



Fiction

The Unwelcome Guest

Carla Masters felt more anxiety about this Thanksgiving dinner than any before it. It wasn't the expectation of a perfectly basted turkey. Her husband, Gary, cooked the bird and mashed the potatoes. She prepared the side dishes and desserts, and the unbaked rolls were waiting beside the oven. Everything was fine except for one thing.

by CHRIS FABRY

"THEY'RE LATE," Gary said, checking his watch.

"They'll be here," Carla said quickly, turning down the temperature on the green beans.

"What do you think he'll be like?" Gary said.

He was always asking questions and tossing up fears like tennis balls. He knew good and well she didn't have answers.

"I'm sure he'll be nice, genteel. He'll put his best foot forward."

"You're gritting your teeth," Gary said, grinning. His eyes sparkled when he was being ornery.

"I don't need this right now."

"I just think it's funny that you've become one of those parents."

"One of what parents?"

"Who don't like their daughters' choices. Her fiancé."

"He's not her fiancé. Don't rush this."

"Carla, come on. She thinks she's found Mr. Right."

She turned, hands on hips. "And I'm the only one who has a hard time with this?"

"I'm not doing cartwheels, but let's have a little faith in our daughter."

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She opened the oven door and peeked inside — then closed it and took the top off the steaming potatoes.

"You need to stay on your side of the stove, and I'll stay on ..."

A car door slammed. Gary's mouth dropped. "Showtime!"

Carla glanced at the hall mirror and practiced a smile. She wanted to wave a wand and erase all the worry lines. Were there more today than yesterday?

She hugged Jen tightly and then gave Stephen a polite hug. She wanted to be courteous, but that was it. Carla had hoped Jen's infatuation with him would have waned. Perhaps it would fall apart by Christmas.

Jen beamed a smile. "Mom, Dad, we have some news."

"Jen, you said we were going to give them time to get used to me," Stephen said.

"It feels like lying to hold back." Jen held out her left hand, and Carla saw a ring flash in the dim light.

"We're engaged!"

"How wonderful," Gary said. "Congratulations!" He hugged his daughter and shook Stephen's hand.

Carla walked into the pantry before the meal, and Jen followed.

"You're not excited for me."

"I'm very excited. If you're happy, I'm happy."

"That sounds like it's from a script."

"Honey, listen. We've raised you to think for yourself. If this is your choice, if it's truly coming from you and you're not feeling pressured to ..."

"How would I feel pressured?"

"Pressure is not the right word. You have strong feelings about him, and who wouldn't? He's gorgeous. He's well-spoken, intelligent."

Then Carla looked up, almost gasping. There was a fear bigger than all of this. What if there were Someone behind all of this?



"But?"

"I wouldn't be a loving mother if I didn't at least bring up my feelings."

"OK. What are they?"

"Let's wait until we can ..."

"No, let's do this now."

You don't like him because of the religion thing. I can't believe you would be so narrow-minded."

"That's not it, Jen. He's just not the type I would have ..."

"What type were you hoping for?"

"He's not like us. He doesn't believe like we believe. Do you see that?"

"Of course, I do. It's part of what attracted me. We've both done a lot of searching and studying. I believe what he believes."

"What are you saying?"

"Mom, I know this will come as a shock, but after all I've learned at school, I can't believe what you do anymore."

Carla tried not to react. She took a deep breath and focused on her daughter's face. "Honey, it feels like you've changed. Like you're a different person."

"I'm not your little girl anymore, Mom."

"I'm not trying to keep you my little girl. Just think this through. Think of what will happen down the road."

"Who knows what will happen down the road? I love him. He loves me. What more do we need? I thought you would be happy."

"I am, and if this is what you want, I'll be behind you."

"The script again," Jen said. "You're saying what I want to hear."

Carla rubbed her hands and searched her daughter's eyes. "Did we do something wrong? Did we push you away?"

"Mom, this is not about you. This is not about something you did or didn't do. You said it yourself. I'm a different person. And you're right. I've changed."

Gary called from the kitchen. "Turkey's cool. I'm going to start carving."

"I need to put the rolls in," Carla said, touching Jen's arm.

The four of them sat around the table, and Stephen said the food looked scrumptious. Carla unfolded her napkin and smoothed it on her lap. Her stomach felt queasy.

"Stephen asked if we had any Thanksgiving traditions as a family," Jen said. "I told him I remember turkey and football and taking a long walk after dinner."

Carla smiled politely but the words felt like a dig. She looked at Stephen. "What kind of traditions does your family have?"

"We eat turkey and watch football too. But every year, before we dig in, we join hands and say something we're thankful for about the person to our left."

Gary was the first to reach out a hand. "Sounds like a great tradition. Let me start. I'm thankful we have a new face at the table. Stephen, it's good to finally meet you."

"Thank you, sir," Stephen said.

Carla glanced at Jen, and then turned to Gary. "I'm thankful you took the cooking and carving duties again," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

There was a long pause. Finally, Jen said, "I'm thankful for a mother who cares enough to ask hard questions."

Stephen looked at Jen. "And I'm grateful for finding someone who wants to share her life with me. Forever." He cleared his throat and glanced up at Carla and Gary. "I was going to ask you, sir, before I popped the question. Your blessing."

Gary smiled. "Let's talk about that on the walk after dinner."

They released hands, and Carla felt relieved. Then Stephen said, "I know you folks feel differently about God than we do. But would you mind if I offered a prayer of thanks to God?"

It felt like a carving knife to Carla's heart. Thanking some deity she didn't even believe existed for something he hadn't been involved with. There was an acrid smell to the whole thing.

Gary glanced at Carla and then back at Stephen. "I guess there's a first time for everything. If that's something you'd like to do, go ahead."

Stephen took Jen's hand, and they closed their eyes and bowed their heads. Such a strange sight in a home where prayer had always been considered a crutch. Before this day, she could keep "religious" people away, distancing herself from their ideas and thoughts. Now, she didn't have that luxury. If she wanted to love her daughter, she would have to deal with two Christians and not caricature their lives. She would have to engage them at a deeper level than dismissal.

She felt anger at Jen for falling into this trap. She felt anger at Gary for allowing Stephen to pray. Why hadn't he drawn a line? She was angry at Stephen for influencing her daughter in this way.

But there was something deeper bothering her. Fear. Yes, there was a deep fear that she had lost her daughter and would never get her back. And what would happen when grandchildren came along and all the Christian ceremonies of whatever church they attended?

Then Carla looked up, almost gasping. There was a fear bigger than all of this. What if there were Someone behind all of this? Someone listening to this prayer of thanksgiving?

It was at that unsettling, disturbing moment that Carla realized the acrid smell wasn't about the prayer or faith at all. It was the rolls.

She jumped and ran to the smoky oven before Stephen could say, "Amen." It was a Thanksgiving memory they would laugh about for years.

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CHRIS FABRY'S next novel, *Under a Cloudless Sky*, releases January 9. He wrote the best-selling *War Room* novelization. His novels have won three Christy Awards and an ECPA Christian Book Award. You can hear Chris daily on *Chris Fabry Live* on Moody Radio. Find him at ChrisFabry.com.

