

## BON APPETIT

**Anne Levy Lavigne**  
for Mark Farrington

Dolly Hall hurried down the steps of her front porch on the morning after Thanksgiving to trek six blocks to the nearby Giant Eagle. The veins in her forehead throbbed as she contemplated the recklessness of venturing forth like this—she hadn't shopped alone, without Phil, since she'd left the hospital. When the entrance doors swung open, her jaws froze, and her palms began to perspire. Only the most crucial items, she told herself.

She dashed back to the meat counter, placed her order, and moved along with her package without even pausing to thank the butcher. As she neared the wine aisle, her breathing quickened, and her step slowed, almost by reflex. But she marched on, double chin raised and eyes straight ahead, resolute as a soldier in battle. At the vegetable bins, she selected mushrooms and a head of romaine lettuce, grabbed a bunch of fresh flowers, then raced to the checkout counters. Finished in mere minutes. What a relief! Yet an airy sense of freedom crept in, too, as if being here by herself was perfectly natural. Natural and safe.

The checkout lines stretched beyond the ends of the counters and moved slowly. Dolly drummed her fingers against the edge of her basket while she waited, admiring the sleek image of the bone-thin fashion model gracing the cover of *Vogue*, so unlike her own frumpy appearance. Then her eye lit on *Gourmet*, her favorite of the food magazines she had once collected, its cover resplendent with platters of bronze-roasted turkey, soufflés of golden sweet potatoes, tortes of bursting cranberries, bottles of chilled pale wine. A magnificent repast, the very kind of Christmas dinner Dolly herself used to make!

She closed her eyes and sensed the fragrant aromas teasing her nostrils, the luscious flavors arousing her taste buds...Cooking had been like an extension of her painting, an act of passion. Until the hospital. Her hand reached for the magazine as if propelled on its own. She began to leaf through it, realizing with a start that it was her turn at the register. She hesitated a moment, then set it on the conveyor with the groceries and watched it glide toward the clerk.

"This too, hon?" the clerk asked, holding up the *Gourmet*.

"I guess...yes," Dolly blurted, feeling tiny pinpricks of guilt. It was just a small treat. A reward for doing well for so many months—nineteen months. Nineteen months and eleven days, to be exact. Today was the first time she'd bent a single rule since they'd launched The Plan all those months ago. But what else could she have done, when she and Phil had forgotten the veal for tonight's Veal Marengo when they shopped on Saturday?

Dolly walked home, buoyed by the success of her first shopping foray and by the idea of having a sumptuous holiday dinner. She loved Christmas—the warmth of family, the laughter and small gifts, the fragrance of potpourri, the fresh promise of a new year. Last year, she and Phil had spent the holiday alone. They'd roasted a small turkey breast, and Phil had concocted an oyster and

sausage stuffing. His forced cheer and booming, raspy *fa la la la la*'s had exasperated her and deflated her spirits even further. How could she face another Christmas like that? She would explain to him how the cover picture had proven too alluring to resist, how badly she wanted to host Christmas dinner this year, how it would be her reward for good behavior, no longer the perilous symbol of her past life they believed it to be.

She put the groceries away and hurried up to her attic studio, the airy loft that she'd designed and Phil had built twenty two years ago, when the attic was a roach-inhabited space relegated to storing suitcases and Christmas ornaments. Every weekend for eight months, Phil had demolished, sawed, drilled, and hammered, with six-year-old Jason's eager help, until he'd finished, pronouncing the result worthy of Dolly's talent. The sole source of light, a skylight that stretched across the sloped ceiling, washed the room in the grays of the late morning gloom.

Tubes of paint cluttered Dolly's worktable. She pulled on her smock and surgeon's gloves and squeezed coils of paint onto her palette, then stepped back from the easel to examine yesterday's progress. Standing with her feet apart and head cocked, she saw the painting with fresh eyes. Feathery strokes of soft violets and blues dappled a small canvas barely half the size of her usual surface. How odd it looked, like the work of another painter. Yet she herself had bought the frame and stretched the canvas, chosen these hues and brushed on these strokes.

The painting showed the bare outlines of a woman in a smoky-blue dress seated on a park bench with drooping head and clasped hands. Something about it seemed amiss, even at this early stage. She turned to the paintings stacked against the wall and set the two most recent ones apart. The first, finished this month, showed a solitary figure gazing into the distance and the second, a woman lying across a bed staring at the wall. All three, the entirety of her post-rehab output, were ashen-toned, semi-abstract females with sagging postures and brooding expressions—virtually indistinguishable.

She crossed the room to the older paintings. The last canvas she'd finished before going into the hospital, broad sweeps of crimson and cobalt, startled her into laughter. Flipping through the others, she found them a distinct series, too, of bold abstracts. The abandon of those strokes, the fire of those colors had defined her style. Somehow her path had changed, from lusty to limp. She returned to the easel, picked up her palette, and began to blend the paints in slow motion, her lips pinched together in frustration.

