



Finalley, a Snickers

I SUPPOSE IF I have to get ditched somewhere, I'm glad it's at *this* 7-Eleven, not the sucky 7-Eleven near downtown. This is the awesome one—the one on 4th and Hill with the nacho cheese bar and the endless row of magazines. Ian and I would stop by here on Fridays to celebrate. “No homework. No track practice. Time for jalapeño nachos!” he would always say. And I'd say, “Just a Snickers.”

It's not that I don't love nachos . . . what's not to love? But I never got them on our Friday 7-Eleven stops because that was the day my weekly thimble-sized allowance was hovering in the cents column, and a candy bar was all I could afford. Ian would've bought nachos for me—he's a

carefree buyer with an unlimited allowance, along with most of the student body at Huntington High School, but I didn't want him to worry that it symbolized more. The last thing I wanted was to weird out our friendship because of a plate of convenience-store nachos.

As I cross through the familiar gas station parking lot, my chest discovers gravity, and my organs and bones weigh me down with sadness, my feet barely moving forward.

Of all the 7-Elevens, *this* one.

Where are you, Ian Clark?

Then music. It's blaring through outdoor speakers, which seems odd this early in the morning. There's no one to listen to it because there are no customers. Except for me.

The bell rings as the sliding glass door opens and a gush of stale air-conditioned air rushes over me. Country music blasts through the indoor speakers, too.

"Need something?"

The cashier stares at my shoes. My two-and-three-quarter-inch heels are covered in dirt and mud—the same ones I had proudly dyed iridescent royal blue just two days ago. But that was before I found out *nobody* dyes their shoes to match their dress anymore. And before I realized listening to the advice of a relative—not my best friend and not an enlightened editor of a prom magazine—was an unwise idea.

Thank you, Mom.

It makes sense that the cashier would stare. I'm guessing not too many girls waltz into the 7-Eleven at 6:15 on a

Sunday morning wearing heels that match their shimmering iridescent blue dress, looking like they'd just lost a match with a vindictive sewer rat.

"Got any Snickers?" My voice is weak.

Her eyes drift up to mine. She softens. She must notice my extreme lack of lip gloss. "You hungry?" She looks over my shoulder, probably to see if I am alone.

"Very."

She is wearing high-waisted jeans (*very* high-waisted), a belt with a large silver buckle, and a long-sleeve white shirt tucked tightly into her jeans. Her ultra-long hair is pulled back in a perfect French braid—totally symmetrical—with hints of gray peeking through. She looks like she belongs in a music video for the country song playing over the speakers. Like she'd play the part of the consoling wise aunt who doles out good obvious advice: *Stop drinkin' and smokin' and gettin' so many abortions, honey!*

I can already tell I like her.

She reaches into a box in front of the counter and lays a jumbo-size Snickers on the counter. I was right—there really is kindness in the world. I glance at her name tag. "Thanks, Gilda."

I give her a big smile and reach for the candy bar.

"That's \$1.09," she says.

"I . . . I . . ." I can't believe Gilda isn't going to take some pity on me and give me the damn candy bar! Do I look like a monster? She's the one with pants pulled up to her boobs!

She'd never be cast in a music video. Actors are *nice*. Which clearly, she is *not*.

I keep my mouth shut about her ill-fitting clothes and lack of human decency, and pat my dress down as if my purse will suddenly appear. But it's gone and I have no idea where I left it. Of course all my money is in there. And my lip gloss. And those directions to Lurch's party. The one Ian and I were supposed to go to the next night. He said he wanted us to go do something fun, just to make sure there wasn't any weirdness after the prom. He even said *weirdness* with air quotes, like I didn't know what it meant. I had hoped "weirdness" referred to all the making out we were going to do—so I guess I didn't know what it meant.

I had no idea "weirdness" to him meant actual weirdness. Dang it.

But in thinking over what happened last night, I have to say, "weirdness" was an understatement of epic proportions. Unreasonably huge . . . an understatement that is Hummer huge. Because Lurch's party—and especially the excessive making-out part—is *never* going to happen.

Which is a pity. Lurch always has the best parties.

"I don't have any money." My voice cracks. It sounds pitiful. Like someone you might even want to take mercy on. But it doesn't sway Gilda.

