

BAKE SALE A RUBY OLIVER STORY E. Lockhart

I don't really like baking.

I like eating stuff that other people bake.

True: Cricket, Nora, Kim, and I used to go over to Cricket's every week and make batches of chocolate chip cookies. But to be honest, I was really more of a tray-greaser and batter-taster than an actual baker. Nora did most of the baking. The one time I took charge of a batch of cookies, something went wrong and the batter was really gloopy; the cookies turned black around the edges, and I got a large burn mark across the center of my palm because I forgot to use a pot holder.

But.

Every year around the holidays, there is this charity bake sale at Tate Prep¹ that raises money to buy holiday gifts for the kids at a shelter in downtown Seattle. It's always a big thing, the bake sale; people get really show-offy. The stay-at-home mothers go all out, and then the non-stay-at-home mothers feel they have something to prove, and go even further out. So it's hardly a matter of a few loaves of banana bread and

¹ The school I go to. It's full of the children of doctors and lawyers and people with big fancy houses on the water. I go there on scholarship.

some sad-looking oatmeal squares. I'm talking about pinwheel cookies with three different colors of batter, cupcakes made to look like ladybugs, cookies decorated like tiny fire engines, and six-layer ultimate fudge.

Quite a number of Tate girls have inherited their mothers' urge to display their talents as domestic goddesses—and if you're the kind of person who believes that the way to a guy's heart is through his stomach, then the Tate Prep Charity Holiday Bake Sale (CHuBS) is a good time to snag a guy. The thing goes on for a week in the entrance hall of the main building, and boys are always waiting on the front steps, trying to get freebies off the girls who are on their way to deliver their stuff to bake sale central.

Not being the domestic goddess type, I stayed out of the whole thing freshman year. Cricket, Kim, Nora, and I did our part only by purchasing and consuming large quantities of baked goods instead of eating lunch. But sophomore year, I had this boyfriend called Jackson: a tall, gravelly-voiced junior who stuck notes in my mail cubby, drank a lot of root beer, and drove an old Dodge that used to belong to his uncle. He and I had started going out in the early fall—and I had never been so happy.

At least, I thought I had never been so happy. Here's what I mean: writing this now, I know that our whole relationship thing was headed for a major breakup debacle that would completely ruin my

life²—but at the time, I felt we had something close to love.

So. Everyone at Tate Prep has to do a certain amount of community service each term—and what with going to Jackson’s cross-country meets, hanging out on weekends, and doing stuff with him after school, I had gotten seriously behind.

That’s where the bake sale comes in.

A popular senior girl named April announced it during assembly in early December. I was sitting in the auditorium with Jackson’s arm around me, surrounded by his friends. April said the organizing committee needed a few more people, and to talk to her afterwards if interested, and that sign-up sheets for baked goods would go up that week in the Refectory and the main building, blah blah blah.

“Roo,” Jackson had whispered as she was talking, his breath warm against my ear, “are you gonna bake me some brownies?”

“What?” I laughed.

“Brownies,” he whispered, nibbling on my earlobe. “I love brownies. Like the kind with lots of walnuts. Or those cupcakes with the cream cheese—what are they called?”

“Black bottom.”

“Sounds dirty,” he laughed, and kissed my neck.

² You can find out what happened in a book called *The Boyfriend List*. But be warned: it’s full of hideous painful details that are not for the faint of heart.

Things between us at this point were already getting a little weird, though I didn't admit it to myself then. For example: I'd seen this note in his back pocket in another girl's handwriting; he'd gone on this completely anxiety-inducing tennis/coffee date with his ex-girlfriend Heidi, and told me he thought she was superbeautiful; we had a fight one time when he said he'd call and didn't; and he'd stopped leaving little presents in my school mail cubby every Monday.

This underlying weirdness made me feel kind of spazzed out, but at the same time, we were having three-hour kissing sessions, and Jackson was saying things like "I never felt this way before."

Anyway. All you really need to know is that when Jackson got me all hot and bothered in the auditorium, breathing in my ear and kissing my neck and asking me to bake things for him, a tiny part of my brain thought: He'll love me more if I make those black bottom cupcakes.

I am an idiot, I know. But that is what I thought.

I ran right up to April after the assembly and offered my services. Partly because of my sorely lacking community service hours. But really because of sex.

"Roo, you're out of your mind," said Nora when I told my friends at lunch. "You can't even read a recipe or remember to use a pot holder."

