Savvy Spring Entertaining



A Guide to Quick Tips, Easy Ideas, and Spring Recipes

SHANNA HATFIELD

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by

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by Shanna Hatfield

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FICTION

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The Cowboy's Christmas Plan

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QR Code Killer

The Women of Tenacity Series

The Women of Tenacity - A Prelude

Heart of Clay

Country Boy vs. City Girl

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Savvy Holiday Entertaining

Savvy Spring Entertaining

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Excerpt from The Cowboy's Spring Romance

Spring Entertaining

Happy Spring!

It's time to climb out of the heavy, dark covering of winter and lighten up!

Spring means green grass, cheery daffodils nodding their little golden heads and breezes that carry more warmth than chill. It is budding trees, and the loamy smell of earth coming back to life after a long winter's rest. It's lemony treats, fresh paint and dust motes dancing in streams of sunlight while you deep clean.

On the following pages, you'll find ideas for bringing spring inside your home, tips for spring entertaining, party theme ideas and, of course, recipes!

You can find more tips, recipes and ideas every day at Savvyentertaining.com!

Wishing you and yours the most glorious spring ever!

Successful Entertaining

Everyone can entertain successfully and simply if they plan ahead and stay focused on the reason for entertaining – connecting with family and friends. Entertaining, particularly during the holiday season, should be as stress-free as possible and that is why keeping things simple and organized is a must.

Create a Timeline

Take a few minutes to create a timeline. It will save time and frustration as well as help the host look organized and savvy.

Start by writing down the menu in detail. What foods can be purchased and made ahead of time? What needs to be purchased and made the day before? The day of the party?

What decorations will be needed? Will you be making any decorations or will you be shopping for them? When will you do this? Where will the centerpieces come from? What cleaning tasks need to be accomplished?

Get it all down on paper and then divide the menu, cleaning and decorating tasks into specific steps for at least the seven days leading up to your party. When you break it into set tasks, entertaining can be very simple.

Cleaning Tips

If you avoid entertaining because you hate to clean, get over it! Focus on cleaning just four areas: the entry, the living room, the kitchen and the guest bathroom.

Atmosphere

Light a few spring scented candles or zest a lemon. The house will have a marvelous spring smell as guests come in the door.

Use candles anywhere you can. They create a wonderful, inviting atmosphere and candlelight is flattering on everyone. If you are concerned about open flame, use battery-operated candles. One rule of thumb is to use one scent or scent family at a time otherwise your home smells like a batch of potpourri gone bad. Also, try to steer away from scented candles around your food. It can overwhelm not only the smell of your meal but also the taste.

Play fun music in the background but make sure it isn't so loud guests are shouting to be heard over it.

Decorations

Keep your focus on a few simple things that can bring a spring atmosphere to your home.

Fill a glass bowl with seasonal fruit for a colorful and exciting centerpiece. Tulips, daffodils and lilacs are excellent selections for spring flowers and scream “Spring has arrived!” Put a few in a vase or even a glass or ceramic pitcher for a beautiful centerpiece.

Serving

Set a buffet and keep your life simple. It keeps the hostess from being so tied to the kitchen, creates a relaxed atmosphere for guests to mingle and is easy to maintain.

Quick Tip: Delegate helpers to do things like greet guests at the door, keep trash collected, make sure food is stocked, etc., to help keep a large party running smoothly.

Set a Beautiful Buffet

If you are going to all the work to have guests over, make the presentation of your food spectacular. It sounds like a lot of work, but really it isn't.

Planning ahead is the key to success. Decide what you will be serving, what you will be serving it in, color scheme, decorations and every detail about your buffet well in advance.

Make sure your serving pieces or washed, polished and ready to be filled with delicious food.

Choose your table linens and make sure they look presentable (interpret as if they need ironed, you can either do that bothersome chore or throw them in the dryer with a damp towel for a quick release of wrinkles).

Decide where you'll set up your buffet. Will it be on a table, counter, somewhere unusual? Remember to use a base cloth followed with another drape for accent. You can even make this work on a counter top.

Choose a centerpiece that complements your theme and color scheme. For spring, think tulips or flower branches. Long trays of grass also work really well.

Most of all, remember to have fun with this.

You are the artist and you can splash all the colors and excitement in this you want!

Quick Tip: For a super fast centerpiece, pile colorful pieces of fruit in an interesting bowl. Try a combination of oranges, lemons and limes in a footed glass bowl for a huge impact!

10 Easy Tips for Bringing Spring Home

As the days start to warm up and get longer, think about refreshing your home's decor. Bringing in breezy fabrics, garden elements and bright florals make the statement "Spring Has Arrived."

Here are 10 tips to bring spring into your home this season.

1. Let the Light In

Do you have velvet drapes or shades you've had pulled closed all winter? Open them up! Think about taking the drapes down and replacing with airy sheers. Toss slip covers in pale tones or bright floral patterns on heavy, dark furniture.

2. Rug Replacement

Area rugs that are so warm and cozy in the winter can look bulky and dull in the spring and summer. Roll these up and store until fall. Bring out some lighter cotton rugs and watch it lighten the look of your room.

3. Looking Out

If you have your furniture grouped around your fireplace, think about changing things up during the warmer months. Take the focal point away from the mantel and take advantage of windows that bring in light and adventure from outside.

4. Bring the Outdoors In

Bring a few garden chairs, accents and floral fabrics into a room for a garden feel. Even a couple of fun wicker chairs with bright cushions can make the room feel fresh and outdoorsy.

5. From Fake to Fresh

Take all the fake plants and arrangements clean them and then store them for the spring and summer seasons. Bring in pots with fresh little plants of violets and primroses, invest in a few live green plants, or fill vases and containers with fresh flowers.

6. Less is More

Take all the knick-knacks and do-dads off your shelves. Dust the shelves and items and then decide what key pieces you really want to put back out. Lighten the load and create more air by not loading the shelves down with too many pieces.

7. Easy Breezy

Sheer fabrics practically scream out warm days, fresh air, sunny skies. Use sheer curtains, tablecloths, bed skirts, and pillows in your choice of plain, printed and patterned selections.

8. Stop the Madness

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: if you don't love something, it isn't serving a purpose or it doesn't have sentimental value (*real* sentimental value) box it up or get rid of it. Get your clutter under control, get organized and enjoy the feeling of awe that comes over you when you are done with this task.

9. Deep Clean

Now is the time to bust out your cleaning supplies and give your home a good once over. Clean the windows, scrub floors, polish all the furniture, vacuum sofa cushions, air out rooms, wipe down walls, shine light fixtures. Give the fireplace a final cleaning for the season.

10. A Welcome Entry

Take stock of your front door entry area. Sweep it down, wash windows, touch up paint if necessary. Put out a welcome sign or nice exterior decor piece that reflects your personal style. Make sure the entire area is clean, clutter free and says "Welcome to our Home."

Bring the Elements of Spring Indoors

You can bring outdoor elements of spring indoors with a few easy ideas.

Dogwood branches, especially pink, are a sure sign of spring. Purchase a few silk branches and artfully arrange them (interpret as stuff in however you like) in a tall white vase. Set this in an entry, on a counter ,or anywhere you want to add an airy feel of spring.

Grass is definitely a symbol of spring. Those first green shoots poking their head above ground are always a welcome sight at our house. Create your own green oasis using bunches of fake grass. You can leave stems long and drape out of vase or use short pieces to cover a piece of floral foam (whatever pattern you choose – could be oval, rectangle, square). Cover the outside and top completely with the grass and then tie a cheery ribbon around it. Set on a footed tray (a cake plate would be ideal) and enjoy.

Flower blossoms bloom with possibilities**.** Every time I go to the craft store, I am amazed at the new items available using floral blossoms. Choose a bright color like hot pink, citrus, apple green or robin's egg blue. Tack on throw pillows in coordinating colors, place them in bowls, or tuck into corners. You can also use magnetic blossoms to brighten up a variety of areas in your home. Attach to a bathroom mirror, hang a metal tray covered in blossoms on a wall, or leave a few on your fridge door.

Color is a must for spring. Think of colors that make you smile. Is it a tempting tangerine, bright fuchsia or a gorgeous green? Find ways to easily incorporate those colors into your home decor through pillows, table runners or centerpieces.

Quick Tip: If you aren't sure about adding bright colors, try bringing home a fabric or paint swatch and testing it out before you jump into a new color scheme. Sometimes a throw pillow or two in a fresh new color can make all the difference in the world to tired décor!

Easy, Inexpensive Spring Makeovers

If you've done your spring cleaning and yet your home's interior still seems lost in the doldrums, think about changing things up a bit for some decor excitement.

Here are a few ideas to get you started and give the inside of your home a very simple and extremely affordable facelift.

Get a Move On

One of the fastest and easiest ways to completely change the look of your home is to move around the furniture. Sketch out your room's dimensions on paper and cut out pieces of paper in approximate dimension to your furniture. Move it around until you get a combination that you like. Then you can do the heavy lifting and move your furniture around to its new resting place (or stand back and direct the process while someone else does the lifting!).