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Dolly put the steaming casserole on the table as Phil dimmed the chandelier. For years, since Jason was small, they had reserved Friday nights as their date night. They ate something more special, used their best dishes and silverware, and lit scented candles. Tonight the table glowed with teal linens and

a centerpiece of gold mums. Better yet, her Veal Marengo, a delectable but simple stew unlike her former wine-sauced specialties, was a favorite of Phil's.

They raised their water goblets for their nightly toast. "Bon appetit," Dolly said. "My day began with an emergency...we actually forgot the veal on Saturday! I had no choice but to go to Giant Eagle. A completely mundane errand, to my great relief."

He frowned. "We'll have to be more diligent about double-checking the list. Mmm, but it smells wonderful. Bon appetit." He leaned over the steaming plate of stew before him. "The office is a madhouse. It's good to relax over a quiet dinner."

For Phil, who headed a small corporate accounting practice, early December brought an onslaught of eleventh-hour meetings and calls about business tax preparation, and the frantic rush made him edgy—unlike Dolly, he thrived on order. He'd changed from his usual pinstriped suit into a faded polo shirt and khakis, and his mood seemed fairly mellow. The sooner she raised the Christmas idea, the better her chances.

"How's the new painting going?" he asked.

She winced. "It looks so tame. The ones I've finished since coming home all do. It's like a before and after. Except the before is better."

Phil grinned, and his face crinkled, closing his deep-set eyes. Dark, thinning hair skimmed across his broad skull and exposed a splotchy birthmark above his forehead that resembled a Rorschach inkblot. Like Dolly, he was short and stout. When they strolled together through their Point Breeze neighborhood, she wondered whether they looked more like brother and sister than husband and wife. They had, in fact, believed themselves fated from the moment they found themselves scrunched together at the Luna Bar in Oakland thirty two years before, as college students.

"You look like you don't believe me."

"Maybe you're too close to it."

They finished eating in silence while Dolly fretted about her painting. "I'd like your opinion. Why don't you come up to the studio with me?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Well. I haven't been accorded that honor in a long time."

Her studio was off-limits to Phil unless she invited him in, which she rarely did. She pushed her chair back and held out her hand to him as she stood. Upstairs, she set two paintings, the most recent of the before and after groups, side by side against a blank wall and demanded to know what he saw in each painting.

He loved the softness of the "after" painting, he said, its colors and shapes, but he found the "before" brash by comparison. "Your newer paintings are quieter, not so frenzied. Easier on the eye, in my opinion. I think it's an improvement." He shrugged.

In her opinion, Phil was of the “I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like” school. He didn’t see what she did: melancholy, a succession of blue ladies. Years before, looking at an especially splashy canvas, he’d burst into his husky-voiced laugh, ruffled her mop of frazzled curls, and, in a slightly tolerant tone, said, “Wild woman!” She suspected that side of her bothered him, that maybe he preferred her this way—more like himself.

Over a dessert of poached pears, Dolly rotated her glass by the stem and replayed his comments in her mind. Easier on the eye. An improvement. After a long silence, she took a deep breath. “I just realized this morning that Christmas is only a month away. And the most exciting idea just popped into my head!” Her voice rose, and her hands fluttered like sparrows’ wings. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have the whole family over for Christmas dinner, like we used to do? It was always so festive.” She smiled her widest possible smile.

His eyes narrowed, and his lips pressed into a thin line. “That’s a goddamn lot of trouble. What we did last year was a thousand times easier on you. That’s why we did it.”

Usually benign, he sounded irritated and nervous. “But it was so dull,” she complained. She leaned forward, her blue eyes round as full moons, intent on his stolid face. “I can’t stay in a cocoon forever.”

“Forget it, Dolly. You’re still green in recovery. You know what they said at rehab.”

Dolly nodded, beginning to chafe. Yes, she knew, she knew, she knew: change the old patterns, avoid stressful situations, accept help. Sometimes she felt like a prisoner, her every small freedom relinquished, and Phil—so closely watchful—more of a jailor than a partner.

“Quit that pouting.” His voice softened. “Look, honey, you’re thinking of it as pure merriment but...” He drummed his fingers against the arm of his chair.

Dear Phil, trying to avoid reminding her of the old humiliation: after the last time, would anyone want to come? Certainly not Jason, who had left four years ago for medical school at Stanford with clipped words about “this chaos you call home.”

He hadn’t come home until two years later, for Christmas. Dolly had plunged into a cyclonic whirl of shopping and cooking, hell-bent on creating a jubilant reunion. By early afternoon on Christmas Day, wired tight as a mattress spring, she was drinking wine from an opaque turquoise water tumbler while she cooked—for medicinal purposes, she told herself. By the time the arrivals began, her steps were faltering and her tongue twisting. So began the Christmas fiasco and Dolly’s final, lonely, downward spiral.

