

BOYS "R" US

A CLIQUE NOVEL BY
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poppy

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Claire Lyons trudged across the immaculately manicured lawn of the Block estate, feeling the same way she felt after a worthy contestant got voted off *American Idol*: Technically, *she* hadn't been the one everyone text-rejected. But somehow, she felt the sting just the same.

Cam Fisher flirt-punched her shoulder. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Claire glanced up at her crush. The warmth in Cam's one blue eye and one green eye shielded her against the late-afternoon chill. She buried her hands inside the sleeves of the burgundy Briarwood Tomahawks jersey she wore over gray leggings and flirt-punched him back. "Easy!"

"Ow!" He laughed. A grape bubble gum cloud puffed from his mouth. It smelled like love.

"Worried about Massie?" Cam slipped his arm around her shoulder and left it there for approximately three Mississippis before stuffing his hand back in the pocket of his red hoodie.

Claire nodded, nibbling her Blistex-coated bottom lip to keep from purring. Now was not the time to think about how close she and Cam were standing or how he could practically read her mind. And now was definitely not the time to sneak an intoxicating noseful of Drakkar Noir. Now was the time to focus on being there for Massie, since the

rest of the Pretty Committee was avoiding her the way Lindsay avoided food.

It had been less than forty-eight hours since Alicia, Dylan, and Kristen had boycotted Massie's Friday night sleepover, but to Claire, it felt longer than Lent. She'd spent most of that time fielding four-way texts and calls from her friends, having no idea how to respond. Dylan had vented about how she and Derrington could have taken their crush public a week earlier if it weren't for Massie holding her back. Alicia had bragged about how much better her cheer squad, the Heart-Nets, was going to be than Massie's, since Alicia was a superior dancer/choreographer. And Kristen had kept moaning about bad sushi.

Massie, on the other hand, hadn't reached out once since Claire and Cam had shown up to her religiously honored sleepover and found her totally alone. Her silence felt eerie, like the calm before the doors opened for a 75 percent-off sale at BCBG. Madness was sure to follow.

"Do you really think Alicia and Dylan'll stay mad forever?" Cam's gentle voice brought Claire back.

She wished she could tell Cam that the Pretty Committee would be back together before dinner. But Alicia and Dylan seemed done with Massie's rigid, Lycra-ing ways. Done with the alpha controlling everything: whom they crushed on, what they wore, and what they did with their Friday nights. Actually, Claire understood their frustration better than anybody. Before Massie, she'd been perfectly content with her non-designer wardrobe. Now she could barely walk past an Old

Navy without imagining being shot at by a round of deadly comebacks.

“Dunno,” she replied honestly. She tried not to think about what could happen if her friends stayed mad. Sure, Lycra kept a tight hold on things. It could even feel suffocating. But it also held everything in its place. Without Massie, the Pretty Committee could fall apart. And where would that leave Claire?

“Sucks,” he offered, obviously trying to sound sympathetic and male at the same time.

It was adorable that Cam thought he knew just how dire the situation was. But no matter how many times Claire tried to explain, he couldn’t possibly understand. At this point, a reunion for the Pretty Committee seemed less likely than a five-year wedding anniversary for Spencer and Heidi.

Claire stopped in front of the French doors of the Blocks’ sunroom and peered inside the canvas tote slung over her shoulder.

“Mood music?” Cam prompted her.

“Check.” Claire fingered the CDs they’d burned and decorated with purple glitter earlier that day, one for each of Massie’s possible states: *PAYBACK PLAYLIST!* (Avril, P!nk), *SMILE SONGS* (“Unwritten” by Natasha Bedingfield, “Party’s Just Begun” by the Cheetah Girls), and *MASSIE AND ME!* (“True Friend” by Miley Cyrus, “My Life Would Suck Without You” by Kelly Clarkson). Claire hoped the last one would remind Massie that she wasn’t totally alone.

“Gummies?”