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Place a mirror across from a window and suddenly you've got another window. Place it across from a door to give your room a wide-open feel. Any time you can place a mirror where light comes in, it creates a whole new level of warmth and openness in its reflection.

Pops Goes the Color

Add bright, fun pops of excitement with colorful throws and accent pillows. This works great on a couch or a bed. If most of your decor is neutral, you can have a lot of fun with seasonal color. Think hot pinks, oranges or bright greens for spring, reds and nautical blues for summer. Think about what one red pillow or one turquoise throw could do for a room.

Room to Breathe

Most people have more decor and sentimental treasures than their house can hold, let alone one room. Instead of trying to have everything on display all the time, select a handful of pieces that fit well with the season and put those out. Make sure whatever you are displaying has room to breathe. Space creates a sense of order and openness.

Let there be Light

Remove lamp shades from lamps, wipe off light bulbs with a microfiber cloth, dust lamps and then clean the shades. Use a soft brush attachment with your vacuum and run up and down along the shade. If you don't have a vacuum attachment, a soft brush will do. Remember to wipe down the inside of the shade as well. If the shade was rips or stains, think about investing in a new one. If lamps are dark and clunky, give them a coat of paint. A light neutral shade can create

a whole new look for your room. Or maybe you want to make the lamp your one focal point of color. Before you slap on a coat of eye-popping orange, get a paint chip and try it in the room to see what the overall effect is going to be.

Whimsy

Have fun with your spring decor and add unexpected elements. A vase filled with bright kumquats can hold a bouquet of daffodils. Limes combined in a vase with hot pink flowers are so fun together in a centerpiece. Use wall decals to brighten up a wall, cupboard or even a piece of wooden furniture.

Bed Linens

Create a whole new look by making a duvet. Place two flat sheets back to back, and sew around the perimeter, allowing for a half-inch seam. Leave an opening at the bottom. To close, sew twill-tape ties or velcro tape to the inside edges. You can also use the same sheet pattern or a contrasting design for your sheets, add some throw pillows and enjoy the new look. Take it a step further and use the same sheet pattern for curtains. Look for curtain hooks that clip on to the fabric or use bias tape or ribbon to create tabs on top of the sheets.

Quick Tip: If you like the idea of painting your room tangerine orange or bright pink but think it might be a bit much, try painting one wall instead. It will give your home a pop of color without being overwhelming.

Spring Scents

Lighten up the smell of your home for spring. How your home smells can have a big impact on your guests and the experience they have.

I'm a huge fan of pumpkin scents but by spring, I'm ready for something fresh and light instead of spicy and heavy.

Think about candles, plug ins or air sprays that smell like spring and sunshine, flowers and freshness.

Lilac is definitely a scent of spring. Fresh outdoors scents that bring to mind clothes on the line, bouquets of spring blossoms and soft breezes are good options.

Something fruity with a kick is always a fun fragrance and tells the nose that nothing stuffy and boring is going on in here. Look for something floral with a spicy undertone.

Scents that are fruity and light with a hint of surprise (like grass) tell your guests, "Hey, the fun people hang out here."

So lighten up! Get a new spring fragrance going on at home and see how much you and your guests enjoy it!

Quick Tip: Remember to keep scented candles, plug-ins and strong-scented flowers away from the food you are serving. The smell can overpower the food and that would be a bad thing!

Spring Party Preparation

If you like to entertain, think about giving your entertaining pieces a good spring cleaning. This will prepare you not only for a new entertaining season, but also to entertain with style on the spur of the moment.

Take out all your serving pieces, dinnerware, flatware – all of it! Anything you use when you have company over to eat.

Are there pieces that are chipped, cracked or discolored beyond hope of redemption? Get them out of your entertaining area and do something else with them. Cracked plates and platters make great bases for planters, can be used as wall art or broken into pieces and glued into a mosaic. You can even set cracked plates into cement and make garden stones out of them. Just get them out of your cupboard!

Do you have serving pieces you don't like to use but hang onto out of a sense of guilt (as in Aunt Madge gave you that hideous bowl for a wedding gift and you'd feel guilty getting rid of it)? Get over it! If you don't love it, don't keep it! Repurpose it, donate it, sell it and be done with it.

Do any of your dinnerware pieces need replaced? Take an inventory. You can find affordable china replacements through a variety of outlets online.

Look at all your flatware and serving sets. Do they need polished? Are the fork tines all in good shape? Do any of them need replaced?

If you have silver items that need polished, make them shine before you put them away.

Spending a bit of time now not only prepares you to entertain beautifully on a moment's notice, it also rids your cupboards and closets of things you no longer like or use.

Quick Tip: Use baking soda to get the dark stains out of light colored coffee mugs. Just sprinkle a bit on a damp cloth and rub around the inside of the mug. In a matter of seconds, the insides of your mugs look like new!

Spring Blooms

Invite some friends over for a casual dinner, brunch or lunch and create your own spring nirvana.

Here are some ideas for easy spring decorating with blossoms and blooms:

• Tulips – bring in a few bouquets, spread them around the house and, feel that warm glow of spring already throughout your home.

• Lilacs – also another harbinger of spring. A few bouquets will make your house smell like Mother Nature herself waved her magic wand and welcomed spring inside. I absolutely love lilacs and their gorgeous scent.

• Wild pops of color – bright, cheerful colors like hot pink, salmon, bright purple, sunshine yellow, grass green and robin's egg blue all shout, "Spring is here. Celebrate!" Hyacinths are a great way to bring these colors indoors. Beware, the scent can be a bit strong, though, so steer away from placing them near food.

• Pussy willows or blossoming branches – fill a tall vase with a few branches and you not only have a striking centerpiece, but you've also created a little corner of outdoorsy bliss in your home.

Quick Tip: Don't mix too many strongly-fragranced flowers in your home at once (like lilacs and hyacinths). The smell will be less than pleasant.

Feather Your Nest

I don't know what it is about cute little nests, but to me they just call out "spring." For a touch of fun and whimsy in your spring decor, think about feathering your nest with a few little nests.

You can find nests at the craft store or in the craft section of your local department store. You can add fake eggs for a natural look, nestle in a glass bowl with pastel candies or add a fake bird in the nest.

A large nest (or a grapevine wreath can also work) is a lovely container for spring floral arrangements. Just make sure you are placing a container inside that is water tight to hold the flowers.

Add a few spring plants to a nest for a colorful centerpiece or accent.

Tuck tiny nests among the piles of books on your coffee table or library shelves. Add them to groupings of glass bowls. Hide them in your houseplants.

I guarantee every time you see one, it will make you smile and think "Hello, Wonderful Spring!"

Quick Tip: Save a few plastic containers from the deli to use as inserts inside bowls, vases or wreaths. Fill with water and blooms then camouflage with greenery or blossoms.

Spring Swap

If you've been a busy beaver and have your spring cleaning all finished, good for you.

You probably have piles of things you no longer want or need languishing in your garage or storage shed now. Before you toss those treasures or donate them, think about hosting a Spring Swap Party. Invite a few of your friends to bring a dozen pieces (be it clothing, home decor, whatever) to swap at your party.

Everyone attending brings items that are in good shape and still usable. You put all the items out and then everyone gets to choose the same number of pieces to take home that they brought. Whatever is left over can then be donated to a charity or put into a yard sale.

Not only does this help your good junk find a home, but it also gives you the opportunity to get some "new to you" items without spending a dime (other than a few basic refreshments). So pick a sunny day, put out a few tables and snacks and jump into the fun!

Quick Tip: If you have pieces of home décor you like but are tired of looking at them in the same place, repurpose them in a different room. It can change the look and feel of a room without spending anything except a little time!

Lime and Flowers Centerpiece

If you are looking for a centerpiece that brings a “Wow” factor to your table, think about combining unusual elements together.

One combination that I love is a vase filled with sliced limes topped with a bouquet of flowers. Not only is it a striking visual element on your table, the smell of the limes mixing with the floral elements creates an appealing scent. This centerpiece doesn’t take that long to put together, but really makes a statement.

To create it you will need:

6-8 limes (depending on size)

a hurricane vase

a plain glass florist vase

6-8 stems of a “drapey” flower

6-8 stems of a “stalk” flower

10-12 stems of a “blooming” flower

To assemble, start by slicing your limes. I make the slices pretty thin. When you are finished with that, put the plain florist vase inside the hurricane. It is okay if the florist vase sticks up a bit because the top will be hidden anyway. Once the vase is in place, start layering in the limes until you’ve got them going up to the top of the hurricane. Fill both the hurricane and the plain vase with water.

Start arranging the flower stems inside the plain vase. I use the “drapey” flowers around the outside edge of the vase to hide the edges. The “stalk flowers” create some texture and height appeal while the “blooming” flowers add bright pops of color and texture.

For example: I used cuttings from a snowball bush that had not yet bloomed for my “drapey” flowers, lavender stems for my “stalk” flowers and peonies for the “blooming” flowers.

