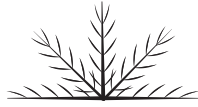


*Christmas at
Grey Sage*

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Chapter One

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Maude stood at the kitchen window and rubbed her hands, especially the fingers of her left hand. Seems the cold made them ache a bit more with every winter, making it painful to hold her palette now. But she wasn't painting today. She and Lita would spend the day preparing for the arrival of the ten guests who would occupy the inn for the next couple of nights.

She turned from the window to see Silas in the keeping room just off the kitchen, sitting in his favorite chair.

Reason says I should have used that ratty chair for firewood years ago, but somehow seeing Silas this morning, sitting, reading, and drinking his second cup of coffee, makes me glad I kept it.

Making Silas comfortable these days was higher on her list of priorities than replacing a worn-out chair.

Seeing her look, Silas grumbled from across the room, "Lita doing the grocery shopping? Did you tell her not to buy eggnog? I don't like that store-bought eggnog. It's too sweet. We'll be making our own."

"I'm certain Lita knows you don't like eggnog from a carton since she's been drinking your homemade eggnog for about forty years." Maude continued looking over the guest list Lily had sent.

"Did you tell her to buy real cream and lots of it?"

"Yes, Silas. She's getting extra cream and extra eggs, and we're counting on you for the extra *nog*. In any case, she and Alo should be here shortly. She'll be preparing food, and I'm sure Alo will be cutting wood."

“Good, we wouldn’t want our guests to arrive to a cold house, now would we, Maude?”

It was strange to be thinking of food and fires and guests this time of year. It had been an age since Grey Sage had housed people during the Christmas season.

Not so the rest of the year. Several years ago, Lita had persuaded Maude and Silas to open their home as an inn.

Lita had pleaded. *“But Maude, you know how many times the tourists see the sign on the gate and drive in. They already think it’s an inn, and they’re looking for a cup of coffee and something to eat.”* She also convinced Maude they could easily sleep and feed twenty on the weekends. *“I’ll do the cooking and cleaning, and you can host retreats.”*

Maude had given in to the idea of hosting artists’ and writers’ retreats, and it wasn’t long before Grey Sage developed quite a reputation across the Southwest and in the East, where Silas and Maude still had many friends.

But even as life returned to the house with so many guests, the one thing Silas and Maude could never manage was Christmas at home. They closed Grey Sage for two weeks during the holidays and took a trip.

Until now. This year Lily Mayfield had persuaded Maude to open Grey Sage for a couple of nights for a group of her travelers. Maude agreed—with the condition they’d be out by Thursday, with Silas and her on a flight by Friday morning.

Maude felt the wind gust as Lita came through the back door. “Getting colder out there?”

“Oh, yes.” Lita plopped several bags on the counter. “The sky’s a thick gray this morning. I’m happy to be done with the shopping and back home.”

Maude rushed to grab a bag of groceries before it toppled onto the floor. “Shall we get the other bags out of the truck?”

“No, Alo’s bringing them after he puts the frozen items away in the storage-room freezer. Let’s just take care of these. We’ll have

plenty to eat no matter what, and plenty of coffee. Speaking of which, I need a cup. What about you?"

"No, thanks. There's coffee in the pot, but I've had my limit. And don't offer any more to Silas, please."

Maude started toward the pantry with several cans and two bags of rice but was stopped by Lita, who had bolted between her and the pantry door. "Why don't you pour my cup of coffee and let me put these away?" her friend suggested.

"I know, I know. You just don't want me messing things up in there." Maude smiled and released the canned goods and rice into Lita's arms.

Lita laughed. "For certain you do a better job of pouring coffee than you do of putting away groceries. You and that artistic brain of yours think it's better to just open the door, toss them in, and see where they might land. Only thing is I'll be the one sweeping rice and trying to find the canned artichoke hearts while I'm preparing meals for our guests." She continued into the pantry. "Did you get the guest list yet?" she called over her shoulder.

