



The Pine Ridge Community Cookbook (Pine Ridge Universe)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Pine Ridge is known for their festive holiday season. From Applefest in September to the annual Halloween Ball at White Pines, to the yearly Christmas Bazaar at the Night Market, the people of paranormal-friendly Pine Ridge, New York, know how to celebrate! This year, local residents are sharing their favorite recipes to create a community cookbook for the library fundraiser—but this cookbook is more than meets the eye. Take a peek to see what's in store!

A bad boy revenant tries to woo the sexy ex-hitwoman with his chocolate peanut butter crunch cookies.

A widowed Orc adds something special to his picnic basket when he sets out to court the woman he loves.

A night shift nurse and her gargoyle groom share the perfect sunset smoothie and bacon cheddar biscuits.

A mothman surprises his lover when she arrives home—and dinner's not the best part!

Food, found family, and romance are foundational elements of the Pine Ridge universe. Enjoy fifteen recipes and their accompanying short stories that range from tender to tantalizing, all featuring your favorite couples and characters!

Never before sneak peeks in the lives of the paranormal citizens of Pine Ridge and their human love interests? Yes, please! Plus recipes? Sold!

Total Pages (Source): 38

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Genesis and Melinda from Stone Cold Groom

Genesis could feel her, even in his sleep. The slow, longing pulling of night as it started to wake him from his stone form and bring him to his bride.

Although by the distant, foggy sounds, his bride was already trying to bring him to herself—deep inside of herself.

He could feel the distant tingles of pleasure working their way from his thighs to the hard, aching erection of his cock. Melinda was such a minx, torturing him like that, leaving him on the verge just as sunlight hit—not that he minded.

Because sunset would bring the dreams and sensations of her stretching her petite, pouting little pussy over his long, rock-hard length, smoothed and slicked with lubricant to make the sparkling abalone-like stone skin even easier for her to take.

“Genesis. God... God, I need you. I woke up so ready for you, and today’s going to be such a crazy day...”

It was enough to make him break the rules of his race and defy the sun.

And to think he hadn’t even wanted Melinda when he first saw her, to think he was furious at ending up saddled with a human bride. Why was it going to be a crazy day, he wanted to ask. Why was she so ready?

Tease... Fucking him like this in his stone sleep, where he couldn’t smell her sweetness, couldn’t fully feel her heat and her wetness.

But the sensations sharpened. He could hear her panting as she pumped up and down him, sliding slowly, carefully.

Moonlight was going to battle sunlight soon, and he needed her off when he woke, shattering his prison. Sharp shards slicing Melinda's perfect buttercream-and-freckles skin wasn't something he wanted to picture.

But, like the expert she was, she launched off of him at the exact second, and the first thing he saw upon waking was his beautiful wife lying splayed and shuddering, her pink puss pouting and glistening at him as her fingers worked furiously in and out.

"I made you breakfast," Melinda gasped as he shook off the last of his stone skin and launched toward the bed, wings unfurled, cock still achingly hard.

"I should say you did," he growled, laughing, burying his tongue where his rod had just been, lapping her inside and out, parting her thighs as wide as possible with his talons.

"No, no, I mean I... Oh. Ohhh, fuck, fuck me with your tongue just like that," her protest changed into a croon.

"I should stop. You were a very bad girl, leaving me like that all day."

"You were a very bad boy, making me get off just before I came," she countered.

"You like it when I'm bad."

"Pot. Kettle," she cried, digging her nails into his scalp as he sucked on her clit.

"I think you're worse, leaving yourself on display like that, fucking my pretty peach while I'm still waking up," he chided, teasing in every slurping word.

“I don’t know, baby. I think you might be the king of bad boys, torturing me all day, sitting there all huge and hard, the perfect husband-shaped toy.

So big. I know you like it when I ride you and stretch to take you in so nice and deep,” Melinda’s voice taunted in a purr that could turn demons into priests.

Genesis couldn’t take it anymore. With a grunt, he shoved himself inside of her, feeling her stretch and then stick, her skin welding to his. She came on the first stroke, and he came on the second. “No fair having all the foreplay while I’m asleep,” he snarled, biting her shoulder lightly.

All she did was moan and arch up. “More, please.”

“Insatiable thing.”

“Horny hunk of rock.” Melinda kissed him and stretched. “I really did make you breakfast, though, babe. Sunset Smoothie, your favorite. I even brought it up here so we could have breakfast in bed.”

“Mmm, I love you, and I apologize for calling you bad.”

Melinda squirmed out from under him, turning over so that her adorable bottom was exposed. She reached for a pinkish-orange pitcher beside the bed and poured herself a glass. “Are you sure?” She waggled her hips at him, making him long to lay his tail across her cheeks, then his palms.

But he didn’t. “You are a good wife. And an excellent wife.”

Melinda looked back at him with a pout.

“Fine, fine. And a bad girl.”

“That’s better. Cheers, baby.”

He took the glass she offered him and drained it.

“You’re going to give yourself an icy headache,” Melinda scolded.

He brought his freezing mouth down across her shoulder, making her squeal and squirm. “Ah, but I have you to warm me up.”

“Mmm, yes. I will, I will,” she moaned as his lips started to tease in a circle over her neck. “Good way to start the day?” Melinda whispered.

He knew she meant night. “Every sunset with you starts a wonderful day, my love. Good evening, Beautiful.”

“Good evening, Handsome.”

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Rough around the edges Eddie Hyde's alter ego is mild-mannered Jack Ellsworth. This modern-day Jekyll and Hyde always gives his wife, Frankie, a two-for-one special, so it was only fair that this recipe offers a mocktail and cocktail variation.

Jack's Mango Mocktail Ingredients:

? ??? cup sliced strawberries

? ??? cup orange juice

? 1 lime, juiced

? 1 ??? cups sparkling water

? Ice, for serving

Method:

? Add all ingredients except ice to a blender and blend until smooth.

? Serve over ice.

Eddie's Tropical Rum Cocktail Ingredients

? 2 cups cubed mango

? ??? cup sliced strawberries

? ??? cup orange juice

? 1 lime, juiced

? ??? cup simple syrup

? ??? cup of light/silver/white rum

? ??? cup of crushed ice

? Additional ice (optional)

Method:

? Add all ingredients to a blender and blend until smooth.

? Serve over additional ice if you like, or drink it as is.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Jack and Eddie and Frankie from Nothing to Hyde

“Hey, baby. You’re way later than you thought.” Frankie smiled and pulled dinner out of the oven.

“I know, I’m sorry. Did you get the text?” Dr. Jack Ellsworth came in, pulled off his thin wire-rimmed glasses, and collapsed into a dining room chair.

“I did. I put Bella to bed. The dogs are up with her. We get...” Frankie put the hot plate on a folded dishtowel in front of her husband, “Enchiladas for two!”

“Mmm! Best wife ever. I’m sorry I was late again... And Eddie has the 5 AM shift,” he gave her an apologetic look.

“This is my dream, baby. Happy wife, happy life.” Frankie smirked and pulled a chair up next to her husband, the tall, slender blonde with stretched out muscles like a swimmer.

He bent and kissed the tattoo on her shoulder. “Really? Even with a husband who works two jobs?”

“I get two-for-one husbands. The two-for-one jobs come with the territory... and so does the way you’re a great dad. Bella loves you so much. Just how you are.”

“I’m sorry I missed putting my baby to bed,” Jack sighed, plunging his fork into the cheesy enchiladas and putting a bite in his mouth.

Frankie smiled while he moaned, head tossed back. This is it. The dream. Big house. Doctor husband... While I'm also getting my degree. My little girl has a dad, a real father. I did good.

And I still get to be as bad as I want.

"Well, you can still put me to bed in a little bit." She fluttered her lashes.

"Mmm, yes, please."

"If you have the energy, that is. How about a pick me up?"

"Something that won't slow me down," he teased.

"I made a pitcher of those mango mocktails you've been raving about."

"Hit me." Jack's tired face lit up.

Frankie smirked as she went to fill a tall glass with the cold, frothy liquid.

Hit me. A drink for Jack. Spank me. Dessert for her.

She could already feel the stinging tingle of his palm on her ass as it was up in the air, her gasping face pressed into a pillow as he fucked her hard, a plug in her backdoor making her squirm all the more.

Keep calm. You can't pounce on the poor guy. The poor, exhausted, starving guy. "Tell me about your day? What happened with the VA that made you so late?" she said, putting the glass in front of him, dropping another kiss on his cheek.

"Clinical rotation pushed back my actual charting hours and file review time. I got all

my patients in and out. This is amazing, baby. Thanks for keeping this cold for me,” Jack sighed in bliss, swallowing a long gulp of the mango mocktail.

“I tried,” Frankie shrugged.

He noticed the tone in her voice, one eyebrow arching. “Trouble keeping things from heating up, hm?”

She bit her lip, a guilty flush on her cheeks. “It’s been an easy day—for me. I have the energy to—”

“Who says I don’t have the energy?” Jack jammed several forkfuls into his mouth in quick succession. “My wife makes the best fuckery fuel in the world!”

“Jack!” she gasped as he wiped his mouth and then stood up, pulling her after him. “I didn’t get to eat.”

“I know you—you snack. Besides, I have something else for you to put in your mouth, and I know you have my dessert, too.”

Frankie found herself lying on her side.

Her slightly thicker, fuller frame lying in reverse of the lanky blonde with his lean body and ravenous mouth.

With a breathless laugh, she switched from lying on her side and ended up over top of him, Jack’s long, slender cock now pillowed in her hungry mouth.

With a groan of pure lust, he slapped his hands down onto her thighs and pulled her pussy over his face. “Why do you always smell so good?” he sighed, before burying his mouth in her pouting pink folds, nibbling, lapping, and sucking.

She didn't answer. Didn't have to, just arched her neck as his tongue sped up her journey to orgasm. Her head bowed, gulping down on his cock while one of her fists closed around the base.

"So wet for me. Juicier than a mango. Or a ripe peach." Jack's kneading hands left her thighs and concentrated on her bottom, spreading her cheeks and spreading her juices up over her tight anus, pressing in with his thumb.

For a moment, she forgot how to move her head, how to breathe or talk, just frozen in hungry sensation while her husband devoured her.

Not every woman is so lucky to have a husband this attentive, said a little voice that made its way through the haze, fighting to the front of her brain, over the sensation of her hips grinding against Jack's face.

"I want you. Need you in me," Frankie demanded, fist curling more tightly around his cock as her head dipped to the side to nip at his thighs, then pressed kisses on the taut, dark pink sack beneath his cock.

Another swirl of bodies, another plundering kiss, this time with her pussy landing firmly on Jack's cock as she straddled his waist, her supple spine bending so her lips fused with his, tasting her own excitement on his tongue.

"Ahhh, fuck, Frankie, yes. You spoil me, sweetheart," Jack groaned and stretched under her, his hands massaging her breasts as she led their movements.

Her hips beat the time she wanted, rising and falling faster and faster until she was just a blur chasing her orgasm, her fingers frantic on her slippery clit while Jack's thumbs tweaked her nipples like a master harpist.

She felt him let go as she tipped over the pleasurable peak, her head thrown back as

her walls spasmed around him. His cum coated the insides of her wet, grasping tunnel as her thighs shivered and burned from staying on top and riding so fast. “Love you,” she whispered, easing off.

“Love you,” Jack panted, and grabbed for her wrist, pulling her back to rest against him.

“You know, I never forget how lucky I am to have you,” Frankie murmured as they lazily moved against each other, spooning with Jack’s taller body behind hers.

“I’m the lucky one,” Jack sighed, nuzzling her neck. “You put up with me.”

“Nothing to put up with. Just things to be happy about,” Frankie argued.

“I mean, you put up with me. All of me.”

Even looking away, her eyes closed and her limbs sleepy, she could tell when he changed. The long, lean body turned thicker, broader, and the chin that had been resting atop her head now pressed against her cheek. The voice changed, falling into a gravelly baritone.

“Eddie,” she hummed, turning her head for a kiss.

Her husband kissed her, now in his alternate form, but it wasn’t a lazy kiss. It was a demanding one. Her stomach prickled in excitement. Jack seemed to revel in her taking control, being on top, but Eddie delighted in taking charge, giving her “bad girl” past an outlet.

“I gotta get up early. Need some sleep... But not after that little appetizer,” Eddie teased, hands sliding firmly over her ass and then nestling between her thighs. “Such a wet mess you left for me,” he rasped, biting down gently on her shoulder.

The prickle in her stomach spread, nipples that were still deliciously tender now starting to ache, and soft, relaxed muscles starting to pulse again.

“You like it when I’m extra wet and slippery,” Frankie purred.

“I do. Makes it really easy to do this.” Eddie rubbed the creamy cum slipping out of her pussy back into it as his fingers invaded, one, then two, then three, his thumb rolling her clit.

“My naughty little mitten,” he chuckled, starting to pump his fingers in and out of her more insistently.

“I could wear you like a glove, baby. I know you could take me with a little lube and a lot of time.”

Frankie nodded, breath coming in short pants.

Eddie’s third form could easily pick her up in one hand and use her like a sexy toy, his cock the size of the narrowest part of her wrist. “I don’t feel any claws,” she hinted, waiting for the familiar sensation of the little dark tips that accompanied what she lovingly referred to as “Hulked Out Husband.”

“I don’t think I’m worked up enough for him to come out and play.

But that’s okay. I can make you scream just the same, baby.

” Eddie dragged his fingers from her squeezing pussy, trailing backwards between her cheeks.

He rubbed their combined essences around her anus, laughing softly when he felt her pushing back into his touch, eager for penetration.

“I gotta hand it to Jack. He always leaves me the best parts.”

“What? You like my ass better than my pussy? I think I’m offended.”

“No, no. We both love every inch of you, all the holes, all the curvy bits,” Eddie nipped her neck playfully. “I mean that Jack knows just how to rev you up, but leaves the naughtier stuff for me.”

“He’s not all vanilla.”

“I know, baby, we’re the same person—sort of. But he doesn’t do this very often.”

With a sudden push, Frankie found herself facedown, ass up, cheeks spread while Eddie knelt on the bed behind her.

His thicker, shorter cock plunged into her pussy while two fingers pushed deep into her ass, not giving her much time to adjust. She let out a gasp of surprise at the twin stretch, a gasp that turned to a moan when his free hand descended with a smarting slap on the fleshiest part of her cheek. “Eddie!” she cried out.

“I’m going to need to hear that a lot more,” he instructed, another slap on her other cheek punctuating his words. “Just to make sure you can still tell who’s fucking this glorious ass and pussy.”

“I know who it is, I promise,” she moaned, arching into him like a cat eager for someone to stroke its spine.

“Who loves to fuck your pussy nice and hard?” he asked, this time dragging his short, blunt nails lightly down her back, making her spine sing.

“You!”

His fingers rammed into her stretched hole more deeply, faster, making her head spin.

“I didn’t catch the name. Who’s fucking both your holes, princess?”

“Eddie! Eddie Hyde!”

“And who already gave you a nice big load in your pretty little puss?”

“Jack!

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“And who’s the luckiest wife in the world and why?” He rocked forward, cock stuffing her to the hilt and fingers twitching inside of her, stroking the thin wall between orifices that made her feel like she was about to burst.

“I am, because I have endless two-for-one specials in the husband department,” she mewled, reaching back to rub her aching pussy.

“Good girl. Bad girl. Best girl.” Eddie praised in short huffs as he started rocking into her. “Get your toy, baby.”

Frankie strained and stretched forward, fingers barely closing on the nightstand’s top drawer and pulling out a thick silicone plug with a jewel-like base.

Eddie took it from her fingers and slotted it into her pussy as he withdrew, twirling the tapered cone inside of her to collect the torrents of natural lubricant she was producing. His fingers slid from her backdoor, and he pushed the plug from her pussy to her ass.

As her hole closed around the base, swallowing it up, she moaned. It fit her differently than his fingers, more solid, bulky, and didn’t give her any respite like his thrusting fingers did.

“So full?” he asked.

“So full,” Frankie moaned. “Ah!” She let out a sharp little gasp when Eddie flicked the jeweled top, making it bounce inside her tight passage.

“Want me to put my cock back in your pussy, baby? Want to be extra, extra full?” he asked, voice low and bruising.

But unlike with her abusive ex, Frankie had no fear, even though some called Eddie and Jack a literal monster, a mutant mess meant to instill fright. She could always say no. She could make the slightest hesitation, and her husband would move heaven and earth to protect her and Bella.

“I want to be stuffed ,” she begged with a naughty smile on her face.

“Oooh, like a turkey,” Eddie teased, sliding his thick cock back inside of her. “Ooh. Ohh, that’s my snug little temptress. You feel that, Frankie?”

She nodded, eyes rolling back as the added pressure of his cock seemed to short-circuit her brain.

Her hips bowed down and her knees spread as if she could escape the thick weight of the plug in her ass and his cock inside of her, an overload of sensation that she craved, even though it left her breathless and wrecked.

Eddie took her over that edge, not a graceful orgasmic peak like she’d found with Jack, but a “fucked out of my mind” wasteland where she was helpless against the pounding of his cock and the orgasms that he wrung from her.

Eddie’s hand came forward, wrapping around her throat as he pulled her back to his chest, spearing her pussy on him, pressing the plug in tighter. “Love you.” The hand owned her. Possessed her.

He owns all of me, and oh, God, it’s so wonderful to belong to him. “Love you,” she hissed through waves of pleasure and stretching, deep twinges as he pressed in, balls deep, the tip of his thick rod hitting her cervix.

“Stay on me. Stay on me right like this, Frankie. You know why?”

“So I can be so full?” she moaned.

“Rub your clit for me, pretty girl.”

The way he said anything to her right now... Her cheeks might as well be on fire. Her fingers stroked down and found her throbbing clit, circling it just how she liked.

“I’m in you deep, aren’t I?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Can’t go any deeper.”

His tip nudged her cervix again. It wasn’t painful this way, but it left a cramping twinge in her middle that played nicely with the contractions her pussy was already having as her orgasm built. “Can’t go any deeper,” she echoed, voice hazy.

“So I’m gonna come in you like this. Right here. Right here ,” his voice was choked, teeth gritting in pleasure, “where my cum is supposed to go.”

