

Claire

As I'm trying to plan the featured dessert items this week at the shop, the ringing of the phone interrupts my concentration. It's the week of Valentine's Day and that means we're going to be slammed with walk-ins—people that have waited until the last minute to get something delicious for their loved ones.

"Hello?" Carter answers.

I listen to his one-sided conversation as I try to remember if the caramel chocolate chunk cookies were featured on last week's menu or the week before and if covering them in red icing would make them "Valentiney" enough.

"No, Gavin isn't home right now. He's at his grandpa's house. Sure, I can let him know you called, Brooklyn. Does he have your number? Okay, got it. Bye."

I stare at Carter with my mouth open as he hangs up the phone nonchalantly and goes about his business of filling his travel coffee mug for work, humming to himself.

"Um, who the hell was that?" I ask, squeezing the pen so hard in my hand I can feel the plastic starting to crack.

"Brooklyn. Some girl in Gavin's class at school," Carter replies, finally turning around and noticing the look on my face. "What's wrong?"

My jaw drops and I stare at him angrily, wondering if he even knows me.

"Brooklyn? Some girl? Who the hell is this slut and why is she calling our son?" I demand.

“Claire, she’s ten. I’m pretty sure she hasn’t reached slut status yet.” With a laugh, he walks over to the table and sits down next to me.

“She’s calling our house. What ten-year-old girl needs to call a boy’s house? A slutty ten-year-old girl, that’s who. She’s got her sights on our son, and before we know it, she’s going to be giving him blow jobs on the back of the bus and forcing him to watch porn with her. This is our BABY, Carter!”

“Blow jobs and porn? When did fourth grade turn into a brothel?” Carter asks, raising an eyebrow questioningly.

“Oh, just you wait. It starts out innocently enough. She calls the house acting all sweet and harmless and then BAM! Gavin gets the shit kicked out of him by her pimp because he’s poaching on the guy’s territory!”

I can’t stop the word vomit no matter how hard I try. This is Valentine’s Day week— one of the most romantic weeks of the year and our busiest at the shop. I should be concentrating on how much I love Carter and the oodles of money I’m going to make selling sweets, but instead I’m worried about my son being led astray by a harlot. A harlot named Brooklyn. Her parents probably named her that because skank was too obvious even though they knew what her future career would be.

“Let’s give a great big Bearded Clam welcome to BROOKLYN as she takes the stage! Brooklyn’s parents knew she’d be working the pole some day and thank God for that! She’s quite bendy and she’s dancing for us tonight because, well, she’s a great big ho!”

Carter gently reaches over and pries the pen from my hand, pulling me out of my pole-dancing thoughts, and sets the pen down next to my list. Glancing around the table, he thinks better about leaving the butter knife from my bagel earlier within my reach and slides it closer to himself.

“She’s just a little girl who likes our little boy. No big deal. I’m going to work now, and you are going to get back to your list and NOT think up ways you can cut this girl’s hair off without getting arrested,” Carter tells me as he stands up from his chair and places a kiss on the top of my head before walking out the back door.

“Please. Like I would really spend my time thinking of ways to cut her hair off,” I mutter to myself as I reach for the pen, tear off the top sheet of paper from my pad and start a new list: Ways of Putting the Fear of God in Ten-Year-Old Girls.

Carter

“So, what are you getting the old ball and chain for V-Day?” Drew asks me as we head to the lunchroom on break.

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided. I could always send flowers to the shop.”

Drew shakes his head at me as we grab a table in the corner.

“Nope, too boring. Try again,” he states.

“Um, jewelry?” I suggest, opening up my insulated lunch bag and removing my ham sandwich.

“Nice, but too over the top. Ooooh, what about chocolate?” he asks me excitedly around a mouthful of chips.

“Seriously? Did you just suggest I get Claire chocolate for Valentine’s Day?” I ask in astonishment.