Now, she held up both palms, fingers spread, toward Phil, as if to say *I surrender*. But she didn’t. Tomorrow she would try again.

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No amount of exceptional cooking or cajoling or even outright whining rattled Phil's conviction of premature timing. Two nights after the first fruitless entreaty, she argued that everything had changed in the past two years, encountering stony-faced silence. She knew enough after thirty one years of marriage to leave him bowed over his shrimp scampi, which she regretted having bothered to make. The following night, over wild mushroom lasagna, she said, "Please understand that having this dinner means a giant step forward to me." He replied, "Excellent lasagna" and buttered his bread. But as he left to return to the office, he kissed the top of her head and said, "I'm far from enamored with the idea, but I'll revisit it." A minuscule dent in the armor.

On the fourth night, she advanced to the heavy artillery: meatloaf with mashed potatoes and mushroom gravy, peas, and homemade applesauce, all prepared his mother's way—lumpy potatoes, pasty gravy, shriveled peas. His late mother, bless her heart, had been the worst cook imaginable, and Phil had relished every flavorless morsel she set in front of him.

He chewed slowly, closing his eyes with pleasure. "You've outdone yourself tonight!"

She hoped so. God alone knew, only bratwurst cooked in beer, to Phil the most fortuitous byproduct of his German heritage, could surpass his beloved meatloaf. With a grand display of self-deprivation, he had declared bratwurst off-limits in Dolly's kitchen, quite unnecessarily. She loathed beer.

While Phil joyfully mixed his meatloaf, potatoes, and peas into a mound, she crushed the lumps in her potatoes and waited. Finally, she said, "So, Christmas. What do you think?"

"Why is this so all-fired important all of a sudden? We haven't seen any of them since..." He bit his lower lip to catch himself.

"Since the last time."

"Let's leave it be for awhile longer."

"But I've done so well. You've said so yourself."

"You have indeed, so far, and I'm proud of you."

"So far?"

"It's the old day after day, one day at a time, like they said in rehab, Dolly. You know that. And holidays are notoriously difficult. Even with a prince like me by your side."

Her laugh burst forth like uncorked champagne. Playful humor, what a relief.

"I know I'll have to be especially careful, but it'll be my reentry into the world, my own 'Hello Dolly' moment. Look," she said quietly, the gaiety fading from her face, "I want...I need...to live a normal life, to have the same kind of holiday other people have. I feel like an outcast, and it hurts. Can't you understand that?" She reddened as soon as the words left her lips. He looked miffed, and, truly, hadn't he been as understanding as she could possibly want?

"Yes, I understand, and you know it damn well." He exhaled loudly. "Okay, we'll do it, under one condition, with a capital 'C.' Keep it simple, strictly within The Plan. No intense hours in the kitchen, no cooking with wine, no alcohol in any form. Your old style marathon extravaganza is verboten, got that? And expect rejection. Not everyone will come."

She broke into a childlike grin and shivered with delight as a vision of the *Gourmet* cover, with its ravishing spread and flowing wines, flashed into her mind. "Oooooo," she said, and darted around the table behind him. She leaned over and pressed her cheek against his, wrapping her arms around him and stroking his chest. Then she kissed the little round bald spot at his crown and patted his paunch. He sighed and squeezed her hand.

"Meatloaf and mashed potatoes again!" he said the next night. "What could top this?"

She'd decided earlier that meatloaf would yield more persuasive effect than the rosemary pork tenderloin they'd originally planned. With one more hurdle remaining, she'd see how far his passion for meatloaf would carry her. "I made a guest list today, sweetheart. We need to start inviting everyone right away. We could have as many as thirty if they all come."

He frowned. "You can't handle that many, Dolly."

"Certainly I can. I'm totally energized, and we're keeping it simple, remember?" She cleared her throat nervously. "Considering past things, would you mind doing the honors?"

"Yes." He glared at her. "You insist you're ready for this. Inviting them is part of it."

"Why don't we split the list—you call your family, I'll call mine—the way we've done before?" Dolly clenched and unclenched her hands on her lap. She knew well that her drinking had ruined more than one family gathering, had made her the family black sheep. A lively but contained lot, they drank but without crossing the line of moderation that Dolly had too often trampled. Her face heated with shame. Calling them would be sheer torture.

"If you want to make amends, you need to start by calling them all."

Damn! He'd learned that tough love crap in rehab's family group, and he took it far too seriously. She fought to keep her voice even. "Just your sister and brother, to even it out a bit?"

A slight smile crept across his face. "Fair enough. Eunice and Norm and their broods."

What a relief. Aside from Marjorie, her own sister, she most dreaded facing his.

"Should I bother trying Eunice?" he asked, and she nodded. "Then it's settled."

"Except," she said, jiggling her foot under the table, "Jason. Would you...ask him to come home?"

Phil's silence hung over them like a thick blanket of fog. Slowly, he shook his head. "When...if...he's ready, he'll decide on his own."

