

# Savvy Autumn Entertaining



*A Guide to Quick Tips, Easy Ideas, and Autumn Recipes*

**SHANNA HATFIELD**

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by

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by Shanna Hatfield

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## *Autumn Entertaining*

When the air turns crisp, fallen leaves begin to crunch beneath my shoes and mother nature paints the landscape with inspired hues of rich, golden color, I know autumn has arrived.

Fall is my favorite season. It is the deep breath of contentment between the hurried, hot days of summer and the cold, gray skies of winter.

I love to entertain in the fall when the food, décor, and atmosphere all reflect the bounty of harvest. Tangy tart apples, creamy pumpkin, and the last remnants of the garden demand to be made into something warm and comforting.

Think about how you can incorporate autumn into your next entertaining venture. Bring the outdoors in with bouquets made of fall leaves and the last flowers of the season. Use pine cones and nuts for accents.

Dress your table in nature-inspired colors of amber, gold, cranberry and green. Use all one color of china and serving pieces and create the feel of fall with your table coverings and centerpiece. Or mix and match pieces in fall colors such as brown, yellow, cream, green and red.

Take the indoors outside when you entertain, soaking up the last warm rays of sunshine while the weather is still cooperative. Provide moveable heaters or build a bonfire. Set a very casual buffet table, again using the colors of fall, and have piles of blankets, extra sweaters and plenty of hot beverages available.

Focus your food on the flavors of fall. Whip up a pumpkin soup or pumpkin bread. Apple anything – from apples with caramel dip to baked apples or apple crisp – is sure to be appreciated this time of year. Think of having some friends over for a “comfort food” potluck. Have them each bring their favorite comfort food and pool your efforts for a fun and unique meal.

However you plan to entertain this fall, remember to keep it simple and keep your focus on connecting with those gathered in your home.

*Happy Autumn Entertaining!*

## Fall Decorating Ideas

If you are looking to bring the autumn season into your home, a great place to start is by going outdoors. What fall leaves, branches or natural items, like grasses, pinecones or nuts, can you bring indoors for an inexpensive accent to your decor?

Use neutral tones highlighted with fall colors, focusing on the vivid jewel tones of autumn like rich red, warm gold, brilliant orange, deep green and pops of purple. This is not the time or the season to go all beige. Think bold, warm and rich when you are choosing accent colors.

Create a fall welcome at your front door by placing pumpkins on steps, a twiggy wreath around an exterior light or baskets filled with bright fall flowers like mums.

Use fall scents like pumpkin, cinnamon and apple throughout your home. Whatever scent you choose, make sure you stick with it consistently so you don't have scents overpowering each other. No one wants to walk into a scent war-zone!

Fill bowls or baskets with nuts or pinecones for a fast fall accent. Place large leaves between a serving tray and a piece of glass (or a clear glass plate). You can use this as a centerpiece, serve warm mugs of cider on it or leave it on the coffee table as a conversation piece.

Keep your focus on warmth. Warm colors and cozy fabrics create a fantastic sense of welcome.

When entertaining guests, serve food choices that bring fall to mind like pumpkin, apple, caramel and cinnamon.

And, as always, remember to sit down and enjoy your guests. That's what it is all about!

## Fall Scents

I can hardly wait each year after Labor Day to get out my fall decorations, dig out the wreath I hang near the front door and set fall scented candles around my home.

If I thought I could get away with it, I'd burn pumpkin scented candles all year long.

Just think about walking into a home where the scents of pumpkin, apple, cinnamon or spices fill the air. It makes you think about fall and hayrides and pumpkin pie and all sorts of wonderful, comforting experiences.

The main thing to remember as you fill your home with the scents of fall is to stick with one scent at a time.

If you're burning a sweet pumpkin candle in the kitchen, don't light a heavily spiced candle a few feet away in the family room. Before you know it, you've got warring scents and quite possibly a headache.

If possible, I try and buy the same scent in varying sizes (a few big jar candles for larger rooms and votives for smaller areas).

Some of my favorite scents for fall are pumpkin, mulled cider, cinnamon stick and (my all-time favorite) creamy nutmeg.

Have fun finding your signature fall scent and see if the warm smell doesn't make you smile.

## Setting a Fall Buffet

The three elements to setting a successful buffet table are height, color and texture. Remember those three things and you can't go wrong.

When you are setting a buffet, start with a table covering. It can be anything you want to use. Feel free to get creative and think outside the box. I like to use flat sheets because they are inexpensive, drape well, are easy-care and come in a variety of color and sizes. Go with a neutral base. For this buffet I chose black as my neutral.

Add some height elements, remembering to keep your centerpiece on one end of the table to create visual interest. I used some cardboard boxes to create height then covered them with another black cloth. Over the top of that I layered a fun pumpkin print fabric to add more color and texture. For fall, if you don't have a printed piece of fabric handy, use clean burlap, or anything in orange, gold, burgundy or earthy green.



The centerpiece is the next item to go on the table. Using fall florals from my yard, it was easy to pull one together. (Side note: carrot tops look green and fern-like if you don't have anything else handy and they stand up much better than I thought they would! ) You could also create a bouquet out of leaves, pine cones, branches, dried vines or buy one at the store.

Plan where each dish will sit on the table. I like to make little party cards that say what is in each dish and then place them on the table before hand. That way, once it is time to put out the food, I know exactly where it goes. I have also been known to set out the serving pieces before filling them with food so I can see how the table will look.

Once you dish up the food and put it on the table, it will really start to pull the look together. The combination of height, color and texture found in your table coverings, serving pieces and food will impress your guests and look fantastic!

## Fall Party Theme Ideas

If you've been thinking about hosting a party this fall, but aren't sure where to start, just jump right in!

Pick a fall theme, center your invitations, decorations and food around it and enjoy! See, doesn't that sound simple? That's because it is! Entertaining at home doesn't have to be complicated and themes are a great way to make a party so much easier on yourself.

Without further ado, here is a list of fall party theme ideas from A to Z!

Apples

Back to School

Crafter's Gathering

Decadent Desserts

End of Summer

Foliage & Fun

Game Night

Harvest Festival

Indian Summer

Jubilee

King's Castle

Leaves & Laughter

Maze Daze

Nature's Splendor

Oktoberfest

Pumpkins

Queen for a Day

Rag Time

Scarecrow

Tailgate

Under the Umbrella

Vintage

Wiener and Marshmallow Roast

X-ray Vision/Superheros

Yearbook

Zebra – *everything is black and white*

## Apple Party Theme

Across the road from our house is a huge apple orchard. It's fun to watch the fruit turn from green to bright red each year.

Seeing those apples hanging ripe from the tree gave me the idea for an apple themed party.

Let's start with invitations. You could send a simple printed invitation on some apple-themed stationery. You could also hand-deliver a caramel apple with the invitation tied to the stick and festooned with a ribbon. I guarantee that will create some interest in your party. Or deliver a small basket of apples with an invitation. You could even write the invitation on a shiny apple with glittery pen.

Once you have set the time and date for your party and invited your guests, decide what your menu will be. Since this is an apple themed party, the menu will be fairly simple to choose – think about what goes great with apples!

Your menu might look something like this:

*Roasted Pork Loin with Baby Potatoes and Carrots*  
*Chunky Applesauce*  
*Sweet and Sour Cabbage or Coleslaw*  
*(with a julienne of cabbage and apples, of course)*  
*Cinnamon Biscuits*  
*Spicy or Mulled Apple Cider*  
*Apple Crisp with fresh whipped cream or ice cream*

Pork is such a natural main dish to pair with apples. They go together like peanut butter and jelly – sort of... oh, you get the idea.

Once your menu is in place, think about decorations. Keep it simple, but have fun with it. Pair sunflowers with apples for striking and eye-catching centerpieces. Hollow out apples to hold votive or taper candles. Pile apples into wooden baskets or clear glass bowls. If you plan to use scented candles, choose a cinnamon or apple based scent to keep the theme going throughout your home.

You can make a dried apple wreath if you peel, slice and dip slices in salt water. Let slices dry for about two weeks, turning every few days until completely dry. String them on jute or raffia or glue to a wreath form.

For entertainment, you could have a bob for apple contest or an apple peeling contest or even something as simple as an apple eating contest. You could also dip apples in caramel or chocolate and let your guests decorate them then pick a winner for the most artistic.

## Autumn Treasures Party Theme

An Autumn Treasures Party Theme is a great way to celebrate the season simply.

Send out invitations shaped like fall leaves or use stationery with a pumpkin or apple theme.

Bring the colors of the season into your home using shades of crimson red, burgundy, sage and earthy greens, golden yellow, and deep orange. Use accent pillows or throws to really create that warm and cozy atmosphere we associate with fall.

(Side note: you can easily recover a pillow using a swatch of felt since the edges won't fray. Cut a piece big enough to cover the entire pillow and glue the edges or simply connect the edges by stitching with a piece of thin ribbon.)

Decorations for your party can be something as basic as a few potted mums, bundles of wheat tied with raffia bows or a pile of mini pumpkins and squash. You don't have to get carried away with something fancy.

Your meal can be simple as well. Make a big pot of stew or a filling casserole. Finish the meal with a pumpkin flavored dessert.

If you want the party to be a more hands-on experience, do a fun activity before the meal like apple picking or visiting a pumpkin patch.

Or host an autumn bonfire. Serve up hot dogs, potato wedges and mulled cider.

However you decide to entertain this fall, just remember to enjoy the experience and not get too wrapped up in the details.

## Chocolate Tasting Party

Flipping through a magazine the other day I came to an abrupt halt when my eye landed on an article about hosting a Chocolate Tasting Party.

Hold. The. Phone.

You can do that? You can invite people over with the only intent (besides connecting and having fun) being to eat chocolate. Eating chocolate is right up there with breathing air and buying shoes!

Can you become a certified master-taster? How much chocolate eating does that require? Sign me up!

I thought I'd share some of the basic info on how to host a Chocolate Tasting Party. In return for the information, please invite me to your chocolate tasting party. I'd love to come.

### ***Know Your Terminology***

**Cacao** – used by the The U.S. Food and Drug Administration to refer to the bean, which is the source of the cacao components such as chocolate liquor, cocoa butter, and cocoa powder.

**Chocolate liquor** – produced by grinding the cacao bean nib to a smooth, liquid state. In the U.S., chocolate liquor can also be called chocolate, unsweetened chocolate, baking chocolate, or bitter chocolate.

**Cocoa butter** - represents the fat naturally found in beans. The amount of cocoa butter in cacao beans typically ranges from 50 to 60%, with the balance being non-fat cocoa solids.

**Cocoa or cocoa powder** – the product made by removing part of the fat from the cocoa bean and grinding into a powder.

**Milk Chocolate** – A combination of chocolate liquor, cocoa butter, sugar and milk or cream. Milk chocolate must contain at least 10% chocolate liquor and at least 12% total milk ingredients.

**Sweet Chocolate** – A combination of chocolate liquor, cocoa butter and sugar, and contains at least 15% chocolate liquor.

**Semisweet or Bittersweet Chocolate** – A combination of chocolate liquor, cocoa butter and sugar, but contains at least 35% chocolate liquor. Bittersweet chocolate and semisweet chocolate are often called dark chocolate.

**Unsweetened Chocolate or Baking Chocolate** – This is straight chocolate liquor formed into a bar with no added sugar.

**White Chocolate** – Made from the same ingredients as milk chocolate but without the nonfat cocoa solids. White chocolate must contain at least 20% cocoa butter and 14% total milk ingredients.

