

THE CLIQUE

SUMMER COLLECTION



CLAIRE

18 GATOR ROAD
KISSIMMEE, FL
Sunday, August 2
2:03 P.M.

“Hey, sweetheaaaa’t, can ya move a little faster? Mrs. Wilkes wants her plants watered by three and she’s seven blocks away.” Todd Lyons stretched out on the yellow terry cloth-covered chaise and folded his hands behind his head. His DON’T CHA WISH YOUR BOYFRIEND WAS HOT LIKE ME? T-shirt lay in a heap on the deck, and a swim coach’s whistle necklace dangled above his gray, shark-covered swim trunks.

“I can’t go to Mrs. Wilkes’s.” Claire skimmed the surface of the drowned bug-infested pool with a net. “I told you that last week.” She wiped her beading forehead with the back of her hand, then dried it on her turquoise Gap drawstring shorts, her gray tank already too sweaty and no longer an option.

“I’ll have to dock your pay.” Todd unscrewed the top off a tube of zinc oxide and smeared the thick white cream all over his freckly cheeks. Combined with his shock of overgrown red hair and the yellow chaise, this made him look like a ten-year-old Ronald McDonald. But as a boss he was more like Jerk-in-the-Box.

“Whatevs.” Claire skimmed the pool one last time, then dropped the long pole. It fell to the cement deck with a resounding clang. If she was going to be docked, why not

leave now? That way she could shower before her long-awaited reunion with her FBFFs (Florida BFFs) and style her hair with the cute flips on the bottom, the way Massie taught her.

Puuuurp!

Todd blew his whistle. “Watch the attitude,” he warned, his eyes closed and lifted to the sun. “And don’t forget, Piper is booked for a walk and shampoo tomorrow morning at eight.”

“I know.” Claire pulled the bobby pin out of her hair and shook her long bangs loose. It was times like these when she wondered if working for her brother was worth it. But her goal was to earn enough money for a Massie-approved back-to-school wardrobe—or at least a cool pair of jeans—and so far, Todd was the only person in town willing to hire a twelve-year-old.

Maybe now that Sarah, Sari, and Mandy were finally back from sleepover camp, working for T-Odd Jobs, Inc. would stop sucking so much. Not that car washing, gardening, pool cleaning, dog walking, and bird sitting would suddenly become fun. Or that depending on her younger brother for a paycheck would become less pathetic. Or that doing *all* the work while he barked orders from the sidelines would become less humiliating. But with the girls around, life off the clock would be filled with side-splitting laughter, DIY crafts, and sugary snacks.

And it was about time.

Claire had waited all summer for summer to start. And with only four weeks left before her parents sold the house

and moved everyone back to Westchester, she didn't want to waste another second.

Pedaling down Cherry Street on her old black and pink turbo Powerpuff Girls bike, Claire breathed in the citrus-scented air. She had missed the palm trees and orange trees over the last year. She had craved the thick, hot air that warmed her like one of Massie's old pashminas. And she loved making a wish every time a speedy little lizard zipped past her bare feet. As much as she'd grown to appreciate life in Westchester, Kissimmee was still home. And with the return of Sarah, Sari, and Mandy, it would finally start feeling like it.

Claire turned up the driveway of her soon to be ex-sky blue split-level ranch house, where three Razor scooters were lying on the grassy lawn beside the SOLD sign.

"Ehmagosh!" She jumped off her bike. It slammed to the ground, wheels still spinning.

"Ahhhhhh," shouted three girls from Claire's open bedroom window.

"Ahhhhh," Claire shouted back as she threw open the front door, bolted by her father, and took the peach-carpeted stairs two at a time. "You're early!" she called, silently telling herself not to worry about her toxic pits and limp hair. It wasn't the Pretty Committee on the other side of her Hello Kitty sticker-covered door. These were her down-to-earth, wear-the-same-pair-of-socks-three-days-in-a-row *sisters*. She'd never cared about her looks before. . . .

Still, a little effort might be nice.

After a quick extra-spitty lip lick (poor-girl's gloss) and a

speedy cheek pinch (PG's blush), Claire barged into her lemon yellow bedroom, her bare feet sinking into the white shag. To honor her friends' return, she'd salted the carpet with each of their glitter colors; blue for Mandy, pink for Sari, orange for Sarah, and green for herself. It looked like the entire Orange Bowl parade had melted on her floor.

"CLAIRE-BEAR!" The girls rushed toward her for a group hug, but Claire kept her arms pinned to her sides. It was either that or get nicknamed Bad Pitt by Massie, should word somehow get back to New York.