"So?"

"So, this is hard-core baking," she said. "You could do yourself some bodily harm."

"Oh, please. Do you think Jackson would like the black bottoms or the brownies better?"

"You could just give him a hand job and save yourself a lot of time and trouble," put in Cricket.

"What?" I started laughing.

"I mean," she said, "the way to a guy's heart. It isn't through the stomach—"

Kim leaned across, picked a raisin out of my salad, and jerked her head in Cricket's direction. "Her mind is in the gutter."

"—it's through the nether regions!" Cricket laughed.

"I'm not nether-regioning Jackson," I said. "That's way too advanced."

"Everyone knows it," continued Cricket, ignoring me. "There's a line directly from the you-know-what to the heart."

"Oh, like you're nether-regioning anybody," said Nora.

"I didn't say I was, but I'm not puttering around in an apron, either," said Cricket, smirking. "And I would fully nether-region before I started opening cookbooks."

"Don't bake," said Nora to me, seriously. "I just know it'll be a disaster."

"Don't nether-region, either," said Kim, sweetly. "If you don't feel like it. Just be yourself. He's already your boyfriend."

“I need the community service hours, anyway,” I said.

“Well, if you must, you must,” sighed Nora. “But put a sign on the stuff you make. So we’ll know not to eat it.”

I threw a raisin at her.

But I didn’t change my mind.

At the first CHuBS meeting, I could see I was way out of my league. April ran the thing with Debra (another highly visible senior girl), and they were talking about silver dragées and meringue frosting and the bakers’ specialty shop in Ballard. “We can charge more and raise more money if the things are super-special,” said April. She told us that last year the sale had raised \$1232, and that this year they were looking to hit \$1500. “You can always figure on banana bread and chocolate chip cookies coming in from random people,” she went on, “and I know we can count on Bick, Steve, and the Whipper³ to get their moms to do something spectacular. Does anyone here remember those Santa cupcakes Mrs. Buchannon made last year?” She giggled. “They sold out in an hour.”

Debra piped up to say she’d kept a record of what had sold for the most money last year, and though it wasn’t scientific because, like, there were forty Santa cupcakes but only twenty-eight snowman cookies,

³ The Whipper: April’s then boyfriend, Sky Whipple, Big Meathead on Campus.

the official declaration was that the cuter it was, the more it would sell.

“So it’s up to you, ladies,” said April, taking back control of the meeting, “to heat up those ovens and bake cute!”

She started assigning people to specific cute-baking projects: Debra would do snowman cookies, gingerbread men, and something called puffballs; Molly would do checkerboard cookies in red and green, blah blah blah. I was just about to raise my hand and ask if maybe there was actual *organizing* I could do—like calling people to remind them when to bring stuff, or buying white paper doilies or something, instead of this hard-core level of baking—when Heidi walked into the room, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

Heidi, Jackson’s ex-girlfriend. The one he said was “superbeautiful.” Who he went on the tennis/coffee date with. Who called him up one time when I was over at his house. Heidi, who before Jackson had been one of my sort-of friends, but ever since the tennis/coffee date, not really. It wasn’t exactly her fault. I just felt like I had radar and could detect her from forty feet away, including how good her hair looked, how tight her jeans were, how close she was to Jackson, and whether he was

- (1) talking to her
- (2) standing too close to her
- (3) flirting with her
- (4) ignoring her in a tense way.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said to April, sliding into a chair.

“No problem. Heidi, I think you and—what’s your name again?” April asked, looking at me.

“Ruby.”

“Ruby. Heidi, you and Ruby are, like, the junior members, because everyone else was on CHuBS last year. So I’m going to put you two together in charge of cupcakes. They always sell well, and they’re not that hard. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Heidi.

“Two dozen cupcakes, every day for five days. And Debra’s got this great magazine article on decorating she can give you. It’s really cute and has all kinds of tips for making them festive. Is that cool?”

A week later, I was in Heidi Sussman’s kitchen with my hands covered in batter, out nearly sixty dollars for five days of ingredients,⁴ and feeling sick with jealousy at

(1) her enormous house⁵

(2) her three beautiful Irish setters (Jackson loved dogs)

(3) her perfectly round tennis butt

(4) her adorable freckles

⁴ My dad coughed it up when I told him it was for charity.

