

# The Missing Ingredient

“The Good Host’s Book of Menus, Recipes and Household Discoveries”

By Tiana Kennell

Alicia Nelson is on a mission to become a proficient cook and impress her boyfriend with a delicious home cooked meal. After another failed attempt in the kitchen, she finds a classic cookbook for guidance. She bites off more than she can chew when she indulges in the secret ingredients that make the cookbook so special.

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## Chapter 1: Burnt Ends

To look at things from a positive point of view, at least Alicia Nelson knew the smoke detector worked. The device blared from the living room ceiling.

The smoke from her broiler-set oven wafted through her one-bedroom apartment with no way to escape. Alicia fanned the air in a poor attempt to break up the smoke. She turned off the oven and eyes on the stove but the damage was done. The asparagus was limp yet tough. The rice was clumped and hardened. And, she found the barbecue chicken had blackened yet was still pink inside. She threw her oven mitts across the room.

“Alicia!” Troy caught them before they hit him in the face.

“Oh no! I didn’t hear you come in! I didn’t expect you to come by so soon,” Alicia said.

She raised her arms to shield Troy’s delicate eyes from the food massacre. Troy returned to the living room to turn off the smoke detector and open a window. Alicia followed. She hugged her “Hot Stuff” apron to her body. It was a blustery December night in Portland, Oregon.

“My last patient canceled, and I was able to get my paperwork done earlier. Good thing I did. Babe, are you trying to burn the apartment down?”

Alicia balled up her fist and swallowed. “No, I was trying to cook you dinner.”

“But...why?”

“Because dear, that’s what girlfriends do when they love their boyfriends. Everybody in my family knows how to cook. How am I the only one who’s never learned?”

“Babe,” Troy crossed the living room and hugged her. He placed his chin on the top of her head then kissed her curls. “I don’t know how to cook either. See, we’re made for each other.”

“Not the answer I was looking for,” Alicia said. She wrapped her arms around his lean torso and relaxed into his hold. “But I’ll take it.”

## Chapter 2: The Cookbook

After a steamy and unexpected date night, Troy whisked back off to the medical center to meet his early-bird patients. Dr. Troy Wilkes, M.D. was a shining star in the ob-gyn department.

Alicia didn't have to be at her "office", a warehouse turned rehearsal studio where she managed a talented, yet struggling, band until noon. She decided to visit an arts district she'd heard had good shops. She could kill time and get some of her Christmas gift shopping done.

Alicia entered The Velveteen Kitten, a store that carried everything from contemporary home accents to men's grooming kits—all handmade, organic, vegan, and environmentally-friendly. It was Portland, after all.

A woman who stood near the front entrance spritzing green leafy plants with a liquid in a bottle greeted her. Alicia wandered through the store then out to the back patio where she found more houseplants and gardening decor and tall bookshelves doubling as display cases. Alicia chose a couple of ornate flower pots for her mother and sister. She was heading to the register inside when a shelf of books caught her eye. The one that won her over was an old green hardback, "The Good Host's Book of Recipes, Menus and Household Discoveries" by Gaiman & Pike Publishing, copyright 1922.

Alicia flipped through the pages and saw directions for setting a table, polishing silver, and adding garnish to a serving platter. There were recipes and menus for all occasions. Upon further inspection, she saw many of them had handwritten notes scribbled in the margins. Alicia read one written for pot roast.: "*A hit with the family. Richard said he loved it more than his mother's, though we will never tell her.*" And at the bottom, written in a different handwriting style: "*Douse olive branch in olive oil and roast with the meat. 'Armistice Inamorato.'*"

Alicia loved old traditions and rituals. She was getting a glimpse into the lives of the book's previous owners, some who may have lived nearly a century before her.

"Finding everything okay?" A voice startled her. Alicia turned to see the shopkeeper.

"Oh! Yes. Sorry. I got caught up in this book."

"My husband James is an avid book collector. This must be one of his."

"So is it for sale?"

The shopkeeper looked at the cover of the book. "Thinking about cracking a few eggs?"

