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Dinner Guests

by Juliet Robinson

'I'm going to check on lunch.' Nancy smiled, though Robin who knew her like the back of his hand could see it was forced.

She headed to the dining room, wishing she had never quit smoking. A caterer was putting the final touches to the elaborately set table.

'All ready?' Nancy asked, in what she hoped was a crisp and calm voice.

'All set.'

Returning to the drawing room she tried to catch her husband's eye, but he was engrossed in Ileana, possibly her conversation, she thought tartly. Instead, she cleared her throat and declared lunch ready.

Drinks were poured though Ileana refused, asking for sparkling water. The starters arrived, and they were exquisite.

Robin sat next to his latest girlfriend Jade a younger variant of the last three. She was smiling at him raptly, twirling a finger through her hair though he kept trying to drag others into their conversation. Casting his eye towards Nancy every so often.

Torin sat between Ileana and Nancy, his shoulder slightly turned away from his wife and his attention on Ileana. She laughed at his jokes, but kept glancing towards Nancy, almost placatingly.

'Torin says you used paint.'

Nancy took a large drink of white wine.

‘Yes, I had a studio not far from your new gallery, the southside was a war zone back then.’

Torin turned to his wife. ‘She really was talented, but along came Alexander.’

‘She still is talented,’ Robin corrected. ‘Stick your head round the door on the right before the bathroom, its filled with her recent work.’

Torin sat up straighter and shot a look at Robin.

‘You’ve been allowed in her studio.’

‘Just once, back in January when you and Ileana were setting up the itinerant exhibit in Amsterdam.’

A tension vibrated round the table, four sets of eyes avoided each other, the other two cast round in amusement and confusion.

Jade changed the conversation though perhaps she hadn’t picked up on the other diner’s sudden rigidity.

‘I adore children, I would love to be a stay-at-home mother.’ She was looking directly at Robin, but he didn’t notice.

Michael giggled loudly. ‘I hate children and I need a smoke, please excuse me. I trust I have time between courses?’

He stood not waiting for a response.

‘Let me show you to the terrace.’ Nancy volunteered.

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Outside he offered her a cigarette, but she declined.

‘Why am I here?’

‘Ileana was meant to be bringing her assistant, young, Italian, with an arse you can bounce off a wall. He’s possibly your type.’

‘You’re trying to tell me something. Partner me off? Spare me. Relationships are for those who have given up on life.’

Nancy sighed, reached over, and snatched the cigarette from his hand. She leaned back against the rail, enjoying a long drag then exhaled. She wilted and Michael put his arm around her shoulder.

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The second course arrived, swordfish in a lemon and garlic sauce.

‘So, Ileana, when does the new gallery open?’ Robin asked.

‘Next month in theory, but Torin keeps insisting that the space isn’t right for his new pieces.’ Her eyes lingered on the artist in question. They shared a smile.

Michael tried to kick Nancy under the table but missed and scuffed his foot up Robin’s leg. Robin glared at Michael, who tried to signal with his eyes that the boot hadn’t been intended for him. Ileana continued unaware of the ocular bout and the glacial look Nancy had hurled at her.

‘I have never meet with an artist with such passion for the entirety of experience regarding their work. Torin is a purist, a talent, a perfectionist.’

Nancy’s eyebrows rose as her husband affected embarrassment.

‘Sadly enough, I am. And it sounds in my ears like an apology. I hope it is not,’ Torin sat back languidly in his chair. ‘This collection is the peak of everything I have been working towards, my entire life. I am not apologising.’

The caterer started to clear the table, she paused at Ileana’s plate which was untouched unsure if she should take it.

‘I am sorry,’ Nancy said. ‘Don’t you like swordfish?’

Ileana fleetingly touched a gentle hand to her stomach, just for a second and Nancy may have been the only person who noticed.

‘It doesn’t seem to agree with me at the moment.’