⁵ Funny, though: I never felt jealous of Cricket’s house, which could eat my house for an hors d’oeuvre. Or of Kim’s, which has a pool. Just Heidi’s, because it was chic and modern and somehow effortless—and because Jackson had kissed her in it.

(5) her tiny, perky boobs⁶

(6) her very differentness from me. Difference. Differentiation. Whatever. How she's kind of sleek and wholesome and future doctor of America, while I'm more thrift shop/fishnet stocking/eyeglass girl.

I knew that it made no sense for me to be jealous. I was the one going out with Jackson, wasn't I? While she was the one carrying a torch.

Really: my butt was perfectly nice, and Jackson himself seemed to enjoy my boobs quite a lot. I didn't actually *want* to live in such a cool, clean house, or get slobbered on constantly by three brainless balls of orange fur. But there I was, the first evening we worked together, feeling like Heidi was a goddess and I was a tree sloth.

Sunday night, we made chocolate cupcakes with chopped candy canes sprinkled on white frosting.

"I need to do remedial decorating to start," I said, so I just tossed the chopped candy in random patterns while Heidi used a tiny cookie cutter to make peppermint hearts on the cupcakes.

She was wearing an apron. I wasn't. She didn't offer me one. I ended up with cake mix on my clothes, frosting in my hair, and a swollen tongue from sucking on so many candy canes.

⁶ Mine are size medium and require a bra because they are already completely destined for sagginess, but Heidi's just stand up on their own like little chocolate kisses.

I wanted to ask her: Did Jackson say to you that he “never felt this way before”? Does he ever call you, now? What were you talking about with him at Kyle’s party, two weeks ago, when the two of you were squashed together on the couch? And when you were going out, did you get around to the nether regions?

When I wasn’t having these paranoid and unmentionable thoughts, I was having a perverse urge to mention my boyfriend—pretty much whenever Heidi said anything about anything—and this put me in a state of constant self-censorship. Like, she asked me what sport I was doing spring term, and I almost said, “I’m doing lacrosse again, and Jackson’s rowing crew. He’s hoping to sit seventh, because the Whipper has eighth pretty much locked.” Or when she showed me how to use the Cuisinart to chop up candy canes, I wanted to tell her how Jackson once used his father’s coffee grinder to make pimento cream cheese.

But I didn’t. I just said “lacrosse” and “cool, they chop up so fast!” So the conversation was pretty strained.

Monday after school was a little better. We made miniature vanilla cupcakes with “ho ho ho” written on them in red icing. Heidi’s friend Katarina came over and gave us an in-depth, eighth-hand report on the breakup of April and the Whipper, involving some very slimy behavior on his part and great public

dismay on hers⁷—which the bitchy part of me found extremely satisfying, since I was cursing April and her stupid cute baking requirements every minute that I spent at Heidi's. But the nice part of me felt sorry.

"April can give one of these to the Whipper," I said, holding out a "ho ho ho" cupcake.

Heidi laughed. "But can you call a *guy* a ho?" she wondered. "I think it's just for girls."

"Act like one, get called one," I said.

"I don't think you can," said Heidi. "It doesn't sound right."

"The Whipper's not a ho, anyway," said Katarina. "He just had to do something drastic to get away from April."

"You think?" asked Heidi.

"She was trying to control everything he did," said Katarina.

"We should make 'slut slut slut' cupcakes," I joked. "Then there'd be no confusion."

Heidi giggled. "I know some people we could give those to," she said. "But it's probably too mean."

"I don't think a guy can be a slut, either, Roo," said Katarina. "Besides, we can't put all the blame on the Whipper. That Nikki has scammed with three upper-classmen before him."

⁷ At her mother's annual holiday party, April caught the Whipper in the broom closet not only kissing but *squeezing the boobs* of some freshman girl named Nikki whose mom worked in the same law firm as April's dad.

“Okay, not ‘slut slut slut,’” I conceded. “But what about Breakup Cupcakes? We could make a big sign saying Break Up Sweetly, or Leave ‘Em with at Least a Cupcake. And we could write on them ‘no no no,’ ‘go go go,’ ‘slow slow slow,’ ‘blow blow blow’—and even keep the ‘ho ho ho.’”

“I betcha they’d sell,” said Heidi, sounding tempted.

“We could charge more for them, too,” I added.

“You better not, Heidi,” said Katarina. “April will kill you, and you’ll never run CHuBS when you’re a senior.”