### ***Choose your Chocolate***

Like wine, chocolate may be chosen based on type, region, blend and ingredients. Try centering your tasting around a theme such as:

**Scaled Percent of Cacao:** Try a range of chocolates from low like 35% cacao to high, around 80%. You'll taste from all the different types of chocolate from milk to extra dark.

**Same Percent Cacao:** Find different chocolates all at the same percentage. You could taste all chocolates that are 70% cacao, for example.

**One Type of Chocolate:** Try a selection of only dark chocolates, or only milk chocolates.

**Place of Origin:** Sample chocolates from different regions. Observe the variations between chocolates from Central and South America countries versus European blends.

### ***Preparing for the Tasting***

You will want to keep your tasting to a maximum of six different chocolates. More than that and your palate loses its ability to discern flavor variations.

Keep chocolate at room temperature.

Each sample should be small, no more than 1/4 inch square.

Create a plate for each sampling. Include a place card with the name of the chocolate or the original chocolate label for reference. Make sure you provide a place for guests to take notes. You could create a tasting mat that lists the chocolates, pertinent info about each one and has a place to jot notes.

Go from light to dark. By doing this, your taste buds are set up for a more complex, intense tasting.

Cleanse the palate. Make sure you have room temperature water available for tasters to cleanse their palate between bites. Unsalted crackers or plain white bread will also work.

You may want to provide a light meal before you begin the tasting, making sure to leave enough time between eating and tasting for the palate to be clear and ready for the chocolate.

### ***The Tasting***

Engage all your senses and have fun with it. Use these five steps as a guideline:

- 1. Sight** – look at the chocolate's color. Is it silky, even textured? Does it have a high shine (a sign of quality chocolate).
- 2. Touch** – Is the surface smooth. Premium chocolate should never be gray or grainy.
- 3. Sound** – When the bar breaks, it should offer a crisp, loud snap.
- 4. Scent** – Breathe in the fragrance. Does it smell rich? Are the aromas intense? Are there added nuances like vanilla, citrus?
- 5. Taste** - Allow it to melt on your tongue and savor the flavors and richness.

Enjoy your chocolate tasting. And remember if you need an extra taster, I'm always available!

## Fall Leaf Party Theme

I don't know about you, but I hate raking leaves. Absolutely dread it. Captain Cavedweller isn't much better. We always hope for a wild windstorm to blow our leaves away before we get too ambitious and have them raked and bagged.

What if you could combine a party with getting the leaves raked up out of your yard and that of your neighborhood?

Think about roping, er... I mean inviting, your neighbors to participate in a block leaf raking party. You could be the "host house" that provides the bags and refreshments and then all participating neighbors would go from lawn to lawn raking and bagging leaves. When finished, everyone would converge at your home for a fun fall-themed meal.

Sounds like a win-win situation, doesn't it? You get your leaves raked, you get to spend time with neighbors and you all get to celebrate fall and a nice clean neighborhood.

Keep your refreshments simple – you could make a pot of soup with hot bread, a green salad and pumpkin bars for dessert. Sliders are another fun option. If the weather cooperates and you have somewhere to build a bonfire, think about roasting wieners and marshmallows.

Send each neighbor home with a "bagged" sugar cookie cut out like a leaf and decorated in fall colors.

The main thing here (besides getting your leaves raked) is to connect with the friends who live around you and enjoy the fall season.

## Harvest Party Theme

Host a seasonal Harvest Themed Party by incorporating the elements of the season.

Start with your invitations. You could do something fun like a making a simple scarecrow face. Cut a heavy piece of tan or yellow construction paper into a square. Turn the square so a corner is pointing toward you and one away from you. Glue two wooden buttons or two pieces of candy corn near the middle for eyes and a gumdrop for a nose. Glue a piece of orange string in a smile for a mouth and then “stitch” over it with a black marker. “Stitch” around the edges of the square with the marker and add a little raffia bow at the top. On the back, glue your invitation. If you are creative with clip art, you could also create invitations that featured corn stalks, pumpkins, baskets of apples, or a harvest moon.

Decorations could include piles of pumpkins.

Think about what you have on hand you could dress up. Right now I’ve got miniature pumpkins surrounding the little cement bunny that stands guard at my front door. An old wheelbarrow, a child’s wagon, even an empty birdbath can be fun containers for pumpkins.

If you are going to put candles in pumpkins, I highly recommend the battery-operated variety. You don’t have to worry about fire issues that way. For something a bit off the beaten bath, take leaf shaped cookie cutters, pound them into the pumpkin with a rubber mallet, pull out with needle nose pliers and get ready for the compliments to roll in once you drop in a candle and illuminate your handiwork.

If you are doing a more formal plated dinner, you have to try this great idea for place cards. Write names of guests on mini pumpkins then using a small knife, follow the outline of the name and peel away the rind without cutting all the way through the pumpkin. Place a votive inside each one. What a fun way to let guests know the seating arrangement. You could also do this with words like “Welcome,” “Harvest,” “Bountiful,” and “Autumn” and place throughout your buffet.

You could also use baskets of apples. There is absolutely nothing on the planet that says fall to me like a wooden basket filled with shiny red apples. Use little baskets to display apples throughout your entertaining area.

Gather stalks of corn and have them stand sentinel by your front door. If you are going to be entertaining outdoors with a bonfire or some other fun activity, be sure to include decorations outside. Straw bales, especially when draped with a thick blanket, make perfect seating for outdoor events. Stack them up and cover with a colorful cloth if you need extra serving space.

Sprinkle fall leaves along your buffet table. You can even tuck a pretty leaf or two into the frame of a mirror or picture.

Bonus decorating tip – nuts and mini pinecones are your friends! They can be trailed along tables, nestled in bowls, poured into jars and stacked in boxes or baskets to create great fall accents. If you’ve got nothing else, at least have a basket of nuts!

Let the kids make a scarecrow and set him by the front door or somewhere sure to be noticed. Do include a few candles in safe and strategic places throughout your home that carry through the scent of fall like pumpkin, apple, maple or spice or use wall plug-ins.

For a simple menu, think about making a big casserole or a pot of hearty soup. Serve with easy herb bread, a fresh salad with chopped apples and toasted nuts, warm apple cider and [bar cookies](#) for dessert.

## Pumpkin Party Theme

As the weather turns cold, the leaves golden, and the air crisp, my thoughts (and taste buds) seem to wander toward all things pumpkin.

I had a piece of pumpkin cheesecake from one of my favorite restaurants the other day. If I hadn't been at home enjoying it, Captain Cavedweller may have needed to scrape me up off the floor of the restaurant. It was really, really good.

So that started the wheels spinning in my head with a pumpkin themed party.

Start with the invitations. You could use mini pumpkins and florist picks. Type out a simple invitation on some cardstock or hand-print a fun invite. Place the florist pick into the top of the pumpkin and insert the card in the holder then hand deliver to your guests.



Another fun idea would be to color a black band around your pumpkin and then write in metallic or glitter a very simple invitation message. This is guaranteed to get you some attention.

You could also use some fun pumpkin paper, cut your invitations out in the shape of a pumpkin or just use pumpkin colored paper.

Once you have sent out the invitations, think about decorations. The options for decorating with pumpkins are only limited by your imagination. You can carve them, bedazzle them, color them, and stencil them.

Etching is a great way to display a fabulous design without having to dig out all the messy insides of the pumpkin.

If you do find yourself having to clean out a pumpkin, use a sturdy ice cream scoop. It gets in there and digs out all the icky goo like nobody's business.

Line your driveway with illuminated pumpkins. Carve out the letters "w-e-l-c-o-m-e" as a fun greeting for guests. Have piles of pumpkins by your door, set little pumpkins on tables and in corners.

You could even march mini pumpkins or gourds down a table for a fun and easy accent.

Think about using white pumpkins mixed with the traditional orange or go all white for a dramatic effect.

Hollow out pumpkins for candle holders or serving containers. Extra-large pumpkins works great as an ice bucket.

Don't forget to light a few pumpkin candles so your home smells like pumpkin. You can even get pumpkin scented soap, if you want to really take your pumpkin theme to a whole new level.

For your menu, think about fun things you can add to tie in the pumpkin theme. You could offer pumpkin soup or even a chunky stew served in hollowed out mini-pumpkins. Serve pumpkin bread or grilled pumpkin. Make sure your grand finale is a pumpkin dessert like [Pumpkin Cake](#), [Pumpkin Roll](#) (a holiday-must have at our house) or even a [Pumpkin Trifle](#). And for goodness sakes, don't forget the pumpkin seeds. You can make your own or buy them plain or with interesting flavors like chipotle, lemon or barbecue.

## Turkey Day Test Run Party



Here is a wild and crazy party idea.... have a Turkey Day Test Run Party!

You know there are several dishes you'd like to try before Thanksgiving. Like that new stuffing recipe or the pie your friend has been raving about.

Plan a casual buffet party, making all the dishes you want to try out, invite over a few friends and have a taste test to see which ones get a thumbs up and which ones get a thumbs down. Some of your friends might want to bring a dish or two for everyone to taste-test as well.

By serving the food buffet style, you can keep things simple with an overlying theme of just getting together and having a relaxed meal.

You can have ballot slips for each guest to fill out, rating each dish. You could even give a few prizes for "most creative descriptions" or "most valuable tester." Keep the prizes simple like a fall-scented votive candle or a boxed single truffle.

The main idea is to get together with friends while trying out some new recipes. I think you'll have a good time if you give it a try!

## Savvy Thanksgiving Entertaining

If you are the lucky one hosting Thanksgiving Dinner this year, there are some simple things you can do to make your guests feel even more welcome in your home.

Start the welcome at your front door. Hang a seasonal wreath or swag. If you don't have one, have your youngsters gather big leaves, tie the stems with a ribbon and hang on the door. You can also have your budding artists draw or paint a welcome sign that can be hung outside.

Let a welcoming scent greet your guests as soon as they step inside. Have a candle burning in the entry, or at the least, have a scented wall plug-in. Think about scents that go with the season such as pumpkin, cinnamon or apple.

Clean out your coat closet or, if you don't have one, make sure there is a designated area for coats. Enlist some youngsters to be the official door greeters and coat takers. It makes them feel important, keeps them occupied, makes guest feel welcome, and frees up your time for more important tasks.

If you are serving food buffet style, make sure you add in plenty of height, color and texture to your table.

If you are serving a plated meal or everyone will be seated at the table, have children create fun place cards for each guest.

When you are selecting a centerpiece, make sure it is low enough that everyone can see over the top of it. For a casual country look, use a piece of barn wood (that has been cleaned) down the length of the table and put a mixture of candles, nuts and pears or apples on it. For a more formal atmosphere, think about taper candles combined with seasonal flowers or even stalks of wheat tied in bundles with satin ribbon.

Make sure the guest bathroom is shiny-clean. This is one area guests *will* notice if everything isn't in top shape. Spend a few minutes the night before scrubbing, polishing and putting out fresh towels. A candle or small floral arrangement is a great finishing touch for the guest bath.

Have plenty of garbage bags on hand as well as plastic wrap and foil. If you are going to be sending home doggie bags, make sure you have resealable bags or even some take out boxes to use.

Have an activity for the children. It could be something as simple as Thanksgiving themed pages to color, board games or find the thimble. Put an older child in charge of these activities. I read something the other day about a game that would have been played around the time of the first Thanksgiving celebration called "Kick the Shins" ... now there is a game I could have fun with!

Most of all, remember it isn't about the house, the food or the atmosphere – it is about the people. Be gracious, be welcoming, and create some warm memories that will last long after the turkey is finally gone!

## Turkey Day Countdown

When hosting a big event, such as Thanksgiving, the day will run smoothly if you do some per-planning.

