

THE CLIQUE

SUMMER COLLECTION



MASSIE

A CLIQUE NOVEL BY
LISI HARRISON



poppy

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
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GALWAUGH FARMS SLEEPAWAY RIDING CAMP

HORSE STALL A

Monday, June 8

8:15 A.M.

The morning sun felt like a spotlight. It cast a thick yellow beam through the window in Brownie's humid, hay-filled stall, illuminating the white horse and blinding his owner. But Massie Block didn't mind one bit. She was used to the glare of the spotlight. She craved it. Chased it. Dressed for it. Basking in its warmth kept her alive. Yet today, the spotlight was threatening to shine on someone else. And Massie wanted to die.

She lowered her tortoiseshell Dior glasses and snapped a purple glitter hair elastic around the bottom of Brownie's foot-long mane braid. His intricate hairstyle, aubergine satin blinders, and gold glitter mascara were sure to impress the judges of the Galwaugh Farms Jump and Canter Competition and, more important, the editor of *Horse & Rider*.

For the first time in the equestrian magazine's history, the winning captain of the Galwaugh Farms' JACC would be featured on the glossy cover of its September issue. And what better way to kick off eighth grade at OCD than with a beautifully airbrushed alpha portrait?

Pop!

Massie jumped. The sound of her teammate Jacqueline Dyer popping Forever Fruit Stride gum between her overbleached teeth was unnerving.

“J, can you puh-lease stop that!” Massie hissed at the dark brown wood stall wall between them. “You’re scaring Brownie.”

“Sah-rreee,” Jacqueline called, her nasal voice slightly higher than usual. “It’s a nervous thing.”

“What are you so nervous about?” Massie asked, already knowing the answer. She tucked her black-and-gold Hermès cravat into the sharp V of her velvet riding vest, even though it was perfectly tucked already. It was all she could do to keep from stress-biting the black tips off her not-so-French French manicure. “Those blue ribbons have Galwaugh Goddesses written all over them.”

“Unless the Mane Mamas take *first*,” Whitney Bennett chimed in from behind the opposite wall.

“Impossible!” Massie barked at her summer best friends. “We win JACC every year.” As team captain it was her job to keep everyone positive, even when things seemed utterly hopeless.

“Yeah, but we never had Fall-a Abdul on our team.” Jacqueline set off a round of gum pops that made Brownie’s gold lashes flutter in panic.

“Stop *calling* me that,” Selma Gallman whined from the other side of the stable wall. “I told you, I got an inner-ear infection from swimming in the lake yesterday. And that’s why I keep falling. My balance is off.”

“What was your excuse last week?” Massie marched out of her stall and straight into Selma’s. “Or the week before?”

She was through with the calm, confident leader act. She

lifted her Diors and glared into Selma's heavy-lidded mud-brown eyes.

"Thanks to your *ear*, my six-year winning streak is in major jeopardy." Massie's voice trembled. A vision of the highly decorated "Wins Wall" in her bedroom—between the bay window and the walk-in closet—flashed before her. It had just enough room for one last ribbon and a framed cover of *Horse & Rider*. And the thought of that space staying empty filled her amber eyes with salty pre-tears. Not only for her. Or for the Galwaugh Goddesses. But for Brownie's elegant hairstyle and all of his hard practicing.

For three exhausting weeks, Massie had focused on victory as a way to put the nightmarish end of seventh grade behind her: The Pretty Committee, with help from Layne Abeley, had accidentally punctured Briarwood's rooftop wave pool, causing the whole thing to leak and collapse, flooding the boys' school. As a result, the ex-crushes were months away from invading OCD and threatening Massie's alpha status. Add in a summer away from her best friends—Dylan spa-ing in Hawaii, Alicia partying with her cousins on the Costa del Sol in Spain, Kristin tutoring spoiled brats in Westchester, and Claire reuniting with her old Orlan-dull buddies back in Florida—and ruling Galwaugh Farms' exclusive riding camp was the only way to keep from snot-sobbing herself to sleep at night.

Glancing out the window, Massie tried to distract herself to keep from losing her cool. But the sight of junior campers, staff members, parents, and local reporters making their way

to the dirt-paved arena only upset her more. The only thing worse than losing was losing in public. And thanks to Selma, she was minutes away from both.

The familiar smell of Jacqueline's citrus-scented gum and Whitney's flowery freesia hoof 'n' nail cream enveloped her. Her girls were standing beside her now in solidarity, shooting how-could-you-be-so-lame rays at Selma and Latte—her carrot-farting steed.

Whitney scraped her riding crop against the scrubbed concrete. "How *did* you qualify for our team, anyway?"