She was taking birth control pills and would be until she finished her degree. They’d decided. But it didn’t make it any less hot, the thought of his cum pumping directly into her womb. Possessing her more than he already did.

Owning her inside and out.

She pushed down and back, hard and sudden, meeting his thrust and hearing his harsh curse against her shoulder. Her walls clamped down as she rubbed herself to one last, thigh-shaking orgasm while speared on his cock, full in both holes.

“Frankie!” Her name popped from his lips as his cum erupted inside of her, a hot rush that sealed her in that dark, swirling orgasmic overload.

“My Eddie,” she returned.

“Hey, you’re supposed to stay asleep, princess.” Eddie’s voice was hushed.

“I smelled bacon.”

“Well, kiddo got up early. We’re having cartoons and breakfast bagels with bacon, egg, and cheese. Homemade by the Dadster.” Eddie pointed past the kitchen into the large open-plan living room where Bella was sitting at the coffee table in her pink pajamas, eyes wide as she watched animated antics.

Frankie rubbed Eddie’s back as she snuggled up behind him. “Got enough for three?”

“Always. Especially since I think you need the calories after last night, hot mama.” He smiled over his shoulder and put a bagel in the toaster. “Wanna smoothie with that?”

“Oh, sure. Is that the mango mocktail I made last night?” Frankie picked up the glass on the counter and sipped—and immediately put it down. “Edward Hyde!”

Eddie slipped the bottle of rum back into the high cabinet. “Mocktail, cocktail, tomay-to, tomah-to. You know how we like two-for-one specials in this house.”

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Ingredients:

? One to two cups crushed ice

? Whipped cream, shaved dark chocolate, additional chocolate syrup, and chocolate sprinkles (optional)

Method:

? Fill a blender with crushed ice. If you like your drink thicker, you will want to use more ice.

? Pour all ingredients except for whipped cream, additional chocolate syrup, shaved chocolate, and sprinkles into the blender.

? Blend on high until all ingredients form a frothy, chocoholic concoction.

? If you want to be fancy, take your tall, empty glass and squirt chocolate syrup in a swirl down the inside of the glass.

? Pour blended mixture into your tall glass and top with whipped cream, sprinkles, and shaved chocolate.

Serving suggestion: Share it with your lover for the start of a very happy hour.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Georgia and Douglas from The Orc's Second Shot at Love

“One year ago, I didn't get to properly enjoy Applefest with you.” I pout.

“Because of a wedding and a Highland Honeymoon,” Douglas agrees, bumping into me.

“What did you drink at the night market?” I ask.

“Hard cider.”

“From which booth?”

“Madge handed it to me.”

“Oh, sheesh. That's probably strong enough to knock out an elephant. Probably also has fertility-enhancing potions. The harvest, you know? The trees and land give birth to their bounty, right before winter kills everything off.”

“Morbid, yet poetic.” Douglas hiccups at me, but his eyes are sharp. “I'm not too tipsy to take advantage of that fertility potion, pet.”

“I'm just saying it might have something in it. Madge wouldn't go around bespelling people into pregnancy. Unless... Unless she knew how desperate a certain barista was to have a baby bump.”

There's a sudden growl that makes me throb, and I bolt up the stairs to our bedroom.

Call me old-fashioned, but I like sex even better when I'm married. Douglas Wickstaff is mine with a capital M. I'm not going to lose him unless God wrestles him away from me, and even then, I'll be hard on his heels.

Speaking of heels—I slowly twirl on mine as I strike a sultry pose, waiting for my kilted hottie to barge in. In honor of our anniversary, I chose to wear a simple white summer dress under a little pink jean jacket—one of his favorite outfits.

“Hey. Bring my bride back here.” Douglas prowls after me, sexy as sin with his shirt unbuttoned, revealing a chest that time and years of roaming the woods and hills have sculpted.

“Oh, I'm here.” I unbutton my dress slowly, never looking away.

I love the way his Adam's apple rises and falls as my white lace bra comes into view.

The dress falls to the floor and reveals the pretty pale blue thong I have on, complete with a lace butterfly appliqué across the front.

“Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. I was feeling... nostalgic,” I purr.

“You look stunning.” Douglas licks his lips and pushes one strong hand back through his dark black hair, streaked with silver

“So do you. Even more so now that you're mine,” I step out of my heels and let him catch me as I twirl into his arms.

“Funny. I was going to say the exact same thing.”

“Really?”

“Husband’s honor.”

“I love having an honorable husband,” I half-laugh, half-groan. His lips are moving over my neck, down the lacy cups that show a shadowed glimpse of my nipples, already hard and thick, begging for his touch.

“Well, I love having a wife. Not just any wife. You. This is... This year has been different. I didn’t know marriage could be so happy, and get happier and better each day.

” Douglas kisses me as if he can undo any words he stumbled over, but he doesn’t have to worry.

I know his marriage to his late wife grew cold and distant, and made him feel like a failure.

I know they eventually stopped being intimate and mostly stopped speaking.

I talk his green ears off. And as for intimacy...

“I love you from the top of your head to your cute toes. But this region in the middle,” Douglas unhooks my bra, and my breast falls into his mouth as he dips his head, “this region is by far the most delicious. From here—” His lips work down to my waist, “to here.” He playfully bites my inner thighs.

“These are perfect. That first night when we came home from our honeymoon, and you made us cocoa? And I put my head on your lap and we watched a movie? Do you remember that?”

“Vaguely? It was just another night. Low key.”

“Not to me. I got to put my head on them and look up at you, and I thought... ‘Dougie, ye we scunner, you’ve been blessed a thousand times over. Even a night at home with Georgia feels like winning a million pounds.’”

“I feel that way, too...”

I whimper as the bites work inward until they reach my full labia, pushing out the crotch of my panties.

The bulge of my clit and lips finds its way into his mouth.

As I moan, he slips the crotch of my panties aside to slide his tongue through my folds.

“I’m going to fall,” I warn him as his tongue starts lapping, making my knees go weak and my toes buzz.

“Then I’ll catch you.”

So he’s my feast. I lay next to her, my mouth latched over her clit as I rest on my elbows.

My sweet little wife writhes underneath me as she slides her open mouth all over the skin of my bare cock, licking around the tip, swirling her tongue over my swollen crown, and moaning when she swallows my pre-cum while she squeezes her first tight around my knot, mimicking the slick walls of her pussy.

It’s a miracle that I don’t pop like a hot chestnut.

I don’t know what I did to deserve this angel who’s a demon in bed.

The feel of her mouth wrapping around me while I'm lost in her soft, sweet pussy pushes me so close, so fast, but I feel like I could keep coming, maybe for hours.

There's a buzzing inside of me. Maybe it's the cider. Or the potion.

Georgia drags her teeth over the sensitive slit in my crown, and I see stars.

Maybe it's just my wife.

"Love, take it easy," I warn as she starts sliding all of my cock into her mouth, letting me tickle the back of her throat and then some. I try getting higher up on my knees, but my sweet little hellcat digs her claws into my ass and keeps me in place, moaning as she devours my cock.

Well. Return fire with fire. I start digging my fingers into her slick tunnel while I work her clit in my mouth, rolling it under my tongue, worrying it hard until I feel her pussy trying to suck my fingers clean off my hand. "Such a good wife," I moan. "Come on me, baby. Come on my fingers."

My cock jumps as she tries to talk around it, moaning and whimpering as her hips buck. I raise up out of sheer desperation, fighting her possessive hands. "I have to, or I'm going to come in your mouth," I half-whimper.

"That's fine! But not now, you're right." She struggles away, and we don't need to talk. We've got this. We've been good partners from the beginning.

She won't come on my hand, and I won't come in her mouth. Tonight, we're marking each other the old-fashioned way. Gotta put that potion to use.

His hot, hard cock slides deep, deep into my pussy as he holds my hips off the bed.

Kneeling between my thighs, Douglas throws his head back, looking like some primal ancient warrior.

He's a mass of sweat, muscles, and veins standing out in his neck as he hammers into me.

I don't have to do anything but enjoy the sensations.

I want to tell him how stunning he is. How lucky I am.

But I can't. My orgasm is stealing my words.

My pussy spasms, and I reach down to rub frantically at my clit.

I slide two fingers into my mouth and suck on them, aroused even more by the taste of our essences mingling.

Getting them wet, I slide them from my lips just as Douglas opens his eyes and catches me. He makes a strangled sound.

"Fuck. So hot."

"You, too."

We'll be eloquent later.

He speaks through clenched teeth, shoulders working, his fingers digging into my thighs. "So close."

"Then push your big knot in me. Pop my pussy that last little bit," I beg, rubbing myself harder, so wet that I know he'll slide right in—and the stretch will make the

river I'm housing into a waterfall.

Douglas obeys, throwing his weight forward and pushing in until we join with a slick pop that signals his knot has entered the arena, that he owns this pussy, every inch, every ounce.

He shudders and holds still as I milk him, edging myself and resisting the pleasure for a little longer, wanting to share the explosion with him.

"Come for me, baby. Come for me," I urge.

Like the beast he is, he slides one arm across his torso to keep holding both my legs up.

"Soon. I know you can go longer," he grunts.

Such a good hubby. Afraid of coming too quick, as if I couldn't ride what's left of his rigid cock for the next hour while he's knotted in me.

Secret weapon time. "I want your cum in me. I want to milk your cock and have something to show for it," I beg, sucking my fingers needily again, wanting something in my mouth while I look in his eyes and set him on fire.

"Temptress."

"Don't you want to see me coming on your knot?"

Little pink pussy wrapped around that big green candy apple?

"I lick my lips. "Give me all that cream filling, sweetie. And you know that when we're done, we'll share it."

” I suck my fingers again, reminding him that I have a weak spot for our essences mixed together, like the happily married little slut I am.

Douglas drops my legs and brings his chest flat to mine. Our mouths mate as my orgasm ripples into him, drawing his. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” he whispers with intensity that cuts through any little hint of tipsiness.

“Same,” I whisper back, biting his collarbone.

“Ungh! Georgia!” He bursts inside me, shaking from the force of the pent-up pleasure he’s finally releasing.

“Oh, baby. Oh, oh, baby!” I gasp, clutching him to my chest as the hot cream fills me, sending me into another tremor.

He’s mine. I’m his. I cover his cheek with kisses as he lies on top of me, eyes glazed in bliss.

“I love you.”

“Oh, thank God. Love you, too.”

We lay, locked together.

Can’t move.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?” Douglas sighs.

“No! Yes? Is that too lame to say after epic sex?” I whisper guiltily.

“I’m starved. And I have the faintest little headache. I’ll be having a word with

Madge,” Douglas groans, rolling to his back and pulling me with him.

I rock on him, so full, and yet the friction and fullness only make me want another orgasm. “I’ll tell you what, when we get unstuck, I’ll make you that coffee cocktail you like... and we can have pie. Georgie’s finest deep dish apple crumb.”

“Oooh, and the dirty talk just keeps coming,” he laughs, slapping one huge hand down on my ass, kneading it as I ride him with slow, shallow wriggles, unable to fully unlatch from his knot inside of me.

“Just keeps coming? I’m sorry, I think you’re the one with the dirty mouth, mister. And I absolutely love it .”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Genesis' Bacon and Cheddar Biscuits

Georgie's Apple-Cranberry Muffins

Douglas' Bannock Bread

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Ingredients:

?

Method:

Note: You must have some pre-cooked bacon on hand for this recipe. You can cook the bacon now and then let it cool and crumble it to use in the recipe, but if so, you won't need to preheat your oven until the bacon is ready.

? Preheat oven to 450?

? Line a baking tray with parchment paper.

? In a large bowl, whisk flour, salt, sugar, baking powder, and baking soda together. If you choose to use chives, add them in at this stage.

? Using your fingers or two forks, cut the butter into the flour mixture until you have a coarse, crumbly mixture.

? Add in the cheddar cheese and the crumbled bacon and stir until it is well dispersed throughout the mixture.

? Pour in the milk and mix until the dough comes together. Scoop the dough onto a lightly floured surface and gently work it together with your hands.

? Gently shape the dough into a large ball, knead for several minutes. Your hands will

be messy, but that's okay. You can apply some butter or oil to your palms to help reduce the amount of dough that sticks to you.

? Pat the dough down into a 1/2-inch thick disc.

? Using a round cookie cutter or the edge of a 2-3 inch glass, cut out circles and place them on the parchment-lined baking sheet.

? Turn, reform, and re-shape the dough as many times as needed until you have 8 large biscuits or 10 smaller ones.

? Bake for 16-20 minutes. If you like, brush with melted butter as the biscuits are finishing.

? Take out and serve warm with butter or sour cream.

? Store in an airtight container at room temperature for 2-3 days (unless your family is like my family, who will eat all of them immediately).

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Melinda and Genesis from Stone Cold Groom

“B aby? Do you know what I want you to do when I get home?” Melinda pulled herself away from me as the sky began to turn from lavender to orange.

“I hate that you have to work the day shift. This is going to throw off the whole week,” I groaned, gathering my wings into a cape-like shape behind my back.

“Stop being a grumpy gargoyle and listen. I have the day shift, and then I have Craig and Minerva’s engagement party in the hospital cafeteria. I’ll be home at seven.”

“I’ve known Craig for years. Shouldn’t his oldest friends be invited?” I grump. Yes. Still grumpy. I hate day shifts. I like Melinda and I to be night owls together, and Pine Ridge’s hospital has a really understanding scheduler—usually.

“It’s for hospital staff and work friends this time,” she soothes.

“There should be a clause about night-dwelling spouses or something.”

“Genesis Davidson! Listen to me before you go rock hard.”

We share a smirk. “You usually like that,” I tease.

She kisses me, and I wrap my tail around her leg. “What’d you want tonight?” I whisper between the sun’s first rays and her final kiss of the morning.

It’s faint, but I hear it as I slide into stone form.

I'm confused as heck, but I hear it.

"I 'm home, sweetie! I'm so stuffed from all the food at Minnie and Craig's party, but I think we can still do that thing I said."

"I sure hope so. I had to bug Georgie and Claire at home for help with this. It's not in any of the cookbooks we have. I had to make it up as I went, but... They taste delicious. I added chives."

Melinda looks puzzled as I pull out the white plate heaped high with my still-warm-from-the-oven offering.

"These look wonderful, babe! Mmm. They smell good, too. Heavenly."

She looks at me. Confused.

I stare back. Confused.

"Mel—"

"Genesis, did—"

"You go first," I offer, putting the plate down as she steps out of her pink sneakers and puts down the gigantic water bottle and tote bag that seem to be part of every nurse's uniform.

"These look wonderful. What are they? Why the baking binge?"

My jaw drops. "Why?? Because you asked me to! You said tonight you wanted to make bacon-cheddar biscuits!"

The confusion deepens instead of evaporating. “I did?”

“Yes! You kissed me goodbye, and you said, ‘Tonight, make bacon-cheddar biscuits.’ So I did! Like a good husband, who has no effing clue how to make bacon-cheddar biscuits. In the old days, I would have just killed you a boar or something,” I mumble, folding my arms in a huff.

Melinda stares. Swallows. Then the laughter bubbles out of her.

“I love you. And I love when we go to the Fenclan’s and eat venison and wild boar and have the big bonfire.

.. but I did not ask for bacon-cheddar biscuits.

I said, ‘Tonight, take care of business.’” Melinda waggles one strawberry-blonde eyebrow under her dark red curls, a bashfully seductive smile spreading across her face.

“Ohhh. Oh!” I leave the table and sweep Melinda into my arms. “ Business .”

“Mmhm.” Her voice is all high and breathy. It makes my talons itch and my tail twitch. “But those would be good... for after.”

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Ingredients:

Method:

- ? Prepare your muffin pan by greasing the muffin cups or inserting liners.
- ? Whisk flour, baking powder, salt, and cinnamon in a small bowl until combined.
- ? In a large bowl, whisk eggs, then add sugar. Whisk the mixture until pale yellow in color, then add melted butter, milk, and vanilla extract.
- ? Gradually add dry ingredients to wet ingredients while stirring with a wooden spoon.
- ? Stir gently with a wooden spoon until just a little flour shows.
- ? Gently fold in apples and cranberries.
- ? Spoon batter into prepared muffin cups. I use a standard ice cream scoop to get the muffin cups filled just right and evenly.
- ? Bake muffins for 25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the center of a muffin comes out clean.
- ? Serve with butter while warm for a heavenly treat with hints of fall.
- ? You can store these in an airtight container for 3-4 days, but they don't last that

long around my house.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Georgie and Claire From The Orc's Christmas Romance

I look fat at this angle.

Well, I am fat.

I tilt my chin, and the double chin is right there as I look at my reflection in the mirror. How can I have lost ten pounds and gained a chin? That is criminal.

I turn from the bedroom mirror and stop, frozen by the door across the hall from the expansion we've built. Under us is my bakery. Above, three more bedrooms, a bathroom, and a den. It's going to be the playroom, and those bedrooms—the one across from ours is going to be the nursery.

“Baby?”

I gasp in, and it hurts so much suddenly that I can't breathe. My husband is calling me baby, like he does half the time, and I can only think about a little bundle that I want to hold in my arms, one we haven't managed to make yet—and maybe we never will.

If we do... It'll never know my side of the family. Mom is gone. Dad won't speak to me. Disowned me. My brother thinks I'm a nutcase, and that means his wife and kids are off limits, too.

“Claire? I was going to see if — Honey!”

Georgie barrels at me. A huge green orc in a tank top that pulls taut over his abs and shows off his bulging biceps, and long, thundering legs in butt-hugging jeans... The sight would terrify any man. Women would just drool.

“I’m okay.”

“You do not sound okay. You sound miserable.” Georgie wraps his arms around me and lifts me up, peering into my face. “What’s wrong, sweetest sugar, sharpest blade?”

Ooh, that man. He can work words around like nobody’s business—and only for me. The rest of the world knows him for his grunts and scowls.

But he’ll make the best dad. His dad is the best. His mom. His sister. Her husband.

I burst into tears. “I bring nothing to the equation except a double chin!” I wail.

To his credit, Georgie doesn’t drop me for bursting into tears right in his face. “What? This little extra nibble spot? It’s so soft. And delicious.” He bites down softly on my neck, moving up my tear-stained cheeks, nuzzling me, and leaving little kisses.

“But I bring nothing!”

