

DIAL L FOR LOSER

A CLIQUE NOVEL BY
LISI HARRISON



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THE WESTCHESTER MALL

STARBUCKS

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10:30 A.M.

On their first school-free morning, the Pretty Committee gathered at Starbucks in the Westchester Mall and drank to their expulsion from Octavian Country Day.

“To Principal Burns and Mr. Myner.” Massie Block lifted her low-fat sugar-free iced vanilla crème.

Claire Lyons folded her arms across her chest while Alicia Rivera, Dylan Marvil, and Kristen Gregory raised their white cardboard cups. It was her first winter away from Florida and she was still adjusting to the cold. Her lips were so chapped it looked like she had been making out with the zipper of her puffy blue jacket.

“Hello?” Alicia widened her brown eyes and glared at Claire’s Chantico drinking chocolate, which was still on the table.

“Oops, sorry.” Claire immediately scooped up the offending beverage and held it high.

Massie nodded in approval, then continued.

“To Principal Burns and Mr. Myner: Thank you for kicking us out of OCD.” Her amber eyes flickered with delight. “From this day forward, stores are the new classrooms. Salespeople are the new teachers. Food courts are the new cafeterias. And Visas are the new seventh-grade ID cards.”

“Ayyy-men!” Alicia hooted.

“Ayyy-men!” echoed the others.

“Jinx!” Claire giggled for the first time since she had been expelled.

The girls looked at one another, then snickered into their palms.

They were wearing what Claire and her best friend, Layne, secretly referred to as “black-tie sweats”—those velvety, two-hundred-dollar tracksuits that Massie described as “casual-cute.” Claire, on the other hand, was “casual-casual” in a long-sleeved red tee and the nail-polish-stained Citizens of Humanity jeans she’d “borrowed” from OCD’s lost-and-found before Christmas break.

“What?” Her heart started to race. “Don’t you say ‘jinx’ here? Is it a Florida thing? I could teach it to you.”

Massie knit her freshly waxed eyebrows. “Silly rabbit, *jinx* is for kids.”

Everyone snickered again.

“Should we tell her?” Alicia asked.

Claire’s cheeks warmed.

“Sure, whatevs.” Massie shrugged.

“Jinx is so second grade,” Alicia explained. “We’re all about apple-C now.”

“Oh, okay.” Claire used her thanks-that-really-clears-things-up-for-me tone, hoping they could fast-forward to something that didn’t make her feel like a foreign-exchange student.

Kristen sighed. “Apple-C is the keystroke on a Mac that—”

“I know.” Claire suddenly got it. “It’s the shortcut for *copy*, so you say it when someone is copying you.” She would have finished with a *duh* but if *jinx* was second grade, *duh* was probably pre-K.

“Moving on.” Massie jiggled the mountain of ice inside her plastic cup. “Here’s to the Pretty Committee and the endless shoppportunities that lie ahead.”

“To the Pretty Committee and the endless shoppportunities that lie ahead.” The girls clinked, then drank.

“Apple-C!” Claire practically shot out of her seat.

“That was a toast, Kuh-laire.” Massie rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t count.”

“Oh.” Claire gulped her hot chocolate, accepting the burn on her tongue as punishment for being so stupid.

It had been six months since her family moved from Orlando to Westchester. Six months of living on the Blocks’ estate, and six months of proving herself to the Pretty Committee. Finally, Claire was an official member, with an exclusive standing invitation to sleepovers, shopping trips, and five-way calls. But no matter how much fun the girls had together, she would wake up the next morning and need to impress them all over again. It was as if their leave-in conditioners seeped into their hair follicles while they slept and clogged their brains, permanently erasing “cool Claire” from their memories. There had to be *something*

she could do to earn their full-time respect—but what? The more she tried to figure it out, the more elusive the answer became.

“We’re living the American dream!” Dylan poked her finger though the creamy swirl on her caramel macchiato.

“Maybe *you* are,” Kristen huffed. “But for *me*, this is a nightmare.” She slammed her complimentary tap water on the table, ignoring the splash.

“I hear ya!” Claire gushed. “This place is so expensive they should call it Sixbucks. I’d much rather be in the OCD cafeteria. I’m over the Westchester.”

“Ehmagawd!” Kristen recoiled. “Seriously?”

Claire stiffened, hating herself for saying the wrong thing—*again*. How could she have expected them to understand that at the mall she was just the new chick with a bad haircut, an empty wallet, and last year’s jeans? But at school she was the mysterious outsider who, against all odds, had been accepted into the Pretty Committee. And that made her special.

“That was a joke, right?” Massie looked deep into Claire’s eyes, silently urging her to take it all back. “You don’t really want to be back at OCD, do you?”

“Of course not.” She forced a huge smile. “This . . .” She opened her arms and turned to face the mall. “. . . is a total fantasy!” Claire silently thanked her parents for giving her three years of community theater acting lessons.

“I would *love* to share said fantasy.” Kristen sighed. “But I have to do *this*.” Her biceps twitched as she lifted the

black Prada messenger bag the girls had bought her for her twelfth birthday. She turned it upside down and an avalanche of textbooks tumbled out. *A History of Western Philosophy*, *Philosophy Made Simple*, *Philosophy for Dummies*, and *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* were among the titles.