“Check.” Claire patted the small, clear plastic bag of gummies at the bottom of the bag. They were sugar free, so Massie wouldn’t have to worry about the calories. And Claire had personally removed every green gummy from the bag, knowing how Massie hated them.

“Aaand, last but not least, Keds?” Cam finished.

“Check.” Claire gazed longingly at the three pairs of worn sneakers—white platforms, springy polka-dotted mules, and sporty camouflage lace-ups—cowering at the bottom of the bag. Mud-stained hedge clippers stood stiffly inside the left platform, like a soldier waiting for its call to action. She shuddered at the thought of Massie transforming her beloved Keds into canvas carcasses. But there was no better target for the alpha’s aggression than non-designer footwear.

“There’s still time to save them.” Cam hip-bumped her.

“No, I just have to be strong,” Claire joked. As controlling as Massie could be, she’d ultimately made Westchester feel like home. She’d given Claire a place to belong, and friends to belong to. And that was worth all the Keds in the world.

“Okay.” Claire flipped the canvas tote over so the image of Cookie Monster devouring the PBS logo was buried in her powder-fresh armpit. Massie was already upset enough.

“Let’s do it.” She led Cam into the sunroom and stepped out of her pink fake Uggs—or FUGgs, as they were known around Octavian Country Day—and then eyed Cam’s laceless brown Converse. He caught on and scraped his heels against the ivory rug until they popped off. A warm, buttery scent wafted from the three Laura Vallon Crème Brûlée

pillar candles flickering in the stone fireplace, masking the wet-goldendoodlesque smell of their combined footwear.

“Massie?” Claire edged past the persimmon silk-covered sofa, careful not to graze the delicate fabric with Cam’s grass-stained jersey. “You home?”

Kuh-laire. Kuh-laire. As if in response to her call, Claire’s cell emitted Massie’s signature ring. Claire reached for her rhinestone-encrusted Motorola cell and opened the newest text in her inbox.

Massie: hlp!!! Guest bedroom closet. Hurry x 10.

Claire gasp-widened her blue eyes and sprinted into the foyer. Forgetting about Cam, she took the Pledged wooden steps two at a time, her heart slamming against her rib cage. As she hurried down the shiny hardwood straightaway and skidded into the Blocks’ guest bedroom, she mentally prepared herself to find Massie collapsed in a tearful heap on the closet floor, wearing last year’s Juicy sweats, surrounded by Sharpie-shopped photos of happier times.

“Massie?” Claire called again, diving past the toile-canopied guest bed.

“In here!” Massie’s muffled voice came through the closet door.

Bracing herself, Claire gripped the ornate gold handle, pumped it once, and yanked the door open.

But instead of finding Massie curled in the fetal position on the floor, Claire found her lounging on a tufted chaise

in the center of the enormous walk-in, looking like a perfectly posed storefront mannequin. Dim recessed lighting spotlighted the red YSL Raspail tote dangling from her crooked index finger. A tags-on metallic Balenciaga scarf was wrapped around her neck like a shiny boa constrictor. Claire's throat closed when she saw the four-digit number on the crisp white price tag.

"Hey." Breathless, Cam appeared in the doorway behind her.

"Took you guys long enough." Massie yawned, stretching out on the extra-long chair like she was relaxing poolside. Rotating racks of designer clothing swished around the perimeter of the walnut-paneled closet, which was easily twice the size of Claire's bedroom. Mountains of clothing, shoes, and accessories littered the gold-carpeted floor around Massie's perch.

Claire squinted at her friend, searching for signs of distress. "Um, are you okay?"

But Massie's high pony gleamed like she'd just had a blow-out, and her shimmer-dusted cheeks glowed. There wasn't a mascara-smudged cheek or outdated tracksuit in sight. In fact, in an emerald cashmere minidress and espresso suede boots, she'd probably never looked better.

"Obv," Massie responded, sitting up and planting her feet on the clothing-strewn floor.

"Are you . . . sure?" Claire asked nervously. Why wasn't she devastated? Road testing her waterproof mascara while cursing Alicia and Dylan to a lifetime of flyaways and visible panty lines?