Gilda places the Snickers back in its box. Then she looks me up and down and tilts her head. "You need a phone or something?"

“Yes! Where?” I feel like a Jack Russell terrier—yippy, anxious.

“Out back. By the hoses. Fifty cents a call.”

I’m not exactly sure why she thinks I can suddenly come up with fifty cents if I couldn’t afford the Snickers. “Thanks.” I wince at her and secretly think about spraying her down with one of those hoses and wiping that unsupportive smirk right off her face. But all I really want is to get home, so I retreat and hobble back through the sliding glass doors, across the parking lot.

The pay phone is *right* next to the hoses, just like Mean-Ass Gilda said, and I have to hike up my disgusting dress to get around them. I’m not sure why I care about saving my dress from any further grossness. This is absurd.

As I step up to the phone, I hear a car—the rattling, knocking sound of a diesel engine. I whip around, hoping it’s Ian, but deep down knowing that he’s never coming to get me. A man pulls up in a Mercedes to pump gas. His car is old, just like Ian’s, but it’s a coupe, not a sedan. He doesn’t even notice me. Good.

I start to read the directions on the pay phone, but the words turn blurry. I can feel the tears gaining momentum—I press my temples with my palms, trying my best to contain them.

Get it together. You’ve gotten this far without falling apart.

My pep talk starts to work—the tears dry up and I glance back at the building to see Gilda planted at the window,

glaring at me with her arms folded, standing firm like a redwood tree. She must think I'm going to steal these hoses. Gilda might be the type who takes her job too seriously.

I quickly turn back and finish reading the directions on how to make a collect call. I've never made one and it looks complicated.

I dial wrong three times, but then finally push all the right buttons in the right order and the phone rings.

Come on, Mom. Pick up.

"You've reached the Griffith residence. Please leave a message. . . ."

I can't believe this. She's still asleep. Doesn't she know I'm not there? No, this can't be right. Maybe she's out on a hunt with the police. They're probably using drug-sniffing dogs and everything. Given the people I've been hanging out with the past few hours, those drug dogs will sniff me out in two shakes of a spleef. Should be rescued any moment now. . . .

But I try the collect call one more time. "You've reached the Griffith residence. . . ."

Crap! This can't be happening. She's asleep. She doesn't even know Ian just ruined my life. I never wanted to go to this stupid prom at that stupid hotel. I told him that: I like running, not dancing. I like veggie burritos, not rubbery hotel chicken. And definitely not rubbery hotel salad. But he convinced me that prom would be different. It would be a night I would never forget, and he promised I'd love the food. Well, he was sure as hell right about one thing: I will

never forget this. But the food? I'm freaking starving.

All of a sudden, I can't hold the tears back anymore, my eyes feeling like the Colorado River after a spring melt—the flow just keeps coming. No pep talk can fix this. I fall to the ground, sobbing. *Why me, Ian? Why couldn't you have—*

“Eat this.”

There's a tap on my shoulder. Gilda drops a Snickers on my lap.

She reaches out and gives me a hand, helping me to my feet. “Here.” It's a scratchy paper towel from the bathroom—she motions to the tears flowing freely down my face, and I wish she had brought more scratchy towels.

I try to explain, not really sure what to say, and the words come out as a blubbering mess. “Why did you . . . Are you—”

“You look like you could use a snack. That's all.” She leads me back to the store. “Come inside. We'll figure out what to do with you.”

I knew there was kindness in the world. Sometimes I guess you have to turn into the Colorado Snot River before someone shows it, but I'm just relieved to know it's there.

Gilda pulls a stool up to the end of the counter and lets me sit while I scarf down my candy bar. She takes a plastic to-go bag and fills it with ice from the soda machine, then spins the bag to close it and hands it to me. “What happened to you, anyway?”

I hold the ice to the knot on my head. *Ouch!*

She waits a moment. “So?”

I look down at my dress. “You mean the stains?”

She nods. “And the scratches and the bruises and the bump on the head and the new tattoo.”

I shake my head. “I know. So cliché to go to prom and end up with a tattoo, right?”

“That’s your *prom* dress?”

“It looked better without the filth.”

