

## THE FINAL INGREDIENT



**I'M A PSYCHIC, I KNOW** what you'll think: Why would a future celebrity chef (me) keep a jar of slugs by her mixing bowl?

I shivered as I thought about what I was doing. Mom, Dad and Pete were asleep. I had the dark kitchen all to myself. The only light was the pre-heating oven.

Slowly, carefully, I reached for my slugs.

*This is for you, Denise, I thought crazily. This is what you get to snack on tonight, at Sheena McAfee's party.*

**PLOP!**

The first slug sank into the mixing bowl. The cookie dough swallowed it easily. I moved the stirring stick back and forth until every part of the slug disappeared.

My instructions were very precise.

Foul gurgles rose from the dough. I didn't stop. I kept stirring and dropping in slugs.

My heart pounded as I rolled the dough into sticky brown balls. I set the balls into five-across rows on my cooking tray. Whenever a slug burrowed out of a ball, I jammed it back in.

I glanced at the oily black cookbook page. Everything looked perfect. I hadn't missed a single step of the recipe.

SCOTT CHARLES

So why was I stalling? Why were my hands shaking?

My thoughts rambled.

*Isn't this a little too evil, Tammy?*

*Can you really feed slugs to Denise?*

I knew it wasn't too late to stop myself. I could still throw the cookie balls out. I could drop the slugs in the grass, go to sleep, and forget about taking crazy revenge on Denise and the Circle Girls for what they did to me.

The clock ticked. Four o'clock.

Should I stop or move forward?

I closed my eyes, thinking of Denise's smug face. Her wide smile. How her green eyes twinkled when she lied to me. Then I imagined what her smile would look like tonight, when I fed her my cookies.

An evil grin twisted my lips.

A minute later, the hot oven beeped.

I slid the cooking tray in.

# 2

**ONE DAY EARLIER**, I had other things on my mind. I wasn't thinking about taking crazy revenge on Denise Daddario. Believe it or not, I was actually trying to help her.

How ironic, right?

My name is Tammy Saris. I'm twelve, and I want to be a celebrity chef when I'm older. I love everything about cooking and baking. When else can you fill a bowl with strange stuff, like sour cream and raw eggs, then squish it all up to make edible food?

Baking a cake is like magic.

I have my celebrity life all planned out. I'm going to tour the world, acting famous and promoting my cook-books.

***Chef Tammy's Top Ten Recipes.***

***Chef Tammy's Holiday Treats.***

***Chef Tammy's Book of Mind-blowing Foods.***

I also want to go on TV. I think my show would break records.

SCOTT CHARLES

The only problem is me, Tammy Saris. I'm kind of a house mouse. I hadn't made one friend since my family moved to Hoberville in the summer. I'm not like my brother Pete. I can't suck up friends like a magnet.

So how could I ever sell cookbooks?

Who would buy them? My grandma?

Mom thinks I should focus more on my food, and less on celebrity. She just doesn't understand today's world. So what if my cooking skills aren't the best? It won't necessarily matter—not if I launch my career through celebrity.

A celebrity can sell ANYTHING.

As a celebrity, I could sell millions of cookbooks. I could do viral videos with nothing but *pictures* of food in them. My food wouldn't have to taste good, or even be edible. On the Internet, no one knows you used vinegar instead of vanilla, then forgot to add eggs.

Which was kind of my plan.

My web channel is called 'TammyBakes'. As an online chef, I have a simple philosophy. No taste tests. Absolutely no scary judges. Just some food that looks normal and cool.

TammyBakes is how I got mixed up with Denise Daddario in the first place.



“GIRLS? GIRLS? ARE YOU listening?” Mr. Trevors, our math teacher, poked his long neck into the hallway. “Miss

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Daddario? Miss McAfee? Miss Sammler? Classroom! Now!”

“Not so loud.” Denise shushed him. “We’re filming a pre-Halloween dance.”

“Ah.” Mr. Trevors pinched his eyeglasses. “Perhaps you would prefer a change of scenery? How about a nice trip to the Principal’s office?”

“Aw, you’re sweet. But we’re fine where we are. Right, girls?”

“*Yep!*”

“*Uh huh!*”

Mr. Trevors was speechless. He had no power to stop them. But really—who did?

Denise and her friends, Sheena McAfee and Maeve Sammler, run a famous web channel called ‘Circle Girls’. The Circle Girls post all kinds of videos. Lipsync videos. Prank videos. Elaborate dance videos they film in the halls, or at Sheena McAfee’s mansion.

