was a leavebehind from your predecessor. Again, I am sorry. I want you to feel you are my first priority, my focus, not a simple replacement.” I had hoped he would show me, allow me to see what he had found, but he walks to the stove and lights the gas burner, incinerating the letter and the scrap of paper from the photo frame. The acrid smell of singed ink and pulp fills the kitchen. He drops the remnants in the sink to flame out without burning his

fingers. “There,” he says. “It’s like it never happened.” He turns to me, cradles my chin in his hand, and leans down to kiss my forehead. “Thank you for telling me. You did the right thing.” He looks me in the eye, a serious look on his face. Then, like the flip of a switch, he smiles, and lets go of my chin. “Time for the game shows, eh dear? I’ll see you in the living room?” He walks away without waiting for my reply.

I stare after him, processing the rapid sequence of events, then gather my wits. “Yes, of course!” I call, hoping my delay wasn’t obvious.

I get up, tie my apron around my waist, and gather the dishes. I place them on the counter while I put on my gloves to begin the washing up, and look in the sink. There is a corner of the letter resting in the basin. I can see a small amount of script unharmed by the browning of the fire. *It’s forbidden*, I tell myself. Yet, I stow the charred scrap in my apron pocket.

Midnight. I can hear Mr. Roberts snoring in the twin bed next to mine, our nightstands between the beds delineating our individual space. I ease myself up and wrap myself in my silken robe. His bed is closest to the door, and I have to cross by its foot to leave. I could say I was going to the bathroom if he woke. That is normal behavior. Still, I tiptoe.

I pull the door partway closed behind me, obscuring the stairs. Down I go, keeping close to the wall where the steps will creak the least, the carpet padding each footfall. Into the kitchen, gently opening the cabinet where my apron hangs. I sink my hand into the pocket and feel for the scrap of paper. I pull it out, careful not to brush the edges of the delicate and damaged page against the fabric, and then steal away into the laundry room. I close the door and turn on the small light above the sink.

The survivor is the size of my palm, two edges pristine, one long side browned, an injured triangle. The same beautiful script in black ink adorns the page. What could I gain from this? I am breaking my vow of honor, aren’t I?

I read.

“...n despair.

...ope you make it out.”

The next several weeks are espionage. I tidy, clean, and cook with the scrap of letter hiding beneath the insole of my house shoe. When I am on my hands and knees scrubbing the bathtub, the scrap is with me. When I make the beds, tucking the sheet corners as I was shown by our Trainer, the scrap is with me. It burns at my foot and pushes at my mind. It is mine. Something of my

own that no one else knows about, not like the dresses meant for Mr. Roberts' eye or the apron meant to keep me clean and presentable. I have a secret, and it is *mine*.

All the while, Mr. Roberts is kind to me. Not once does he mention the letter, though it seems the incident has assured him of my loyalty. He starts bringing home flowers when he arrives from work, is more amorous in the evenings before bed. He compliments the tidiness of the house and meals he has tasted many times before.

"This rib-eye is delicious, Mrs. Roberts," he says as he dabs the corner of his mouth with his napkin. It is a Monday, and while he has tasted my rib-eye each Monday previous, I always try to add some kind of unique flavor or presentation so he won't tire of the recipes we were taught.

"Thank you, Mr. Roberts," I reply, smiling to myself.

He sets down his silverware. "I must speak to you about something," he says. His plate is still half full. My spine immediately goes stiff and I grip the silverware in my hands. I have been so careful. I am always wearing the house shoes when he is home, or they are by my bedside table as we sleep. Could he know? He holds my gaze as I force a smile, his eyes not settling on one single feature on my face. Is he searching for a clue? "I realize we haven't been together for very long, but it seems that we get on quite well. Don't you agree?"

"Yes," I reply, imitating my normal tone of voice. "Very well. It has been a joy."

"Good. Good, because there is a work function this Friday. The board and upper management will be there. I realize it is rather soon, for us, but things seem to be going so well, I thought you might be ready to accompany me."

My face flushes. "Why, that would be lovely, Mr. Roberts. I would be delighted."