Have fun with this, be creative and remember there aren’t any rules set in stone about how this has to look. You could also substitute lemon or orange slices and you could use any combination of flowers and greenery. If you want dramatic height, you could even throw in a few tree branches.

Spring Party Theme

This party theme is super simple, but will bring you and those gathered around your table much joy as you celebrate the arrival of spring.

Create a colorful invitation and send to your friends. You could do this via email, in person or snail mail. If you email the invite, there are hundreds of colorful choices online, many that you can send free with services like evite.com.

Cover the table with a bright colored table cloth – something pink, green, yellow or orange would fit the bill. If you don't have a bright table covering, go for a neutral and use bright colored dishes. I've got some apple-green pieces that just scream "springtime." You could also use a piece of cloth from the fabric store or pick up an inexpensive sheet at a discount store.

Create some springtime fun around the table by tying flatware and napkins in a bundle with raffia twine and tucking in a packet of seeds. You can also create a fun centerpiece with a terra cotta planter, garden gloves, some garden tools and seeds. Have a garden-themed guessing game and let the winner take home the centerpiece.

Another centerpiece option would be a simple vase of tulips. You could also float individual tulip stems in little bowls or dishes at each place setting.

Keep your menu really simple. A huge green salad filled with fresh veggies and grilled chicken is a wonderful meal when accompanied by a loaf of crusty warm bread. Finish the meal with a citrus or berry dessert, like lemon or raspberry bars.

To keep the conversation spring-focused, have your guests share a favorite spring memory, what is the first sign of spring for them, or what one thing they enjoy most about spring. Share gardening tips or planting ideas.

Sit back, enjoy the companionship and give a bit of spring-like refreshment to your spirit!

Quick Tip: A fun take-home gift for your guests is a packet of wildflower seeds with a little note that says "Friendships are like flowers – they grow and bloom!"

Easter Egg Hunt Party

Planning an Easter Egg Hunt Party can be a fun excuse to gather family and friends together for a casual get-together. Here are some ideas to make your party memorable.

•Make it an evening affair with adults. Try Easter Egg hunting in the dark and gather some fun prizes for unique awards like the most broken eggs, least number collected, etc.

•Ask everyone to bring their own basket so you won't have to go to the expense of purchasing one for all attendees. Tell them to dress them up and have a best basket contest with a prize.

•Keep the event casual by serving a buffet-style meal. If you do it in the morning offer a brunch, afternoon and evening serve easy finger foods like deviled eggs, pitas, fruit kabobs.

•Keep decorations simple with a vase full of tulips and glass bowls filled with jelly beans.

•Use plastic eggs if you are hunting so you don't have to worry about food safety. This also gives you the opportunity to hide goodies in the eggs like candy, notes, dollar bills or other prizes. If you are filling the eggs for kids, go to the dollar store and get some stickers, jacks or other little toys.

Quick Tip: Make fun take-away gifts using two graham crackers, a mini-Hershey's chocolate bar and a marshmallow peep – Easter S'mores - in a Ziploc bag.

Jelly Bean Centerpiece

Looking for a fun and simple idea for an Easter centerpiece? Try this one!

If you have no talent for arranging flowers or want something different as a centerpiece, find three or five wide mouth jars or vases (you can use however many you like, but keep the number odd).

Place a glass votive holder in each vase and put an unscented votive candle inside. Pour jelly beans all ready the votive holder, right up to its edge. Spread the jars or vases down your table or group together in the center. Use a strong fruity or spicy flavor of jelly beans. When you light the candle and the votive warms, the scent of the candy will fill the room. I don't know about you, but some fun candy scents definitely make me think of Easter and baskets filled with goodies!

You could also use a large, flat-shaped bowl and place in several votives then fill with jellybeans. This could also work with a hurricane vase and a larger candle.

Have fun with this and see how simple and fun entertaining at home can be!

EASY RECIPES!

Here is a collection of recipes I like to make in the spring, when the heavy flavors of winter are overwhelming and we are ready for lighter fare.

Enjoy!

Strawberry Bliss

Here's a recipe for a fun, refreshing drink that can be made non-alcoholic for the whole family to enjoy.

Strawberry Bliss

1 can of Bacardi Mixers Frozen Strawberry Daiquiri concentrate

1 1/2 cans of water

1 bottle of Club Soda

granulated sugar

Mix concentrate with 1 1/2 cans (using the concentrate can) of water. Stir and freeze for a couple of hours, until it starts to firm up.

Wet the rims of your glasses and dip in sugar. Just put a teaspoon or so of sugar on a flat saucer and dip away. I like to put the glasses in the freezer after I sugar them so they are frosty when I serve the drink.

When you are ready to serve, remove the glasses and strawberry mix from the freezer. Scoop slush into glasses and fill about two-thirds full. Pour in enough club soda to fill the glass. You can garnish the glasses with a strawberry if you so desire or a sprig of mint.

Fruit Slush

This can be served as a refreshing first course, an intermezzo or for dessert. Simple and so good!

Fruit Slush

1/2 cup water

1/2 cup frozen orange juice concentrate

1/2 cup frozen pink lemonade concentrate

1 large banana, halved and sliced

1 small can pineapple chunks

1 can mandarin oranges

1/2 cup frozen raspberries

1/2 cup Maraschino cherries, stems removed

few additional Maraschino cherries, for garnish

In a large bowl, combine all ingredients, including juice from pineapple and mandarin oranges. Cover and freeze for 8 hours or until firm.

Remove from freezer about 20 minutes before serving. Scoop into individual serving cups or bowls and garnish with a Maraschino cherry.

Egg Chicks

These are a fun way to use up all those boiled eggs and have something fun the kids will want to eat, too!

Egg Chicks

12 hard-cooked eggs

1/2 cup mayonnaise (do not use salad dressing, repeat – do not use salad dressing)

1/4 cup Ranch dressing

1/2 tsp. salt

3 stuffed olives

Peel eggs then cut a thin slice from the bottom of each one so it will stand upright. Cut a zigzag pattern about a third of the way down from the top of each egg. Carefully remove yolks. If you do not carefully remove yolks, your egg will appear mangled like mine. Please, don't be like me.

Mash yolks in a bowl and add mayo, Ranch dressing and salt. Spoon into bottoms of egg, replace tops.

Cut olives into thin slices for eyes and use pimento pieces for beaks. Gently press into filling. Chill until ready to serve

Gyro Salad

With the arrival of spring, our tastes also seem to shift from the heavier comfort foods of winter to lighter fare.

This salad is a great blend of flavors that are tangy and fresh. It can serve as a side salad or a main mail.

Gyro Salad

Dressing:

1 cucumber, peeled and coarsely shredded

1/2 tsp. salt

3/4 cup plain yogurt

2 tbsp. white vinegar

1/2 tsp. dill weed

Salad:

1/2 lb. ground beef

1/4 cup chopped onions or onion flakes

1 tsp. all purpose seasoning

1 package of romaine salad blend

2 Roma tomatoes, chopped

1 package of crumbed feta cheese (about four ounces)

1/2 cup pitted Kalamata olives, drained

Toasted Bread Wedges

In a medium bowl, sprinkle salt over cucumber and mix well. Let stand five minutes. Drain. Stir in remaining dressing ingredients. Cover and refrigerate.

In a large skillet over medium heat, cook beef, onion and seasoning until onions are tender and meat is no longer pink. Drain.

Arrange greens on a large serving platter the top with tomatoes, feta cheese, olives and meat. Spoon dressing over salad. Serve immediately with toasted bread.

Tortellini Bites

I needed to make some appetizers for a party and really wanted to try something different. That different turned out to be really very tasty and so simple using easy to find ingredients and a few minutes of my time.

Give these little tortellini bits a whirl. Your taste buds will thank you repeatedly. Especially if you are a pasta fan.

Tortellini Bites

1 bag cheese-filled tortellini

1 container mozzarella cheese balls or cubes

1 container calamata olives

1 cup olive oil/vinaigrette dressing (or Italian)

Cook tortellini according to package directions. Drain, rinse and cool. Drain mozzarella balls if they come pack in water. Add dressing to both the cheese and the pasta. Cover tightly and refrigerate for at least an hour, overnight is even better. The more time they have to marinate in the dressing, the yummier they taste.

Assemble using toothpicks or mini skewers. Thread on one tortellini, one cheese ball and finish with an olive. Arrange on a platter and stand back to watch the crowd go wild. It is nearly impossible to eat just one, unless you are Captain Cavedweller who refuses to eat tortellini, calamata olives and anything marinated in vinaigrette dressing.

Tortilla and Ham Roll-Ups

If you want a simple appetizer that people absolutely can't stay away from, try this easy recipe. I've made it countless times over the years and never have any leftovers.

Warning – we absolutely will not talk about the caloric content of this recipe! And don't go all healthy-substitute crazy on me, here. You have to follow the recipe or it just doesn't taste right!