“What? She doesn’t like chocolate or something? That’s like, totally un-American.”

Before I can tell him what a jackass he is, Jim walks over and plops down on the chair across from me.

“What are we talking about, dick bags?”

“We’re talking about the stupidest holiday in the world and what we’re getting our wives,” Drew tells him.

“Ahhh, so Valentine’s Day,” Jim states.

“Hey, did you know Claire doesn’t like chocolate? She must be allergic to it or something,” Drew informs Jim.

Jim pauses in the process of opening up a bag of Doritos and stares at Drew a few seconds before shaking his head and sighing, then turns his attention back to me.

“What are you getting Liz this year? Any fun plans?” I ask him.

“Hold on, I have a list,” he tells me, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans and pulling out a folded piece of paper.

“A list? What the hell do you need a list for? What all are you buying her?” Drew asks in shock. “Awww, man. You’re totally going to make us look like dill weeds, aren’t you?”

Jim unfolds the paper and flattens it on the table with the heel of his hand.

“No, the list isn’t because I’m buying her a ton of shit and can’t remember all of it. The list is from Liz. She told me exactly what I’m supposed to get her,” he explains.

“Um, what? That doesn’t sound very romantic to me,” I tell him in confusion.

“Liz, sweetheart that she is, has come to realize that I suck when it comes to Valentine’s Day. Every year she has this idea in her mind of what she wants me to do, and every year I completely fuck it up. I ruin her day and she cuts me off from sex for a week. After an incident that happened four years ago with a pet llama for a day and floor seats to a Cavs game, I handed the reins over to her. A week before Valentine’s Day she writes down exactly what I should do, and ever since she started doing that, I have had a stress-free holiday and lots of good sex,” Jim explains.

“Dude, a pet llama? How in the fuck could *anyone* hate that? That is just full of awesome right there,” Drew tells him.

“Right? I thought so too,” Jim complains. “I mean, Liz loves animals. And every time we’re at the zoo she always goes to the petting part and spends the entire time with the llamas.”

“So what was the problem then?” I ask.

“It was fine at first. I mean, the handler showed up with the llama and explained to me what we needed to do for the four hours we had it. The llama and I bonded before Liz got home from work and I really thought she understood me. Boy was I wrong.”

“Jim, I’m home! What time are we – SON OF A BITCH! Why the fuck is there a giant rat with fur in our living room?!” Liz screeched.

I ran into the room from the kitchen and came to a sudden stop when I saw Liz pinned against the door with the llama right in her face sniffing her.

“It’s not a rat!” I whispered loudly as I crept over to where they were. “Don’t say that so loud. You’ll offend her.”

Liz looked around the llama’s head and gave me a dirty look.

“I’ll offend HER? What the hell is it doing here?”

I got next to them and reached over to pet the llama to put everyone at ease.

“Her name is Princess Sugar-Britches, and she is your Valentine’s Day present!”

Liz didn’t share in the excitement that I obviously did. She inched her way out from under Princess Sugar-Britches stare and punched me in the arm.

“You brought a llama into the HOUSE?”

I shrugged as PSB turned around and looked me as if to say “What’s this chick’s problem?”

“It’s totally fine,” I explained to Liz as she paced back and forth behind the couch. “She’s totally housebroken. She’ll go to the door and spit on it when she needs to go out.”

That was probably the wrong thing to tell Liz, but it was too late to take it back. Before she could react to the spitting statement, she let out another horrified scream and darted to the corner of the room.

“Is there SHIT in my brand new Coach purse? OH MY GOD! There is a steaming pile of llama shit in my purse! MY COACH PURSE!”

I glanced over in that direction as Liz held up the purse with the tip of one finger through the strap, as far away from her body as possible.

“Oops.”

She stalked over to PSB and held the purse right in front of her.

“Did you take a dump in my purse? Do you have any idea how much this thing cost me, you furry little rat?”

I told her not to call PSB a rat, really, I did.