Hearing his voice tighten with tension, Dolly stared at her fingernails and picked at the chipping red polish. She pictured Jason's face after everyone had left that Christmas, tight-jawed with the anger and resignation he had harbored since his teenage years. "Nothing ever changes, does it? I should have known better than to come," he'd snapped. A flash of recognition told her what her rehab therapist would say months later—Jason's distancing had begun years before that night. The steely edge in his reproach, the anguish cracking through, had sent her skyrocketing. "You think you're so superior, Mr. Dr. Would-Be-World-Class-Neurosurgeon? You're still the same scared little boy who used to wet the bed. You don't have the guts to be a surgeon," she yelled, her slurred, grief-stricken words as tangled as her coils of sandy hair. She had collapsed into tears at the sight of his stunned expression.

"Haven't you told him about my rehab? Couldn't you explain that this time would be different?" Her eyes welled with tears. "Please. I can't call him myself."

"Leave him be. It's too soon."

There had been no visits since, no letters, the occasional call directed to Phil. She and Phil never talked about the void, the core of dull pain that sometimes ebbed but never left. She never asked him if he blamed her, nor did he say, but she knew he must. Their greatest sorrow was the only one they couldn't share.

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It took Dolly six cups of coffee on Saturday morning to generate the fortitude to begin making the calls. With a wry smile, she wondered whether the glut of caffeine in her system or sheer nervousness was causing her hands to tremble. She punched in her sister's number, and, to her dismay, Marjorie's in-person, singsong "hell-ou-hoo" intercepted the second ring, dashing Dolly's hopes for the painless detachment of an answering machine.

The receiver clenched in her slippery palm, she forged ahead with determined cheer. "Marjorie, it's Dolly. How good to hear your voice!" They hadn't spoken since the last time.

Her dry response followed an interminable silence. "Dorothea. What a...surprise."

Dolly sucked in a breath and steeled herself. Marjorie's use of her given name did not bode well. "I know an apology is way overdue, but I was too humiliated to face you, and the more I delayed the harder it was. I hope you can forgive me, Marjie. I spent a month in rehab nineteen months ago, and I'm doing great now." When Phil had called Marjorie about Dolly's hospitalization, she'd retorted, "About time, isn't it?"

"We're having a gala Christmas dinner to celebrate. I'm calling to invite you and Ben and the girls."

"Dolly, I'm truly glad you went into rehab. Heaven knows you needed it. But you've had periods of good behavior before. None of them have lasted."

"I've learned this time, with rehab and therapy."

"I want to believe you, but your promises aren't anything new. Just like Pop. Except he never quit for more than three days."

"I can't blame you for being angry." She sighed audibly. "I certainly went all out to earn your wrath, didn't I?" Having caught Dolly weaving toward the oven tilting a pot of gravy, Marjorie had shouted, "Stay away from there, you'll burn yourself!" Dolly had pushed her aside, snarling, "Get out of here, you controlling, know-it-all bitch—you're worse than Mom."

"You did, indeed. It hurt that you might really feel that way about me, even worse that you were drunk enough to say it."

Dolly closed her eyes against what was true. When she'd awakened the next morning, aching with remorse, she'd told Phil, "I don't understand what happened. I drank almost nothing; it must have just hit me hard." She was lying; they both knew it. "It will never happen again, I promise." But she'd lasted for only four months. How could anyone trust her? She couldn't trust herself.

Marjorie would mull it over, she said, discuss it with Ben. To Dolly's amazement, she accepted five days later. "You're still my little sister. We'll give it one more try. One."

The others were easier—she hadn't personally insulted any of them, despite her general offensiveness. But Phil fared less well with his sister.

"Calling her a pretentious, social-climbing toady went too far," he said, fidgeting with his knife, "and she doesn't believe for one minute that you didn't know what you were saying." Eunice, finding her reaching into the hot oven without benefit of pot holders, had grabbed her shoulders to stop her. Dolly had wrenched away and sputtered the insult guaranteed to pierce her infuriating pomposity. "Never again," Eunice had hissed through clenched teeth.

She refrained from asking if he'd called Jason. He would tell her, perhaps. If he had, she might be best off not knowing Jason's response.

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Twenty-two people would be there, more than she'd expected; without Jason among them, it hardly mattered how many or how few. Dolly's challenge was to compose a menu befitting her culinary skills and the holiday itself within the restrictions of The Plan. It would be far less exciting than the elegant fare featured in the concealed *Gourmet*, but it might exude a homey appeal. By now she could tolerate such a compromise.

Despite three days of searching through cookbooks and the *Gourmet*, Dolly could not find acceptable selections. She pondered her dilemma while preparing that night's turkey-corn hash, a recipe from *Bon Appetit's* new "Simple Meals in Thirty Minutes" section that her next-door neighbor, Phyllis, had told her about. Nothing could be more tailor-made for The Plan, which demanded fast



and uncomplicated meal preparation *only*. Why, a quick trip to the store for the holiday issue might entirely solve her problem! She would buy noodles to make tonight instead of rice, a barely noticeable substitution.