Tortilla and Ham Roll-Ups

4 large flour tortilla (or 6-8 smaller ones)

1 large package cream cheese, softened

1/2 cup grated cheddar-jack cheese

1 small can chopped olives

1/4 cup ranch dressing

1 package of ham lunch meat, thinly sliced

In a bowl, combine cream cheese, cheddar-jack cheese, ranch dressing and olives. Mix well then spread over tortilla, going almost to the edges.

Layer on ham then tightly roll up tortillas. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for several hours or overnight. When you are ready to serve, unwrap, slice into about 1/2-inch wide slices and stand back. You don't want to get trampled by the crowd as they hurry to devour these.

Popovers

I love the egg-y texture of these wonderful bites of bliss. Warm out of the oven with butter dripping off the edges – oh my! Give them a try! You'll be glad you did. Just don't forget to poke the tops with a fork when you take them out of the oven to let the steam escape.

Popovers

2 beaten eggs

1 cup milk

1 tbsp. oil

1 cup flour

1/4 tsp. salt

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Spray six custard cups or a large 6-cup muffin pan with non-stick cooking spray. Set aside.

In a mixing bowl, combine eggs, milk and oil. Add flour and salt. Mix well, beating until smooth. Fill the cups half-full. Bake 40 minutes or until very firm. Remove from oven and quickly poke the tops with a fork to let out the steam. You can return to the oven for another five minutes for extra-crispy popovers or serve immediately.

Roasted Salmon

This recipe is so easy and simple, anyone can make delicious salmon this way!

Roasted Salmon

Salmon filet

Olive Oil

Salt

Pepper

Spices

Place filet on baking sheet. Drizzle on olive oil and then sprinkled on spices.

Put into a cold oven and bake at 400 for 25 minutes. Serve with your favorite accompaniments!

Tater Tot Casserole

If you want a filling meal that is fast and easy to put together, try this one using hamburger and tater tots. Wonderful choice for a night when you want some good comfort food.

Tater Tot Casserole

2 pounds of ground beef

1 package of tater tots

1 cup shredded colby-jack cheese (or cheddar)

1/2 tsp onion flakes

2 cans of cream of mushroom soup

all-purpose seasoning

salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Put tater tots into a 9 x 13 casserole pan (I lightly spray mine with non-stick cooking spray first) and place in the oven while you brown the ground beef. I add the onion flakes, seasoning and salt and pepper to the ground beef. When the hamburger is browned, mix it with the two cans of cream of mushroom soup and spoon over the top of the tater tots. Sprinkle with cheese and cover with foil. Bake for about 20 minutes, or until soup is hot and bubbly. Remove foil and bake for a few more minutes until cheese is a melted layer of luscious gooey-ness. Remove from oven and savor a yummy meal.

Fruit Pizza

I was desperate for something fruity and light and delicious to make for a party. So I decided to finally give fruit pizza a try. Why didn't someone tell me how perfectly wonderful and easy to make this is years ago? If you haven't experienced fruit pizza before, give it a whirl. You'll regret not trying it sooner!

Fruit Pizza

Sugar cookie crust, baked (you can make from scratch or be lazy like me and purchase a tube of cookie dough

1 cup whipped cream cheese

1/2 cup powdered sugar

1 banana, sliced

1 kiwi, peeled and sliced

1 cup sliced strawberries

1/2 cup grapes, sliced in half

1 can mandarin oranges

Bake your sugar cookie crust and let cool completely. You can use a round pizza pan or a baking sheet. I knew I was serving this on a rectangular platter so cutting it into squares made more sense.

Mix together cream cheese and sugar. Remove crust from pan then spread with whipped cream cheese. Slice.

Top with sliced fruit and serve.

How easy is that!

Lemon Cookies

I love all things lemon for spring. It's like holding little bursts of springtime on your tongue. These cookies could only be easier if they made themselves!

Lemon Cookies

1 box Betty Crocker Lemon Cake Mix

2 eggs

1/2 cup butter, melted

1 tsp. lemon juice

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Melt butter then combine with remaining ingredients. Drop by onto a baking sheet and bake about eight minutes or until cookies are just set.

Do not let them get brown because they will get hard and goodness knows lemon cookies should be soft and luscious. It's a law written somewhere, I'm sure!

Remove from the oven and while warm, dust with powdered sugar.

Lemon Meringue Pie

Once upon a time, I was overcome with the urge to make a lemon meringue pie. I've made them on numerous occasions using a box of lemon pudding mix but never lemon pudding from scratch.

I shall never open another box of lemon pudding again.

The burst of flavor, the fusion of sweet and tart, was positively wonderful. Not to mention the euphoric state created by zesting the lemons. The scent was beyond divine and delightful. I was afraid Captain Cavedweller would come home to find me still melted in a puddle across the kitchen floor.

Yes, it was that fantabulous.

Lemon Meringue Pie

1 pre-baked pie crust, cooled

Filling

Meringue

Meringue

3 egg whites

3/8 tsp. cream of tartar

1/2 cup granulated sugar

To start with, make sure your bowl is completely grease-free. Any oily residue will ruin your meringue. Go for a glass bowl if it all possible. You need 1/8 tsp. of cream of tartar for each egg white. Sprinkle on top of egg whites and beat with mixer on medium speed until soft peaks form. Add in sugar gradually and continue beating until stiff peaks forms and the meringue is glossy and lovely.

You will want to whip up the meringue before you start cooking the pudding.

Filling

3/4 cup granulated sugar

1/4 cup cornstarch

2 1/2 cups milk

3 large yolks, lightly beaten

2 tbsp. finely grated lemon zest

pinch of salt

1/2 cup fresh lemon juice

2 tbsp. butter, softened

NOTE: Three fresh lemons gave me plenty of zest and came out, when squeezed by hand, to be right at 1/2 cup of juice. Do yourself a favor and squeeze your own juice. The flavor is amazing! Also, separate your egg whites from the yolks and put the whites into a large mixing bowl. You'll use them for the meringue.

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Place sugar and cornstarch in a 2-quart heavy saucepan. Whisk to combine. Gradually add milk, whisking until smooth. Add egg yolks.

Stir in lemon zest and salt.

Place saucepan over medium-high heat and cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thick.

Remove pan from heat and stir in lemon juice and butter. If you don't want the zested lemon in your pudding you can run it through a fine mesh strainer at this point. If you are like me and don't care, pour the pudding into the prepared pie crust. You can make your own crust – I highly recommend the vodka pie crust recipe following – or use a store-bought crust. Whatever floats your boat. Mine floated with the vodka recipe.

While the pudding is still piping hot, spoon on the meringue and bake in oven for about 5 minutes or until top is lightly browned. If you want mile-high meringue, double the recipe for the meringue. I'd recommend baking it at a lower temperature longer to make sure the inside gets cooked – 325 for 20 minutes or so.

Let cool completely before serving.

Vodka Pie Crust

Here is a no-fail, flaky every single time recipe for pie crust. It is absolutely delicious!

Vodka Pie Crust

2 1/2 cups flour

1 tsp. salt

2 tbsp. sugar

1 1/2 sticks cold butter, cut into 1/4 inch slices

1/2 cup vegetable shortening, cut into 4 pieces

1/4 cup cold vodka

1/4 cup cold water

Process 1 1/2 cups flour, salt, and sugar in food processor until combined, about 2 one-second pulses. Add butter and shortening and process until dough just starts to collect in uneven clumps, about 15 seconds (dough will resemble coarse crumbs). Scrape bowl with rubber spatula and redistribute dough evenly around processor blade. Add remaining cup flour and pulse until mixture is evenly distributed around bowl and mass of dough has been broken up, 4 to 6 quick pulses. Empty mixture into medium bowl.

If, like me, you do not have a food processor, get ready to apply some arm muscle and work the dough together with either a fork or pastry cutter until all the flour is mixed in and it is crumbly.

Sprinkle vodka and water over mixture. With a rubber spatula, use folding motion to mix, pressing down on dough until dough is slightly tacky and sticks together. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 45 minutes or up to two days.

Generously flour a clean, flat surface and your rolling pin. Divide dough in half and roll out one half, turning dough over between rolls to keep from sticking to counter or surface. Roll to desired thickness then transfer to pie plate.

Easy Lemon Tarts

A really easy and tasty dessert that can be thrown together in a jiffy for last minute entertaining is this recipe for lemon tarts. Great anytime, they are especially tasty on these hot summer days.

Easy Lemon Tarts

1 small box lemon pudding

whipping cream, whipped

2 packages frozen mini phyllo shells

Make the pudding according to package directions. I prefer the flavor and texture of cooked pudding, but if you are really in a hurry, use instant. Once the pudding is made, chill. The phyllo shells I purchase have 15 in a box and two boxes comes out proportionately to the pudding. You can let the shells thaw and then fill or you can put them into the oven for a few minutes to make them crispy. Fill the shells with the chilled pudding. Dollop with whipped cream (if you are in a big hurry, use Reddi-Whip or frozen dairy topping) then finish with a fresh raspberry.

