

WAITING

by

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Three young women stood talking in the garden of an old mansion that hugged the banks along a slow-moving southern river. The hot, humid summer afternoon hung like a tiger tensed for the kill. A small band played soft music for the party.

Shannon, the dark-haired woman, wearing a yellow, wide-brimmed hat, toyed with a cluster of red grapes. “He promised me a trip to Cannes,” she said in a low voice, “but he never showed.”

Melinda, the blonde, wore a white lace dress open down to her full bosom. She turned, started to speak, but changed her mind, and just watched the other faces facing each other, some knowing, some not knowing. “Mmmmm . . . oysters.” She stared at the tray a waiter served.

He stared at her breasts.

She stared at the oysters. “I love oysters.” Melinda cooled her round face with a small fan. “He always ate oysters at my place.”

Jennifer, the other woman, red-haired and pretty, stood against a leafy fern tree and sipped a dark, tropical drink in a tall glass. She ogled the young, handsome waiter.

He still watched Melinda and tightened his grip on the tray.

“I knew it was the end,” Jennifer said, “the day he said farewell to oysters.”

“You too.” Shannon adjusted her yellow hat. “With us—it was a very short story.” She eased a large grape through her lips into her mouth and looked up at the waiter.

He shifted his feet and turned his gaze to her.

“Today is Friday,” Melinda said. “He said he’d come. Our love was strong . . .”

“Then was then, now is now,” Shannon broke in, still watching the waiter. “He may be with another, but he’ll find that men without women are like cats in the rain—cold and wet.”

Jennifer finished her drink and handed it to the waiter. He turned to her light eyes.

“Oh, look.” She glanced across the river at a small doe darting into the trees.

“Too late, it’s gone.”

“Time has taken its toll,” Melinda said, “like the bell at Notre Dame. Best we forget what once was good.”

“But he promised me that trip,” Shannon moaned, still hoping. She was sad until the waiter winked at her. Then she smiled.

He snatched an oyster from his tray and slipped it into his mouth.

“He won’t get his surprise now,” Jennifer whined.

“Mmmmm . . . I do love oysters,” Melinda purred, swallowing faster.

All three women noticed the waiter devoured more oysters. His smile broadened. They laughed.

The stinging sun settled below the tall trees surrounding the estate as the music dwindled. A slight breeze stirred throughout the garden.

Walking through the crowd, a tall, tanned, well-built man headed straight for the three women. He opened his mouth to speak.

They saw him at the same time.

“John!”

“Eric!”

“Anthony!”