And guess what else?

People watch them. A lot.

Guess how many people watched my **HOW TO BAKE PEANUT BRITTLE** video? Ten. And they were all Pete, so it didn’t catch on.

“Three empty seats.” Mr. Trevors slumped to his desk. “Seventeen seats minus three is fourteen. Eighty-two percent present is eighteen percent absent. *Eighteen percent.*” He sighed wearily. “I should call the Vice Principal.”

I felt sorry for the guy. I really did.

No one else seemed to.

**SCOTT CHARLES**

“Nooo! Mr. T, let them finish!”

“I wanna see what they post!”

“Denise is so pretty and funny and cool!”

Mr. Trevors stared at us, like we were a bunch of Halloween trolls.

What can I say? In this world, celebrity is everything.

The Circle Girls were celebrities. They were the crown royals of Hoberville Middle School. So you can imagine how panicked I was when Denise Daddario came up to me after class, suggesting we do a video together.

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**“HEY! YOU HAVE THAT** channel, right? TaffyCake?”

I looked up and saw Denise. *Denise Daddario*. Her famous green eyes twinkled back at me, seeming to light up my lunch tray.

“T-TammyBakes,” I stammered. “It’s, um, TammyBakes. Yeah.”

“Cool.” Denise twirled her perfect black hair. “My friends and I run a web channel, too. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

My eyes slid across the cafeteria, to the throne-like seats where the Circle Girls lorded over the school. Sheena McAfee is tall and blond, with thin eyes and huge, clinking bracelets. Maevie looks kind of the same, only sportier. She wears swishy gym shorts instead of tight, stone-washed jeans.

Denise caught me looking and smirked.

“So you *have* heard of us.”

“Well—”

“I wasn’t totally sure, since you’re new. This is good!” Denise smirked again. “So I’ll get right to it. My friends and I are planning a new web series. Halloween-themed.

SCOTT CHARLES

Our biggest one yet. And if you're not too busy, we could really use your help on it, Taffy."

"M-Me?" I blinked at her. "You want *me* to help? On a video?"

"Yes." Denise smiled. "But you can't tell anyone what we're doing, okay?" She dropped her voice to a whisper. "It's about this cute boy I like. I want to film every step of our romance together. Our first date. Holding hands. Then the big, break-up fight at the end. Sheena's dad is a movie producer. We've got all the scenes planned already."

"Wow." I felt my legs start to shake. "So is it, um, a reality show? Or all fake? Who's the cute boy that you like?"

Denise sighed dramatically. "The boy is the problem. You're new, so you probably don't know him. His name is Jake Aberforth, and he cannot be replaced. He *cannot*."

"Oh. Okay."

"Unfortunately, he's also a huge scaredy cat who keeps ducking our cameras. I think he's intimidated by my huge social media following. Such a pain, right? Don't you hate that?"

"Yeah, totally," I lied.

My heart was thumping like crazy. I looked around and saw the whole cafeteria looking on. Watching me talk to Denise. It was a shocking turn of events for a house mouse who sits alone during lunch.

*Play it cool, Tammy, I begged myself. Don't say anything dumb.*



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“So, um, why do you need me?” I blurted out.

I cringed right away. Did I sound desperate or what? Could you tell by my voice that I would do anything to get myself into a Circle Girls video? Literally anything?

Denise’s green eyes twinkled. “We need you to get Jake for us. Duh.”

“Who? Me?” I almost swallowed my tongue.

“Yes, you, Taffy! You’re, like, the only kid in school that Jake trusts.”

Denise set her phone on the table. It was cherry-red, with big, silver rhinestones. I stared, wide-eyed, as she swiped the passcode and slid the phone toward my plate.

The screen showed a girl with plain brown hair in a ponytail. She wore loose jeans, a half-panicked expression, and a ratty wool apron she regrets ever buying.

“That’s me,” I said. “That’s my video.”

“Check the comments,” said Denise.

She thumbed down the page. My eyes popped.

**Ur so talented tammy. moar plzzz!**

**–jake\_aberforth13**

I couldn’t believe it. A comment? Someone left me a comment?

“Jake Aberforth,” I whispered. My first fan.

“So you’ll help us?” said Denise. “You’ll introduce me to Jake?”

SCOTT CHARLES

“Huh? Introduce you?” My stomach twisted. “But I’ve never even *met* Jake. You said it yourself. I haven’t even *heard* of him. We aren’t friends.”

