



A Taste of Christmas Magic

Author: *Sinclair Jayne*

Category: Romance

Description: This Christmas, he just might believe in a little magic...

Rustin Wildish furiously left Belmont North Carolina as a teen to make his reputation in the culinary world. Over twelve years later, he's back in the town that where the founding family of Mayes once branded him a worthless bad boy. Intent to show them how wrong they were, he buys the local diner—considered an institution—from his former mentor and boss, Miss Millie Maye and transforms. Success will be his revenge as the Maye's and other 'upstanding families,' are forced to eat their words and so much more. But then the youngest Maye daughter asks him for help, and he inexplicably says yes.

This Christmas Chloe Maye has finally bitten off far more than she can chew. She's agreed to organize The Maye family's annual fundraiser—a movable feast where historic downtown homes are open to the public and each serve one course of a lavish meal. Chloe can't cook so armed with a historic handwritten cookbook she mysteriously finds in a mini library outside her Grandma Millie's home, she approaches Rustin for help. She's always crushed on him and is thrilled he's back.

But when Rustin, who ignored her their entire childhood, takes a bite from the meal she cooks under his exacting supervision, the unthinkable happens. He falls head over heels in love...

Total Pages (Source): 51

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Prologue

Millicent Maye concluded the short meeting and waved her four granddaughters off, but before she locked the doors or turned off the lights for the night, she had to implement step two of her plan. She'd surprised them all with her announcement. That was for sure. But no mischievous smile kissed her lips. She'd waited too long. She'd known it, but something inside her wanted to grant her girls, as she called them though they were all adults, the freedom that she and many of the women of her generation had never had.

She walked up the elegant, wide curved staircase to her bedroom, feeling unusually tired, but her mind was settled. She opened the cedar chest that had been a gift from her mother, who had received it from her mother—four generations starting with Maeve O'Malley, who had received it from her mother and had brought the chest with her when she'd left Ireland and talked her way onto a ship bound for America.

"So much history," she whispered, running her fingers over the roses carved into the lid, but this was not the time to reminisce.

She opened chest and picked up the book she'd stored there for far too long.

Food Is Love

Recipes for

Southern Love Spells

She pressed her lips against the worn leather cover. The book was a family heirloom passed down—like the trunk—mother to daughter, but Millie had only had one son and now four granddaughters. She'd waited. Looked for a sign—who was ready for the book? Something inside of her had whispered that the book would choose. But the book had never left the trunk. Had never whispered to her. Had never showed up unexpectedly to tell her when it was time. Perhaps because she had hidden the book away, a little awed by its power.

She'd never fully understood the book. Hadn't used any of the recipes in her diner except the one for biscuits. Over the years, many of the book's recipients had added recipes, notes, stories and advice. Millie never had, perhaps too intimidated by the book's legacy.

Or too arrogant.

She should have used the book with her girls, passed it down years ago. She regretted that now.

Holding the book to her chest, she walked back downstairs and out her front door. Down the regal steps to the brick path and out her wrought iron gates to the small mini home library that had been a gift many years ago from the town as a thank you for her generosity. All of her girls had loved the little library, adding books and borrowing them over the years. Chloe, the teacher and the youngest, still did.

Millie opened the door, surprised to find the library, with its three brightly painted shelves, empty. She felt like her heart skipped a beat. The library was never empty. Never. She made sure of that, but she wasn't the only one. The mini library was loved by many.

She closed her eyes and sent a wish up to her ancestors.

“It’s time to find her soulmate,” she whispered, trusting in the book to know which granddaughter was primed to find her true love.

She placed the book carefully on the shelf, not feeling bereft, as she’d imagined but buoyed by hope and a sense rightness that had eluded her for so long.

Chapter One

“What’s he doing here?”

Chloe Cramer, still riding the high from her Madrigal Dinner solo, dragged her attention reluctantly back to her cousin, Jessica Maye. Finally, Chloe had had the opportunity to sing the plaintive and beautiful call to buy her lavender at the annual South Point Abbey College Madrigal Dinner that was a fundraiser for the small but prestigious college’s music conservatory and fine arts department. Held the Saturday before Thanksgiving, the Madrigal Dinner kicked off Belmont’s holiday season and Chloe’s favorite time of year.

“Who?” Chloe didn’t look where Jessica pointed. Instead, she tilted back her head to stare at the panoply of stars. “It’s a night full of stars and possibility,” she sang out, still riding the high of the night.

“No. Just no,” Jessica said. “Not him.”

Chloe and Jessica had just finished loading the last of the rented linens from the annual event into laundry bags. Already a team of fraternity brothers from South Point Abbey folded up the tables and rolled them toward a storage area in the back of the small, Gothic-like campus chapel. Chloe loved how the many groups on campus jumped in and pulled off so many events throughout the year.

She continued to hum the song she’d just performed. It was, in her opinion, the most

beautiful feature of the Belmont Madrigal Dinner, which the Maye family had launched decades ago.

“Look!” Jessica gripped her arm, halting her progress across downtown’s large Maye Park. “It’s him. I know it is. I can’t believe he’s returned to Belmont.”

Chloe stared dreamily at the “interloper.” She’d been sneaking peeks at him most of the night. How Jessica had only now noticed the bad boy of Belmont was a travesty. Chloe had been dreamily staring at Rustin Wildish since childhood. She’d noticed him at the beginning of the night unloading steaming tureens of stew from a black van.

She, of course, had been running late. She’d dashed across the park towards the dinner under medieval-looking tents—although there had been merry party lights casting a golden glow. She’d ducked behind a fat dogwood trunk and wiggled into her serving wench costume. She loved playing a serving wench because she could be cheeky with the guests and other wenches, and often broke into quoting medieval poetry or song. Jessica and her two accomplished, elegant and sophisticated sisters always played a lady and sat at the head of the table as hostess.

“Jessica, Belmont is Rustin’s—”

“Sh...sh...sh...sh.” Jessica clapped her hand over her mouth like she was still eight and had blurted an embarrassing truth. “Don’t say his name.”

Chloe dragged Jessica’s hand off her mouth. She was so over how everyone shaded the Wildish family, especially Rustin. Belmont was better than this, or it should be, and all the Maye family—not just Grandma Millie—should step up and set the example.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“What is he, Voldemort?” Chloe rolled her eyes and shifted her focus back to Rustin—a much more enjoyable view than Jessica’s peevish pout. Even from yards away, Chloe could see the flex of muscle in Rustin’s forearms and part of a tat as he loaded tubs of dirty dishes into racks in the back of a black van.

She sighed in pleasure. He’d always moved like water. And his focus was hot. Even from here, she could see that his rangy frame had filled out: broad shoulders, narrow waist, tight butt, and long legs.

Yes, please.

Not that Rustin Wildish would ever notice her. She was small and unremarkable and considered the “odd Maye.” Not even a Maye by blood but a charity child Miss Millie Maye had generously raised.

“What’s he doing here?” Jessica again demanded as she peered around the tree then spun back and flattened herself against the trunk like they were playing hide-and-seek.

Jessica had already changed out of her medieval costume. Chloe had forgotten where she’d stashed her bag of street clothes.

“Jessica, you’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting? Oh, dear Lord.” Jessica crossed herself and Chloe crossed her eyes. “Rustin Wildish is back in Belmont.”

“I know,” Chloe said, devouring Rustin with her hungry gaze. “He looks as delicious as his stew.”

Jessica made a weird choking sound that made Chloe laugh, but she noticed, Jessica too still stared at Rustin who’d kept the rumor mill full of grist since kindergarten. Grandma Millie joined Rustin. She was tall, slim, and spry even in her late seventies. She paced beside him as he toted dirty dishes, her ringed fingers weaving in the air as she no doubt detailed another long list of directions for him to carry out. She’d always worked her employees and volunteers hard, but fairly.

Wow, even the way Rustin cocks his head and listens is sexy.

“Unbelievable,” Jessica said and glared as if scandalized. She looked at that moment, exactly like her mother, and Chloe laughed, hoping to help Jessica snap out of her unusual judgey mood.

“C’mon. It’s funny. Same as when we were kids. You, shocked by all things Rustin Wildish, and me, sneaking around and spying on him.”

Chloe had been fascinated by Rustin. She saw through his impressive brood to the hardworking boy who wanted to be the man to pull his family out of the dark and cold of poverty. Most everyone else in town had fueled the dismissive rumors about generations of lazy, addicted criminals and skanks of the Wildish clan. But even the worst gossips couldn’t deny the Wildish men were panty-flaming hot.

Jessica peeked around the tree trunk again.

“What is Grandma Millie thinking? He shouldn’t even be in North Carolina, much less Belmont!”

“He’s using the skills that Grandma Millie taught him to help the college.” Chloe felt

her patience slip. “Why are you being so rude?”

“He’s probably stealing from Grandma Millie.”

“Dirty dishes?” Chloe loved Jessica, but she’d always been way too critical of Rustin. “Please. He worked for Grandma Millie for years as a kid. She taught him how to be a chef. He’s volunteering, which is an homage to his...”

“A chef,” Jessica interrupted and rolled her beautiful green eyes. “He was a dishwasher and left town without graduating high school.”

“He went to culinary school,” Chloe defended.

“How do you know that?” Jessica crossed her arms, her expression tight with disapproval. Color slashed across her high cheekbones. “Rustin is trouble just like his whole family tree.”

“That is not fair, Jessica, and you know it.”

“He’s bad news,” Jessica insisted.

The critical behavior was so unlike Jessica that Chloe stared at her, mind whirling. What was the cause of her intense dislike? To Chloe’s knowledge, Jessica hadn’t seen Rustin since high school. She sounded more like her father, Sean Ryan Maye, than her usual thoughtful, kind self.

“Don’t crush on him again, Chloe. Steer clear. He’ll smash your heart.”

“Like there’s a chance of that happening,” she said good-naturedly. If she had a chance with Rustin, she’d willingly risk any level of heartbreak.

“Seriously, Chloe, steer clear.” Jessica gave her a quick, fierce hug. “You’re so sweet you give everyone the benefit of the doubt. You don’t know what Rustin’s like.”

“You do?” Her interest flared.

Jessica took a step back, her leaf-green eyes wide in her creamy white skin. “Of course not.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Jessica seized her hand and dragged her across the downtown park of Grandma Millie's historical home. And what a home it was: a beautiful famous landmark, eight thousand square feet of fully restored and preserved antebellum architectural history delicately perched on two acres of manicured lawns backing up to a small man-made lake and fountain. It had been in the Maye family for generations, and Grandma Millie had moved into the house as a bride and still ruled there. Her one son had married and raised his three daughters in the house, but he and her aunt had bought a house on Lake Wiley after Jessica, his youngest daughter, had left for college.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Chloe pulled her arm free. "You're like six-inches taller than I am and a total runner and with all the gardening you've been doing to update Grandma Millie's old farm property, you're practically an Amazon."

"Maybe that's what Grandma Millie's text was about to meet her at the house. Maybe she needs help getting rid of Rustin."

"Unlikely. She always took an interest in Rustin," Chloe said, and then she pulled her cousin's stiff, slim body into a tight hug, wanting to will her suspicion and bad mood away. "Please, Jessie." She resorted to the nickname from childhood. "We're all grown up. Give Rustin a chance."

"No," Jessica said.

*

Jessica's sisters, Sarah and Meghan were already assembled in Grandma Millie's parlor. They too had changed from their medieval costumes into knit dresses with

matching blazers and colorful high-heeled ankle boots. It shamed Chloe that she could barely walk in high heels much less run across a park like Jessica had.

“Guess what?” Jessica burst out, and Chloe sighed heavily.

It wasn't like Rustin was guilty of anything except being incredibly hot and not particularly friendly and coming from a rough, disadvantaged family. But she didn't blame him for that. He couldn't help who his family was any more than she could help that her family had abandoned her like a Christmas morning fruit basket on the Maye's massive and elegant front porch.

Like her, Rustin had done his best to help his family. Sure he'd been an indifferent student probably because he'd been hustling for work to help his single mom who had rheumatoid arthritis and four kids to house and feed.

In her mind, Rustin was a hero, like Heathcliff or—

“So nice of you to join us girls,” Grandma Millie interrupted Chloe's thoughts.

One night in town, and I'm Rustin-obsessed again.

Grandma Millie sat in her usual cherry winged-back armchair with the brilliant silk peacock-patterned upholstery.

“Let's get to it,” Grandma Millie said briskly as soon as Jessica perched on a chair and Chloe chose a matching ottoman. Seeing Jessica's perfect posture, Chloe made an effort to think like the ballerina she'd never been. While all of the Maye sisters looked calm, likely they all wondered about the summons following the Madrigal Dinner. Sunday dinners at Grandma Millie's was when they would “autopsy” any family news or event the family spearheaded.

“Girls, I have an announcement,” Grandma Millie said. She took a sip of tea and then looked at each of them.

“What?” Meghan made a rolling hand motion, as if rolling out a red carpet, to hurry along Grandma Millie.

“Meghan Carlingford Maye, don’t hurry me,” Grandma Millie said, and as if she pulled a string, Meghan shot ramrod straight. Twin slashes of color stained her cheeks. Gone was the corporate attorney.

Chloe bobbed the teapot. She wasn’t technically a Maye sister, though she’d grown up alongside them and was often lumped in with the Maye girls, even now that they were women. But she’d never called Sean Ryan MayeDaddy. And Elizabeth Katherine Maye would have had a stroke if she’d once called herMama. Grandma Millie had beenGrandma Millieas long as Chloe could remember, and the few times she’d inquired about her past—Jessica called it her origin story—Grandma Millie had called her ablessingin a tone that warned her to leave the topic alone.

And for the most part, she tried to.

Grandma Millie looked at each of them, one by one. It seemed as if everyone was holding their breath. Chloe heard the grandfather clock, a relic brought over by boat from Ireland, mark the time. That clock had terrified her as a small child.

“The town is changing,” Grandma Millie said, and she took a fortifying sip of tea.

They all waited. No one interrupted Grandma Millie. And they couldn’t disagree.

Belmontwaschanging. The mills that once had made Gaston County an economic force had closed decades ago. The Mayes had owned three of those once thriving mills but had turned the market crash into property development, and the completion

of the highway over a decade ago had made the charms of historic Belmont more accessible to Charlotte residents. The pandemic had brought more development as young professionals jettisoned their condos, wanting yards, open spaces, coffee shops, wine bars and restaurants and activities to raise a family.

“We can fight the change or lead it.”

Grandma Millie took another sip of tea and then carefully put down her teacup and saucer and blotted her lips with a linen napkin.

“Why would we fight change?” Chloe wondered. Jessica lightly tapped her arm, a subtle warning.

“I’m a fighter.” Again, she drilled them with a stern look. “As are all of you.”

Chloe sat straighter on the ottoman. She’d always wanted to be a true Maye and often felt like she fell short. But she wouldn’t let Grandma Millie down. Not ever.

“Mayes are one of the founding families of Belmont,” Grandma Millie intoned, “yet none of you are married. It’s past time.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

No one spoke. An image of Rustin—black hair tumbling over his brow, tatted forearms flexing as he carried the tub of dirty soup tureens—popped in her head, and she felt herself flush.

“I don’t think any of you are even dating.”

None of the Maye sisters spoke. They were a little pale, and their fingers fidgeted on the teacups, and no one looked at Grandma Millie. Chloe figured they were all thinking their love lives—or lack of them—were none of Grandma Millie’s business, but they were too polite to say so. Chloe knew Grandma Millie not only considered all of her family’s lives her business, but all the goings on in the town her business as well.

“Well?” Grandma Millie demanded. “Nothing? Do I have to do everything myself?”

“You want to find dates for us?” Chloe tried to cut some of the tension.

Jessica pressed her lips together to keep from laughing, but Sarah and Meghan looked a little scandalized.

Grandma Millie made a sound that on another woman would have been described as a snort.

“It’s tradition for Mayes to lead this town, and it’s time you all stepped into your roles.”

No one spoke, but the schooled expressions likely hid many thoughts.

It's like we're in a play, but we don't know our lines.

Grandma Millie picked up her teacup and saucer again, a small smile ghosted as she clearly savored the drama.

"I am stepping down from my leadership in the Belmont Ladies' League, and the four of you are taking my place."

Sarah's mouth opened but nothing came out. Jessica regarded Grandma Millie like a prospective client she wasn't sure she wanted to take on. Meghan examined the linen napkin in her lap like she'd never seen it before.

"What exactly does that mean, Grandma Millie?" Chloe finally ventured.

Grandma Millie was incredibly busy chairing many committees in town and at church. A few months ago, she'd shuttered her diner, Millie's, a town institution, for renovations, and she hadn't allowed any of them to see the progress, even Chloe who'd practically grown up in the diner.

"I'm retiring," she said succinctly. "Perhaps this calls for something more celebratory, girls. Sarah, champagne," Grandma Millie instructed.

Sarah jumped up as if Grandma Millie had jerked a string.

"I'll help, Sarah," Jessica said and carefully put down her teacup, though it rattled in the saucer.

No one spoke until Sarah returned with a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. Jessica carried a tray of champagne glasses.

"You planned this big announcement, Grandma Millie?" Jessica's voice strained with

shock.

“I always have champagne in the fridge. All hostesses do.”

Good to know.

Chloe had never hosted anything ever, though she'd been Grandma Millie's minion—as had the Maye sisters for as long as any of them could walk and talk politely.

“Don't tell me.” The tension in Meghan's voice could cut glass. “The champagne was already chilling in the ice bucket and the glasses were trayed.” Meghan had always had the syrupy sarcasm down to abless your heartart form. Probably why she was an attorney and rarely fooled.

“Sarah, pop the cork,” Grandma Millie spoke into the tense silence. “And then we'll toast your next challenge.” She smiled like a shark, and Chloe's tummy flipped. Grandma Millie had always been kind and supportive, but she did not suffer anything less than your best.

Chloe felt her best fell short on too many occasions.

“Or two,” Grandma Millie added.

“What exactly do you mean, Grandma Millie?” Sarah asked, her voice perfectly modulated, but her body was tense as a violin string as she expertly popped the cork.

She poured and Jessica handed the flutes around, the first to Grandma Millie.

“A toast,” Grandma Millie said. “To the Maye family and their continued good health and prosperity as they steward Belmont into a new era and start their own families.

Drink up.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

The girls all sipped like it was poison, and they had a gun held to their heads, Chloe thought a little dramatically. She sat on the edge of her seat. The portentoustick-tockof the clock reminded her of a bomb in an action-adventure film.

“I know you girls have careers, and it’s important for a woman to establish herself, to pursue her dreams, but family too is crucial.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they all chorused, and Chloe wondered if at the end of Grandma Millie’s sermon she should shout hallelujah.

“Belmont is important. We were a small town far away from big-city greatness, and now we are considered one of the most desirable bedroom communities of Charlotte, with a strong tourist draw, unique shops, professional businesses, good schools, a desirable liberal arts college with a respected music conservatory and fine arts program”—and she smiled at Chloe, the only one of the Mayes who’d attended South Point Abbey, which the Mayes had helped establish.

“Mayes are integral to the community with their service and expertise,” Grandma Millie nodded at Sarah and Meghan. “We’ve built a strong town and a strong community and a stronger family.”

A chill froze Chloe.

“You’re not sick, are you Grandma Millie?”

One of the reasons Chloe hadn’t objected when Grandma Millie told her to choose South Point Abbey’s music conservatory and live at home for college instead of

moving away like her cousins had done was because Chloe hadn't wanted her grandma to be alone, even though it was impossible to imagine such a busy woman lonely.

Grandma Maye sipped her champagne, her posture exemplary.

"Certainly not. But I'm not getting any younger. We need to prepare for the future."

Chloe relaxed and took another, heartier, sip of champagne. Dang it was delicious. She hardly ever drank, and she imagined the bubbles going straight to her brain.

"The Mayes have help to build Belmont with other families. We were initially farmers, then industry and now businesses. We fundraised for the church, the parks, the hospital, schools and helped establish the college. But what is it for if there is no one left to carry on the legacy?"

"Sheesh, Grandma Millie." Meghan looked at her watch. "Let me schedule in time to pop out a baby. You're still accepting new patients aren't you?" She looked at Sarah.

"Enough," Grandma Millie said tartly. "I've made my decision. Now for the challenge."

Sarah looked like she'd bitten into a lime instead of taking a sip of Salon Champagne Brut Blanc de Blancs. Meghan tossed back the remaining champagne, put down the glass and rubbed her hands together.

"Oh goody. Dukes up, girls." She made fists like a boxer.

"A challenge within a challenge," Grandma Millie said cryptically. "And while I expect you to help each other, one of you will have to take charge. You can volunteer or we can pull cards."

Choosing the high card draw was Grandma Millie's favorite way to make a decision when the four of them had been in disagreement.

"For what?" Sarah asked warily.

Grandma Millie looked at Sarah for a long moment, and Chloe wondered what she was looking for, or what she wanted to see but didn't. She clutched her champagne glass and went to take a sip but it was empty.

"Each of you will head the committee of the four major events that the Maye family sponsors each year, starting with the Movable Feast."

"That's in three weeks," Sarah objected. "Most of the work's probably been done."

"It's the tradition that has the most individual freedom for the participating families on Belmont Circle," Grandma Millie nodded. "And yet the families apply and are chosen. Yes, the participating families have been chosen, but the menu has not. The meeting to approve the menu and the theme is tomorrow at my house at three p.m. Keep in mind that it's tradition for this home to anchor the event by offering a main course, so whoever takes the event will also be in charge of planning and cooking an entrée. Who will take over for me this year?"

Grandma Millie sounded like she had a clipboard and pen as she stared down Jessica, who nearly bit off a chunk of the champagne flute. "You'd be the obvious choice, Sarah, as the eldest, but Jessica has the organizing and IT skills as a CPA, and it's not tax season."

Chloe practically heard Jessica gulp.

"Meghan, you are an excellent delegator. Persuasive and quite brilliant as the lawyer in the family. Cooking a showstopper entrée for up to two hundred guests is a bit

more of a challenge, although you will have volunteers helping, of course. The college groups are already signed up to help to serve and clean up. I have faith in each of you.”

No one spoke.

Chloe wasn't sure what happened. It was like she was under a spell. Grandma Millie hadn't even mentioned her—of course. But why not? As a teacher she made lesson plans, managed students, planned field trips, chaired committees, and organized concerts for her small acapella choir at the high school and the college.

Shame stirred in her. And anger. Maybe it was because she hadn't eaten all day and had merely gulped down a mug of mulled wine backstage when she'd learned she was finally going to sing a solo at the Madrigal Dinner and chased that with one bite of delicious stew.

“I'll do it.” She jumped up from the ottoman so quickly that it tipped back and clunked on the gleaming hardwood floor and antique handloomed carpet. She held up her empty flute, upside down. Oops. She righted it. How had she gulped the champagne so quickly? “I'll do it,” she sang out. “I will keep the Maye tradition of Belmont's Movable Feast alive and delicious!”

Chapter Two

As always when Rustin Wildish was exhausted, he pushed harder. He'd finally persuaded his team to go home or hit a local sports bar to unwind after busting it with him all afternoon and evening at the Madrigal Dinner. His root vegetable and lamb stew that he'd served in crusty cheese bread bowls had been slurped to extinction, and his spiced chicken satays on rosemary stalks had been a hit. More than a dozen guests had asked for the chef to divulge the recipe.

As if.

He had created everything in his finally completed and licensed commercial kitchen. His crew, handpicked from his years working in kitchens abroad as well as the past few years working in restaurants in Portland, D.C., Atlanta, and Charlotte, had delivered the food to South Point Abbey College's staging site for the Madrigal Dinner and plated it to his exact specifications. He trusted his crew, not the hodge-podge of Belmont's best do-gooder volunteers, especially if they'd known who the chef was and why he was back in Belmont.

A grim smile touched his lips.

The good, church-going folks of Belmont weren't as smart or as generous in spirit as they told themselves, but their contempt had made him stronger and primed for battle.

He still was shocked that Miss Millie had sold him Millie's Diner. He'd been cobbling together grants and financing to open a restaurant in Charlotte's South End so he'd be closer to his mother when Miss Millie had approached him with her

scheme. She'd been his mentor and his first employer. As a cocky preteen, unforgettably, he'd told her that one day he'd run Millie's.

His world had been so small then, but his ambition had burned bright.

But though he'd kept in touch with Miss Millie over the past twelve-plus years, he'd never thought to approach her about her diner. Mayes never sold property. Not ever. And why should they when they had their name slapped on more than a few buildings in town or the surrounding county? Why sell when Sean Patrick whatever number Maye could collect rents in perpetuity?

But Miss Millie Maye hadn't wanted to lease him the historic diner that had started out as mill offices and a warehouse. She'd wanted to sell it—the whole building, which included two upstairs apartments that he and his brother and a small construction team had worked to remodel, along with the restaurant—to him.