Here is a countdown list of things to do to be prepared for Turkey-Day. By following these steps, hosting Thanksgiving will be easier and hopefully a lot more enjoyable for you. Start your planning 11 days out and by the time Thanksgiving rolls around, things will be a breeze!

Day 1: Make your guest list. Who exactly will be attending? Get confirmations from each guest as soon as possible and find out if any of them are bringing extras. If people can't commit right away, give them a deadline of one week out. You need an accurate head-count.

Day 2: Determine what is going to be on your menu this year. As you think about recipes, keep in mind how much stove top, oven and microwave space you have available, what can be made ahead, what will be made that day, what will be cooked where. Do not try a recipe for the first time on Thanksgiving Day. If you want to try something new, give it a test run before the big day ([Test Run Party Idea](#)). Agree on dishes your guests can bring. Make sure you know if someone has food allergies or dietary restrictions. Plan at least one special dish for them. Gather all the recipes you'll be using into one handy place.

Day 3: Talking Turkey! Today decide what type of turkey you will be serving (fresh, frozen, etc.) and how big of a bird you need to purchase. If you are ordering the bird from the butcher, do that today. Also place orders for any pies or deli trays today.

Day 4: Make a checklist. Go through your cupboards and pantry and see what is missing, outdated or in need of replacement. Make a list of things you need for your menu. Also, if you will be hosting overnight guests, check out the guest room and guest bathroom. Do you need extra towels? Are you well stocked on facial tissues, toilet paper, paper towels and soap? Is the guest room clean and comfortable? Take stock of your table linens. Spread out the linens you are planning to use. If they are stained beyond hope, think about purchasing a stain-resistant tablecloth or turn to my favorite – sheets! Inexpensive and easy care, sheets come in a variety of colors or sizes and are worry-free coverings for your table. Grab a few in fall colors! Make sure you are also well stocked in trash bags, foil, plastic wrap, and zip-top storage bags or plastic containers. What will you use for a centerpiece? Are you making one or ordering one? If you need to order it, do that today.

Day 5: Complete your non-perishable shopping list. Do you need batteries for the camera? Cleaning products? Paper goods? Candies? Take inventory of your cutlery, cookware, and serving pieces. Do the knives need sharpened? Is your turkey platter chipped? Do you need to get a new vegetable peeler? Replace those stained and frayed potholders and dish towels. If you don't have one, get an apron to wear on Turkey Day. Decide what you and the family will be wearing. Do clothes need to go to the cleaners? Repaired? Pressed? Take care of that today. If you don't have a thing to wear, do your shopping today.

Day 6: Something to sip... Today, decide what beverages you will be serving and in what you'll be serving the beverages. Have a few selections and plan to have a pitcher of ice water available.

Day 7: Make the do-ahead dishes. Any dishes that you can freeze, go ahead and make them today. Some things that freeze well are cranberry sauce, casseroles, cheese sauces, and piecrusts. If there is ironing that needs done, take care of it today. Today is the one-week deadline for those who wouldn't commit to coming earlier. Follow up with them and get a definite head count.

Day 8: Setting the scene. Decide today how to set your table? What will the place settings look like? Figure out what item will go in what dish and mark with a sticky note. Wash all platters and polish the silver. Store silver wrapped in tissue paper in an air-tight bag to keep from tarnishing. Enlist your spouse and kids to make place cards and fold napkins. Decide what background music to play. Get your emergency clean-up tools ready and in a handy location (stain remover, whisk and dust pan, hand-vac). Make sure you have plenty of chairs. If not, beg, borrow or steal what is needed from friends or family members.

Day 9: Move your frozen turkey from the freezer to the fridge as well as the make-ahead dishes. Shop for all perishables and make sure you have extra ice on hand. If beverages need chilled, stick them in the fridge now.

Day 10: Set the table. You already know what goes where, so go ahead and set the table. Label trivets with sticky notes so you know what hot dish will set where. Roast or steam vegetables and make pies. Make sure your outfit is set out and ready to go. Have a list of the help-lines by the phone, in case of cooking emergencies! Make sure the person in charge of carving the turkey is up to the challenge.

Day 11: Happy Thanksgiving! Today you will make the stuffing, cook the potatoes and any other side dishes that need made. Whip the whipping cream for dessert and chill. Cook the turkey, bring the cranberry sauce to room temperature before serving, warm the pies before eating and make hot beverages. Enjoy the warmth of the day, a delicious meal and be thankful!

## Thanksgiving Tablescapes

If you are hosting Thanksgiving this year and aren't sure how to set your table, here are some ideas!

You can make the gathering as casual or as elegant as you like, there are no set rules you have to follow. The only rule I enforce is that you have a good time!

Before I share a few ideas, I want to throw out the reminder that the more you prepare before Thanksgiving, the less stress you will endure on Turkey Day. It is true. I honest to goodness would not kid you on something this important!

To begin your tablescape design, think about the number of guests you will have attending and how formal the meal will be. Is it a laid-back crowd that would prefer something simple? Are the guests more of a fine-dining group who are comfortable with a formal place setting? Think about these things as you decide how ornate, or simple, to decorate your table.

For a casual thanksgiving gathering, you could place a table runner down the center of the table with a few candles, mini pumpkins and nuts as decoration. You could use placemats at each place setting.

Your everyday dishes can be made to look special when you layer them and add some fun accents to the table. Think about placing a large pinecone at each place setting and fastening a piece of thin wire around the top. Bend the wire to hold a small place card. This is a fun way to create a seating arrangement while adding a little pop of fun to each place setting.

For a more formal gathering, use a tablecloth. If you are worried about Uncle Fred spilling on your fine linen, use a washable and easy care table covering.

Haul out your good china or a more formal pattern if you have one. Create a beautiful centerpiece or arrangement. Make sure it is low to the table and not obstructing the view or put it up high enough that guests can see under it. You can do this by using a plant stand or small side table. It adds quite a bit of drama to your table. Make sure you have candles for added warmth. If you have cloth napkins, use them! If you are using fresh flowers, make sure the smell is not overly strong. It will compete with the smells of your food and can even inhibit the taste. It is also a good idea to steer away from strong floral aromas in case some of your guests have allergies or may be sensitive to the odors.

If you want a table that is more formal than casual, but less stuffy than elegant, set your table with a cloth, add in a nice centerpiece, but make the place settings a bit more fun. If you have two or three dish patterns that go together (like a cream set and a brown set) mix and match the pieces. This works especially well if you don't have enough of any one pattern to make it around the table.

However you decide to entertain this Thanksgiving, remember a little preparation goes a long way and that the most important thing is to connect with those who have gathered in your home. And don't forget to be thankful for each face seated around the table!

## Pumpkin Possibilities

When pumpkin time rolls around each fall, my taste buds shift ever so slightly from their 24/7 obsession with chocolate to throw pumpkin into the mix. Crazy, yes. But absolutely true!

So if you are a pumpkin maniac as well, here are a few ideas to add pumpkins to your menu.

- Make a simple pumpkin soup by adding about four cups of chicken broth to a 28-ounce can of pumpkin. Cook until bubbling and let simmer then stir in about 3 ounces of Feta cheese, season with salt and a pinch of nutmeg.

- Use canned pumpkin as a thickener. Add it to any type of chili or stew that needs a little thickening.

- Substitute canned pumpkin for half the fat in quick breads. This works well with cinnamon, citrus and chocolate. Or make your taste buds extra happy and make a loaf of pumpkin bread.

- Add canned pumpkin to half your cheesecake filling. Swirl it into the filling, but don't mix, before baking to get an awesome design and incredible flavor.

- Mix canned pumpkin into softened ice cream then refreeze for a quick pumpkin dessert. Serve with gingersnaps and a drizzle of caramel sauce.

- Mix a heaping spoonful into grits, top with grated Parmesan cheese and a tiny dollop of butter.

- Mix canned pumpkin with one part apple cider and two parts ginger ale for a fun beverage.

You could also make pumpkin polenta, pumpkin cupcakes, pumpkin muffins, roasted pumpkin wedges, pumpkin roll or pumpkin seeds.

## Recipes

On the following pages are some of my favorite recipes for fall!  
Enjoy!

## Granola Bars

My friend Laurie, who is a gifted baker, cook and all around fantastic person, graciously shared her recipe for Homemade Granola Bars with me. Her family loves these granola bars and they are less expensive than buying them from a store. She said the best part is that it takes just a few minutes to mix everything together.

### Laurie's Homemade Granola Bars

Bring to a boil:

1 cup brown sugar

1 cup corn syrup

Then quickly add:

1 cup peanut butter

1 tbsp. vanilla

1 tsp. salt

Mix well then add:

4 cups old fashioned oats

5 cups Rice Krispies cereal

1 cup coconut

Stir well to coat all. Put half the mixture in a foil lined and ungreased 9×13 pan. Sprinkle generously with whatever (mini M&M's or chocolate chips, crushed up cookies or candy bars, raisins, marshmallows, dried fruit, a combination- use your imagination here!) Then put the remaining half on and press down using a piece of parchment paper. The mixture won't stick to this or your hands. After they have completely cooled cut into bars of whatever size you like.

Laurie also individually wraps the bars so they stay fresh and are ready to grab and go.

## **Fabulous Fall Munch**

Sure to please kids of all ages, this is a fun fall treat that is easy to make to take on the go!

### **Fabulous Fall Munch**

- 1 pound spiced gum drops
- 1 pound candy corn
- 1 pound pretzel sticks
- 3 cups goldfish crackers
- 1 16-ounce can salted peanuts

Mix together and serve in waffle cones.

## Toasted Pumpkin Seeds

Pumpkin  
Salt  
Olive Oil

Preheat oven to 400°F. Cut open a pumpkin and use a sturdy ice cream scoop to dig out the insides. Separate the seeds from the strings and rinse.

In a small saucepan, add the seeds to water (about 2 cups of water to every half cup of seeds.) Add a half tablespoon of salt for every cup of water. Bring to a boil. Let simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat and drain.

Drizzle a tablespoon of olive oil over the bottom of a roasting pan. Spread the seeds out over the roasting pan, all in one layer. Sprinkle with a bit of salt, and seasoning, if you so desire.

Bake on the top rack until the seeds begin to brown, 10-20 minutes. When browned to your satisfaction, remove from the oven and let the pan cool on a rack. Let the seeds cool all the way before eating.

## Easy Herb Bread

This is so simple, you could have your 5-year-old make it for you. It's the next best thing to sliced bread.



## Easy Herb Bread

Sliced Bread (your choice – I used white and, yes, I do realize the nutritional value, thank you very much)

Herb Seasoning or Powdered Dip Mix

Butter (melted)

Butter slices of bread, sprinkle liberally with seasoning. Use a fun cookie cutter shape and cut out pieces of bread then place on a baking sheet (I used varying sizes of leaf cookie cutters).

Bake in a pre-heated 350 degree oven until edges are crispy and tops are starting to brown.

## Pumpkin Bread

What can I say? Once fall arrives, my head is filled with thoughts of pumpkin delights. This easy pumpkin bread comes together quickly and has a nice mellow texture and flavor. You can add all sorts of wonderful goodies to it like chocolate chips, nuts, raisins, cranberries, whatever tickles your fancy. Or enjoy it plain!



## Pumpkin Bread

1 cup granulated sugar  
1/2 cup brown sugar  
1 tsp. cinnamon  
1/2 tsp. pumpkin pie spice  
2 eggs  
1/2 cup butter, softened  
1/3 cup milk  
1 cup canned pumpkin pie filling  
1 1/2 cups flour  
1/2 tsp. salt  
1/2 tsp. baking soda  
1 tsp. baking powder

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Combine flour, salt, baking soda and baking powder. Set aside.