“Claire, what in the—”

“Our babies will never know my side of the family because my side of the family is made up of horrible, horrible, selfish people,” I sob.

“Renaldo is horrible people?” Georgie puts me down and crosses his arms.

Renaldo is the doorman who sort of adopted me when we moved into the swanky

penthouse in a swanky apartment building.

He's moved to Pine Ridge now, and he's engaged to be married to Madge, the intimidating little lady who runs the magic shop.

He has become the father that I never had and always needed, even though the short little Hispanic dude looks nothing like tall, icily handsome Luke Langdon—my biological dad, who tried to have me committed, stole my trust money, and was basically all around a shitty person.

I shouldn't want my kids around a man like that.

Ray will be warm and loving and a perfect grandpa.

That makes me cry harder for some stupid reason. Logic is being an asshole.

"I look nothing like my parents. They were so pretty. So thin. Nipped and tanned and tucked. Whatever, they were model-perfect."

"Where the fuck is this coming from?" Georgie growls out, voice coming from low in his chest.

"I saw the empty nursery, and maybe I'll never get pregnant, and even if I do, the baby will never know my parents.

Or my brother. Or his cousins! Or her cousins.

All I brought was Ray, and I love Pop, but I had so much more.

Like, cosmically speaking, I started out with more, and now I just have.

.. Ray. And that sounds so crappy, because Ray is hands down so much better than my biological father or my dumbass brother. ”

“Yes.” Georgie doesn’t mince words, which is one reason I love him, but also why he intimidates the hell out of people.

“Yes, you’re right, and I’m thankful for who you bring, babe.

Ray is now my father’s bestest best friend.

Without Ray, there would be no ‘bromance for the ages’ going on, and without Ray, Madge would never have fallen in love, and she wouldn’t be your mother-in-law-to-be.

She wouldn’t be in-laws with my mother, and you know she and my mother are best friends.

Sweetie, you are the knot that ties us all together. ”

I stare at him, because the word knot has a very different connotation in Orc couples, and even in the midst of whatever breakdown I’m having, my mind goes to the gutter.

Georgie stares sternly. “No gutter. You know what I mean. I’m happy for what you bring to my family, but do you know what?

You don’t have to bring a damn thing. I just wanted you.

And if you want a big family, we’ll find a way to make it happen.

Fostering, adopting, a dozen pregnancies—I don’t care, Claire.

And I also don't care if we have zero kids.

We can be that little old shriveled-up couple who has twelve yappy dogs and a house full of parakeets.

I don't care, because I married you. Not your family.

I love you. You." He cups my face and brings his forehead to rest on mine.

"Life can change so fast. I could wake up tomorrow, and my parents could be gone. Georgia and Douglas could move away. But you and me... We get to spend this life and eternity together."

"Just me?" I sniffle. "Is enough?"

"Beyond enough."

"I feel better." I do. I'm still feeling a little woozy and shaken up for no apparent reason, but I'm better than I was.

"You are going to get on the couch, and I'm making you a new recipe I want to try. Apple-cranberry muffins. Extra streusel and whipped cinnamon butter."

"Mmm. That's good comfort food. All of your food is comfort food."

"That's because I'm your comforter—and you're mine. I really don't—"

"Wait, honey. Pop is calling." I wipe away tears and smile up at Georgie as he tucks me in with a fleece blanket.

"Because he's amazing. He's family," Georgie says with a glare, crossing his arms,

daring me to argue.

I won't. I believe him—when I'm not having some stupid hormonal existential crisis.

“Hi!”

“Mi Vida ! Claire, can you and Georgie come to dinner on Tuesday? Taco Tuesday, family style?”

“Family style?” I squeak.

“Of course! Madge will be there.” Ray's voice goes all soft and dreamy. “You know, she is such a powerful woman—”

“I'll say,” I mumble, because Madge is not only a powerful witch, but she owns a magic store, rarely smiles, and has an iron gray pixie cut. She looks like someone shrunk a drill sergeant, gave him arcane lore, eyeliner, and fierce choices in purple clothes and dark red lipstick.

“And for all that—she is so scared to get married and be your ‘step-mother’ and perhaps an abuela. She worries that you will think she is too intimidating.”

“What? I love Madge! She is intimidating, in the best possible way.” I wipe away tears (yes, more) because I suddenly remember how she and Georgie's mother were with me as I prepared to walk down the aisle, how they mothered me, and comforted me, and...

And made me not feel alone.

“Tell her she's not alone, Pop. She's going to make this family feel so real. It's gonna be so nice that our kids have two sets of grandparents right in the same town.”

“That’s what I said!” Pop cries. “Emotions are funny things. Sometimes, they are like angry, hungry kittens. You just have to feed them and scratch them just right, right, Cupcake?”

“Right, Pop.”

“I’m feeding her right now. Apple-cranberry muffins will be ready in an hour. Do you and Madge want to come over and play Scrabble?” Georgie shouts from the kitchen.

“Madge will have to come over after eight—the shop is open until then. But I will be there in an hour. Are Ian and Farrah coming?”

Georgie pokes his head in.

“He says, are Ian and Farrah coming?”

“That’s up to you, babe. You want the house to be full of family?”

Funny how I can feel so alone one minute and so loved and surrounded by support the next. Some women hate their in-laws. My in-laws adore me, and it is so mutual. Farrah Fenclan is stunning and willowy, with silvery blonde hair, and yet she never makes me feel like some outcast, some ugly mistake.

“I’ll ask them, Pop.”

“It’s okay if they can’t. I was just hoping to beat Ian.”

I laugh. “I’ll text them.”

“Can I bring anything?”

“Just yourself. You are enough.”

Georgie smiles at me, a mixing bowl cradled in one arm. “That’s my girl,” he mouths.

I beam back. That’s right. I am.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup buttermilk

1/2 About a tablespoon of butter (for cooking)

1/2 Additional flour for surfaces and kneading.

Method:

1/2 Finely grind the oatmeal in a food processor or blender, and then transfer to a medium-sized mixing bowl.

1/2 In the bowl with the oats, whisk in the flour, baking soda, and salt.

1/2 Mix in the buttermilk until a dough is formed. The dough will be thick and sticky.

1/2 Turn the dough out onto a floured surface.

1/2 Knead two or three times to bring the dough together into a smooth ball, then shape into an eight-inch disc.

1/2 Heat a skillet over low heat. Add the butter to the skillet and let it melt and start to sizzle.

? Place the dough disc in the skillet.

? Cook the bannock until nicely browned (between 10-15 minutes), then flip to the other side and cook for another 10 minutes or so.

? Traditionally, the bannock is best served still warm and cut into wedges. In my opinion, you need blackberry or strawberry jam and fresh whipped butter. (My editor says you need molasses and whipped butter, so there's that.)

Eat with one Orc or several hungry friends. In the unlikely event there are leftovers, you can store them in an airtight container for about three days at room temperature.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Douglas and Georgia from The Orc's Second Shot at Love

The picnic takes place on a sunny patch near the cabin, Georgia leaning on one hip while she eats, showing off her long, toned legs, enslaving me further with every casual caress of her hand on my arm or leg.

She's tucked away two pasties and is working on her third . My stomach flip-flops.

She hasn't touched the bannock. What if she doesn't? What if that's not proper picnic lunch food? What if she's full?

I swallow hard, fighting to get the lump of deviled egg down my suddenly sawdust-coated throat.

What if she only wants a sliver of it? It's not exactly sweet. Why didn't I bake a proper cake?

Because I can't bake!

Why didn't I learn to bake?!

"Babe? You don't look so good." Georgia rises to her knees and hands me a water bottle.

I swallow it sloppily, water splashing over my chin and front. I pull the plastic bottle away and snag it hard across one tusk, sending more water cascading down my thin white shirt.

“Bloody hell!”

“Ooh.” Georgia makes a breathless noise, even as she rushes to hand me napkins. “Do you realize how hot you look in a wet t-shirt, Doug? I thought that was strictly for girls, but I was wrong.”

“Minx.”

“I prefer vixen.” She rubs her nose to mine.

“Your chin fits right between my tusks,” I marvel, not for the first time.

“I know. I’m way smaller than you.”

Wet and all, she presses to me, stroking my damp face. “You’re the perfect fit for me,” I whisper. I swallow again, thumb stroking over her smooth peach cheek, so fair and so different from my green skin, so different from Nicola’s, too.

“You are the most beautiful to me.” I pull her hand into mine and capture her fingers, netting each one between my own so I can kiss the tiny hills of her knuckles, dwarfed by the mountains of mine.

“And you are the most handsome to me. The second I saw you—you took my breath away. Like, literally, because I had a cookie in my mouth, and I gasped when I saw you. Sucked that thing down my windpipe.” She groans against my shoulder for a moment. “So unsexy.”

“On the contrary, I thought it was highly seductive.”

More laughing, more nuzzling. More marveling at how she fits against me, under me, and with me in all ways.

“You are my first love,” I murmur.

Georgia’s eyes widen. “Me? I— No, I—”

“You are my first love ,” I repeat firmly. “My first. My only . I have loved and cared for others. I have never been in love with another. You are what they mean when they say ‘true love.’”

“And you are mine, Douglas. Honestly.” Her sweet blue eyes overflow. “I don’t know why I’m crying. No, I do. Because I’m really happy,” she whispers.

My small and gentle smile broadens. “You know, my grandmother’s ring is at home in my chest of drawers. Waiting for my bride.”

Her breath catches, and her eyes widen even more. “Oh, honey, I—”

“It wouldn’t fit you, Georgia. And the thing is.

.. I always felt some strange nagging guilt that I didn’t propose to Nicola with it.

And lately, I’ve been looking at it.” I sit up a little, and she flows with me, two currents in the same stream.

I reach for the bannock in its cheesecloth and set it out on the blanket.

“I’ve been having this feeling that it’s just not right. ”

“Oh.” Her face falls.

I’m not only all thumbs, I’m an arse as well. I hurry to save the smile I love. “I’ve never wanted to use that ring. You see why?” I lift her hand to my lips again. “My

mate's hand is far too small—but it fits just right in my grasp. The ring I never wanted to use was never meant to be used, love.”

Georgia nods, face unclouding, sunshine back in her gaze. “That’s so sweet. Do you want me to cut you a slice?” She reaches for the knife in the picnic basket.

“Aye.” I push out my plate, hoping my voice isn’t quivering. I’ve shoved the ring into the bottom of the bannock, dead center. “Long and thin, please, love? I like the middle. That’s the best bit.”

“Really? I like the way it gets crispy on the edges.” Georgia smiles and slices. “See? We’re perfect. You eat the soft middles. I’ll eat the hard parts.”

For a second, we try to be mature, and then we giggle like teenagers.

“I have one soft middle that I’ve very much missed eating,” I confess, hand on her thigh.

“And a hard bit I’ve been dying to wrap my lips around.” She presses the knife down with a grin and then frowns.

“What?”

“I think you’ve got a big clump of oats in the center, hon, it’s... It’s... Not oats?” Georgia puts my slice of bannock on a paper plate and then peers at the middle of the cake.

“Something the matter?”

“Sweetie... I think you baked a measuring spoon in the middle!” Georgia whispers, trying not to laugh.

“I didn’t!” I sit up in false shock. “Never!”

“I think so. Look at this, there’s something metal.” Georgia clicks the tip of the knife to the center of the cake, and sure enough, there’s a tiny metallic sound.

I groan. “Promise you won’t tell your brother.”

“I’ll never tell. I’m sure he’s done something similar at one point. Probably not lately.”

“I suppose you don’t want any now?” I prod.

My heart has stopped beating evenly. It’s now tap dancing like a drunken spider. If she doesn’t realize it’s a ring soon, I’m going to rip the bannock in half and show her.

Not elegant, but it’ll get the message across...

“No, baby! I still want some! Especially with that blackberry jam. I’d eat anything with blackberry jam. In fact...” Her eyes glint with wickedness and lust. “I wonder how it’d taste on you?”

“Eat up your lunch like a good girl, and we’ll find out.”

Georgia slices again and again. The fork clinks.

You can’t cut a pearl with a bread knife, can you?

“I’ll just get that spoon out of here,” she stage whispers, fingers pushing at the bottom of the cake.

I just nod. It’s all I can manage.

Georgia's face changes from amusement to consternation, then, finally, to awe as she pulls out the circle of gold with its beautiful pearl and halo of diamonds. Crumbs cling to it, but I deftly grab her wrist and blow them off as she continues to stare, open-mouthed.

“What? What is this?” she whispers at last.

“You are my first love. My only love. My true love. I have waited half my life to find you, Georgia Fenclan. Will you be my bride? My mate and my wife, mother of my bairns, and heart of my home for the rest of our lives?”

My talkative Georgia... She's suddenly mute, tears coursing over her cheeks as she nods. She doesn't stop nodding until I pull her into my arms, kissing her cheeks and her lips, wiping away the tears that fall faster than I can catch them.

“Georgia?”

He asked me.

Now.

So soon. Probably too soon for his cautious nature and all he's gone through.

But he means it. He means it.

He's mine.

When he kisses me, his lips give me back my voice. “My love. My husband and mate. All the things and all the people—you are everything to me, Douglas. Yes, I'll be your wife and mate. Bride. Lover. Everything.” I let him slip the ring on my finger, my hands and voice shaking in unison.

“Thank you.” His sigh is so deep and heartfelt. “I know it probably can’t be this year that we’ll wed, but thank you a million times for letting me show the world you’re waiting for me.”

“What? Why can’t we marry this summer? I’d marry you tomorrow, silly.” I stroke his face, the gorgeous creamy pearl and shining diamonds resting on his green skin as I cup his cheek.

“Well... Ye’ll want a big wedding. You deserve one.

You’re the heart and soul of the town, everyone’s friend, the smiling face they see in the morning or at lunch.

You deserve a big bash. And your family just came over from Scotland a few weeks ago.

We’d have to ask them to come again so soon. ..” He trails off.

He has valid points. My future husband (eee!) is smart.

But he doesn’t understand everything about me just yet.

“My whole life has been full of parties and people. You’re right. I’ll always be in the public eye, and I like it there. We can invite all the people who matter to us whenever we want to get married, sweetheart, but let me tell you something.”

“What?”

“The wedding is only one day, not my whole life. On our wedding day, I only care if you’re there with me. That’s a day for me and you. Everyone else is extra.”

“You wouldn’t be sad if it was smaller?” Douglas licks his lips. “And sooner?”

“I’d say let’s get married tomorrow—but I want to enjoy being engaged for a few weeks at least.” I lean on Douglas, and he goes down on the blanket. I sprawl on his chest. “So, I’m a little bit of a social butterfly, hm?”

“A beautiful one, indeed.”

“Well, I’ve been waiting my whole life to have someone to cocoon up with. My other half.” I bend my head and plant a lingering kiss on his lips. I feel his erection stirring against my middle, and I instantly feel an answering throb inside.

“Pinch me?” Douglas whispers, looking up at me with dreamy eyes, his arms stretching back and folding behind his head.

I lightly dig my finger into his cock where it’s covered by his kilt. “I have better ways to convince us both that we’re not dreaming.”

Douglas sighs. “Mm. Come here, darling bride.”

“I’ve never made love as an engaged person,” I whisper against his mouth as we roll to our sides.

“Hmm. Get used to it. It’s essential practice for making love as a married person.”

“I didn’t think you could do it,” I sigh between kisses.

“Hm? Didn’t think I’d get up the courage to ask you?” Douglas asks, the faintest note of injury in his voice.

“No! I didn’t think you could top the last picnic you took me on, but...” I raise my

hand above my head and let the afternoon sun catch the jewels. Reflections sparkle down on us.

Magical.

Love is magical.

Douglas is magical, and I know he'll never believe it, but he doesn't have to. I believe it enough for both of us.

"But you did it, sweetie." I beam at him. "You just keep making things better."

I love the way he looks at me, eyes full of heat, but also so sincere. It's a quiet, deep kind of heat, an intensity that I can tell will last a lifetime.

"Aye—because everything is better with you."

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ray's Taco Tuesday Taco Bake

Milo's Barley and Asparagus Risotto

Calder's Sweet and Savory Shrimp

Lennox's Vegetarian Lasagna

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

? Cooking spray or olive oil

? ??? cup diced onion

? ??? cup of fresh diced tomatoes (not canned)

? ??? cup pico de gallo salsa

? 2 tablespoons chopped olives, or to taste (optional)

Method:

? Preheat oven to 350°F.

? Spray a 9x13-inch baking dish with cooking spray or olive oil.

? Brown the ground beef in a large skillet over medium heat until browned through. Break into crumbles with a spatula.

? Add diced onion and cook until soft and translucent, about 5 minutes more.

? Mix water and taco seasoning into beef mixture and simmer until mixture is thickened and water is absorbed.

? Line the prepared baking dish with tortillas until the bottom is covered.

? Top with 1/2 of the ground beef mixture.

? Spoon 1/2 of the corn and tomatoes over the meat layer in the pan.

? Top with 1/3 of the Cheddar cheese in an even layer.

? Crush tortilla chips over the cheese layer.

? Repeat the layers a second time.

? The top layer should now be covered with Cheddar cheese. Spoon the salsa over this layer until it forms a fairly even coating. Top with olives (optional).

? Bake fifteen to twenty minutes until heated through and cheese is melted.

? Remove and serve while hot and ooey-gooey.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Madge, Renaldo, Georgie, and Claire, from The Orc's Christmas Romance (and a lot of other books, too)

“Mi amore , you just sit there. Have your wine. Let me look at you.”

Renaldo is the only man that I've ever loved in my life.

More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that Ray is the only man who has ever loved me.

Oh, when I was young and cute, and less afraid of pissing people off, there were boys who came around.

They wanted something, something I might not have minded giving, but there was never love.

Love potions never work, by the way. Take it from a witch. You basically have a mental delusion potion, because true love can't happen because of herbs in a bottle.

True love means they love you with gray hair and hammertoes. Or a mouth that isn't prone to smiling. True love means they see how beautiful you are when you can't see it.

It means this sexy, short stud muffin, who must be five foot six, seems like Fabio in a loincloth to this gray-haired “spinster” wicked witch who is barely scraping five foot three.

“I’m nervous.”

True love means you can say that shit, too.