The next morning, she flipped to the quick-and-easy section of the new *Bon Appetit*, only to discover not a miracle menu but an artfully photographed collection of hopelessly mundane recipes like Old-Fashioned Mashed Potatoes. Then she happened on the tantalizing Duck Breast with Cherry-Pistachio Salsa—throughout the rest of the issue, one superb idea followed another, any of them perfect, except...Yet on close inspection, many of them seemed rather uncomplicated. Quite safe, actually. Perhaps she should try one or two, as an experiment. If they didn't fit The Plan, she'd continue searching. Two weeks remained till Christmas.

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Dolly's cheeks tingled at the bite of the chill winter air, and the mist of snow flurries awakened her senses as she trotted to the store. Sunlight sparkled on the icy branches of the trees along their street, and the decorations on the houses splashed the neighborhood with vibrant color. She breathed deeply, filling her nostrils with the scent of pine wreaths.

This morning's mission was to buy ingredients for her preholiday tryouts. She'd decided on turkey cutlets with wild mushroom sauce for tonight, telling Phil it came from her new *365 Quick and Healthy Recipes* cookbook, and he'd nodded distractedly. Oddly, despite his vigilance, the results interested him more than the means. Now that he spent weekday evenings and weekends at work, he'd conceded that Dolly had to take over the shopping for now. The sauce for the turkey cutlets called for wine, but she fully intended to find a substitute. She picked up the turkey and mushrooms, then wandered to the edge of the wine aisle and peered in, her heart thumping, before drifting forward.

A clerk approached her right away. "Can I help you find something, ma'am?"

"I was wondering if you carried that alcohol-free wine. I forget the brand name."

"Let me look. Here it is, Ariel. There's a red and a white."

She thanked him and took a bottle of white. Continuing down the aisle, she noticed that the Talus chardonnay she'd once used for her nightly dinner preparations was on sale. Some for her, some for the sauce, some for her...the cooking and drinking cycle. She'd bought it on sale for \$5.49 a bottle, a dozen every few days. Now it cost \$6.79! She'd bought finer wines to drink with dinner, when they'd had one glass each; she'd finish the bottle later, while doing the dishes.

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Two days later, Dolly entered the wine aisle with less trepidation. Her experiments so far had tasted cloying, and Phil had asked, "What's this odd flavor?" It was that bogus wine in the sauces, no better than third-rate grape

juice. She would correct that tonight. After a sleepless night, she'd come to realize that she was being unnecessarily cautious: the wine in alcohol dissipates during cooking, the very most elementary of chemical precepts! Maybe the entire Plan was overzealous, in fact misguided. She'd secretly long questioned whether these earnest young rehab therapists, with their crackling new master's degrees and ready supply of verbal bromides, truly knew what they were talking about. She reached out for two bottles of Talus, still on sale, closing her ears to *Some for me, some for the sauce...*

On Tuesday morning, Dolly measured two cups of red wine for *Coq au Vin*, an elegant old favorite. She wondered if Phil would remember it. A few drops spilled onto her hand, and she absently licked them off.

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*Coq au Vin* was the chicken dish she had started on the afternoon of their thirtieth anniversary nineteen months before. So splendid a milestone had deserved a festive soirée, Dolly believed, but Phil insisted on celebrating with their own romantic tête-à-tête, starting with hors d'oeuvres at seven-thirty. When he arrived home at six-fifteen, he found Dolly passed out on the kitchen floor, an empty wine bottle near her hand and two others hidden under the sink, the raw chicken and chopped vegetables strewn over the countertop. She awoke the next day in the hospital with Phil sitting beside her, his eyes red and swollen. "You have to do something this time," he'd said wearily. "I cannot take this anymore. If it continues, I'll leave. The choice is yours—it's me or it." On that disastrous Christmas night five months before, she'd been roused from fitful slumber by Phil's cajoling and Jason's quavering but unyielding "can't deal with it...how in hell can you?" Phil had driven him to the airport at six-thirty the next morning. Jason meant it. Phil meant it, too. Always he'd stayed beside her, gently prodding, often tight-lipped but steadfast. Not once had he so much as hinted at leaving: now he'd directly, firmly threatened. She'd frozen with fear and promised, "It will never happen again." She'd entered rehab after detox, followed The Plan faithfully.

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In her studio that afternoon, Dolly breathed in the earthy aroma of the chicken baking in the oven as she sipped a glass of red wine, a small, altogether harmless amount from the bottle she'd opened for the casserole. God, she'd missed it—she'd realized how much this morning, when she smelled it pouring it over the chicken. She found herself painting with a relaxed energy, streaking cobalt and canary yellow over the canvas' drab grays and violets. To her delight, the painting was becoming increasingly carefree. At five-fifteen, she drained the glass and tucked the wine bottle behind the paintings against the wall. She hurried downstairs to wash and dry the glass, gargle Listerine, and change clothes. Phil would be home at six.