Miss Millie held the mortgage so after a hefty down payment, he paid her monthly, and with the business loan from a Charlotte billionaire's foundation that took on entrepreneurs from sketchy backgrounds—their words, not his—he'd been able to upgrade the kitchen and remodel the cafeteria into an industrial-looking restaurant with a large deck for outside seating. He'd kept expenses down by using sweat equity: his, his brother's, and the restaurant's crew.

Though Rustin was suspicious by nature, Miss Millie Maye had always been honest and fair to him. She'd given him a job cleaning the restaurant after hours first, and then more and more responsibility. She'd taught him how to cook and how to run a restaurant—front and back house and the business end—and she'd helped him harness his roiling anger and resentment and hone it into purpose. As long as he worked, he and his family had been fed. She'd also helped him study for his GED and had sponsored his placement into a culinary institute in Charlotte.

She loved Belmont. It was her home, but she'd pushed him to travel and to hone his craft, and he had. And now he was back, but Belmont didn't feel like home, yet. But it would. He'd turn The Wild Side into a culinary destination, and that was only the beginning of his plans.

Noticing that some of the brown paper covering the back windows had come loose, he stalked across the darkened dining room just as Taylor Swift's "Out of the Woods" blared over his Sonos speakers.

Singing the chorus, he grabbed the drooping edge of paper to smooth it back in place and came face-to-face with the widely spaced, large, slightly spooky eyes of Chloe Cramer.

His startled shout and jump definitely dented his bad-boy reputation.

Her mouth, which had always been too big for her fine-boned, heart-shaped face, in his opinion, grinned like she was actually happy to see him.

"Hey, Rustin! Are we?" she yelled through the accordion-style glass doors like they were still kids and she had zero filter. She sang along with Taylor and did a little dance on the nearly finished deck.

"No." He slapped his hand over the paper, taping it back up as if that would cover up the memories that felt too close tonight. Belmont. The Maye sisters. Jessica, still beautiful, floating across the dark park toward the mansion that glittered like a crown on the other side of everything he'd ever known.

The Mayes were one of the bigger reasons he'd accepted Miss Millie's offer. There were others of course, but the thought of opening a restaurant and feeding the town—maybe even some Mayes—when his family had been so hungry would be a poke in the eye to the Maye patriarch and his beautiful daughters.

And he'd own the building that had once been the mighty Maye offices and where two generations of Mayes had fed their workers so that they could work longer and harder—double shifts.

Rustin Wildish was back. A self-made man stronger, more determined, and smarter than anyone born sucking on a silver spoon.

*

“Rude,” Chloe stared at the brown paper blocking her view of Millie’s Diner’s new digs.

She’d been itching with curiosity to see the remodel, but Grandma Millie had demanded no peeking. The construction trucks, equipment, and materials for the final stretch of the years-long Riverwalk project, which would connect the downtown park and Belmont to the Riverfront development had made sneaking a peak too hazardous.

But what was Rustin Wildish doing inside? Was he working for Grandma Millie again? Was he going to be the chef? Her heart leaped even as disappointment poked. While she loved the idea of Rustin being back in town, she’d imagined him having a more epic career—his own edgy restaurant with lots of buzz and a string of whatever those things were called...Michelin stars?

Rustin had been her adolescent crush, her fantasy. Jane Eyre’s Rochester, Kathy’s Heathcliff, Elizabeth’s Darcy, and Bella’s Edward and Jacob all smushed together. But she didn’t have time to moon about. She had an entrée times two hundred to plan and a chef’s mercy upon which to throw herself.

Feigning a confidence she did not feel, she rapped on the window.

“Like the Raven,” she murmured, although the night wasn’t stormy.

Nothing.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Chloe huffed out a breath and rapped again.

“Evermore,” she misquoted. Rustin Wildish ignoring her wasn’t exactly news, but Chloe had stuffed both feet in her mouth tonight in front of Grandma Millie and her cousins, and now she had to own it. She was going to prove that she was a true Maye—giving and competent. Tackling the Movable Feast might be the one thing she could do to get her family and the town to finally see her as an adult. She’d be poised, no longer a goofy kid.

She dug in her small backpack she used as a purse for the key to the side kitchen door, as she often met the early morning delivery drivers for Grandma Millie. Hopefully, the locks hadn’t been changed during the remodel.

Palming her brass cleft-shaped key chain, Chloe searched for the right key.

“Ready or not, Rustin, here I come.”

Chapter Three

Rustin stared at the kitchen’s side door as it spookily moved inward. Chloe walked through still wearing the ugly brown medieval costume that made her look like she’d been trussed up in a burlap sack from the feed store.

“How’d you get in?” He growled like some feral animal. Not polite, but the Mayes irritated him. Chloe rankled less than the others, but with her otherworldly vibe and unblinking blue-purple stare—the iris of one eye was darker, more purpled than the other—she’d unsettled him when they’d been kids. She’d followed him like a puppy

as a kid, totally irritating him, and that was the seed of a lot of teasing. But he'd also felt protective of her, which had irritated him more.

Chloe was a Maye, even if she had a different last name. She'd grown up with Miss Millie in her elegant mansion, steeped in family privilege and tradition. Chloe didn't need his sympathy or anything else.

She grinned infectiously. Her face scrunched—a little like a pug. Her slightly off-colored eyes light up, and her smile stretched to reveal small, straight, white teeth, and more gum than it should. She didn't have Jessica's beauty, but she had something that drew him, but he resisted. Too much history. And Chloe still looked like she had as a kid: knowing, mischievous, inviting him in on the joke. And her smile invited him to smile back.

She dangled a key and swung it back and forth on a key chain shaped like a music note.

“Give it here.” He held out his hand. This was his kitchen. His home. He owned it. He was the boss, and no Maye could come and go as they pleased. He'd covered all the windows for a reason, even though he'd despised shutting out the light. No Maye could assuage their curiosity without his permission. He'd only discussed his plans with Miss Millie.

“Grandma Millie gave it to me a few years ago. I sometimes meet the early morning delivery vans before I head to the high school for work—or at least I did.” Her voice cracked with uncertainty.

“What are you doing here Clo Beau?”

She would not soften him. He'd get the key back tonight.

“Eeeew.” She made a dead-on impression of the yuck emoji that nearly made him smile. “I can’t believe you remember that wretched nickname! I never looked like a boy! Never! Right? I didn’t? And that was thenicestthing people teased me with.”

He crossed his arms. Name-calling should be beneath him. He’d certainly been called too many unpleasant and often unwarranted names before he’d lit out of Belmont the day after he turned seventeen.

“Okay,” she acknowledged as if he’d spoken. “It was a bad haircut. And yes, I looked like I had a case of mange.”

He stared at her, astonished that she kept digging deeper. Mayes never admitted they were wrong.

“And no one let me forget it. But I waseight.”

“It’s late,” he said, unwilling to be amused. “I gotta close up.”

And that was all the explanation he’d give her, even though her eyes and mouth rounded, full of questions.

“Hand over the key and get on home to your glittering mansion in the park.” He could taste the bitterness and worked to dial it back.

“You can’t boss me around, Rustin.” Chloe stuck out her pointy chin, and that small act of defiance made him want to grab it. What was wrong with him? He wasn’t that tired, or desperate. Playing games with a Maye was suicide.

“And you can’t kick me out of Millie’s. I can close up for you if you have some hot date with a pillow or something else.”

He bit back a sigh. She'd never had a filter. Why should he think twelve years would have given her one?

"I need to think, and this is where I do my best—" She finally looked around the kitchen, her gaze ping-ponging. "What?" She moistened her bottom lip and turned in a circle, taking in all of the space. "I knew Grandma Millie was remodeling, but everything looks so different."

She reached out and touched the massive, distressed metal island that separated the open kitchen from the main dining room. The island was hinged so that it could form a bar for more seating.

"Wow," she breathed, turning a slow circle, and he had the urge to grab her, throw her out. "It's...it's how I always imagined you." She smiled at him. "But why...?"

"It's not Millie's anymore." The words shot out of his mouth before his brain kicked in.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Damn. I'm not ready!

Chloe's mouth dropped open like a cartoon character.

"Rustin," she whispered, her creamy complexion with the starburst of freckles on her nose and cheeks paled to milk. "What do you mean?"

Now he'd done it. He'd wanted to wait until everything was finished. Until January's opening night when he'd rip the paper off like it was a birthday present and shout out a big F-ingta-daaaah!

He mocked his need for secrecy and glared at her stonily.

"Rustin." Her delicate fingers grazed his forearm, and he felt singed.

He closed his eyes, ignoring the appeal in hers.

"Rustin, tell me what's going on."

He owed her nothing. He didn't want her here.

"Please."

A lot of people had thought he was selfish. Arrogant. Uncompromising. Critical. Harsh. True. But he was no liar, unlike many of the Mayes and the men in his family.

"Millie's made no announcement?" Tension threaded his voice. She'd promised not

to. They'd each had their reasons.

"No. Just that she was closing to renovate. We respected her privacy, and there's been a lot of buzz but no flies."

This town. The people. The sayings. He felt bone weary. Why had he wanted to come back here? He'd intended to stay in Charlotte. Rebekah, his manager and assistant, had wanted to stay in the city. So had his brother, Lucas. But the startup costs in Belmont were less than half of Charlotte's. And he owned the building here. He never could have swung that in Charlotte.

"Why was everything kept secret?" Chloe asked, puzzled. "No surprise Mr. and Mrs. Maye were not pleased with the secrets or Grandma Millie remodeling. But it's her business. Still, I'm sure they would have scowled if wrinkles weren't a concern."

"Doubt she can with the pounds of Botox she's been darted with over the past decades."

"Be nice," Chloe chided, but she giggled, and the sound shot clean through him.

Maybe Chloe hadn't entirely bought into the Maye mythology. Not like the others. Not like Jessica.

"I'm not nice, Clo Beau," he warned, shutting down all thoughts of the past.

"I don't believe you," she stated simply. "Since I'm here, show me around and tell me what you and Grandma Millie have been up to," she invited.

So, she really didn't know everything yet. Rustin weighed the risk. He knew Chloe was the odd Maye out. Everyone knew that. She didn't even have the Maye last name, but she'd definitely been raised and cared for by Miss Millie. Whenever she

took the Maye sisters out for a treat or excursion or volunteer work party, Chloe had been there following in Jessica's beautiful, elegant, regal wake.

"No."

"Are you the chef?"

"No. Yes."

"Glad that's cleared up." She looked around the kitchen—gleaming, commercial-grade appliances, vintage pendant light bulbs dangling over a metal island that he'd spent hours washing in an acid bath, polishing, and sealing. He was particularly proud of the reclaimed wood that formed the support tresses so that the second floor could be a loft bar and separate dining space.

"The lights are gorgeous." Chloe walked over so that the light cast a golden glow around her, making her, too, look vintage, ethereal. "The color highlights the rust inherent in the metal, making the island or bar or whatever you call it look like a work of art.

Rustin was proud of the lights. They were custom. Too spendy and the first non-kitchen items Rustin had chosen. The bar had taken weeks to get right.

For a moment, pride pushed forward. Basking in her approval and awe was far more appealing than being cursed out by his team and the construction crew for his exacting perfection.

Idiot.

He'd worked too hard and come too far to let Chloe mouth off to her sisters so that they'd all descend before The Wild Side was ready to open.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Would Jessica come? His heart curdled. Irritated, he pushed the question far away.

“Tell me about the restaurant, Rustin.” Her voice was a soft invitation, and her mismatched eyes shone.

“Time to go, Chloe. Key.” He held out his hand.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t care.”

Instead of getting angry or defensive or tearing up, Chloe held on to the prep counter like she could stop him from tossing her out.

“I need your help.” She gulped in a breath. “You have a lot of experience cooking Southern food but also, I heard you’ve traveled. You could help me do something unique. Unexpected.”

She had his attention. No Maye had ever asked for his help. Demanded. Yes. Paid for his services, yes. Chloe’s delicate hands were now poised like a supplicant in prayer. His heart began to thud.

“It’s not just for me but Grandma Millie too,” she pleaded. “I need to pick your brain to cook something for the Movable Feast this year. Grandma Millie is really shaking things up. She’s insisting that the three Ms and I each run a separate event this year because the town’s growing and changing and we need to keep the traditions alive. And I can barely keep my panini sandwiches from burning to a crisp, so there’s that.”

She bounced up on her toes. “Please, Rustin. Please, please, please. You would create the most amazing meal, and, of course, Millie’s and you would be credited.”

She said the last part like it would seal the deal, and he could feel the shields she’d started to rattle, snap back into place.

Of course, the Mayes would want to cling to their power structure.

“She says we need new blood and...” Her voice trailed off, and for some reason she flushed bright red. “She said we need to keep the town traditions strong. It’s a challenge to all of us.”

The Maye’s and their challenges, he sneered. Would Jessica also approach him for his ‘help’? Then dread hit dead center.

“Miss Millie’s not sick is she?”

Chloe nipped her lip. “I asked. She said no?”

The question in her tone swirled the dread. Now Miss Millie selling him her diner made horrible sense, though he’d seen no decline in her these past few months as he’d buckled down and worked in near secrecy.

“So, will you help me come up with an entrée, Rustin? My first meeting with the hosting families is tomorrow afternoon.”

“You grew up in Millie’s kitchen. Surely you can plan a bite-size entrée to wow your guests into dropping enough dollars for a mortgage payment.” His bitterness tasted like ashes.

Chloe opened her mouth but then snapped it shut, clearly trying to organize her

thoughts. “The feast benefits the Secret Santa program,” she said softly, and he fought his urge to cringe. His family had benefitted from that program his entire life. “And I’m sure you’re going to be courting the same folks to return to Millie’s Diner when you reopen.”

“You can read a cookbook, Chloe. Do it.” He tried to grab the key from her hand, but she clung to it as her determined gaze clung to him, full of fire and life.

“I need help, Rustin.”

“Not my problem.”

“Please, Rustin, please. I can’t fail Grandma Millie!”

He spun her around and pushed her toward the side door, where his trash and recycling was fenced off and where the deliveries would be arriving in another five to six weeks.

“Rustin,” she balked, but he kept the pressure steady, not wanting to hurt her but needing freedom and to breathe air without her fresh ocean breezy scent.

“Please,” she entreated.

“Get your own hands dirty.”

He closed the door and locked it. Turned his back on it and leaned against the steel, feeling like a jerk, but knowing he’d done the right thing. His survival instincts were honed.

*

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Chloe kicked the door and then pressed her back against the cold steel. That had just happened. She'd been Rustined—pushed out and shut down.

“Same as it ever was,” she muttered.

She kicked the door again with her heel just to vent the last vestiges of her frustration, but she was already feeling childish even as she tried to prove she was all grown up. Chloe looked up at the waxing moon, clouds scuttling across its pale face. Rustin was a beast.

She laughed. Maybe that made her Belle.

“As if.”

She couldn't imagine a woman capable of taming Rustin.

She walked home, contemplating her next move. She could ask Grandma Millie, but that would defeat her bid to prove her independence and value. She'd said she'd run tomorrow's meeting and create a memorable entrée for the Movable Feast. And yes, she would have help during the event, but she would be running the show, and her pride was on the line in a way it often wasn't.

She imagined her cousins would jump in filled with advice, anticipating her failure.

“Not my first fallback to Google,” she muttered, not convinced Google would impress this crowd. She could hire a caterer; lots of hosts did, although they claimed the recipe was a family one or from a famous chef, but they would guard

it with their lives.

But that felt like cheating.

Conferring with Rustin felt right. Having him work beside her in Millie's historic home would publicly welcome him back and ease his transition to being the new chef at the hugely remodeled Millie's Diner. He'd probably totally overhauled the menu.

She walked along the part of the Riverwalk path that was finished, then she turned around to see where Millie's had been. Sorrow pierced her heart. She'd grown up in that diner. It was a fixture. A place of comfort. The new look was edgy, interesting, and elegant in an industrial way, but it didn't have the same come in, lay down your troubles, and enjoy soup or a sandwich or fish or fried chicken platevibe.

The building was shrouded in darkness, mystery. Land had already been excavated for another development along the Riverwalk, incorporating one of the abandoned mills into what was going to be loft-type apartments, retail stores, offices with river views, a park, and connecting paths for biking, running, and walking. The new development would have a riverfront park with activities for families—river floating, paddle boards, kayaking—and it would connect to the small, historic downtown.

"But that does not solve my lack of culinary skills," she said aloud. Rustin's refusal to help irked her, but she wasn't giving up. He was talented. He'd taken the shot Grandma Millie had given him and had made a name for himself. And judging from Jessica's reaction, he was still going to receive a heap of bless his heartscorn.

Besides, working with Rustin would ensure that she would show the three Ms and Grandma Millie that she could solve her own problems. Tackle a traditional and elegant event that raised funds for local families in need to have a Christmas, and score! Her messed-up football analogy made her smile.

She wasn't giving up on her Rustin plan, although she was sort of running out of time. The meeting was tomorrow, and she had to ensure that everyone had their menus and cooking and serving plans and that the subcommittees were on track. She'd planned enough concerts, field trips, school events, and lesson plans that she felt more confident in that area. She might still resemble a woodland fairy, but she was a strong teacher.

She'd come at Rustin from a different angle, make it harder for him to refuse. If they worked together on a menu, he'd hopefully see her as a woman, not Millie's oddball granddaughter. And she'd gain some cooking insights. And have eye candy to feed her fantasies for months.

Chloe paused at the intersection where the historic district started. To the left she could see the downtown: three blocks of cute shops and sidewalks lined by replicas of old gas lamps. The street was anchored by a large, old-fashioned clock, which was one of the landmarks in which locals took a lot of pride.

She didn't feel ready to cut across Maye Downtown Park to return to her carriage-house apartment. She was still too riled. Cold. And she still wore the dumb costume. No wonder Rustin hadn't taken her seriously.

She needed to think of a recipe for tomorrow. Maybe if she cooked something early in the morning, she could take it to Rustin for advice, and he'd take pity on her and help.

Or throw me out again.

But she was not going to give up so easily. She wouldn't let Grandma Millie down with an uninspired entrée that had guests complaining and demanding their money back and forever cementing her reputation as the odd and unsuccessful Maye.

“I can do this. I have to do this,” she said, and even as she put power in her voice, she felt failure creeping behind her. Had her biological mother left a string of failures in her wake culminating in an unwanted, unloved baby?

Chloe walked along the massive wrought iron fence that circled the estate. She trailed her fingers along each bar as she’d done many times as a child imagining her mother standing outside the gates early on that Christmas morning twenty-six years ago. What had she felt? Fear? Regret? Guilt? Relief?

And what had she done afterward?

“Don’t think. Don’t think.” She stopped and squeezed her eyes shut. Grandma Millie had always shut down speculation about her biological mother.

“We are your family,” Grandma Millie had always soothed, her voice and attitude never wavering.

But Chloe felt like she’d been wavering her entire life. She had to stop. To change. To take a stand and make it stick. Taking the job at the high school teaching English when she’d really wanted to pursue opera in Europe had been her sticking to something realistic, familiar, and safe.

Grandma Millie wouldn’t have to worry about her if she stayed in Belmont. She could take care of Grandma Millie if she got sick. And Chloe loved living in Belmont. She had singing opportunities in church and with the Belmont Women’s Choir. Plus she could pour her passion into her vocal students and the acapella choir she directed at South Point Abbey.

And now she was going to take a risk and step up to take her place socially alongside her cousins. She just needed a recipe for the Movable Feast.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“And a miracle,” she said opening her eyes and continuing to walk, taking comfort in the solid feel of each bar.

“A miracle,” she repeated, nearly smacking herself on the forehead for not thinking before of Grandma Millie’s mini-home library.

Twenty-five years ago, the Belmont Library Society had gifted Grandma Millie with a small replica of her house, crafted by students at the high school woodshop, who’d also painted it to match. The cute library had three shelves. The bottom shelf was generally stocked with children’s books. The middle shelf held fiction and mysteries, and the top shelf had everything else: self-help, nonfiction, and...cookbooks!

Chloe had often borrowed from and donated to this small library over the years, and she’d never failed to find a book she needed or wanted. Growing up, the library had almost felt mystical in that it would answer her thoughts or soothe the fears storming around her brain. She placed her fingers reverently on the doorknob, closed her eyes and whispered a prayer.

Chloe eased the doors wide and breathed in the scent of wood, paper, and, she liked to think, a little magic.

She opened her eyes and stared, shocked. The shelves were empty except for one book leaning drunkenly against the side. Curious, she pulled it out, marveling at its buttery-soft leather cover with some kind of silky thick ribbon binding it all together.

She cradled the book in her arms and read the cover, barely illuminated by the waxing moon.

Food Is Love

Recipes for

Southern Love Spells

“Ask and ye shall receive,” Chloe said, loving the mystery of it all, the drama. Had Grandma Millie put the book here knowing that Chloe would be out of her depth and regularly perused the shelves of the mini library?

“The plot thickens...dum, dum, dum, dummmmm,” she hummed under her breath and opened the book. She could make out handwriting, ingredient lists, and even some sketches.

She leafed through a few pages, her heart hammering with hope. Surely it was a sign.

“You got this, girl.”

Chapter Four

This was the team’s second run in the new kitchen, and though it was intense, they already had a good rhythm, and the sample menu was coming together as if opening night were weeks in the rearview mirror instead of weeks ahead.

Rustin looked at his main kitchen team—Clara Pond, Raul Rodrigo, twins Flannery and Hannah Marks, and his younger brother Lucas, who had aspirations of being a bartender and DJ.

Mostly to snag women, I bet.

Lucas hadn’t wanted to leave Charlotte, but even though his brother was twenty-two,

Rustin had laid down the law. He wasn't leaving Lucas alone in the city full of temptations. His assistant and restaurant manager Rebekah James also surveyed the team through eyes dramatically accented by thick black eyeliner.

"The team will still take you seriously, Chef, if you crack a smile before Christmas."

"We got six weeks to prepare for our soft open."

"You don't do soft, Chef." Rebekah raised her eyebrows suggestively, probably trying to get him to relax.

As if.

"I won't smile until our first-quarter earnings hit."

He had a grant and a no-interest loan from a foundation in Charlotte, along with an unusual mortgage with Millie Maye, and a more traditional investment from a Charlotte foodie and budding venture capitalist who'd followed his career for the past six years. But margins in the restaurant world were small, and the fan base could be fickle.

The Wild Side was his first solo restaurant and opening it in Belmont was not only him making a statement. It was a risk. Would young, trendy diners with a lot of jingle drive from Charlotte to Belmont for a dining experience?

"Easier to hit earning margins if we'd actually open," Rebekah said drolly, tapping her new manicure—an eye-popping red with snowflakes on the tips. "We need to open for the holidays. We're burning through cash with the remodel, and this town is like something out of a Christmas card. They need us."

Rustin winced. He'd hated how Belmont went all out on Christmas. It had severely

stressed his single mom who struggled to support four kids while two of his uncles cycled in and out of their former small mill house, supposedly looking after his family. From what he'd seen, they crashed on the couch, ate everything they could lay their hands on, and stole from his mom so they could buy booze and cigarettes. He'd always been happy when the cops would arrive and haul them off to jail for one infraction or another.

“There’s something called aMovable Feast.” Rebekah dragged him away from his memories, and he winced remembering his rough treatment of Chloe last night. “There’s also a holiday market, and Belmont’s near to some town called McAdenville that has so many lights it’s calledChristmas Town USA. People drive or walk around for the whole frickin’ month of December, Chef. I’m not all about Christmas, but people drive from all over, and we gotta get several slices of that.”

He'd hated Christmas because it reminded him of everything his family didn't have, and he'd deliberately slated to open after the holiday rush to stave off the memories.

Right in the dead period.

“No need,” he said mildly when what he wanted to do was yell. The memories crowded close, and he knew his past was driving him to make a poor business decision.

“We’d kickstart our earnings. Get some buzz,” Rebekah pushed.

“Gotta get the menu perfected.”

“Yeah, like the menu is the problem.” Rebekah continued to call him out in front of his crew. “January’s the worst time to open. The industry screams to a halt.”

Like I don’t know that.

“We want a soft opening,” he reiterated. “Time to tweak.” He held on to his temper. He’d hired Rebekah because she was smart and pushed back.

“We need people at tables eating to have something to adjust,” Rebekah practically growled. “We’re ready for action.” She looked at the sample dishes his crew had prepared while he’d supervised and timed. “And beyond ready for cash. Our permits and licenses are ready. I checked with the chamber of commerce. We can have a food truck at the Christmas Market. We can have a food truck at the McAdenville lights, which you can probably see from the space station. Let’s get this party started. I even got two special-event liquor licenses. Used my own money.” She winked at Clara. “Don’t make me waste it.”

“We don’t have a food truck,” he reminded, struggling to keep his voice soft, though he couldn’t disguise its coldness, a warning for anyone but Rebekah.