"Why so stiff?" Mandy pulled away, her thick dark eyebrows more noticeable than they had been a year ago.

"Is that a Westchester thing? Because I heard people are colder up there. No pun intended. Well, maybe a little pun intended. But when I say colder I mean emotionally. Not weatherwise. Even though weatherwise it's coooold." Sari fake-shivered, her thin upper lip disappearing against her slightly buckteeth.

"Maybe it's a New York tr-eeeend?" Sarah shimmied like a limbo dancer preparing to slip under the pole but looked more like someone who had taken muscle relaxants in a windstorm.

Claire smiled warmly. Mandy still refused to pluck her hairy eye visors! Sari still rambled when she was excited! And Sarah still had no rhythm! Like an old song that brings back memories of a long-forgotten crush, these quirky traits brought Claire back to that place she was just before she moved. A place where gloss was saved for class photos, blush was for Halloween, and body odor was perfectly natural.

“None of the above. I just have a little BO.” Claire giggled.

“More like MO.” Mandy lifted her long, thin arm and pointed at Claire’s daisy fabric-covered twin headboard. The cheery white and green floral print had been poked with pushpins that held dozens of Pretty Committee photos. Shots of the girls lying on sleeping bags, piling in the back of the Range Rover, cheering at soccer games, carving the Chanel logo out of snow, dangling tuna sashimi from their mouths, latte-toasting at Sixbucks, flying on the Gelding Studios private jet to Hollywood, and several *Vogue* poses with the Massie-quin were all on display.

“What’s MO?” Claire asked, half smiling, half fearing the answer.

“Moved On.” Mandy pouted, her turned-out bottom lip looking extra pink against her ever-pale skin.

Claire’s white blond eyelashes fluttered in confusion.

“Or Massie Obsession.” Sari twirled her long blond hair, something she always did when goading someone.

“Or Meeee-Owww,” Claire purred like Catwoman, desperate to put an end to their teasing. Not because she couldn’t take it, but because it forced her to consider the truth behind it, which she was nawt ready to do. Wasn’t it possible to like both sets of friends equally?

“Or Making Out!” Sarah lifted the one photo that was facing backward, kissed it, and then buried it in her mess of short, dirty blond curls. But Claire still managed to catch a forbidden glimpse of her ex-crush Cam Fisher winking his green eye.

At the beginning of the summer, when she'd hung the picture, Claire had made a pact with herself not to look at it until Cam responded to one of the six I'm-sorry-for-spying-on-you-through-the-secret-camera-that-was-planted-in-your-sensitivity-training-class-and-I-will-never-do-anything-like-that-again-if-you-give-me-a-second-chance letters she'd sent him at summer camp. Now it was almost eight weeks later, and her mailbox was just as empty as her heart.

Seeing him now, even for a second, conjured the rich woody smell of his Drakkar Noir cologne and the heaviness that came with missing him. The sudden sensation was dizzying. Claire lowered herself onto the edge of her bed and sighed with the old squeaky springs, leaking joy like a punctured balloon.

Sarah sat gently beside her. "We're only kidding Claire-Bear." Her sea foam green gauze pants scratched the side of Claire's thigh.

Sari sat too, covering her bony knees with her pink TJ Maxx sundress. "We just missed you. And these pictures prove you replaced us."

"I didn't *replace* you!" Claire stood. "You should see my computer. You guys are my screen saver *and* my wallpaper."

"Wow, *both*?" Mandy twirled her fingers in the air like a plate-spinner without plates. But more than the biting sarcasm, Claire noticed the black hair on her friend's arm. Maybe it wouldn't be as noticeable with a tan . . . or a sleeve. Anything other than a dishwater gray tank dress would have been a step in the right direction.

“Thank gosh *Dial L for Loser* was a flop or we would have lost you forever!” Sarah pulled the picture of Cam out of her hair and pinned it back to the headboard, facing forward this time.

“Opposite of true!” Claire blurted, stealing one of Alicia’s lines.

“Whaddaya mean?” Sari play-smacked Claire’s arm. “It tanked.”

Claire burst out laughing. “I mean the part about *losing* me was opposite of true. I *know* the movie tanked.”

They all cracked up a little more than necessary. And Claire couldn’t help wondering if it was a way for them to release the stress that had been building up inside each one of them over the last year. Stress that came from constantly wondering if your best friend had found someone better.

But as they slapped the daisy-covered bed and wiped the giggle-tears from their eyes, the answer was obvious. They were getting their groove back. And things would stay that way, as long as Claire could show them that Massie and the Pretty Committee hadn’t changed her a bit. Which wouldn’t be *too* hard, right?