The next thing I know, PSB pulls her head back and spits right in Liz's face. Great big globs of llama spit dripped down the front of Liz's nose.

"You did NOT just spit in my face!" Liz yelled at her.

And since PSB obviously thought Liz didn't get the memo the first time, she reared back and did it again, while at the same time spreading her legs and pissing all over the carpet by the entryway.

Liz was too busy screaming at the top of her lungs and wiping llama gobs off of her face that she didn't notice PSB turning around, pawing at the ground, and flaring her nostrils angrily.

"Um, Liz, you might want to come over here close to me, very slowly," I told her gently.

Of course Liz didn't listen. She stood right where she was, stomped her foot, and pointed angrily at PSB. And then, all hell broke loose.

PSB's back leg shot out and kicked a hole right through our front door, and then she charged.

"RUN! JESUS H CHRIST, LIZ, RUN!" I screamed as I turn and ran towards the kitchen.

Liz took off hurtling the couch and screaming right along with me.

We flew out into the backyard, and I slammed the door right in PSB's face.

"That doesn't sound so bad. A little shit, a little spit, running and screaming into the night. That kind of sounds like having a kid," Drew says with a laugh.

"When I called the handler to come back and get her, he wasn't surprised. He said no one lasts more than an hour. That ass hat should have told me that when he dropped her off. It would have saved me the trouble of buying a new front door, a new coffee table, a new couch, two new windows, new carpeting, and replacing a \$400 Coach purse," Jim complains. "But man, Princess Sugar-Britches sure was a sweetie for a few minutes there."

Lunch ends and we throw out our garbage and make our way back out into the plant. We get to our work stations, and as the line

powers up, I wonder if Liz and Jim are on to something. Why should I have to be so stressed about what to get Claire? It's just like Jim said. Every year I spend a ton of time trying to come up with the perfect gift, and every year, just when I think I've found it and I can't be more excited, Claire seems less than thrilled even though she tries to hide it by overacting and gushing about it so much that even *I* start to hate what I got her.

This year, I'm going to be smart about it. She is so going to love me for this, and she'll never have to worry about anything pooping in her purses.

Claire

“He what?”

“He said, and I quote, ‘How about this year you just tell me what to get you.’ Can you believe that? Of all the unromantic things I have ever heard,” I complain to Jenny as I put the last batch of Devil’s Food cupcakes in the oven.

“If Drew said that to me, I’d cancel *Anal Fridays*, I’ll tell you that,” she says as she hops up onto the counter next to me and starts swinging her feet.

“Jenny, how many times do I have to tell you that there are just some things you do not need to share with me?” I ask her with a grimace.

“I’m so lucky with Drew. He has never bought me something for Valentine’s Day that I didn’t like. Last year, he got me a membership to a Jelly of the Month Club,” she tells me with a huge smile on her face.

“I’m sorry, but how is that something you would *ever* like?” I question as I start piling dirty mixing bowls in the sink.

“Do you have any idea what you can do with that much jelly, the extra attachment from the vacuum cleaner, and the newest DVD of *Foot Fetish Fantasies, Volume 57?*”

“Jesus God no. And I never, ever want to, so stop talking right now,” I beg her as I fill the sink with hot water and soap.

“You know, that’s what Liz does for Jim. She told me that a few weeks ago when we were getting many pettings,” Jenny informs me.

“Did you just say *many pettings*? Do I even want to know what you’re talking about?”

Jenny sighs and rolls her eyes.

“Duh. We had our nails and toes done at the salon. How have you never gotten a many pettings before? It’s like you live in a cave or something, Claire,” she complains as she shakes her head at me. “Anyway, Liz was telling me that she got so tired of Jim never having a clue what to get her, she started making a list for him. This year, he’s supposed to take her to the Cheesecake Factory for dinner and then to see a chick flick after. That way he won’t show up with an alpaca or whatever the hell that was that shit in all her Coach purses a few years ago.”