"You do have a cocktail dress?"

"Yes, they gave me one."

"Then it's settled. Tell me the color and I'll match my tie. The event begins at six-thirty and includes cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, so you won't be on the hook for dinner. I'll come home first to escort you." He returns to eating with a smile.

"Lovely," I say, my heart thudding in my chest.

On Friday morning, I bustle about the house to complete my chores early and have plenty of time to prepare for the event. As I work, hair bundled in curlers atop my head, I mentally go over the Training I received for corporate events. How to delight colleagues, ingratiate a boss, and even influence a deal in favor of my husband.

I enter our closet and pull out the beautiful blue cocktail dress, its satin reflecting the

light in waves around its skirts. It is a flattering piece, giving my body the illusion of an exaggerated hourglass shape. It hasn't been out of its protective sleeve since I received it, and it will need a bit of care before it will be worthy of Mr. Roberts. I hang it in the bathroom for steaming. I pull out the steamer case from the linen closet and unzip it, laying its contents on the counter: steamer, attachments, and a tattered manual. As I open it, the pages fall to the floor. I sigh, pick them up, and open them to determine which page numbers had fallen so I can replace them in order.

But where there should be the tidy print of typed instructions I find feminine script. Before I can pull myself away, I am reading.

If you already read my letter from the bedside table, do ignore this one. I simply made a copy, just in case you felt compelled to show Mr. Roberts and it was destroyed. I felt that way, once. I felt so proud of being a Wife.

Supporting Mr. Roberts seemed like a dream come true. I had anticipated the day of my Assignment and Uniting since I was a little girl. It's what we dream of, isn't it?

I'm so sorry to shatter the illusion, my dear, but it is just that. An illusion. The truth is, we are indentured servants, kept for the sole benefit of another. What about your benefit? What about your potential in this life?

They told us women working was a disaster. That it broke society. But we are working! Here, in this house, you slave away every day, cooking, cleaning, primping for him, keeping him happy, all unpaid. We are forever dependent on our husbands.

'For the higher good,' they say. But is it good that we have no choice? That our minds should be so wasted? Minds so clever we can discern our husband's mood from the other side of a room or help close a business deal without appearing to be any influence at all?

There is a society, called The Underground, of women enriching their minds. It has been more than eye-opening. They meet at the grocery store on Wednesdays. I'm sure you're used to having the groceries delivered. They encourage it. If you went out and mingled, you might be exposed to other ideas, and so they teach us to stay put and use the Services. You benefit from another's service so that you may serve your man. It's a thinly veiled trick, yet we fall for it. But I'm sure you can find a way to attend.

I think Mr. Roberts suspects me. I can't suppress the ideas we've been sharing in The Underground meetings. I try to be as demure and subservient as I always was. For

three years I've served so well. If you find this letter, my dear, it's because I was Returned — and someone like me won't be Recycled. I hope to goodness The Underground can find me and rescue me before they terminate my service...

You deserve more. Find them. Learn from them. Let them help you escape. There is more out there. The whole world is vastly different than what we've been taught. More than the despair of giving your life away in the shadow of a man. I hope you go get it and achieve the freedom that may no longer be in reach for me. I hope you get out.

Yours,

Mrs. Roberts

Her signature ends in a beautiful flourish. The final lines match those I stand on inside my house shoe. I'm not sure I am breathing. I stand in shock, staring at the scripted handwriting, reading and re-reading as if compelled by a spell on the page. It is a window into a world I didn't know existed.

A car door slams shut, breaking the trance. *He's home!* I scramble, shoving the letter between the pages of the steamer manual, and pressing the manual back into the bottom of the steamer case. I am nowhere near ready to greet him. The dress needs steaming. My makeup is only half done. My hair is still in curlers. *Oh, what a mess.*

"Darling!" he calls when I don't greet him at the door.

"Upstairs, dear!" I reply over the banister. I can see half his body beyond the stairway wall. "I'm so sorry — I am running behind. This event is so important to you, and I admit I lost track of time as I got ready."