Mix together sugars, cinnamon and spice. Add in eggs, milk, butter and pumpkin. Mix well. Add in flour mixture. If you want to go crazy and add nuts or chocolate chips, now would be the time to do that (as opposed to after you have the batter in the pan and end up poking things through the batter with your spoon – not that I have ever done that).

Bake for about an hour or until a knife inserted in the center comes out clean. Remove from oven. Cool and devour.

## **Breakfast Burrito**

Captain Cavedweller likes to make breakfast burritos.

They are not for the faint of heart. Or those on a diet. Or vegetarians. Captain Cavedweller is definitely a meat eater.

Start to finish, it takes less than five minutes and they are quite tasty (but don't tell him I said that!).

## **Breakfast Burrito**

2 pre-cooked sausages

3 eggs

1 tbsp milk

1/4 cup shredded cheese (CC used colby-jack)

1 tbsp. olives

salt, pepper to taste

seasoning to taste

Thinly slice sausage and warm in a skillet on medium heat. Whisk eggs with milk and seasoning then pour over sausage. Scramble until eggs are set. Scoop into a flour tortilla and top with olives and cheese. This will make three burritos (or two really big ones).

You can also add in sour cream, ranch dressing or salsa if you like. (CC doesn't like, so his is the plain-Jane model).

## Fried Apples

Fried apples have been a menu staple my entire life. I remember watching my grandma make them, as well as my mom.

Serve along side pork or chicken dishes or anytime you want something delicious to add to the table. You can spoon them over vanilla ice cream, serve with spice cake or just enjoy the spicy, caramel goodness all by itself.

## Fried Apples

1 apple

1 tbsp. butter

1 tsp. cinnamon

1/3 cup brown sugar

Wash apple then core and slice. I like medium-thick slices (about 1/3 inch). Melt butter in a non-stick skillet over medium heat. When melted, add apples, cinnamon and sugar. Stir until apples are coated. Cover and simmer until apples are tender (about 15 minutes) and the sauce is thick and makes you want to eat it with a spoon.

Serves two (if you feel like sharing).

## Quick and Easy Potatoes

If you are looking for an easy side dish that is filling and really yummy, give these potatoes a whirl.

### Quick and Easy Potatoes

6 medium red potatoes  
1 tsp. extra virgin olive oil  
1 tsp. all-seasoning spice (Mrs. Dash)  
1/2 tsp. parsley flakes  
1/2 tsp. onion flakes  
salt and pepper to taste

Clean the potatoes, leaving the skin on. Cut into bite-sized chunks. Spray a shallow baking dish with non-stick cooking spray. Put the oil in the bottom of the dish, add potatoes, toss to coat. Sprinkled in season, onion and parsley flakes, tossing to make sure potatoes are well coated. Bake at 350 degrees for 20-30 minutes covered, or until fork tender. If you like the potatoes crispy, toss them in oil and season then spread on a greased baking sheet, uncovered.

## Beef Bundles

I had a gathering of people at our house and wanted to make something filling that would also fall into a finger food category. With a roast on hand, I decided to just make up a recipe. It was a good decision, based on the fact there weren't many of these left after the party. You could use this as an appetizer or as a main course, depending on how big you make the bundles.



## Beef Bundles

1 3-4 pound roast  
1 can chicken broth  
1 tsp. salt  
1 tsp. seasoning  
1 can cream of mushroom soup  
1/2 cup shredded colby-jack cheese  
2 tubes of crescent rolls

Put roast in a slow cooker with salt, seasoning and chicken broth for six to eight hours on low, depending on the size of your roast. I like to stab mine with the thermometer at about five hours to see if we are close to done. If not, I turn the temperature up a bit and let it finish cooking.

Once the meat is cooked, remove from the slow cooker and shred using two forks. (You can do this right before making the bundles of the day before.) Let the meat cool slightly, then mix in one can of cream of mushroom soup and the shredded cheese.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Unroll crescents and separate into individual triangles. Place a heaping spoon of filling into each triangle then fold dough around filling, making a bundle. Pinch to seal edges.

Place on a baking sheet and bake until dough is a golden brown.

## Chicken Dumpling Soup

When the weather turns cold and staying at home cozied up by the fire seems like the best thing to do, I like to make a pot of homemade soup. One of our favorites is Chicken Dumpling Soup. It is comfort in a savory, steamy bowl of creamy goodness!

This soup can come together in less than an hour and is one I make from leftover baked chicken with potatoes. Once I take the cooked chicken out of the pan, I pour all the juice into a bowl. The next day when I'm ready to make soup, all the fat can be easily skimmed off the top and the juice has all the great bits of meat and spices that make this soup extra tasty.

Your chicken for the soup is pre-cooked as well as the potatoes, which is why the soup can come together so quickly.

## Chicken Dumpling Soup

chicken broth (approx. 2 cups or 2 cans)  
1 cup cooked potatoes, cut into chunks  
1 cup celery, sliced  
1 bag of frozen mixed veggies  
3 cups cooked chicken, cut into bite-sized pieces  
6 cups water  
1 tsp. parsley  
1tsp onion flakes  
1 can of refrigerator biscuits (*do not* use the flaky variety!)  
2 small cans of cream of chicken soup  
salt and pepper to taste

In a stockpot, mix the chicken broth with the water, add in celery, potatoes, frozen veggies, chicken, parsley, onion flakes and salt and pepper. Bring to a boil on medium heat. Add in the refrigerator biscuits by pinching off a bite-sized piece at a time and dropping into the pot. Cover and let boil without peeking into the pot for about 15 minutes or until the biscuit dough is nearly cooked. Add in the cream of chicken soup and stir well to completely mix. Let simmer for a couple minutes, just to get the cream of chicken soup hot and serve!

## Cashew Chicken Casserole

I came across this recipe a few years ago and it has quickly become a favorite comfort food dish that is tasty enough to serve to family and friends alike. The combination of creamy, smooth and crunchy is dynamite! The thing I like best about this particular recipe is that you can make it the night before!

## Cashew Chicken Casserole

2 cups uncooked elbow macaroni  
3 cups cubed cooked chicken  
1/2 cup shredded cheddar or colby-jack cheese  
1 tsp. onion flakes  
1/2 cup chopped celery  
1 can sliced water chestnuts, drained  
1 small can cream of mushroom soup  
1 small can cream of chicken soup  
1 3/4 cups milk  
1 can chicken broth  
1/4 cup butter, melted  
2/3 cup crushed saltine crackers (about 20)  
3/4 cup cashew halves

In a greased 13x9x2 inch baking pan, layer the first six ingredients, in the order listed. In a bowl, combine the soups, milk and broth. Pour over layers in pan. Cover and refrigerate overnight. When ready to bake, toss butter and cracker crumbs together and sprinkle over casserole. Top with cashews and bake uncovered at 350 degrees for 35-40 minutes until macaroni is tender.

## Pasta Ribbon Salad

If you are looking for a colorful side dish to serve this holiday season, try this easy Pasta Ribbon Salad.



## Pasta Ribbon Salad

- 1 package ribbon pasta
- 1 can sliced olives
- 1/4 cup sliced Mazanilla Olives
- 1/4 cup sliced Kalamata olives
- 1 cup feta cheese, crumbled
- 1/2 cup Italian salad dressing

Cook pasta according to package directions. Drain and cool completely. Add in olives and cheese. Toss with dressing. Chill and serve!

For some extra eye-catching pop, garnish with some finely grated parmesan cheese and a few sprigs of dill or parsley.

## Quiche

When I was in college living in a co-ed dorm getting an education in things that had nothing to do with either my major or minor, a bunch of us girls got together and decided to have a nice party before we all left for the holidays. We all were supposed to contribute one thing to the meal and it needed to be “girlie” food.

I called Mom in a panic with no idea what I could make. She saved the day when she sent me this easy quiche recipe. It was a hit at the party, and every time I’ve made it over the years.

Wonderful for breakfast, brunch, luncheons or dinners, it is so good!

## Quiche

3 eggs

1 1/2 cups cream

1/4 tsp. salt

1 cup shredded cheddar or colby-jack

1/2 cup crumbled cooked bacon or diced ham

1/2 tsp. onion flakes

Prepared pie crust in 9 inch pie pan.

Beat the eggs, stir in cream and salt. Sprinkle cheese and bacon over pie crust. Pour egg mixture over the top and bake at 350 degrees for 40-45 minutes or until knife inserted comes out clean. Let rest a few minutes before cutting and serving.

## Spaghetti Carbonara

I originally got the recipe for this dish from my friend Jolene, who is a fabulous cook. I tweaked the recipe just a bit and came up with one I really like and Captain Cavedweller will eat – a double winner!

It is easy to make and comes together fairly quickly. Serve with warm bread and a crisp green salad and you've got a fantastic meal.

## Spaghetti Carbonara

1 pound spaghetti  
1 tbsp. olive oil  
1 tsp. salt  
6 slices bacon  
4-6 sausages (your choice if you want Italian, plain, etc.)  
1/2 cup cream  
1/2 cup Parmesan cheese  
2 eggs, beaten  
2 tbsp. fresh chopped parsley

Bring a large pot of water to a boil with salt, add spaghetti and cook until al dente. Drain well. Toss with olive oil, and set aside.

Chop bacon into small pieces and fry in a large skillet until slightly crispy. Remove from skillet and drain. Set aside.

Using remaining bacon grease fry sausages until brown on all sides, then cover with water and cook for about 12-15 minutes until cooked through. Italian sausages would be best but you can use whatever you have on hand.

When sausages are nearly finished cooking, add beaten egg, Parmesan cheese and cream to noodles, stirring vigorously to keep the egg from getting all funky on you. Add bacon and return to low heat, stirring to coat all noodles and to make sure eggs are cooked before serving.

Sprinkle fresh parsley (or dried if you don't have any fresh) over the top and serve with sausages.

## Chicken Enchiladas

This crowd-pleasing recipe also comes from my Mom. She used to make this dish for big crowds, but it is so easy to make, you could whip it together anytime you want a delicious and simple meal. It comes together with just a little effort and one of the best things is that you can put it together the night before!

## Chicken Enchiladas

3 cups cooked chicken, cut into bite-sized pieces or shredded

1/2 cup chopped celery

1 tsp. onion flakes

1 small can cream of mushroom soup

1 small can cream of chicken soup

1 small can green chiles

1 1/2 cups grated cheddar cheese

8 corn or flour tortillas

Mix chicken with celery, onion flakes, soup and chiles. Layer greased 9 x 13 casserole pan with half the tortillas, and then half the chicken mixture and half the cheese. Repeat the layers again, ended with a topping of cheese. Make the night before and let the flavors mix before baking at 325 degrees for one hour.

*\*Note:* You can sauté the celery and onion flakes with a dash of chicken stock before adding to the mix if you don't like your celery quite so crunchy.

## Salisbury Steak

One of Captain Cavedweller's favorite comfort meals is salisbury steak. I know there are many, many variations of this recipe, but this is an easy one that we both enjoy.

### Salisbury Steak

1 1/2 lbs. ground beef  
1 small can cream of mushroom soup  
1/2 cup bread crumbs (or Saltine crackers crumbled)  
1 egg  
1 tsp. onion flakes  
1 tsp. all-purpose seasoning (like Mrs. Dash)  
Salt and Pepper to taste  
1 cup water

In a large bowl, mix together ground beef, egg, bread crumbs, onion flakes, seasoning, salt and pepper. Form into six patties. Combine water and soup in a separate bowl and set aside.