“You’re not . . . upset or anything?” She took an involuntary step backward, toward Cam.

“Um, Kuh-laire, am I a Jonas Brother?” Massie blinked.

“No,” Claire said, flicking her bangs away from her eyes.

“Then why are you waiting for me to lose it?” Massie grin-whipped the metallic Balenciaga scarf on the floor and stood up.

Cam snorted.

“Well . . . you said crisis . . .” Claire mumbled, a knot forming in her stomach at the sound of her crush’s laugh.

“Correction.” Massie paused briefly, refueling with a fresh swipe of Glossip Girl Toasted Marshmallow gloss. “CrisEEEEEEes. The first is that gawd-awful jersey you’re wearing. And the second is that I can’t decide which bag to donate to the homeless and which to keep.” She held out both arms in the shape of a T, showcasing the two bags. On the left was a dark blue Chloé Paddington clutch and on the right a buttery, tan Kooba. “You dress like the less fortunate. Which would you like more?”

The knot in Claire’s stomach tightened like a clenched fist. Being the true friend she was, she’d come to help Massie in her time of need. But Claire’s definition of help didn’t include getting shot down mercilessly by Massie while Cam was just inches away.

“Time’s up,” Massie sighed, lowering her arms. “I’m keeping both.” She tossed the bags up onto a heap of clothing that almost reached the ceiling. A Bloomingdale’s Big Brown Bag marked COUTURE TO KEEP was positioned in front of the pile.

Bean was asleep on top of a smaller pile marked DESIGNERS TO DONATE.

“What about my Donna Karan suit?” Kendra Block’s perky voice sounded from somewhere nearby. Claire whipped her head around, searching for signs of Massie’s mom.

“Spring ’08 or resort ’09?” Massie called back.

“Spring ’08.” Kendra entered the closet, holding up a cream-colored pantsuit. Her stylish dark bob gleamed under the soft track lighting. In pencil-leg jeans and a navy silk tunic, she looked like she was ready to hit the town, not clean out her old clothes. “Claire! Cam!” she exclaimed. The sweet, fruity scent of Kendra’s Dolce & Gabbana Light Blue perfume chased off Cam’s Drakkar Noir and claimed Claire’s nostrils as its prize. Claire silently transitioned to mouth breathing.

Kendra shook the pantsuit at Massie. “Verdict?”

“Ew.” Massie wrinkled her nose. “Extremely Worn.”

“I only wore it twice.” Kendra gazed at it sadly, as though it were an old lover.

“In public?”

Her mother nodded slowly, like she knew what was coming.

“Toss.” Massie beamed, obviously marveling at her ability to instantly ID overexposed garments.

“You’re right.” Kendra dropped the suit on the floor next to Bean, then turned back to Claire and Cam. “I hope you came to help.” She smiled expectantly. “Ever since we lost our special event chairperson to bad Botox, we’ve needed a few extra hands.”

“Help with what?” Claire asked, only half paying attention while she surveyed Massie from the corner of her eye.

“Our clothing drive.” Kendra smiled humbly. “I’m on the board of directors of the Ladies’ Luncheon League.” She tossed a quilted Chanel bag aside like it was an empty Starbucks cup. “I’m sure your mother’s involved, Claire.”

Claire nodded politely, even though she was pretty sure the only league her mom was involved in was Todd’s Little League.

“I’m hosting a big fund-raising dinner here at the house. Each guest donates ten pounds of couture to the local homeless shelter.” Kendra clapped her hands together in delight. “We’re calling the event Ho Ho Homeless.”

“Seriously?” Cam muttered under his breath. Claire elbowed him.

“My idea.” Massie beamed.

The defensive knot in Claire’s stomach loosened at the sight of her friend’s brave smile. Massie was obviously diving headfirst into this whole charity thing to avoid the pain of fighting with her best friends. And if helping the less fortunate would get Massie through this difficult time, then Claire and Cam would work right alongside her.