Her face is blank. “It’s just all so . . . *matching*. I thought maybe you’d been in a play. Or a pride parade.”

I almost laugh—like she even knows what a pride parade is, but I don’t feel a need to educate her on this matter. “Nope. Mom’s idea.”

“You didn’t get a friend’s opinion?”

I shake my head. “Didn’t even read a magazine. I just wanted to impress him—”

“With your matching skills?”

“Color. But Mom dressed me exactly the way she did at her own prom . . . secondhand dress, dyed shoes, matching purse.” I lower my head. “It’s not like I’m proud of this.”

Of course I would much rather be wearing my regular clothes: all-black everything, as Ian calls them. True, I only wear black: black shirt, black jeans, black boots, every day, without fail. Because no one asks questions. They just assume I’ve gone to the dark side—and lately that would not be too far from the truth.

But I get wild sometimes—with my nail polish. Black Cherry.

Gilda gives me a look like she's in pain—physical pain. “You mean you let your *mother* dress you the same way she dressed for prom?”

She must not have a daughter. Otherwise she'd understand how hard it is for a mother to let her daughter just “be.” At least for *my* mother. I consider explaining this to her, but I figure I should zip it and be thankful for the Snickers. Plus, the rush of chocolate is calming me down, and the balance of blood sugar suddenly makes me a much more reasonable person. Unlike most of last night.

I shrug. “Mom's eager face—there's no escaping it.”

Gilda scratches her hair, digging in delicately with her long red fingernails, being careful not to mess up a braid. I can tell she wants to let loose with some sort of hand-flailing lecture on being myself and not letting my mother's eager face control my life, but all she says is, “Huh.”

“Look, if I had known my dress was going to cause this much pain, I would've worn a sleeping bag. No . . . I wouldn't have gone at all.” I take another bite of my Snickers and swallow hard.

“So why did you go?”

Of course that's when his face pops into my mind. And all the amazing things he said to convince me to go to prom.

“Ian Clark,” I say, as if that explains everything. But she doesn't know him. How could she understand his powers of persuasion?

Gilda looks around the store. “But Ian Clark isn’t here now. Did he do something bad?”

“Yeah. Very bad.”

“Did he—”

“Hurt me?” I ask, because, looking at me, I’d wonder too.

She wrinkles her nose. I can tell she doesn’t want to ask, but she knows she should. “Did he?”

“No, no. He ditched me.” I adjust the ice pack on my forehead. The pain is lessening. I’m starting to think more clearly. “I was ditched. Figuratively and literally.”

“He sounds like a real jerk.”

I twitch. That word: *jerk*. It confuses my nervous system because my body wants to react with my first instinct . . . defend him.

Because even though *jerk* is the only word I can imagine to describe him now, it’s not a word that ever entered my mind as being synonymous with Ian Clark. Ever.

I have always known *of* him—Huntington High isn’t huge and it’s the type of place where everyone’s business is just known. It’s almost as if we’re all distant relatives—people you’ve heard of and you know their basic story—or the Lifetime movie version of their story—but you don’t *really* know them, and sometimes don’t want to.

Ian became more than a person I knew basic facts about back in sophomore year, spring quarter, P.E.: softball. I remember my first words to him. “Have you seen that silver bat around?”

He turned and walked off on me. Sorta rude. But then he popped back into my vision a moment later, the bat in hand. “Silver bat’s my favorite too.” He gave it to me, but not in just some ordinary handing-over-of-a-bat type of way. He flipped it around in a highly coordinated maneuver and presented it to me, handle first. Just to make it that much easier for me. “Whack it good,” he said with a little smile.

I struck out.

But I stuffed that little moment away in my mind—the importance of it seeming like something that needed to be noted, filed, remembered. I now knew Ian Clark was a handle-first kind of guy. Why did this matter to me?

But time passed and the silver bat always seemed to be around and I couldn’t think of any other questions to ask him. So I didn’t. And that memory started to fade. Ian remained merely an unexamined file in my brain.

Until last summer. The pool party.

Gilda opens up a bag of gummy bears and chews the head off of one, then hands a piece to me, an indication she’s ready for the story. “Why’d you go with this guy?”

I twirl the gummy bear in my fingers. “Operation Lips Locked.”