In a large skillet over medium-high heat, brown both sides of the patties. Pour off excess fat. Pour soup mix over patties, cover and cook for about 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

This is great served with rice or creamy mashed potatoes.

## Simple Apple Crisp

If you want to fill your home with the delicious scent of baked cinnamon and apples, this apple crisp will do the trick. Comes together quickly and is yummy served warm with a side of ice cream and a drizzle of caramel sauce.



### Apple Crisp

3/4 cup brown sugar, packed  
1/2 cup flour  
1/2 cup oatmeal  
1 1/2 tsp cinnamon  
1/4 tsp nutmeg  
1/3 cup butter, melted  
6 apples, peeled, cored and sliced  
1/4 cup sugar  
1/4 cup brown sugar, loosely packed  
Caramel topping or sauce

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Spray a 9×9 casserole dish with non-stick cooking spray. Mix together 3/4 cup brown sugar, flour, oatmeal, 1/2 tsp cinnamon, nutmeg and melted butter. Work together with a fork until it is crumbly and well-mixed. Set aside.

Mix 1/4 cup brown sugar, 1/4 cup sugar and 1 tsp cinnamon with the sliced apples. Stir well to coat apples then pour into the casserole dish. Top with crumbly mixture and bake for about 35-40 minutes or until juice is bubbly.

Serve while warm. Warm caramel sauce (pop in microwave for a few seconds) and drizzle in a fun design on the plate. Place a piece of crisp on top of design and drizzle with caramel sauce. Place a spoonful of vanilla ice cream or whipped cream next to the cobbler and sprinkle with cinnamon.

Savor the delicious flavors of fall!

## Baked Custard

This is one of Captain Cavedweller's favorite treats and, lucky for me, very easy to make on short notice (like when he is begging me to make it after dinner and I'd rather sit eating bonbons and reading a novel.)

## Baked Custard

3 eggs  
1 1/2 cups milk  
1/3 cup sugar  
1 tsp. vanilla  
1/2 tsp. cinnamon

Preheat oven to 325.

Beat eggs until well combined but not foamy. Add in remaining ingredients and mix well. Using an 8×8 glass baking pan, place in four custard cups (or ramekins or small oven-safe bowls). Pour boiling water into pan until it is standing about 1 inch.

Pour batter into custard cups and then carefully place the pan in the oven preheated. Bake about 35-40 minutes, or until a knife inserted in the center of a custard cup comes out clean.

We like to sprinkle cinnamon on top of the custard just before baking. So good and so simple!

## Caramel Toffee Bars

I was standing in the baking aisle at the grocery store the other day trying to decide what to make for an upcoming party when my eye landed on a bag of caramel bits.

I think I heard music playing and someone shout “Yahoo!” (that may have been me). Caramel bits. What a concept. Little bits of delicious caramel ready to turn into something amazing. The part that I really loved is the line that says “Unwrapped for Easy Melting.” Call me lazy, but I hate wasting time and precious brain cells unwrapping caramels. So I generally don’t bake anything with caramel for that very reason.

The file of recipes stored in my head immediately went to toffee bars. They are moist and delicious and completely bad for you. What would happen if I threw in some of these caramel bits? I had to find out!

So I brought them home and whipped up a batch of caramel toffee bars. I almost fainted when I took a bite out of one warm from the oven. They are so good. No really, in the top ten of bar cookies I’ve ever tasted (and believe me, there has been a lot of cookie tasting!).

## Caramel Toffee Bars

### ***Crust:***

1/2 cup butter, softened  
1/2 cup brown sugar, packed  
1 cup flour

Cream together and press in bottom of an 11 x 17 baking pan. Bake 10 minutes in a 350 degree oven.

### ***Caramel Filling:***

bag of caramel bits (11 ounce bag)  
1/3 cup of heavy cream

Put caramels and cream in a microwave safe bowl and heat in 30-second intervals, stirring until caramels are melted. If you aren’t a lazy slug like me, you could use regular caramels. You’ll need about 2 cups. When melted, pour over the top of the cooked crust.

### ***Topping:***

2 eggs  
1 cup brown sugar, packed  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
2 tbsp. flour  
1 tsp. baking powder  
1 cup coconut  
1/2 tsp. salt  
1 package of Heath Bits ‘o Brickle Toffee Bits

Mix ingredients together and pour over the caramel on top of the crust. Return to the oven and bake for 25 minutes or until golden brown.

When done, remove from the oven and top with Heath Toffee Bits. If you want to turn this dessert from something incredible that will make your taste buds scream “Thank you!” for days into something even more wicked.... try drizzling a bit of melted chocolate on top. You may need someone nearby to help you off the floor after you take a bite. Melt about 1/2 cup of semi-sweet chocolate chips with 2 tbsp. of heavy cream in the microwave. Just use a spoon or a knife to drizzle over the bars.

## Carrot Cake

This recipe for carrot cake comes from my grandma. You could always count on finding some delicious baked goodie at her house, especially when she baked carrot cake. It is easy to put together and makes the whole house smell yummy while it bakes. Hands down, this is Captain Cavedweller's favorite dessert, which is saying a lot since he isn't a big sweet eater (he leaves that to me).

### Elsie's Carrot Cake

2 cups flour  
2 cups sugar  
1 cup oil  
4 eggs  
2 tsp. baking soda  
4 cups grated carrots  
1 tsp. salt  
1 cup walnuts, chopped  
2 tsp. cinnamon

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Cream together eggs, sugar and oil. Mix in remaining ingredients and bake for 45 minutes or until edges begin to pull away from the pan. You can bake this as a sheet cake or in layers.

Top with Cream Cheese Frosting. Garnish with halved walnuts. Keep refrigerated until ready to serve and put any leftovers (if such a thing exists) in the fridge.

### **Cream Cheese Frosting**

1 box powdered sugar  
8 ounces cream cheese, softened  
1/2 cup butter, softened  
1 tsp. vanilla

Mix cream cheese and butter, stir in vanilla then add sugar, a little at a time until well blended.

## Popcorn Cake

The first year I was away from home on my birthday, my Mom sent me a popcorn cake. It was a taste of home, fall and love all wrapped up in one fragrantly satisfying bundle.

This is a fun treat to make that little ones especially enjoy. A warning: you will have sticky fingers both in the making and the eating process, but it is so worth it!

## Popcorn Cake

24 cups of popped popcorn\*  
1 cup of spiced gum drops  
1 1/2 cups of peanuts  
1 large bag of mini marshmallows  
1/2 cup oil  
1/2 cup butter

Mix oil, butter and marshmallows in a large bowl. Microwave at 20-30 second increments, stirring between each set until marshmallows are melted and oil and butter are mixed in nicely. (It will still look a little oily).

Mix in popped popcorn, peanuts and gum drops. Press into greased bundt or angel food cake pan. Leave standing at room temperature for an hour or so until cake is set then slice and serve. You could also press into balls and wrap individually.

\* For a fun variation, use colored popcorn kernels.

## Pumpkin Cake Balls

If you love pumpkin and cream cheese, you are going to adore these pretty pumpkin cake balls (from the cover). These do take a little time and effort, but the result is well worth it!



## Pumpkin Cake Balls

1 vanilla cake mix  
1 egg  
1 small can of pumpkin  
½ cup evaporated milk  
½ cup sugar  
1 tsp. cinnamon  
1 tsp. pumpkin pie spice  
1 can cream cheese frosting  
1 package candy coating (Almond Bark)  
Sprinkles or other decoration  
Pretzel sticks

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Mix cake mix, egg, pumpkin, milk, sugar and spices until well blended. Pour into a greased 11 x 176 baking pan. Bake for about 20 minutes or until cake is lightly browned and a finger poked in the top bounces back. Cool completely.

In a large bowl, break up entire cake then mix in 1/2 the can of frosting. You may have to get your hands into the project to get it thoroughly mixed and you most definitely will get hands-on- involvement when you form the balls. The size is totally dependent on how big you want to make them. I'd stick in the ballpark of between one to two inches diameter.

If the cake seems too moist, pop in the freezer for a few minutes and the balls will be easy to form. If you are more talented than I am with a melon baller you can use it or form them by hand. Once they are formed, melt the candy coating, a little at a time. Pop it in the microwave in 20-second intervals until it is melted. Do not reheat it as it gets gunky and icky very quickly. Use it up then melt the next round.

When the candy coating is ready, dip in the ends of the pretzel sticks then stab them into the balls. Let them sit until the coating is nice and firm. This is very important. If you don't do this, your sticks may fall out.

Once the balls are ready for dipping, use a spoon to swirl coating over the balls. Tap the edge of the stick lightly on the bowl to get off excess coating. Cover the ball in sprinkles, food glitter, whatever sounds good and looks tasty. Rest the balls on a wire rack sprayed with non-stick spray until the coating is good and firm.

Repeat until all balls are coated. You can put these in the freezer, wrap in individual cellophane bags or share them as soon as you are finished.

## Pumpkin Cheesecake Bars

One day I had a craving for pumpkin cheesecake which somehow morphed into the idea of pumpkin cheesecake bars which turned into pumpkin cheesecake bars with crumb topping. Unable to find a recipe I liked, I made up my own.

It actually turned out well, or at least that is what the taste testers told me. Some asked for seconds, but I only brought a limited sampling to work. Sorry about that, guys.

### Pumpkin Cheesecake Bars with Crumb Topping

#### *Crust*

1 1/2 cups quick cooking oats  
1 1/4 cups flour  
3/4 cups brown sugar, firmly packed  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1/2 teaspoon baking soda  
3/4 cup butter, room temperature

#### *Filling*

1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, room temperature  
3/4 cup canned pumpkin pie filling  
1/2 cup sugar  
1 large egg  
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon  
1 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Combine oats, flour, brown sugar, salt, baking soda, and butter. Beat until mixture is crumbly. Reserve 1 1/2 cups of the crumb mixture, pressing the remaining mixture into a greased 13 x 9 x 2- inch baking pan. Bake for 10 minutes.

Mix cream cheese, pumpkin pie filling, sugar, egg, and cinnamon. Beat until well blended and smooth. Spread filling over hot crust then top with remaining crumb mixture. Return to oven and bake 25 minutes.

Cool and cut into bars. You can make this a couple days ahead of time but keep refrigerated until ready to serve.

If you want to get wild and crazy, drizzle the tops of the bars with caramel or chocolate sauce, or both. Also, try serving bars with Dulce de Leche ice cream. See if that doesn't make you melt in a puddle.

*\*Note:* If you like nuts, you can add 1/2 cup of finely chopped pecan to the crust mixture. You could also put toasted pecan halves on top of each bar before you drizzle with caramel.

## Pumpkin Mousse Trifle

Warning: If you are on a diet or trying to avoid sweet, delicious goodness, you may want to skip right past today's recipe post. I made this Pumpkin Mousse Trifle for a potluck and it was quite tasty. Actually, it was more than quite tasty. It was downright want-to-lick-the-plate good.

And here is the best part – it was super fast and easy. Anyone looking for a fast no-bake recipe for Thanksgiving, try this.



## Pumpkin Trifle Mousse

- 1 box of gingerbread mix, baked (or 2 cups of cake cubes)
- 4 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 1 small box instant cheesecake pudding
- 2 cups milk
- 1 cup pumpkin pie filling
- 1 tsp. pumpkin pie spice
- 1 tbsp. cinnamon
- 1/2 cup caramel sauce
- 2 cups whipped cream
- Toffee bits for topping (optional)

If you are making your own gingerbread, bake and let cool. You need about 2 cups of cake cubes. I planned to use gingerbread, but I ran out of time to make it, so I grabbed a pound cake that looked quite yummy. It was.