“So?” Kendra prompted expectantly.

Cam coughed. “I usually have soccer practice after school, so—”

Claire glare-silenced him. “We’d love to help,” she announced.

“Perf.” Massie nodded. “You can start by tossing out anything gray, silver, or black.”

“Why?” Cam asked, looking confused.

Massie shook her head, like it should have been obvious.

“The idea is to make the homeless stand out, Cam. Not make them blend into the pavement.”

Ordinarily, Claire would have jumped to Cam’s defense. But this time, she was just glad that Massie wasn’t focusing on her.

“Always thinking.” Kendra smiled, pulling her daughter in for a side-hug.

Massie squirmed happily under her mom’s Clarins-lotioned grip. “Please. I’m just getting started.” She pulled away and turned toward Claire and Cam. “Anything shimmer or metallic is a definite yes. That way, cars can see them at night.”

“And she’s safety conscious, too.” Kendra watched her daughter proudly. She paused, tilting her head slightly to the right, the same way Massie did when she was examining her reflection in the mirror. “You really seem like you’re taking to this whole philanthropic process.”

“Ah-bviously,” Massie confirmed, producing her white iPhone and turning it on.

“You know,” Kendra continued slowly, “we have that open spot on the board—the special event chair position.” She crossed her arms thoughtfully over her silk tunic. “You wouldn’t be interested in chairing the event, would you? It’d be a great experience.”

Claire watched a tiny smile begin to twitch at the corners of Massie’s mouth. “Special event chair” was just a grown-up way of saying “party-planning alpha.” And throwing parties and bossing people around were Massie’s specialties.

“Depends,” Massie replied nonchalantly. “What would my time commitment be?”

“Two board meetings a week, plus party-planning time after school and on weekends for the next two weeks.”

“Press opportunities?”

“The local press is already scheduled.”

“Put calls in to the *Times* Style section and *Vogue*,” Massie advised shrewdly. “This could be way bigger than Channel Five.”

As she talked, Massie’s face slowly began to light up, like she’d just applied a fresh dusting of MAC Belightful highlighting powder. “They do say giving is the new getting,” she pontificated, twirling her purple hair streak around her index finger.

Kendra leaned toward her daughter expectantly.

“I’m in,” Massie decided grandly.

“That’s my girl.” Kendra glowed as her cell buzzed from the black Kate Spade holster on her hip. She reached for it and checked the screen. “Excuse me.” She held her hand up, pressing the phone to her ear and bidding adieu to Claire and Cam as she sauntered out of the closet. “Olga! Tell me you’ve had a cancellation.” She swiftly closed the closet door behind her.

“Did you hear that, Bean?” Massie scooped up her pug from the donations pile and kissed her tiny head, leaving a glossy lip print in her black fur. “I’m going to be on the board of directors for a charity!”

“Are you sure you want to give up all your afternoons and weekends?” Claire fingered a violet silk Chanel blouse as it skimmed by on the rotating rack next to her.

“Why not?” Massie shrugged. “It’s for a good cause . . . and Dempsey is so going to love that I’m doing this.”

That explained it. Dempsey Solomon, Massie’s newest crush, had been on a mission to save the world ever since he and his parents moved back to Westchester from Africa, where they’d been doing charity work of their own. Short of showing up to school with an African orphan peeking out of her Louis handbag, getting involved with a cause was the best way for Massie to capture Dempsey’s attention—and his heart.

Massie glared at the Cookie Monster tote Cam was holding. “That, by the way, is a definite no. These poor people have suffered enough already.”

Claire pulled out a scuffed, camouflaged Ked and the hedge clippers. “We brought a few things to cheer you up.”

“Huh?” Massie’s right ear dropped toward her shoulder.

Cam placed a Patricia Underwood fedora from Massie’s short-lived hat phase on his head. “Yeah. After your other friends ditched you, we thought—”

“Um, we just wanted to make sure you were okay, after everything that . . . happened,” Claire finished awkwardly, dropping the shoe back in her bag.