And so we didn’t.

Tuesday, we made red velvet cupcakes (cocoa and red food coloring), decorated with red cinnamon candies and chocolate icing we made from scratch. Heidi talked about how much she loved to bake, and I nodded my head and wondered if she’d ever baked for Jackson.

“Jackson will like these cinnamon ones,” Heidi said, carefully pushing candies into the chocolate edge of a cupcake. “He likes red hots and FireBalls, things like that.”

Ag. I couldn’t believe she’d brought up Jackson. After two and a half days of successfully avoiding the topic, we actually had a chance of making it through the whole CHuBS experience without ever mentioning him.

Maybe she was just trying to break the tension and talk about the big thing that was looming

between us and making everything all weird. Maybe she was trying to be nice and talk like things were normal. But at the same time, it was like she was telling me, "Hey, I know your boyfriend really well. Really, *really* well. I might even know things about him that *you* don't know yourself. So don't think you've got him all locked up. He could want me back."

And maybe she did know things.

And maybe he did want her back, sometimes.

There was no way for me to be sure.

"He's off of those now," I said, although it wasn't true. "He's into watermelon stuff. Like those jelly beans with pink inside, or the Jolly Ranchers."⁸

Wednesday, the cinnamon-chocolate cupcakes didn't sell so well. April was in a pissy mood because of her breakup, and told me and Heidi we had to do better. "I don't know how you think we're going to pass the fifteen-hundred dollar mark if you're just doing the same old, same old," she said, wearily. "Didn't I tell you cupcakes should be big sellers?"

Heidi and I worked the late-afternoon shift at the CHuBS table and ate two of our own cupcakes each, to make it look like we'd done better.

"I would completely buy these," I said. "I don't know what her problem is."

⁸ What I really meant was, You think you know my boyfriend better than me? Ha. The stuff you know is so over. You don't know him at all, anymore. And you probably never did.

“Her problem,” said Heidi, “is that her boyfriend ran off with another girl. Come on, Roo, we can cut her some slack.”⁹

“Ooh, I know what we should do tonight,” I said, changing the subject and trying to pretend like I’d just thought of it, even though I’d been planning it all along. “Let’s do black bottom cupcakes.”

“I don’t know.” Heidi wrinkled her nose. “That’s not what April wants us to make. They’re so uncute. I don’t want her to yell at me again.”

“Cuteness is overrated,” I said. “If you ask me, this entire bake sale has been thus far sadly—nay, disastrously—lacking in true deliciousness.”

“What?”

“Everything’s just colored sugar and sprinkles and silly Christmas shapes,” I improvised. “I think at this point the Tate community is really looking for some hard-core chocolaty cheesecake-y yumminess. As a culture, we’ve gone beyond the juvenile attraction to snowman cookies. We’re ready, collectively, for the black bottom. And if they sell,” I added, “April will be happy. You know she will.”¹⁰

⁹ At that point, I had no idea *what* it would feel like for my boyfriend to run off with another girl. But Heidi did—because Jackson had dumped her only a week before he started going out with me.

And I would find out how it felt for myself, plenty soon enough.

¹⁰ What I was really thinking was: Jackson will know I baked these for him. It’s a romantic gesture. He’ll be surprised and touched that I remembered what he wished for—and then when he takes a bite, they’ll be so good he’ll think I’m wonderful by extension. (I am an idiot, I know. I know. I know.)

“Whatever,” she said. “If you really want to do it, fine. Have you got a recipe?”

I didn’t, but I skipped out of Drama Elective and found one on the Web. Once at Heidi’s, the cupcakes were the hardest thing we had made yet: we couldn’t rely on a mix, like we had before. We had to work from scratch, using stuff like buttermilk and Dutch processed cocoa. We had to put a tablespoon-sized plop of cream cheese mush on top of the regular chocolate batter, and we made a worse mess of the kitchen than we had any other day.

They smelled amazing, though, and when they came out of the oven, Heidi was ecstatic. “Oh my God, these are soooo good!” she moaned with her mouth full. “Like, a hundred times better than the ones from yesterday.” Then she lay down on her beautiful marble kitchen floor and ate the rest of her cupcake staring at the ceiling. “I just have to lie down and concentrate all my energy on this deliciousness,” she said.

I got down next to her, and ate one too. We just lay there and chewed, on the cool tiles splattered with cake batter, until we were full and the Irish setters came in from outside, skidding into the kitchen on wet feet.