Mix pudding with two cups of milk. Add in softened cream cheese and blend. Then mix in pumpkin and spices. Blend well then set aside for about five minutes. Whip whipping cream until some nice peaks form (add in about ¼ cup of powdered sugar and mix until blended if you like your whipping cream sweet), set aside.

Cut cake into cubes and start layer in a trifle bowl, large glass bowl or individual glasses. You are going to do three layers, so use everything in thirds (guesstimates work just fine). Top cake with mousse then drizzle with caramel sauce. Spoon on a layer of whipped cream then start again with a layer of cake.

Finish with a layer of whipped cream. You can top with toffee bits and cinnamon or another drizzle of caramel and cake crumbs. Whatever strikes your fancy.

## Pumpkin Roll

My sweet Aunt Louise used to make this pumpkin roll. I thought it was divine then and still do. She was one of those special people who just exuded loving kindness. She always looked for the good in others, was generous and giving, and gracious.

She shared this recipe with me, taking the time to type it out on a 3x5 index card. That recipe card is now covered in splatters and caked on sugar, but every year when I pull it out of my recipe box, it makes me smile and remember a wonderful lady.

### Louise's Pumpkin Cake Roll

#### *Cake*

3 eggs  
1 cup sugar  
2/3 cup canned pumpkin  
1 tsp. lemon juice  
3/4 cup flour  
2 tsp. cinnamon  
1 tsp. ginger  
1/2 tsp. nutmeg  
1 tsp. baking powder  
1 cup finely chopped walnuts

#### *Filling*

1 cup powdered sugar  
1 8 ounce package cream cheese, softened  
1/4 cup margarine or butter  
1 tsp. vanilla  
1/4 cup candied cherries

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

In a large mixing bowl, beat the eggs with a mixer on high for five minutes. Gradually beat in the 1 cup of sugar. Stir in pumpkin and lemon juice. In a small bowl, stir together flour and other dry ingredients. Fold into pumpkin mixture. Spread batter in a greased and floured 15x10x1 jelly roll pan. Sprinkle with nuts. Bake for 15 minutes. Immediately invert cake onto a flour-sack towel sprinkled with powdered sugar. Roll cake and towel up together. Cool completely. Unroll cake.

In a mixing bowl beat 1 cup powdered sugar, cream cheese, butter and vanilla with mixer on medium speed until smooth. Spread over cake.

Reroll cake, cover and chill in refrigerator until ready to serve. Cut into 1-inch slices and garnish with cherries and whipping cream if so desired. Makes 10-12 servings.

*\*Note:* You can substitute pecans for walnuts or make without nuts.

## [Salted Caramel Shortbread Bars](#)

I love shortbread. I love caramel. I'm even learning to appreciate salt on my caramel. So why not combine the three? This is a simple recipe that will earn you many rave reviews!

### [Salted Caramel Shortbread Bars](#)

*For the shortbread*

1 cup flour  
1/4 cup granulated sugar  
1 stick of butter  
1 tsp. vanilla

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Cream together sugar and butter. Stir in flour and vanilla. Press into a greased (spray with Pam) 8×8 baking pan. Bake until shortbread is set but not brown (about 10-13 minutes). Remove from oven and let cool slightly before pouring on caramel layer.

*For the caramel layer*

1 stick butter, cut into pieces  
1/2 cup sugar  
2 tbsp. light corn syrup  
1 (14 oz.) cans sweetened condensed milk

To make the caramel layer, combine the butter, sugar, corn syrup and condensed milk in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Heat, stirring occasionally, until the butter is melted. Increase the heat to medium-high and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to maintain a simmer, stirring constantly. Continue simmering and stirring until the mixture turns an amber color and thickens slightly. Pour the mixture over the shortbread layer, smooth the top, and allow to cool completely and set. Make sure you use a heavy-duty saucepan or you'll have burnt bits in your caramel.

When cool (I stuck mine in the fridge to hurry things along) sprinkle with sea salt. Cut into squares and enjoy!

## Spice Bundt Cake with Vanilla Butter Sauce

If you enjoy the flavors of cinnamon and nutmeg, you will love this moist cake that is easy to make. Topped with the vanilla butter sauce, it is the perfect end to a fall meal.



### Spice Bundt Cake

#### *Cake*

1 box Golden Vanilla Cake Mix  
1 small package instant white chocolate pudding  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
1 cup sour cream  
1/2 cup water  
1/2 cup oil  
3 eggs  
2 tbsp. cinnamon  
1 teaspoon ginger  
2 tsp. nutmeg

#### *Butter Sauce*

1/2 cup butter  
1/2 cup heavy cream  
1 cup packed brown sugar  
1 tablespoon vanilla

*\*Note:* If you want, you can purchase a spice cake mix and omit the additional spices.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

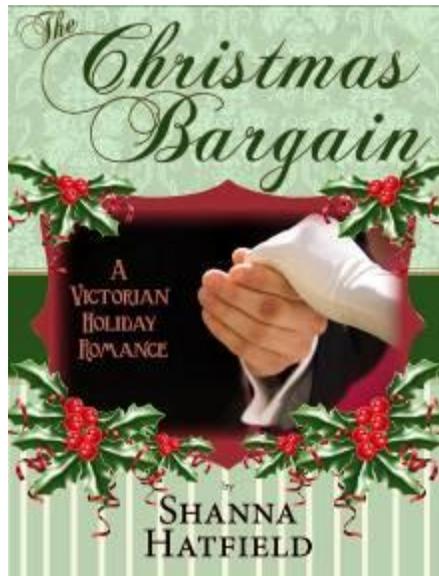
Beat eggs, water, vanilla, oil and sour cream with cake batter and pudding. Add in spices. Beat on medium speed until combined. The batter will be super thick, so don't panic.

Scoop it into a greased bundt pan, evening it up as best you can (I tap the pan on the counter to get out air bubbles and even up the batter). Bake for one hour or until it starts to pull away from the edges of the pan.

Let cool completely then invert on a cake plate.

To make the sauce, combine butter, cream and sugar in saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring consistently, then reduce and simmer for about 10 minutes or until sauce thickens. Add vanilla, stirring well. Cool slightly then drizzle over cake.

Serve with dulce de leche ice cream or cinnamon laced whipped cream.

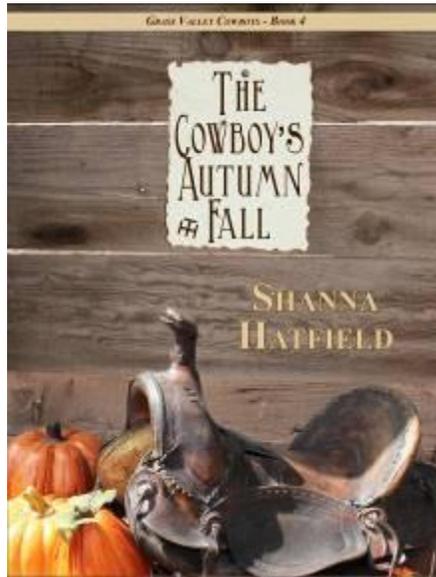


**Coming for the 2012 Holiday Season!**

***The Christmas Bargain*** - As owner and manager of the Hardman bank, Luke Granger is a man of responsibility and integrity in the small 1890s Eastern Oregon town. Calling in a long overdue loan, Luke finds himself reluctantly accepting a bargain in lieu of payment from the shiftless farmer who barter's his daughter to settle his debt.

Philamena Booth is both mortified and relieved when her father sends her off with the banker as payment of his debt. Held captive on the farm by her father since the death of her mother more than a decade earlier, Philamena is grateful to leave. If only it had been someone other than the handsome and charismatic Luke Granger riding in to rescue her. Ready to hold up her end of the bargain as Luke's cook and housekeeper, Philamena is prepared for the hard work ahead.

What she isn't prepared for is being forced to marry Luke as part of this crazy Christmas bargain.



**Coming Fall 2012!**

***The Cowboy's Autumn Fall*** - Brice Morgan thought love at first sight was some ridiculous notion of school girls and old ladies who read too many romance novels. At least he does until he meets Bailey Bishop at a friend's wedding and falls hard and fast for the intriguing woman.

Bailey Bishop attends her cousin's wedding with no intention of extending her brief visit to Oregon. Married to her career as a paleontologist, Bailey tries to ignore her intense attraction to her cousin's best friend, Brice. Ready to return home to Denver, Bailey instead accepts the opportunity to explore a new dig site not far from the family's ranch in Grass Valley.

Can she keep her feelings for Brice from derailing her plans for the future?

As the autumn season arrives, love falls on willing hearts at the Triple T Ranch.

# THE COWBOY'S AUTUMN FALL

by  
SHANNA HATFIELD

*An excerpt...*

## Chapter One

*“He who would not be idle, let him fall in love.”*

Ovid

“Disgusting. Absolutely disgusting,” Brice Morgan muttered to himself as he made his way through the crowd gathered for Trent and Lindsay Thompson’s wedding reception.

If he had to watch one more couple gazing dreamily at each other, Brice thought he might be sick. Enduring about all the romance he could handle for one evening, he sat down next to his sister Tess at a large table beneath one of the white canopies. Leaning back in his chair, he shook his head in irritation and sighed.

“Maybe you need to work some moves like that into your routine, man,” Travis Thompson said, leaning around Tess and slapping Brice on the shoulder. Travis and Brice, just days apart in age, had been best friends since they were old enough to push each other down.

Following the direction of Tess’ pointing finger, he watched Travis’ adopted six-year-old niece Cass dance with the wild abandon of a happy child next to her uncle and his new bride. Arms flailing, red curls bouncing, Cass spun around and around giggling with giddy excitement.

“That would definitely get you some attention,” Tess teased, offering Brice a sassy grin. “I’m sure all the girls would be lining up to dance with you.”

“Definitely,” Travis said, nodding his head in agreement. “Anyone under the age of ten or over the age of seventy would be putty in your hands.”

Before Brice could form a snappy comeback, Travis leaned over and whispered in Tess’ ear, making her blush.

Rolling his eyes, he realized sitting next to Travis and Tess, basking in their newly declared love for one another, wasn’t the best choice if he was trying to get away from the evening’s love fest this wedding was turning out to be.

Travis’ older brother Trent was goofy in love with his bride of a few hours. If that wasn’t bad enough, Travis’ oldest brother Trey and his wife Cady were sitting across the table from him whispering sweet nothings to each other and looking more in love than a couple wed eight months had a right to.

Brice sighed again and swiped a hand over his face. All this talk of love and romance was ridiculous. It was the stuff that kept school girls twittering and old ladies and love-starved women buying romance novels. In his opinion, it was a bunch of mush perpetuated by florists, candy companies, and sappy-minded idiots.

“You okay, BB?” Tess asked, calling him by the nickname she’d given him when she first learned to talk. Less than a year apart in age, Tess couldn’t quite say “baby” so the name BB stuck.

“Just great,” Brice said, trying to hide his annoyance as Trey stood and took Cady’s hand in his, kissing her fingers.

“Cady, darlin’, will you please dance with me?” Trey turned on his charm. He gave his wife a pleading look, one that everyone knew inspired Cady to do whatever Trey wanted. “I know you’re pooped and you shucked off your shoes half an hour ago, so you can waltz out there barefoot for all I care, but come dance with me. Please?”

“I’d be honored, boss-man,” Cady said, getting up from the table and stuffing her tired feet back into her high heels, letting Trey pull her toward the dance-floor.

