

The Party

Everything was perfect. Janette had spent the last month making sure it would be. It had started with the invitations. Each one was handmade and lovingly addressed with only the best names she felt were worthy of this evening. This was to be the party of all parties, the envy of neighborhood, no, the entire city!

Once Janette sent the invitations – by mail, of course, with individualized stamps no less! – she set about preparing the look of the party. Janette only shopped at the finest of trinket boutiques. She spent with wild abandon on crystal vases, silver candlesticks (and the finest beeswax scented candles to go in them), china serving trays, and of course, the flowers. She had to have the freshest assortment of the most expensive flowers available. She placed her order for them early, but her husband would have the pleasure of picking them up Saturday, right before the party began.

It took the better part of a week to set everything just so. In the meantime, she forbade the rest of the family from entering the dining room. If Janette saw so much as a nose pressed against the glass doors, she would shoo the perpetrator away and grab the glass cleaner to make sure everything remained pristine. She was not about to let anyone ruin the coming gathering.

Janette placed most of the vases around the room on the china cabinet, the serving board, and other available surface she could find. When the flowers arrived, it would give the room the look of a tropical garden. She so loved the tropical vacations her husband and she went on each February to escape the chill of winter.

Her poor, dear husband, Rick had the worst time with allergies on those trips. He usually spent the time cooped up in the hotel while Janette toured the islands flora. How she loved the sights and smells. And he was such a dear for putting up with the trips. For the past five years since his retirement, they had gone, and he didn't complain once despite how miserable the environment made him. Rick also always came back feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

Janette thought fondly of the vacations as she decorated the dining room. In addition to the fancy crystal and silver, she also included tropical themes – palm fronds, tiki-style lights in the corners, and a string of small white lights winding around the room. It was perfect, both relaxing and elegant. Everyone would love it!

Speaking of everyone, she had invited in the best of the best. The mayor of the city was at the top, Mr. Conrad Jenkins, and of course, his rather dowdy wife, Cynthia. Janette didn't care much for Cynthia because the woman was quiet and meek. She simply didn't set the right sort of tone for such a party. But Mrs. Jenkins was part of the package, so Janette tolerated her. Janette put the Jenkins' near the head of the table, next Rick. They would have so much to talk about.

Seated on the other side of Rick would be Dimwalts. They were the owners of the local market and big names throughout town. Mayor Jenkins was prepping Mr. Dimwalt to be the next mayor after Conrad decided to step down. Next to the Jenkins were the Johnsons. Janette thought that was a terrible mundane name, but they were decent people. They threw regular parties as well, and always invited Janette and Rick, so she had to return the favor at least once in a while.

Finally, next to the Dimwalts, she sat Joseph Martin and Laura O'Dell. She knew Laura from her Pilates class and Joseph was the son of one of Rick's old co-workers. Janette had been trying to get Joseph and Laura together for some time, thing they were simply perfect for one another. For some reason they never seemed to click though. Janette was going to put an end to that one way or another. After all, Janette had been instrumental in finding spouses for her own children, and that had turned out marvelously! She was an expert in these sort of things. Janette, herself, would sit on the opposite end from Rick, so that they could both be involved in the conversations.

No party would be complete without food. In Janette's oh so humble opinion, the food made the event. Of course, she hadn't cooked since her own children were young and they were still struggling to make their place in the world. Rick had worked his way up through the ranks of one of the leading shipping companies in the country. He had retired at the vice president level, leaving Janette years of leisure to raise their two lovely children and lead a full and active social life. Parties like the one she was preparing for now, were hardly a rarity. That was how she had come to know exactly who to invite.

And what to serve these fine guests? Only the finest quality food, of course, prepared by the top chef in the area, Chef Antoin Beaudreaux. He owned a five-star restaurant downtown, and reservations had to be made months in advance. Janette had been sure to contact Monsieur Beaudreaux (who was actually Cajun, but played himself off as French) to arrange for the party meal the moment she made the invitations. With a guest-list like hers, he was more than happy to provide exactly what she was looking for. Money was no object after all. At least so long as Rick didn't know what Janette had spent. She was always careful not to discuss such vulgar topics with her darling husband.