He chuckles, leaning against the first step to get a better view of me. "I'm sure it will be swell," he says. "I'm going to grab a small bite, then come up to change."

"There are cold cuts in the fridge," I instruct, and he disappears from the stairway.

I duck back into the bathroom and turn on the steamer. While it heats, I finish my makeup, including that same red lip from our Uniting. I whirl to face the dress, pick up the steamer, and soothe away its wrinkles.

I hear Mr. Roberts coming up the stairs. *Good enough*, I think. I remove my robe and throw the dress over my slip, fumbling to fasten the back.

A tap comes at the bathroom door. "What color is your dress?"

"Blue," I say as cheerily as possible.

"Like your eyes," he replies. I listen as his socks pad away on the carpet and resume

orienting myself in the dress. The curlers come down. I plump my hair, pin it, spray it, then take a moment to look myself over in the mirror. The look needs jewelry. I turn to leave the bathroom and knock the steamer over. Water spills out.

The letter! I leap to rescue the steamer case, then throw towels down over the mess. The case drips in my hand, but no water has gotten inside. I feel a drip on my foot and look down in despair. Water had splashed on my dress.

I set the steamer case in the bathtub, wipe up the steamer and its parts, and place them beside their case in the tub. I then pull out the hair dryer.

“Nearly ready?” comes Mr. Roberts’ voice from the other side of the door.

“Oh, yes! Just a final touch.” I turn on the hair dryer and do my best to remove the damp blotches on the skirts of my fine dress while brushing with a dry wash cloth and fluffing to get some air beneath the fabric. I sigh a breath of relief as the wet marks disappear.

I emerge from the bathroom and bustle into the bedroom. My dress shoes are still in the closet. I slip off my house shoes and step into the smart blue heels, then move quickly to the jewelry case on the dresser, my skirts bustling around me. I pull out a match set of silver jewelry set with sapphires. I’m able to clasp the necklace and earrings, but the bracelet defeats me. I look at myself in the mirror. My reflection is just like the examples in the Training Book. I take a deep breath, then take the steps down into the foyer, where Mr. Roberts waits.

His face shows no small amount of pleasure. “You look perfect,” he says, taking my free hand.

“Almost,” I reply using the sweet tone of voice we were taught. I hold up the bracelet.

“Oh,” he grins. He takes the sparkling thing and clasps it to my wrist. He places his hand over it, holding my hand in his, and looks into my eyes. “Now you’re perfect.”

I break his gaze, looking down and away, as if bashful, as if his praise is what I live for.

“I can’t believe they hired a string quartet,” I whisper to Mr. Roberts as we are served champagne at the bar. We are on the thirtieth floor of his office building, surrounded by windows overlooking the city.

“Yes, they do tend to throw lovely parties,” he replies. His hand is around my waist. “Now, don’t be shy. They know you’re new, but they’ve heard good things from me.” He pecks my forehead, then turns us to join the crowd of his colleagues.

“Roberts!” cries a plump red-faced man who slaps the back of Mr. Roberts. He glistens and he huffs as if he had just run up a flight of stairs.

“Mr. Carrigan,” my husband smiles. “May I introduce Mrs. Roberts?”

“My, my, welcome young lady. Welcome. You seem to be settling in quite nicely, from what I hear. Roberts here has had his best quarter, yet! I credit you in part.” Mr. Carrigan sweeps his arm across the room. “Enjoy yourself dear! Don’t need him holding you all night. Go, eat. For once, you didn’t have to prepare it!” He guffaws as he clinks his glass against mine. I look at Mr. Roberts, who is smiling, though his face is slightly pink. “Shoo!” Mr. Carrigan flicks his wrist at me.

“Oh, well, thank you, Mr. Carrigan,” I say. I peck Mr. Roberts on the cheek, then make my way to the buffet that lines the windows. Through them I can see the city lights twinkling on, the sunset beyond a beautiful pink and orange, made more intense by the tinted glass. I gather myself a plate, then look about the room.

To the side are tables where the other Wives sit. They lean toward one another, laughing in between bites of their food. A woman in red waves me over.