Swallowing down another sigh, Brice supposed he should be used to the Thompson brothers and their romantic tendencies by now. It was practically legendary in their small community of Grass Valley, Oregon.

Growing up nearby, Brice, Tess, and their brother Ben spent as much time here at the Triple T Ranch with the three Thompson boys as they did at home on the Running M Ranch. That was before Trey, Trent, and Travis were all love struck.

Sitting back in his chair and looking around, he had never seen the Triple T look quite so nice, especially in mid-August. From the fresh coats of paint on the outbuildings to the flowers blooming profusely in every available corner, the ranch looked like something you’d see in a home and garden magazine.

The big yard was now set up like a fairyland with billowing tents, enough white lights to line the landing strips at PDX and a portable dance floor where he could see Trey drop Cady into a dip while Trent twirled Lindsay in his arms.

The only reason Tess and Travis weren't out on the dance floor was due to the pair of torn hamstrings Travis received the previous month when he rescued a little boy windsurfing. Only able to walk for short stretches without crutches, dancing wasn't on Travis' current list of activities approved by his physical therapist, who also happened to be Tess.

"I hate for you to miss all the dancing, honeybee," Travis said, rubbing his hand across Tess' shoulders. "Why don't the two of you go show them how it's done?"

Tess kissed Travis' cheek and gently patted his leg. "The only guy I want to dance with is you, Trav. I'm fine sitting on the sidelines tonight."

"Give me a break," Brice muttered under his breath, again rolling his eyes. If those two kept this up, he might even regret the extensive efforts he made all summer to get them together.

"I heard that," Tess said, leaning closer to Brice and smacking his arm. "What's gotten into you tonight, grumpy britches? You're usually the life of the party."

Brice shrugged. His sister was right. Usually the first one on the dance floor and the last one to leave, Brice loved to have fun, be the center of attention, and keep everyone entertained. Tonight, he just wasn't interested. Maybe it was because he was here all alone.

"Excuse me," a soft voice said next to Brice and he turned to look into the face of a lovely girl. Petite with honey-blond curls cascading down her back and sparkling blue eyes, a dimple popped out in her cheek when she smiled at him. "Would you like to dance?"

"Absolutely," Brice said, getting to his feet and taking her hand as she walked toward the dance floor.

"You must be related to Travis' girlfriend," the girl said as they settled into the rhythm of a moderately fast dance.

"Tess is my sister," Brice said, smiling at his dance partner, admiring her well-shaped form and beautiful face. "How do you know Travis?"

"He's my cousin," the girl said, bringing her dimple back out of hiding with a big smile. "I'm Sierra Bishop. My mom and Denni are sisters."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Brice Morgan and I've known the whole Thompson clan since I was born," Brice said, admiring the way Sierra moved on the dance floor while casting teasing glances his direction. She was not only a very good dancer, but also an accomplished flirt. He had met a few of the Thompson boys' cousins, but obviously they'd been holding out on him with this branch of the family tree.

Deciding the evening had just gotten a lot more interesting, Brice asked Sierra for the next dance and they both grinned when Travis limped onto the dance floor, pulling Tess behind him.

The band played Blake Shelton's *Honey Bee*, thanks to Trent and Trey's prompting, drawing the interest of all the guests. Most everyone knew the song was the inspiration behind Travis' nickname for Tess. As they the crowd clapped and cheered, Tess' cheeks turned bright red but she buried her face against Travis' chest and kept on dancing.

"Do you think there'll be another wedding soon?" Sierra asked, eying the couple as they became much more involved in sharing loving glances than dancing.

"Quite possibly," Brice commented, glad to see both Tess and Travis so deliriously happy, even if it was a little nauseating.

As the song ended, Brice walked Sierra over to the refreshment table and handed her a glass of sweet tea. They were standing there talking when a young woman came up beside Sierra and whispered something to her before pouring herself a cup of punch.

Studying the two of them, Brice could see a resemblance although the girls didn't seem to share much in common. Where Sierra was short and bubbly, the other girl was older, taller and had an aura of self-confidence. Her hair, the same honey-gold shade, fell in short curls above her shoulders and Brice would have guessed her to be about five eight or so if she'd kick off her incredibly high heels.

When she turned and looked at him with eyes the same intense turquoise shade of blue as Trey Thompson's, Brice thought he'd been struck by lightning when an electrifying jolt shook him from the top of his head right on down to the toes in his polished cowboy boots.

Half expecting smoke to billow around him, Brice forced himself to stand still.

“Brice Morgan, this is my sister Bailey,” Sierra said, putting a hand on the arm of the woman Brice decided in the last dozen seconds he was going to one day marry.

Brice leaned forward and offered his hand which Bailey took in hers. Ignoring the snap of heat that shot up her arm at his touch, Bailey studied the lean, muscled man before her and liked what she saw.

“A pleasure to meet you Mr. Morgan,” Bailey said in a smooth voice that made Brice think of something silky and rich. Her hand in his felt soft and so right, he hated to let it go.

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Bishop,” Brice said, reaching to doff a hat he forgot he wasn’t wearing. Quickly recovering, he gave her his most charming smile. “May I ask you for a dance?”

“You may,” she said, handing her cup of punch to Sierra and placing her hand back in Brice’s as he led her to the dance floor. Bailey glanced over her shoulder and caught the look of surprise on her sister’s pretty face. This was the first time any member of the male species chose Bailey over the perfectly perky Sierra.

Looking into the bottomless depths of her eyes, Brice realized he had never, in his twenty five years of living, felt this way about another person. While his heart pounded wildly, the rest of the world suddenly disappeared, leaving him with his attention completely focused on Bailey.

Trying to maintain his composure, Brice was glad the dance was a slow one. It gave him time to start a conversation with the woman in his arms.

“Welcome to Grass Valley, Miss Bishop,” Brice said, keeping the formal tone of their introduction.

“Thank you, Mr. Morgan. We’ve been here a few times over the years, but it’s always fun to visit,” Bailey said, glancing up at Brice. He was taller than her, about six feet, she would guess. He had lush brown hair that was cut short and styled with a spiky wave in the front. Eyes the color of root beer held a spark of mischief and his teeth gleamed white when he smiled. Deciding he was definitely handsome, she smiled back at him. “Please, call me Bailey.”

“Bailey,” Brice repeated, liking the sound of her name on his lips. What he’d like even more was the taste of her lips on his. He supposed that was pushing things a bit since they’d just met a few minutes ago.

Carrying on a conversation about generalities, they were oblivious that the tempo changed as they continued to dance the next three dances in each other’s arms. Finally, Brice asked Bailey if she’d like something to drink and escorted her back to the refreshment tent. Sierra was long gone, so Brice poured Bailey another cup of punch and fished a bottle of water out of an ice-filled tub for himself.

Bailey finished her punch in a few swallows and refilled it while Brice was looking around for an empty table where they could sit and chat.

Taking her elbow, he walked her to a table where her aunt sat visiting with his parents.

“Bailey, honey, I see you met our Brice,” Denni Thompson said when Bailey sat down beside her. “This is Mike and Michele Morgan, Brice’s parents.”

“How lovely to meet you both,” Bailey said, suddenly feeling a little light headed. She probably needed to eat something, since she’d missed eating her dinner, distracted by some work details she’d received. Sierra told her to put away her phone and have some fun, so she of course ignored her sister and responded to three text messages. By that time, her plate had disappeared and she was left watching Sierra work her charm on the single male population attending the wedding.

Denni put her arm around Bailey and gave her a hug as they all visited for a while. Bailey felt oddly detached from herself, being chatty and carefree. Normally she was quiet and reserved, much preferring to sit back and analyze the conversation going on around her than actively participate in it. She assumed her behavior was due to the fact they had flown in from Denver that afternoon and she was a little punchy from the excitement of the wedding.

“Brice, why don’t you go get us all some cake,” Michele said, looking at her son as he gazed adoringly at Denni’s niece.

“Sure, Mom,” Brice said, getting to his feet, hoping Denni wouldn’t let Bailey escape before he got back. “Coming right up.”

Brice soon came back trying to balance five pieces of cake on flimsy paper plates and managed to get them all on the table without dropping one. Seeing Bailey’s empty cup of punch, he went to get her a refill and poured himself a glass of tea.

Finishing up their cake, Bailey seemed interested in spending more time with him, so Brice asked her to dance again. He nearly bore a hole through his brother Ben with his cold glare when he cut in. Knowing he ruffled Brice's feathers, Ben returned Bailey to his keeping at the end of the dance with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

"Your brother seems nice," Bailey said, watching Ben walk away, surprised at how much the two brothers looked alike. In fact, if there wasn't a definite age difference between the two, it would have been easy to think they were twins.

"He has his moments," Brice said, pulling Bailey a little closer into his arms. When she didn't offer any resistance, he ran his hands up and down her back, fighting the urge to kiss her.

Observing her as they danced, he realized she wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her nose was a little too wide and a gap between her two front teeth would keep her from being considered magazine cover quality, but she had a heart-shaped face and skin that looked like smooth porcelain.

Although her mouth was small, her lips were moist and inviting. She had long legs, a nice curved figure, and apparently worked out by the toned muscles visible with her sleeveless dress. The most important thing Brice noticed was how absolutely perfect she felt in his arms.

"I enjoyed meeting your parents," Bailey said, glancing around like she was looking for someone. "Mom and Dad are around here somewhere. I'll introduce you if I can find them."

"I'd like that," Brice said, knowing it was hard to find anyone in the crowd of hundreds of guests filling the Triple T ranch yard. Since it was getting late, some of the guests were starting to leave. It wouldn't be long before Trent and Lindsay tossed the bouquet and said their goodbyes, then the cleanup process would begin.

Brice promised to help tear down the tents after the crowd cleared out, so he hoped to spend the next few hours with Bailey. He suddenly wondered if she was staying at the ranch or elsewhere. "Where are you staying?"

"Here at the ranch," Bailey said, enjoying the feel of Brice's arms around her. It had been a while since she had allowed herself the pleasure of being close to a man. This particular man was doing funny things to her ability to reason as his warm, leathery scent kept teasing her nose and his engaging smiles kept drawing hers out in return. "I have some business to attend to Monday and then I'll head back to Denver with the family on Thursday. We all want to make sure we have time to visit with Nana."

Brice smiled as he thought about Ester Nordon, grandmother to the rowdy Thompson brothers. She had the same brilliant blue eyes as Trey and Bailey and was known for her gentle yet formidable spirit.

"You definitely don't want to miss that opportunity. I've had my ears boxed by your Nana more than once," Brice said with a grin.

"I'm sure you did nothing to deserve it," Bailey said, smiling at Brice and finding herself wanting to kiss the mole that rested at the edge of his bottom lip. Shaking her head to rid herself of the notion made her dizzy, so she leaned forward and pressed her cheek against Brice's. She felt his arms tighten slightly around her and let out a contented sigh.

Brice had never been so enraptured by a woman before. Usually one to take things slow to keep girls he wasn't all that interested in from getting the wrong idea, Brice felt like he'd been hurtling headlong down an uncharted course since his eyes connected with Bailey's.

"Bailey, I know this sounds crazy..." Brice started to say, but was cut off by cheers and clapping when it was announced that Lindsay was ready to toss the bouquet. Turning with his arm around Bailey's waist so they could watch the fun, Brice cheered when Trent shot the garter in a high arc and Travis captured it by sticking one of his crutches up in the air.

The crowd went wild with applause when Lindsay tossed the bouquet straight to Tess. Someone hollered "two down, one to go," causing Tess' face to turn a bright shade of red. It seemed to be a fact of general agreement that there would be another Thompson family wedding in the near future.