“Why, mi amore ? I have made this recipe for you a dozen times, and you always like it.” Ray hurries to me and kisses my cheek while topping up my glass.

“What if I... What if I can’t do this thing? Where I’m someone’s wife and stepmother? Grandmother? Oh, God, mother-in-law !” I put my hands over my eyes. Maybe if I hide, the future won’t see me.

Ray just laughs. “Can’t do this? Loca . You can do anything you want. I believe that you could fly me to the moon on the back of your broom, if you wanted. Hmm? Or maybe I would be turned into a toad? I would still hop around after you all day. And I would croak— ‘ Mi vida . Mi amore .’”

I snort-laugh at the idea of a lovesick toad following me around the magic shop. “Those are stereotypes,” I try to sound stern.

And for some reason, some very annoying reason, Ray isn’t ever afraid of the steel wool personality I project. It’s like he weaves right through the tangly little prickles and sees that there is someone sweet underneath, carefully hidden, revealed only as needed.

“Exactly! Madge, what is your idea of what a wife and mother should be?” he challenges, pulling on oven mitts adorned with the phrase, “Quit your bitchin’ or exit my kitchen!”

“Someone... motherly. Younger? Sweeter?”

“Stereotypes,” he says, pulling the most delectably cheesy, ooey-gooney pan of his

famous taco bake out of the oven.

“No fair using my own weapons against me.”

“You like that I play dirty. And I like that about you, too. What is a wife? A wife for me is not some young, bubbly, innocent thing. She is the woman who pulls me under a tree on the night of the full moon, the one who makes love like a wildcat in the fresh snow. In public.” He closes his eyes, leans against the fridge, and lets out a lusty groan.

“No one was watching,” I say, blushing as I remember the first night we made love, the winter solstice when Georgie and Claire got engaged.

“You would not have cared if they were. You would have told them to leave, or you would have flayed them with a look. And that is the woman I would want for my wife and the mother of my child. Strong! Brave! Sexy. Okay, that last bit is just for me.” He winks.

“But—”

“I am serious. My Claire has had nothing but bullies and sadness until she came to this town. Her mother did not even show her affection for most of her life—and Mrs. Langdon died right when she had finally realized the error of her ways. Claire’s heart is.

.. What’s the right word... It’s a morning glory.

It will wilt and close up tight if someone hurts it again.

You won’t hurt her. You will be like a mother bear defending her cub.

And ooooh.” He places the pan on the table and swoons, his head back against my china cabinet—which holds no china, but seventy-three crystals, several useful bones, a lot of herbs in cute sachets (I’m a witch, not tasteless), and a whole bunch of ceremonial goblets, mortars, and pestles.

“Can I help it if I am someone who sees all the beauty behind the claws? The glory in the powers you possess?”

That’s part of it. I’m so ‘powerful’ and so ‘fierce’ (no one shoplifts from my shop, not after the great College Mischief Night Transmogrification of 1998), and I feel stupid for being afraid of what is supposed to come naturally. Love. Femininity. Maternal crap.

“You could always give me back my ring,” Ray says in a voice that is far too smug for my liking. “Tell me you can’t be the wife and stepmother, even though everyone loves you—once they are done being terrified of you. Run away; hide behind your cauldron.”

“Renaldo...” I warn, rising and putting down my wine glass. “Stereotypes!”

“But, mi amore , you have a cauldron! And you are far, far too brave to run when you are scared. Although if you must run, run to my arms.” Ray comes up to me, ignoring the glare I’m giving him, and kisses my neck, wrapping his strong, stocky frame around mine.

His voice turns husky, pressing into my ear.

“Or run, so I can catch you. Perhaps this time, I can press you up against a tree? Hmm?”

Oh my God. This man. I whirl around to kiss him, pushing him backwards into the

screened-in back porch. “Against the workbench. It’s sturdy,” I gasp, pulling his belt loops.

“They’re supposed to be here in—never mind. The things you do to me, it’ll be fast.”

“Not too fast,” I warn, but I feel silly for even saying it. If there is one thing this man knows how to do, it is how to please me.

He pleases me in every possible way, physically, emotionally, with his words, his support, his help in the shop, his help in the kitchen.

“I love you. Of course I’ll marry you. I just..

. I might not be good at it,” I confess as he pushes my hips up onto the workbench that’s covered in screwdrivers and scattered seed packets.

“But you already are.”

“Ray and I are going to have a small ceremony.” I put down my fork and wipe my mouth, thankful that Georgie and Claire were a little late, and that Ray’s food only gets better the longer it sits and absorbs all the spices.

“Cake on the house,” Claire says at once.

“Everything on the house. Or at cost. We do for family,” Georgie says, like the good kid he is.

Well... I never thought I’d have kids at my advanced age,” I chuckle at myself, and Ray is quick to make a scolding cluck.

“As if someone like my Madge ages. You are timeless, diosa . Beauty has no age.”

“Listen to him.” Georgie dares to sound firm with me, the little boy—okay, he’s thirty-something now, and easily seven feet tall, but I remember him when he was still a toddler.

“You’re going to make a wonderful mom,” Claire whispers, looking at me wide-eyed.

Funny.

I’ve never looked at Ray’s adopted daughter for too long. She just became part of the fabric of the town, a person who slotted in easily, seamlessly, like she belonged with Georgie and had always been there.

When she looks at me, I see fear and hope in her eyes—like we could make this work.

The “wicked witch,” too old to be someone’s lover, too old to have a new family.

The “ugly duckling” child, grown up into an insecure woman.

Ray’s words are wonderful and bolstering, Georgie’s firmness is kindly meant, but Claire’s anxious, helpless, but still hopeful eyes are what get me.

“Well. Cake and catering aside, what’s really important are the people who support you on that day.

Claire, will you be my matron of honor? Georgie, I know that your father will be Ray’s best man, but as my son-in-law,” I swallow as the word sticks in my throat, “perhaps you could walk me down the aisle?”

“Really?” Claire squeaks. “Mom—I mean, Madge, I would love to!” She hesitates,

then rises and throws herself into my arms as I open them.

She's so soft. Short and soft, as I am stringy and hard.

But I tell myself she could have been mine. The strength she carries, however she carries it, the height... The hope.

"Mom is fine," I whisper, and I feel her nod against my shoulder as she hugs me tighter.

Maybe I can do this family-thing after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

? Chopped basil for garnish

? salt and pepper

Method:

? Pour the chicken stock into a saucepan and bring to a boil.

? Reduce to a simmer and cover to keep the stock warm.

? Heat up another pot over medium heat, then add the olive oil.

? Add the minced shallots to the pot and cook until softened and fragrant.

? Add the barley and toast for 2 minutes, stirring frequently. Do not leave during this stage, or you'll end up with burnt barley.

? Add the white wine and cook for two or three minutes, until the wine is mostly absorbed.

? Add the hot stock a little bit at a time, adding just enough to cover the surface of the barley. Stir the barley frequently. You can't rush making risotto, so be prepared for this to take a while.

? Once the liquid is absorbed, add more stock. Repeat this process for the next 25

minutes or so, until the barley is al dente.

? When you are about fifteen minutes into cooking the risotto, wash the asparagus and snap the stalks so the soft tips of the asparagus are about two inches in length.

? Boil the asparagus in salted water for two to three minutes. Remove from heat.

? By this time, the barley should be al dente. Remove from the heat.

? Gently stir parmesan, asparagus, and herbs into the risotto. Serve while warm and creamy.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Milo and Libby from The Minotaur's Valentine

“It's a boy. I know it's a boy.”

“We have the ultrasound tech's picture and notes. I know you wanted it to be a surprise, but we could open the—”

Libby whips her coffee cup down and her work bag off, slamming both down on the kitchen island. “Touch that envelope before Saturday, and you're a dead minotaur. Doc already ordered the cake for the party, and your mother is running a betting pool with the girls at book club.”

“I'm just saying, we could find out if it makes you feel better.”

“Nothing will make me feel better,” Libby pouts at me.

“Honey, sit down and stop—”

“If it is a boy, it means that I'm going to be pregnant two extra weeks, which means I'm going to be pregnant for- ever .”

I swallow. Baby boy minotaurs do take longer to develop. Something about the bone density. Right now, my wife is 38 weeks pregnant, and she looks like she's been attacked by a beanbag chair. She's little. I'm not.

Baby seems to be taking after me.

“I can’t sit down because I can’t fit where I’m supposed to be sitting!” Libby curses like a sailor when she keeps trying to sit on the barstool next to our kitchen counter—and wobbling.

“Babe, lay on the couch. Put your feet up.”

“I can’t. If I do, my massive stomach will press on my aorta and kill me.” She glares at me—and notices the spatula in my hand. “Are you cooking?”

Now I’m worried that maybe the baby is taking blood flow from her brain.

The entire kitchen island is full—shallots, garlic, cream, knives, a huge wedge of parmesan.

.. But I don’t say that. I would like to live.

My wife is tiny, and I’m a minotaur with hooves like hubcaps and horns that could gore a telephone pole, but I know which one of us is truly dangerous.

It’s Libby. It’s always been Libby—and I’m honored, because you have to be truly badass to protect the badass.

“I’m cooking for you because I’m so lucky to have you and our baby,” I whisper, suddenly all choked up.

And Libby is immediately choked up right along with me. “I’m being so bitchy. I just hurt. My back is miserable, and I can’t get comfortable, and I can’t get full . I ate an entire box of crackers for lunch. What if I never lose this baby weight?”

I look at the much larger hips and bust that pregnancy has bestowed upon Libby, and I know I must tread very, very carefully. As I mentioned earlier, I would like to live.

“I would not mind that. I would enjoy that, but I don’t think that will happen,” I say in an even voice, trying not to stare at her glorious breasts, currently straining the purple scrubs she’s wearing.

“I’m making barley and asparagus risotto.

It’s extra filling. I promise.” I hope so.

It didn’t say that in the cookbook where I found it, but I’m making promises to the mother of my child here.

“I will put on extra, extra cheese if you want.” There. That should help.

“How long until dinner?”

“Twenty minutes, and I have to keep stirring this, or I’d come give you a foot rub. A back rub. I’d rub any part you want me to.”

If you thought that sounded pathetic, think again.

Libby’s face loses that strained look. Her shoulders ease, and she curls up in my arms as Freddy and Felix circle our ankles, tails happily high and curled at the tip.

“How about after dinner, we watch that Greek sitcom your father got me hooked on, eat all the ice cream in the house, and you rub my feet while I massage your tail.”

“You know what a tail massage does to me,” I whisper, putty in her little pale hands.

“Oh, I know. Believe me, I know. They say certain activities can help speed things up.”

“And you know, since this baby is fifty-percent human, fifty-percent taurosapien, he might not need the extra time to ‘bake.’”

“Maybe.” Libby smiles up at me. “I was wrong.”

A wise man would say something clever like, “Nonsense, my beautiful fertility goddess.” I ask, “About what?”

“I said nothing could make me feel better. But I was wrong. You always make me feel better, and even though I might fuss about aches and pains, there is nothing that makes me happier than thinking about how our little one is going to have the best dad in the world, and see a mom and dad who love each other. That’s something I didn’t have, you know? ”

I nod. “I’ll give them everything they could ever want, Lib. I promise.”

“If they take after their mom, all they’ll need is you.”

Sympathy hormones. They’re real. I wipe my eyes hurriedly. “I gotta stir the risotto. Pajama party dinner? Popcorn?”

I feel the baby try to punt Libby’s ribs into mine, and we both jump.

“Baby says yes,” she gasps.

“Baby and Mama get what they want.” I kiss her head and resume stirring as she slowly walks down the hall to our room.

“Risotto for three, coming up.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

? ??? teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional, adjust for heat)

? Salt and black pepper

? You can always jazz this up with sliced scallions, sriracha, lemon twists, etc. Those are optional.

Method:

? Begin making your rice now if you would like to have your shrimp over rice. I use jasmine rice. I recommend using about two cups of rice to four cups of salted water, with a dash of olive oil, and cooking it according to the package directions until tender.

? While rice is cooking, whisk the honey, soy sauce, garlic, and red pepper flakes (optional) in a small bowl until well combined. Set aside.

? Heat oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat.

? Lightly season the shrimp with salt and pepper.

? Add the shrimp to the skillet and cook on one side for about 2 minutes.

? Flip the shrimp over and cook on the other side for 1 minute.

? Add the sauce to the pan and toss to coat the shrimp. Cook until the shrimp are cooked through and the sauce is warm, 1 minute more.

? Serve immediately over rice with desired toppings.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Calder and Janet from Love at Country Pines Motel

“C omfy?”

I feel weightless in the water, but on land, I feel slightly helpless. More helpless right now, as I’m blindfolded, and I don’t know what Janet’s going to do next.

She strokes my tentacle tip in and out of her mouth as I lie next to the inground pool we installed, safe from prying eyes in the little white pool shed—which is frankly like our second bedroom.

I moan and hear a strange popping noise that I can’t identify. A bottle top? Lube?

My cock stiffens as I imagine my tentacles invading all of her holes, maybe two in one at once. Maybe that’s why there’s lube?

“You’ll like this game,” she purrs.

“I like every game with you,” I gasp as her hands slide up and down my bare chest. I rarely wear clothes. “What’s this one called?”

“Hide the honey.”

“Ooh. I know where that’s hiding. I reach out with my hands and connect with her bare hips, pulling her up to my face, tentacles gripping and pushing from behind when she resists with a laughing cry of,

“No, not that honey!”

But it’s too late. I have my prize, my sweet, succulent mouthful, my pink treasure hidden between brown thighs. Soft black curls brush my nose as one tentacle teases her backdoor, rubbing between her cheeks.

With a moan that makes me throb, Janet slowly runs her tongue over the tentacle she can get her hands on, her tongue dragging up between the rows of suckers that open and close, dying to kiss her back.

With a growl that surely ought to come from someone less soft and pretty, she sinks me into her mouth and sucks, letting me tickle the back of her throat.

I feel her swallowing me, and I almost come on the spot, lost in the way she devours me, sucks me down until we separate with a shared gasp.

“Fuck, Janet,” I hiss as I try to worm my way inside of her with another tentacle, mouth still busy at her slit, licking the current of sweet, sticky honey that comes from her center.

But she takes my delicious dinner away, and I hear the bottle popping noise again, this time followed by a sucking sound. A soft noise I can’t place.

“Okay. The honey is hidden, handsome. Your job is to find it— and you can’t use your eyes.”

I tap my blindfold. “I figured.”

“Can’t use your hands, either.”

“Tentacles?” I wriggle them at her.

Janet lies back against me. I can feel her sprawl with a giggle, soft, lush curves against mine. “Nope.”

“Even better.”

I roll over, tentacles slapping the elegant mix of concrete and tile we have surrounding the pool and inside the shed that rests on its boundary.

With a push, I’m up, over her. Janet’s legs part around my thick tentacles, as thick as muscular human legs at the base, tapering to a finger’s width at the tip.

Even without my sight, I can see her so clearly, warm and waiting with her eyes half-closed, a knowing, fearless, sensual goddess. Her hands find my shoulders as I drop to press my mouth to her neck, nostrils working, looking for hints of honey.

Mouth and tongue roving, I caress her throat while my hands stay planted on the ground and my tentacles wave anxiously, wanting to wrap around her legs, to pull her open and fill her with my cock.

“Calder,” her breathy moan almost makes me forget that I’m supposed to be playing this game of sweet hide and seek. I just want to be inside of her—now.

She pulls my long, dark hair into her fist, moving me away from her pulse point, leading me down.

With her arm raised, I catch a sudden sweet, honeyed hint, and I zero in, tongue flicking like a snake’s.

I work my way around one breast, sucking hard on the nipples until I feel her buck against me. Janet’s hand comes down and grips my cock, rubbing it against her opening as both of us moan.

“Once you find it, you can come in,” she hisses, hips grinding in a torturous circle.

Well, that’s an incentive I can’t resist.

My mouth moves to the other breast, tongue flying in circles, and then stroking down, working toward her navel. I smell the honey, close by, but I’ve passed it, I think.

Sneaky Janet.

I gently nudge my head against her full breasts, lifting them up, and the honey scent is stronger.

“Getting warmer,” she says, and I know that she wants me. She wouldn’t give hints otherwise. She drives a hard bargain, my Janet.

“You can’t resist your kraken.”

“You can’t resist me, either.”

“That’s true.” I break the rules, sort of, my hand grasping her breast, squeezing softly so that she moans, and I bow my head, tongue dancing on the underside of her second-softest place.

“Found it!” I taste the tiniest trace of honey, sweetened by her skin, mixed with the salt of her sweat in the humid night.

“Thank God!” Janet whimpers, sheathing me inside of her with one long, deep groan that does things to me.

My tentacles are tired of behaving, and they quickly wrap around her thighs, her waist, holding her to me as she takes every inch she should, and maybe one or two

she shouldn't.

I press into her hard nub and feel her tight opening stretching to the fullest around my base.

“Ohhhh, God.” Janet rocks on me, rolling me to my back so she can ride.

I don't mind. I slip my blindfold off and enjoy the view.

Wild hair falling from her bun, soft curves, shimmering skin, closed eyes, and opened lips...

“Next time, it'll be harder,” she warns between panting breaths, her hips working harder and faster.

“Easy, sweetie, your back,” I remind her, even though I don't want to.

“Into the pool,” she demands.

Water makes it easier for both of us to move.

We become one, weightless, as my tentacles walk-drag us from the concrete to the water.

High fences and the awnings we've erected shield us as Janet grips my shoulders and I grip her middle.

I lift, she sinks, each moment a rebellious dance that the water supports.

“I love you,” I whisper. “Thank you for thinking of fun games.”

Janet smiles into my eyes. “Plenty more where that came from—and I’ve got a whole bottle of honey, just opened it tonight.”

“Mmm. I can’t wait to play again.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

Roasted Vegetable Layer

? One small butternut squash (about two cups' worth) cut into two-inch chunks

? ??? cup of olive oil

? 3 garlic cloves, minced

? Salt and pepper to taste

? 1 tsp. Dried oregano

? 1 tsp. Dried basil

Spinach and Ricotta Layer

? 1 lb. frozen spinach, thawed

? 1 lb. ricotta

? 1 large egg

? 1 cup of shredded mozzarella or Italian blend cheese

? 1 garlic clove, minced

? 1 onion, diced

? ??? tsp salt

? ??? tsp ground pepper

? 1 tsp. Dried oregano

? 2 tsp. Dried basil

Sauce and Pasta

You can use your favorite homemade tomato-based sauce, store-bought sauce, and fresh or dried pasta, boiled and ready to layer. You will also need about 2-3 cups more of mozzarella or Italian cheese blends for the top. This is not part of the ricotta mix.