“He watches your channel,” said Denise. “It’s practically the same thing.”

“You think?”

“Of course, silly. We’re *celebrities*.” Denise batted her lashes. “Oh, one more thing. The place where Jake hangs out after school is a little...strange. Sometimes people get scared. They refuse to go in. But you don’t mind, right?”

My smile froze. I really hate scary things. Like I said before, I’m a house mouse. I squeak when a pen hits the floor.

“I—um—”

“Excellent! Meet me outside after school, okay? Don’t be late.”

Denise giggled and snatched her phone back. The entire cafeteria watched her cross the room to join Sheena and Maeve at the Circle Girls’ table.

My jaw opened and closed. Denise’s last words left me dizzy, and a little bit starstruck.

*A Circle Girls video. I was going to help in a Circle Girls video.*

I spent the rest of school in a daze, imagining what a boost this could be for my channel.

For me, personally. For my future celebrity.

The craziest part was, I wasn’t wrong. When the video aired, it really would be a boost.

If only I knew what the web series was really about...

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# 4

**I DIDN'T TAKE THE** bus after school. Instead I wandered the parking lot, dodging buses and cars as they swerved not to hit me.

“Sorry!” I squeaked. “Coming through!”

Several parent cars beeped.

“Where the heck is she walking?”

*“Brainless! Just brainless!”*

I looked for Denise behind the gymnasium and out toward the soccer field. As the last yellow bus roared away, I crossed the sidewalk and did a lap of the empty school grounds.

I felt sick to my stomach. Where was Denise? Had she lied to me? Did she forget about wanting to meet?

I was about to do another lap of the school, just in case, when suddenly a fingernail scraped down my neck. I let out a scream.

“Aaaaaaahhh!”

“Gotcha, Tammy.”

Denise Daddario grinned. I smiled stupidly as her camera light flashed.

“I knew it was you,” I lied. “Very funny.”

SCOTT CHARLES

Denise swiped a line on her phone and slipped it into her pocket. Her lips curled in a grin.

“Sure you’re still up for this, Taffy? You aren’t scared?”

My throat tightened. What was with Denise and asking if people were scared?

“Perfect,” said Denise. “Follow me.” She started walking away from me.

“Hey, wait!” I said. “What about Sheena and Maeve? Aren’t they part of your group? Aren’t they coming?”

Denise didn’t reply. She sped off, past the soccer field. My feet squished in the grass as I stumbled behind.

“Hey, where are we going?” I said. “Where are you taking me?”

Denise turned left, down a forest trail I’d never seen before. “Hurry,” she said.

I followed Denise through a thick clump of trees. Her tiny hips curled through the gaps, like a fairy tale elf. Unlike me. I had to struggle and squirm through the branches that all seemed to grab me.

“Denise, stop. You’re moving too fast.”

I felt a chill down my neck. I was terrified of being left alone in the woods. The trees looked so prickly. Their shaking leaves made me quiver in fear.

And where was Denise? Miles ahead of me.

At long last, I saw light through the treetops. I put on a burst of speed, hoping to see Denise as I rounded the—

“Aaarrgggh!” I cried out.

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Some monster, some terrible force, was dragging me back to the forest! I almost died of pure shock. Then I wiggled my shoulder blade.

A tree branch. A giant branch snagged my shirt.

“So stupid.” I twisted out of the branch with a groan. “Why are you even here, Tammy?” I asked myself. “You could be baking cupcakes right now. On video.”

“*Yes!*” said a deep, scratchy voice. “*You should never have come!*”

My heart jolted. I spun around so fast, I almost snagged on the branch again.

No one. There was no one behind me.

“W-Who’s there?” I stammered.

“*This is a cursed place,*” the voice answered. “*It is easy to enter, but impossible to leave! Habababa!*”

My blood chilled. I felt like a cornered rabbit as I frantically shook.

“*You will never escape. You will die a slow, painful death in these woods!*”

I suddenly heard a noise like a car engine.

VrrrrRR! VrrrrRRRRR!

My face paled. *A chainsaw? Was it really a chainsaw?*

“Help!” I cried. “HELLLLPPPP!”

The chainsaw roared in my ears. My shaking knees locked together. I stumbled backward and tripped to the dirt. Eyes wide. Staring up as a robed figure emerged from the trees.

I saw a glint of red mixed with silvery-white. My heart froze.

**SCOTT CHARLES**

The chainsaw blade. It was already dripping with blood.