“What about that funky bubble trailer you bought two years ago and kept playing with?”

“The vintage Airstream we tricked out!” Lucas fist-bumped Clara, and Rustin narrowed his eyes at his brother. “It would be rockin’ for parties. A few signature plates served out of one window and specialty holiday cocktails out of the other.”

“Yes,” Clara clapped her hands. “I’m all in. Tips are killer at events and parties.”

“The trailer’s not ready.”

Lucas opened his mouth likely to protest, and Rustin stared him down. “The Wild Side’s not ready. We can’t lose focus.”

“The trailer’s ready.” Rebekah rolled her eyes. “You tricked out its kitchen. All you got to do is cut a hole in the side to be a serving window, add a hinge. Voilà! Food truck, trailer, whatever. I got the licenses handled.”

“I’ll do it,” Lucas volunteered. He even raised his hand like he was still in school. “Rustin, I can do it on my own.”

“String some party lights, add an awning.” Clara caught the spirit.

“Bam! We’re in business,” Rebekah nodded. “I got our socials ready during the remodel to build buzz. We hit these holiday events with themed nibbles and cocktails with strong socials. I’ve got the QR codes, TikToks ready to go. That’s a soft opening, and it would bring in revenue without the overhead of the serving staff I’m hiring.”

Rebekah made sense—he hated that!—and that’s why he’d hired her as a sous chef years ago and kept her on, moved her up, and offered her a stake in The Wild Side. She was the manager and had wanted to take on the marketing.

“What’s up, Rustin?” her voice softened. “You’re dithering, and it’s freaking me out.”

“Dithering? What kind of a word is that? “I don’t dither.”

“You are. This is our shot. Your fears are going to screw this up for all of us. The Wild Side is not just about you.” She swore, tugged angrily at her blonde ponytail, and stomped out of the kitchen. He heard the rip of paper. Rebekah must have opened one of the back doors to the deck.

It’s not like they hadn’t argued before. She gave as good as she got and had no trouble getting in his face when she thought he was wrong, but she didn’t do it in front of the crew, and she’d never walked away.

The silence was louder than Rebekah’s accusation. He wasn’t afraid. He was just being cautious.

Yeah. And acting out of character.

His mouth felt sour. He turned his attention back to the kitchen crew. Lucas had turned the heat down on the stove, likely to better take in the kitchen drama.

“Plate the food like the diagram.” He ran his fingers through his hair, pulled out his elastic and let it roll over his wrist. “We’ll sample at the community table.”

“Want me to talk to Rebekah, Chef?” Hannah asked.

“You got a cocktail specialty sample?” he asked Clara, ignoring Hannah. He’d deal with Rebekah. He just wasn’t sure what to say because she was right.

He was playing it too safe. Would he blow his opportunity?

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Once he'd found his calling in the kitchen, that accusation had never once been hurled. Since he was seventeen, he'd been hot-shotting it in kitchens in major cities and interning under chefs at the top of their games. No one once said he was cautious...until today.

"Yes, Chef," Clara said. "I've been working on some holiday cocktails and mocktails."

Holiday. Of course the team would think that. Rebekah had probably been pushing behind his back before she went public today.

"Make it," he said. "We'll meet at the community table in five. You ready?" he asked Clara. "Samples only. I don't want anyone staggering around when we're on the clock."

"Yes, Chef." She smiled and looked at Lucas. "You want to learn something?"

Lucas shot a pleading look at his brother. He was twenty-two, no longer the kid Rustin remembered protecting, feeding, helping with his homework. And if he wanted to learn more about bartending, Rustin should let him, but alcohol and his family tree had a long-twisted history. But if you could control it, it was a moneymaker and a reputation-builder.

"The devil you know." He slapped Lucas on the back.

Now to Rebekah.

But when Rustin walked out to the deck, Chloe, her short, dark curls dancing in the weak morning sun, faced off with Rebekah. The scene was almost humorous if the tension hadn't shimmered between them. Chloe held some sort of covered platter in her hands.

"What about private don't you get, little girl?" Rebekah sneered.

"Rustin and I know each other." Chloe tilted up her pointed chin, but still stood nearly a foot shorter than the tall, slim Rebekah in her platform Docs. "We grew up together. He worked at Millie's, and I..." Chloe flushed a pretty pink. "My Grandma Millie was...you know..."

"Queen Bee around here. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've heard." Rebekah looked Chloe up and down. "Suppose you think that makes you Mini Queen Bee Millie. What you got, a casserole to welcome us to the neighborhood?"

He could practically taste Rebekah's sarcasm, and an unexpected and unwelcome urge to come between the two women rose up. But why? Chloe was a Maye. He owed her nothing. And why the hell was she bringing him food? She wasn't still looking for advice, was she? He'd shut her down hard last night.

"No. I have a question," she said, proving she had steel in her spine. "I'm coordinating the Movable Feast this year, and I..."

Damn. Rustin closed his eyes, but he could feel Rebekah's searing stare across the deck.

"The Movable Feast, huh?" Rebekah challenged.

"I'm in charge of an entrée and—"

“Let’s take this inside,” Rustin interrupted, knowing he had to push himself off the fence he’d been straddling.

Distaste and shame were a potent brew. He was in charge of his destiny, but he was letting his childhood doubt take a bite out of his ass. Time to squash the past underfoot for good.

“We’re doing a tasting,” he said, eyes on Chloe. “You can join us.”

“And tell us about this Moveable Feast.” Rebekah’s voice was dark with intent. Using her lanky body, she steered Chloe toward the open door.

*

“You,” Rustin said in a sexy growl, “in here.”

“Thank you for seeing me.” She followed him into the kitchen. Her heart still pounded from running into the Goth, supermodel, Amazon warrior outside. Since Rustin had taken her key, she’d no way into Millie’s, so she thought she’d try the back door. She didn’t recognize the hard but gorgeous blonde from Millie’s kitchen staff, so Rustin must be making a lot of changes. Many of Millie’s employees were well into their retirement years.

She should have changed her clothes before coming. Sweet potato stained her white shirt; flour dusted her black skinny jeans; and it felt like there was still browned cumin in her hair. She’d thrown on a large purple cardigan she’d found at a thrift shop in college and rushed off to beg Rustin to try her sweet potato empanadas.

He picked some cilantro from her hair and threw it in the sink.

“Have you been cooking or in a food fight?”

“I know, right?” She smiled, relaxing a little since he’d let her inside his new domain.

“I’m working, Clo Beau.”

She gulped in a breath for courage and patience and let the nickname go. “I know. And I’m sorry for interrupting, Rustin, I am. But I took your advice.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

His thick, dark brows rose, and Chloe thought he looked like a hero on the cover of a romance novel: an Italian tycoon or a pissed-off marquis cornered at a ball and forced to behave with a boring debutante.

Focus.

“I did what you said. I found a cookbook.” She wasn’t sure if that was exactly what it was. “It’s really quite unusual. Some of it is handwritten with sketches and the most unusual side notes, and—”

“Point, Chloe.”

“Right, yes.” She licked her lower lip nervously trying to corral her racing mind. “I chose a recipe that seemed pretty simple, something I could handle. And I tried it and...and...I’m not sure. I need an expert opinion. Too much salt? Too little? Too bland? I want it to wow. I love sweet potatoes, so I started there. I’ll need to practice with the pastry, obviously, but it tastes...not like I thought. Sort of like the beginning of a melody that should intrigue the listener and make them think of castle walls and open windows, mist creeping in, but it just stays flat, doesn’t build, doesn’t beckon. And Ilovesweet potatoes,” she practically wailed. “Oh, I said that already.”

“Sweet potatoes have appeal, but they don’t really pop,” Rustin said, thinking he’d finally caught the point of her rant. “They add more texture than flavor. They are subtle but complement other flavors, provide a base from which to build.”

“Great,” Chloe said, doing a happy hop. “I can work with that. A base. What do I need to add?”

She reached into her pocket and grabbed her phone as if she'd record his answer. "I need help, Rustin. I'll get down on my knees. I'll pay you."

"This will be interesting." The woman who'd blocked her on the deck strode back into the kitchen. "Clearly you have a fan, Rustin."

She was long and lean and coiled her ponytail into a perfect low braid as she leaned against a counter. She smiled wickedly at Rustin, and then her pale blue gaze, sparkling with contempt, shifted to her, and Chloe gulped on her dismay. Were the supermodel and Rustin a couple? She seemed like the type of woman Rustin would go for. Beautiful. Edgy. Maybe that was why she was so hostile; she was marking her territory.

As if Rustin would look at her twice.

But you're hoping he will.

Chloe corralled her racing thoughts. Rustin had always been a fantasy, and he needed to stay there. She needed an entrée recipe and appetizers to serve at the meeting this afternoon, not drool to add to her stained clothes collection.

"Don't let me interrupt." The beauty moved to cock her hip against a massive stove. "You were about to get on your knees and beg. Not sure the health inspectors will approve that outcome, and you won't be the first unwelcome woman Rustin's had to hold off with a cast iron skillet."

"Rebekah. Chill." His voice was cold. "We're not done talking about what happened in the kitchen earlier, but we're done for now."

"What happened in the kitchen?" Chloe couldn't help asking.

Rustin's eyes glittered, but Rebekah didn't seem intimidated.

"Chef," she said and walked out of the kitchen and joined a group of people at a long table. Chloe only recognized Rustin's younger brother, Lucas, who was doing something at a cool-looking bar at the end of the room.

"Wow. A bar?"

"Give me five," he said to Rebekah's back, still a clear 'back the F off' edge to his voice.

"Remember the cameras, Chef."

"Cameras?" Chloe parroted, looking around.

"Marketing. Rebekah's idea."

"Huh?"

"Seriously, Clo Beau, how could you sit at the counter your whole childhood and grow up with at Millie's diner and learn nothing?"

Shame washed through her. How could she explain her imagination to him? How she could stare out a window and lose herself for an hour or more? Or start reading and lose half a day?

"Will you help me, please, Rustin? Chef?" She tasted the word and liked it. "Please. I won't even object to you calling me Clo Beau."

He frowned. "I remember you serving with Miss Millie at the soup kitchen twice a week." His face twisted with distaste. "Did you really pick up nothing?"

She stared at her toes. “I tried.” She worked the word out of her tight throat. “I always muddled things, made a mess...got distracted. Everyone just got mad and took over and stopped asking me for help cooking.”

Rustin had thrived with Grandma Millie’s tutelage. He’d learned a skill, built a career.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

He rocked back on his heels. "I guess I owe you."

"What?Why?"

Man, hope is painful.

"Sophomore year. American Lit. Not my thing. Was nearly failing, and the poetry unit would have put me over the edge. Millie made me skip time at work to sit at the counter to write my ten poems, but all I could think about was that I needed the money, the dinner to take home. When I opened my notebook, they were finished. Printed out. Lyrical but incomprehensible to me."

Chloe flushed. She remembered. Writing the poems had been a joy to her, a gift to him. She'd been more than two years younger but had skipped a grade.

"I didn't think you knew it was me," she said, suddenly shy remembering how she'd allowed her heart to crack open, her spirit to soar in those poems.

"Who else?" He shrugged, his expression dark. "I passed. Never thanked you."

"But you still quit school at the end of sophomore year."

That had hurt and upset Grandma Millie.

"Why?" She didn't think he'd answer. He'd ignored her earlier questions.

"This is your thank you, Chloe." He took the dish from her and put it off to the side

of the counter. “Everything you see, hear, and taste today at The Wild Side stays in the vault.

And as he spoke, he walked a circle around her and mimed zipping her lips.

“I mean it. Don’t bring the three Ms here for a peek. Don’t tell them what you saw, what you heard, what you tasted.”

“And you’ll help me with a recipe?”

“Thought you were zipping.”

“But if we’re making a deal, if you’re thanking me, I should know what I’m getting.”

“A few lessons. That’s it.”

She nodded. That was more than generous, but she had a million questions. “Should I bring my dish for tasting?” She picked it up again off the counter.

“No. That’s for later.”

Probably to save her feelings from the critique of his team, she thought, humbled further.

“Lesson one,” he said. “Focus. Listen. Don’t talk.”

*

His crew’s shock when Chloe followed him into the main dining room was palpable. Hannah had swung out the long arm of the bar that separated the kitchen so they could eat and see the trees along the river. The mid-morning sky was clear, cold,

beautiful, and light flooded the space. Finally. Maybe his need for secrecy had been a bit obsessive. He felt like a mole, and the mood of his crew was definitely brighter, more cheerful.

Clara instructed Lucas on how to make a cherry bounce in the bar area, and Rebekah, still pissed, her slim body radiating aggression, peeled the brown paper off the accordion doors in long strips.

“You’re just going to have to put it up again,” he stated, barely keeping his temper as tension hummed through him.

“Done with working in the dark and secret.”

“Becca...”

Chloe reached out, rested her delicate hand on the small of his back, and he felt her touch sizzle all the way to his spine.

“She’s right,” Chloe said quietly behind him. “Rustin.” She walked around him so she could face him. Her slightly mismatched eyes were wide and earnest, and the light streaming through one of the windows caught her creamy skin and high cheekbones, highlighting her in a dewy glow that looked otherworldly.

“You’re back in Belmont. You’re home. It’s time to flex. Show everyone who you are.” She smiled, sweetly. “You’ve worked hard. Taken risks. Won. Savor your victory and make your stand.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

His lips twitched in a smile he barely shut down as Rebekah ripped off the last strip of paper. Same message. Different delivery.

“I’m not hiding.” He hated that he sounded defensive. “I just want everything to be right. To be prepared.”

Rebekah snorted and watched him and Chloe like they were facing off in a match.

“You only get one shot for a first impression,” Chloe murmured softly. “Don’t I know it. Still.” She raised one shoulder and dropped it. “Take your shot.”

She was right. Rebekah was right. I’m stalling. When did I become such a coward?

Chloe’s unusual gaze flicked to the plated food on the table.

“Let’s see if you’re ready, Chef,” she invited, smiling up at him with that big cheeky grin he remembered from when she was a kid trying to get away with something or wheedle another biscuit out of Millie’s kitchen staff. “Wow me.”

*

Tasting food with Chloe was unlike anything he’d experienced, and after the initial few giggles of surprise from the twins, the crew seemed to warm up to her effusive praise. It opened a spigot of happy Millie’s Diner memories for him.

Except Rebekah. Her glare drilled Chloe as if she were a venomous insect needing to be crushed with a shoe.

“I got this, Rebekah,” he reminded quietly.

Rebekah sat to his left; Chloe at the far end of the table.

“This is beyond cool,” Chloe sang out, waving her skewer with the tilapia that had been rubbed with curry leaves and soaked in sambar. She popped the food in her mouth and bounced in her chair like a little kid.

“I loved Millie’s. It felt like home. But this feels like a private club. A secret. An international hot spot where I’d get a decadent cocktail, a savory dish I couldn’t pronounce, listen to some ethnic, vibey music with sick beats, and hear some gossip that would place me in a deep moral quandary.”

Rebekah’s machine-gun laugh was raw. “She gets it, Chef.”

“Rustin, I mean, Chef.” Chloe blushed charmingly, and he stared at her, feeling a little off-balance by the adult Clo Beau. “Tell me about the dishes and if you have anything I could buy to serve at a meeting today.”

“I’m not a caterer,” Rustin objected.

“What kind of meeting, Junior League? Church group?” Rebekah sneered.

“You’ll do takeout, though, when you open, right?” Chloe clarified and then turned to Rebekah. “I have the Movable Feast committee coming over today to finalize the plans, menu, and preparations for the event. I asked Jessica to help me make some sandwiches and scones or something, and this is her answer.” Chloe held up her phone as if he could read a text from across the table, and never would he voluntarily read a text or communicate with Jessica Maye.

Taking his silence for an answer, she turned her phone around and read. ‘Chloe, since

you jumped in to take over, handle your own food.’ “So this is me, attempting to handle my own food by asking for some clever appetizers from an expert in order to wow the committee, give them a preview of your awesome power,” Chloe said, tucking away her phone.

He opened his mouth to refuse, even as her enthusiastic praise and overt trust in him did something funny in his chest, but Rebekah, who never missed an opportunity, leaned forward.

“The Movable Feast?” Rebekah opened a screen on her phone. “The one on the town’s holiday events homepage?”

“Yes.”

“If we made some nibbles for your afternoon event... How many people?”

“Minimum, fifteen.”

“Would you post signage with our website, QR code, socials?” Rebekah raised one pierced brow.

“I haven’t agreed to cook anything for you today, Chloe,” Rustin said coolly. Rebekah had the vibe of a thoroughbred racehorse geared to bolt from the starting line, while Chloe was an excited pony kicking and whinnying, wanting to follow.

“Lucas can prepare it if you’re feeling too grand to ignore a business opportunity,” Rebekah snarked.

“Huh? For reals?” Lucas looked up from his cherry bounce.

Like hell he’d have his brother take charge of a menu before they were open to

provide food for Belmont's most exclusive and wealthy citizens. And wouldn't it burn their tight, surgically trimmed and lifted asses to learn who'd made the food they'd enjoyed?

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

And Jessica would be there. Eating his food. Enjoying it. And learning how wrong and shortsighted she and all of the Mayes, except Miss Millie and likely Chloe, had been.

“I’ll do it,” he said quietly earning a shocked look from Rebekah that morphed into a slick “gotcha.” Chloe wasn’t so subtle.

“Woo-hoo!” she jumped up and cheered, holding her shot glass of the cherry bounce sample aloft. “Rustin, you won’t regret this, Chef!”

I already do.

“Cheers to you and your crew and all your culinary endeavors and the Movable Feast that’s going to slay this year. With your help, I’ll cook the best entrée ever and prove I don’t F everything up, and your name and mad culinary skills and innovative recipes will have every seat filled and a line out the door for your grand opening and beyond!”

Chapter Five

“Rustin Wildish, when are you going to start using the front door?”

Rustin paused, feeling guilty and exposed even though he was delivering the plate of appetizers for Chloe’s meeting, but using the side door off the kitchen was habit.

Miss Millie stood in her kitchen preparing a cup of tea.

“You didn’t see me,” he practically growled, annoyed at being caught.

The crème de le crème of Belmont’s society women must have arrived early because he could hear a murmur of voices in the front parlor.

“No reason to hide from anyone, Rustin,” Miss Millie stated.

There was every reason. When people learned he was back in town, he wanted it to be on his turf and his terms.

“I’m not hiding.”

“Skulking then.” Miss Millie sipped her tea from a dainty flowered teacup. “Own your accomplishments and take your victory lap, boy.”

“I haven’t been a boy in a long time, Miss Millie.”

Miss Millie’s hawkish features softened minutely, or perhaps it was a trick of the light. “You were never a boy, Rustin.”

She looked at the covered platter he held.

“Bailing out Chloe?”

“No.”

“Humph.” Miss Millie gracefully rose and peeled off the foil covering of the platter he held. “This looks like a life preserver to me.”

“It’s a thank you.”

“Your success and dedication are more than enough thanks, Rustin. You’ve become your own man and a passionate, dedicated chef. I was merely a flashlight illuminating the first few steps on your path.”

It was unlike Miss Millie Maye to be modest. Rustin’s suspicions swirled.

“You were my shot,” he said, not wanting to say any more because Miss Millie had been a helluva lot more than that. “But I’m thanking Chloe for a kindness years ago.”

“You’ll have to be more specific.” Miss Millie sipped her tea and regarded him as if she were measuring him for a suit jacket. “That girl is endlessly kind. She practically runs her own cat and dog rescue with Jessica on my old family farm on Cramer Mountain. I’ve heard a rumor about a goat, so I’m waiting for Jessica to hex Chloe on an upcoming full moon, as goats eat everything, and Jessica loves her plants more than people.”

He waited for the familiar kick to his gut whenever he heard Jessica’s name, but it felt more like a casual nudge this time.

Miss Millie took one of the jalapeño poppers he’d made with pimento cheese and olives, then wrapped in a thin slice of crisp pork belly.

“Oh my.” She chewed thoughtfully. “Where are you getting the whisper of sweet?”

“It’s in my nature.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

She laughed. “I think the spice will clear out half the room. You may save that girl yet, though she’s never lacked courage. Go on then, remount your white horse.”

Miss Millie propelled him with surprising strength toward the swinging door that led to the parlor. “By the way, I made a change on the feast map this year. Check-in will be at The Wild Side as well as where the patrons will finish. I’m expecting the unexpected and wow factor, Rustin, so stop perseverating.”

She pushed him through the door, but he stuck his foot out to stop it from swinging back into his face.

“I’m not involved in the feast,” he said decisively. “This”—he brandished the tray—“is my contribution.”

Just the thought of the Movable Feast turned his stomach. Growing up, the event had sounded like a golden ticket to an adult version of Willy Wonka’s works. He’d heard stories about guests buying new clothes, magazine-worthy food, live Christmas music at every house, chocolate fountains, steaming, savory cheese to dip homemade bread and more in, real reindeer, and Santa handing out presents and prizes all in homes that were mansions, full of treasures and history.

Rustin, who’d always been hungry, had lived to catch details about the food. He’d wanted to sneak in, hide, and spy on the opulent pleasures. Steal some food to take home to his family so they could pretend to be grand, part of something good.

“Of course you are.” Miss Millie had no doubt. “I’m thinking a little nightcap or bounce at the end of the evening to encourage the guests to open their wallets again.”

“That was never part of the deal. I’m not opening until after the New Year.”

“It is now,” Miss Millie said complacently. “Sitting out the holiday season is dumb,” she said bluntly. “And you are not a stupid man.”

“I’m not ready,” he said, fiercely resenting the manipulation pushing in on all sides now.

“Then I suggest you prep yourself. Nothing like a time crunch to get the creative juices pumping. Fear doesn’t look good on you, Rustin. Besides,” her voice turned crafty, “you came here today as a thank you, so clearly you owe me.”

“You said my success was thanks enough.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

And with one final push from Miss Millie, Rustin was propelled backward through the swinging door into a narrow passageway—it was a sort of a butler’s kitchen—that lead to the parlor.

*

Chloe clasped her hands together between her thighs.

“Thank you everyone for coming,” she said, noting that Jessica had ensconced herself in Grandma Millie’s usual chair. Chloe practically sighed at how effortlessly elegant and beautiful Jessica was. She held court like a queen. Hard to imagine Chloe saw her more wearing gardening gloves and a dirt-stained romper than dressed up in her Lilly Pulitzer pretty.

Chloe waited for everyone to sit, but they didn’t. And Meghan and Sarah hadn’t

showed up yet—hopefully that meant they trusted her to pull this off. More nervous, she looked to Jessica, who raised one elegant brow as if to say your party.

More like my doom.

Chloe cleared her throat. No reaction. She could feel Jessica's look drilling into the side of her head.

Pull it together. You are a teacher!

"I'd like to get the meeting started."

The volume of women chatting didn't dim one decibel as far as she could tell.

"Ladies, please, let's get started! We have a lot to talk about with the Movable Feast, and I know y'all are busy."

Of the seven women attending the meeting, three huddled together near the blazing fireplace chatting away, and four others sat together, two on matching Stickley chairs and the other two on a love seat, but really in one conversational grouping.

Chloe bounced out of her seat. "Ladies," she sang out and then rhythmically clapped. Seven pair of eyes swiveled in her direction.

"Really, Chloe," sniffed Mrs. Mason. "We are not your students, dear. Of course, we are waiting for Miss Millie. It's unlike her to keep us waiting. And your mother, Jessica; she's uncharacteristically tardy, and I don't see your sisters."

Chloe gulped.

And we're off...

“Actually,” Chloe dug deep for her teacher’s smile, the one that said I know y’all don’t want to do this, but we’ll find some fun, “we’re switching things up a little this year.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

You'd have thought she'd burst out of a cake in pasties and a G-string and started rapping an Ice Spice song.

Dead silence and unnerving stares. A shiver bloomed at the base of Chloe's spine and spread to the tips of her toes and fingertips. Even her lips felt chilled.

"How very unusual," Mrs. Parker Louisa Smith said. She had grown up alongside the Maye sisters and Chloe and now lived on her family's town estate with her husband and three young children. "And quite shocking to spring it on us with no warning."

Her hard gaze pinned Jessica. "Don't tell me your hobby garden will be on the feast's map this year. That's more than a stroll—the...what was it called...farm, I believe is five miles out of town."

Jessica, sipping her own created spicy chai blend, stirred in the chair, and Chloe could practically hear her claws unsheathe.

"Ahhhh, not exactly," Chloe hedged, not wanting to insult Jessica—Did she want to be on the feast's map?—"but Jessica is—"

"Surely you're not thinking of cooking anything, Chloe," Parker interrupted sweetly. "Perhaps a punch. I'm sure you could manage a punch. My Reese, who's seven..."

And then it started. A cacophony of comments about needing to rearrange the order of the feast. The menus. The map. The printer. She heard "Dear God, not Chloe, bless her heart" several times. Everyone was talking at once, and Chloe knew she had to gain control before Grandma Millie felt the need to launch a rescue. She was nearing

twenty-seven. She was a teacher. A choir director.