"That is perfectly splendid," Bailey said, leaning closer to Brice. "I didn't realize Travis was that serious about your sister."

"He didn't either until a few weeks ago," Brice said, taking Bailey's hand and leading her along with the crowd as they followed Trent and Lindsay out to where a carriage waited to whisk them away. Given the lateness of the hour, Trent and Lindsay were going to spend the night at their cute little cottage down the road

then leave in the morning for a week on the Oregon coast. The carriage would drive them the few miles from the Triple T to their house.

Waving as the carriage rolled down the long driveway, the guests began saying their goodbyes. It didn't take long for the crowd to depart and the remaining family and friends to begin the massive undertaking of taking down the fairyland and picking up the debris left from the celebration.

Brice and Bailey helped clear off tables, fold linens and carry gifts into the house where Trent and Lindsay would open them upon their return. Bailey was uncommonly thirsty and drank three more cups of punch while she helped move the gifts inside.

Noticing that plenty of help was making short work of the mess, Brice caught Bailey's hand and tugged her away from the chatter of the others down to the pond where Lindsay and Trent exchanged vows earlier in the evening.

Hundreds of white lights illuminated the area, hanging in the trees and draped over shrubs. It was beyond lovely and Bailey stopped at the bottom of the hill where the trail ended to take it all in.

Brice watched Bailey and smiled, wondering if she enjoyed evenings like this in Denver. Frogs and crickets created a soft serenade and a slight breeze cooled the warm summer air. In addition to the twinkling white lights around them, a canopy of stars twinkled overhead.

"Wow," Bailey said, tipping her head back to stare at the night sky. She wasn't sure if she moved or Brice did, but she found her head resting against his shoulder and his arm around her waist as they stared up at the stars. It was one of the most romantic moments Bailey had ever experienced.

Feeling completely unlike herself, she spun around, throwing her arms around Brice's neck and putting her lips to his.

Brice's surprise rapidly gave way to acceptance as his arms went around her and he pulled her closer, deepening the kiss.

Sure her lips were on fire, Bailey was torn between wanting the kiss to end immediately and go on forever. Tremors rocked through her and her heart felt like it might take flight from her chest in its frenzied beating.

"Brice, I..."

Lips moving insistently on hers kept her from saying more. It was probably a good thing since she couldn't remember what it was she was going to say. Brice worked his way from her lips down her neck and back up to her ear, which made her moan and bury her hands into his thick hair. She tipped her head back to give him better access and he pulled her flush against him.

Suddenly he released his hold and took a step back as reality crashed down on him. What was he doing? This was Travis' cousin and from all appearances, she wasn't the kind of girl to get embroiled in a passionate encounter upon first meeting someone.

"I'm sorry, Bailey," Brice said, trying to catch his breath and recapture some small degree of sense.

"Don't apologize, Brice," Bailey said, leaning against him, even though she knew she shouldn't. She should be offended, annoyed and angry.

Only she wasn't.

She was, however, lightheaded, emboldened, and more interested in the good-looking cowboy standing in front of her than she had ever been with a man before.

Brice took a series of deep breaths, started to say something, stopped and swiped a hand over his face. It would be way too easy to take advantage of this situation and he wasn't going to let it happen.

Finally, he took her hand and turned them both toward the house, urging her up the trail. "I think we better get back to the house. We both seem to be under some sort of spell."

"Spells can be good," Bailey said, casting him a look that filled him with renewed longing. The heat in her intensely blue eyes made Brice trip. He had to take a few hurried steps to catch himself, making Bailey giggle.

"Bewitched is more like it," Brice muttered under his breath. He was doing some fast thinking as they walked back up the hill. If Bailey left Thursday that only gave him about ninety-six hours to convince her she was the woman for him and to stay in Grass Valley permanently.

"You can't be bewitched, I can't wriggle my nose," Bailey said in a breathy voice, turning her face to Brice. "See?"

“Yes, I do see,” he said, trying not to kiss her again with her face only an inch away from his. Actually, he was finding it difficult to see anything except the alluring woman who was standing next to him, warm and willing for his attentions. Gently pushing her forward, they continued walking.

Cresting the hill, it looked like the work was done and those left behind were either going to the bunkhouse, the ranch house, or getting in their cars to go home. He watched Travis limp beside Tess as she walked to her car and whisper something in her ear that made her smile. Brice knew he'd have a few minutes before he needed to leave since Tess was his ride home and she obviously wasn't quite ready to tell Travis goodnight.

Leading Bailey around the corner of the ranch house where it was dark and quiet, he put his arms around her and let her warmth seep into him. He never imagined holding a woman would make him feel like he was finally complete, but that is exactly how he felt with Bailey.

“Can I see you tomorrow?” Brice asked as Bailey rested against his chest, melting against him while melting his restraint.

“Umm, hmm,” she said, eyes closed and face upturned to his. Feeling weightless and wonderful, she grinned. “But you better kiss me goodnight first.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Brice said, dropping his head to hers and giving her a kiss that made bright lights explode behind his eyes and his gut clench with heat.

Bailey wrapped her arms around his neck and was leaning so far into him, he was all but holding her up.

“Oh, Brice, I think I just love you,” she said with a giggle followed by a hiccup. She toyed with the wave of his hair that fell across his forehead and was nearly purring in his ear. “You're so sweet and sexy.”

Pulling back, Brice studied her, trying to determine if she was sincere in what she was saying. Bailey had been somewhat reserved and quiet when they first met. As the evening progressed she became more and more relaxed and now she was quite ... uninhibited. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was drunk, but all he'd seen her drink was punch.

Rolling his eyes, Brice realized the punch must have been spiked. Thinking back, he saw the rotten Bradshaw boys hanging around the punch bowl when no one else was around. They were famous for their ability to spike just about anything in liquid form.

“Punch, Bailey. How much punch did you have, sugar?” Brice asked, gently untangling her arms from around his neck and helping her walk around the corner of the house.

“I don't know. Five or nine or eleventy-three cups,” Bailey said, knowing she sounded stupid, but unable to keep her mouth shut. Feeling flushed and dizzy, she was having the most difficult time simultaneously holding open her eyes and moving her feet forward. Despite that she felt completely light and without care. She giggled again and leaned against Brice's arm. “It was yummy.”

“I'm sure it was,” Brice said dryly, trying to keep her walking upright in her high heels.

The third time she stumbled, Brice sighed and picked her up in his arms. Hurrying up the back steps, through the mud room and into the kitchen, he wasn't surprised to see a few people milling around. Sierra was there talking to an older woman who looked enough like her, he assumed she was her mother.

“My gracious, is she hurt?” the woman asked as Brice tried to set Bailey down and she refused to let go of his neck.

“No, but she's probably going to have a humdinger of a headache tomorrow,” Brice said, bending his head and sliding it out of Bailey's grasp. He set her down on her feet, but her legs were wobbly and she tilted dangerously to the right.

“I hate to ask, but would you mind? I'm her mother, Mary Bishop” the woman said, pointing toward the great room. She tried to hide a smirk behind her hand. “I can't believe she's snookered.”

“No problem. Just point me in the right direction. South or North Wing?” Brice said, happy to help as he picked Bailey up, enjoying the feel of her body close to his, even if she was drunk.

“South,” Mary said leading the way. Knowing the house well, Brice followed Mary and Sierra through the kitchen and dining area, past the great room and down the hall to the south wing of the house. “I'm Brice Morgan, a good friend of Travis'.”

“Thank you, Brice. I hate to meet you under this embarrassing circumstance, but it's our pleasure. My apologies for Bailey,” Mary said, sounding more amused than distraught over Bailey's drunken state. “I can honestly say she's never been drunk before. I don't know what inspired her to do so this evening.”

Brice laughed and both Sierra and Mary turned to look at him. "It's not her fault. I think the punch was spiked. Here I thought she found me charming and clever. Guess it was only the liquor talking."

Sierra, who was glad to see her sister show some spark of interest in a man regardless of how drunk she may have been, smiled.

"Oh, she liked you, Brice, or she would never have danced with you in the first place. She's not much of a socializer," Sierra said, sharing a knowing look with her mother.

Brice carried Bailey into the room that was Trey's during his growing up years and gently placed her on the bed. When she reached up looking like she would kiss him again, he turned his face so all she got was his cheek. It wasn't that he didn't want about a thousand more kisses from her, he just preferred she be sober without her mom and sister watching.

"Well, isn't that something," her mother said, observing the way Bailey was clinging to Brice.

"I told you, Mom," Sierra whispered, having already informed her mother about the cowboy who swept Bailey off her feet. "Now do you believe me?"

"Yes, I do," Mary said, watching as Brice kissed Bailey on the forehead and told her goodnight.

He turned and gave them both a grin before walking toward the door. Mary put a hand on his arm with a warm smile before he stepped into the hall.

"Thank you, Brice. I hope we'll see you again before we leave the ranch."

"I'd like that," Brice said, tipping his head to both Sierra and Mary. "I look forward to seeing the lovely Bishop ladies soon."

Rather than retracing his steps through the house, Brice walked to the end of the wing and went out the door, hurrying around to the side yard where Tess was parked. Seeing Travis with his hands buried in Tess' hair, Brice grinned.

"I think you two have done more than enough of that for one evening. Come on, Tessie, let's head home," Brice teased as he walked up to the car.

Tess jerked away from Travis, giving her brother a stern glare that only made him laugh.

"Thanks, dude," Travis said, shaking his head at his friend. "Don't think we didn't notice you saying goodnight to Bailey a minute ago."

Brice stopped the snappy retort he was going to give Travis and instead climbed into Tess' car.

Watching his sister blow a kiss to Travis, he felt compelled to blow one as well and bat his eyelashes theatrically, which earned him an elbow in his side from Tess.

Heading down the driveway, Tess was quiet while she seemed to pull her thoughts away from Travis. When he glanced at her again, she offered him a teasing smile. He was going to have to be careful or Tess would give him a hard time about his attraction to Bailey.

"You like Bailey, don't you?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Maybe," Brice said trying to sound uninterested.

"She's quite pretty with all that honey colored hair and those intense blue eyes. I wonder how come she and Trey are the only ones to inherit Nana's eye color?"

"Don't know. Just the way genes work I suppose."

"I happened to notice you two getting pretty friendly out back a little while ago. Don't you think that is kind of pushing the limit considering you just met her?" Tess asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I would say yes, except I figured out she was drunk."

"Drunk! How'd she get...oh, the punch," Tess said, turning off the road into their driveway.

"So it was the punch," Brice said, slapping his leg. "Let me guess, the Bradshaw boys?"

"I assumed so," Tess said, parking the car and turning off her lights. "Travis said they asked a couple of their hands to keep an eye on the punch bowl, but there were a few minutes when it went unguarded. I guess we should have thrown it out, but Travis didn't think the boys had time to dump anything into the bowl."

"Well, apparently they did," Brice said, keeping a hand on Tess' elbow to steady her as they walked through the gravel to the back sidewalk. "I mistakenly thought Bailey was completely taken with my undeniable charm and dashing good looks. Instead it was just the punch talking."

Tess laughed as they went in the back door.

"Maybe, but I hope it at least had something good to say."

Brice grinned. It definitely had something to say. Something along the lines that love at first sight wasn't such a far-fetched crazy notion after all...



SHANNA HATFIELD spent 10 years as a newspaper journalist before moving into the field of marketing and public relations. She has a lifelong love of writing, reading and creativity. She and her husband, lovingly referred to as Captain Cavedweller, reside in the Pacific Northwest with their neurotic cat along with a menagerie of wandering wildlife and neighborhood pets.

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