Although very simple and easy to make, these little tarts look like you invested a lot of time in them.

Luscious Orange Panna Cotta

This recipe for Luscious Orange Panna Cotta is easy to make and so flavorful and smooth and wonderful and fragrant. It is like breathing in a bit of spring. Just remember, you need to let this rest in the fridge for about 8 hours, so plan accordingly!

First, make the Buttery Orange Curd. Then whip together the Panna Cotta.

Buttery Orange Curd

2/3 cup sugar

2 ½ tbsp. cornstarch

1 1/3 cups orange juice

1 large egg, lightly beaten

3 tbsp. butter

2 tsp. orange zest

Pinch of salt

Combine sugar and cornstarch in a 3-quart saucepan. Gradually whisk in orange juice. Whisk in egg. Set on medium burner and bring to a boil, whisking constantly, and cook three to four minutes or until mixture starts to thicken.

Remove from heat then whisk in butter, zest and salt. Place heavy-duty plastic wrap directly on the curd, to prevent a film from forming, and chill eight hours. Store leftovers in the fridge for up to three days.

Luscious Orange Panna Cotta

A silky custard, made without egg…

1 3/4oz envelope unflavored gelatin

1 cup cold milk, divided

3 navel oranges, divided

1 ¾ cups heavy cream

¼ cup granulated sugar

½ tsp. vanilla extract

¼ cup sparkling sugar

Sprinkle gelatin over ¼ cup milk in a small bowl. Stir until moistened. Let stand five minutes (it will be lumpy).

Removed three 2×1 inch strips of rind from an orange with a peeler. Make sure you have properly washed your orange before peeling off rind.

Cook heavy cream, granulated sugar and orange rind strips in a saucepan over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally for about four minutes or until sugar is dissolved. Remove from heat and add gelatin mixture, stirring until completely dissolved. Add in vanilla and remaining ¾ cup milk. Stir in then discard orange strips.

Pour mixture into six 4-ounce dessert glasses or wineglasses. Cover with plastic wrap and chill eight hours.

Peel and section remaining oranges. Make sure you have removed all the peel and bitter white pith. Roll orange sections in sparkling sugar.

Top Panna Cotta with Buttery Orange Curd and sugared oranges. Garnish with a dollop of whipped cream. May be stored in fridge for up to three days.

Banana Cheesecake

My most wonderful mother-in-law loves banana cheesecake. I first made this for her last year for Mother's Day and it was a hit.

I will warn you that it takes a bit of patience to make, but the result is most definitely worth it!

Banana Cheesecake

1 package vanilla sandwich cookies

1/4 cup butter, melted

24 ounces cream cheese, softened

2/3 cup sugar

2 tbsp. cornstarch

3 eggs

1 cup mashed bananas

1/2 cup heavy cream

1 tsp. vanilla extract

1 tsp. banana flavoring

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Place cookies in a resealable bag and smash the dickens out of them with a cast iron skillet or a meat tenderizer. If you have a food processor, just pulse until they are finely crushed. Mine were finely crushed by Captain Cavedweller. Crushed by the fine Captain Cavedweller. Finally crushed finely. Oh, you know what I mean.

Add melted butter and mix well. Press into the bottom of a 10″ spring form pan and refrigerate.

Beat cream cheese on medium speed with electric mixer until creamy. Add sugar and cornstarch, beating until blended. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in bananas, cream and vanilla and banana flavoring. If you don't have banana flavoring, just add another spoon of vanilla. Place spring form pan on cookie sheet. Pour mixture into prepared crust. Bake 15 minutes.

Reduce oven temperature to 200 degrees and continue baking 75-90 minutes until center is just set. Loosen edge of spring form pan but do not remove. Let cool completely then take off pan rim. Refrigerate cheesecake for at least six hours before serving.

Banana Pudding

Captain Cavedweller likes bananas. As in, if we don't have any, he goes a little bananas. Other than meat, they are the one thing he thinks he must have on a daily basis.

The other day, I was feeling unusually generous and offered to make him banana pudding. After his comment that he didn't think we had any instant in the pantry, I was less inclined, but forged ahead anyway. I'm glad I did because the pudding was really good – smooth and creamy with just the right amount of banana flavoring.

The recipe is easy and comes together quickly.

Banana Pudding

1/3 cup sugar

2 tbsps. cornstarch

1/8 tsp. salt

2 cups milk

2 large eggs, slightly beaten

2 tsps. banana flavoring

1 banana

Nilla wafers

Slice banana. Line dessert cups or bowls with Nilla wafers and banana slices, set aside. Lightly beat eggs in a small bowl. Set aside.

In 2-quart heavy saucepan, mix sugar, cornstarch and salt. Gradually stir in milk. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until mixture thickens and boils. Boil and stir 1 minute.

Gradually stir about one cup of the hot mixture into eggs, a few spoonfuls at a time then stir back into hot mixture in saucepan. *(Note, if you mix the eggs and the milk mixture together all at once, you'll end up with egg-y lumps that will not be the most palatable thing you've ever tried to swallow.)*

Boil and stir 1 minute; remove from heat. Stir in flavoring.

Pour pudding into dessert dishes. Cover and refrigerate about 1 hour or until chilled. Store covered in refrigerator. When ready to serve, garnish with whipped cream, banana slices (dipped in chocolate if you want some added deliciousness) and a few Nilla wafers.

Chocolate Bombe

If you have a little patience, this show-stopping dessert is well worth the effort. It is guaranteed to impress your guests and garner rave reviews every time!

Chocolate Bombe

1 Betty Crocker Chocolate Fudge cake mix (18-ounce box)

1 1/3 cups water

1 /2 cup oil

3 eggs

1 quart fresh strawberries, divided

2 envelopes unflavored Knox gelatin (1 ounce)

1/2 cup frozen strawberry juice concentrate, thawed

3 cups heavy whipping cream

1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1 tbsp. vanilla extract

1/2 cup confectioner's sugar

1/2 cup semisweet chocolate chips

1 tsp. oil

2 tbsp. prepared chocolate frosting

Grease and flour three 8-inch round cake pans. Prepare cake mix according to package directions. Divide evenly in the three pans and bake at 350 degrees for 20-22 minutes or until toothpick inserted near the center comes out clean. Cool for 10 minutes then remove to wire racks to cool completely.

Reserve a few strawberries for garnish. Purée enough of the remaining strawberries to measure 1 cup and set aside. In a small micro-wave safe bowl, sprinkle gelatin over juice concentrate; let stand for five minutes. Microwave on high power one minute. Stir until gelatin dissolves; set aside. In a small mixing bowl, beat 1 cup of the heavy cream until stiff.

In another mixing bowl, combine cream cheese, sugar and vanilla; mix well. Blend in strawberry purée. Gradually add gelatin mixture and blend until smooth. Whisk in whipped cream; set aside.

Line a 12-cup capacity bowl with 2-3 long sheets of plastic wrap, allowing ends of plastic wrap to hang over the sides of the bowl by at least 6 inches.

Gently press one cake layer into the bottom of the bowl. Spoon about one-half of the filling over the cake layer, then top with another layer of cake. Spread remaining filling over the second layer of the cake; top with the third layer of cake. Gently press down. Cover with loose ends of plastic wrap and refrigerate at least one hour (you can refrigerate overnight as well).

Line a baking sheet with a piece of waxed paper or baking parchment. Place the butterfly pattern under the paper. Mix chocolate chips and oil in micro-wave safe bowl, microwave on high in 10-15 second intervals, stirring until chocolate is smooth and melted. Spoon into a pastry bag or a resealable plastic sandwich bag with the tip of a corner snipped. Trace the butterfly pattern with the chocolate. Move the pattern around the pan, tracing as many butterflies as you'd like to make. When finished, place in the freezer for at least an hour until chocolate has hardened.

When ready to serve, mix the confectioner's sugar with the remaining cream until stiff. Uncover top of the bombe. Invert onto a serving platter; remove and discard plastic wrap. Frost with sweetened whipped cream.

Put prepared chocolate frosting in a microwave safe bowl and warm on high for about 15 seconds. Using a knife, drizzle chocolate over the cake in a swirling pattern. Top with chocolate butterflies and add a berry on top for garnish. Don't let the butterflies set out of the freezer for too long before you add them to the cake as they softened quickly.

Stand back and be prepared for your guests to be dazzled by your creative culinary talents!