Shame coated her throat. She should have let Jessica take the feast. Or Sarah. Meghan would have hated doing it, but any of them would have skillfully risen to the challenge. All the Mayes would have.

Except me.

She couldn't help but shoot a desperate look at Jessica, who pursed her lips and put two fingers to her lips as if to whistle. She winked, and Chloe felt a ping of humor.

“Good afternoon, ladies.”

Rustin Wildish strode into the room, a platter of beautiful somethings in his hands. And oh God it smelled amazing. Her mouth watered over the man and the food. She ate him up with her gaze, while Jessica, still sitting, paled, her deep green eyes widened, and she slowly stood.

Rustin knew how to make an entrance. He stood, feet slightly apart, floor-to-ceiling windows of the parlor at his back framing him in a halo of light like some otherworldly creature entering through a portal.

He wore black jeans. Black boots with chunky soles making him even taller. A black T-shirt that stretched over his broad shoulders and sinfully defined chest and hinted at abs that made Chloe's knees weak. Black leather bomber jacket unzipped. His hair was unbound and flowed to kiss his shoulders in waves. His charcoal eyes appeared to be black and snapping with barely repressed emotion. His whole aura snapped and crackled like the moment before lightning hit. Chloe felt the sizzle of him on her skin.

The shock and tension clashed and would have been funny if she'd had any head space to notice anything except how Rustin looked as he dominated the elegant and

feminine parlor.

“Sorry, I’m a bit late, Chloe.” He speared her with a look. “Your poppers have popped.”

His smile dazzled as she’d rarely seen it, and she gulped. Feeling behind herself for a chair and not finding one, she squished herself next to the immobile Jessica.

“R-Rustin Wildish?” Parker struggled to find her voice. “How dare...what...” She sucked in a breath. “Whatever are you doing here?” Her voice trailed off.

The silence pulsed.

“What are you doing back in Belmont?” Kitty Oxford, whose family had been in town almost as long as the Mayes, snapped. “And why interrupt our very important meeting?”

“Not interrupting.” Rustin’s smile went a bit feral, and Chloe’s tummy heated.

“I’m opening a restaurant, The Wild Side. It’ll be the first and last stop on the Movable Feast,” he said to the stunned crowd.

Chloe bounced on her toes.

Yes.

“Popper anyone?” she called out, and swept the tray out of his hands, noting the cocktail napkins said, OLIVE ME. For some hosts, the napkins would have been cutesy. Chloe felt like Rustin was symbolically flipping the gathered Belmont society leaders a wink and a middle finger.

“I insist,” she said when Parker demurred the offered appetizer.

*

Rustin returned to Miss Millie’s kitchen feeling like he’d run a marathon barefoot and with the flu, but he was still standing. He hadn’t turned to stone and then smoked to ash after seeing Jessica.

No black despair dragged him under. No fury burned through his brain.

He was whole.

It had taken nearly thirteen years, but he was free of Jessica's pull. She was finally in the past where she belonged.

"You tricked me," he said to Miss Millie, with no bitterness. Her manipulating and challenging him was hardly unexpected.

"She always had a crush on you." Miss Millie added a splash of bourbon to her tea and raised her eyebrows, shaking the bottle at him.

And just that easily, Jessica roared back into his mind.

"She was ashamed to be seen with me." The comment tore out of his throat though he returned to Belmont determined to ignore the past. The future held promise and challenge enough. He didn't need to duel with ghosts.

"A putty knife couldn't have scraped Chloe off her hero worship and crush." Miss Millie sipped her tea, smiling fondly.

Rustin bit back a curse at his careless mistake. What would Miss Millie have done if she'd known how much he'd adored and worshipped Jessica?

Likely she'd have poisoned me and buried me on Cramer Mountain.

"You were a hero with your Byron looks, languid Edward Cullen sullen grace, and the rapper de jour's spitting fury. You captured my sweet Chloe's imagination. You

were as much a changeling in your family as she was in mine. Renegades and outcasts.”

Rustin kept his mouth shut. He knew when he stepped in a hole he needed to stop digging.

But Millie wielded silence like a scalpel. And they had too much history for him not to get cut.

“She was a kid,” he said, “your granddaughter.”

Not that that had stopped his dogged pursuit and wild love of Jessica.

“Chloe was an unexpected and very welcome gift.” Miss Millie sipped her spiked tea, staring him down. “She’s always had an unbridled imagination, wide-open heart, and an old soul. She’ll need help with the Movable Feast.”

“She has three sisters...cousins...whatever. They can help. They’re all glued at the hip. Can’t believe they aren’t here bossing Clo Beau around.”

“This is important to Chloe.”

“It’s your party,” he parried. “Now that you’re forcing me to participate during the holiday season, I’m going to be too busy to help.”

“We’ll see.” Miss Millie had a smile he recognized. Over the years he’d seen the recipient of that smile get twisted up, shot down, or socially cut. “It’s not total magnanimity on your part. My Chloe will be a great help to you.”

He was about to correct her on that—no way was he babysitting—when the topic of conversation, followed by Jessica, nearly tumbled into the room.

“Rustin, you certainly know how to whip up the drama,” Chloe said, her eyes sparkling and her wide mouth stretched in that telltale grin of hers.

“Nothing new there,” Jessica accused. Her green eyes were beautiful and hot with temper. He saw a pulse flutter in her neck. “What game are you playing?”

“Jessica! What’s wrong with you?” Chloe practically flew before Jessica like a small crow, flapping as Jessica stalked toward him.

“How did you trick Grandma Millie out of her diner?” Jessica glared at him, pushing around Chloe. “You think my daddy will stand for you stealing from an old lady?”

“Jessica!” Chloe gasped.

“Old lady?” Miss Millie rose from her seat.

“Jessica, are you possessed? Rustin would never trick anyone.”

“Ha.”

“Grandma Millie’s too smart for that,” Chloe said staunchly.

“I’m the only clear-eyed one here. You’ve both lost your minds. I know what Rustin Wildish is.” Her exquisite face was pale but for twin slashes of color. Her breath came quickly, but it was Chloe who held his attention.

“A chef!” Chloe answered swiftly.

“A thief!” Jessica countered.

Rustin stared at Jessica’s beautiful features: so angry, so disdainful, so like a Maye. Beautiful. Entitled. Dismissive. And he felt...nothing.

Not true. He felt like he was floating free from his once-obsessive love like it was a bad dream. He was no longer that desperate boy.

“I’ve stolen nothing. Ever,” he said, not even angry at the accusation. She had no power to hurt him anymore.

“I’ve worked since I was twelve. I know you can’t say the same, Jessica.”

I can even say her name without choking!

“You think my childhood poverty and the violence I had to protect myself and my siblings from is a permanent stain on my soul whereas you are pure. But not from where I’m standing, Jessica Maye. Miss Millie offered to sell me Millie’s. I bought it. It’s mine. I remodeled it with my money, my team, and a friend’s construction crew, which I paid for along with all the supplies.”

Jessica swayed, and he wondered if he’d have to catch her like some dashing hero in a book. And would Miss Millie forgive him if he let her fall on her face?

“Your daddy can make up all the lies he wants about me. Doesn’t make them true.”

And then, because he was on a roll and feeling rather empowered with his I'm the boss of me persona, he slanted a look at Chloe, who stood on her toes as if trying to see something just out of reach.

Miss Millie's words came back—it felt like a premonition—Chloe needed help, but she could somehow help him as well.

Miss Millie had saved him—at least he'd thought so—but she'd always told him that he had saved himself by taking her offer, working hard, and dreaming big.

"I'm home for good," he informed Jessica. "Deal or don't. Your opinion means less than nothing to me." And then, because he could be contrary even in the same five minutes, he turned his attention to Chloe.

"You ready to roll, Chloe?"

Her shocked blue and purple gaze bounced between him and Jessica and back again. Her lips pursed as if to ask where, yet no sound came out.

"You were going to show me the recipe book you found," he prompted.

"What book?" Jessica demanded.

Chloe focused her attention on him, and Rustin felt something inside of him shift. He hadn't even been aware that he'd cared one way or the other if she said yes.

"Ready to roll, Rustin." And Chloe Maye Cramer followed him out the door.

Chapter Six

"Wow." Chloe turned full circle as if looking at her carriage house apartment for the

very first time. The furnishings were from Grandma Millie, all antiques pulled out of storage and refinished and reupholstered. It was clean, but not totally tidy. She had papers to grade organized on the dining room table, several open books strewn on different sitting places, and the kitchen... Well, the kitchen looked like hurricane Chloe had blown through, and the eye and back end of the storm had passed, but the debris had never been cleaned up.

She did a little happy hop and then tried to cover it up by pretending she'd tripped, which made everything more awkward.

"Rustin Wildish is in my apartment!"

"Want an autograph?" He tossed his leather jacket on her coat stand.

He was being facetious. He must be, but she couldn't read his arresting, hard-planed face. He looked more like a man out of time. Tall, dark, edgy, cut, impatient. A rogue...more like a pirate instead of a refined, talented chef opening a restaurant.

"Some chefs are celebrities, so I probably should get your scrawl before there's a long line of fan boys and girls. Have you been practicing?"

"Show me the cookbook, Chloe."

"It's not really a cookbook," she stammered, hoping she hadn't made the book sound epic as if it belonged in a museum. "It's kind of...um...weird." She couldn't quite get over that Rustin was in her apartment and going to cook with her. This was a dream come true, yet she was hesitating like she was going to share her poetry or song scribbles in her journal.

God, the thought of sitting with Rustin, sharing...

“You said it had recipes.”

“Ummm, yeah.”

He held out a hand, palm up, and for a wild second, she imagined resting her hand in his. But no. Her imagination was galloping off without her brain. Rustin wanted the book.

“I don’t know why I’m feeling so protective about the book,” she admitted. “It’s not like it’s a family heirloom or anything.”

“Could be.”

“No, Grandma Millie wouldn’t have put a family heirloom in her mini library outside her house. You know the one,” she reminded. “She’s had it for years. Bring a book, take a book.”

His hands shifted to his hips, fingers arrowing toward the most masculine part of him, and Chloe’s heart skipped a beat. His eyes looked like shadows, swallowing her.

Act like an adult.

Rustin was in her home. He was going to help her—hopefully. She needed to leash her impulses and fantasies and show him respect since Jessica had been uncharacteristically rude.

To steady herself, she walked to the island peninsula that separates the living space

from the kitchen and retrieved the bound book. Holding it to her chest, she faced Rustin.

“Maybe it is a Maye heirloom,” she said, hesitating. “Usually there are so many books in the mini library, but last night there was only this, as if it had been abandoned,” she whispered, hating the catch in her voice. “I feel like it called to me. Accepted me.”

I need to shut up now, relating the book to my past. Ugh!

“Show me,” he invited, and Chloe had to remind herself that he meant the book. Rustin gazed at her so intently it was hard to breathe. His whole sexy vibe and his masculine energy unnerved her, made her feel unraveled down to her essence in some way. Primitive.

“I’m not a Maye,” her dry voice croaked out. She tried to swallow. “Not really.”

“Maye enough.” His scrutiny swung over the entire carriage house apartment—the art, the antiques, the architecture, none of it chosen by her. “You’ve always been a Maye, Chloe.”

“I was wrapped in a pink blanket in a Moses basket and left on Grandma Millie’s doorstep like a Christmas gift fruit basket.”

His eyes widened. “That’s real? I thought that was just spiteful gossip because your coloring was so different and, well, Miss Millie raised you, not Elizabeth Katherine and Sean Ryan Maye,” he sneered their names.

Of course he wouldn’t like the three Ms’s parents. They were pillars of Belmont society and had taken their lofty positions quite seriously.

“Miss Millie kept you.” Rustin took two steps forward so that she could feel the heat, the snarling energy that pulsed off his body like he was some kind of cosmic phenomenon. “That meant something. She loves you. What matters is what you’ve become, not how you started out.”

Warmth infused her. Rustin made it sound so easy to leave the past behind. Her throat tightened, and her eyes pricked with tears. Never had anyone dismissed, accepted, and summed up her beginnings so succinctly.

“So be a phoenix,” she said doubtfully.

To her shock, he peeled off his black T-shirt, and she found herself looking at a chest that appeared airbrushed perfect. Her breath tangled, and her tummy heated.

“W-what...?” The bronze skin, the muscle definition, the ink made her head swim.

He tapped his left pec. “Phoenix,” he said. “First tat. Total cliché, but I was seventeen and was proving a point to myself. I needed something I’d see every day to remind me that I was rising from my past, not defined by it.”

Like I want to.

“Rustin,” she breathed into the rush of feelings.

“Show me the book, Chloe.”

The hardness of his voice and eyes was a slammed door on her feels.

She handed the book over, bracing for Rustin to scathingly shut her down. He’d been to culinary school. Had trained in some top kitchens in different cities and countries, and she had the impulse to snatch the book back, protect it from his well-trained

scorn.

Rustin stared at the cover, one hand passed over the leather and binding reverently. He carried the book to the window that looked out over Grandma Millie's garden and Maye Park with the bare oaks and crepe myrtle branches pointed toward a bright blue sky.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

He slowly turned the pages, and she heard him murmur, “Food is love.”

For someone who’d grown up poor and started washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen at Millie’s for money and meals for his family before he was in his teens, food probably had felt like survival and a hard slog, not love.

“Food is love.” His finger touched each handwritten word.

“That resonated with me too,” she said softly. “I remember no matter how tough school was or what was going on, I could go to Millie’s Diner and get a cup of soup, a biscuit, and a kind word, and the day was instantly better.”

She stared at her toes as she spoke, not wanting to see his curled lip of disdain or impatience flash like lightning in his eyes. He had often been at the diner, and that had always soothed every hurt. Still, her troubles had been nothing compared to his.

“Millie’s felt like home to me too,” Rustin said after a long silence, still leafing through the book, one page at a time. “I often wished it was my home. If I hadn’t had my family to help, I would have snuck back in after closing and slept there surrounded by warmth and the comforting scent of biscuits baking. Then I would have been up at dawn firing up the grills.”

Sorrow pierced her.

“So, you came home and bought a part of your history but changed everything.”

*

Rustin heard the question but ignored it. He'd given Chloe Maye Cramer too much already and was now poised to give her more after seeing the book. She had no idea of its history. Value. Power. And he wanted total access. Ideas and plans and recipes shuffled through his brain like a pack of cards under the hands of an expert Vegas dealer.

Hungrily he read the recipes. The notes. The corrections. Written in different hands. Ink faded. And then as he read more deeply into the book, a few times he saw more personal notes. Some sketches. Romantic advice. That was unexpected. Notes on health and herbs. A couplet—or was it a haiku?—here and there. A smile teased. That, at least would interest Chloe. He'd heard she'd become a teacher.

“There's a whole personal and family history here,” he said. “Like it was handed down, used, enjoyed, and added to. But why would anyone shove this obviously treasured book into Miss Millie's mini library?”

He finally tore his gaze from the pages to look at Chloe, who rocked up and down on the balls of her feet. She'd done it as a kid, and he remembered she'd been teased by kids who'd asked if she was trying to fly. Knowing what a fey, free spirit Chloe had been she probably had thought she could fly.

“Sure it's not Miss Millie's?”

“I don't recognize any of the handwriting,” Chloe admitted. She too was puzzled.

“No,” he said definitively, as Miss Millie had left him many notes over the years by way of lists of tasks, notes on recipes. “And I don't recognize any of the recipes but the biscuits.”

He closed the book and faced Chloe ready to negotiate.

An idea niggled. Traditions. Heirloom recipes. Modern twist. Fusion elements from countries of origin. Themes.

“What’s your theme for the Moveable Feast?” he asked, knowing there was a theme every year.

He knew the event was the weekend following Thanksgiving, and it kicked off the holiday celebrations on Belmont’s busy Christmas calendar. Of course, he’d never attended, but from the age of twelve he’d helped Miss Millie’s crew pull it all together and cleaned up after, hidden away in the kitchen because no one would allow a Wildish to be a guest in their elegant, historic homes that perched like jewels ringing the crown of Maye Downtown Park.

“Last night after finding the book, I looked through it and Grandma Millie’s binder on all the previous feasts,” she said and cleared her throat. “I thought maybe Southern holiday traditions or...” She nibbled on a thumbnail and looked at him doubtfully.

“Roots.” His ideas coalesced. Usually, he only let his ideas roam freely in his kitchen when he was alone. Or sometimes he brainstormed with Rebekah because she was brilliant and thought in terms of marketing and monetizing, which was not his strong suit.

He brought out his phone and hit VOICE MEMO. “I could have a roots section on the menu, changing weekly. No, monthly. Seasonally aware, holidays when appropriate. Farm-to-table emphasis or a section. Beef up research on local food sources.” He paused, a little embarrassed for Chloe to hear him brainstorm.

“I love the roots idea, Rustin,” she said and bounced up on her toes. Her eyes shone, and her high, round cheeks pinked. “For your menu and the feast, but you probably want to keep your menu sacred. Perhaps a sample for the feast, and then you could experiment with something else at the Christmas Market the following weekend?”

You definitely should have a food truck there or...” And she was off, ideas flowing like a river sweeping him away.

“We could theme the Movable Feast ‘Back to Our Roots,’ and you could have a ‘Southern Roots’ section on your menu that rotates with recipes and perhaps roots from around the world.”

Not a bad idea.

His finger twitched on RECORD, but he hesitated, hearing again the first word in her sentence. “There is no ‘we,’ Clo Beau.”

She flushed Barbie pink, and he shoved down the guilt and unwanted need to protect her.

“You are going to cook, Chloe. I’ll guide you through it.”

*

Chloe was thrilled. “Really?”

“Yes.” Rustin’s attention was on the book, not her.

Of course. He was a trained chef. Cooking was his passion, and she’d just handed him a historical text. It had nothing to do with her. It was the same as if she’d found a handwritten draft of one of Milton’s works or notes on a Wagnerian choral composition.

“When do we start?” she asked humbly.

“Now. Choose a recipe.”

That proved more difficult than it should have. She kept mentally dismissing each recipe. Not elegant. Not sure what it is. How would I cook that? I’ll blow through the budget Grandma Millie has set.

“Choose something you like to eat, Chloe,” Rustin said, his dark-eyed attention finally shifted to her. “No point in making something to impress others if you don’t think you’ll love it.”

She blinked at him. “You’re right.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

And now she felt nervous for a different reason. She and Rustin stood side by side. She could feel his energy and smell the faint cedar and bergamot scent that wafted off

his skin. Was it body wash? Shampoo? Aftershave? Cologne? Innate?

“You smell good.”

She clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“Let’s stick to food. I’m coaching, not on the menu.” But she saw a hint of a smile curve his mouth.

Was that a dimple in his left cheek?

“Do you have dimples?”

She’d never seen anything resembling a dimple. But then she’d never seen Rustin Wildish smile. He’d mostly scowled. Or intently focused on what he was doing in Millie’s kitchen. Or fighting with an arrogant townie prepster who’d mocked him or trash-talked his family.

Yeah. Rustin hadn’t had much to smile about.

“Recipe, Clo Beau.”

She carefully turned the pages. “I want comfort food. Tradition, but with a twist. And colorful or holidayish, like the jalapeño poppers you made, but those aren’t a main dish.”

“They can be part of a main dish,” he said. “A side. The Movable Feast is a combination of small plates. I’m going to start off with an aperitif that’s dry with a sweet and savory garnish.”

“Of what?” she asked eagerly.

“You’ll have to wait.”

“I could help.” She couldn’t resist trying to make him almost smile again.

“You’ll have your hands full, so pick something you enjoy eating. Festive jalapeño poppers and...”

The way he waited was so seductive.

Not that she’d ever been seduced like a heroine in a romance or anything. It was hard to think about anything other than Rustin, but as he’d said, he was not on the menu.

“Pulled pork is hearty. There’s a barbecue sauce recipe in here, I bet.” She flipped through, but the handwritten recipes, sketches, and notes of advice—some geared toward men’s hearts and stomachs—seemed rather sexist, and she wondered if Rustin was having a hard time not busting out laughing.

She blushed for whose ever ancestors had had the book but felt guilty that she now was the keeper of so much history. The book should remain with the family who had created it.

“Whoever wrote the recipes were rather randy,” she murmured.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

That did get a laugh, and she thrilled.

“Gotta keep the generations coming.”

“Have you ever come close to marrying?” Yeah, her mind popped there. “You’d be a great dad. You’re so family oriented. Loyal.”

“No.”

And she’d just killed the synergy they’d been building. She hunched a little. He was back to being an edgy, icy, feral beast, chained and straining.

Always gotta push, Chloe.

The Maye sisters had always said it—kindly, but with exasperation. And their mother. ‘Button your lips,’ had been her favorite along with ‘No one wants to hear your random thoughts.’

“I love biscuits! Big fluffy biscuits dripping with butter and honey,” she sighed happily, picturing them so clearly that her mouth watered.

“I remember.”

Her tummy flipped. He remembered her as a kid running to Millie’s after school for a snack and to do her homework while Rustin was cleaning. But there was always one oven still baking biscuits for the mill workers, and then when the mills were closed, construction workers and others to buy and take home.

What would it take for Rustin to see her as a woman?

“Go for biscuits,” he said, as if she could really do what she wanted. “With pulled pork, you can’t get more North Carolina than that.” He flipped through the book. “There’s a savory biscuit, and you could use the sweeter barbecue sauce here. I have Miss Millie’s smoker. You could hire someone to do the meat the day before and let it marinate in the sauces the day of.”

That made it sound more manageable.

“And if I’m doing pulled pork sandwiches with biscuits, I definitely need slaw. I love slaw,” she said happily, beginning to think that she might not spectacularly fail.

“And I adore hush puppies. Look here, a recipe for crab and shrimp–stuffed hush puppies. Done.” She closed the book and did a little dance.

“No,” he said. “You’re just beginning.”

Rustin stalked over to her kitchen, opened drawers, cabinets, and the fridge.

“Make yourself at home,” she joked weakly.

His disapproval was tangible. “First, shopping.”

Chapter Seven

It was pastnine in the evening before Chloe, energy waning, finally felt she was close to being ready to plate. She just needed to get her biscuits in the oven.

“You haven’t lit the candle.”

OMG. Rustin had to stop. For hours he'd stood in her small kitchen issuing orders in that sexy voice. He took up too much oxygen and her focus. He was like a darn magnet, and her quivering attention was the metal.

"I don't see why I need to light a lemon-scented candle," she objected. "For the dinner table, I can understand, but..." She wiped her forearm over her face, her hands sticky with chunks of dough. Flour was in her hair. This was her third attempt at the dough.

And she'd thought the shopping excursion with Rustin this afternoon—he'd taken her to Harris Teeter out of town instead of Food Lion, which was closer and where she usually shopped for her simple needs—was rough. They'd been in the store nearly ninety minutes and had filled two baskets with what Rustin had deemed kitchen essentials. Chloe was still trying to ignore that she'd dropped more on groceries in one afternoon excursion than she'd spent the last two months. And she'd ignored several texts from Jessica, Sarah and Meghan asking if she needed help.

Why had she put all her trust in Rustin and not her cousins?

"Did you massage the dough with the rosemary-infused oil?"

"No, I like butter better," Chloe asserted. She had to make at least one stand.

"You agreed to follow the recipe exactly."

"Don't you dare say you need to walk before you can run again," she warned, trying to scrape dough off her hands again. "Grandma Millie musta said that to me a million times."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“But you haven’t taken it to heart.” He took the bowl from her.

“Hey!”

He dumped out the sticky mixture. “She only had to say it to me once,” he smirked at her. “I listened; I learned. Again.”

Chloe’s shoulders drooped. “Really? Freshly plucked rosemary, rub one leafed stem between my palms after warming between them for ten deep breaths?”

“It’s in the recipe.”

She huffed out a breath, and never had a sigh been more well-earned. “I never follow recipes. I just make it up, throw things together, see what happens.”

Often the compost bin was what happened.

“I thought chefs were creative.”

“They are.” His voice was dark as molasses, and Chloe blamed his potent draw for her distraction and disinterest in doing the recipe over again. Maybe she should just suck it up and hire caterers.

“But chefs learn the basics. Practice the essential skills over and over. We learn what works and how and why before we can play and get our hands truly dirty.”

The way he looked and sounded when he said “dirty” should be a sexy man internet

meme. Viral. Boom! Mentally, Chloe made exploding jazz hands.

“You still write poetry?”

The question was unexpected, and she could barely swallow as a red wave swamped her cheeks. “Ummm...yeah?”

“There are rules to language. Grammar. Syntax. Stuff like that. Miss Millie told me you’re a high school English teacher, and that you also teach a creative writing class.”