She was about to call Phil to dinner when the phone rang. She started toward it, but he bounded across the kitchen and snatched it from the hook by the second ring, turned his back, and paced into the hallway, where he spoke almost inaudibly for several minutes—she heard him say “*Excellent*” before he hung up.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“A client.”

“Why are your clients calling you at home?”

“An especially complicated accounting issue in this case. It’ll be resolved soon,” he said. His forehead furrowed as he took a forkful of chicken. “This tastes familiar, like one of your old French specialties.”

Dolly cleared her throat. “It’s...Phyllis’ recipe.”

His eyebrows knitted together. “Oh? Still, your cooking does seem different lately. More rich sauces, like you used to make.” He coughed, that nervous cough, and his voice rose. “Why are there wine glasses on the table? What the hell is in them?”

His voice strained as it had when he’d said, “It’s me or it.”

She lifted her palms and shoulders with a quick laugh. “It’s white grape juice. Doesn’t it complement the chicken delightfully? Part of my Christmas rehearsing.”

“Rehearsing? What do you mean, ‘rehearsing’? All of a sudden you’ve forgotten how to cook? Exactly what are you planning?”

“I’m just trying to expand my horizons. Within The Plan, of course. It’ll be just as we agreed, festive but easy—turkey with cranberry-hazelnut stuffing and herb gravy, your special sweet potatoes, various vegetable and fruit side dishes, and dessert.”

“What does the word ‘simple’ mean to you? An epic cook-a-thon? Is that why you’re so wired these days?”

His words sounded clear yet far away. Did he suspect her earlier nipping up in the studio or the bottle hidden behind the paintings? How much had she had, anyway? Her lips quivered when she smiled, and her hands trembled on her lap; her mind floated as if on waves. She’d better get hold of herself, stop playing with the rules before he noticed.

“Christmas is only five days away. There’s the chaos of gift shopping, and I’ve been trying new painting techniques. You worry too much. Besides, you’ve been acting peculiar yourself lately, with your mysterious phone calls.” The other night she’d come into the bedroom and found him on the phone. He’d muttered something garbled and hung up, glancing at her sheepishly. “Anyway, we need to borrow some chairs, and I’ll be counting on you for last minute errands”—she took a quick breath and raced on—“including picking up some wine, a good one, like Coppola maybe.”

“Wine? What do you mean, wine?” The Rorschach birthmark above his forehead flared flag red.

"Of course we don't have to," she said quickly. "But every one of them drinks, and this is the most gala holiday of the year. We can't very well serve Kool-Aid, can we?"

"We could..."

"Why penalize our guests because of me? It's ungracious, and it's something I have to confront sooner or later, anyway."

"Then later. This soon is tempting fate." His eyes became dark slits, wary.

Feeling cornered, she shot back, "You should have more faith in me after this long." Her voice grew shrill. He hadn't wanted to have this dinner in the first place. "You're green in recovery," he'd said. Dolly looked away, her eyes stinging with guilty tears. Why, for a tiny slip? It happened often, they'd said so in rehab. She could stop any time. He stood up. "I'll clear the table. Then I'm going for a long walk. You're letting this whole thing get out of hand. And don't tell me I worry too much. I haven't worried enough over the years." He stacked the dishes with so much clatter she thought they'd break.

After loading the dishwasher, Dolly fled to her studio. She looked at the painting on the easel, its emerging vibrancy, and thought of the zest of her old cooking style, of the nips of this afternoon that had filled her with a vibrancy she couldn't seem to summon any other way. She knew that she could handle an occasional drink by now, that the rehab edict—that it never worked, that it foretold a full-blown backslide—was empty rhetoric. But Phil believed it, unreservedly. Her head throbbed as if about to explode.

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Dolly was finishing the stuffing on Christmas morning when she heard Phil's footsteps on the stairs. She hurried to return the bottle to its hiding place behind the soup cans, managing to pull the pantry door shut just as he walked into the kitchen.

It was already eight o'clock, late for him. His eyes had the hollow look of a restless night, his voice a forced edge of cheer. "Merry Christmas, m'little Yuletide Yummy!" he said, his traditional greeting since their first Christmas together.

"Merry Christmas to you, sweetheart." She smiled and touched his cheek. "After I finish the crust for the tarts, we'll have breakfast." They usually opened their gifts on Christmas morning, but they'd done it last night instead. He had given her a stunning pair of silver earrings, and she'd surprised him with a too-expensive fountain pen he'd coveted. Watching him cradle the pen in his hand, beaming, she was glad she'd splurged. Like taking laissez-faire insurance.

"Tarts, in the plural?"

"Pumpkin, cranberry, and apple-pear."

"Three? Holy Moose, Dolly! You should have ordered from Prantle's or asked Marjorie and Ina to help."