Method:

? If you're making your own sauce with your favorite recipe, you'll want to start that now and let it simmer while you start the roasted veggie layer.

? Preheat oven to 400°F.

? Place chopped squash, zucchini, and onion on a large baking sheet lined with parchment or foil for easy cleanup.

? Sprinkle minced garlic, herbs, and olive oil all over vegetables on the tray, drizzle with oil, sprinkle with garlic, salt, and pepper. Toss and mix with a rubber spatula so everything is evenly coated.

? Roast for 25 minutes, turning at 15 minutes. Cook until tender and lightly browned.

? Remove from oven and quickly scoot into a bowl. Don't leave it on the baking sheet as the veggies will stick when they cool. Set aside for layering.

While the veggies are roasting...

You're stirring your homemade sauce as it simmers and/or working on the spinach and ricotta layer! Also, start boiling your pasta noodles, especially if they are dried, not fresh.

? Take your thawed spinach and place into a colander. Put several paper towels on top of it and press, press, press until all the extra water is released from the spinach.

? Take your spinach, ricotta, mozzarella or cheese blend, herbs, salt, pepper, and egg, and mix together in a bowl until you have one beautiful, creamy spinach mixture.

?

It's time to assemble!

? Preheat the oven to 350°.

? Start with a layer of your tomato sauce on the bottom of a 9x13-inch pan.

? Place a layer of boiled lasagna noodles on the sauce.

? Layer roasted veggies in an even layer over the noodles.

? Spread creamy spinach ricotta mixture over the top of the roasted veggie layer.

? Layer another layer of lasagna noodles.

? Cover your lasagna noodles with tomato sauce.

? Repeat until the pan is full or you run out of ingredients: Pasta, sauce, roasted veggies, creamy spinach mixture, pasta, sauce, roasted veggies, creamy spinach mixture. I usually get three repetitions.

? Cover the final layer with pasta sauce and your two to three cups of shredded cheese.

? Cover with a loose tent of foil. Bake at 350° for 35 minutes.

? Remove foil and bake for a further 10 to 15 minutes until the cheese is melted and golden brown on top.

? Serve to people you love, because it's SO GOOD.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Cindy and Lennox from Velvet Wings

“ W hat. The. Actual. Fuck?” Cindy’s eyes are wide, and her voice is loud as she stops dead in the doorway of the townhouse we share.

“Nothing.” I guiltily hide the jammed vacuum behind my back. We’ve only been living together in our little townhouse for a month. We haven’t even set a date for the wedding.

I don’t know if that’s relevant, but I’d just feel better if I waited until after I was her official husband to break the vacuum.

She rolls her eyes. “I can see it’s something!” Cindy puts down her bag.

“I’ll fix it. Even though I’m not your husband yet, I know that husbands... fix things,” I trail off lamely.

Cindy’s smile is crooked as she hurries to my side. “Sure they do. Now, what’s broken?”

“The vacuum. It turns on, but it won’t suck up anything.”

“The canister is full.” Cindy frowns and looks at the carpet. “Of feathers, I’m guessing? Baby, wait, why are your feathers falling out?” she gasps, eyes horror-stricken.

“My setae ,” I correct, even though I know they look and feel like feathers.

Cindy kneels and clutches a handful of soft black feathers. “Honey, are you going bald? Is it because you’re living indoors?” Her voice is a mournful squeak.

I love this woman. I bend down and scoop her up. Even though she proudly declares herself an overpacked hourglass, her thick, plentiful curves are light in my arms.

“No. Feel?”

Cindy nuzzles her face into my cheek and runs one hand over my shoulder.

“Oh. Ohhh, my gosh. You’re so silky! Like, brand-new-baby-kitten silky!” She buries her face in the crook of my neck and sighs.

This broken vacuum thing isn’t turning out as bad as I thought.

My boyfriend feels amazing. If silk lingerie and a cashmere sweater mated—Lennox would still feel even softer and smoother. As I knead my hands all over his broad biceps, he purrs like an overgrown cat, and the sound waves rumble through my middle.

I just want to get naked and rub my body all over him.

As soon as I figure out why my sweetheart has black fluff all over the living room floor.

With an effort, I pull myself out of his embrace and put my hands firmly at my sides to stop from groping him. “Start with the feathers. Move to the vacuum.”

“Well, remember I lost a lot of ‘feathers’ at the end of May? Or was it June?”

I don’t, but I was starting a new job full-time, and Lennox was crazy busy because, as

the gardener/landscaper at White Pines, he was in full wedding season swing. Still, I think I would have noticed if he suddenly covered the floor with black fluff.

“As much as this?” I demand.

“Nooo, but a lot. I shed my heavier, fluffier setae from the winter in preparation for summer.”

“Okay, but—”

“Well, this is a little different. This is a full molt. All my setae will be pushed out, and my winter ‘coat’ will come in. Don’t worry. I’ll be thick and fluffy again in no time.”

“Good.” I love him thick and fluffy.

“Was there a bad cold snap?” Lennox asks. “As a gardener, I can usually predict, but—”

“We had a sudden cold front move in earlier today.” It’s early October in the mountains, but Pine Ridge moves into sweater weather in September, like a cultural thing. I guess, if you’re a “monster,” Halloween and Spooky Season get raised to an art form.

“You were gone when I woke up, and I started feeling off right away.” He rubs his hand sheepishly over his broad chest. “I called Wes and Gloria and told them I had to stay home, and I spent a lot of the day sleeping.”

“A mini-hibernation?”

“Mmhm. Oh. Don’t go into the bedroom.”

“Why?”

The sheets are covered in fluff. I have to—”

I dash past Lennox, pushing my way up the stairs. I know what he has to do. He has to shake out the sheets, launder them, vacuum more... But I don't want him to do any of that. I want to flop on the bed and roll around on them like an excitable puppy—or the sensory slut that I am.

God, if Lennox was in bed with me, letting me have every inch of his new, smooth, silky body while I was cushioned in a nest of his soft down...

“Is it gross to make love on your sheddings?” I ask, already stripping out of my black leggings and the new black tee with the Claire's Cakes logo on it.

“What? No! I mean... Not to me, I used to line my nest with my... Oh. Um. Hi.”

“Good. Not to me, either.” I toss the last piece of clothing in the hamper and shake out my hair, loving the way Lennox's mouth hangs open, even after months together.

I press my naked body to Lennox's for a minute before I buzz over to the bathroom. “I'm taking the world's quickest shower. Stay silky and think naughty thoughts.”

Think naughty thoughts, she says. My Cindy. Naked in my nest.

It's a cozy, naughty thought that takes away all the weird achey, tingly, prickly feelings I've had all day.

My seam aches as my hardness begins to uncurl and protrude, slick, thick, and gray, unspooling and looking to fill her.

Warm, wet Cindy, shivering in the October chill, in need of my wings and “fur” to warm her. Snuggled up to me. Pressed to me. Bodies becoming one.

In moments, I have the thick quilt of molted feathers made into a little dish for her to recline in.

“These are going to get stuck to you,” I call over my shoulder.

“They’ll brush off! And I’m drying off really good before I lie down!” she shouts back.

A little later, I hear the shower stop and the hairdryer blowing. I wince, the sound reminding me of the vacuum I damaged. “Cin, about the vacuum. How do you fix the canister?”

My wife-to-be emerges, hair floating free, curves barely concealed by a straining pink towel. “It just occurred to me that you probably never used a vacuum before, huh?”

“When you live outside in the woods, you don’t really need one. And the little cottage that came with the gardener’s job—well, you’ve seen it. A broom was good enough.”

“Well, you’ve done great learning the stove, microwave, and the washer and dryer.” Cindy slowly drops her towel, inch by inch. “The hair dryer. The blender. We’ll work on things like vacuum cleaners and dishwashers later.”

“I can use them, just not fix them,” I murmur, arms wrapping around her.

“How about if you use me? Fix me?” Cindy purrs, rubbing against me, soft middle pointedly brushing my protruding cock before her hands wrap around it, tugging me with her to the bed as if it’s a leash.

Well, I'd follow her anywhere, so that tracks...

"I was sorry I had to get up so early. I tried to wake you, but you were knocked out."

"Because I'm finally in a place I feel safe," I say, scooping her up by those luscious cheeks that far overflow my palms. "This nest, this home, this town, with you..." I wrap my wings over her, and our mouths meet, my long tongue curling possessively around hers.

I purr and she sighs, her fingers gently finding my antennae and caressing them, sending shivers running through me. My cock pulses, eager to be safe at home like the rest of me.

Soft, fluffy down under me, a mattress made of a thousand fine, soft feathers, all brushing my skin.

As I lay there, bare and soaking for him, Lennox takes one of the longest discarded feathers that he's shed and runs it up my inner thigh, then traces it over my outer labia.

I breathe out hard at the whispering tickle that turns to a desperate urge as he begins brushing it over my clit and daring to run it between my plump lips, the tip finding where I'm juiciest.

His hands join the action, rubbing up and down my legs, coming to tease my pussy.

His soft hands, coated in black setae, make it feel like he's wearing the silkiest gloves in existence.

One finger, thick as a human's cock, pushes inside of me, and I keen at once, full and unable to decide which sensation I like the best—the feel of his new, slick coat or the

thrusts that build inside of me.

My shy mothman plays my body like an expert musician now. One finger dances and curls inside while his tongue unspools and flicks my clit one second, then my nipples the next. I reach for his cock, far too long to fit inside of me as it lies, tapered and ridged, with a thick hump near the base.

“I wanna watch,” I whisper in my most sultry voice. I cup handfuls of feathers and let them fall on my body like black snow.

“You naughty thing.”

“I’ll be the naughtiest thing you can imagine,” I tempt, pussy clenching on his finger. I’m always hoping that he’ll surprise me with an outrageous suggestion, but he rarely does. It doesn’t matter, because whatever I say, he gladly follows.

He purrs and sinks beside me, finger still inside. “I want to watch, too.”

“Mm!” I gladly obey, teasing my nipples with one of the longer inky feathers, cupping and squeezing my breasts. My show can’t compare to Lennox’s, who takes his long, talented tongue and lets it graze over the tapered tip of his cock.

I sit up, losing his finger but gaining a spot by his thigh. “Keep licking the tip for me, baby,” I whisper, moving my mouth along the side of his cock.

I drag my tongue up and down, a bolt of pure heat going to my clenching pussy muscles when our tongues meet on his crown. “So hot watching you suck your cock for me,” I praise.

“So hot watching you play with those big soft breasts and that tight little pussy,” he whispers back, tongue retracting.

I lean forward, breasts smoothing up the sleek fur on his legs until my tits nestle on either side of his cock. His tongue lashes across my nipples one second, then fences with mine the next. It's a hot, primal mess of touching and sharing everything, and I want more.

Want him. Always want him.

So he always wants me, wants more of me. I cannot fathom it, even after months.

When she puts her mouth down to suck greedily on the swollen hump of my shaft where my beads of cum lie, I can't wait any longer.

I push her to the side, fluff and feathers cascading off the bed in a "whoosh" and landing all over my wings and back as I shove my aching cock into her, curling it to fit, ramming my hump against the mouth of her sex.

Cindy screams in pleasure and arches her hips upward to grind her clit to my hump—the hump that rapidly disappears as she brings herself to a swift orgasm after our foreplay.

Her tight, wet muscles clasp and shiver, pulling me deeper towards her womb.

The slit at the tip of my cock looks for the soft nub of her cervix as I feel the round pearls filling my shaft.

As the hump deflates, my shaft hardens, filled with treasures for my mate, seeds for her garden.

Cindy's legs curl around my thighs to keep me close as her hands dig into my back. Her wetness christens my freshly grown-in setae, marking me as hers.

“I will mark you as mine,” I growl, lost in sensations, lost in us.

“God, yes. Yes, I’m all yours. Always yours.”

Tension ebbs out of me as pleasure burns through.

My release is fast and hard, making us both cry out, making her bulge and squirm as I fill her and remain inside, giving the bubbles of cum no room to escape.

Eventually, her heat will melt them, and my essence will pour from her—a thick, opalescent tide.

“Love you,” I whisper.

“I love you, too.” Cindy writhes on me, and I know that she’ll come again soon.
“Wait... Isn’t it Wednesday?”

“Yes.”

“Honey! We have book club and canasta!” she yelps, starting to move her hips more insistently, chasing a second peak.

“Oh! We do!”

“I was supposed to come home from work, grab a snack, and change.”

“I know... But... Maybe we should stay in tonight.” I grab her wrists and keep them pinned to her sides so I can thrust into her more determinedly, helping her find the friction she craves.

“Ooh.” Her eyes light up. “I want to, but I said I’d be—”

I rub my cheek across her breast as I bow my spine.

“But I’m not feeling well. And I need you to take care of me,” I point out with a smirk.

Her eyes light up. “Does treatment consist of massaging you all over?”

“While naked. Yes. Absolutely.”

Cindy snorts out a laugh. “This is all your fault. You and your feathers.”

“You love them.”

“I do.”

I roll over, letting Cindy sit on top. My tongue flicks down to snap against her clit. She shudders and leans back, letting her back sink against my legs as they bend up to support her.

She looks like a queen, sated, and I’m her throne. I’m her lover.

Maybe I’m even her king.

“Feathers...” She sighs, and I begin to claim her again.

“ I . Can’t. Move. But I’m starving. I can’t cook. Should we order takeout? I know we’re on a budget...”

“I took care of that, and it was very budget-friendly. I felt bad for messing up the house, so I made that spinach ricotta lasagna you like? The one with the chunky roasted vegetables?”

“My favorite! See, you are totally hot hubby material.” She beams up at me, and then frowns. “How did you do that without getting feathers in it?”

“I wore an apron and my big trenchcoat.”

She sits up suddenly.

“What?”

“You in a trenchcoat?” Cindy fans herself.

“I thought you couldn’t move.” I cross my arms and give her an accusing glare.

“If I wear nothing but that little black lacey number and you wear that trenchcoat and call me a dame... You won’t be able to move, either. But after dinner?”

I have to work to keep my cock and tongue in place. “Okay. After dinner.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Lazarus' Chocolate Peanut Butter Crunch Stovetop Cookies

J.J.'s Hamantaschen

Ivy's Zeppole

Gloria's Lazy Daisy Cake

Georgie's Last-Minute Gingersnap Pumpkin Cheesecake

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Ingredients:

? Pinch of salt... If you are using standard peanut butter, this recipe may not need the salt. Taste as you go to see if it needs salt.

Method:

? Preheat the—Nope! Not this time. You will NOT need an oven, just the stovetop. Lazarus' crypt doesn't even have an oven, so there's that.

? Line two baking sheets with parchment paper or a silicone mat and set aside.

? In a large, heavy pot, combine the butter, sugar, milk, and cocoa powder.

? Stir over medium heat, and let the ingredients combine.

? When the mixture begins to bubble, let it simmer for only sixty seconds.

? Remove mixture from heat (don't just turn off the heat, you have to take it off the burner for this one, or you'll get a gritty, scorched chocolate mess.

? Stir in peanut butter, oats, vanilla, and salt if desired. Mix until combined.

? This mixture will quickly begin to set up. Drop scoops of about two tablespoons each onto the parchment paper.

? Let the cookies sit at room temperature until cool and firm. If you're impatient (like

me), you can put these in the fridge for fifteen minutes.

? Store in an airtight container in a cool, dry place or the fridge for best results.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Lazarus and Victoria from Secondhand Soul and Manny and Rhea from Monsters, Marriage, and Mistletoe

“Lazarus. Lazarus, come back here and listen like a man instead of a three-year-old.” Manny leaves the service office and chases me into the stockroom.

“Hey, there's only a little bit more than that on my clock, but I'm never going to get any older, am I?” I wear a bitter smile and come to a halt, not because my boss told me to, but because I'm where I want to be, in front of the oil filter shelves.

“Sweet Jesus, not this again. We play the hand we're dealt, kid. You got out of California and came here for a better life, and everyone has welcomed you with open arms. Rhea! Rhea, will you come talk to your son?”

I bite my tongue. Manny and Rhea adopted me on sight.

When I escaped from the demented mobster and his sorcery-happy henchmen, I never imagined I'd find anyone else in the world who looked like me, or who knew what it was like to be “made” instead of born.

Even if I wanted to snap, “You're not my parents!

” I would never do that to the beautiful “Bride of Frankenstein” rushing toward me.

“Sweetie, you shouldn't even try to have this conversation on an empty stomach.

Both of you get cranky when you're hungry.

” Rhea passes through the shop and straightens my wild white hair—which instantly resists her touch and goes right back to an untidy mess that makes me look like I’ve been electrified (shocker) and gives me Goblin King vibes.

“This isn’t about being hungry!” I call out, but Rhea’s already heading back to the tiny little galley kitchen behind the service office.

“What is it about?” Manny asks.

“I don’t want to be around all of those people. All of the fa-la-la-la-losers who get together with strangers and celebrate.”

“Once you meet people, they stop being strangers,” he points out.

“Ha ha, very profound.” But it is kinda true.

“Victoria’s going to be there.”

Victoria. Ooh. Images of the leggy brunette slide into place faster than they should. Dark hair. Dark soul. The only person in this town outside of Manny and Rhea who might even be considered my friend—when we’re speaking to each other.

“You save one little assassin from an open grave, and suddenly everyone thinks you’re pals,” I mutter, shelving oil filters.

The thing is, I was made to be an assassin myself, and I’m trying to be a nice guy—at least to Manny and Rhea, because I like them and they’re like family. And they gave me a job.

And I fucking caught their oven on fire on Thanksgiving morning.

“Victoria’s lonely. I don’t think she’d come except Rhea talked her into it.” Manny stands next to me, clipboard in hand.

“We have all of this organized in the system. Don’t try to fool me with the old clipboard routine.”

“You could at least try to bring something to the library Christmas party. Something that doesn’t require baking.”