Why she felt utterly exposed was a mystery. It wasn’t as if Rustin would want to see her journal...okay, dozens of journals. If he did, he’d abandon his new venture and head to a city where he didn’t feature in dozens of effusive entries about Rustin sightings in her childhood journals.

“You know the rules that make writing work so that the meaning is clear, so you can experiment a little—create a voice that sings on the page in places.”

“Like when I verbize nouns,” she said, making the connection.

“Yeah. I guess. So, this time do it exactly as specified in the recipe.”

“It’s not like this old book is the Bible,” she griped, reaching for the bag of flour. “And if you’d helped me, we’d both be tucked in bed.”

The flour dropped from her hands and would have plopped on the floor, making an even bigger mess, but Rustin caught it. Handed it back. His expression amused.

“Separately, I mean,” she stammered, sure she was crimson again. “Different beds. Yours. Mine. Oh. Never mind. Zipping. Right now.”

“Good idea. Again, exactly.”

Rustin was broodingly hot, but she felt he was laughing at her a little, and that cheered her, like they were friends.

So, she read the directions. Followed them exactly, including the rosemary stalk and the lemon candle, and then she plated the food exactly as Rustin had instructed. That part was interesting because she’d never thought about a plate as a canvas. Or like a choral arrangement, each voice singing something specific to complement or draw attention to a certain line or tone.

Rustin sounded like an artist as he talked about the shape and colors and texture and the way it would all “draw the eye.”

And it did. But, still, her eyes, her hungry gaze, would always, always, always be drawn to Rustin.

And now he was back in Belmont.

“Ta-da,” she said softly, placing the plate in front of Rustin as he sat at her bistro-style table she’d snagged at a Charlotte bakery that was going out of business. It was the one piece of furniture she’d chosen. Grandma Millie had chosen all the other furniture from generations of Mayes or Cramers. Chloe loved the thick, reclaimed wood round top and the hand-painted design accents.

Rustin looked at the food and then picked up the still piping-hot biscuit that she’d layered with slaw and the pulled pork that had cooked and marinated in her Crock-Pot all afternoon.

“Aren’t you going to taste it with me?” he asked.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“I feel like I’ve dined on the smell.”

“Foreplay,” Rustin said softly, and her tummy flipped.

Was he flirting with her? No. She was being her usual impulsive leap-before-looking self.

“Besides.” She rolled her eyes, remembering the directions—allof the directions.

“The book says that the man must sample first.”

“Who am I to argue with tradition?”

Chloe barely refrained from snorting. “You fence with tradition daily,” she said.

“Probably since birth. It’s your superpower.”

“A compliment from a Maye.” He picked up his fork.

“You don’t like the Mayes much,” she noted.

“You don’t consider yourself a Maye?”

She nibbled on her lip, her hands clasped together. She should. Grandma Millie had once taken her by the shoulders when she’d been seven or eight and sobbing over some holiday slight at the big table with all of the family, and her green eyes had been fierce.

You are a Maye! You are every inch a Maye, and I don’t want you to ever doubt it,

not for one second more!

“I am,” Chloe said slowly. “But someday, a lot of days, I feel only part Maye. And a lot of days, I don’t really fit in, and I wonder...” She shut her mouth before she verbally jumped off the ledge and overshared her curiosity about her birth family. Grandma Millie would be so hurt.

Rustin’s gaze drilled into her. “I know how it feels to not fully belong,” he said softly.

Chloe felt everything still inside her as if she’d stepped to the edge of the tall diving board at the YMCA.

Jump.

“I wonder if my birth family would have understood me better,” she blurted.

Rustin stilled. “I feel blessed that I have nothing in common with the previous generations of Wildish men.”

Chloe felt as if she were in church at the end of a prayer.

“Bon appetit,” Rustin said and took a bite.

Chloe held her breath.

*

The flavors and textures melded like magic in his mouth, and shock infused him as if he’d jumped into ice-cold water. Chloe had created this? Exquisite. He couldn’t even praise her—yes, he was exacting with his crew, but also unstinting with deserved

praise—because his mouth was full of the divine.

Mutely, Rustin picked up the other quarter piece of the pulled-pork biscuit and held it out to her. Chloe looked nervous, yet her bow-shaped lips closed over the offering, brushing his fingers. A jolt speared through his chest harder than the time he'd been in a head-on when a small truck had jumped its lane on a mountain road in Turkey. The airbag had felt like a gunshot, and his sternum had been bruised and ached for a month.

Rustin stared into Chloe's slightly mismatched eyes like he'd never seen her before. Her blue and slightly purple gaze held stars and questions he was just beginning to ask, and then as she chewed, her pale cheeks pinked, and she smiled, the hint of a sunrise swallowing the night.

"This is amazing. Delicious," she said in wonder. "I did it! We did it!"

How could she speak? Rustin had no words. He could barely form a thought. It was like he'd walked up to a wall that became a door opening into a different universe.

Chloe Maye Cramer. Pixie adorable. Fairy smart. Creative, giving, funny, ethereal beauty, and so far out of his league.

Rustin felt dizzy, upended as if he were on the deck of a ship that was pulling the Titanic. But instead of drowning in icy water, a warm wave washed over him, pulling him somewhere he didn't want to go.

What's happening?

He gripped the edge of the table as if to hold himself in place, though he wasn't sure he could move if he wanted to.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

He inhaled the lemony fragrance of the candle. Lemon verbena. He would forever associate that scent with Chloe. What was happening? Was it magic? Witchcraft? He'd heard a few rumors and cutting comments about Chloe growing up, but since he'd resented the hell out of being a topic of gossip, he'd mostly ignored it.

"What have you done to me?"

"Huh?" Chloe asked around a bite of the popper. "You don't like...?" She reached for one of the hush puppies. "Try the hush puppy, Rustin. They might be my favorite."

But Rustin felt unraveled, as though he'd been a wrapped package, but now all the trimmings were stripped off, leaving him exposed. Brand new.

He stumbled to his feet on wobbly legs.

What was happening? She hadn't drugged the food. She wouldn't. He'd watched every step.

"You did something."

"Yeah, I cooked. I did everything the book said. You insisted."

"No, it's wrong. Out of this world. Delicious."

"That's a good thing, right?"

Blindly he rushed for the door, stumbled down the stairs, and ran into the night. Gulping in air like a beached fish, he ran through the park, crossed Central, and ran to the river, thinking an icy dunk would somehow break the spell that had enveloped him. He ran and ran, even as every cell in his body screamed at him to turn around. Return to Chloe and her oddly old-fashioned apartment.

Panic screamed through him. He'd once given his heart to a Maye. Jessica had kicked it. Despised it. Mocked it. No way would he give another woman a chance to take a shot, especially not a Maye.

He felt like his chest was being crushed, but he fought back, harnessing his will that shoved him through tough spots. Rustin had grown up hard. Tough. He was a survivor. Chloe Maye Cramer would have no hold over him. Not ever.

*

Chloe should be exhausted. After Rustin had run out last night—embarrassingly not the only date that had ended with a man making a hasty exit—without an excuse, she'd wanted to run after him because she'd been worried. Had he had an allergy attack? Choked? But as she'd watched him fly across the park, she knew he was fine. Besides, following him would have felt stalkerish. She had done enough of that as a kid.

She had forced herself to stay put for once. Rustin knew all the ingredients. He'd been militant about every step in the preparation and cooking process. And he hadn't indicated any concerns.

Instead, she cleaned her kitchen, stored all the food, and read through more of the book, putting sticky notes by recipes she thought might work. This afternoon, she'd rushed home from teaching, intending to check on Rustin and run the new recipe ideas by him. The fried sage leaves intrigued her, and yet she worried. Was that skill

set too high a bar for her to hurdle?

“You’re busy.”

“Grandma Millie.” Chloe pulled up short as she headed out her front door.

“You’ve been cooking?” Grandma Millie sniffed the air delicately. “Nothing smells charred.”

“Ha. Ha. I followed a recipe. Like really followed it. Detail by detail.”

“No cowgirling up?”

Chloe laughed. She’d forgotten that Grandma Millie used to tease her about being a cowgirl in a past life because she’d been so independent and spirited and fiercely willing to strike out on her own and follow an idea, though never with a plan.

“Not a single yeehaw. Rustin supervised and made me start over and over if I deviated. I even had to light a lemon-scented candle and let him take the first bite because he was the big man.”

“Oh my.” Grandma Millie hid a smile. “That sounds very diligent. What did Rustin think? He’s a tough critic but fair.”

“No idea,” she said, still troubled. “I thought he liked it, but after he offered me a bite, he got this weirdly intense look on his face like I was a stranger and accused me of doing something to him. Then he stood up all wobbly and took off at a run. I think maybe he’d OD’d on me by that time. We shopped together, as he’d found my kitchen utterly lacking, and then he had me make the sauce and get the pork cooking in the Crock-Pot, and he came back last night and watched me do the whole thing. He didn’t help one bit.”

Chloe waited for Grandma Millie to say something wise.

Instead, she seemed to be choosing and rejecting several replies. Chloe was puzzled because Grandma Millie was never at a loss for words.

“A fine way to teach,” she finally said. “What cookbook did you use?”

“I found one in your mini library. It’s...unusual. I was thinking about roots, Belmont and North Carolina roots. Rustin was all in on the idea, and when he saw the book, he agreed to help me if I let him look through it, take some inspiration. It only seemed fair to agree. I need the help, and I know he’s busy and not a Chloe fan.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Grandma Millie said drily.

“You want to try what we...well, what I made? I have a plate already. I was hoping we could have dinner later tonight and review some other recipes to try because I want your feedback, but I wanted to check in with Rustin first. I’ve been worried and confused all day.”

“I would enjoy eating dinner with you, my darling Chloe, but the decisions about what you are going to serve at the Movable Feast are yours,” she said tartly.

“But Grandma Millie, it’s me! And the Maye name and tradition! I don’t want to mess it up!”

“Dear girl, I have no doubt you will hold up your end. Shall we say dinner at my house at seven? Invite Rustin. Not sure he’ll want to come, but since you’ll be using my kitchen, I’ve no doubt he will be full of opinions.”

*

“No,” Rustin crossed his arms when Lucas and Rebekah approached him, Rebekah with a budget request and Lucas with his unrequited crush on Rebekah, supporting her every idea.

“Absolutely not. I will not have cheesy red and green or tinsel sparkling anything.”

“The Wild Side is kicking off the holiday season in this dinky town. This is no time to play a too-cool heathen,” Rebekah shot back. “The next town over is called

McAdenville and in December it becomes Christmas Town, USA. and has a huge light show. I've seen it online."

"I've been there," Lucas said. "It was the one Christmas thing we could afford when we were kids. We should do the pop-up there too."

"I've applied for a permit for that event too, for several nights."

"What? No. We're not open," Rustin reminded. "We've already been dragged unwillingly into the Movable Feast."

"Speak for yourself. The rest of us are thrilled you will be creating an aperitif with a sweet edible garnish to kick off the feast."

"And a cherry bounce cocktail," Lucas added.

Rustin heard the excitement, but also the sarcasm in his brother's voice—he knew it burned his ass that Miss Millie had issued an edict, and though he was now a man, he didn't have it in him to ignore her.

"So, we need decorations." Rebekah pushed her agenda, clicking her red nails together.

Rustin pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd felt off-balance since last night. What had he been thinking—that he was in love with Chloe Maye Cramer? Absurd. He hadn't been idiotically in love since he'd been sixteen. He was just tired. Hungry. Slammed with so many memories—many of them unpleasant—since he'd returned to Belmont.

"We are absolutely not decorating for Christmas. Final answer," he told his crew, trying to ignore their disappointed expressions and slumped shoulders.

“Oh no, Rustin, absolutely you need to decorate for Christmas.”

Chloe marched into his restaurant from the outside deck, holding the book and something in Tupperware.

God, no.

She was here to poison him again.

“The Wild Side will be ground zero. It will set the stage for the Movable Feast,” she smiled at him. That cute little dent in her chin tempted him to reach out and caress it.

Her eyes were liquid with emotion, sparkling with excitement.

“But I can see why you want to do something different.” She put down the book and Tupperware on the long, family-style table, and then draped her pink coat over a chair.

She turned a circle. “You want to really make a big WOW.” She swung her arms wide. “Lean into the industrial vibe you’re rocking with a pop of festive that’s unexpected, unique, and yet sings Christmas. Oh! I know!” Chloe snapped her fingers, and he found himself totally charmed. “A rebar tree. I could talk to the high school shop teacher. She has a welding class. I have some students who are talented metal artists. They could make you an unconventional tree, maybe even a little abstract, that you could mount on the wall with vintage lights. We could paint the two-story side wall with a glossy red. Vibrant, with the tree and lights. And then we’d need a smaller tree where we hang the giving cards.”

Her ideas flowed like the Catawba River in spring. How did she have so many? And she walked around his main dining room, the bar, and the outdoor patio, her petite frame and elfin figure seemed to glow with happiness. Rebekah actually followed

her, phone out taking notes.

“Poinsettias are probably too traditional, and I bet swags of evergreen are out too.” She smiled across the room at him, while he stood watching her, helpless to look away even as he prompted himself to walk.

“Maybe holly twined around bare branches, or... I know!” Chloe bounced to her toes. “Large, matte black pots and white birch branches—white pots would emanate a sterile hospital vibe—so white birch branches in big black pots, black stones, and tiny LED twinkle lights. Not twinkling; they could be programmed to change colors for different seasons or events. Those could go on the patio. Visual interest and light source and holiday without the holiday.”

“Huh?” Lucas said. “I can’t see it.”

“I can,” Rebekah said.

Unfortunately, so could Rustin, and he liked it too much, damn it.

“You,” Rebekah pointed at talon at Chloe, “sit. Mood board. Google. We do have a budget,” she said warningly to Rustin, who had clearly just lost control of his restaurant and vision.

“Excellent,” Chloe smiled and then crooked a finger at him. “Two birds, one stone,” she said, patting the space next to her. “I brought snack samples and would love some feedback, and yes, Chef, I followed the directions exactly.”

No. No. No.

But Rebekah sat, Lucas popped the lid off the Tupperware, and everyone who’d been curiously eavesdropping, swooped in.

“This is a bad idea,” Rustin said.

“You promised to help,” Chloe said, sounding, unfortunately, reasonable. “And a promise is a promise. And I promise.” She crossed her heart like she was a little kid. “I was totally the un-Chloe, and I did everything exactly, including simmering rosemary to infuse the room with remembrance and love and fidelity and,” her voice dropped dramatically low, “immortality.”

“Don’t eat...” he warned but Lucas had already grabbed a hush puppy stuffed with tilapia, green olives, red peppers, and charred corn and popped the whole thing in his

mouth.

“Slay,” he mumbled and thumbs-upped the snack.

Chloe glowed with the praise. Rebekah ate a hush puppy and moaned low in her throat before reaching for another and shouting out, “Come and get, boys and girls!”

Rustin watched, eyes narrowed, waiting. But everyone seemed normal. Lucas kept his calf-eyed love gaze fixed only on Rebekah, and Rebekah didn’t suddenly turn gay.

“What do you think, Rustin? Please?” Chloe stood at his elbow, a hush puppy snuggled in a napkin between her thumb and forefinger. “I was worried about you,” she said softly. “Last night you ran off and... You looked weirded out. I thought I should chase you, but...”

“Women can chase men. It’s the twenty-first century.” What was he doing flirting with Chloe?

She smiled. “And you never tried the hush puppies.”

“Did you follow the recipe for the hush puppies exactly, exactly how we discussed?” He clarified.

“Yes, Chef.”

He waited for a moment, scrolling through mental scenarios. Maybe, if he took a bite, this...this fascination bordering on obsession would unwind. Spell broken. Or what if it made it worse? But his team seemed normal. Eating. Jawing at each other. Maybe the feeling of being hit by a two-by-four and seeing stars in the form of Chloe Maye Cramer had just been caused by exhaustion or his nerves about The Wild Side’s

opening.

But he had nerves of titanium.

And arrogance to spare.

Leaning forward, gaze firmly locked on Chloe's slightly mismatched blue and purple eyes, Rustin took a bite of the hush puppy, deliberately brushing Chloe's fingers with his lips. Heat speared through him even as his tongue was bathed in flavors as warm and bright as Chloe's shy smile. Her pupils dilated.

"Rustin?" she whispered, but she might as well have shouted because his vision tunneled and the room silenced. Time stood still. Just him. Her.

And Rustin knew he'd made his second mistake since coming home.

Chapter Eight

Saturday at noon, Chloe continued her prep work for the Movable Feast happening that night. Grandma Millie's house looked beautiful. The outside Christmas lighting designers had finished yesterday, and she, Jessica, Sarah and Meghan had decorated the public rooms Thursday night while enjoying cocktails that Clara, The Wild Side's bartender, had taught them how to mix. It had been one of the few times Chloe didn't feel overwhelmed by her need to fit in with her cousins, and this morning, she wondered if her childhood insecurities had not only driven her intense need to please and fit in but also colored her connection to her cousins.

Chloe sang Keith Urban's "Somebody Like You" at full volume while she worked. She was thinking of Rustin and had already overdosed on Christmas carols from rehearsing with her student choir. She moved around Grandma Millie's kitchen like she knew what she was doing.

Fake it until you make it, right?

Only she sort of did know what she was doing now, and that should make her nervous. But she had a new confidence, and for several evenings after she and her cousins had finished decorating, she'd gone to The Wild Side to sample cocktails, practice her recipes, and pitch in decorating the restaurant for tonight's festivities.

She and Rebekah had painted the huge wall at the back of the restaurant red—Rustin had rented rolling scaffolding—and Chloe, who'd loved participating in musicals in high school and community theater, was reminded of how much she enjoyed being part of a team. With teaching, she had colleagues, but she was also fairly isolated in her classroom with only her students, lesson plans, and grading.

The best part of this week had been spending time with Rustin. He'd given her cooking skill challenges and had her practice her recipes. She'd started thinking of the kitchen as a stage and herself as a performer, with Rustin, an attentive audience member who had no compunction about jumping in with advice.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

The week had felt imbued with luminous magic where she and Rustin were enveloped in a silver-gold bubble. It was like her childhood fantasies had come true but with an adult edge. She found herself trying to find excuses to touch him, to make him smile. And she'd started to dream that even after the feast they would spend time together.

She particularly loved the Santa tree that she'd put together with Lucas after Rustin had flat-out refused. Chloe had collected broken branches from Cramer Mountain's woods after a late fall storm. She'd thought to paint them white and add small LED lights, but Rustin, after looking at the project and his brother's enthusiasm, had found a touch of Christmas spirit.

"Spray-paint them black. More The Wild Side vibe."

Of course it was. She hadn't seen Rustin wear anything else, but then she only had really seen him cooking.

Maybe black is a kind of uniform?

"We can get red pots with black river rocks and 'plant' them in the entrance for a statement. Sophisticated but edgy holiday," she'd conceded.

"Make it so."

"Aye, aye, Captain Picard," Chloe saluted, thrilled that Rustin liked Star Trek Next Generation. She'd loved streaming the reruns of the show during slow weekends at college.

“Huh?” Rustin deadpanned, but as he walked away, she’d seen the hint of a smile.

“He and I used to stream the shows late at night to fall asleep after a busy night in the kitchen,” Lucas had outted his brother. “Rustin would work out on the home gym he’d set up and watch. We’d have push-up contests while Jean Luc was saving the universe.”

Cosmic. Rustin Wildish is perfect.

Chloe found herself feeling protective of Lucas, like he was a little brother. She’d been a student teacher when Lucas was in her class a few years ago. He’d been an indifferent student in English, but an outstanding athlete, so she’d held tutoring sessions after school for many of the athletes struggling to keep their GPAs up. Lucas had been unfailingly polite but insecure about his writing.

He still seemed insecure, always looking to big brother Rustin for approval and instruction.

Kind of like me.

That realization had slapped her upside the head, and she made a promise to herself that she would start taking herself and her ideas more seriously.

“Starting today.” Chloe dragged her mind away from her memories and spoke aloud so she’d hear the words. Own them.

“Time to grow up, Chloe. Claim your power,” she added.

She needed to stay in the present because soon her volunteers, many of them college and high school students, would arrive ready for her to dole out directions. She needed them for everything from placing the rented holiday-themed linens on the

rented bistro tables scattered in several of Grandma Millie's mansion's living spaces and garden to learning how to plate and serve the main course, and also how to keep circulating and checking on guests, clearing away service items, and monitoring the outdoor heat lamps' need for new propane tanks.

Panic momentarily coated her throat.

"How's it going? Is Lucas holding up his end?"

"Rustin." And just like that, the afternoon felt sunnier, warmer, as if defying the impending winter. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be crazy busy at The Wild Side. Your *aperitif* and *amuse-bouche*."

She loved saying those words together. They sounded so sophisticated, like she traveled Europe regularly instead of taking whirlwind tours with Grandma Millie through France and Italy when she'd graduated high school and college, respectively.

"And then the *surprisemignardiseto* finish with coffee or your homemade punch. I figured you'd be all decked out in your chef clothes, bossing everyone around."

He looked so handsome in his black T-shirt, leather jacket, jeans, and motorcycle boots that even had a chain detail that added a sexy and dangerous vibe. She had a million things to do today and her own crew arriving soon, but nothing and no one felt more important than stopping everything to just savor Rustin.

"Perhaps I've come to boss you." His hint of a smile nearly melted her.

"Don't tempt me to lose my focus, Chef." She put down her knife and wagged a finger at him. "It was a crash course, but you've trained me well, Chef. I got this."

"I know," he said, and for a split second, he looked almost bashful. "I just feel like

Miss Millie thrust you into the deep end, and the hand I offered kept you swimming but didn't help you out of the pool so you're warm and dry."

"Good analogy." She poked a finger at him and was shocked when he grabbed it. Held it. The touch was like every middle school and high school fantasy she'd ever harbored.

"But by making me do everything on my own over and over, I did gain some confidence, and Lucas has been handling the smoker, and he'll bake the bacon. I have the tilapia already cooked and seasoned, and I mixed the pimento cheese last night for the jalapeño poppers, and my biscuit dough is chilling. I'll take it out in an hour," she said breathlessly. "And this morning I made my hush puppy batter. 'Prep is queen,'" she quoted.

"King."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“Queen,” she lobbed back, enjoying herself. “I should be terrified, but I feel excited and energized. That’s you, Rustin. That’s all you,” she admitted, meaning it.

“Chloe, it’s you,” he said softly. “I showed you a path, but you walked it. You chose your theme and recipes and put in the work.”

“It was us together,” she breathed as his praise washed over her. “I’m nervous about the sage leaves,” she admitted. “I’m doing them last like you said, less chance of distraction, but...” She worried her bottom lip and confessed, “I should probably have a shock collar to keep me at the stove. I always wander off thinking I have time and suddenly the fire alarm’s blaring and everything smells charred.”

“You’ve made the sage leaves successfully before. But there is a trick to it.”

“Timing, and don’t leave the stove,” she repeated.

“Again.”

“Stay at my post. Use the stopwatch.”

“By the time you’re flash-frying your sage leaves, everything else will be ready. You’ll have Lucas in here, your plating crew, your serving crew. You’ve given them their job assignments, so all you need to do is put the final...” He kissed his fingertips and spread them, and she stared at his mouth like it was magnetized, “flourish.”

Impulsively, Chloe laid her hand over Rustin’s that was still, unbelievably, holding hers.

“I’ll remember,” she said softly.

“And believe in yourself.”

She’d been working on her skills and confidence. The other ladies of Belmont might not be cowed by her like they were Grandma Millie, but Chloe didn’t want to intimidate. She wanted to collaborate. Win-win. Respect and friendship. Comradery. Teamwork. Everyone pulling together for the good of Belmont and its citizens. She wanted to do good, not necessarily put her own mark on something or dominate anyone.

“Hey, Chloe.” Jessica breezed in the side door to Grandma Millie’s kitchen. “The smoker’s really making me and everyone in the neighborhood drooly with hunger. Sorry, I’m a bit late. Mom was pitching a fit that I wasn’t going to stay and help at the house, even though I told her weeks ago I was helping you and Grandma Millie. Meghan and Sarah wanted to come here to help, but I foisted them off on Mom. Still,” she smiled slyly, her green cat eyes lit up with humor, “expect a hurricane Elizabeth Katherine tonight.”

As she spoke, Jessica slipped out of her coat, hung it up on a hook, and took a folded apron from a drawer. “Reporting for duty. Put me to work.” Jessica tied on her apron and twisted her thick, flowing strawberry-blonde hair into a low bun. “Ready and willing.”

She turned around, smiling, and Chloe felt an odd sense of guilt flash through her when Jessica’s sharp gaze drilled onto her and Rustin’s joined hands.

“I wasn’t sure you’d be able to help,” Chloe confessed, happiness swamping with Jessica’s support.

Jessica raised a brow. “Clearly.”

Jessica continued to look at them like a cat waiting for the mouse to feel safe enough to come out of its hidey hole.