"Yes. Last night I tried to make dinner using recipes I found online. It was a disaster. I want to show Troy, my boyfriend, that I can learn to cook. Maybe I need to take it back to the basics."

"I think you have something there. Hmm. James didn't write a price on the cover. You know what? I'm a romantic. I'll sell it for \$5 if you come back and let me know how things work out."

"Deal."

### **Chapter 3: Fully Stocked**

Alicia could hardly wait to get to the grocery store. During rehearsal, she'd earmarked several recipes to try for a second-act redo for Troy that evening. She felt exhilarated while pushing her cart from aisle to aisle loading it with raw ingredients instead of her frozen and instant usuals.

It was 3:30 p.m. when she returned to her apartment. The mess from the dinner the night before was still cluttering the kitchen.

"Oh yeah. I forgot about you," Alicia said. This was not going to work. Alicia returned to her car and drove to Troy's house. It was a beautiful two-story home with 3 bedrooms, 2.5 baths, and a large and underused kitchen. She made three trips to her car with arms and hands weighed down by bags of eggs, meat, vegetables, wine, and milk.

She found an apron folded in a drawer and propped the cookbook onto the recipe holder, which usually served as an iPad holder for watching “Modern Family”.

Curls pinned back, hands washed and the apron tied tight, Alicia sat at the island and read over the recipes for longer than the glance she had previously given them. Certain parts of the recipes didn’t make sense. What was most boggling was the last handwritten lines of each.

For instance, Alicia decided to attempt a meal that consisted of lamb chops, roasted potatoes, creamy asparagus soup, cornmeal biscuits, and for dessert, cocoa cookies with rose jam. The lamb chops recipe ended with: *“Wrap three strands of fresh rosemary with twine three times and hold it to the heart while saying “Amar Para Sempre.” Dip the bundle in red wine vinegar and place it on the plate of the intended before serving.”* And the cocoa cookies recipe instructed: *“To motivate intimacy, make a rose jam of sugar, fresh roses, water, and lemon juice. Jam can be used in the cookie dough or for more fast-acting potency, ingest directly.”*

There was much about cooking Alicia didn’t understand. But she was trusting her sisterhood of the time-traveling cookbook to see her through. If it took a few silly rituals to bring good luck, love, health, and passion, what could be the harm?

#### **Chapter 4: Dinner, Well-Done**

After following the cookbook’s explicit instructions for setting the table, Alicia looked at the spread of food and couldn’t believe she had prepared every dish with time to spare. She went upstairs to change into a little black dress, low heels, and jewelry. She lit candles, leaving only the kitchen light for background illumination. She freshened up her makeup and dabbed a tiny bit of the rose jam behind her ears and in her perfectly elevated cleavage. She was going to wow Troy before they even got to the table.

At 8:17 p.m. Alicia finally heard Troy's car pull up in the driveway. She took a seductive stance at the door with a glass of cabernet in each hand.

"Hello, handsome," she said, flipping her curls. Her smile froze when he stepped in with a beautiful Latina woman behind him. Their conversation and laughs stopped.

"Alicia, hun, um, I didn't know you would be here tonight," Troy said. "This is Marissa."

"Your ex?"

"Yes. She's passing through Portland to visit family and she called to ask to pick up the last of her things from me. Hey, you look beautiful!" Troy kissed Alicia on the cheek. She forced a glass of cabernet into his hand and took a long swig from her own.

"Alicia, it's so nice to meet you," Marissa said. "I am sorry for interrupting what I see is a special night for you both. It smells amazing in here. Did you cook?"

Troy laughed. "Oh no, Alicia doesn't cook. Did you order from Angelo's?"

Alicia gritted her teeth. "No! I cooked, Troy!"

"Oh, that's just...wow," Troy's face strained. "Did you call your mom or sister to help you?"

Alicia spun around and took long strides to the dining room. "I need more wine."

Troy and Marissa followed her into the dining room and admired the table setting. Alicia flipped on the overhead chandelier breaking the ambiance. She looked at the pair standing next to each other. There was something still there. That chemistry without trying. She saw the glow in his eyes when he looked at and laughed with Marissa.