“What type of operation is that?”

Breathe in. Breathe out. Here we go.

“It’s the type where you get ridiculed at Jimmy DeFranco’s pool party for hooking up with two different guys even though it was accidental because one of them was a dare

and one of them was due to drinking too many Jägermeister shots—him, not me—and get publicly humiliated when those two guys claim it was much more than kissing—which is all you remember happening—but the glares from people you hardly know pierce your skin and jab your heart, so you declare to your best friend you are never *ever* going to kiss another boy again until you know deep in your bones, in your marrow, in your cell structure—one hundred percent—that he is boyfriend material.”

“Okay,” Gilda says. “I mean . . . *what?*”

I shrug. “No kissing allowed until the guy proved he had the material. Until then, lips locked.” I press my lips together, reminding myself what they feel like. “It’s been eight months and twelve days since I kissed a boy. I was going to finally unlock my lips for Ian. At prom.”

The bell at the sliding door rings. The man who was pumping gas in the old Mercedes strolls around the store.

Gilda holds her hand up to me and whispers, “Hold on a sec.”

She helps him find some individual packets of Tylenol, then rings him up. He’s older with a pudgy middle and a rumpled shirt.

While he fishes through his leather wallet for money, he glances my way. And as he hands Gilda a twenty, he’s still looking my way.

I shift on my stool. What’s this guy’s problem?

“You need a lift?” he asks.

I laugh. A nervous laugh. Not really a laugh. “Me? No.”
“Her ride’s coming,” Gilda lies.

He puts his wallet away and gives me a smirk. “Looks like you worked a rough shift last night. Hope you made enough to buy yourself a new dress.”

Oh my god, this ass thinks I’m a hooker!

He scoops up his bag of Tylenol—hangover medicine, I’m sure—and saunters out before I can tell him he’s so rude for assuming I’m a hooker because I’m only sixteen and this is my prom dress and my boyfriend who is not my boyfriend ditched me, and no, I do *not* have a ride home!

But I’ve gotten good at not confronting people. I let out a deep sigh instead.

When he’s gone, Gilda turns to me with big eyes. “He doesn’t know you haven’t even kissed a boy in eight months. He’s a jerk.”

I shake my head. Given the reputation I managed to create for myself, money may be the only thing that keeps me from being a hooker. A kissing hooker. “He’s probably not totally off base. I’ve kissed a lot of guys in my past.”

She waves me off. “Oh, who hasn’t.”

“A lot.” I clear my throat and hope she doesn’t ask—

“How many?”

Of course she asks. I clench my fists and look away. “A little more than a dozen.” Silence, no response. “Or so,” I add quietly.

“Or *so*!?” Her eyes are satellite disks.

“It’s not like it’s triple digits or anything. And it’s not something I’m super proud of, except at first . . . I kind of . . . was.”

Which is true. When I first started my excessive lip landings, I was a freshman and I was so excited about my success rate I wanted to put it on my résumé—in bold, italics, everything. I was *proud*.

“But nothing ever materialized. No boyfriend,” I explain to her. “I just really, really like kissing. It’s my drug of choice, I guess. It’s like I have a kissing disorder—I’ve overdosed on it and now I can’t even get one simple smooch from my prom date. I mean, it’s *prom*. *Everyone* gets kissed on prom night! What is wrong with me?” I look down at my muddy feet.

I feel like a non-human at this point. Realizing that it’s come to this. Me without any dignity—completely alone and jonesing only for the feel of his lips—and he’s probably off with Allyson Moore doing whatever he’s doing. I take a breath and look up at Gilda. “I’m always The Girl At That Party, never The Girl.”

“Sounds like you’ve kissed one too many toads.”

“And toads never turn into boyfriends. Not in my case.”

“But Ian proved he was boyfriend material?”

