

MY LITTLE PHONY

A CLIQUE NOVEL BY  
LISI HARRISON



**poppy**

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THE BLOCK ESTATE  
THE GUESTHOUSE  
Friday, December 5th  
3:02 P.M.

The ground glistened like Frosted Mini-Wheats. Claire Lyons's fingers were purple. Her Florida-born toes had gone numb before she'd packed her first snowball. And she was fairly certain she had bang-cicles. But the sight of Cara Whitman making a snow angel, Syd Martinez shaking snow off herself like a wet dog, and Layne Abeley eating the bag of carrot noses—it warmed her like July.

Claire stuck one blue-button eye then one green-button eye into the head of her snowman and stood back to admire her work. Her creation wore a green plaid scarf, a long orange nose, and twigs for the arms, and it had a snow-and-mud soccer ball at its feet. "Look, it's a snow-Cam!"

Layne burst out laughing. Little carrot flakes shot out of her mouth. Claire grinned, happy that her friend appreciated the homage to her longtime crush, Cam Fisher, and his different-colored eyes.

"Very avant-garde," Cara said, tucking a loose strand of blond hair under her white mohair cloche hat. Snow covered her belted black military coat, and her L.L. Bean duck boots were soaked clean through.

"Really?" Syd crinkled her pug nose in concentration and turned up the collar on her vintage plaid coat. "I think

if we got a pocket watch and a hair dryer, he'd be pure Dalí."

"I think . . . your snow-Cam is about to get Van Gogh'd!" Cara pulled out Cam's blue eye and pressed it into the side of his cheek.

"Ahhhh!" Claire cried in mock horror. "Get her!"

Instantly the air was filled with flying snowballs as Claire and Syd pelted Cara. After a moment, Cara spun around and lobbed a snow grenade at Claire. She giggle-jumped for cover behind an evergreen shrub, then peeked out to see Layne and Cara shaking a branch over Syd's head.

Syd and Cara, Layne's ninth-grade community theater friends, were the smartest girls Claire knew. She'd been hanging out with them for the past three weeks and had loved every second of it. With them, it was about *culture*, not *couture*, and they cared more about fun than fashion. The four of them had gone Thanksgiving caroling and had made gingerbread cookies shaped like little Claires, Laynes, Syds, and Caras. After being under Massie's tight rein for the past year, Claire found hanging out with Syd and Cara as comfortable as her favorite Old Navy striped sweats.

She crept out from behind the bush, fixed Cam's eye, and stuck it back in place.

"Et ezz peek-ture purrrr-fect," Syd said, stealing Claire's silver ELPH out of her coat pocket. She circled the snowman, snapping pictures. "I see zis as zee centerfold for *Snowteen Magazine!*" she said. "Bee-yoo-tiful, darling! Now, give me more, more, MORE. Now, less!"

Claire laughed until her sides hurt. Syd sounded like Luc Coulotte, the artist Massie always hired to paint Bean's birthday portraits.

Another snowball whizzed past her head and hit the barn's front door. As Claire watched it fly by, her eyes landed on the four sets of designer boot prints leading to the GLU headquarters, along with a tiny pair of dog-sized tracks. Just a few weeks ago, Claire's own square boot prints would have been right there next to them. But now, even though she stood only a few feet away from her former friends, she might as well have been back in her hometown of Kissimmee, Florida.

A few weeks before, Massie had launched a mission to get Claire and the rest of the PC to upgrade from their eighth-grade crushes to crushes in ninth. And when Claire had refused, their friendship had crash-landed—hard. But it wasn't until she had caught Claire karaokeing with her new friends that Massie had declared war.

Since then, things between the two of them had been icier than the Blocks' swimming pool in winter. And although Claire had IM'd with Kristen, Alicia, and Dylan over Thanksgiving break, she hadn't seen the girls, been invited to a sleepover, or been awarded any gossip points. But every time she felt a pang of Massie-itis, Claire reminded herself that Massie's friendship was like an Hermès Kelly bag: rare and beautiful, but it came at way too high a price.

Claire didn't know why Massie needed to control her friends, but she did know she was sick of being bossed around. In seventh grade she probably would have gone crawling back

to Massie and begged her forgiveness. But that was more than a year ago. She was already three months into eighth grade, and she planned to spend the rest of the year having no drama with her new drama friends.

“I’m going to make a snow Robert Pattinson!” Cara exclaimed, gathering piles of snow with her arms. “Just think how beee-yooooo-ti-fully he’ll sparkle in the sun.”