Troy excused himself before exiting out the back door to the garage. He hesitated before leaving the two women to talk.

"Marissa, would you like a glass of wine?" Alicia asked.

"No, I have to drive to my sister's. How about sparkling water? I know Troy keeps them."

Alicia nodded and left Marissa in the dining room. Of course, she knew what Troy had in his kitchen. Then, the history of the house came flooding back to Alicia. At the beginning of their relationship, she'd asked Troy why he'd purchased such a big house for himself. He told her that he bought the house when he and his ex were together and never had the time to resell it.

Alicia was Troy's first serious girlfriend since. Their seven months couldn't compare to the seven years he'd had with Marissa. She'd hoped he was over Marissa but all the doubt she had pushed aside returned when she saw them together.

Alicia cracked open a bottle of sparkling water and took a champagne flute from the cabinet. She looked at the cookbook on the recipe stand on the island. So much good it did her now. Her feast was growing cold and their "guest" had sucked all romantic possibilities out of the evening.

Then, she remembered, Troy hadn't eaten the food yet. Alicia prepared the dishes and performed the rituals thinking that maybe a little magic could exist. If nothing else, it had made the cooking experience fun. She felt confident in the kitchen for the first time. She made the meal for Troy with love and that's what she wanted him to get out of it. He just needed to eat it.

And if there were recipes for paramours, maybe there were recipes for getting rid of the ex-girlfriend who came flouncing back to town.

A few minutes later, Alicia walked out of the kitchen to find Marissa sitting in an armchair in the living room. She accepted the flute of sparkling water from Alicia.

"Thank you. By the way, the house looks great. I'd forgotten how beautiful it is," she said.

"Thanks, but I can't take credit. I don't live here," Alicia said.

"Oh, I thought..."

"No. We've been together seven months but I have my own place across town. Nothing as grand as this place. Did you like living here?" Alicia said.

“Well, I never really lived in it.” Marissa took a gulp of the water. “I’m sure Troy told you, but when he bought this house for us I had just returned from a big audition in New York City. While I was gone, he had all of our things moved from the apartment we shared into this house. He surprised me when I came back. Proposed. But when I’d landed at PDX, I had a voicemail telling me I’d gotten the part. It was a huge off-Broadway show with a theater known to launch performers on Broadway. I couldn’t pass it up. I told Troy I was moving to New York. He was just starting at the medical center and didn’t want to leave it. I’m surprised he kept the house.”

Troy came back with a large box with the letters “MM” scrawled in marker on the side.

“Sorry it took so long. It was in the back and there was a big collapse of other boxes. I guess you were right about me not needing to keep all of my childhood possessions,” Troy shrugged and shared a smile with his ex. “I’ll put this in your car for you, so you can go.”

Marissa finished the water and put the champagne flute on the coffee table. “It was really nice meeting you, Alicia. I’m glad Troy found someone special.”

Alicia watched from the doorway as Troy carried the box of memories to the car and closed it in the trunk. He watched her car pull away, waving. Alicia couldn’t bear to witness anymore. She closed the door against the cold breeze.

Troy came back into the house and found Alicia sitting at the dining room table. Their plates were made. “It’s not as hot anymore, but it should still be good,” she said.

“Great. I’m starving.” Troy sat down and began digging in. He pushed the twined rosemary from the top of his lamb chop to the side and sliced into it. He moaned when he placed the bite on his tongue. “Wow, babe, this tastes delicious. You learned to do this in a day?”

Alicia cut off a piece of the chop and ate it. Her eyes widened. It was good. Better than good. It was perfect. The couple ate in silence only breaking to give comment about how each new bite



was savory, moist, buttery, and delectable. When their plates were cleaned, Alicia had to stop Troy from going in for seconds. “Leave room for dessert.”

Alicia’s mood was back to where it was before the intrusion of what’s her name. She slipped away to the kitchen and came back with two pie plates with two cookies on each topped with rose jam. She’d thrown a few petals on the plates for effect.