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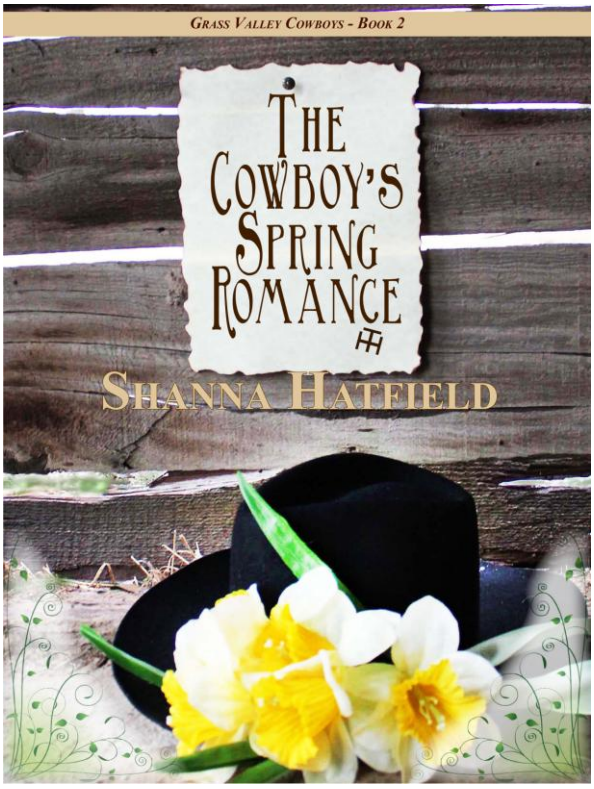
Coming May 2012!

The Cowboy's Summer Love **-** After six years in the service and two tours of duty in Iraq, Travis Thompson eagerly returns home to Grass Valley, ready to resume his life on the Triple T Ranch with his two older brothers. Always the wild-child, Travis doesn't disappoint as he rolls from one adventure to another in his quest to keep his adrenaline pumping.

In love with Travis Thompson since she was old enough to notice boys, Tess Morgan can't stay away from him no matter how hard she tries. Growing up together, she thinks Travis sees her only as his best friend's sister, not as a woman who could turn his head.

Will these two be able to overcome their challenges and fall in love? With a little summer magic, anything is possible!



Available March 2012!

The Cowboy's Spring Romance **-** Trent Thompson has carried a torch for the new schoolteacher since she moved to Grass Valley more than three years ago. Instead of asking her out, he's dated every single female in a 30-mile radius, giving her the impression he's not interested in her at all.

Lindsay Pierce moved to Grass Valley to teach and quickly fell in love with the small community as well as the delightful people who live there. Everyone welcomes her warmly except for one obnoxious cowboy who goes out of his way to ignore her.

Will Trent be able to maintain the pretense when he has to babysit his niece, who happens to be in Lindsay's class? Will love blossom along with the first flowers of spring?

Romance is in the air as spring fever hits the Triple T Ranch!

The Cowboy's Spring Romance

By

Shanna Hatfield

An excerpt…

Available March 2011

Where ebooks are sold

In print on Amazon.com

The Cowboy's Spring Romance

Chapter One

Romance is everything.

Gertrude Stein

"What's a honeymoon?"

Trent Thompson looked down at his five-year-old niece regretting, yet again, his decision to play babysitter while his brother enjoyed a trip to Mexico with his new wife.

Rubbing his hand across the back of his neck and trying to think of a suitable response, he didn't have time to provide one before he was pelted with another round of questions.

"What do peoples do on a honeymoon? Do they play and have fun? What do they do, Uncle Trent?" Cass asked, standing on Trent's feet with her arms wrapped around his knees, looking up at him with questions burning in her bright blue eyes. "How come I couldn't go? Is Daddy going to kiss Mama like he does when they think I'm asleep? Is that why I couldn't go? Why, Uncle Trent? Why?"

He was going to die.

Picking up the little redhead, he gave her a hug before setting her down on the kitchen counter.

"Well, Cass..." Trent racked his brain for an answer. His standard response to her tricky questions was to tell her to go ask her mother. Now that he didn't have an escape route, he was going to have to come up with something to stop her questioning. "People do go on a honeymoon to have fun. They usually go somewhere they can enjoy spending time together. You couldn't miss school, that's why you had to stay here with me and Uncle Travis."

Feeling pretty smug he hoped that answered Cass' questions.

"Oh, okay," Cass said, swinging her feet on the edge of the counter, looking around the big kitchen. "Where's Uncle Travis?"

"He went out to warm up the pickup so you wouldn't freeze your toes on the way to school," Trent said, picking up Cass' coat and helping her put it on. Being responsible for a little-person was new to Trent. Actually, it was new to all of them.

Cass' mother died right after Thanksgiving. Trey and Cady, who also happened to be their cook and housekeeper, held a special interest in the little girl long before she became an orphan. After spending time with her, Trent had grown quite attached to Cass as well. It only took a few days of her staying with them after her mother passed away for Trey and Cady to decide they wanted to keep her on a permanent basis. They went to court to get custody, putting their romance on hold until they received the court ruling on keeping Cass. When they were granted custody just two days before Christmas, the lovebirds plunged ahead with their plans and began the New Year with a wedding. With the help of the judge who awarded them custody, Cass' adoption papers were pushed through and finalized, making them a ready-made family.

Now that Cass was settled into a regular routine, the newlyweds felt comfortable leaving her in the care of her two uncles so they could finally get away for a honeymoon.

Trent didn't blame his brother at all. Trey and Cady rarely enjoyed the luxury of spending time alone and if he had a wife as pretty as his new sister-in-law, he'd want to take her off to some warm, sunny beach and keep her all to himself.

That thought conjured up an image of Lindsay Pierce, Cass' kindergarten teacher. She was a leggy blond with a beautiful smile, and a scent that reminded him of a walk through the woods on a warm afternoon. Not that he noticed these things, especially about Lindsay.

The woman positively hated him.

Annoyed with himself for thinking of Miss Pierce, Trent pulled Cass' stocking cap on with a little more force than necessary and tugged the whole thing down to her chin.

"Uncle Trent! That's not how it goes," Cass said with a huff, jerking the cap off and sending her head of red curls into a wild tangle.

"Sorry, Cass," Trent said, helping her put the cap on properly. Making sure her mittens were on, he set her on the floor, took her hand, picked up her backpack, and walked out the back door into the bright morning light.

Although the sun was shining, it was bitterly cold outside. His breath came out in puffs and the packed snow crunched beneath their boots. It was a typical February day in Grass Valley, Oregon. Located between the deep canyons of the John Day River on the east and the Deschutes River on the west in north central Oregon, Grass Valley was a rancher's paradise in the growing season with rolling fields of wheat and barley, as well as pastures full of cattle. Now, though, it was cold and barren as winter swept the landscape.

Helping Cass to his pickup, Trent buckled her into the booster seat in the back, handed the backpack to her and climbed inside.

Irritated at his younger brother, Trent didn't know why Travis refused to take Cass to school. He knew how much Trent didn't want to see Lindsay. Travis probably thought it would irk him to have to do it and unfortunately, he was right.

For three long years, Trent watched Lindsay from a distance. She always looked at him like he was something that stuck to her shoe while walking across a barnyard. He tried to ignore her, dated every single female in the area, and hoped to feel some interest spark with another girl. Instead, his playing the field seemed to increase Lindsay's dislike of him and made Trent that much more fascinated by her.

When she served as one of Cady's bridesmaids, he assumed the time they spent together would help chip away at the icy wall she erected between them. His efforts at teasing her seemed to have only made things worse. After she called him a contemptible clod, he was pretty sure that meant he was not on her list of dating prospects.

He managed to avoid her quite successfully since the wedding, even though they attended the same church. Now, though, he was going to be forced into some form of interaction with her until Trey and Cady came home unless he could make it perfectly clear to Travis that school pick up and drop off needed to be on his list of "uncle duties."

Sighing, he pulled off the highway and turned down the lane to the school. Kids ran all around the playground, laughing, throwing icy snowballs and enjoying the few minutes of freedom before it was time for their classes to begin. Glancing at his watch, Trent knew the bell would ring any minute.

Turning off the pickup, he got out and helped Cass climb down, handing her the little backpack.

"Okay, goofball," Trent said, using his pet name for Cass, which made her giggle. "Give me a hug and off you go."

Cass hugged his long legs, hitting him at the knees, but then turned her big blue eyes up to his face. "Please come in with me, Uncle Trent. I want you to see my desk. Pretty please?"

Unable to say no when she turned those baby blues on him, Trent nodded his head and took her hand.

At six-feet, five-inches, Trent tended to stick out in a crowd. With the cowboy boots he wore and the Stetson on his head giving him added height, and he looked more like a giant as he walked with Cass across the schoolyard. Kids stopped and looked his direction, then resumed their playing.

"Come on, Uncle Trent," Cass said, tugging on his hand. "Hurry before the bell rings."

He sincerely hoped the bell would ring soon so he could make an excuse and leave before he ran into Lindsay.

Stopping at the door to her classroom, Cass pulled on his hand. "Come see, come see!"

Trent walked in, grateful the room was empty. Cass hurried over to one of the tiny desks and opened it, taking out a picture drawn in crayon.

"See the picture I drew?" Cass held it out to him with a beaming smile. "This is Mama and Daddy and you and Uncle Travis and Grammy."

"Wow!" Trent said, hunkering down next to her desk. "You got all of us in this one picture and look at all the colors you used. This is very creative, Cass."

The little girl beamed at him, making Trent glad he hadn't dropped her off and hurried back home.