Just then, Liz walks through the door carrying a huge box and drops it on the floor in front of Jenny.

“Jenny, can you open this box and make sure everything I ordered is in there?”

She hops off of the counter and begins tearing the tape off of the box and opening the flaps excitedly.

“Ooooooh, we used these at the movie theater and used the extra butter—”

Liz holds up her hand and closes her eyes, stopping Jenny mid-sentence.

“Without a running commentary of the places you’ve stuck them and the condiments you used to get them there.”

Jenny looks up at Liz with a perplexed look on her face.

“We don’t use condoms, Liz, you know that. It’s like you never listen to anything I say.”

Jenny huffs and continues pawing through the box.

“So, I heard you guys discussing shitting farm animals when I walked in. Reliving the Valentine Coach Massacre of 2009, are we?” Liz asks as she leans against the counter while I wash the dishes.

“Jenny told me about how you give Jim a list every year for Valentine’s Day. It sounded a little unromantic to me, but I forgot about that whole Queen Shitty Britches or whatever her name was.”

Liz nods her head in understanding.

“I agree, it’s a little unconventional, but it’s necessary so I don’t smother my husband in his sleep. It really does make for a much happier holiday all around. Plus, Jim doesn’t have to sleep out in the garage for a week, and I don’t have to soak my face in bleach to get llama germs off,” she explains with a shrug.

“You know, you could have gotten Key Lime Disease from something like that, Liz. Llamas have these little bugs called sticks that carry Key Lime. I saw it on Animal Planet,” Jenny states.

“Did you maybe see it on the Food Network instead? With Paula Dean?” I ask with a laugh.

“I think Key Lime Disease is cured with whip cream,” Liz adds with a snort.

“You guys are weird. That makes absolutely no sense.”

Jenny rolls her eyes and goes back to her sex toy sorting while Liz reminisces fondly about the time she almost got a delicious citrus illness, and I have to pause with the dirty dishes because she starts sobbing uncontrollably about her favorite Coach purse she buried in the back yard that year while she made Jim hum *Taps*.

Maybe Liz is on to something with this idea. Her expectations won’t be through the roof because she’ll know exactly what she was getting, and it will be what she’s wanted because she had spelled it out for Jim. But the more I think it’s a good idea, the more I go back to square one and think, where’s the romance in that? Carter is amazing and I love him more than I ever thought possible. Even though it’s hit or miss sometimes because come on, he’s a guy and they really aren’t the most perceptive when it comes to knowing what to buy us girls, I still love being surprised and hopeful when it comes to the most romantic holiday of the year. Is it too much to ask that he just put on his thinking cap and really concentrate on something that he knows will make me happy?

“Hello mothers! Thank you so much for volunteering to help out with your child’s Valentine’s Day class party this year,” the principal of Gavin’s school announces to the twenty or so mothers gathered in the lobby of the elementary school a few days later.

As I stand in the corner with my arms crossed in front of me so none of the other mothers will try and talk to me, I glance around and wonder when the hell cupid puked all over these people. Every single mother is wearing red from head to toe. Red shirts, red sweat-ers, red jeans, red skirts, red and pink striped knee-high socks (no, I’m not joking). Half of them have God-awful headbands on their heads with red springy hearts or glittery pink flowers. A few of them even light up. I look down at my jeans and black t-shirt and shrug to myself. I may not be over the top like these freaks of nature, but at least I’ve worn *something* in honor of the day. The black shirt had been a gift from Drew when he found out I got roped into being the room mother for Gavin’s Valentine’s Day party. It has a picture of a voodoo doll on the front with pins and needles sticking out of it all over the place. Under the doll it says: Be mine. Or else.

“When your child’s class party is finished, please make sure to sign your child out before you take him or her home. Have a *Heart-stopping* good time ladies!” the principal finishes.