Chef Beaudreaux was tasked with preparing a tropical feast with a French twist. The sides featured the flavors of pineapple and coconut, with traces of banana and a wonderful mango chutney to die for. Fragrant rice and roti were on hand to go with the hot pepper soup that was the starter. For the main course would be the freshest wild-caught salmon, served with a delicate layer of sauce chien. For dessert, blancmange, decorated with spears of pineapple and drizzled with chocolate. It would be marvelous, and Janette fully intended to pass it off as her own.

The day of the party finally arrived. Rick had done his part by picking up the flowers with nary a sniffle. Beaudreaux's assistants dropped up the prepared meal with list of instructions on proper serving techniques. Janette quickly shooed them out. It was still a couple hours before the guests would arrive, but she didn't want any trace of someone else's hard work, and that would take some careful disguising.

By 6pm, Janette had everything exactly as she wanted it. The sides and condiments rested on the table, and each place setting had a nametag of the person who was supposed to occupy the seat. The soup was ready to be served, and the salmon with its delightful sauce chien was ready and waiting. Janette wore her short-cut bottle-blonde hair in a fresh looking bob, and paired it with an elegant dress of the deepest blue. She took great pride in her slim figure she had

somehow managed to keep all these years. She could still wear a bikini on those vacations if she wanted too, though she preferred to remain modest.

She picked out Rick's suit for him; a tidy black number. He wore the suit to funerals, which were sadly becoming more common as they got older. But he did look rather dashing in it. The darkness of it matched his salt and pepper hair, giving him a distinguished look. The deep shade also made his glowing, icy blue eyes stand out. How she loved glimmer of his eyes. Rick hadn't taken quite as good care of his body though. He had the paunch of an elderly man who had seen a few too many social functions in his day. Still, he remained happy even through the ravishes of time. He had to be happy. Janette wouldn't have it any other way.

Laura O'Dell was the first to arrive. The girl never had much sense of timing. She always showed up to Pilates at least 20 minutes early. Janette found it a bit unbecoming, but soon calmed when Joseph Martin appeared. She sat them both in the living room and encouraged them to chat over cocktails while they awaited the others. The conversation was minimal and awkward. They both tried to be polite, and Laura tried to keep the conversation going, but Joseph did his best to answer with single syllables in his light, wispy voice. Janette quietly wondered what sort of boy his parents had raised when the doorbell rang again.

This time it was the Johnsons. They had arrived precisely on time, 6:30. Mr. Johnson had been military sometime back in his youth, and still carried himself that strict air. Punctuality was in his blood and he wouldn't allow himself or anyone in his family to be too early or too late. The Dimwalts followed, arriving only five minutes later. Last to arrive, Mayor Jenkins and his wife. He apologized profusely for being late, but there were city matters that he simply had to take care of. Cynthia Jenkins nodded quietly, practically hiding behind her powerful husband.

Most of the guests fit the theme, just as Janette had described in her detailed invitations. This was to be an elegant tropical evening, and she expected everyone to dress the part. Laura O'Dell wore full sarong that showed off her young and fit profile. The men wore light suits, except Jenkins who had shown up in a more traditional business suit. He had just come from City Hall. Mrs. Johnson was dressed much like Janette, in a long, blue silk dress. Mrs. Dimwalt took a very different direction, donning a white linen suit. Cynthia Jenkins looked more like she had just stepped out of a parent teacher conference, having played the part of the teacher. Janette wondered if this was the best, poor Mrs. Jenkins could do.

As proper guests, they did each bring small gifts for the hosts. The Johnsons and Dimwalts each brought wines, the Johnsons a pinot gregio, the Dimwalts a fine chardonnay. Laura O'Dell brought a box of assorted chocolates, and Joseph Martin matched it with a box of Turkish Delights. Only the Jenkins came empty handed. The mayor apologized profusely, but claimed they simply hadn't the time to find a proper gift. Janette waved it off telling him that as the mayor his presence here was gift enough. In the back of her mind, she knew she would make a smaller campaign donation the next time he came knocking.

With all the guests arrived, Janette herded them into the dining room. The invitees made several oohs and ahhs as they gazed over the decorations. Though Janette had combined a rather strange mix of elegant and tropical, it worked, giving the room the look of a Caribbean resort.

The only thing lacking was the beach and ocean. Janette made up for that by piping in ocean sounds through speakers she carefully hid under the sideboard. Rick appeared rather impressed with her ingenuity.