“It’s a cookie exchange, isn’t it?” I growl.

“Well... Partially?”

“So I should have cookies. If I did this. Which I won’t. Because I just have one of those little two-burner flats in my place, and baking means ovens. Before you offer, no. I will not use your oven. Ever. Not after the great squash fire.”

Manny rolls his eyes. “If you’d stop living in that old crypt and get an apartment—”

“I’m a dead thing, Manny. I’m supposed to live in a crypt.”

Manny’s gray-green hand lands on my wrist. I was trained to attack at such a gesture. To rip that arm off.

But he’s just like me. Some people call us revenants. Made of scraps. I’m more of a chalky gray, or a clay gray. Maybe I was made of different kinds of scraps, or maybe the preservation techniques have gotten better since he was made.

You’re not my dad , I want to tell him. You couldn’t be.

But I don’t say that, because some empty part of me wishes he was.

“We live. We love. We work. We play. We eat. Some of us bake.” Manny smiles at me like he didn’t just see the flash of violence in my eyes. Maybe he did. The main thing is that he saw it vanish, too.

“Let’s put it another way. The sickos who made me and sent Victoria after me will try again one day.

I don’t want them to have an address to trace me to.

I shouldn’t even be working. Shouldn’t even be staying in one place.

” When I see the genuine worry in Manny’s eyes, I quickly add, “But I will. Because this is the best place in the world for a monster to have a good life, doing good things... like fixing cars.”

“And going to the Christmas party—even if they don’t bring anything. Just go. So Victoria won’t be lonely.”

Neither of us points out that his argument is dumb. It’ll be full of people. She shouldn’t be lonely if it’s full of people, and it shouldn’t matter if I go or not.

“I’ll go,” I mutter.

“Good. You know, I think she’s sweet on you.”

“What would make you think that the woman they sent to kill me likes me?” I demand.

Manny’s chuckle is so smug, it makes me want to pop him one with a lug wrench. Not like it would hurt him. Much.

“Well, son, mainly because she hasn’t killed you. Hasn’t even tried since the first time.”

“And that’s flirting?” I scoff, but in my mind I’m wondering if... Yeah. Yeah, for a woman like Victoria, maybe that’s flirting.

And me not actively hating her guts is flirting back.

I’ll go... and I’ll figure out how to make her some damn cookies, even if I have to cook them one at a time in my frying pan.

“I don’t know what she’d even like, Manny. If I make something, I’m not doing it for the rest of these happy, shiny people. I’m doing it for her.”

“Women seem to like chocolate. Chocolate with something. Chocolate and peanut butter, chocolate and raspberry, chocolate and mint, chocolate and caramel. In my experience, chocolate with mint is the biggest gamble, and chocolate and peanut butter is the sure thing.”

“How much time with women have you clocked, old man?” I tease, and then I feel like shit, because Manny and Rhea were literally made as a set, and they were separated for over a century before finding their way together again.

“Two years of married bliss, plus a couple weeks. But I’ve also been around happy couples and in the candy aisles enough to know what’s what.”

“You’re right. Well. Uh. I’m going to figure it out. Nothing like a problem to solve to keep me out of trouble.”

“You can go to the library and check out cookbooks.”

“Yep.”

When Manny leaves, I just pull out my phone and search recipes instead. Libraries are for old people.

I smirk, because if I said that to the hot Latina MILF who runs the library, she’d hit me with a reshelving cart.

“Cookies you don’t have to bake.”

Healthy raw crap with coconut oil and chopped cashews comes up.

Ughhhhhh.

“You’re a man of science.” Rhea comes out to the shop and puts a sandwich down in front of me.

My frown turns to a soft smile. “Thanks. I was going to go to the coffee shop.”

“You don’t have to. I cook for my boys. Well... I stick bread together.” She ruffles my white hair. I don’t know why my hair is white, and Manny’s is black, and hers is black with thick white streaks.

“For a man of science, there’s a lot of stuff I don’t know,” I grumble.

“Sometimes, it’s okay to be a man of faith. To take a leap. Or ask for a push in the right direction.”

I nod. The only thing that makes me a man of science was that I was put together by a crazy-ass doctor who also had fucked-up warlock sidekick on the payroll to bring his sewing projects to life.

“You know how you were made for Manny?” I say, and I wish I hadn’t. Rhea goes stiff right away. They don’t like to think about the man who made them.

“Yes.”

“Sorry, but... I killed my doctor before he could make another one of me... whatever I am. Maybe he was making me a bride. What if I’ll always be alone now?

I’ll never have—what you have.” I hurriedly take a bite of the BBLT (beef bacon, lettuce, and tomato) she made, hoping that if I swallow enough, this sudden lump in my throat will leave me.

“They were not making mates, honey. They were making death machines. You saved someone a life of pain and self-torment, and that means the woman for you is out there, somewhere. You know, in a way... wasn’t Victoria sent after you to ‘make you pay’ for going rogue and killing that mobster’s underlings? ”

“Pazcuso’s head doctor and his dark arts dude. Yep.”

“So in a way, she wasn’t made for you, but she was sent to you. You were still matched up, weren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Stubborn boy. Tell you what—I know a stovetop cookie recipe.”

“I want to figure this out by myself,” I lash out.

Rhea doesn’t even change expressions. “So, like I was saying, I have this recipe. I’ll give you the ingredients and lend you a pot and some cookie sheets. You figure it out. I’ll taste test.”

“I shouldn’t agree to that last part. They might be little lumps of burnt rubber.”

“Only if you cook the spatula, Laz. I’ll run home, get it together, and bring it here before work lets out for the day. You have a couple of days before the party to get it right.”

Three jars of peanut butter, seventy-six burns, and one new cookie sheet later...

“These are so good.” Manny shovels a second one into his mouth.

Rhea takes a third. “Delicious! Different than my recipe. I think you added more vanilla, and I love it.

“We need to stop eating these,” Manny groans, reaching for a third.

“I have seven batches. Some more awful than others,” I admit, chuckling as Rhea smacks her husband’s hand away as he goes in for a fourth.

There’s pride in my voice as I slip him another one. “They’re addictive as f—”

“Language!” Rhea hisses. “Stop that, Manny. We need to save some for—Victoria!”

“Well, maybe I made them with her in mind, but I guess I have to put it on the table for everyone to try,” I say.

“Um. Hi. I was wondering if you have wiper blades? It’s starting to sleet, and one of my blades is just dragging and streaking.”

I whirl so fast that cookies go skidding off the plate. Manny catches them like a star outfielder, and they disappear into his mouth. “Victoria!” I gasp.

“Told you,” Rhea mutters.

Victoria smiles. She’s in a slinky little black dress. Dressed up for this Christmas party.

“Uhhh... You know what, I’m sure I do. But I don’t want you two to be late for the Christmas party.” Manny takes his keys from his pocket and passes them to me. “Take my truck, and we’ll bring over Victoria’s car when I get the blade on. Won’t take more than fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” she protests softly, eyes wide.

“It’s no trouble, and it’s getting slick out there,” Rhea urges, her hand out for Victoria’s keys, which she slowly hands over. “You two run along. Lazarus, wrap those cookies up tight—after Victoria tries one. Victoria, Lazarus made these himself. They’re divine.”

“He can bake?” One smooth brow arches, and she tentatively walks over and takes one of the cookies.

I watch the way her mouth closes over the first bite and...

I swallow hard, pointed canines digging into the inside of my lip. Victoria was there during the great squash fire. In fact, I blame her for it—at least, partially.

“Amazing,” she praises, the tiniest smile on her lips, but real light in her eyes.

“He made them because he knew you would be there,” Manny says, because he has no idea how uncool and overeager that makes me sound.

But the tiny smile turns into a big one, and the little light becomes a high-intensity

beam. “You did?”

I wave the accomplishment away like it’s something I do every day. “Yeah, well, I didn’t want you to think that I’m a total screw up in the kitchen. I can cook, not just set an oven on fire.”

“I’d love the recipe for these.” She takes another one.

Another one! There’s a victory parade in my head. “No problem. I’ll write it down for you.”

“Hurry up, kids. Hungry people, eggnog, and mistletoe await,” Rhea urges.

I scowl. Victoria nods, expression flat—but she’s going to ride in Manny’s truck with me.

“Brings back memories,” she says.

I saved her life in this truck—not knowing she was there to end mine. “Seems like old times. Here, hold the cookies?”

She puts them on her lap after she climbs in, long, long legs crossed at the ankles.

I try to act like I’m just making sure the cookies are secure. “Got ‘em?”

“You’ll have to pry these things out of my cold, dead hands.”

I flex mine. “Join the club. I’m actually sort of room temperature.” I put us in drive and carefully ease out on the streets, following a salt truck as it swooshes by.

“Room temperature hands?”

“Or warmer. Not just my hands. Everywhere.” I don’t know why I tell her that.

“That’s good to know,” she says, and my mind goes to stupid places. I need a distraction. “Pass me a cookie?”

“Keep your hands on the wheel. I don’t want to die going to this dumb party,” she murmurs, and pops the cookie in my mouth, letting her fingers brush over my lower lip for the slightest second.

“We could go somewhere else? Get a drink? I don’t want to deck the halls with the squeaky clean suburbanites, either.”

“We have to go. Your family has my car.”

“They’re not my... You’re right. They do.”

Victoria deliberately takes another cookie and bites into it, a little chuckle of pleasure following her first bite. “If I’m there, and you’re there, it’s not just squeaky clean types.”

She makes me smile, not just a fake smile, or a begrudging smile, but something real. She touches the dark part of me and doesn’t back away. “Here’s to Christmas with the criminals.”

“I’ll drink to that... Say, tomorrow night?”

“Sounds good.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

1/2 cup vegetable oil

1/4 cup orange juice

1/4 cup of lemon juice from two fresh-squeezed lemons

1/2 Lemon zest

2 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract

4 cups all-purpose flour (you may need more)

1 tablespoon baking powder

1/2 cup strawberry jam, 1/4 cup apricot preserves. (You can use other flavors if you'd like.)

Method:

1 Preheat the oven to 350°.

2 Line two cookie sheets with parchment

3 Prepare a clean table surface by putting parchment paper down, and then cover with a light dusting of flour.

? In the bowl of a stand mixer or in a bowl with an electric mixer, combine three eggs and sugar and beat until smooth and creamy.

? Stir in oil, orange juice, lemon juice, lemon zest, and vanilla.

? Add flour, one cup at a time, until you create a stiff dough, adding more flour as needed.

? Turn dough out onto your prepared work surface.

? Roll dough out until it is about 1/4 inch thick.

? Cut circles of the dough using a circular cookie cutter or the floured rim of a round glass.

? Place circles about 2 inches apart onto the lined cookie sheets.

? Using a teaspoon, spoon two teaspoons of jam into each cookie's center, making sure you evenly divide the cookies up so that half are strawberry and half are apricot (or if you have three people in your family who want the one kind and only one person wants the other, divide accordingly ;))

? Spoon about 1 to 2 teaspoons of preserves into the center of each cookie. Pinch edges to form three corners.

? This is the tricky part: PINCH the dough together to form three corners around the jam-filled center. Do not ROLL or FOLD the dough, because usually the dough breaks when you try to do that.

? Once you have them in the triangular shape, bake for about 15 minutes.

Check at around 12 minutes to check on the color.

You want the final color to be a golden light brown.

The addition of citrus can make it brown faster, so don't wander off and do other things, or you'll end up with charred cookies.

? Store in an airtight container for up to five days.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Jesse, J.J., and Mr. Minegold, from *Pale Girl*, and so many other books.

References to Mr. Minegold's origin story, *Missing Stars*.

"Jesse Jakob, don't eat all the jam, sweetheart."

The three-year-old slowly puts down the spoon.

"Silly boy of mine. The little hat cookies will be done soon, then you can have one, warm out of the oven. It'll be much better than just the jam—even if it is very good jam."

"They don't look like hats." J.J. peers into the oven.

"Not hats like your baseball cap, or your winter hat. These are old hats."

J.J. laughs. "Eating old hats! Daddy! Daddy, we're going to eat old hats!"

Mr. Minegold scoops up his grandson. "Jesse! Your son does not know the story of Purim."

"He's also three." Jesse comes in, a soft pink bundle in his arms. "Look who's awake."

J.J. waves at his sister and kisses the air near her as he runs past, off to the play area in the old mansion where his grandfather, a vampire, lives; where his father, also a vampire, brings them a few times a week, because family is everything. Worth

risking everything for.

“You and Sophie do not have to teach him my faith. I am a man of many faiths. Many traditions.” Jakob Minegold suddenly looks tired—old, even though he stopped aging long ago.

“We know that. But we want to. We just haven’t had much time or experience teaching him these big things.

This world is full of monsters—I don’t mean like Orcs and vampires, I mean like horrible people who do horrible things to each other.

I don’t want to burst his bubble yet. I want him to believe Pine Ridge is a beautiful, wonderful place for as long as he can, and to learn that there are still ugly things inside of it later. And outside of it—much later.”

Jakob Minegold remembers how things started in Poland. How he wanted to keep his students safe. His children safe. How he made light of the signs.

“Dad? Dad, are you okay?” There’s a firm hand on his arm, and someone calls him father, but his own children have not called him father in so long. They are gone. Saved, and gone.

Maybe he has grandchildren. He must.

But right now, he has J.J. and Mary, and Robert, and Selene and Matthew... Three are only here because of the gift he gave their fathers. Two are tag-along grandchildren, and he loves them dearly.

“Dad!” Jesse’s voice is frantic. “J.J.! Bring me my cell phone! It’s by Mary’s baby bag!”

There's panic in Jesse's voice.

He hasn't heard panic and terror in one of his children's voices in a long time.

"Because we sacrifice. And we risk. We do not hear the evil and the screams because there are still good men and women who do what they must. What they can."

"Oh, thank God." Jesse hugs him, the little pink bundle of dark hair and pale skin smushed between their chests. "I thought... I don't know what I thought. I was so scared for a second. You went far away. You wouldn't answer me."

"I was far away and long ago. May I hold the baby for a little?" he whispers.

"Of course! I'm not going to work today. You don't seem—"

"Sometimes I forget my blessings. You know... If the people of this town had been in my town, long, long ago, almost ninety years ago—I would not be who I am today. I would not be a vampire with a soul. I would be resting peacefully with my wife, buried side by side, and my city would be standing. My children's children would come to visit my grave.

I truly believe that—if all of us who are here together now had been together then—"

"I wouldn't have been here, Dad. Neither would J.J. or Mary. Or Robbie, or Robert," Jesse says softly.

"Here's the phone, Daddy!" J.J. careens into the room, tiny round face frozen in fear, eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

He is galvanized, the old warhorse, the man who made a deal with a demon, but then played the beast at its own game. Kept his soul, saved his family, and started a new

one—but never forgot either. Never stopped loving any of them.

“Nothing is wrong, J.J. Nothing is wrong here. Do you know that? In this town, you are everyone’s favorite little boy?”

” He picks them both up, his little granddaughter and his big grandson, and squeezes them close, feeling a phantom flutter in his chest, heart still racing in his memories as he made sure that the train carrying his family went somewhere safe, somewhere far, far away from the wicked.

“I’m not everyone’s favorite little boy! Max’s mommy would say Max is her favorite little boy.”

“Ah, yes. Maybe. But you are my favorite little boy—but it is a tie, of course. You must understand that it is a tie.”

“When you both win?”

“And no one has to lose. Like the cookies.” Minegold puts the baby back into her father’s arms and lets the boy sit on the counter, the wide, beautiful counter in a spacious home that has been a safe haven to many.

He bends, swoops, whirls, oven mitt on, cookies out, steaming and smelling of citrus, red and golden orange jam bubbling inside the centers.

“Like the cookies.” He slides one strawberry and one apricot onto a small white china plate. “They can both be your favorites. And you can have them both.”

Like his families. He can have them both. One past, one present. More in the future.

But he will never have to say goodbye again, not like that—not if he can help it.

He looks at his son blowing on the hot cookies, and the baby sleeping in his arms, and the little boy daring to poke the golden edges of the sweet triangles on his plate...

They can have their innocence.

Because if the wicked come near us, we will drive them out. We will make them pay.

“Are you going to have a cookie, Grandpa?” J.J. holds out one cookie, and to a three-year-old who has waited patiently from start to finish, there is no greater sacrifice than sharing a warm cookie.

“I would love one, sweetheart.” Mr. Minegold takes the cookie and kisses the mop of brown-black curls.

They taste like joy after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

? ??? teaspoon ground cinnamon

? Pinch of ground nutmeg

? ??? teaspoon kosher salt

? 2 large eggs, beaten

? neutral oil for frying (vegetable or canola are my preferences)

? powdered sugar

Method:

? In a medium-sized bowl, whisk together the warm milk, 1 tablespoon of sugar, and yeast until combined. Set it aside for 5 to 7 minutes or until a fluffy, bubbly mass has formed on the top. This is the yeast “blooming.”

? In a separate large bowl, mix together the flour, salt, remaining 1 tablespoon of sugar, nutmeg, and cinnamon.

? Beat the two eggs until they’re smooth and no streaks of whites remain.

? Gently mix the eggs into the dry ingredients.

? Add the milk and yeast mixture and combine until the ingredients are mixed.

? Cover with a tea towel and set in a warm place to rise for about two hours or until doubled in size.

? Heat oil in a heavy pot. Use a candy or cooking thermometer to ensure the oil reaches 350° and holds steady. You don't want the oil to get much hotter, but the temperature will drop as you add the dough.

? I use a small cookie scoop to drop dough in the oil. Now, if you don't have one, use a heaping tablespoon and scrape it off with a second spoon.

? Cook for 45-60 seconds per side or until browned, then flip.

? Once browned on both sides, drain on a rack or plate covered with paper towels.

? When the doughnuts are done draining, toss them in powdered sugar, or dust with powdered sugar. (Or if you are my editor or my son, please toss in cinnamon sugar.)

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Ivy and Zagan from All I Never Wished For

“My wife makes the best zeppelins ever.”

Ivy looked up from the papers she was grading. “What did you say?”

“You make the best zeppelins,” Zagan repeated, coming close and pressing his cheek to her face, long, strong fingers sliding down her side.