Everyone stared.

“My mom is forcing me to study philosophy until I’m back at school,” Kristen explained. “She wants me to figure out the meaning of life so I’ll know exactly what I’m throwing away.” Her blue eyes began to fill with tears. “Her words, not mine.”

“She’s probably mad because you lied.” Alicia lifted a steaming cup of Sumatra to her glossy, light pink mouth.

Kristen sniffled. “What was I supposed to do? Miss out on our first boy-girl field trip because my parents couldn’t afford it? Puh-lease!”

“You told them you were going away with your soccer team, then hopped a bus to Lake Placid.” Alicia pinched off a piece of her low-fat blueberry muffin. “And while you were there, you got expelled *and* lost your scholarship.”

“Yeah, I saw that episode,” Kristen hissed. “No need for the recap.”

Massie put an arm around her and gave her a loving squeeze. “I thought it was very brave.”

“Me too.” Alicia grinned.

“Same,” Dylan added.

Kristen tugged a chunk of her short blond hair. “Why does it seem like I’m the only one who got punished?”

“Because you are,” Dylan smirked. “My mom *can’t* be mad at me. This whole thing is her fault. If she hadn’t been hooking up with Mr. Myner in Lake Placid, I never would have run away. You guys never would have chased after me, we never would have gotten lost in the woods, and we’d be napping in science lab right now.”

“Well, *I* got punished.” Claire slouched. “My dad woke me up at six thirty a.m. this morning and made me shower and get dressed, like I was going to school.”

The girls made pouty frowns to show how sorry they felt about Claire having been denied her beauty rest.

“Then,” she continued, “at exactly seven thirty I had to go out in the cold and stand by the Range Rover for five minutes and act like I was waiting for Isaac to carpool me.”

“Seriously?” Dylan’s green eyes were wide with disbelief.

“Yup. And the worst part was . . .” Claire pointed to Massie. “. . . *your* bedroom light was still off.”

Massie accepted a congratulatory round of high fives.

“That’s not all.” Claire leaned forward. “My dad asked Layne to e-mail me our homework. I have to do it all. Every night! And that’s the only time I can use my computer. Which, by the way, he moved into the kitchen.”

Everyone gasped.

“But the worst part is, I can’t ride my bike to Cam’s, and I haven’t seen him since Lake Placid.” She paused to count on her fingers. “That was five days ago!”

“He’s a guy.” Alicia tossed her long black hair. “Make him come to you. It’s less pathetic.”

Claire ignored the jab. “He’s not allowed. No visitors until I’m back in school. Not even Layne.”

“Well, I can do whatever I want,” Massie smirked. “As long as I prove it’s educational.”

“How is shopping *educational*?” Kristen asked.

“Figuring out my change is math. And speaking to you is English.”

Kristen rolled her eyes.

“If the school board doesn’t let us back in, my dad’s gonna sue,” Alicia announced.

“When are they meeting?” Claire asked eagerly.

“April second.”

“They better change their minds.” Kristen ripped her crumpled napkin. “Or I’m getting homeschooled.”

“I don’t care if we don’t go back.” Massie glossed her lips with Baby Aspirin—the latest delivery from Gossip Girl. “I want to try boarding school in Switzerland.”

“Me too.” Alicia nodded.

“Ehmagawd, same!” Dylan sounded utterly shocked by the coincidence.

“Well, I’ll be going to Abner Doubleday Day,” Claire moaned.

“*Ew!*” Alicia gasped. “Public school?”

Claire nodded slowly.

Alicia checked over her shoulder, leaned forward, and whispered, “ADD is full of juvenile delinquents who steal your lunch, then force you to buy it back for a hundred dollars.”

The thought of fighting her way to the top—again—made Claire shudder twice.

“They hate private-school girls there. They think we’re spoiled.”

“What do they know?” Dylan pushed back her cuticles with the corner of her American Express gold card.

“Zzzzzzzz,” Massie fake-snored. “Can we puh-lease go shopping now?”

“Given!” Alicia clapped.

“I’ll be here studying.” Kristen moped. “I’m getting quizzed tonight on Socrates.”

“We’ll pick you up on our way out.” Massie reached into her burgundy leather wallet, pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, and tossed it on the table. “For me, the meaning of life is a Frappuccino and a cinnamon biscotti. Study *that*.”

“Thanks!” Kristen beamed.

The girls pushed back from the table and threw their bags over their shoulders. Claire waved goodbye to Kristen, then followed Massie, Alicia, and Dylan into the bright atrium.

“Let’s go to Juicy,” Dylan suggested.

“No,” Alicia whined. “Neiman’s.”

“Let’s start at BCBG and we’ll work our way left,” Massie insisted. “Don’t worry, we won’t miss a single store.”

Claire stuffed her hands in her empty pockets and yawned. Her parents didn’t need to ground her for getting expelled. Being sentenced to a lifetime at the mall was punishment enough.

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