Janette served the soup, and the party began to dine and chat. Most of the conversation happened between the couples, with Laura O'Dell and Joseph Martin keeping largely quiet. They barely even looked at one another, though Janette did her best to engage them in conversation. At the head of the table, there was a good deal of politicking going on between Mayor Jenkins and Mr. Dimwalt. The national elections were coming up quickly, and there was still a great deal of posturing. The best officials were the ones on the winner's side.

The soup course had just ended when the doorbell rang. Janette gave Rick a questioning look. They weren't expecting anyone else, and it was far too late in the evening for a delivery. Mayor Jenkins added to the intrigue by stating that perhaps it was for him. The city's business never ended, and someone always knew where to find him in case of an emergency.

Since hesitation is in poor manners, Janette quickly excused herself to go answer the door. She had told Rick a number of times they needed to invest in some household staff for just such an occasion. It was bad enough she had to leave her guests to serve each course of the meal, but to answer the door as well? They would certainly remember this the next time invitations went out.

Janette would just have to be quick about answering the door. She peered out the peephole first to see just who thought they could crash her party. What she saw was the retreating back of a young woman. The woman had long, ebony hair that hung to her waste. She had shapely hips that swayed with each quick step, and she looked a number of different directions as if she was afraid of being seen in this tony neighborhood. In the few, brief glimpses of the woman's face that Janette could catch, the woman had soft features covered in an olive complexion that shined in the streetlights.

Janette frowned, feeling as though she had seen this woman before. She sniffed slightly and opened the door, intending to call after the woman. But before any words could leave her mouth, she looked down to see a large basket sitting on the stoop. The basket contained three things that Janette could easily see. The first was a large bottle of Tropical Mango Moscato, and the second was a note taped to it. They had brought back this very same Moscato from their vacations by the caseload. Rick couldn't get enough of it. Janette was even serving it with tonight's dinner. But it was not the wine or the note that caught Janette's attention. What held Janette's gaze was the squirming, fussing baby who nuzzled the bottle like a pillow.

With shaking hands, Janette leaned down to pick up the basket. It was heavy in arms unused to doing difficult work, and the moving baby made it unwieldy. She opted to drag it in through the door instead, and leave it on the floor as she picked the note off the wine bottle. Janette's hands continued to shake as she read the note, hoping for some kind of explanation.

Her eyes slide over the carefully written words, but passed into her brain with little meaning. After three attempts, she shook her head and crouched down to look over the baby. It

had the same olive complexion as the disappearing woman, and a crop of fuzzy dark hair spouting on its head. The swaddling around it was pale blue, making Janette think it was a little boy, though she couldn't tell for certain. That didn't matter either. What did matter were the eyes that were staring back up at her between fidgeting blinks. They were the rich brown of vast majority of dark skinned people. They were an icy blue. The same icy blue as Rick's.

By now, her guests must be wondering what is taking her so long. She can hear them murmuring from down the hall. How long before Rick came to find her? Janette couldn't feel the time passing though. Her mind was too busy putting the pieces together. The Moscato had come from a small family farm on the island where they vacationed. Of course, they had been there. Each time they brought home a new case of the stuff. That's where she had seen the woman before. The smiling, young daughter of the farmer who produced the wine.

And Rick's allergies? He hasn't sneezed once this evening, despite having picked up the flowers. They had been sitting all around him once the dinner had started, and there was no hint of a wheeze or a watery eye. Had his allergies while on vacation simply been an excuse? A reason to stay in the hotel while she went sightseeing?

Janette felt sick to her stomach. This baby, with the dark skin and blue eyes, it was a perfect blend of the woman and Rick. The note was the key. The letterhead gave it away by announcing the family farm. She picked up only a couple things from the writing. The woman walking away from the door had had been this child's mother. She couldn't take care of him, though Janette didn't know why. The letter hadn't been specific. She did know the child's name though, Armaan.

Janette continued to crouch over the small boy, unsure what to do or say. She heard footsteps behind her, and Rick's voice. He was asking if she was all right. Who had been at the door? Was she coming back? Then he stopped just behind her and she could feel his shadow crossing her as he looked at the contents of the basket. Janette let the note fall from her hands. It wafted like a leaf back into the basket. Behind her, Rick stuttered. He was trying to find the words to explain. Janette didn't need to hear it. The party was over.