Massie rolled her eyes. “Puh-lease.” She sighed with a dismissive flick of the wrist. “I’m so over them.” She pinch-lifted a hairy black sweater from the DESIGNERS TO DONATE pile like it was a pair of dirty underwear. “Those girls are like this itchy angora,” she said. “Pretty, but toe-dally not worth the pain.” She tossed the sweater back into the reject pile.

Claire tugged at the hem of her Tomahawks jersey. “But what about the Pretty Comm—”

“Everybody knows PCs are out,” Massie said crisply. “I’m switching to MAC.”

“MAC?” Cam asked.

“Massie and Crew,” she announced. “Which includes me, Claire, and Kristen.”

The knot in Claire’s stomach resurfaced. Massie and Crew? Could she seriously move on this quickly? Forget about the Pretty Committee like they were last season’s resort wear? What if Claire didn’t want to move on? What if she wanted her old group of friends back?

“What about Dylan and Alicia?” Once again, Cam practically read her mind.

“Out,” Massie repeated casually, like she was Heidi Klum and Dylan and Alicia were *Project Runway* castoffs.

Claire swallowed hard. This was all happening way too fast. And she had too many questions running through her mind at once. Did being part of Massie’s new group mean she couldn’t be friends with Dylan and Alicia? Was Massie forcing her to pick?

Cam patted Claire’s shoulder awkwardly, as if sensing her panic. His warm hand comforted her. She straightened up, looking Massie in her amber eyes. If she was going to get through this, she wanted Cam by her side. She took a deep breath. “I want Cam in too,” she declared boldly, the knot in her stomach growing tighter.

“This isn’t an all-you-can-eat buffet, Kuh-laire,” Massie balked. “You can’t just pick and choose.”

Claire opened her mouth, but Massie cut her off.

“Besides, you can’t have a boy-girl crew. It doesn’t work.” She shook her high, glossy brown pony authoritatively.

“Fine by me,” Cam said, looking slightly relieved.

Claire felt her cheeks start to flush. Making mix CDs, agreeing to help with her charity. . . . Cam had gone out of his way to make Massie feel better.

“But—” she started. She put her hands on her hips. Cam took a step backward toward the door.

“Kuh-laire.” Massie leveled her eyes in Claire’s direction. “Is Cam a fattening Girl Scout cookie layered with creamy peanut butter and a chocolate coating?”

“No,” Claire snapped, knowing what was coming.

“Then don’t make him a Tagalong,” Massie finished triumphantly.

“So now I’m a cookie.” Cam looked more confused than ever.

“All I’m saying is, maybe you could be a little more like an elastic waistband.” Claire suggested, yanking at the hem of her jersey. “You know, stretch a little? Maybe if you apologized to Leesh and Dylan—”

“Eh-ma-never.” Anger flickered behind Massie’s amber eyes. “Alicia stole my cheerleading squad. And Dylan stole my Derrington.” She scooped a large pile of silk and knit clothing from the closet floor and secured it underneath her chin. “They’re dead to me. I’m moving on.” Her purple hair streak suddenly lodged in her lip gloss. She spit it out ferociously. “And you have one minute to decide if you’re coming with

me.” She brushed past Cam and stomped out of the closet, a white Chanel blouse stuck to the heel of her boot like silk toilet paper.

“But wait!” Claire called after her. “What does that mean?” She leaned against the closet wall, dizzy. Just seventy-two hours ago, the Pretty Committee had been as tight as Ben and Jerry.

“It means you’re either a PC or a MAC.” Massie whirled around in the doorway and turned to face her.

“Can’t I be both?” Claire focused on the gold-carpeted floor to avoid Cam’s disapproving glare and Massie’s challenging stare.

“Im-possible. PCs and MACs are nawt compatible.” Massie scraped the blouse off her heel and kicked it aside. “At some point everyone has to choose.”

The knot in Claire’s stomach tied its own bow. So she was being asked to pick sides. Her friends or her alpha. It wasn’t a choice Claire was prepared to make.

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