She took more papers out of her desk and showed him what she was working on and pointed out some of her projects hanging on the walls around the room with the other students' assignments.

"You are doing just great, Cass," Trent said, picking her up and giving her a hug. "Your mom and dad are so proud of you."

"Thanks, Uncle Trent," Cass said, giving his cheek a kiss. Looking over his shoulder she giggled. "Morning, Miss Lindsay."

"Good morning, Cass," Lindsay Pierce said, striding purposefully into her classroom carrying a box full of art supplies. "How are you today?"

"I'm great. Uncle Trent and Uncle Travis are taking good care of me while Mama and Daddy are gone on a honeymoon. Have you ever been on a honeymoon?" Cass asked, wiggling for Trent to put her down, which he did reluctantly. Holding Cass gave him something to do with his hands beside jam them in his pockets or twirl his hat nervously.

"No, I haven't, Cass," Lindsay said, as a slight blush rode her cheeks. Of all the questions for Cass to ask, it would have to be one about honeymoons while her obnoxious uncle was in the room.

With her blond hair, eyes the color of a summer sky, and golden skin, Lindsay attracted Trent as no other woman ever had. At six-feet tall and athletic, she was lean and lovely. If Trent had been a shorter man, she might have intimidated him. Instead, she drove him to distraction. This morning her hair was shining like spun gold in the light streaming through the classroom windows and she wore a peach-colored sweater with black slacks and flats.

Trent absently wondered if the sweater would be as soft as it looked, longing to run his hand up and down her arm. Gathering his manners, he took off his hat and nodded in the direction of Cass' teacher. "Hello, Miss Pierce."

Looking down her nose at him, Lindsay raised her chin a fraction and sniffed. "Hello, Mr. Thompson."

Sliding toward the door, he told Cass to be good and he'd be back to get her at noon when the kindergartners were released for the day.

Before he could make his escape Lindsay stopped him.

"Mr. Thompson? A moment of your time, if you please," Lindsay said, motioning him to join her at the front of the room.

Lindsay didn't know what had come over her, but walking into her classroom this morning and finding none other than Trent Thompson standing there holding Cass did funny things to her insides, let alone to her ability to think rationally.

Moving to the community three and a half years ago to take the position of kindergarten and first-grade teacher, she was welcomed by the residents of Grass Valley with open arms. Except for Trent. He avoided her, rarely spoke to her, and when he did it was to offer some teasing comment or joke that she most often found insulting rather than humorous. On top of that, he had a reputation for dating any single female for miles around and had never once shown the slightest interest in her. She would reluctantly admit wounded pride was part of the reason she was uncomfortable around him. The man was, in her opinion, a certified boor.

Never mind the fact that he was extremely tall and physically fit, that his blue eyes glowed with warmth and humor, or that he and his two brothers could all have modeling jobs if they

wanted to give up their work as ranchers. She thought it was decidedly unfair for one family to produce three such good looking, square-jawed, broad-shouldered men.

Too bad her friend Cady snatched up the pick of the three, though. Everyone talked about Trey being the best looking, Travis being the daredevil, and Trent being the easy-going giant.

Although Cady tried to convince her that Trent was just as solid and kind as Trey, Lindsay couldn't quite believe it. He never failed to say something that irritated her.

Lindsay was a bit of a romantic at heart. That was why she ignored the way Trent's presence made her heart speed up and her palms get moist. A romance with the arrogant rancher? The entire notion was nothing short of ridiculous. Positively ridiculous. She would bet he didn't know the first thing about romancing a woman. He'd already proven that with his idiotic jokes and relentless teasing.

Watching Trent begin to exit the classroom, she spoke before her brain was fully engaged. What possessed her to call him to her desk? Thinking frantically, she glanced at the box she carried in with her a few moments earlier. Suddenly a thought pushed through the muddled turmoil in her mind and made her smile.

"Since you are here anyway, would you mind hanging these decorations for me? It would save me a trip to find a stepstool since I can't quite reach the hooks." Lindsay held a glittery red heart by its satin ribbon and pointed to a series of hooks in the ceiling.

Trent took a deep breath and walked to her desk, praying he wouldn't say anything to stoke the fire of her animosity this morning. He didn't know what it was about Lindsay, but he got so tongue-tied around her, the only words he could get out were lame jokes and teasing. It sounded stupid to his own ears, so he could only imagine what she thought. No wonder she went to great lengths to avoid him.

Although he still hadn't worked up the courage to ask her out, Trent knew any number of things about the attractive school teacher gained from his hobby of studying her from afar. He knew she liked two packets of artificial sugar in her coffee, no cream. She always crossed her right leg over her left. She wore a silver ring on the middle finger of her right hand that she spun around and around when she was nervous. She also had a habit of pushing her hair behind her ears when she wore it loose, which wasn't often. She favored soft shades of peach, yellow and blue over brighter colors. When she liked someone, she tipped her head slightly and smiled from her eyes as she talked to them.

If he didn't know better, he'd say he was completely infatuated with the woman, but that just couldn't be possible.

Taking off his hat, he set it down on one of the tiny desks, unsnapped his coat and took the decoration from her. When their fingers accidentally brushed, his entire hand tingled. Managing to keep his mouth shut, he hung the decoration on the hook she indicated and reached for the next one. Neither one of them spoke during the entire process and Cass, chatterbox that she was, kept the silence from being awkward.

As the last sparkly heart dangled from a hook, Lindsay glanced around, pleased by how festive the classroom looked and turned to find Trent starting at her. Instead of blushing, she tucked a lock of her straight hair behind her ear and gave him a small smile. "Thank you for helping me. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," Trent said, picking up his hat and putting it back on his head.

Lindsay admired the waves in his brown hair, wondering what it would be like to run her fingers through it. Mentally slamming on the brakes, she brought that thought to an abrupt halt, sucked in a breath and stood a little straighter. "I think…" What she planned to say was cut off by the morning bell. Taking a quick look at the wall clock, she turned to see Trent rubbing his hand affectionately on top of Cass' head as he walked out the door.

Sinking behind her desk, Lindsay knew she needed to get herself under control. Trey and Cady were going to be gone for ten more days. It was going to take every ounce of restraint she had to endure seeing Trent twice a day for almost two weeks. Even if he was good with Cass and looked like he'd stepped out of the pages of one of the romance books she enjoyed reading, she had to keep focused on the fact that she usually found him annoying and pretentious.

If only she could wipe the memory of his warm smile, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes and his enticing woodsy scent from her mind.

Inwardly groaning, she put a smile in place, ready to greet her class.

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Travis was in big trouble. Huge trouble.

When he got home, Trent was going to find his brother and make it perfectly and unmistakably clear that he was no longer going to be Cass' bus service to and from school. He just couldn't take being around Lindsay.

His heart still pounded and his fingers continued to tingle where her fingertips, all soft and slender, had connected with his multiple times as she handed him the decorations.

Now, instead of seeing him as a wise-cracking smart-aleck, she no doubt would think he was the world's biggest dolt. Why did that woman tie him up in knots? He dated more girls than both his brothers combined and never had any problem talking to any of them. But stick him in a room with Lindsay and his mind went as blank as her freshly cleaned chalkboard.

Stopping his truck by the back door, he went in the sprawling ranch house, traded his town hat and coat for his work outerwear, yanked on his gloves and stalked out to the barn. He loved this ranch and loved sharing the big house with his two brothers, but sometimes all of them living under one roof was challenging.

Busy all morning, he didn't have time to find his brother. Knowing Travis wouldn't bail on him twice the first day Trey and Cady were on their honeymoon, he didn't give another thought to picking up Cass at noon.

At a quarter to twelve, his phone buzzed and a text message arrived from Travis.

Fixing fence, can't get Cass. Sorry.

Trent felt his temper start to boil. Travis was obviously doing this on purpose and if he found out Trey was involved in the set-up, both his brothers were going to be two of the sorriest men that ever lived.

Jumping on the four-wheeler and hurrying to the house, he started his pickup and drove back to the school. The noon bell rang as he pulled into the parking lot.

It didn't take long for the kindergarten students to come outside. Trent was standing by the pickup, waiting for Cass when she ran his direction, waving a hand over her head.

"Hi, Uncle Trent!" she said, all smiles.

"Hi, Cass. Did you have fun this morning?" he asked as he set her in the booster seat and helped her buckle up.

"Yes!" she said, trying to tug something out of her backpack. "I made you a picture."

"You did?" Trent said, waiting while she carefully pulled a piece of art paper out of her bag, still wet with glue and glitter. Even with his limited experience at kindergarten art appreciation, he could see the stick figures were of him and Lindsay in the classroom this morning hanging up the decorations. Cass added glittery hearts all over the ceiling, just like the ones he helped Lindsay hang. In her drawing, his legs each looked ten-feet long in comparison to the rest of the scene.

"This is very nice, Cass. Do I get to keep it?" Trent asked, as her feet wiggled and she bounced in her seat.