“You had your first week with a full courseload, you went to three faculty events, you made sure the baby was a happy baby... and then you make zeppelins. You make sure your husband is a happy husband. You know, even though I am the djinn, you make all my wishes come true,” Zagan purred, lips nuzzling her neck.

Ivy shut her laptop. The papers could wait. Going back from maternity leave was hard, emotionally and physically.

“Zeppole. They’re not zeppelins, those are old-timey airships.” Ivy turned to him more fully, wrapping her arms around his neck. “What’s more, you have all the knowledge of the centuries, you can speak any language, you’re all powerful—”

“Formerly all-powerful. You freed me from my powers, which are more curse than blessing, the longer you have them. And you know this.” Zagan’s arms wrapped around her waist, hands skimming her hips.

“And you know what zeppelins are.”

“I know, I know, but there are lots of foods that have names for other things, too. Subs. Like submarines? You know, the ones I like, over at the new Italian place? When they do the lunch special, with the meatballs and the homemade sauce, which Mr. Argento calls ‘gravy,’ and the provolone cheese...” Zagan stopped for a moment to sigh.

“Oh, and that’s another one! I thought gravy was what you made with the turkey at Thanksgiving, but it is also the good red sauce that Mr. Argento’s nonna taught him.”

Ivy shook her head and laughed. “I think I’m seeing the point. You really thought these little balls of dough were called ‘zeppelins’?”

“If a sandwich is a submarine, a doughnut can be an airship, no?”

“You make me fall in love with you more every day. In all the little ways, sweetie.”

“That is good. Because I ate all the zeppole—but I will make more. I will make them. I just need your recipe, my angel.”

“All of them!”

“There were only about ten left!”

“Ten, Zagan! Ten doughnuts!”

“Ten little bites.” Zagan held up his forefinger and thumb to convey how small those bites were.

Ivy rolled her eyes. “And you think you can make them the way I do just by following my recipe?”

“I was all-powerful. I have the wisdom of the ages,” he wheedled.

“I don’t want to grade anymore essays, anyway.” Ivy grabbed his hand and marched them toward the kitchen. “Come on. I’ll teach you, Sweet Tooth.”

“You are too good to me.”

Ivy tied on her apron. “I try. Okay, we’re going to need flour, sugar, milk, yeast, and an egg. I’ll get the cinnamon and nutmeg.”

“I’ll get two eggs. We should make a double batch. And, my angel, if I am a very, very good student—do you think you could take everything off but that apron?”

“Zagan!” Ivy blushed as she went to the spice rack. “I still have all the extra saggy skin in my middle from having the baby.”

“Yes! You had our baby! And you have been tired and busy, and I have been very, very patient.” He came up behind her, kissing her neck.

“I think since she’s been born, I have only gotten to appreciate you five or six times.

How am I supposed to make sure you want to have another baby if you won’t let me practice? ”

“But everything is sagging!”

“That is why God gave you a husband, silly!” Zagan clucked his tongue and slid his hands up to cup her heavy breasts, moaning when his palms connected with her tightening nipples.

“I’m supposed to hold everything up if it sags.

And do not say ‘sags’ like it is a bad thing, Ivy.

That word you say with a frown and sadness, and it breaks my heart.

Say things are resting lower, if you like.

They deserve a rest. Say your skin stretched, because it carried a whole new person.

My God, Ivy... Say you are covered in more fluffy softness for your husband to bury his face in, because I could never, ever get tired of hugging you, or touching you, or marveling at every little line and cell of you.

You are real, Ivy. Do you know that is the biggest wish for a djinn, to be free, to be real, not confined and forced to smoke and shadows?

You made me real, too. You made a child to write another chapter in our love story. ”

“Oh, Zag...” Ivy sighed and let herself fall back into his arms, dropping the small glass jars of cinnamon and nutmeg on the counter.

“Perhaps we need another class before cooking class. And this one, I will teach.” Zagan said, sweeping everything off the kitchen table.

Bottles, bibs, burp cloths, and a dozen papers and plastic baby spoons went toppling to the floor.

“Honey!”

“I will clean that all up—when I’m done with this lesson.”

Ivy let herself be swept back onto the table, let her handsome husband pull everything

off of her, even the apron, even though the kitchen was bright and her body had never been perfect.

Maybe that's the lesson, she thought as his body pressed against hers.

You don't have to be perfect to be loved.

That's even better than learning how to make zeppole.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients:

? ??? tsp of salt

Topping:

? ? cup of evaporated milk

? ??? cup of chopped pecans

Method:

? Preheat the oven to 350°.

? Grease and flour a 9x13-inch cake pan.

? In a large bowl, whisk flour, salt, and baking powder.

? Warm the butter and milk on the stove until the butter is melted and forms one mixture.

? Using a stand mixer or electric mixer, beat the eggs and sugar together in a large bowl until golden and fluffy.

? Using a rubber spatula, gently fold the milk mixture and flour mixture into the egg and sugar mixture, a little of one, then a little of the other.

? When all ingredients are gently mixed and incorporated thoroughly, pour mixture into the prepared pan and bake for 30-40 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean.

? Take out the cake and set aside.

? Heat the broiler.

? In a medium bowl, make the topping by combining the melted butter, sugar, milk, and pecans.

? Spread the mixture evenly over the cake. Be gentle! The cake is tender.

? Broil for about 3 minutes, until you see the topping brown and bubble.

? Serve warm for a delicious, vintage experience.

? You can store this cake at room temperature and reheat individual portions in the microwave or oven for three or four days.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Starring Gloria and Wesley from Haunted Hearts

“Feels like a lazy day,” Gloria stretched and yawned.

Wesley didn't point out that for a ghost, days could always be lazy. That wasn't the case in Pine Ridge. As his wife, in her corporeal form, rested against him, he looked at his phone.

This Wednesday, the book club would be at their house, as always.

Thursday and Friday, six women from the New York State Garden Social Club were staying the night and touring the White Pine Estates gardens.

Saturday, they had Chloe and Jared's wedding, which was supposed to be a small, intimate affair that turned into a medium-intimate affair for one hundred and fifty, catered by Cakes for Claire and The Pine Loft Coffee Shop.

Sunday, Mr. Minegold was coming over for dinner and chess.

Monday, the Pine Ridge Chamber Orchestra was meeting with the new piano teacher at the elementary school. They were planning to do some concerto or other in the ballroom for a school fundraiser.

“Yes. Let's have a lazy day.”

Gloria waited, biting her lip. “I don't think you ever had a lazy day in your life, Wesley Creighton, not until your heart kicked your backside and put you in your

place.

Even then... You were raising a little hell, trying to battle a certain glamorous ghost, solve a cold case, and turn this place into a wedding venue.

You know what the surgeon in Boston said.

You're a prime candidate for the heart tissue regeneration trial, but you have to take care of yourself. "

"I eat like a rabbit on a health kick."

"He didn't mean just diet and exercise."

"You're right, you're right." Wesley kissed the top of her dark, curling bob, and Gloria sat up. With a thought, she changed from wearing nothing to a peach peignoir. "I've been exercising plenty, sweetheart. You're my daily workout."

"Well, today, we're going to have a lazy day like I used to when Daddy was in the city and there were no parties to go to. I wonder... I wonder if the cook's old recipe book survived the years and the various clean-outs and rearrangements..."

"What do you need it for?"

Gloria looked at him and smiled. "She used to bake me a Lazy Daisy Cake, and called me Miss Lazy Daisy. I'd go for a long swim, floating in the pool with my bathing cap on and records playing on the phonograph," Gloria sighed and as she did so, her outfit changed into a dark blue swimsuit that was in quite a daring cut for the 1920s, a tight fitting top and ending midway down her thighs in a snug skirt, complete with a bathing cap with chinstrap.

Wesley beamed. He loved hearing about her life.

Loved hearing about when she was young. And though a part of him mourned for the crime that cut it short, it found solace that, as a ghost, she had met her soul mate.

Things worked out in strange ways, including his own near-death event that brought him to her side.

“So, I make this cake if we can find the recipe? We swim. We float. We listen to records. I’m loving it.

Although, there’s no cook here today. No one is here except Lennox in the garden, and he won’t bother us if I text him we’re busy—which I’m doing now.

I say I want the full Lazy Daisy in all of her glory.

Petals on display.” He licked his lips and could tell his wife was blushing, even though there was no real color in her cheeks.

“Wesley!”

“Sex is out of the question on a lazy day? What if it’s slow, lazy sex? Lots of time lapping you up, petals first, eating cake off my favorite plate,” he teased, squeezing her cheeks as she sank back next to him.

“Mmm-maybe,” her answer was broken as his hand found her breast and his lips found her throat.

“More?” he asked, hand trailing down between her legs now, finding the split of her pale white flesh, sliding easily into the warm, sucking center of her that felt not quite solid, not quite liquid, a warm, pulsating gel that clamped hungrily onto his fingers.

“God, yes,” she let out a shaky squeak as his thumb found her clit and teased it slowly, firmly, just the way she wanted, just the way she craved.

“And what happens after you take off this suit, and we swim naked in our pool? After I find your favorite record, and I push up against the edge and fuck you nice and slow until you beg me to go faster?” Wesley asked, his fingers mimicking the pace of his words.

Gloria moaned and her suit vanished, leaving her naked in his arms, sprawling, mewling, clinging as he stirred his fingers in her sex, weaving a magic potion of pleasure that they’d only ever shared with each other. She grabbed his shoulder and tugged, pulling him on top of her.

“After I fill you up here, and then later, and then maybe again, after I cover you in the frosting from that cake—”

“There’s no frosting. It’s a pecan topping,” Gloria gasped as his cock sank into her easily, sliding to the hilt. She wrapped herself around it, her body breaking all the human laws of motion and mass, sucking him into her pussy as if her nether lips belonged on her mouth.

Wesley held still above her, eyes closed against the pumping pleasure she delivered.

“We could just stay in bed all day,” she purred, calf gliding against his hip as she anchored him deeper inside of her.

“No, no. I want to have the day you wanted to have. The cake, the pool, the records. I want a thousand days like this with you.” Wesley kissed her forehead, then her lips, finally laying his scarred chest down against her nearly translucent one.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, rocking together, chasing the peaks that seemed

to come so easily with love and lust for each other.

No one mentioned the fact that she was already there, in the time where thousands of days meant nothing, waiting for him to join her. She traced the scar that meant maybe his heart would give out far too young, far too soon, and send him to her sooner.

She kissed his collarbone, eyes closed. She didn't say that she hoped he would make it to the end of the year, to Boston, to the new trials to heal damaged tissue. That she wanted to see his whole life, and then start over with him in the afterlife.

"We share a life, and a half-life, dancing on the line, twirling at the middle, where life and afterlife meet." Wesley was the one who said things, sometimes.

Like now, saying this weighty, heavy thing, as he ground into her, as she dissolved around him in pleasure, and then, feeling their mutual climax, dissolved into airiness, solid form turning into airy shapes and insubstantial light.

"Must've been good," Wesley teased as she floated up, over him.

"Amazing, and not nearly lazy enough, mister. That was short and intense. I might need to help you make that cake. You look winded."

"I'm just fine." Wesley sat up and reached for his Nebivolol, taking two pills instead of one as he breathed hard around a slice of pain that he knew his wife saw, even if she couldn't feel. "I'm ready to go. You still didn't tell me what comes after the pool?"

"Nothing has to come next, Wes. Nothing has to be scheduled next. That's the beauty of a lazy day. We bake, we swim, we love. We dance on that line. Is that enough for you, Mr. Wall Street Wonder?"

He nodded. “All I want to do is dance with you.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Ingredients for the cheesecake filling:

? ??? teaspoon ginger

? ??? teaspoon clove

? ??? teaspoon cardamom

? ??? teaspoon nutmeg

? ??? teaspoon allspice

? 2 teaspoons vanilla

Ingredients for the crust:

? 2 cups gingersnap crumbs (You can make homemade gingersnap cookies and crush them up, or just use a boxed brand. My family used to use Sweetzels spiced wafers, because they were cheap, and we were not affluent. Now that I bake, I make my own.)

? 2 tablespoons light brown sugar

????teaspoon ground cinnamon

????teaspoon ginger

? ??? teaspoon nutmeg

? ??? teaspoon allspice

? Pinch of cloves (Be very light on the pinching! Too much clove will overpower.)

? 6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Method:

? Lightly grease a 9-inch springform pan.

? Combine gingersnap crumbs, brown sugar, spices, and melted butter until you form a crumbly dough.

? Press the crumbly mixture into the bottom of the pans and tap down until you create an even layer.

? Pop these pans with the crust in the freezer for about twenty minutes while you make the filling.

? In the bowl of a stand mixer or in a large bowl with an electric mixer, beat the whipping cream until it reaches the stiff peak stage (between 3-5 minutes). Be careful not to overbeat or you'll end up with something like butter.

? Set the whipped cream aside. If you only have one stand mixer bowl (I only have one, but I want another one for Christmas), just scrape the whipped cream into a bowl and set aside. You don't have to wash out the bowl, because you're going to mix all of this together anyway.

? In a mixer bowl, beat cream cheese, pumpkin puree, white sugar, spices, and vanilla

at medium speed until you get a beautiful, smooth mixture.

? Gently fold whipped cream into the pumpkin mixture until evenly combined.

? Spread filling evenly into pie crust.

? Refrigerate until firm, 3 to 4 hours.

? When serving, I like to top with whipped cream, a gingersnap tucked into the whipped cream, and a dash of nutmeg or cinnamon. But I'm fancy like that when it comes to dessert. (Sometimes. Other times, I will eat peanut butter and chocolate chips off a spoon.)

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

“Lazarus has a girlfriend,” I deliver this news with a flat voice, waiting for the vultures to swoop.

My wife, not really very vulture-like, swoops as if on command. “He does ?? Who?”

“Victoria.”

“Who is that?”

“I have no idea.”

Claire storms over, oven mitts on hips. “Well... Well, you can’t drop a bomb like that on me and not back it up with details! How do you know he has a girlfriend?”

“Because he asked me for a recipe he can make that’s decadent and doesn’t require an oven.”

“Why doesn’t he just buy—”

“No boxed mixes. No store-bought. He wants to make it with his own two hands. Wait. I wonder if you can say that, since he’s made up of, like, different people? He could have fingers from like—”

“Honey, stop.” Claire winces. “Never mind how many recycled pieces he has; he has two hands now. And he wants to make something himself, homemade?” Her eyes turn starry.

“Cooking is my love language, that’s for sure.

I think it is for a lot of people, and it must be for this Victoria. How romantic.”

I hesitate. I could let her dream. That might be nice. Or, later on, she’ll find out the truth, pout at me, and I’ll feel guilty. “I think it might be more like him showing that he can actually do it. For a bet. Or to shut her up.”

“Oh. I thought he liked her.”

“He must, or he wouldn’t go to the trouble to butt heads with her. You know him. If he didn’t care about her, he’d just ignore her. Like he ignores pretty much everyone. I don’t even think he’d come in here, except Manny likes the coffee.”

“That is true. So what did you tell him to make?”

“My Last-Minute Cheesecake. The one with the gingersnap crust and the pumpkin filling?”

“Oh my God, I love that one. But that’s so not last-minute. You need four hours to let it set!” Claire protests. “Why do you call it last-minute anything?”

“Because I made that recipe the day my oven broke, and at the last minute, before I closed the shop for the day, I told Georgia to write on the special board that we were having Gingersnap Pumpkin Cheesecake. And now it’s a bestseller.”

“Well, I can’t argue there.” Claire pouts at me.

Damn it. I thought I was going to avoid the pout! “What? What is it?”

“Can you make me one? Pleeese?” Claire wheedles.

“But—we have to go out tonight, don’t we? I thought you said tonight we had to drive up to the mall to see that new furniture store? To get stuff for the guest bedroom?” I protest. “I told Georgia and Douglas we would call and tell them a time to meet up over there.”

Claire smirks and shuts the bedroom door behind me as I take off my grubby-feeling tee shirt, stuck to my chest after baking and cooking in a hot kitchen all day.

“You shower, I’ll join you—right after I text Georgia and tell her we’ll have to push it back to Friday night. I’ll just say that something came up at the last minute.”

I look down at my boxers as I step out of my jeans. Claire follows my gaze.

“Well, I’ll be,” I say, all teeth and seduction as I saunter over to her so she can feel what “just came up.” “It looks like you’re right.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Lennox

I'm having a very bad day. No, let's make that a very bad month.

It's not enough to be one of the only mothmen left in West Virginia, or that I have no hope of finding a mate or even being able to pop into the grocery store without attracting terrified screams—but now my home has been destroyed, too.

With my forest gone and my career as an amateur arborist kaput, I do the unthinkable.

I leave my family and head to paranormal-friendly Pine Ridge, knowing that I can find safety there.

..and maybe even get WiFi and the occasional convenience store veggie wrap.

If I really want to shoot for the moon, perhaps in a year or two I'll be doing well enough to convince my hothead brother to leave the ruins of our old life and join me.

Cindy

I'm getting old. Okay, no, not really, but I'm becoming more mature.

I just watched one of my best friends seize life with both hands and go from a struggling, single waitress to an engaged pastry chef and business owner.

I want that. Okay, maybe I don't want to own a business, but I'm tired of random

hookups and fun flings.

I want to find my person, that one special somebody, and Pine Ridge seems like the place to do it.

I don't know what it is about this little town, but wedding bells always seem to be ringing!

There's just one problem. I'm not the good girl type. I don't know how to keep things serious. I don't even know where to find a guy who wants to settle down and start a new life. Even if I did, I don't know if he'd be into someone like me. (My friends say I'm kind of a lot.)

It's not like Mr. Sweet-And-Sensitive is going to fall out of the sky and land at my feet...

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

I look at what's left. An army surplus blanket, one of my speckle-covered notebooks with a pen tucked inside, and whatever is in my old canvas book bag. I haven't even used it in months. I don't know if there's anything valuable inside.

Marlow hasn't fared much better. He has his leather Harley-Davidson vest, a tarp, and whatever he has in a big blue gym bag. His is probably better stocked. He travels more—which might be a blessing right now.

"Damn." Marlow looks at where we used to live. The lightning strike struck the biggest elm in the strand, and the bare trees, dry and tough from a historically dry winter, went up like matchsticks.

"It's gone. The whole strand. The whole woods!

" My throat is full of tears. I don't care.