Thursday morning, I saved three of the black bottom cupcakes for Jackson, squirreling them away from the CHuBS table and wrapping them in tinfoil

before April could notice. Then when I saw him between classes, I hid the package behind my back.

"I made something for you."

"You did?"

"Guess."

"What? No, Roo, I'm late for chemistry."

"Come on, guess."

"A painting?"

"No."

"One of those yarn thingummies you make in camp?"

I laughed. "A god's eye? No."

"Oh, oh—" He pointed at me, like he'd just had a brilliant idea. "A lanyard?"

"Wrong again."

"Can I have it now?"

"Yeah." I gave him the cupcakes.

"Excellent. Thanks, Roo. I'm gonna eat one on the way!" He gave me a kiss on the cheek and went to chemistry.

Later, it seemed like he forgot about them. He didn't mention them again, at least.

All that time and money and being with Heidi, and he didn't even remember that he'd wanted them at all.

Thursday was our last night of baking. "I don't want to spend any more money," I said to Heidi. "Let's just see what we can do with the leftovers."

"All right."

We baked vanilla cupcakes from a couple of boxes of mix left over from the miniatures we'd made on Monday, and whipped up a frosting from butter, vanilla, and powdered sugar that were already in Heidi's kitchen.

"It's gonna look boring," said Heidi. "April's gonna be cranky."

"Let's put food coloring in."

We put in all that was left of the red, but there wasn't enough to make a real pink. So we added a little yellow, and the frosting turned a kind of Caucasian flesh tone. We had little cinnamon candies left over, too—and I put one right in the center of a peachy-colored cupcake.

Then I did another. "They look like boobs," I said.

"Oh my God, they completely do!" Heidi cried, holding them up to her chest. "I could use a set of these, don't you think?"

"April would have an absolute attack if we brought them in," I said.

"Ooh, she would, wouldn't she?"

"She'd just about die."

"I know."

We were silent for a moment. I took an index card and a pen off her kitchen counter and wrote, Breasts: Two for a Dollar.

Heidi cracked up. "People would completely buy them," she giggled. "Let's do it."

So we made four dozen breast cupcakes (double the required amount—we even ran out and got more cake mix), and we brought them into school, along with the sign.

They sold out before first period was over.¹¹

People were eating breasts in class, in the Refectory, in the hallways. They were holding them up to their chests, laughing.

Nora ate the candy off hers, and then said she was completely freaked out by it because it looked deformed without the nipple. Cricket gave two anonymously to this guy Pete that she liked, leaving them in his mail cubby. Kim wrote a racy note and gave a pair to her boyfriend, Finn.

“Roo’s the idea bunny,” Heidi told everyone. “I’m the execution.”

Even Jackson bought some, and put the following note in my cubby:

“Roo: each bite of your luscious you-know-whats made me think about being alone with you tonight. Can’t wait. I’ll pick you up at seven. Jackson.”

I read the words over and over.

And at that moment, I thought, It worked.

It was worth it.

¹¹ April was furious—until they started selling. Then she acted like it was her idea all along, and did some really good fast talking when the headmaster swung by in the afternoon to ask about some anatomically correct baked goods he’d been hearing about? April slid the sign into her back pocket as he was walking over, then convinced him that he’d been hearing about a bunch of reindeer-shaped gingerbreads.

All the jealousy I felt toward Heidi, the tedious baking, the burns on my hands (because I *did* forget to use the pot holder), the stupid CHuBS meetings—it had all been worth it.

Because it made him love me, even more.

We went out that night and spent most of the time in the backseat of his Dodge.

Now, months after our horrible breakup and the whole debacle that followed it, I am not so sure. I mean, now that Jackson has left me, and hurt me, and humiliated me, and betrayed me; and now that I'm not in the thick of the moment, feeling his warm breath on my neck or basking in the shine of his wide-open smile—I don't think it worked at all.

It didn't make him love me.

In fact, he hardly even noticed.

Actually, it was Heidi who appreciated the stuff I did. The black bottom deliciousness. The idea for the Breakup Cupcakes. The Two for a Dollar sign. What it meant to subvert April's regime and the cute-baking requirement.

True, Heidi was sleek and popular and she wanted my boyfriend. But she wasn't all bad.

I mean, the girl knew how to appreciate a good cupcake.

And that's more than I can say for Jackson.

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