"Yep! You can put it on the fridge, just like Mama does," Cass said. Cady, who liked things neat and orderly, had turned their huge commercial refrigerator into an art gallery of Cass' creations. The only thing not covered by paper drawings and assorted pictures made from things that were once edible, was the ice maker in the door. It was just another sign that their neat orderly world was now interspersed with the trappings of a much-loved child.

"Are you hungry?" Trent asked as he pulled in at Viv's diner. He couldn't cook to save his life, but Cady's Aunt Vivian promised to feed Cass lunch every day, so Trent took her in and they quickly found a table.

Viv saw them arrive and waved her hand. She soon came to the table with a hearty bowl of stew for Trent and a plate of macaroni and cheese with fruit and veggie sticks for Cass.

"Hope you don't mind if I assumed on your order, Trent," Viv said, setting down a glass of milk by Cass and poured Trent a cup of coffee.

"Not at all, Viv," Trent said. He took Cass' little hand in his and offered thanks for their meal then took a bite of the stew. "This is great. Thanks for taking care of us."

"You're welcome, although I thought Travis was supposed to be the one running Cass to school," Viv said, looking at Trent suspiciously.

"He was, but I haven't been able to track him down since breakfast. We'll be having a discussion about that later," Trent said, nodding toward Cass.

"I see," Viv said with a grin. "Did Trey and Cady get off okay?"

"Yes, they left at four this morning to get to Portland in time for their flight. I'm glad they decided to go ahead and take the trip now, while things are still slow. It will be nice for them to have a few days away."

"I agree. If you and Travis need any help with your ward, let me know. Joe and I can take a turn if you need a break," Viv said, volunteering her unsuspecting husband for babysitting duty.

"Thanks, Viv. I appreciate it."

Viv returned to the kitchen while Trent and Cass ate their lunch. Trent smiled, remembering that this diner was where he and Trey met Cady back in September when she first moved to town. She was about the worst waitress they'd ever seen, spilling food and dropping trays of glasses. When she accidentally spilled water all down the front of Trey, Trent knew his brother was a goner for the dark-haired beauty.

Cass was eating her last bite of an apple slice when Viv came to the table carrying a plate with cookies and another with a big piece of banana cream pie.

"Cookies for me?" Cass asked as Viv set them down in front of her and the pie in front of Trent.

"You bet, sweetie-pie. Now eat up," Viv said, smiling at Cass before disappearing into the back.

Cass munched on her cookies and drank her milk. Watching Trent eat the pie, she finally got on her knees and leaned across the table. "Uncle Trent?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I have a bite of pie?"

Trent looked up from his plate and held out the fork for Cass. He already knew she wasn't fond of cream pie, but indulged her request.

She took a little bite, made an awful face, but swallowed anyway.

"I forgot I don't like that," she said, draining her milk glass and taking another cookie. When Cass moved in with them out at the Triple T Ranch, she had been half-starved. After two months of good food and loving care, she was starting to fill out and grow, although she did seem to have a hollow leg. As rambunctious as she was, none of them worried about her putting on any excess weight. She wiggled off too many calories in a day. They all were quite lenient when it came to her eating in an effort to help her get to a healthy weight and size. Although she was five, she could easily be mistaken for a much younger child by her tiny frame.

Finishing his pie, Trent took out his wallet and left money for the bill and a tip on the table, waving to Viv as she came out of the kitchen. Helping Cass on with her coat, mittens and hat, he

pulled on his own coat and was settling his hat on his head when Viv hurried over and hugged Cass.

"Let me know if you hear from that niece of mine. I want to make sure they made it to down there in one piece."

"You know we will," Trent said, giving Viv a side-ways hug and taking Cass' hand. "Thanks for lunch."

Cass kept up a steady chatter on the drive home and Trent wondered if she would wind down enough for an afternoon nap or if his ears would be sore from listening to her before the day was over.

He helped her climb up the porch steps, which still seemed a little slick despite the deicer he put out earlier. Trent then assisted her as she took off her outwear in the mudroom. Going into the kitchen, the house seemed so quiet without Cady or Trey there. Glancing around, it didn't appear that Travis came in for lunch, which meant he was most likely still out fixing fence. Trent felt his anger cool down a little.

Taking his drawing from Cass, he found a place to stick it front and center on the fridge and she clapped her hands as he tacked it up with a magnet.

"So, goofball, what is on your agenda for this afternoon?" Trent asked as he watched Cass flit around the great room across from the kitchen and dining area.

"What's an agenda?" Cass stopped and gave him a questioning look.

"An agenda is a set of plans. So, my question is what do you have planned to do this afternoon?"

"Well," Cass said, making the word sound like it had two syllables. Trent was coming to recognize when she said it like that, it meant he probably wasn't going to like whatever poured out of her little rosebud lips. "You could play fort and give me horsey rides and take me sledding and help me make cookies or I guess we could read a story for a while."

"I vote for reading a story," Trent said, relieved at that option in her list of things he didn't really want to do. "Why don't you pick out a book and we'll sit in your dad's chair."

"Okay," Cass said, already running to her room to get a storybook. The pounding of her little feet on the tile floor was a happy sound that always made Trent smile. She raced back with a book in hand, her curls flying out behind her. Settling into the big rocking recliner, Cass quickly scrambled onto Trent's lap.

"This is one of my favorites," she said, settling in for story time.

Trent looked at the cover and, with great self-control, managed to not roll his eyes. He accepted the fact that in the next ten days, he would probably get enough glitter, princess, and fairy exposure to last him a lifetime.

Turning to the first page, he began reading the story while he set the chair into a slow and steady rocking motion.

"Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a beautiful princess…" He was only on the fourth page when he heard Cass' breathing deepen and looked down to see her fast asleep.

Quietly setting aside the book, he picked Cass up and carried her to her room, tucking her under the quilt on her bed and partially shutting the door.

Going to the office, he worked on inputting data in the logs they kept for their herd of cattle then spent some time researching bull sales in their area. He and his brothers discussed getting two new bulls this spring and he wanted to make sure they got the best bloodlines for their investment. Trent narrowed down their wish-list to a half-dozen prospects and he hoped to be able to make a final decision when Trey got back.

Although he felt like he could be doing something more productive outside, he knew someone needed to stay in the house with Cass. He just hoped he and Travis would be taking turns in this role of temporary parent.

The patter of Cass' feet along with her calling "Uncle Trent?" brought him out of his search for a few prime bulls on a breeder's website.

"In the office, goofball," Trent called, knowing she'd hear him. She ran in the door and climbed onto the office chair with him.

"Did you have a good nap?" he asked, attempting to smooth down her wild hair which sprang every direction. He quickly gave up, letting her curls fly.

"Yep, I did," Cass said, looking at the picture of the bull on the computer screen. "Are you going to buy him?"

"Maybe. Your dad and Uncle Travis and I are looking for just the right bull," Trent said, half listening to her chatter while he read the details included with the photo.

A tiny finger soon blocked the words as Cass pointed to the bull. "How come the bull gots that? The cows don't. What's it do? Is that how you milk him?"

Trent felt his face grow exceedingly warm and quickly closed the window on the computer. “Cows and bulls are just different, that’s all. Like boys and girls are different.”

“Oh,” Cass said, turning in his lap so she was facing him. She sat quietly for a moment before rubbing a hand on his cheek over the stubble that had grown in since his morning shave. “Like how you have scratchy cheeks but me and Mama don’t?”

“That is exactly right,” Trent said in relief, hoping to derail this conversation before it went any further. He wondered how Cady and Trey handled all her questions. This morning it was honeymoons, this afternoon the anatomy of bulls. What was next? One thing was for darn sure and certain - Travis better get home soon to help in the babysitting department. Trent was about at his wits end.

In an act of desperation, he asked Cass if she wanted to look at anything online.

“My friend Ashley said she gets to play fairies. She said you go to…” How a five-year-old could remember the exact web address of one of the most horrendous websites ever created, Trent didn’t know, but Cass did.

An hour later, he was sure he had already died a slow and painful death as he helped Cass create a fairy named Snowy Sparkles and set up an account so she could buzz around with other little fairies in their make-believe online world.

A squeal that pierced his ear-drum made him nearly crush the computer mouse. Cass excitedly pointed to a purple fairy. “That’s Ashley’s fairy right there. She told me her name. Quick, Uncle Trent, we have to let her know who I am! Hurry!”

Although he didn’t seem to have the same sense of urgency in introducing Snowy Sparkles to Paulina Purple, he helped Cass send a message to her friend.

“I can’t wait to see Ashley tomorrow so we can put fairies on our agenda for after naptime,” Cass said, bouncing on his lap.

Trent immediately regretted teaching Cass the word agenda as well as helping her find the fairy website. Although he had to admit it was keeping her distracted from asking questions he didn’t want to answer.

“I wonder where Uncle Travis could be?” Trent ground out, ready to give Travis more than a piece of two of his mind when he did bother to show up. He’d make sure Travis got more than his share of babysitting time and question answering tomorrow.



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