I groan as I bend down and pick up the Walmart bag filled with enough juice boxes for the twenty-four kids in Gavin’s class and a cookie sheet full of red and pink frosted cupcakes. I had stopped feeling inadequate years ago when I came to these things and saw all of the Longaberger baskets decked out in pretty little Valentine’s Day liners and filled with beautiful little bags of candy tied with perfect little bows or flawlessly made alligators on card stock with cutesy little sayings on them like “I’d snap at the chance to be your Valentine!” I have a full time job and a full time family to take care of. I don’t have time to spend forty hours creating Valentines for a bunch of ten-year-olds who will just throw them in the garbage when they get home.

I follow the other moms down the hallway until I come to Gavin's classroom and step inside to complete and total anarchy. The kids had a day filled with Valentine activities and they are obviously already hopped on enough sugar to take down an elephant.

"Hi! Thanks for coming!" Gavin's teacher shouts over the noise. "Sorry about this. They just exchanged valentines and they're a little excited."

I feel myself breaking out in a cold sweat as I scan the room. I want to get down on my knees and weep at his teacher's feet. Instead, I stand up on a chair and shout at the top of my lungs.

"HEEEEEEEY! Sit down and be quiet or no one gets a cupcake!"

The kids stare at me for a minute, then everyone scrambles to their seats, everyone except for one little girl who stands directly across from me on the other side of the room. I step down off of the chair and stare at her. She is a tiny little thing with the most amazing head of hair I've ever seen on a ten-year old. It's full of natural curls and it hangs down to the middle of her back. She's impeccably dressed in a Valentine-themed outfit: a red long-sleeved shirt with pink and white hearts on it, a matching skirt, and red glittery shoes. The whole outfit is finished off with a cute little red bow in her hair.

"Hey, Mom!" Gavin greets me as he runs up to my side while the rest of his class, sans miss fashion plate over there, settles in their seats.

"Hey there! Who's the chick over there by the window staring at us?" I ask him as I pull the juice boxes out of the bag and take the foil off of the tray of cupcakes.

"Oh, that's Brooklyn," he says before running back to his desk.

I stop with my hand in midair over the top of the cupcakes, turn my head back over to the corner of the room, and then stand up straighter. We glare at each other for a few minutes, and I swear to God the room suddenly gets deathly quiet and I can hear that weird whistling song that always plays in those old westerns when two cowboys are getting ready for a gun fight at the O.K. Corral.

It's going down, and it's going down right the fuck now. I don't care if there is a room full of witnesses. This slut is getting a piece of my mind.

I square my body towards her and wiggle the fingers of my hands as they hang down at my sides, wishing I wore worn my gun belt. Wishing I *had* a gun belt.

Little Skankasaurus Rex over there tilts her head from side to side, cracking her neck, as we stared each other down. No one in the classroom moves and all eyes are on the two of us. I'm pretty sure I see tumbleweed roll by, but it might have just been a wad of paper one of the kids had thrown. Whatever.

"Mom! What are you doing?" Gavin whispers loudly as he runs back up to me. "You're supposed to be passing out the cupcakes."

"Hey, remember when I used to ask you all the time when you were little who you wanted to marry when you grew up and you would always say, 'I just want to marry my mommy'?" I ask him without taking my eyes off of Fourth Grade Floozy.

"Um, sure. Whatever. Can we have the cupcakes now?" he asks, growing impatient with me.

"You still want to marry Mommy, right?" The desperation is clear in my voice.

"Mom, you know that's illegal, right? Seriously, we're hungry. Give us the sugar and no one gets hurt," Gavin threatens.

"You should go back to your seat, Son. Go back to your seat and cover your eyes. As a matter of fact, cover your ears too," I inform him distractedly.

I take a step in *Brooklyn's* direction. Just thinking her name makes me cringe. Her parents had named her after a city known for housing the Russian mafia and call girls. Not to mention dirty. Dirty, little Brooklyn. It's a nice place to visit, but no one wants to live there. I bet you it says that under her name on her birth certificate.