Rustin's still holding my hand.

Usually, Chloe was the one noticing a smitten man in Jessica's orbit.

Rustin's not smitten.

But could he be? Chloe felt defiant, unable to let the idea go. She notched her chin at her sister, daring her to say something.

"Hard to cook with no hands, Chloe," Jessica teased.

"You good Clo-Beau?" Rustin asked, and the tenor of his voice felt like a caress.

"Never better," she whispered wanting to convey so much with a few words.

"I'll see you at the after-party, Rustin." And if that wasn't a planted flag, what was?

*

"Hiding, Rustin?"

"No."

Yes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Figures Miss Millie would find him in the kitchen avoiding everyone who milled around drinking the aperitif—at first, curiosity tugged at their expressions, and then pleasure.

Score for me, he'd thought, but the pressure on his chest and the ringing in his ears had increased as more people eagerly entered the restaurant, excited for the elegant evening to begin.

When he recognized the brother of the long-term mayor, then the mayor himself and his wife, a state senator, and then the former principal of the high school, he'd retreated rather than engaged.

Stupid. This was his restaurant. His new life. His stand. He was the chef. The owner. A man.

Not that despised punk they remembered.

"You always retreated here," Miss Millie said fondly, walking around the kitchen that was so changed. "To work. To learn. To feel safe. It was your home."

No lie. "Does it bother you, all the changes I've made?"

Miss Millie didn't answer right away. She continued to take in the scope of the kitchen. He'd doubled its size from the previous narrow strip of two large fry grills, a double oven, two massive dishwashers, and a sink tucked in a corner.

"I knew you'd make it yours," Miss Millie said finally. "It was time you came home,

Rustin.”

The words sounded prophetic. He never thought he’d return to Belmont. He’d made a silent swear to himself, and yet the past year had tugged even as he’d worked in one of the trendiest rooftop restaurants in Charlotte.

But it hadn’t been his.

And the cities over the past ten years had become a monotonous cacophony of noise, demands, and posturing. More about reputation than the food.

“You belong here.”

“Here I am.” He held out his arms facetiously.

Hiding.

“I love the style,” Miss Millie nodded. “It’s unexpected yet assertive, unabashedly you. I’m not sure what to call it—industrial meets folk meets...” Her thin lips, glossed in the signature pink lipstick he’d never seen her without, twitched in a smile.

“I love how you incorporated pieces of the past in the restaurant. Pieces of a loom in the wall, tapestry spilling down.”

“Gift from Chloe. She and Rebekah came up with the idea. I wanted history and art from discarded junk that once had a purpose, function.”

Miss Millie nodded, then she pursed her lips and stared him down. “Rustin, you’ve come into your own. No more hiding.”

“Not hiding. Just catching my breath. Shouldn’t you be in your home welcoming

your guests?”

“It’s Chloe’s night. I want her to have her moment. It’s past time,” she said under her breath.

Rustin agreed it was long past time for Chloe to shine. He could still hear her beautifully haunting soprano winging through an open window as he’d helped at the Madrigal Dinner.

Millieheel-toed across his floor in her elegant purple pumps that matched her streamlined purple dress topped with a tailored lavender, ivory, and purple knit jacket with gold buttons. She swished open the door, and he breathed in a sigh of relief waiting to hear her pumps click out the door. Instead, the silence took a breath.

“You’re the chef, Rustin.” Miss Millie held the door open and pointed a thin, elegant finger at him. “Act like it.”

*

“Wow,” Jessica said, looking at Grandma Millie’s pristine kitchen. “You did it Chloe; really pulled off the night.”

Chloe was still buzzed with the success: no epic fails, no rescues launched. She and Jessica had worked as a team, and Jessica had played the part of hype-woman. She’d taken pictures, posted them, and had shared many with her sisters.

“It was a team effort,” Chloe reminded Jessica, who wore her flared silk trousers and matching wrap tunic that was still pristine despite her hard work behind the scenes. “I really had a good time,” she said, almost surprised to admit it. “Everything worked out.”

“You were a good leader.”

The flush of pleasure made her hop. “We all pulled together for the Movable Feast, just like always. You and me at Grandma Millie’s and Sarah and Meghan helped out Elizabeth Katherine.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

She'd never called their momaunt, and Jessica opened her mouth as if to question Chloe's take, but then she sighed.

"More like we did all the work, and then Mom swept in, coifed and gorgeous and sweet as pecan pie," Jessica quipped. "But the event was successful. I wonder if Grandma Millie is really passing the torch," Jessica speculated as she touched up her makeup in a mirror near the door. "And do we want to pick it up?"

She fake shivered and laughed. Then she looked at her phone. "Meghan and Sarah are demanding that I bring the chef to the after-party." Jessica swung the door open wide. "And they want to know the origin of your recipes so be prepared to dish. Apparently guests were raving about your entrees when they hit mom and dad's house."

"I used a book I found in Grandma Maye's outdoor mini library. It's historical. The recipes are handwritten."

"Dear sweet baby Jesus, I can just imagine the casseroles in that," Jessica laughed. "But it must be more than that if you found and followed those recipes. I'd love to see the book. I collect vintage cookbooks. Are there botanical recipes in there? That would be interesting if..." she trailed off.

"If what?" Chloe pulled on her red wool coat. Jessica looked a little flustered.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "But I would love to see it and you can entertain Sarah and Meghan with your skills. Bring the book tonight."

"Uhhhh..." Why was she pausing? This was Jessica. "Of course you can borrow

it—use it, but not tonight. I... Rustin has it now. I promised him he could look it over for inspiration for his menus.”

Jessica stopped styling her hair in the mirror.

“You gave Rustin Wildish a family heirloom?”

“We don’t know that,” she quickly defended. “Anyone could have put the book in Grandma Millie’s library. I didn’t recognize any of the handwriting.”

“Huh. Why are you hiding it?”

“I’m not. I sort of mentioned finding it a couple of weeks ago.” Hadn’t she? “I’ll get it back from Rustin, but not tonight. I promised he could use it, and he helped me a lot.”

Jessica waved her hand dismissing her debt to Rustin. “But who would give away a family treasure? An heirloom. Definitely not Grandma Millie. She has Maye and Cramer treasures in trunks and boxes in the attic. Remember? We used to spend hours up there poking around.”

Chloe mostly remembered being shooed away, but she had been much longer and more persistent than a stray dog in the rain.

“Get it back from Rustin. Someone is probably missing it. Leaving it in the mini library must have been an accident.”

Chloe thought of the faded words, the recipes, the notes, the comments, the occasional random almost poetic line or a nature haiku, and even a couple of notes that sounded like relationship advice and ways to win back men through their stomachs.

So sexist sounding.

“Maybe,” Chloe mused as Jessica slid on her coat. She felt possessive of the book now and hoped no one would come looking for it.

“In addition to the recipes, there are some side notes written in different ink, different hands, and some read like a back-and-forth conversation.”

“I want to see it. Tell Rustin you want it back.”

“He deserves time with the book.”

“Why are you so generous to Rustin?”

“He helped me with the...inspiration and execution of my entrée.”

“You mean he cooked it.”

“No, he made me do everything. He just stood in the kitchen and watched like I was some medieval apothecary apprentice.”

Jessica rolled her eyes.

“You shouldn’t be so harsh.” Chloe buttoned her coat. It wasn’t a far walk along the almost-finished riverfront walk where they would be celebrating the success of the event, but the night temperatures had plunged this week. “Rustin was judged his whole life more by who his family was than by his own actions, and that’s not fair, Jessica, and you know it.”

Jessica paled a little, and then her cheeks pinkened.

“He’s come back to Belmont. He has employed his younger brother and is training him, and Lucas worked all day on the smoker to make the pulled pork and bacon for the poppers. Rustin’s an entrepreneur. He’s employing people—becoming part of the town and sharing his gifts.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

Jessica pressed her lips together, and her eyes glittered. “You shame me Chloe.”

“No shame Jessie.” Chloe hugged Jessica. “But please don’t hold his past against him,” Chloe pleaded. “Don’t hold his family’s reputation against him. We’re all carving out our hopes and dreams and building our futures one brick at a time. Don’t make Rustin carry baggage that is not his.”

“I’ll try, Clo. I will.” Jessica hugged her back hard. “There’s a reason you won teacher of the year, Chloe. You really are a shining light and are coming into your own. Ready? Or I’ll ruin my makeup.”

“Yes.” Chloe bounced to her toes.

“It’s beyond cold,” Jessica shivered in her long, emerald-green wool coat. “I know you like to walk everywhere downtown and considering what we’re likely going to be snacking on and drinking, I, too, should walk, but I’ve been on my feet all day, and I’m driving us to Millie’s.”

“The Wild Side,” Chloe corrected as Jessica opened the side door to walk out through Grandma Millie’s kitchen and herb garden. She stopped abruptly and Chloe crashed into her, inhaling her lovely jasmine scent.

“Just don’t take his restaurant’s name to heart, Chloe. You don’t want to walk, run, or stroll down any path with Rustin Wildish.”

“How aboutsaunter? Orskulk?Skip? Sashay?”

“Every woman needs a sister who’s a thesaurus. Seriously, Chloe, I know you want tokumbayaRustin’s return to Belmont, but just steer clear of him. He’s...”—Chloe swore Jessica murmuredpotentunder her breath—“dangerous,” Jessica ended.

Chloe followed Jessica to her car, pondering the advice. Why? Jessica had never advised her romantically, not that there’d been much opportunity. She’d been a choir, musical theater, and orchestra geek in high school. And doubling a classical voice major with an English major hadn’t upped her romantic opportunities.

But what if...?

The wordpouncecame to mind.

Chapter Nine

Weird. There wasno other word for it. Rustin Wildish felt weird. Instead of his usual tunnel-vision calm, he was keyed up and felt out of his body.

So many people wanted to talk to him. People he remembered. People he didn’t know. Most of it was about The Wild Side. When he was opening. The food. The themes. Rebekah had created marketing materials and a menu vision board. And so many questions, the main one being how he had convinced Miss Millie Maye, a Belmont institution, to sell the second-generation diner.

It had been an act of hubris, announcing at barely seventeen when she’d dropped him off at the bus station to head to Atlanta and a top culinary institute, on her dime, that he’d come back someday and buy Millie’s.

She’d shaken his hand firmly.

“Bold words, Rustin, mean nothing. Hard work. Intention. Action. Follow through.

Those need to be the words on the pavers of your road to success.”

Rustin now looked around at how he’d changed the space to reflect what he wanted. Would Miss Millie think, as so many had claimed tonight, that he’d arrived?

The Wild Side wasn’t officially open, but people returned for a signature coffee or cocktail to complete their Movable Feast evening. Guests lingered on the deck with the party lights and heat lamps merrily blazing, or they’d ventured to the second-level loft-style bar to watch the crowd below.

Rustin had hired a DJ, a friend of Lucas’s, who made and sold beats with him. He was mixing up holiday classics with sick beats that should have given Rustin a splitting headache, but instead, the music fit the vibe of the party and space, and he was starting to feel the suspicious tug of something that might be interpreted as holiday spirit.

Lucas had arrived a few minutes ago and joined the DJ. It felt good, solid, to see his brother so happy, relaxing and doing something he loved after working hard all day. But his attention kept tugging to the deck door, waiting for her: Chloe.

He didn’t imagine any of the Maye sisters would come, and he didn’t care, but Chloe would definitely come. And he felt like he was crawling out of his skin to see her, talk to her, to find out how tonight had gone for her.

She’d practically become a fixture in his life this week, arriving after school or her private voice lessons to help put the finishing touches on The Wild Side. And he found her more enchanting every day, like he was spellbound. He’d resisted at first. Dismissed the tug of attraction. Then he’d tried to intellectualize it away. He was tired. Wound up. Hadn’t been with a woman in over six months as all of his energy had been focused on gaining awards as a chef and hustling funding for his own restaurant.

I can ignore the attraction, think of it as a low-grade headache.

And then she walked in, and Rustin felt the air whoosh from his body like the building had exploded and he'd been propelled thirty feet in the air and splatted on the ground. He felt slightly dizzy, disoriented, and unable to look away. She entered with Jessica, but all he could see was Chloe, shrugging off her red wool coat and hanging in on a hook in the entry. Her bright eyes searched the room, and she smiled as she tucked her mittens in her coat and unwound a brightly knit long scarf from her slender throat. She wore ivory flowing pants and an ivory and gold flimsy tank that made her look more delicate, more magical than usual. Her dark curls glistened in the light with the beginnings of a rain shower.

And then she looked up and saw him.

Play it cool. Acknowledge her but talk to someone else.

But as if preprogrammed, Rustin muttered an excuse to the group that had gathered around him in the loft area to discuss the restaurant's architecture and use of reclaimed wood and industrial detritus—whatever that was—as part of the design to create a sense of place. He practically soared down the distressed metal stairs, his entire focus missile-honed on Chloe.

As he hit the first floor, the people arriving, moving toward the buffet, or getting a drink parted as if they were actors hitting their cue. It was then he noticed Jessica, a speculative look on her face, standing next to Chloe. He hesitated.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“Congratulations.” Chloe rushed forward solving his dilemma of how to greet her. No dignified greeting for Chloe. She threw her arms around him and held tight, and everything in him settled, grounded him.

“You did it, Rustin! You did it! The Wild Side looks amazing! It looks so chic and cool, and like it’s always been here waiting to show off. You stripped it to its bones and rebirthed it, and with people here, it feels like...” She let go partially, one slim arm still tucked around his neck as she swung back like a door opening. “It feels like history. Like it’s yours.”

Chloe laughed and hugged him again. “I’m so happy for you! So happy. You’ve worked so hard, and I know, know, know that this,” she waved one arm airily around, “will be your typical Saturday night: full of life, full of fun, people dressed up or dressed down, vibing with each other, eating delicious food and creating memories and experiences.”

“That’s the plan,” he said. Totally lame response after her gush of words, but he could barely speak, and all he wanted to do was tug her out to the deck and down to the path along the river so he could have her alone, hear himself think, express the words and thoughts that drummed against his skull.

But he knew, absolutely knew, that he needed to keep himself and his confusing feelings locked down tight.

This was Chloe Maye Cramer. And Maye was a big part of that. She was sweet, and he was in no position to start anything because of the demands of his restaurant. Too many people depended on him. And Miss Millie trusted him. He could hardly put

moves on her granddaughter.

“It’s crowded,” he stated the obvious. “Loud. Do you want to take a walk?”

What? That’s not what I was supposed to say!

“Yes.” Chloe smiled at him, her expression so open, so guile-free, that he nearly kissed her. Time clunked to a stop, and it was hard to breathe.

He was acting out of character. For over a decade he’d been driven, disciplined. A few weeks in Chloe’s presence, and he felt himself slipping precariously toward the edge of...something.

It’s that damn book.

But that was crazy, right? But so was this out-of-the-blue need to be with Chloe.

“But first I want to taste that cherry bounce you created. Lucas went on and on about it. I think his brain cells were getting fried by so much time by the smoker, even though I kept bringing him water and herbal sweet tea to keep him hydrated. He said you’d made your own batch, fermented it for weeks.”

“I like to play around even though the bar is not supposed to be my domain.”

“Allof The Wild Side is your domain.”

He should ask her about her night, how her stop on the tour had gone. Chloe had said she’d been volunteering at the feast since she’d been eleven or twelve, so plating, serving, cleaning up, and welcoming a parade of guests wasn’t new to her. But this had been her first year cooking and being in charge. And more tickets had been sold this year than ever.

“Congratulations, Rustin,” Jessica approached him.

He’d practically forgotten she’d arrived with Chloe. He never would have imagined the woman he’d loved beyond reason as a teen, the one who had kicked him to the curb, would become nearly forgettable. Maybe time did heal most wounds.

“You’ve really,” she looked around, and he saw her pulse kick up in her elegant neck, “created something,” Jessica said softly.

He waited for the hot burst of heat. Of anger. Of agony. But he felt nothing.

“Thank you,” he said cautiously, amazed that he could talk so politely to the woman who had once crushed him.

“It’s been a long road,” he admitted, feeling prideful. “I wanted to come home and open my own restaurant even before I left,” he admitted.

“Why?” Jessica asked, her voice full of curiosity. She ran a hand through her thick, rich hair. “Why would you want to come back to a town with so many painful memories? Why do you want to work so hard on such slim profit margins?” Jessica’s voice still had that little curious husk that had always torn him up inside, made him mad with desire to protect her.

She really wanted to know. He saw her smile, and her hands clenched in front of her fluttered before she gripped them again, but his attention caught and held on Chloe, who stood on her toes, smiling widely, waiting for his answer while her eyes sparkled with warmth.

She wasn’t beautiful like Jessica. But Chloe had magnetism, charm, and an openness that invited him in rather than left him on the outside looking in.

“Why, Rustin?” Jessica insisted. “Why Millie’s? Why a restaurant?”

“Because.” His voice felt raw, scraped from the back of his throat. He tried to swallow. Jessica had asked the question, but it was Chloe he was talking to. She saw him. The real him he’d always hid, even now. “Because I was always hungry.”

He let that sit a moment. It hit him as hard as it seemed to knock into both Chloe and Jessica.

“Excuse us,” he said before he even knew he’d meant to speak or move, and he lightly put his arm around Chloe. “I wanted to show Chloe something after I get her a glass of my cherry bounce. Enjoy the party at The Wild Side, Jessica.” He wouldn’t tell her it was good to see her again. But it hadn’t hurt one bit, and he’d take that as a win.

Going with instinct, he steered Chloe out of one of the doors that led to the deck. Not willing to stop long enough to grab her coat, he shrugged out of his leather motorcycle jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“What did you want to show me?” Chloe asked after they’d walked about fifty yards down the Riverwalk away from the restaurant and farther from downtown.

“I just needed to get out of there and wanted to talk to you,” he admitted.

She sipped her drink and turned around to face the moody lighting but festive atmosphere of The Wild Side. Her smile was radiant.

“I love your holiday mix,” she said softly. “And the tree sculpture is amorphous enough that you could leave it up all year on the back wall—maybe add more to it—a mural or more to the sculpture, like kudzu or grasses.”

She pulled his jacket closer and breathed in deeply.

“I always loved the way you smelled.”

“In the animal kingdom we’d be mates.” He pushed his luck recklessly.

What was wrong with him? Was he a lemming running solo off a cliff?

“We are animals,” she said softly. “People just pretend they aren’t. Look, Rustin.” She tapped his forearm, and without thinking he closed his hand over hers.

She turned him back toward the restaurant.

“It’s beautiful rising up in the night. The lines. The light. The way it nestles above the bank of the river. It’s a beacon.”

“Feels like.”

She laced her fingers with his. “I had fun tonight. I didn’t think I would. I thought I’d be nervous, fumbling. But it was like I finally found my rhythm. Not like I am Grandma Millie herding the good people of Belmont into good deeds, but looking at the recipes, finding ones I liked, strategizing the steps to cook everything with you this past week, and learning how to scale and delegate—again you,” she bumped against his shoulder, “it gave me a confidence I didn’t expect to feel, and that’s you too.”

“Maybe it’s you...cutting loose from your family a little. Striking out a bit more on your own.”

She stared at the water.

“I never left Belmont, but I never felt like I was missing anything. I mean, I traveled—I studied abroad in Paris, summer conservatory programs in London and Rome for voice, and a couple of trips with Grandma Millie—but I never left Belmont, as in maybe not coming back. All of my cousins did. They went away to school. Lived other places. Worked. Jessica moved to Cramer Mountain this year and has been working hard to restore the Cramer gardens. Sarah’s finished up her residency and fellowship and work commitments and she’s joining a pediatrics practice in town. I think Meghan’s thinking about joining a firm in town instead of traveling so much for IP law.”

He didn’t want to talk about her family and their accomplishments.

“You’re not thinking of moving are you?” His stomach lurched uncomfortably, even as he knew he should welcome Chloe leaving—less distraction for him. He could get back to normal.

“No,” she said. “I love teaching at South Point High School.”

Everything in him soured. “I hated high school.” He’d not felt like a kid or a student. He’d put most of his energy into making money to help put food and more on the table. And he hated not doing well at anything.

“Not a single good memory?” she asked softly, leaning her head against his upper arm.

If he turned his head, he could kiss one of her springy curls.

Don’t do it. Disaster!

“You fought so hard,” she said. “You were so fierce and focused. A man when you should have been allowed to be a child. But the struggle, the resilience, the determination to get up again and again each day to fight, to slay, honed you into the man you are, so I’m not sorry, although I wish you had some good memories.”

Her voice, her understanding and kindness was like an ointment soothed over a burn. Bandaged.

“I do,” he said. “I felt confident and necessary at Millie’s. She put me to work. Taught me discipline. Organization. My life had been chaos. She taught me order and the value of working, being prepared and being part of a team. And you brought the light.”

“Me?” Chloe blinked up at him, looking so beautiful he nearly slipped his leash and kissed her.

Just one taste?

“You were always bouncing, full of questions, smiles, observations, random songs, and quotes and ideas. Unfiltered and uncaring what people thought of you.”

“I cared,” she groaned.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“Yeah, I guess when we’re young we care too much. I pretended I didn’t give a rat’s ass, but I cared too much about being dismissed. I felt raw with it.”

“I don’t know if it’s just being young,” she said. “But I’m learning that I can’t be who I thought I should be or who others expected me to be. Teaching has taught me how richly diverse people are and the value in that diversity. I had my students, my colleagues, and then I always had singing. That was the one thing I was good at.”

“You’re good at a lot of things, Chloe. Better than good.”

“I’m finally starting to believe that,” she said softly.

They were quiet. The night was a cloak billowing around them. No agenda.

Don’t kiss her.

Don’t kiss her.

The warning rang in his ears as Chloe took a sip of punch, then stole the decision from him. She stood on tiptoes, hooked her hand behind his head, and angled him down for a kiss.

*

I’m kissing RustinWildish!

The thought shot lighting through her body with the visceral punch of fireworks.

His lips, firm and sensual, stilled for a moment, and Chloe, who could count the men she'd kissed on one hand and have digits remaining, seized her courage and coaxed, sliding her tongue along the seam of his mouth and nibbled his bottom lip.

Then his lips parted, and he kissed her back, making her toes curl and her heart thunder in her ears.

He broke the kiss, briefly resting his forehead against hers, and she breathed him in.

"I've always wanted to do that," she admitted.

"Bad-boy fantasy?" His mocking tone cut through her thrill.

"No. Rustin fantasy," she corrected.

She reached for his hands. "You're too strong. Too determined to fall in with anyone else's outdated and narrow-minded thinking."

His eyes darkened and he scowled, but she continued because if she didn't say this now, she'd likely never get the chance.

"When I was a kid, I saw you as a fierce, independent spirit, so far out in front of everyone else, a fighter for what you wanted, for justice, for freedom from all the BS little boxes everyone wanted to kick you into, and I felt... I felt..." She clenched her hands together and held her fists against her wilding thumping heart.

"Inspired. I wanted to have your courage. You stalked through life, where I felt the urge to hide and be an observer. I wished your magic would rub off on me."

He huffed a laugh, or maybe he choked on his spit. "Pretty sure you were the only one with that opinion, Chloe."

“Unique,” she said, wishing she could smile, relishing her individuality instead of feeling always on the outside looking in.

But no. She was leaving her childhood insecurities in the past where they belonged.

“You are unique, Chloe, then and now,” he said, trailing one knuckle along the side of her face.

His eyes darkened to charcoal. “I always noticed you. Thought you were too sweet to be a Maye.”

“I always wanted to be a Maye,” she said, heart heavy.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t be anyone but who you are.”

It was the sweetest thing anyone, except Grandma Millie, had ever said to her.

The moment stretched out, fraught with things unsaid, expectant, but not a bit awkward.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:06 pm

“I feel like you put a spell on me,” Rustin said slowly.

His statement was totally unexpected, and Chloe had no answer.

“Since the night you cooked the practice entrée for the Movable Feast.”

“You mumbled something about a spell or a curse when you ran out.” She remembered his odd behavior. “But what do you mean? I just followed the recipe.”

He opened his mouth, and she leaned forward, wondering what he would say next. The Wild Side rose above the river, lights glowing, a door rolled up so the crowd, noise and music drifted into the night, but it was a pleasant hum, almost a bubble of humanity floating above them and away on the chilly breeze.

A smile teased his lips. “Yeah, recipe follower. That’s it. No witchcraft involved.”

“Definitely not,” Chloe said, thinking how Grandma Millie would cross herself if she’d heard him say that. “I don’t have a black cat, but...” she paused. “The book is called Southern Love Spells.” She hummed the music from The Twilight Zone.

“You’re not funny.”

“You were going to show me something,” Chloe invited, not ready for the alone time to end. The next few weeks would be so busy for them both, and once his restaurant opened, he’d be working long nights, and she’d be back in her classroom teaching days, directing her choir, and seeing vocal students a couple nights a week.