"You know I wouldn't do either." She also knew he was right. She felt exhausted, muddled with an odd mixture of excitement and dejection. Unable to sleep, she'd come downstairs at six-thirty to make a pot of coffee, splashing vodka into her fourth cup to counteract the nerve-jangling effect of the caffeine. "When are you starting the sweet potatoes?"

"After I set up the tables and chairs and put the juice in to chill, and wine."

He'd left work yesterday with a shopping list Dolly had handed him that morning. Later, setting bags of groceries on the kitchen counter, he'd said, "Against my better judgment, I bought some wine, and flowers for the tables." He kissed her. "I've given the matter some thought the past few days. I'll try to be more trusting."

Dolly's breath had caught in her throat. "That's...good," she'd whispered. He hadn't returned from his walk the other night for more than an hour, despite the bitter chill and wind. Nor had he spoken to her till the next day. That had scared her—it was unlike him to react with silence when angry. Did he suspect?

"I do worry," he continued. "But I'm not always wrong." They'd laughed uneasily.

The morning whizzed by in a flurry of chopping and mixing, dusting and flower arranging. She took her ivory embroidered tablecloth from its plastic bag to iron; her mother's most luxurious possession, it had been her wedding gift to them. At three, when Phil went out to sweep the front walk, she sneaked the bottle of vodka from the pantry and poured a turquoise water tumbler full, proud of having held off so long. She would have nothing to explain—it looked exactly like water and gave off no odor, in the glass or on the breath.

They sang Christmas carols while they worked, and Dolly teased Phil about his precise way of lining up the silverware and folding the napkins so that each corner met. "What a perfectionist, but what kind of accountant can't count? You've set one too many places." He flushed and left the room.

As she continued to swig from the water tumbler, her facial muscles slackened, and her movements and speech slowed. The strain of the anticipation and memories that had gripped her for weeks began to slide away. Occasionally, she thought she noticed Phil's jaw stiffen, his lips compress. Or was she imagining it?

At four o'clock, she went upstairs to get dressed. She laid out her magic holiday outfit, the flamboyant red velvet caftan that increased her height by five inches and reduced her hips by ten pounds. Her *artiste* persona, Marjorie called it. Wild Woman. From her dresser drawer, she took the velvet box containing the earrings Phil had given her last night. She slipped into the tub, a frothy blanket of bubbles; the water's silky warmth soothed her aching limbs and lulled her into drowsiness, soon broken by a run of sharp raps on the door.

"Are you nearly finished? They're coming in forty minutes, and I have to shower."

\* \* \*

By five-thirty, the house was ringing with voices. Logs crackled in the fireplace, and presents spilled out from under the tree. They'd trimmed it the night before with gauzy silver ribbon and golden pears, and perched a red-plumed partridge on the top branch. More pared down than usual but effective, Dolly had conceded. As they stood at the door greeting everyone, she realized how acutely she'd missed noise and laughter in their home.

She took a tray of cheese puffs and began circulating with an ebullience that matched her dress, yet tinged with nagging reminders of her shame. Over the growing noise of conversation, she heard the phone jangle and spotted Phil darting into the kitchen. When he returned a moment later, she caught his eye and mouthed out, "Another client on Christmas Day?" He smiled, somewhat tightly, she thought, and turned his head.

She sought out her sister first. They embraced without speaking, Marjorie rubbing her back the way she'd done to soothe her into sleep as a tot.

"So. How are you doing?" Marjorie asked, searching her face.

Looking for a sign, Dolly supposed. "Wonderfully." But she wasn't too sure. She'd just gone to check the turkeys—with both ovens on, the kitchen was sweltering—and, suddenly light-headed, she'd had to lean against the counter to steady herself.

"Can we be real sisters again, Marjie?" She hated herself for asking, but she'd always craved Marjorie's reassurance.

"That's more up to you than me. You make your life, you know that."

In rehab, Dolly had flashed with anger at such wisdom: *The greatest lies are the ones you tell yourself. You hurt yourself more than anyone else. They can manage without you, but what will you do without them?* A well of unfaced truths had lain submerged, waiting for her to admit to what she had known for years but resisted, still resisted, knowing.

"I miss seeing Jason," Marjorie said. "He couldn't make it this time?"

"No, not this time," Dolly said quickly. "I wish he were here, too." Marjorie's question stabbed like a javelin in the chest. Surely she knew why he wasn't here.

She turned away and floated back through the living room, catching waves of disconnected conversation, feeling at once there and distant, as if she were watching herself from behind a shadow of mist. Occasionally, she retreated to the kitchen and the turquoise glass, the leftover vodka a well of water by now.

When the turkeys looked browned to perfection, she hastily washed and dried the water tumbler before calling Phil to carve, a task he relished. The last time, he had yielded the knife to Jason with a sweeping flourish, as if passing on a royal scepter, and Dolly had joked that Jason's delicate carving foretold a brilliant future as a neurosurgeon. But her speech had skidded, words on ice, and Jason had glowered silently. He knew with almost psychic perception when she

was drinking, however minute the amount or clever her subterfuge, even when no one else had the slightest inkling.