She takes a step in my direction as well, and before I know it, she's skipping across the room towards me at lightning-fast speed,

barreling into the front of me and wrapping her arms around my waist, squeezing on for dear life. I stand there with a look of horror on my face as I stare at the top of her head, unable to move.

Finally, she pulls away from me and beams at me with a huge smile on her face.

“Hi there, Mrs. Ellis! I’m so excited to finally meet you! You’re so pretty! And I love your shirt! Wow, you’re really young! You don’t have any wrinkles on your face like my mom does! I love your hair! When I grow up, I want to look just like you!”

Is this some new form of warfare? Kill the enemy with kindness? Her skills are no match for mine. NO MATCH! And she speaks in nothing but exclamations. I don’t know whether to challenge her to a cage fighting match or braid her hair.

“Your son is really nice. And really cute! But you probably know that already,” Brooklyn continued.

“Eeeew, gross,” Gavin mutters next to me.

I reach out blindly for him and fling my arm around his shoulder, pulling him into my side in a crushing one-armed hug.

“He is cute, isn’t he?” I tell Brooklyn. “And he’s such a good boy. So nice and polite and did you know he told me he’s going to marry me when he grows up?”

Gavin lets out a gasp and whines in a loud whisper.

“Mooooooooooooom! Cut it out!”

Brooklyn claps her hands together in glee. “Oh my gosh! That is the sweetest thing EVER! You are the best mom in the world. He talks about you all the time,” she explains.

I’m totally going to cry. Right here in the middle of this fourth grade class. I am going to curl up in the fetal position sucking my thumb and sobbing like a baby.

I takes me about ten minutes to compose myself, but I manage to do it as well as pass out the cupcakes and juice. Oh, and I tell Brooklyn she can call the house anytime she likes.

“Alright, I hope this makes up for the fact that I tried to act like Liz and Jim this Valentine’s Day. Open your eyes,” Carter tells me later that evening after the dishes from dinner have been cleared.

I slowly open my eyes and on the table in front of me is a vase full of a dozen long-stemmed pink roses, my favorite, and a thin box wrapped with a red bow on top. I quickly tear into the box, lift the lid, and my breath catches in my throat as I look at what’s inside.

“Where did you find this?” I whisper, trying to hold back the tears I can feel pooling in my eyes.

“I found it at your dad’s. I told him what was going on with girls suddenly calling the house, and he pulled out a box of things from when you and Gavin used to live with him,” Carter explains as he scoots his chair closer to mine and rests his chin on my shoulder so we can both look at the eight-by-ten frame in my hands.

Back when Gavin was around four, right before I found Carter again, he and I used to have weddings at night after his bath. It was a huge production. He would come into the living room, tell me it was time for our wedding, and then we’d stand up in the middle of the room, exchange gifts (which usually consisted of two stuffed animals that we traded), and say our vows.

“Mommy, do you wanna marry me?”

“I do!”

“And I wanna marry you, so yay! We’re married! Let’s go on a honeymoon to the kitchen and have pop and cookies!”

I had no idea my dad took a picture of one of our *weddings*. In the frame, Carter blew up a profile picture of Gavin, in a pair of Spider Man pajamas, and me, in a t-shirt and yoga pants, standing in my dad’s living room facing each other, holding hands. How had I ever thought for one minute that Carter didn’t know me or that he wouldn’t pick out the most amazing Valentine’s Day gift ever?

“Carter, this is amazing!” I tell him as I take my eyes off of the picture from what seems like so many years ago to look at the man I love.

He takes my face in his hands and places a gentle kiss on my lips.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, baby. No matter what, Gavin will always be your little boy. The first woman he ever asked to marry him. Even when he’s in fifth grade and those little bitches pull out the big guns and start getting boob jobs and vaginal rejuvenation surgeries.”

The End