“I am,” he said. “Crazy idea. An impulse that I purchased for a different reason a couple of years ago, but the more I think about it and adjust to the idea and free-range menu options, it may be a stroke of luck.”

“We make our own luck.”

“Can’t disagree with that idea,” he said. Holding her hand, he walked farther away from The Wild Side and the party.

Chloe felt like she’d never experienced a more perfect moment. He brought her hand to his lips.

“So finely made. Delicate. But such strength,” he breathed against her skin, sending her tummy tumbling.

No. Those seven words were the best thing anyone had ever said to her, and she hugged the words to her heart, committing them to memory to take out and savor later.

“Show me,” Chloe invited. She hadn’t expected the vintage Airstream trailer.

“Wow, this is cool!” Chloe exclaimed.

The trailer was parked farther down the trail in the Catawba Riverfront Park, which was closed and under renovation as part of the Riverwalk project.

“Do you live in this?” she asked, beyond curious. She hadn’t thought about the practicalities of Rustin’s life. After his long hours renovating Millie’s into The Wild Side and perfecting his menus, where did he lay his head at night?

“I did a few times. I renovated the trailer with Lucas. It was his idea. Initially, I

thought we could live in it to save rent money when I started my own restaurant in Charlotte, but Lucas had bigger plans. He thought it could be a food truck, save us money instead of going the brick-and-mortar route.”

“Brilliant,” Chloe enthused.

“I didn’t want a food truck. I wanted my own destination. To create an experience with the food and drinks and ambiance.”

She smiled. So Rustin.

“This could be a pop-up, though,” she said as she explored the small, efficient kitchen. “I love this.” She opened the awning-style window that worked as a counter where people could see into the trailer and kitchen. “If you cut a hole in the other side like this one, you could serve specialty food items on one side and turn the other side into a bar. There’s room for three people to work in here, Chef,” she smiled. She pretended to be working and wiggled her butt near him as if to prove there was space. “Food prep, order-taker/server, and then a bartender on the other side. This could be a fun way to cater an event, or you could have a presence in the community—farmer’s market or...hey...” She snapped her fingers. “The Christmas Market! Waffles and fried chicken, and then mulled wine, cocktails, drinks for the kids. Hot chocolate slathered in whipped cream. ‘Welcome to The Wild Side, y’all.’ All you need is an awning with some party lights and a crew to boss.” She pointed to herself. “Sign me up.”

“You want to help.” He leaned against the counter, arms crossed, watching her closely.

She nodded.

“Rebekah thought we should have a presence at the Christmas Market in Belmont

and the light festival in McAdenville the following weekend.”

Chloe felt a little embarrassed. Of course, Rebekah was in marketing and management. She’d be thinking months in advance. It was her job.

“You’re going to do it, right?”

“Thinking on it. Fried chicken and waffles, huh?”

“I saw it in the book,” she said.

“I’ll have to check it out.” His expression turned thoughtful. “I’ll need a taste tester. Original recipe first and then I play.”

Rustin made the wordplay sound dirty, and even though Chloe knew she might be punching above her weight, she wasn’t going to let those three bitches—fear, caution, and doubt—push her aside.

Chapter Ten

“Order up for Carl,” Chloe sang out, sticking her head out the window of the tricked-out Airstream. She grinned back at Rustin. “That was my favorite part of hanging out at Millie’s. Saying it at the Christmas Market is even cooler.”

He’d forgotten how she would sing out order up in the voice of different singers or in different music genres. Chloe was a wicked, on-the-mark mimic.

How had I forgotten that?

Because his life had been a grind, and he’d been an angry, desperate, and resentful punk, determined to squeeze the sour out of every moment.

Was he different now? Could he relax enough to enjoy himself?

Again, his fascinated gaze settled on the smiling Chloe, who handed the food to Carl and his date, then propped her slender frame up on the tiny counter and stuck her

body half out the window, her tongue curled out of her mouth.

“It’s so cold. I think it’s going to snow.”

She launched into “White Christmas,” and even though Rustin had done his best to avoid Christmas his entire life, he had to fight the urge to smile and join in singing the few lyrics he knew.

Chloe had been correct in her suggestions for the pop-up menu: Southern comfort food in easy-to-carry The Wild Side recyclable containers.

Using the Southern Love Spellsbook as inspiration, Rustin had three versions of hush puppies: savory, crab and shrimp, and traditional. He also offered lightly fried chicken strips with a small waffle and a variety of drizzle sauces. Not the most inspired offering considering how his signature dishes were creative fusion blends. But he’d put his own personal spin on traditional, just a step off the path, considering his audience of small-town folk and families out to enjoy the local arts and crafts market selections. The small downtown lot was decorated, and artisans had red awnings in case of rain, but the night was clear and had dipped below freezing.

“Hey.” Chloe’s soft comment captured his attention. “Look at you. Look at this,” she encouraged, her proud gaze taking in Lucas—serving as his sous chef—and The Wild Side head bartender, Clara, serving two original Christmas-themed cocktails and mocktails as well as homemade hot chocolate, mulled wine, and Southern spiced coffee.

“You and your team have created an experience. Holiday memories for friends and families. Savor this moment, Rustin. You’ve accomplished so much.”

Her words hit him in the center mass of his chest, and it was all he could do to not walk away from his station and gather her in his arms. In the crush of the moment, he

wanted to uncage his feelings, his thoughts, his belief that she, too, was part of The Wild Side and the pop-up she'd jokingly called More Wild. He, Rebekah, and Lucas had run with it.

She was so beautiful and full of life. Her enthusiasm and kindness were infectious. Goodness and light radiated from Chloe like a heat source.

He'd fought the pressure of his feelings for the past two weeks—preparing for the Movable Feast, seeing Chloe every day as she practiced her cooking skills, timing, focus, and organization. And then she'd thrown herself into helping trick out the Airstream after work every day.

She fit in with his crew now, and it felt like she'd always been a part of them. He no longer blamed the book, black magic, her rumored gypsy genes, or his bone-deep loneliness. Instead, he was grateful. For the first time in his life, he was enjoying the journey, not just focused on his next goal.

Seeing her shining, slightly mismatched eyes, wide smile, and general golden doodle enthusiasm about everything—the menu, the food, the absurd custom-made red beanies she'd knitted for the More Wild crew—had crushed to dust the last of his resistance.

Chloe was so warm, so sweet. His fascination was a battle born to be lost.

He didn't want to be angry anymore, proving something to people who likely barely remembered him, judging by the way the mayor had brought his family by the More Wild and ordered three styles of hush puppies and hot chocolate for his grandchildren and then welcomed Rustin back to Belmont, congratulating him on becoming the first anchor for the Riverfront development. The mayor introduced him to his wife and family, shook his hand, and acted generally pleased to see him.

Chloe had fist-bumped him and made the cutest exploding sound, then hummed the theme from *The Twilight Zone* and intoned, “In a world where the past no longer has power, one man is freed to...” she’d giggled. “Finish the sentence, Rustin. It’s your world.”

And as he cooked and was entertained by Chloe’s happy greetings to customers—she knew most of them—he contemplated the new world he wanted to build so he could complete Chloe’s teasing fill-in-the-sentence challenge.

*

Chloe felt so happy she could burst. She and her small acapella choir of South Point Abbey students had finished their thirty-minute slot to sing their own arrangements of Christmas carols as they walked around the market and down Main Street.

“Y’all slayed,” she cheered the group of twelve students decked out in red with the knit hats with musical notes she’d made for them. “I’ll treat you all to a hot chocolate and some hush puppies. I know just the place.”

“Where the hottie chef works?” A couple of the girls perked up.

“Yum, I saw him too,” Lorelei and Shevawn said at the same time. They each licked one finger and made a sizzling sound.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:07 pm

“I cannot disagree with that assessment,” Chloe laughed, “but you are representing the college, so let’s keep it G, y’all.”

She and Rustin had kissed. Her mind was already racing. Should she ask Rustin out on a date? Would he like to go to a concert or a play at the school? With the end of the semester looming, there were so many upcoming holiday activities. It was a bit weird because they’d spent so much time together, and yet they hadn’t had a date-date. She hadn’t shared her feelings, although she had many. She’d never been accused of subtly.

She was determined to take her shot with Rustin.

She walked with her choir, chatting about holiday plans and Christmas shopping, slowing some at a few booths and making a mental note to return to shop for friends and family.

“Hey girl, we heard your choir singing.” Jessica hip-checked her, Meghan and Sarah flanked her. They all carried two reusable totes filled with a variety of local crafts and were bundled up in festive-colored long wool coats, mittens, and brightly colored hats with Christmas themes—bells and sleighs for Jessica, snowflakes for Sarah and Santas for Meghan.

“Beautiful,” Meghan agreed.

“Thanks.” Chloe hugged each of them, feeling like her heart was overflowing with gratitude. “Join us. The choir and I are getting hot chocolate and hush puppies, then I’m going to check in to see if Rustin still needs me to help tonight.”

“Rustin?” Meghan goggled at her. “You’re working for him now? You’re a teacher!” Meghan said, as if Chloe had forgotten.

“Volunteering,” she said cheerfully, willing Meghan to drop it and not launch into a diatribe about Rustin or his family.

“That’s sweet, Chloe.” Sarah smiled. “Rustin helped you with the Movable Feast and now you are helping him get his new business off the ground. Grandma Millie will be so pleased and proud.”

“We are all proud of you,” Meghan added.

Jessica nibbled on her bottom lip but said nothing. Grandma Millie had talked about stepping up the fateful night of the Madrigal Dinner. Couldn’t get much more changing of the guard than having Rustin take over the diner and have his new restaurant be the anchor for the new Riverfront development.

“I volunteered at the Movable Feast,” one of her students, Jaimie, announced, “and was stationed to serve and clean up at the new restaurant. The bar is killer. I can’t wait until The Wild Side opens. I’m going to apply for a hostess or server job there this summer.”

Chloe looked at Jessica as if to say see, prodigal son returns, creates a destination restaurant, employs locals, and ups Belmont’s culinary destination cred. Case closed.

“I could use a cocktail,” Meghan said.

“When can you not?” Jessica teased, but her face was thoughtful as the three of them linked arms with Chloe and followed the students to the More Wild food truck.

“What can I get you, Chloe?” Rustin called out through the window.

He looked gorgeous in the warm, sunset glow of the trailer's lighting. His shirt sleeves were rolled up his forearm so she could see the tanned flex of muscle and a partial tat she still hadn't had the chance to ask him about. His black hair was pulled back from his angular face, and his attention felt like a blast of heat.

She asked for four orders of hush puppies and four orders of fried chicken and waffles for her choir to split, then one regular order of hush puppies, and two savory hush puppies to share with her cousins.

"On me," she said, pulling out her card. "We order drinks on the other side."

Rebekah, cheeks flushed, shot into the back end of the trailer, Lucas right behind her.

"Sorry," she said washing her hands as Lucas did the same. "Got caught up in the shop opportunities. Who knew this podunk town would have so many creative craft artisans?"

"Belmont is a beautiful, historic town about forty-five minutes from downtown Charlotte. Hardly podunk, and you're managing the latest and greatest restaurant in the area, so sing our small but mightily charming town's praises." Chloe defended Belmont, Rustin, and well, everything. "We're a college town with a music conservatory, so we have lots of performances and interesting lectures."

Rebekah paused keying in the payment. She blinked at Chloe, and then turned back to look at Rustin.

"You're right," she said slowly, looking at Rustin. "You're right."

"About what?" Chloe demanded.

"You running for the Belmont Chamber of Commerce or mayor," Rebekah teased

and almost smiled. “Food’s on me! Well, me and The Wild Side,” Rebekah smirked. “But you’re practically part of the team. You helped decorate the restaurant for the feast, helped us get this trailer ready for the market, and worked the first two hours of the night, so the food’s comped. You can get the drinks,” Rebekah insisted as Chloe continued to push her credit card at her.

“I’m going to do a quick round of shopping, and then I’ll come back to help,” Chloe promised.

“No worries.” Rustin poked his head through the window. “I’m running low on food, so we’ll just keep the bar open.”

“It’s been a big success.” Chloe bounced on her toes. “I knew it!”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:07 pm

“Is this the part where I say you were right?”

“You can.”

“You were right, Chloe Maye Cramer. Right about the pop-up. Right about the type of food. And I was wrong. I had no idea what crowd to expect,” he said, and briefly his attention left her and skewered the milling crowds. He looked calculating and confident.

Chloe was conscious that the three Ms were watching the interaction avidly.

“We’re taking two weekend spots for the McAdenville light festival,” he said looking back at her, smiling. “If you ever get bored on a Friday or Saturday night.”

“I’m never bored,” Chloe confessed. How could she be? There was always music and books and lesson plans and grading. “But I’ll definitely work the counter for food and fun.”

“Good,” he said as she high-fived him through the window. “It’s a date.”

OMG! He just asked me on a date!

Chloe had no idea her spirits could soar any higher. It was a miracle she didn’t blast off.

“Jessica, Meghan, Sarah,” Rustin acknowledged them, the teasing light in his dark gaze gone as if it had never been there, and for a moment he looked like the angry,

sullen teen stalking around town. But then his features smoothed, and a smile played at the corner of his stern mouth. “Happy holidays.”

His attention was back on his gas burners.

“I feel dissed,” Sarah smiled, “but you seem to have jumped to the front of the line of admirers, Chloe,” she teased.

“Better buy some boxing gloves. The town has lots of ladies sharpening their eye and lip liners, preparing to welcome Rustin back to town,” Meghan said. “I might have some Krav Maga tips.”

Meghan and Sarah broke into giggles.

“I’m surprised Belmont singletons haven’t broken The Wild Side door down yet to get to Rustin,” Chloe said honestly, taking the food that Rebekah handed her.

She handed one of the custom cones of fried chicken to an unusually quiet Jessica and the other to Meghan and Sarah, along with a serving of hush puppies. She juggled the other food and walked around the trailer to the other side, holding her credit card in her teeth.

“Gross, Chloe,” Meghan laughed. “What are you a puppy?” She grabbed the card out of Chloe’s mouth and wiped the edge along her red flowy pants she’d worn to every holiday concert for the past few years. “I think single ladies of Belmont are struggling with a strategy. They’re too terrified to pawn off a family casserole on a chef with a reputation for innovation and who’s bringing all kinds of heat in and out of the kitchen.”

Meghan made a sizzling sound and popped a hush puppy into her mouth.

“Damn,” she moaned, her eyes rolling back. “That is beyond delicious. Get your own, Jessica and Sarah.” She hugged the order of hush puppies to her chest. “Not sharing. I’ll hit the gym extra tomorrow.”

Twenty minutes later, Chloe walked with Jessica along the row of booths. Sarah and Meghan had split off to buy more presents and had ordered ‘no spying.’ Chloe kept waiting for her to dish.

What’s bothering her?

But Chloe felt weirdly too nervous to ask. Jessica chowed on the chicken strips and waffle, while Chloe shopped with intention; she was careful with her budget. She did prefer holiday markets with their creative wares, and the feeling of shopping locally always buoyed her spirits. But soon Jessica’s silence felt spectral, judgey even.

“You want to walk down Main Street? Some of the shops have stayed open. I thought I could buy candy canes to decorate the gift bags,” Chloe asked.

“As long as you don’t buy those handmade candy canes for your students,” Jessica warned. “Remember the year when even with the teacher discount Leigh Anne gave you, you broke your Christmas bank?”

“It was my first year teaching, so I was pretty broke to begin with. Your idea of baking Christmas cookies and having carafes of hot chocolate on the last day of class before the Christmas break is much more economical.”

“Oh. Chloe, I ate everything.” Jessica looked down at the empty cones that had held the hush puppies and the other that had had the fried chicken and waffle, her cheeks flushed a pretty pink.

“Rustin’s cooking is that good,” Chloe said, happy Jessica had enjoyed the meal.

Maybe her emotional vendetta against Rustin was fading. “Speaking of cooking, well, baking. Are we still on for our cookie-baking extravaganza?” She placed her palms together as if in prayer and hopped a half circle around Jessica on the sidewalk in front of the bookstore.

“You want to?” Jessica asked. “I thought you’d be asking the practically hometown hero celebrity chef to bake with you.”

Chloe blinked. Jessica had a tone.

“But it’s been our thing,” she said. “We practice a new mulled wine recipe for the Maye open house tea, taste test it, and then bake Christmas cookies for my students and the family holiday tea.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:07 pm

Chloe felt crushed that Jessica thought she didn't want to do it with her this year. "It's my favorite part of Christmas," Chloe barely stifled her wail. "And I'm getting better. I'm good with the cookie cutters. I always set the timer last year without any reminders and even took out each tray when it buzzed without using my 'intuition of doneness.' And we decorate your tree at the Cramer House and listen to Christmas carols, and I spend the night, and—"

"Okay, okay," Jessica chuckled. "I love it too, Chloe. We'll bang out a lot of cookies, get a smidge buzzed, and you do a much more festive job decorating the house than I do. I'll check in with Meghan and Sarah to see if they can join us. You're sure you aren't going to bake with Rustin, or is he too busy?"

Chloe grinned. "I hadn't thought to ask. He doesn't really exude a cookie vibe, does he? But spending time with him in the kitchen has been dreamy, although humbling and humiliating because I get so distracted watching him chop and finesse. And his focus!" She fanned herself. "Dreams do come true. He has the sexiest forearms."

Jessica stared at her.

Oops.

"TMI?" Had she been too loud? There were still a lot of families milling around the market and Main Street since everything was open late tonight. "But Christmas cookies are our thing."

"Chloe, are you really dating Rustin for real?" Jessica demanded.

“Um...” Why did she feel defensive? Rustin had finally asked her out on a real date. “We’ve spent time together,” she said, unable to cork the happiness bubbling through her. “But we haven’t really had a date, yet.”

Jessica looked astonished. “Chloe, be careful.”

“What? Why?” she asked, hating to see Jessica upset and not understanding it. “Everything we’ve done has had a purpose: the Movable Feast, where he taught me some cooking skills, how to exactly follow the recipe in the Southern Love Spellsbook.”

“Love spells?” Jessica repeated, eyes wide and staring. “That’s the book you found and used? Love spells? Really, Chloe.”

“It’s not really spells,” Chloe defended, feeling like she was ten again and had messed up. Belatedly she remembered that Jessica, along with Grandma Millie, was the most enthusiastic churchgoer in the family. Well, most of them attended, but it was more obligation than a joyful choice.

“It’s not like I was incanting anything while lighting candles. Well, I did light candles for one recipe and another time when Rustin and I made a cherry bounce, but I wasn’t summoning ghosts or pricking fingers or...” She trailed off, daunted by Jessica’s shocked expression. “Jessie, I’m kidding. It’s really tame with lots of love advice about cooking and presenting food to men. Sort of a hoot really.”

“You said you’d show me that book.”

“Yes, I will,” Chloe said quickly. “I promised Rustin he could use it; he wanted to study for inspiration on the Roots section of his menu. When he returns it, you can see it. A deal’s a deal.”

“You could be giving away Maye family secrets.”

“Please.” Chloe rolled her eyes. “I know I found the book in Grandma Millie’s little library. But Grandma Millie hasn’t written in it.”

“Did you ask her?”

“Noooo,” Chloe drawled out, wondering why she had been so private and protective about the book. “It wasn’t hers.” She infused her voice with confidence. “Anyone could have put it there.”

“And you just impulsively closed your eyes and picked a recipe or two and then had everyone in town eat the food?”

“It’s a cookbook, Jessica, not voodoo or whatever.”

“I want to see it.”

“See what?”

Rustin had strolled up behind them, and Chloe felt herself light up. She stifled the impulse to touch him.

“Jessica wants to borrow the cookbook.”

Rustin’s gaze flicked to Jessica and then back to hers, and Chloe felt heat curl in her toes and pulse up through her body, warming her to the point that she thought she just might melt in her white puffer jacket.

“She does, does she?”

He has the sexiest mouth.

“Uh, huh. For cookies.”

“Cookies?” Rustin smiled, and Chloe thought she’d liquify onto the sidewalk, despite the chilly night. She could feel Jessica’s scrutiny but didn’t care. Maybe she and Rustinwerereally dating.

I can dream that big!

“Jessica and I are baking cookies one night this coming week for the Maye open house and my students. The last day before break I give them a holiday party and share a special compilation of holiday-themed poems or sudden fiction that they’ve found or written over the semester.”

“You can take the book to her when you bake cookies; does that work?” Again, he flicked a cool gaze toward Jessica, but Chloe felt the temperature rise when his dark gaze broodily settled back on her.

Her tummy flipped. Again. It was like every fantasy she’d ever had—Rustin’s attention on a December night bathed in golden Christmas lights and music. Holiday happiness surrounded them.

“I thought we could walk around the market a little, Chloe,” Rustin said. “I’ve wrapped up cooking for tonight.”

“Of course. I didn’t think you’d be able to get away.” Chloehappy-hopped in place.

“That’s the advantage of being the boss.”

“You want to join us, Jessica?” Chloe asked, half hoping Jessica would decline but also wanting her to say yes, so the uncomfortable rift that she felt between them and the suspicion of Rustin would have a chance to heal.

“No. I’ve got a few things to do,” Jessica replied.

Disappointment crashed through Chloe. “Do you need help?”

“I got it.” She looked at both Rustin and Chloe, her gaze penetrating, yet inscrutable. “When do you want to bake the cookies?”

“We usually do it on Wednesday in case something goes wrong; so we have another night.”

“Nothing ever goes wrong with my cookies, Chloe. Not ever.”

“That’s tempting fate,” Rustin remarked.

“I feel like tempting fate,” Jessica shot back. “Let’s shoot for Thursday night this year, Chloe,” Jessica said, “but bring the book to me on Wednesday so I can take a look, maybe choose a different recipe for the Maye open house.”

Jessica smiled and walked off, doing her signature handwave over her head. as she strode away.

“Do you think she’ll try to poison me?”

Chloe brushed her finger along the back of Rustin’s hand and was thrilled when he peeled off her glove and, holding her gaze, kissed the pad of each finger.

“I’ll be your official taste tester,” she promised breathlessly. Maybe theyweredating.

Please let us be dating!

“She could want to take us both out. A two-fer.” He sucked her thumb into his mouth. “I want to be alone with you.”

“I want that too.”

He smiled. “You’re not supposed to make it that easy for me, Chloe.”

“I am easy,” she said. “You’ve always been the one, Rustin. Always.”

His eyes looked dark, even in the vintage-inspired gas streetlights that stood vigil along Main Street.

He pulled her in for a hug, and she hoped he’d kiss her but instead, he just held her, his chin resting on her head.

“You warm me through and through. I was so cold, angry, driven. You calm me. I feel so content.”

“That’s not romantic. I’m supposed to make you burn up with crazy passion,” she objected.

She felt his chest rumble as if he were trying to suppress a laugh.

“There is that,” he said. “But lust I’ve had. Contentment? Calm? Never. My whole life has been a struggle, a fight to survive, to win, to achieve. I was angry for so many years. Always running hot. Fury. Intensity. It feels so good to be able to relax, to enjoy the moment. I have a home, an apartment above The Wild Side that I’m not afraid will be taken away. I haven’t fixed it up yet, but it’s mine. Lucas has his. No one can throw us out. I don’t always have to be flexed, geared to battle the next problem.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:07 pm

“Oh, Rustin.” Chloe looked up at him, that strong, masculine jaw, the hollowed cheeks crowned by bones that should be in Hollywood but thankfully were in Belmont with her. “That’s the sweetest, most heart-rending, most romantic feeling ever. I want to make you happy. I want to be home for you. I want you to feel like you can relax and rest with me.”

She threw herself in his arms, and he caught her just like in the movies. She tangled her hands in his hair and kissed him. The only thing that would make the moment more perfect would be if the first few snowflakes fell, but the sky, though portentously pregnant with clouds, clung greedily to all moisture.

Chloe sighed into the kiss and nipped his bottom lip.

“Very public, Chloe. We need to keep it G-rated,” he said and gently put her down, kissing the top of her head. “You are a teacher, and I am a business owner and don’t want to play into the bad-boy image everyone still has of me.”

“It’s very sexy,” she said, running her hand along his leather motorcycle jacket. “Total fantasy. The all-black, the boots, the jacket, the tats, the longish hair. Bad-boy vibe, and you know everyone is secretly longing for you.”

“I’m only interested in if you are longing for me.”

“Nothing secret about that,” Chloe admitted. “I was a sure thing since we were kids. I stalked you.”

“That’s right,” he said, and she reached up to touch his lips when she saw one of his

rare smiles. “You’re a dangerous woman, but as much as I’d like to be alone with you, I do want to get some gifts for my crew before the stalls close. Up for helping me play Santa?”

“Definitely,” she said.

Always.