“Well, well. If it isn’t the new Mrs. Roberts,” she says, a blonde curl dropping into her eye.

“Hello. Yes, that’s right,” I sit, arranging my skirts on the chair.

“Don’t bother, dear,” says the woman in green sitting next to me. “It’s not that kind of party.” I look at her, confused.

“What she means,” says the woman in red, “is that those gentlemen over there are going to eat and drink and talk shop all night. We’re here because we’re supposed to be, but you won’t have the chance to talk, again.”

“Oh,” I say, and begin picking at my food.

“Relax! It’s more fun that way. I’m Mrs. Schulz, by the way.” Red reaches for my hand across the table. She holds my gaze for what seems a beat too long.

“How do you do, Mrs. Shultz?” I return. The table laughs.

“She’s so polite, still! You’ll see, dear.” With that, the table returns to its previous state of relaxed chatter. I smile and act engaged, skewering pigs-in-a-blanket with a toothpick, ankles crossed beneath the chair. I glance toward Mr. Roberts from time to time, hoping he’ll notice my poise and appreciate how I reflect him.

“Mrs. Roberts?” Mrs. Schulz calls from across the table, her eyebrows raised.

“What?” I start. All the ladies are looking at me. I’ve missed something.

“Which grocery do you go to?”

“I- I don’t. I use the delivery services.” Mrs. Schulz nods, and the table returns to its chatter.

And that is it. I sit. I eat. I drink. I meet the other Wives. And then, at eleven, I am escorted home.

“I’m sorry we didn’t see much of each other this time,” Mr. Roberts says as we drive.

“Some of the parties are more intimate, however. You’ll see.”

“Of course.” I am here to serve in whatever capacity makes him more efficient at his work. But I’m disappointed. I’m a thing he brought to the party because it’s conventional to bring the Wife. My extensive Training in business meetings didn’t seem to matter.

We return home in silence, padding up the stairs, I ahead of him.

“Would you mind me using the bathroom, first?” he asks. “It will take you longer, won’t it? I’m done in.”

I shake my head. “No, of course.” I proceed to the bedroom and begin removing my jewelry. I hear the faint sound of the shower curtain sweeping open across the bathtub.

The bathtub! I left the damp steamer and its case in the tub. I grip the dresser, listening. *It is just a manual, I will. Just women’s tools. Set them aside. Please...*

I wait. So long. Too long. Listening. Why is he so silent?

The bathroom door opens and I jump half a mile. Mr. Roberts enters the bedroom, shirt half undone. “You’re not changed, yet?” he asks.

I look down at my dress. “Oh, no. I’m so tired I’m moving at a snail’s pace.”

He comes over to me and kisses me lightly on the lips. “I didn’t mean to wear you out, my dear. I’m sorry. Be quick to bed, then.” He walks to the closet and begins to change into his pajamas. I fumble the rest of my jewelry off, pick up my robe and nightgown, and take them with me to the bathroom.

The steamer is in its open case on the counter. I can see the manual beneath, undisturbed. My breath catches in my throat in a sob of relief. *What am I doing? I should have shown him this letter before the party! It is a wonderful placement. He is a wonderful man. I am successful.* I look at myself in the mirror, a miserable woman returning my gaze. I exhale slowly, then close the steamer, put it away, and get myself ready for bed.

The morning light streams in through the bedroom window. I crack an eye, unfocused, watching the dust dance in the rays landing on the floor. Its advanced progress tells me it is late. Mr. Roberts must have turned off the alarm. I press my head into my pillow and stretch, feeling the cozy covers around me. How I love Saturdays.

I roll over to look into our room, then sit up with a jolt. Mr. Roberts is there, fully dressed, sitting on his bed, facing me with clasped hands. I bring my hand to my cheek and blush. “Are

you watching me sleep?" I ask in my small Wifely voice.

"You could say that," he replies. He stands and hands me my robe. "Come downstairs with me."

I adjust my nightgown and wrap myself in my robe. I slip on my house shoes, then follow him to the stairs. "Did you make me breakfast?" I ask, smelling coffee. He doesn't reply. *All the Wives would be jealous*, I thought. *This is so rare it was mentioned only in passing at the Center. Men don't cook!* I clutch my robe to me with pleasure as we descend into the foyer.