"Who called before?" she asked, as Phil bent over the turkey, apparently deciding where to place the first incision.

"Let me concentrate now," he said, without lifting his head. "We'll talk later."

Once he'd filled the tray with symmetrical slices and spooned the stuffing from the cavity, Dolly ushered everyone to the tables. It was as elaborate a spread as she'd envisioned on her first solo shopping trip the day after Thanksgiving, each dish flawlessly done, and the room buzzed with anticipation. She started the platters around, savoring the bursts of color and luscious smells, then sank into her chair with weary pride. All was well. What a relief! Mercifully, the cottony thickness in her head was clearing.

She watched Phil serve the wine, a popular Coppola chardonnay that she especially liked. He set a nearly full bottle behind her and poured white grape juice into her glass. Placing the bottle beside the wine, he walked toward his own place. "Too busy," she heard him say, "...second year of his surgical residency." Jason's unending silence, an unhealed, unhealing wound. Was there any use, in any of her struggles?

Marjorie, two seats away, said, "Dolly, the table looks beautiful, the lilies and poinsettias and Mom's tablecloth. You've outdone yourself."

"A definite improvement over last time, isn't it?" They laughed and others joined in, and the air cleared. The last time, the dinner had sat on the kitchen counter, tepid and intact, looking as congealed as a caterer's week-old window display.

Marjorie peered at Dolly, frowning. "What's that you're drinking?"

"White grape juice." She smiled and shrugged, draining her glass. Whatever she did, she'd never escape suspicion.

The entire table was absorbed in the pandemonium of crisscrossing platters. She contemplated the bottle of chilled chardonnay placed beside the grape juice behind her and gazed into her empty glass, her fingers tapping the stem. No one would know. For nineteen months, she had done so well, except for this little slip, a temporary mini-vacation that hardly counted. It had happened to several of her rehab compatriots. Some had come back for a second time, even a third. Not at all unusual. She could get back on track, easily.

She felt the tingle of Phil's eyes on her and tried to read his expression. Suddenly, the cold fear that had consumed her those months ago, his firm, flat "If it continues, I'll leave" flooded back, like ice water through her veins. "It's me or it." She shuddered. Did he still mean it? Or had he lapsed back into the complacency she'd always counted on, that had so infuriated Jason? Dolly the perpetrator, Phil the perpetrator. He had capitulated—about Christmas dinner, about serving wine. But he'd also scrutinized her every move.

"A refill, Dolly?" Beside her, Phil tilted the juice bottle, and the pale lemon-colored liquid swirled into her glass. "Great success," he murmured. His praise shot through her like a cupid's arrow of guilt. Forget the wine. He had been her life, her strength for thirty two years. After Jason, especially after Jason, she couldn't risk losing him.

He frowned quizzically. "Are you all right? You look bleary-eyed."

"I'm fine. Just tired, excited." She smiled brightly, wanting to slip into the pantry for a small splash, aching to feel the tart coolness sliding down her throat, the burning warmth of quiet elation suffusing her chest. But she couldn't. Not now.

She stood, gripping the table for support, gambling that she was safe from a telltale lisp. When Phil took his seat, she began to speak; spotting the extra place setting, she wondered why he hadn't bothered to remove it.

"I'd like to offer a toast! To you, our family and friends, for making this holiday beautiful by coming tonight. To all of us, for a year full of promise. Bon appetit!"

"Bon appetit!"

She raised her juice glass and smiled into the gaiety of clinking glasses. Tonight, a celebration of her triumph, her reward. Tomorrow, nothing.

Seconds later, the doorbell rang—three loud, swift ding-dongs in a row, unmistakably familiar. She looked at Phil, her mouth gaping. "Go get the door, Dolly," he said quietly. His smile slid from impish to helpless to angry, and his jowls tensed with resignation.

The walk from the dining table to the entrance hall, no more than ten feet, felt like a desolate twenty mile corridor leading to an execution chamber. Her throat closed in panic and her mouth grew parched, shriveled inside. Oh my God. He knew. What had she done? She struggled to catch her breath, blinking furiously to clear the haze from her eyes, and reached toward the wall to steady herself. One foot in front of the other, slowly, she told herself, now another. The knot in her chest loosened; her breath came more easily.

Perhaps the effect of this afternoon's vodka had worn off entirely, or it had never actually affected her at all. Perhaps Jason, standing in the doorway, would see the glowing vision of recovery she'd longed for him to see, not the empty sham her recovery had become. Perhaps she had misread Phil, and tomorrow she could begin anew. Sham, shame. Tomorrow, absolutely. But the familiarity of those words, of the timeworn, worn-out promise, stunned her awake, and she knew better. Her smile quavering, she opened the door and her arms to her son.