"Lily sent it this morning." Maude poured Lita's cup of coffee and added cream, handing it to Lita when she returned.

Lita took it with a grateful smile. "Did the number change?"

"No, still only ten. She also sent a rooming list and a brief description of our guests. Looks like an interesting-bordering-on-eccentric group headed our way." Maude grabbed the list and shared the details. "A retired military officer, an aging ballerina, a religion professor with his wife and a son who's recuperating from war injuries, a pharmacist and his music-teaching wife, a grieving widow who's a psycho-therapist, her daughter ... Need I go on? Oh, and then there's Lily."

Lita took a sip of her coffee, then began steady trips to the pantry and back. "Well, sounds like they have it all covered. We'll have music and dance, religion and politics. Oh, and with a grieving psycho-therapist who has a single daughter, we're bound to see tears. And,

as you say, there's Lily. She always brings the drama with her latest man-grabbing stories."

Alo came through the kitchen door with more grocery bags hanging from his arms, shoulders, and hands. He grunted as he kicked the door shut. "We could have left the frozen goods outside. Feels like they wouldn't be thawing 'til June. How many guests are we expecting? You have enough groceries here to feed a hungry tribe."

"Maude, would you pour him a cup of coffee? Might help his grumps." Lita took some of the bags from Alo and headed toward the pantry again. "Maude just went over the guest list of ten. But we have more than one tribe to feed. I didn't want to leave the mountain again unless I had to, so I bought food for when Catori and Doli and the grandchildren arrive for Christmas."

Silas got up from his chair and patted the ten-pound bag of beans. "Looks like we can feed them beans until after the New Year." He fixed a look on Lita. "Did you get plenty of eggs and cream for the eggnog?"

"I did, and it would have been cheaper to buy a cow and a couple of chickens."

Maude's eyes widened. "Don't give him any ideas. I finally got him retired from doctoring and taking care of folks. We don't need anything else around here to feed or take care of. We just need to get through the next couple of days, and then we're off."

"Oh, sure. You're off to the warm waters of the Caribbean, spending Christmas with strangers under palm trees." Lita shook her head. "Wish you'd just stay here with us. Our casita looks like I've been spending too much time in the Christmas store in Santa Fe, and Catori and Doli would love to see you. Would you just think about it, Maude?"

"And I'd love to see them and all your new decorations. But our cruise is already paid for, and my achy joints are ready for some tropical sunshine. And I'm finally putting my toes into the water off Curaçao. Another check on my checklist." Maude grinned in anticipation.

Alo removed his jacket. “Tell me again: how many different countries have you visited on your Christmas excursions?”

“Curaçao will make seventeen countries in the last twenty-two years,” Silas answered.

Lita rolled her eyes. “There’s just something wrong about Christmas in Curaçao. No snow, no pine trees, no fireplaces. And ‘Silent Night’ samba style?”

Maude raised her eyebrows. “Just think, though, Lita—it’s all about interesting cultures. You started this. I never saw your venison rump roast with a cactus pear Christmas salad on a Christmas dinner table in West Texas. Oh, or your Hopi Cold Christmas Cake.”

“Yes, but all of that is *our* tradition,” Lita retaliated.

“True, and *our* Christmas tradition is to see how many culturally different Christmas dinners we can have before we’re too old to travel. Then it’ll be your venison rump roast again.”

All four adults in the kitchen went silent. Escaping Christmas had become Maude and Silas’s tradition, and even after twenty-two years, remembering still brought pain.

Lita broke the silence. “And what if I’m too old to cook it?” she asked.

Alo put his hand on Lita’s shoulder. “See, I’ve been telling you to teach your daughters how to cook in our tradition.”