“Won’t that make Doug jealous?” Syd asked. Cara’s boyfriend, Doug, was the bassist in a band called Smells Like Uncle Hugh. They lip-kissed *all* the time—even in public.

“Jealousy is healthy in a relationship. When jealousy dies, passion dies,” Cara said, kneeling to pack the bottom globe of the snowvamp. “I read it on the bathroom wall at school.”

Claire felt a ping of jealousy herself. All the OCD bathroom walls said were things like *KATIE WAS HERE OR YOU’RE UGLY!*

“Me-ladies!” Todd emerged from the barn, his eyes lit up like the white Christmas lights strung around the Blocks’ windows. He wore a baby blue cashmere hat with earflaps and tassels. Claire frowned. The hat was totally cute but totally girly.

Tiny Nathan bobbed behind him, balancing a tray of hot chocolates. He held them out with a shaky flourish. “They’re from Massie.”

Claire wasn’t sure what the gesture meant. Was it a truce in the name of the Christmas spirit? Or were they venti-sized cups of steaming cat pee?

Cara, Syd, and Claire inched cautiously toward the offering.

“Hmmm.” Layne lifted a cup to the sun and examined the bottom. She shoved it toward Todd. “You try it first.”

Tiny Nathan snort-laughed as Todd took a big gulp. “He’ll do anything a girl asks him to!”

“All clear,” Todd announced, licking whipped cream off his lips.

The other girls shrugged and grabbed their cups.

“Wanna know what else he’ll do?” Tiny Nathan pressed.

“Not really.” Claire rolled her eyes, suddenly mortified that her older friends were being forced to hang with her younger brother.

“Okayyyy,” Tiny Nathan beamed. “You asked for it!”

“No, they didn’t.” Todd stepped back. But it was too late. Nathan jumped up like an anxious puppy and managed to grab hold of a blue tassel. He yanked twice. The hat slid off Todd’s slick head and landed on the snow with a muted thud.

“You’re bald!” Claire shouted.

Layne laughed so hard, hot chocolate sprayed from her nose. “You look like a Tootsie Pop.”

“Thanks,” Todd beamed, and then curled his fist under his chin and struck a thinking-man pose. “Massie did it. She says my skull is my best feature.”

“She got that right,” Syd joked.

“Even my snow-Cam has more hair than you!” Claire pointed to the little evergreen pine needles poking out the top of its head.

Layne clasped her hands together like a caroler and began to sing. “Frossssty the bald man . . .”

“Had a jolly, shiny skull!” Cara added.

Syd threw her arm around Cara. “With an earflapped hat and a button nose and two eyes made out of . . .”

Claire stared at her transformed little brother, rage fizzing through her veins like shaken Coke Zero. But was it really anger . . . or jealousy? She used to love getting a Massie makeover.

Todd slapped his bald head. “Oh! I almost forgot.” He picked the hat off the snow-covered ground. “Massie said this was for you.”

Claire stared at it, her heart pounding as she went through another loop on the roller coaster that was life with Massie Block. First the hot chocolate, now this. The muscles in her hands were dying to reach out and grab the hat. To rush the barn and throw her arms around Massie and ask if the hat—a soft, stretchy cashmere—meant that they were finally going to make up. That Massie was finally going to be more flexible and let Claire make her own decisions. But her memory ordered her impulses to sit this one out. Could the girl who forbade her to eat processed sugar, hang out with Cam on a Friday night, or sit with Layne at lunch suddenly be open to change? Yeah, maybe. When Gwen Stefani tans.

Claire glanced at the barn. A familiar pair of amber eyes stared back at her from the window. Massie smiled sweetly and motioned for Claire to take the hat. Was it possible? Was Gwen was on a yacht in St. Barts slathering on the Hawaiian Tropic oil?

*Stranger things have happened*, she thought. *Like . . . well . . .*

Actually, Claire couldn't think of anything at the moment. She was distracted by her tingling feet, which were finally thawing with the hope of reconciliation. It had been weeks since the girls had even acknowledged each other. And a part of Claire had been numb ever since.

She studied the hat. It was soft and pale blue, the same color as her own cornflower blue eyes. She had to hand it to the alpha: When it came to knowing what looked good on people, the girl had more vision than Bausch & Lomb.

She put it on. It fit perfectly and warmed the tips of her ears. As she tied the tassels under her chin, the Massie-shaped ice block around her heart began to melt.

"It looks adorbs," Cara said.

"Totally you," Syd pronounced.

Claire grinned. She looked at the window and raised her hand to wave her thanks, but Massie was gone.

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