It wasn't just home. It was my work, my hobby, my passion.

It's not like anyone pays me to take care of the trees, but as a mothman, it isn't like I could go over to the West Virginia Department of Forestry and hand in my resume, either.

"Well. It's a big state. Spring is coming. Plenty of trees in the woods. Race you to see who can make a new nest!" My brother pounds me on the arm, his steely gray feathers at odds with my crow-black ones.

"Make a new nest? Here?" I shake my head, red eyes blinking back tears. "Marlow,

no. This place isn't for us anymore. It's... stagnated. The humans know it, too."

Marlow's face is tight. "Humans are all idiots, and you know it. Let 'em leave. Then we'll rule the woods like we used to."

My antennae droop. My brother is the stupid kind of fearless. As our mother used to say, he's missing the bone in his head that tells him to avoid danger.

"We mothmen won't reclaim the area. The mining companies will move in. If not them, the mega marts and mall complexes. The new developments. Whether it's progress or purgatory, we're going to lose."

Marlow gives me a long, cold look before laughing. "You read too much, smarty wings. 'Progress or purgatory.' Ha. So what are you going to do? Make yourself your final cocoon and wilt away?"

I take a deep, patient sigh. Being the brains of the family (what's left of it) has some benefits. I'm used to dealing with Marlow's childishness. I've always been the mature "older brother" even though we're the same age.

"I think I want to go to a community that welcomes our kind."

Strong fingers tighten on my wrist before I can even cry out in pain. "You will not go to a CrossRealms, you idjit."

Whoo. Idjit. When the country drawl pours out like that, I know Marlow is close to losing his tough facade—and his temper.

"I'm not looking to fight evil vamps and demons! I like to prune trees, not whittle stakes. I was thinking someplace peacefully paranormal friendly."

Marlow snorts. “Not too many places around here like that. Thinking of crossing the ocean and hiding out in the Hebrides? I’d love to see you scrounge up money for airfare. Or did you plan on those wimpy little wings carrying you over the Atlantic?”

Yes. He’s being a jerk. He’s being a jerk because he’s scared and upset. I try to remember that. I try to count to ten, but I can only make it to three before I snap out, “No! Like Moonlight Bay or Pine Ridge! Yeah. Pine Ridge. It’s a little closer and a little warmer.”

My brother’s wings flare open, gray and red and angry. The markings on his wings are like eyes, black and crimson scowls on gray. They’re subtle enough that in the darkness of a moonlit night or a dense forest, humans just see flashes of shadow.

“You’re going to leave our home? Coward! Deserter!”

Calm. Calm. Calm.

“There is nothing for us here. Come with me. Come with me and help me start a new home. We aren’t going to thrive here. What happens when there’s only one of us left? We just die out?”

“We’ll meet someone. Someday.”

“Out here, we’re monsters. Up there, we’d be citizens. You know. Eventually.” My antennae flatten down to my head, and my wings droop. Mothmen aren’t social creatures. The idea of making friends and interacting scares me so much I could molt.

Marlow says nothing.

He knows I’m right. There is no chance of us saving our kind out here.

No chance of mates. There are other mothmen and mothladies out there, scattered few and far between, but all of them have fled the cryptozoologists, crazy hunters, and curiosity seekers that have chased us to the edge of extinction and deeper into hiding.

Why have we stayed here in the wildest wilds of West Virginia?

I'm too scared to go.

He's too stubborn to leave.

What's more, Marlow isn't afraid to mix with people.

Of course, he can only do it a few times a year, late at night during the huge festivals where they come to "celebrate" the mothmen most attendees don't truly believe in.

People dress up like us (well, like bad imitations of us), watch grainy footage of turkey buzzards, and have parties.

Marlow waits until these conventions have turned into bacchanals of monster fans and girls wearing tight tank tops with catchy slogans like "I'm Mad for Mothman" and "Mothman's Monster-Fudging Mate" and stuff like that.

Then, he slips into the crowds. People love his "costume."

And if you believe his stories, those mothman chicks love it when he "keeps the suit on" while he satisfies them.

I would die. What if it was a trap? What if those girls find out it's not a suit and I end up dried and preserved on the world's biggest pushpin in the mother of all butterfly collections?

I'm dying right now, just thinking about making a move far from everything I've ever known, far from tradition, roots, and maybe...maybe someplace in this state, there's one of my kind that I haven't discovered yet. If I leave, I never will.

A shower of sparks and a loud crash startles both of us. Charred trees are crashing and falling like dominoes in the wind as drenching rain begins—too late to do any good.

“There is nothing left here,” I repeat firmly.

“You are a quitter and weakling.” Marlow glares.

“You aren't going to out-macho me! If I don't 'quit' this place, our whole family will die out. Up there—there might be one of our kind.”

“Like she'd pick you.” He snorts, scoffing at my timid hopefulness.

“Yeah, I'm sure she'd rather have you, stud. Why don't you come with me? See what kind of mothman the ladies prefer?”

“Don't you try that dang smartass reverse psychology on me, Lenny.”

“Don't call me Lenny. I hate that. And it wasn't reverse psychology, you idiot!

That's what you do when you don't want the person to do what you said!

I do want you to come with me! That was bait .

” I turn away in exasperation, my dark, solid black wings fluffed up in anger.
“Hillbilly hick with wings.”

A hard tackle takes me down.

“Heard that!”

As our home and world crash down around us, my brother and I fight in the wet mud, beating the tar out of each other until we’re laugh-cry-cursing in the chilly late February air.

“Damn. Where was this rain hours ago when it would have saved us?” I shiver, wiping mud from my face.

Marlow lies next to me, panting. “I know, right.”

We both sit there, getting drenched. It’s the only way we’ll get clean.

Finally, Marlow yanks me up. “Aw. Go if you want. Yankee.”

“Don’t you do that. You know we’re not northern or southern. We’re mothmen. Come with me, Mar. Please? I really don’t want to leave you behind.”

“Lenny.” He heaves a deep sigh that ripples the feather-like hairs that make up our “fur.” “If I don’t stay, there won’t be anything to come back to when you can’t stick it up there in New York, with all those eight million people.”

I wince like he landed a blow. “Eight million? Are you sure?”

“Heard it on the television in the back of the bait shop.”

Another tree crashes, this one revealing an eerie orange glow. The fires are still burning, even in this wet, misty fog that’s covering the mountain. Another lightning bolt sizzles the air, and we have nowhere to hide, no nests, no nothing—not anymore.

Unless I'm brave enough to make something new.

"I'm going. If I don't come back home by Christmas, you gotta come up there and find me, okay?"

"Deal."

We stand, awkwardly gathering our stuff as the rain starts to come down harder and faster. "Do we hug?" I ask, arms dangling like limp windsocks.

"You big sap."

But Marlow hugs me anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

“ U gh! Ugh! Ugh! Oh my God! Ohhhh. God!”

Will this loser please finish already?

Why do I keep doing this?

“Oh, yeah, baby! Who’s your daddy?”

I’m glad I’m facing away from Frat Boy. Rolling my eyes while he’s clearly giving his best pornstar-wannabe performance is probably rude. I don’t answer his question. It’s a turn-off. Hell, this whole night has become a turn-off.

It occurs to me that I’m doing a disservice to my fellow women.

This guy is probably nineteen or twenty (old enough to be at the Pine Ridge campus of NYU), and he still doesn’t know how to have good sex.

He’s rushed and clumsy, but he’s not giving off “this is my first time” vibes.

If I hadn’t been soaking through my black fishnets since the moment I walked into the party a couple hours ago, his attempts at athletic fucking would be mildly uncomfortable.

And he thinks outdated phrases like “Who’s your daddy? ” sound hot?

I am doing nothing for my fellow women in terms of training this bozo. That is probably rude—on my part.

And yes, having time to have deep introspective thoughts during passionate sex is also a sign that it's not good. Passionate is a misnomer.

Faking does nothing for either of us.

I pull away.

"H-hey!" Bozo is handsome enough, and yes, I know his name isn't Bozo. It's Brad or Bert or something. Right now, he looks like a stunned, breathless Adonis-in-training.

"This angle isn't working. You're not hitting my g-spot, you're totally neglecting my clit, and you didn't go down before moving right to home base. Also, 'Who's your daddy?' Ew, no. You don't know if I even have a daddy-kink. Which I don't."

Bozo blinks. "Well...You have a fat ass!"

"I know." I beam and pat my generously padded posterior. "And if you had been good, you probably would have gotten to fuck it on some future date. But this isn't a date. This is a party hook up, and I'm horny. Now, you'd better make me come, or I'm leaving. Want me to show you how?"

Bozo splutters. "I k-know how to have sex, skank!"

"Oh, God. Your poor, poor future wife. Learn to take directions." I pull my dress back down and leave whatever abysmal dorm room I'm in, walking past dozens of other couples who are spilling out of other rooms, making out in halls before they end for the night or take things inside and move to the next level.

As I get to the top of the stairs, a red plastic cup full of watermelon vodka splashes me in the back of the head.

I turn slowly. My lazy, psycho bitch smile spreads even slower. Bozo, holding up a pillow in front of his semi-adequate junk, gulps and slams the door shut.

Outside, I stand in the chilly mid-March air and let out a deep, guttural groan. It's more than sexual longing. It's sexual frustration. I slip into my car and roar away from the dorms.

Back at my apartment, I head into the shower with my favorite toy—but then stop as my phone buzzes.

Cathy: Are you up?

Cathy works at The River House restaurant.

My fellow waitress is also my primary bestie.

Claire, who used to be a waitress, is my secondary bestie.

She's now my part-time boss. She and her almost-hubby own a bakery and coffee shop, and I help out when they have catering.

When the bakery side of the business opens, they've offered me a full-time job.

Cindy: Yes. Just had the most unsatisfying sex I've had in months. Called it quits, and now I'm getting into the shower with something long, thick, and suction-y.

Cathy: TMI

Cindy: Why are you up?

Cathy: How do we throw Claire a bridal shower without her knowing when she

works at the place where we want to have it?

Cindy: This is what keeps you up at night?

Cathy: Also the plight of children in need, human suffering, and global warming. Oh, and the threat of nuclear war.

I put my head in my hand and nearly blind myself with my OctoPussy, my delightful teal tentacle toy.

Cindy: I'll ask Georgia to help. We'll say we're catering for some other person, but it'll be for her.

Cathy: But then she'll do all the work!

Cindy: It's late. I'm horny. I will have more plans tomorrow.

Cathy: Don't you ever want to find just one nice man to love and sleep with?

My heart hurts. Yes, I do. But I don't know if I can find that.

Cindy: Sure, but in the meantime, I'm keeping sex toy manufacturers gainfully employed.

Cathy: You're a mess and I love you.

Cindy: I love you, too.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

Pine Ridge, New York.

Marlow acts like New York is a world away, but I just fly diagonally up Pennsylvania, spend the day hiding out-slash-napping in the mountains surrounding Antonia, Pennsylvania, and then work my way toward Pine Ridge.

As the tractor-trailer drives, it's about seven hours.

As the crow flies, probably five. As I fly—around six.

(Crows don't worry if someone sees them. I do.)

In case you're wondering, no, mothmen do not have a fancy built in GPS in our antennae. I just took one of those complimentary folding paper road atlases from the Wheeling Travel Plaza, and then I darted down low enough to read road signs every now and again.

Sorry if it's not as mysterious as you thought—and you can see why I won't be putting my flying skills on display any time soon.

Once I get to the Binghamton area, my senses start to tingle in a way I've never felt before. Oh, maybe a flash here and there, but this time, it's like my whole body is lighting up from the inside out. Magic. Supernatural power. Paranormal beacons.

Ley Lines, in other words. Pine Ridge is a paranormal-friendly place because there are three intersecting Ley Lines. A supernatural powerhouse.

“I’ve gotta be close.”

You would think that would spur me on, but it doesn’t. I find a dense area of trees and land to have a quick pep talk and work on my hyperventilating.

What if I can’t do this?

Marlow is right. I’m a coward. I’m timid. I’m shy. I’m...not good at things. I don’t have skills. I mean—unless you have a sick tree. I’m good at woodlore, and I know a lot about plants. I know how to survive in the wild, on my own.

So why the heck did I decide to fly to a place where I’ll need new skills I’ve never honed?

I wince as I see the sign in the glow of my red eyes, “Welcome to Pine Ridge, New York! The town with a heart as big as the great outdoors!”

Pine Ridge may be considered a small town to humans, but by loner in the West Virginia wilderness standards, it’s intimidating.

Flying over it, my cowardly self-preservation instinct kicks in.

Well, Marlow says it is cowardly, but if I don’t stay hidden, how will our species survive?

If I do stay hidden, how will our species survive?

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other,” as my grandpa used to say.

There are thick snags and strands of pines everywhere in this town. I need to be near water. I want to be near enough to observe people and the magical beings who

supposedly live among them.

Supposedly is a big, frightening word that makes me want to turn around and fly south, back home.

What if the rumors that trickled down over the past two centuries are just that? Rumors?

I decide to stay hidden until I have proof that Pine Ridge isn't just paranormal—it's paranormal- friendly .

I fly past the town, stomach churning as I see all the lights, and some are even scattered far into the hills. I'd like to fly further, but flying this many hours in two days, carrying all the stress of leaving home after watching it burn...

It doesn't surprise me when my body finally quits, wings fluttering limply until I touch down several miles from the last point of light, deep in a thicket of snow-covered boughs.

Cold, far from home, and alone.

Exhaustion and depression make a good sleeping pill.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm

“Y ou look... tired.”

Claire is polite and sweet and I love her. When I show up to help paint the bakery that will one day take the world by storm (Cakes by Claire, remember it), I don’t look fabulous.

The only consolation is that I don’t have work at The River House or classes today. Last night’s failed frat party kicked off Spring Break.

“Why is Spring Break not even in spring?” I whine, grabbing a cup of the famous Cinnamon Streusel coffee that Claire and Georgia have gotten me addicted to.

It’s the perfect thing for a late February pick me up—especially if you’re an idiot who barely got any sleep as you tried to chase a certain erogenous high that you just couldn’t catch.

“I can’t afford to go to Florida, and I’m definitely not going home to Ithaca—they got thirteen inches of snow this morning!

Whatever zany madcap fun I have will have to be around here. ”

“Ohhh, that explains why you look so beat. Late night Spring Break bash?” Claire pulls her long brown waves up into a red bandana and pulls on one of her fiancé’s old white t-shirts.

Claire’s honey is perfect for her, being a chef with a heart of solid gold—and ridiculously drool-worthy.

Georgie is this gorgeous blonde Nordic-looking god with a chest like a whiskey barrel that worked out, and he's about seven feet tall.

Even on Claire's very pumpkin-shaped physique, his shirt hangs loose like an old smock, becoming the perfect painting outfit.

"Not so much a bash as a crash," I say, pulling my own sandy blonde hair up into a sloppy bun. "You look like Rosie the Riveter's much hotter twin."

"Thank you! You look cute, too. Um. Are you sure you're up to painting?"

"Hey, I want the job as your assistant. The sooner this place is up and running, the sooner I can transition out of waitressing and into... something else. This, I guess."

"You don't sound very excited." Claire pulls out rollers and painter's tape, giving me a sidelong glance.

"No! I am! It's just that in three months, I'll graduate—after forever-and-a-half. This is my last Spring Break. Ten days of freedom before 'freebie' vacations are a thing of the past. I guess at twenty-five, it's about time."

"Hey, my timeline was the same—but for different reasons. I guess Georgie and I won't see you for a few days, huh? You'll be living it up—or laying low." Claire laughs with a wink.

I know she's probably picturing me having an endless loop of swinging singles' fun in my apartment or living at Jax Alley, which is a sexy-skeevy roadhouse bar outside of town. "Haha. No. Probably not much."

I don't want to tell Claire about how pathetic my love life has gotten.

I'm supposed to be the sexy adventurous one, the one who is self-assured and

brimming with confidence.

Claire and Cathy don't look up to me, exactly, but they're the mild to my "wild." Claire wouldn't be happily engaged without Cathy and me.

We told her to go for it and make a move when she met the hunk of hot chef who hides out in the kitchen.

I want that. Not necessarily the tall, beefy drink of water Claire has, but—

Oh, who the hell am I kidding? Yes, I want that.

I want a big, strong provider and protector to wrap me in his arms and tell me that it's okay that I've putzed around with my life for so long and that I don't know what I'm doing.

That it's okay that I don't know what to do with a freaking liberal arts degree, and who understands how much I dread moving back home just to be shunted along into my parents' plumbing business.

"I really do love working with you. I love working in catering, and I would be crazy not to stay here and help out in this bakery. With your flavors and designs, it's going to be big."

"Maybe. It sure popped In December and January when you helped out at Jan and Diana's wedding.

We got lots of people lined up for tastings.

If only we can get them to commit. If only we can get Cakes By Claire trending again once I actually have a bakery open and I'm not just working in Georgie's kitchen where the coffee shop prep takes up most of the space!

And a website. And social media. Oh, God. ..” Claire puts her head in her hands.

“Hey! Hey, hey. You should worry about your wedding day, babe. Leave the social media and web stuff to Georgia and me.”

“Oh! The catering department, too...”

“You. Georgie. Happily ever after. Wedding bells a-ringing. White dress. Fancy shoes. Tux.”

“He’ll be in a kilt.” Claire looks glazed.

I go over and firmly take her hands. “Ooh. I like. I thought he had Viking blood.”

“Orc.”

“What?”

“No-rth! Northern Scotland. The Hebridean area,” Claire stammers and stumbles over the words.

“Cool. Focus on that, okay? That’s what really matters in life.” I give Claire a big hug, expression pained where she can’t see it.

Love and a lifetime partner. A passion to follow. That’s what really matters.

Yeah, that’s right. That’s what I said. That’s what I meant.

“You’re right, Cindy. You’re totally right. I’ve got the person I love most in this world, and we’re getting married—and we have the money to make this place shine. We have the friends to help us. Oh, gosh. I’m going to start crying!”

I swallow a sigh and laugh instead as Claire hugs me and cries a couple of happy tears on my shoulder. I pat her back and roll my eyes heavenward.

No, not because this is a Hallmark moment.

Because I'm mad at myself.

Dang, I can dish out advice, but I sure as hell never learned how to take it.