We round the corner into the living room and I freeze. Two strange men in black suits sit on our couch. They are sipping coffee from our coffee mugs. They stand, buttoning their suit jackets. I look up at Mr. Roberts, who nods at the men.

"Cathleen," one says. "You're to come with us."

He used my first name! We only have first names in the Training Center, when we aren't attached to a husband. "Mr. Roberts?" I squeak, looking at my husband. He does not look at me.

The men make their way toward me.

"Mr. Roberts!?" I cry, grabbing his hand. He wrenches away from me, stepping into the living room, exchanging places with the imposing men as each takes one of my arms. I yelp and begin to struggle, my skin twisting under their grip. They pull me toward the front door.

"Be quiet," the first man says. How could I be quiet!? He was Returning me! He didn't even talk to me about it. We were doing so well. It was so good!

"Mr. Roberts! Talk to me! I'm your Wife!" I scream, leaning away from the men in suits. He turns to face us and holds his hand up to the men. They stop pulling me but do not release their grip.

"No," Mr. Roberts says. I stop struggling as he speaks. "You are not my Wife. You are one of *them*." His lip curls with disgust.

I sob. "I'm not. I'm not. I only just found the letter. I didn't know. I don't know!" He had to believe me. I had to make him believe me. I am good. I am so good. I served so well. "We were just finding our rhythm. It was so good!" The words tumble from my mouth.

"I hesitated last time," he interrupts.

"What?" I'm stopped short.

"I hesitated. Your predecessor, the first Mrs. Roberts, was with me for three years. I was naive. I thought her restlessness would settle. By the time I confronted her, she was already heavily involved with The Underground, those stupid wretches who want to destroy all we've worked for and take us back centuries. I let it fester," he grits his teeth and looks through the front window. "This time we nip it in the bud." He looks at me with the same disgust he showed as he spoke

of her. “Get her out of my sight.”

“No!” I yell as the men pull me out the front door. “I didn’t go! I didn’t do anything!” I watch Mr. Roberts leave the living room as I am dragged toward the black van waiting in our driveway. I trip as I fight, my house shoe with the little scrap of paper falling to the cement, bare toes scuffing the pavement.

They shove me into the van and slam the door behind me. There are no windows in the back, only a console light glowing by the front. I spring at the door, yanking on the handle, but it will not budge.

The front doors slam and the engine starts. I lose my balance as the van begins to back from our driveway. I prop myself against the front panel, knees up, and hold my head in my hands. I did nothing wrong. It was going so well. Everything was okay.

You didn’t show him the letter. No, but I was going to, I think. I... I’m not sure what I was going to do. I lean my head against the front panel, looking up at the metal frame of the van. There I stay for the entire ride.

We stop and I hear the shifter thrown into park. The front doors slam. I crouch, ready to spring. I’ll leap from the van as soon as that door opens and run. I grip the wall and wait.

The door opens and I leap right into the arms of one of my captors. “NO!” I belt as the other throws a black hood over my head. I kick and shake but the man has his arms around my entire torso. I’m helpless.

They don’t say anything as they carry me. Gravel crunches beneath their shoes. I can smell grass and dust. A door clangs and their footfalls begin to echo. It smells of must. I whimper, and they tighten their grip.

Another door clangs open. A few more steps and we stop.

“Where do you want her?” The man holding me says. I hear no reply as they move further into the room. How many people are around me? My head brushes against the man’s chest and hood over my head, making it hard to distinguish sounds.

The man swings me around and drops me on a metal folding chair, the cold permeating my robe. The hood whips off my head and I cough, squeezing my eyes shut against the sudden light. In a way, I don’t want to open them. I don’t want to know what comes next.

I hear a snap in front of me, so close to my face that I could feel the wind from the fingers passing by each other. I flinch, then open my eyes. Someone’s face is inches from mine. I squint, then I realize I know those smiling features.

“Mrs. Shultz?”

She grins. “Welcome to The Underground.”