“I did teach them, and they’ll do a fine job when it’s their turn. But for now, it’s still my turn. And right now, it’s my turn to get the rest of these groceries put away and the beef bones boiling to make beef stock.” Lita pointed to the door. “Alo, could you take the rest of the boxes down to our casita? And Silas, could you check the cabinet to make certain you have enough nog for all the cream and eggs I bought? And Maude, maybe you could get a pad and pencil and we could finalize the menus while I get the water boiling.”

Maude rummaged for writing supplies, then sat on the barstool, ready to make notes. “Hmm, the butcher must adore you, paying money for all those beef bones that he’d have to throw away.”

“I’m not certain we’d want to know what they do with these beef

bones if I didn't buy them, but I can't make good soup and chili without good stock." Lita added salt and pepper to the pot.

"I guess that means we can work soup and chili into our menu, right? Maybe for tomorrow's lunch?"

"They're arriving for lunch tomorrow? And they'll be back for tomorrow night's dinner?"

"Yes on the lunch, no on the dinner. They'll eat in town tomorrow night. You might go easy on the heat in the green chili, though. Lily says these folks have Midwest palates, and I'm not certain they can handle New Mexico green chili."

"Well, let's tingle those delicate palates and give them a true Sangre de Cristo Mountains experience," Lita said. She grinned impishly and added more black pepper to the pot. "And Lily's not bringing a man with her this trip?"

"No, I couldn't believe it. Such a rare occasion. But I think that's why she put this trip together."

"Why? Because she's manless right now?"

"Maybe." Maude shrugged. "Or maybe she's got her eye on the single military guy."

"Which one? The old retired guy or the young soldier?" Lita dumped a bowl of beef bones into the stock pot of boiling water and secured the lid on top.

"Now, Lita, Lily has her ways, but I don't think ..." She trailed off. Lita was already shaking her head.

"Uh-huh. I still don't understand how you two became such friends. She never married and changes men more often than we change the light bulbs around here, and you've been a one-woman man all your life." Lita washed her hands and dried them on the dish towel, then reached for a basket of fresh peppers.

"I don't think our friendship had much of anything to do with our mating instincts. I think it had to do more with our mutual curiosity. When we met, she was Manhattan in a sack dress and a fur-trimmed jacket. I must have looked like Annie Oakley to her—my third day in Chicago and standing on the corner of Madison and Wabash trying

to find my way to the main building on Michigan Avenue. She took pity on me and walked me to the front door a few blocks away.”

“Somehow I can’t picture Lily being kind to a stranger.”

“Like I said, I think she was just curious. We were so different. It’s a lot more than eighteen hundred miles separating Lubbock from New York City. We had much to learn from each other. And of course, we shared a passion for art,” Maude finished with a smile.

“But that was so many years ago, and you’re still friends.”

“That we are. I guess those long walks on Lake Shore Drive stretched more than our legs. And then there were the late nights in the studios trying to finish a project. And all the days and evenings we spent in museums together while I was filling up time and missing Silas.”

“Was she man crazy then?”

“You might say that she liked *variety*, and she was a bit—” Maude paused. “Ahead of her time. At least, ahead of my time.”

Lita laughed out loud. “Guess she taught a young, small-town, yes-ma’am-ing, church-going, skinny thing like you a few new tricks.”

“Well, friendship with Lily exposed me to a bit more than art. But that was—is—Lily. Underneath all that flamboyance is a good soul who loves life and sees the world differently than most of us.”

“She’s still raising eyebrows with her flamboyance. Last time she was here for a retreat, I heard a young artist ask her where she grew up, and she shook that flaming red mane of hers and said, ‘*Grow up? I didn’t grow up. Who wants to grow up?*’” Lita mimicked the way Lily shook her long, curly locks. “Left that poor young thing speechless.”

“Avant-garde. That’s what she was and still is.”

“Avant-garde or not, I’ll be on *my* guard and prepared for most anything with her around. At least they’ll be out touring Santa Fe most of the time.”

“Yes, they will. And while they’re out, I’ll be packing my red crepe pants and kimono for Christmas Eve in Curaçao,” Maude said with satisfaction.