They bit into the cookies, sighed, and looked at each other. There, she saw it. A look of desire she hadn’t seen since they first started dating. Alicia only finished one cookie in the time it took for Troy to polish off his two.

“Alicia, I am so proud of you for being so dedicated. Thank you. I loved it. I love you.”

Troy stood and walked around the table, leaned down, and kissed her with urgency. She returned the passionate kiss, silently begging him to stay hers.

An hour and 43 minutes later, Alicia slipped down the stairs to put away the leftovers, blow out the remainder of the candles, and collect the clothes scattered through the dining room, living room, stairway, and hall leading to his master bedroom. She hummed happily as she whisked through the tasks savoring her success. Bluebirds could’ve flown into the kitchen and she would’ve sung and danced along with them.

Her tune was interrupted by the doorbell, which sounded louder in the dead of night. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the flash of red and blue lights coming from the police car parked in front of the house.

### **Chapter 5: The Missing Ingredient**

Marissa Mendoza was missing.

Her rental car had crashed into a hedge of bushes two blocks away, the police officers said. The car was still in drive with the doors locked. The radio was on, yet there was no one inside. A

box marked with the missing woman's initials was in the trunk. Her purse was in the passenger seat with a wallet full of money, credit cards and a cell phone still inside. The last person dialed from the cell phone was a "Troy." Her sister had called the cell phone several times, as well.

The next hour was a series of questions and retellings of the evening. Alicia learned Troy had been in contact with Marissa for the past week.

It was tense long after the officers left. Troy went into his study and called Marissa's sister.

Alicia lay in bed thinking about her part in the disappearance. Could the water have done this? More so, the cookbook? Earlier, she'd found a recipe for blood punch that called for the juice of a cactus to be added to banish a person or negativity. Troy kept a row of succulents on his kitchen windowsill. It was easily accessible, but challenging to cut a piece off and squeeze any liquid from it into the flute of water. She'd pricked her thumb, and Alicia was sure that a tiny bit of her blood had been swirled into the liquid before she'd served it to Marissa.

Could she get arrested for witchcraft? She didn't want Marissa to disappear from earth to wherever she was. She just wanted her to go back to New York, never to return to Troy's doorstep. Had she made that clear to the...gods? No, she was pretty sure her rage and jealousy were set on "go away" with no specifics as to where or how or for how long.

Troy walked into the bedroom and stood next to the bed looking down at Alicia.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should have let you know I had been talking to Marissa this week. I didn't want you to get jealous."

"It's okay."

"It's not. I brought her here and didn't tell you. I can't imagine how that made you feel. If roles were reversed I would've decked the guy if you brought an ex to your apartment."

Alicia sat up and pulled Troy to sit next to her at the edge of the bed. “It’s okay now. I’m more concerned about Marissa. Maybe she just wandered to a gas station after the crash.”

“Leaving all her things? Her purse, cell phone, and keys? She was two blocks from here. She could’ve walked back if she was in trouble. What if—”

“Troy. Don’t jump to the worst conclusion. I’m sure she’ll pop back up with a plausible explanation and everything will be fine.”

Troy kissed her cheek, then moved over to kiss her earlobe, then the back of her ear where a hint of the rose jam was still fragrant. He licked his lips and kissed her mouth.

“You’re right. You’re my priority. You’re who matters, Alicia. You and only you.”

Alicia didn’t think she could get back to the place they were before the police arrived, but soon enough they were back in the throes of lust and love with nothing else between them.

The next morning, tired and frazzled, Alicia scanned the cookbook from the front to back covers in search of a reversal spell to bring Marissa back from who knows where?

Before, she’d skipped straight to the recipes. This time she flipped to the front pages. There she saw a handwritten addition scribbled in cursive at the end of the original introduction pages: *Use carefully and sparingly. No substitutions for the best results. Measure precisely. For remedies and countering, see book 2.*

“Dammit, there’s a second half.” She grabbed her purse and car keys and drove in the direction of The Velveteen Kitten.

No one ever reads the introduction.

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