“Yeah. Except it took a long time for me to realize it. We were . . . friends. For a long time. Like, almost nine months. I mean, that’s how long it takes to incubate a baby, or whatever.” I take a bite of the gummy bear, feeling more

settled. “Ian drove me to school every day. And he’d remind me which color uniform I needed for a track meet. I trusted him.” I stare at the half-eaten gummy bear, getting lost in the memories of him. “It’s strange how you can be friends with someone for so long and then one day he brings you licorice and Motrin because you’re whacked out from heinous painful cramps straight from the devil, but you notice he’s wearing a new shirt that’s a certain shade of green and . . . whammo! Your insides turn to pudding and all you can do is think about making out with him. He’s the same guy, doesn’t change a bit from one day to the next”—I start to think about his eyes, his mouth—“but because a color brings out his eyes, you suddenly realize . . .”

Gilda finishes my sentence. “Boyfriend material.”

I sigh. “Totally.”

That damn green shirt. None of this would have happened if it weren’t for that stupid color.

It’s like some nightmare *Sesame Street* episode: *This month’s gut-wrenching, painful heartache brought to you by the color green!*

But I quickly snap back to reality and remind myself that I am telling this story to the cashier at the 7-Eleven due to the fact that Ian Clark left me on prom night and I ended up in a ditch on Hollister Road.

Screw the color green.

I sit up and clear my throat. “He totally *was* boyfriend material. At least I never kissed the guy.”

“That’s good. I guess.”

Maybe Gilda is right. It is good we never kissed. That way we don’t have to worry about any “weirdness.” Except that our friendship has come to a complete halt, and I’ll have to find a new ride to school. Which is a total pain. So I should’ve just kissed him and gotten something out of this ridiculous mess. Plus, I still can’t help but wonder what it would’ve been like. *Curse you, wonder.*

“Or maybe I should’ve kissed him. Just once? Like maybe I should’ve done it a long time ago, not sat around waiting for the perfect moment. I could’ve gotten it out of the way.”

“Like a chore?”

I laugh at that. I’ve never thought of kissing as a chore. More of a sport. “I just don’t want to have to wonder anymore.”

“Wonder what?”

“If he’s the perfect kisser. Some guys are—they know exactly how much tongue to give, when to be gentle, and when to put on the deep pressure.”

She quickly pops another gummy bear in her mouth and fake coughs.

“Sorry. Too much?” I wince.

She gazes off in the distance toward the hot-dog cooker. “No. Actually, I know exactly what you mean.”

I snag another handful of bears from the bag and start gnawing. It really seems to calm the nerves. “Okay then, so you know that there are also guys who are sucky kissers. Too wet. Too toothy. Too much tongue. Too much breathing.

Too much coloring outside the lines, you know what I mean? I want to know which category he falls in.”

“You still want to know?”

Immediately I picture him talking to Allyson Moore next to that pool and then overhearing that phone conversation in the In-N-Out Burger bathroom. “No. Not anymore. All Ian Clark got me was a ruined dress. And the worst night of my life.” I straighten out my stained dress.

Allyson Moore.

Just *thinking* about her almost makes me throw up in my mouth. I mean, what was it exactly that he couldn’t resist? Her strappy, silver Jimmy Choo pumps? Or her pale pink lip gloss with a hint of glitter? Surely it wasn’t her remarkable intelligence—the girl thinks monogamy is a type of dark wood. Maybe he found her lack of common vocabulary terms adorable?

None of this makes sense. Why am I the one who ended up in the ditch, not Allyson? I know . . . girly parts. That’s why. He’s always had a thing for the female form—boobs, to be exact. Which is something I do not naturally possess, despite my support from Victoria’s Secret.

But Ian is not the kind of guy who would leave me alone in a ditch. And somewhere deep in me, maybe in some file buried in my brain, I know this is true.

At least, I *hope* it’s true.

This picture is so fuzzy . . . no crisp black and whites . . . just grays . . . and unanswered questions.

Gilda leans toward me to get a better look at my stained outfit. “What *are* all these?”

Looking them over, I realize each one tells a little piece of the story of what happened to me last night. Like a quilt—a stain quilt. A disastrous, heartbreaking, nasty-ass stain quilt. “You really want to know?”

Gilda looks around at the empty store, another sad country song blaring in the background. She shrugs. “It’s real busy, but I guess I could spare some time.” She tosses a gummy bear at me, then gives me a sneaky smile. “I gotta hear about this Ian Clark guy.”

I point to the very first stain of the night—the one near the hem of my dress. It’s the greenish-yellow one.

The one I got from him.