Chapter Eleven

Chloe arrived at Jessica’s house on Cramer Mountain ten minutes early loaded with three bulging shopping totes of supplies. Sarah and Meghan were already there, wine open. They were quiet when she arrived, and Chloe had the uncomfortable, but not unusual feeling that they’d been talking about her.

“Who are you and what have you done with Chloe?” Jessica asked, looking at the totes.

“So funny,” Chloe said breathlessly as she began unloading the ingredients for the cookies and decorations, the holiday-themed plates, colored cellophane and ribbon and gift tags, the red wine Rustin had recommended for making the mulled wine, along with the spices and the ingredients that Jessica had texted her periodically throughout the afternoon.

“So, what’s up? Is this an intervention?”

“Paranoid much?” Meghan asked, her voice light, but her cheeks flushed pink, and she didn’t meet her gaze.

“No,” Sarah said firmly. Her voice calm and her gaze steady. She was the oldest and naturally the leader and smoothed things over. “We’re just...” Sarah looked at

Jessica. “Worried.”

Chloe felt her good mood evaporate. “Why? Everything’s going great. The Movable Feast worked out. The Madrigal Dinner earned more money than ever. My contract to teach choir at the college was renewed for next semester. I’m happy.”

“That’s great,” Sarah said.

“Are we going to bake cookies or not?” Chloe finished unloading the supplies, slapping them down harder on the counter than she should.

“Yes of course.” Sarah looked at Jessica and then flowed to her feet.

“No, we’re not going to bake cookies.” Jessica stood up jerkily and crossed her arms. Chloe felt flanked. “Not yet. We’re going to discuss the book and Rustin.”

“Jess, let it go.” Meghan stood next to Chloe. “It’s just an old recipe book. Nothing weird about it. Chloe says she’s happy. Let her be happy.”

“We have to protect her,” Jessica insisted. “The book actually has ‘love spells’ in the title. And Chloe cooked something from it and Rustin ate it.”

“That’s the way recipes usually work,” Chloe said. “Seriously, Jessie, you’re overreacting.”

“Maybe,” Jessica said. “But you’re our little sister, and we are not going to throw you to the wolves and Rustin Wildish is a wolf.”

“He’s a talented chef and a new business owner like you want...” Chloe broke off at the aghast look in Jessica’s green eyes.

“Huh?” Meghan looked between them.

“Nothing. Let’s keep the focus,” Jessica snapped. “You didn’t see the way she was gazing at him like he was the sun and the moon.”

“So what?” Chloe breathed, feeling betrayed. “I can be happy. I can be in love.”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:07 pm

“Love,” Jessica yelled. “You barely know him. This is dangerous, Chloe. Can’t you see it?”

“No. You don’t think Rustin can have feelings for me?”

“Him? No. Any other man yes, but not Rustin. It’s that darn book. There was a spell that made you gaga over Rustin.”

Chloe felt like she’d been slapped. Jessica was belittling her strong feelings for Rustin that she’d had forever.

“We need to look at the book, girls,” Jessica said to Sarah and Meghan. “You brought iut right? We need to study the recipe. Reverse whatever Chloe accidentally did.”

“There was no spell, Jessie. I just followed a recipe—exactly. Rustin helped. He trained me. He spent time with me. He said he’d help and he did. There was no magic.”

“He took advantage of you.”

“Never. Rustin is so professional. He gives each task or person his total attention, like it’s the most important thing happening, and I’m like that with my teaching, with my students. But in my personal life I just...” she nibbled on her lip, “muddle through. I’m passive or I lack confidence and let the day and my to-do lists roll by me.”

“When Rustin looked at the book with me, walked me through each step, forced me to see how each step was connected to the whole, it opened my eyes to the big

picture. I had hoped he would take over because he's so much more skilled, but his perseverance in only supervising while not letting me cook anything slap-dash showed me I could achieve near perfection. 'Good enough' didn't have to be my fallback." The words, finally uncorked, just spilled out.

"Cooking with Rustin helped me take myself more seriously. He listened and he pushed, and I rose up and worked harder then Rustin started taking me more seriously. I saw that I mattered just as much as the recipe, the guests, and the community cause, and that started bleeding into the rest of my life."

"Chloe, that's wonderful." Sarah pulled her into a hug and looked at Jessica, warning clear in her gaze.

"I know it's new, and maybe it's hard to believe that Rustin could lo...care for me," she amended.

"It's not hard at all," Sarah said quickly. "You are infinitely lovable."

Jessica huffed out air and slouched against the preheated double stove. Jessica continued to stare at her, expressions chasing across her face too quickly for Chloe to get a read. Pain clenched her heart.

"He's a brilliant chef, Jessica. And a really smart and good man."

Jessica seemed to shrink. She stared at the wide-planked heartwood pine floor.

"I know," Jessica said to her toes. "I know."

The silence felt like a dirge while Chloe stared at the top of Jessica's head.

"What recipe do you want to start with?" Chloe finally broke the silence, willing

herself to let her heart go.

“Why don’t you get the wine mulling.” Jessica finally looked up. “We can have a mug at the end and keep it warming for Mom and Dad’s open house. You’re still going to help Saturday, right?”

“Of course,” Chloe said, breathing a sigh of relief that Jessica seemed to be backing down from her distrust. She was relieved that Elizabeth Katharine always held her open house in the afternoon, which would give Chloe plenty of time to meet Rustin and his crew at the McAdenville light Festival.

Chloe’s task was to hand out a holiday-inspired nibble sample on a cute cork-backed coaster advertising The Wild Side. She’d pitched the idea to Rebekah, who’d loved it, and Chloe had designed and ordered stickers with the date of the open house the following weekend, so that the remaining coasters from the order could be used again for future events.

But she didn’t tell Jessica any of that. Instead, she relaxed into the conversation between her cousins, although her anticipation for the evening had faded. She’d felt attacked, and yet defended. And she no longer wanted to share the book with Jessica. She didn’t have an open heart or spirit to cook using the book.

You didn’t either until Rustin helped.

“Let’s look at the recipe book—love spells I think were mentioned.” Meghan made a kissy face. “Maybe we should make some cookies using a recipe and create chaos at the open house. We could have half the town in polyamorous relationships.”

“Stop,” Sarah laughed and lightly slapped Meghan’s hand. “You are so bad.”

“I’m going to look through the book,” Jessica said staunchly. “I am. I might make

something to help.”

Meghan hooted a laugh. “I’ll put a warning out on the town’s Facebook.”

Even Sarah stifled a giggle. Jessica sounded evasive, and yet her words had the tone of a dare. Deciding she was being too defensive, Chloe tried to join into the fun, reluctantly taking the book from one of the totes and handing it over.

“Be careful who eats whatever you make, Jessica,” she joked. “Rustin accused me of putting a spell on him. When I finally made the Movable Feast entrée correctly, Rustin took one bite, looked at me weirdly, muttered something about magic, and ran out the door.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:07 pm

Jessica didn't laugh. She took the book from Chloe using the tips of her fingers like it was hot.

"But I made the same entrée for hundreds of people, and I don't have masses banging on my door for dates so..." she drawled out, but Jessica kept baking, her expression intent, inward.

Four hours later, Chloe had packaged up the gift plates of cookies for the high school staff and the tins of cookies for her holiday parties. She stifled a yawn and helped Jessica store the cookies for the open house. No one had tried the mulled wine, and Sarah who had an early start had been the first to escape. Meghan had brought an overnight bag and had already claimed a bedroom.

"You can stay the night here if you're too tired," Jessica offered as Chloe slipped into her puffer coat to take her first load to her car. "Meghan's already crashed. She's been staying here more and more. It's been nice to have her here." Jessica looked hopeful.

"No, I've got to get an early start tomorrow," Chloe demurred even though she had an overnight duffel in her car. She loved spending time with Jessica, but tonight had felt like a high-wire act. They were off, so even though Chloe had a guest ensuite that she and Jessica had decorated for her in the rambling house, she wanted to go home.

Chloe took out her first load and returned for the second but Jessica, coatless, was already there carrying the rest.

"Chloe, be careful," Jessica urged.

“I’ve driven this road hundreds of times.”

“No, I mean with Rustin. He’s not. I... Darn it, I already ruined tonight, and I’m sorry.”

“What?” She’d never heard Jessica admit fault before.

“Chloe, I’m so sorry. I thought it was done, over. I thought I was doing the right thing, but I’ve been... Oh I can’t even explain. Never mind. Forget it.”

Wrapping her arms around herself, Jessica ran back toward the house. Chloe sprinted after her, leaving the hatch of her car open.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Chloe pulled Jessica’s stiff, slender body into a hard hug. She couldn’t stand that Jessica was hurting. “You’ve been off all night.”

Chloe’s heart thumped heavily and not from the dash up the path and stairs to the house.

“I’m so confused.” Jessica’s voice broke, and she edged backward into the house.

“About what?” Chloe propelled Jessica toward a chair by the island and poured her a mug of the mulled wine they’d ignored earlier. “Take a gulp. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Alcohol isn’t going to fix this.” However, Jessica glugged some wine and held out the mug for more. She half giggled and sobbed. “Damn, even your mulled wine recipe tastes magic. I’ve been such an idiot.”

“What? Why?” Chloe felt as if she’d stumbled into the wrong theater rehearsal space and didn’t recognize the scene or play.

“I love Rustin!” Jessica wailed.

“What?” In the process of dishing out more mulled wine, Chloe dropped the mug into the wine, and warm, fragrant liquid sloshed onto her hand.

Her entire body went cold. Stiff. Time-tunneled. “But you...you...” She had no idea what to say. Jessica had only expressed suspicion and contempt toward Rustin.

“I loved him in high school.”

Chloe stared at Jessica, trying to make sense of the words. Jessica had dated John Randall, the homecoming king and quarterback. Of course, she had.

“We loved each other.”

Chloe staggered back.

No. It was impossible.

“Rustin was... He was so...everything,” Jessica breathed out. “So wild and romantic and intense and beautiful, and he made me feel alive and like I could do anything. I used to sneak out to meet him. Lie and skip class to meet him. He was my first. My everything. He wanted us to run away together.”

As Jessica spoke, Chloe backed up with each shocking admission until she hit the kitchen wall. Her knees gave out inch by inch, and she slid to the floor.

“I loved him. But I hated him too. He terrified me. He was so...so...everything I wasn’t. What would Mama and Daddy do if they knew about Rustin? What if my friends found out? Mama and Daddy’s friends? I’d lose my reputation. My social standing. My family’s respect.”

“But you loved him?” Chloe whispered, still not quite able to believe she hadn’t once guessed.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 7:07 pm

“I was so afraid I’d lose everything, so I broke it off. He didn’t believe me, so I said hateful things. A lot of them to get rid of him. I was so mean. So nasty. I think God has been punishing me because I was so awful. I threw Rustin away because I was heading off to college and thought I’d easily find a more suitable boy.”

“Jessica.” Chloe’s heart broke for Rustin and also for Jessica’s frightened teenage self.

“And Rustin went away, taking my heart and soul with him. He went so far away. For good, I thought.”

Chloe couldn’t speak or even process. Jessica seemed like a different person right now. She’d had a secret life, a secret love. All that self-contained elegance and air of untouchability hid a once wild and passionate heart.

“I was horrible. I lost respect for myself because I’d been cruel, and now that he’s back, I don’t know what to do. When we were in love, he swore it would always only be me,” Jessica said. “And I’ve had other boyfriends, but no one like him. No one who made me feel like he did.”

Chloe thought she was going to throw up. “What are you saying?” she whispered. She felt frozen with dread.

“Rustin was the love of my life, the man I haven’t been able to forget. I think we were soul mates, and I tossed him away because I didn’t want to disgrace myself and disappoint Mama and Daddy.”

Chloe stared in mute misery at the glowing blue numbers on the microwave as they ticked over three minutes. “You still love him?”

“I don’t know,” Jessica replied. “And I don’t know if he’d give me another chance, but what will people think?”

“Who cares what anyone thinks?” Chloe breathed out what felt like fire.

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Because it is easy.” Chloe pushed herself to her feet. “If you truly love Rustin, you won’t care what anyone thinks!” Her breath sawed through her lungs. “Love is everything! Nothing else matters!” Her voice gathered passion. “Love is the beginning, middle, and end! And it’s sacred! No one else’s opinions or gossip count in the face of love!”

Jessica looked up at her, eyes swimming in tears.

“I don’t think I have your courage,” Jessica whispered.

Something knitted together in Chloe’s shredded heart. Courage. She did have courage now. She’d always had it; she just hadn’t recognized it. And she’d need every ounce of it because she loved Rustin. She’d always loved him. She didn’t need an ancestral cookbook to tell her that. She loved Rustin and didn’t care who knew. But Rustin should be the first person she told. He should have a true choice, and while Chloe marveled at her audacity to possibly go up against Jessica, she would.

“If you love him,” Chloe said, thinking of Jessica’s cookies and possible love spells, “you should tell him, or you’ll regret it. But know that I, too, will not cede the field and slink away, because I will not live my life hiding my heart and counting up my regrets.”

Chloe walked out of Jessica's kitchen, closing the door softly behind her.

She paused on the porch, said a little prayer while looking at one winking blue-white star. She sucked in a cold, deep breath. Taking on the Movable Feast for Grandma Millie had been a big step into adulthood, but she'd taken so many smaller ones over the past few years. And now with Rustin she was going to take one more—risk her heart and perhaps risk her relationship with Jessica.

"I love Rustin," she tasted the words, wondered what his response would be when she told him. Chloe squared her shoulders, stepped off the porch. She'd soon find out.

*

"Now we're cooking with gas, Chef," Lucas called out, probably to irritate him with the trite saying, but it was good to see his brother relax a little, enjoy himself. Lucas liked working the pop-up more than straight kitchen work, and Rustin knew why: more visual exposure, less stress, more chances to switch up tasks, and more freedom to get out and enjoy the event during a break. Plus, Rustin let him make the music mix.

Rustin knew Lucas was more passionate about music and bartending than he ever would be in the kitchen, but he had solid skills. Rustin didn't want to hold him back, but he was having a hard time letting him go. Teaching his brother marketable skills and a work ethic had been paramount, and he was proud of Lucas and enjoying the international-vibe music mixes he'd made both for The Wild Side and the pop-up. He'd used a chunk of his last paycheck to buy a new mixer and other equipment, and Rustin knew he couldn't keep his younger brother under his wing forever.

His eyes scanned the crowd looking for Chloe. He hadn't seen her since Wednesday night, and anticipation lit down his spine.

“Pull it together,” he muttered as the next order came in. In just a few weeks he’d enjoyed Chloe’s funny and happy texts and pictures. She saw the world so differently than he did, and he found himself relaxing in her warmth. Chloe’s lack of communication today didn’t mean anything was wrong.

He knew with the end of the semester, she’d be busy, and he’d had quite a few press and podcast interviews regarding *The Wild Side*, but still, he’d been a little uneasy that she’d only texted him once to say that she would arrive after she helped with Sean Patrick and Elizabeth Catherine’s open house. Strange that she never called them aunt or uncle or mom and dad. Chloe was a deep river he was only beginning to plumb.

Relief coursed through him when he spotted her petite frame, wrapped in her white puffer jacket that made him think of a s’more. Chloe was angled away from the trailer and partially behind a tree along the small man-made lakefront, where the food trucks were set up for visitors taking in the famous light show.

Almost like she doesn’t want to be seen.

The thought dried his throat.

What. The. Hell.

“Take the counter. Two minutes,” he told Hannah, who was taking orders and handing out the food tonight. Now that he’d spotted her, he noted that she already had the tray of samples and was handing them out, but she’d been sneaky. She hadn’t said hi when she’d arrived to hand out the samples.

Or kissed me.

He had it bad. Definitely worried now, he vaulted out of the back door of the trailer and headed through the crowd. He hadn't gone far before he ran into Jessica.

"Rustin! Hi!" she smiled, and then her tongue moistened her already gleaming plump lower lip that had driven him crazy when he was a teenager. "How's it going?"

"Busy. Good." He looked over her head trying to spot Chloe. It was harder now that he was on the ground.

Jessica nodded and smiled like he'd said something fascinating. She held a Tupperware of...something and suspicion coursed through him.

"You seen Chloe?" He wanted to make it clear that his interest was definitely elsewhere though it floored him to think she might want to rekindle anything after the way she'd treated him. True, they'd been kids, and the pressure for her to perform and behave in her family had been intense in a way he couldn't fathom as a kid. And it had been years. And Chloe loved her. Inwardly sighing, he forced himself to not bolt.

"No" Her smile faltered. "I came to see you, Rustin. I wanted to talk."

Her voice had that Adele husk to it that had always made him feel like the only one who mattered long before he'd been a man. He cringed at what a fool he'd been. Run away with him. How had he been such an idiot? They'd been children. And why had he idealized her long after he should have matured out of a teenage crush? Thank all

the gods she'd had some sense because it had taken him years to get her and her words out of his head.

"What about?" His gaze lifted again to search out Chloe. He couldn't shake the feeling she was hiding from him.

"Do I have to have a specific topic? We used to talk for hours about nothing," she smiled.

"Used to," he emphasized. "C'mon, Jessica. I'm on the clock. If you're here to warn me off Chloe, you're too late and none of your business."

"Chloe is my sister."

"Cousin."

"My parents always made that distinction. I'm not sure why, but from the first morning we found her and brought her in from the cold, she felt like mine."

"You treated her like a doll."

Jessica swallowed hard, and her creamy skin paled. "I want to protect her."

"From me?" His voice was hard. "From the filthy stench of my family?" He could feel the muscle twitch in his jaw, and he could barely unclench his teeth.

"No, of course not." Jessica flushed prettily.

"I should be beyond that. I've proved myself."

"You are. You have." The words spilled out in a torrent. "I was cruel Rustin.

Overwhelmed and afraid and out of my depth, and I've...I've regretted the words I said so many years ago even as I uttered them. But this is about Chloe and that book."

"Huh?"

"The Love Spell recipes."

This time he did laugh. "You don't believe in woo-woo or whatever do you?"

"Do you?" she challenged. "Chloe admitted that when she followed the recipe exactly, and you had a bite you accused her of putting a spell on you."

He ran an unsteady hand through his hair. "Unbelievable." He tried to gather his thoughts. "You think I'm playing with your sister—why? To get something? I already have what I want. My own restaurant. Restoring my family name and reputation. I'm taking care of my mother. I helped send both my sisters to college, and they have careers in health care—what they always wanted, and I'm helping Luke to find his way. I don't need to play Chloe."

"I'm not saying it's deliberate," Jessica muttered.

"Your sister is smart and fun and warm and funny and so full of life. She's light to my dark, and she accepts me and my dreams and my schedule. She makes sense, and yeah, we're new, but I'm happy. She's happy. Life has no guarantees. Why isn't that enough for you?"

Jessica gulped in a deep breath. "Prove it."

"I don't have to prove anything to you."

But she was holding out a floral china plate with cookies artfully arranged that she'd

unlocked from the Tupperware container.

“Prove it,” she dared.

“You poisoning me, Jessica Maye?”

“No. But I know how to follow a recipe exactly including grinding a cinnamon stick with a marble pestle and other unusual requests.”

“So what?” he asked warily. “I eat a cookie and poof I’m in love with you, not Chloe?”

“You love Chloe?”

He waited for a moment, replaying the small moments over the past few weeks—the way her eyes sparkled when she shared something about her day. The way her face lit up when she saw him. Her willingness to help out. The way ideas sparked off her like a Fourth of July sparkler.

“Feels like,” he said, though why he was confessing to Jessica when he should be telling Chloe was all kinds of messed up.

“So if it’s real love and not the book, you shouldn’t hesitate to prove it.” Jessica seemed stuck on this theme. She even tucked one of her long, loose strawberry-blonde curls behind her ear, which she did when she meant business.

Funny I remember that.

She was still beautiful. But cool. More ice princess than a siren. Yes, she’d once

devastated him, but he'd risen. Stronger. Absently, he rubbed his thumb along his phoenix tattoo. A cliché, yes, but a necessary reminder in the early years. But he was clear-eyed now about who he was and what he wanted.

"Did you follow the recipe in the Southern Love Spellsbook exactly? Alone. No help?"

"Yes," she said pushing the plate a little closer. "I mixed the dough yesterday at dawn because that's when the first sprinkle of rain finally came."

What?

The air between them felt electric. Jessica watched him intently as he picked up a cookie. Her dare felt life changing. Fine. And then he spotted Chloe walking towards him. She saw the cookie and stopped.

He held the cookie up as if toasting both women and took a bite. Chloe needed to trust him and his feelings. He chewed. Let the flavors coat his tongue front to back.

"Huh. Basic butter cookie, a hint of molasses, but more maple, a touch of cinnamon, nutmeg. Crystallized brown sugar for a crunch."

The axis of the world hadn't changed. He didn't feel dizzy or breathless like last time when he'd panicked and fled Chloe. What an idiot he'd been running away. His place was beside her.

"Pretty good, Jess. I'd add some cardamon next time. Thanks. See ya' around," he nearly laughed as her expression morphed from worry to relief, to doubt and then something he couldn't read. He finally felt free of the past.

"The book is safe to use." He wiggled his fingers at her witchily and then laughed

again. Turning around he felt determination flow through him like molten steel. Chloe stumbled over her feet, and then she hopped and ran towards him. He caught her in a fierce hug.

*

A hug had never felt so fantastic. Chloe clung to Rustin like he was a tree in a hurricane.

“I can’t believe she had the audacity to bake you cookies.”

“She was trying to prove a point.”

“What point?” Chloe demanded. Then she wiggled out of his arms, her eyes glittered with tears, and she dashed them away.

“She’s your sister. She loves you and wanted to protect you.”

“I had no idea she had such a superstitious streak.”

Rustin laughed. The night finally felt just right. “She was feeling like a mama bear.”

Rustin sounded like he was in a forgiving mood, but Chloe wasn’t. She’d doubted herself and when she’d seen him with Jessica and the cookies, all her insecurities had come roaring back, and she didn’t want to live that way.

“I’d rather talk about us. Were you hiding from me?”

“Um...no?” He looked so good. He rode that edge of frustration but was trying to dial it back, which made him even hotter. “Yes.No.I’m trying to think of what to say,” she admitted.

“Just say it.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“Chloe, you’re freaking me out.”

“I have to get the words right.”

“Everyone who’s ever met you knows you have no filter. Just spit it out.” Arms crossed, he waited.

“Did you eat Jessica’s cookie?”

That was not what she’d meant to ask, but it was, quite possibly, important. She searched his beautiful charcoal eyes looking for...something. An invitation? A validation? A warming?

Courage. She stood up on her tiptoes.

“Yeah, she dared me to take a bite. You saw me so what about it?” A hint of a smile chased the dare in his voice.

“I’d ask how you feel.”

“Before or after?”

Excitement bubbled through her at the look in his eyes and their teasing rapport.

“After.”

“The same.”

“As before?” She crossed both fingers.

“You asking me how I feel about you, Chloe?”

“I love you,” she blurted. “I’ve always loved you. You are my North Star, Rustin.”

“Did you doubt that I feel the same?”

She fidgeted. “You said it was the book. It was a spell. Magic. Not me.”

“It’s you, Chloe.” He pulled her in tightly and kissed her lips, her cheeks, her chin. Then he held her against him, and she experienced his warmth seep into her body, and her inner trembling subsided. She felt his heart slam against hers, a reminder that they were alive and that they were together. “Thank God,” he murmured feverently.

“You’re magic. You. Not the book.”

She sighed happily and looked up at him.

“Maybe you are the spell, or maybe the book pushed us there,” Rustin whispered. “I don’t know. I don’t care. You’re real, Chloe; we’re real.”

She pressed herself deeper into his embrace.

“Jessica told me you and she had been in love. I thought what if she still had feelings for you or that your feelings might have rekindled.”

Rustin pulled away enough so he could look deeply into her eyes.

“I thought I was in love with her when I was a teenager, but I was in love with a fantasy, not a flesh-and-blood-and-heart woman. Jessica’s a memory. And your sister so she’ll always have a place in my heart, but you are my heart, Chloe. I’m a different man now. A better man. And I hope that I’m your man.”

“You are,” she happily agreed and smiled up at him as families and friends moved around them and the lights glowed, casting them in red and gold and the green of new beginnings. “This is going to be the most perfect holiday.”

“This is only the beginning,” he promised, kissing her reverently. She relaxed into his body, his strength surrounding her.

“This is all the magic I need.” She snuggled close. “With you, Rustin, I see the beginning, middle, and the most romantic ending. All we need now is snow.”

His laugh rumbled, tickled her chest.

“Look up, Chloe. Once again you’ve created magic.”

She tilted her head back toward the blanket of black sky illuminated by the ring of dozens of homes decked out for the holidays around the small lake. Fat white flakes drifted in a swirl that seemed sentient. Chloe stuck out her tongue.

“Catch a snowflake, Rustin. First of the season. Make a wish,” she invited.

“I have all my wishes, Chloe. Every single one.”

The End