"Does it matter?" Selma took her fleshy pink hand off her cocoa horse's buttock and placed it on her own lumpy hip. "I thought the whole point of riding was to have fun."

"No, Sel-muh." Massie kicked a haystack with her black Hermès riding boots. "The whole point of riding is to win. The *fun* part is laughing at the losers."

Selma opened her heart-shaped mouth to respond but was cut off by Alessandro, their award-winning groom.

"A good-luck gift for youuuu," he announced in his sing-songy European accent.

Everyone turned to face the tall fortysomething man bounding toward them in an ivory linen suit and black Gucci loafers. He had four enormous silver gift bags swinging from the mini-biceps on his hooked fingers.

"Enjoyyyyy." Alessandro smiled proudly, deepening the Botox-thirsty smile lines that fanned out from the corners of his dark eyes. His black hair was parted neatly at the side and plastered across his forehead with cherry-scented

pomade. He gave each girl a bag, then stepped back to witness the joy.

Massie offered Alessandro a courteous pre-thank-you smile. But it was fake. Unless the bag contained the secret to keeping Selma on her saddle during the competition, its contents were meaningless.

“Toooo cuh-yoot.” Jacqueline held up a delicious caramel leather saddle with a big *J* hand-stitched in scarlet thread across the seat. Its dangling stirrups were studded with tiny red horseshoes for luck.

“I second that.” Whitney kissed her scarlet *W*, leaving behind a glossy soft pink lip print.

“Third.” Selma held up three fingers.

Massie rolled her eyes as Selma fought to position her new saddle on Latte, the pink elastic band on her loose cotton underwear oozing out the top of her jodhpurs as she struggled with her straddle-mount.

“Hey, Elizabeth Hassel-buuutt,” Massie snickered. “Stop torturing us with *The View!*”

“Whoa!” Whitney blurted, just like she always did when someone said something most people would simply laugh at.

Jacqueline giggled into the big yellow bubble she was blowing. It popped against her wide smile.

“Latte’s skin is oily,” Selma responded defensively. Her shifty eyes bore into the groom, scorching him with blame. “He wasn’t greasy *before* camp started.”

Alessandro patted his ultra-smooth side part. “With all due respect, Ms. Gallman, I have been show-grooming for

twenty-seven years, and I have never been accused of *oily animal*. Not even during my stint with the seal theater at Sea World.” He took off his ivory linen jacket and folded it across one arm, smoothing out the heat-creased sleeves with intense concentration. “Now open your gift,” he urged Massie.

“Why?” She flattened the saddlebags on her olive jodhpurs. “I already know what it is.”

“Yes, my dear captain.” He playfully flicked the metallic bag with his buffed fingernail. “But yours is special.”

Special? Massie felt her lips curl into a soft grin. She was a sucker for that word.

She lifted the silver tissue out of the bag and stuffed it in a hanging copper bucket marked GUM RAPPERS that had been incorrectly spelled by Jacqueline in Paint-The-Town-Red nail polish. Massie hadn’t bothered to correct her.

“What’s this?” Massie examined the new butterscotch-colored monogrammed saddle. A gold arm was fixed to the left of the cantle. She pushed the button at its base and out popped a gleaming round side-view mirror.

“To check the competition?” Whitney crinkled her freckle-dusted nose.

“No.” Alessandro beamed. “The gloss.”

“Whoa!” Whitney cupped the tight blond bun on the back of her head.

Massie stood on her tiptoes and threw her arms around the groom. Her vision fogged—a mix of joyous tears and a reaction to the pungent smell of his spicy deodorant. He was like the human form of comfort food. After three try-

ing weeks with Sel-muh, this was just the pick-me-up she needed.

“Now these . . .” Jacqueline hurried to her stall and quickly returned with an armful of black velvet helmets. “I had our team name inscribed on the backs.”

Massie reached for hers. Funny how ah-dorable accessories had a way of lightening even the darkest of times.

“Wait, what is *this*?” She stared at the swirling red-stitched letters that spelled *Galwaugh Girls*.

“Aren’t they sweet?” Jacqueline asked as she happily handed out the rest.

“But we’re the Galwaugh *Goddesses*! And have been for six summers.” Massie picked at the thread to see if it was removable.

It wasn’t.

Jacqueline pulled one of her tight black curls, then released it, sending it boinging back into place above her shoulder “I couldn’t fit ‘Goddesses’ on the back,” she explained. “It was too long.”

“So is this day.” Massie tucked a glossy strand of chestnut hair into her unsightly (but mandatory) hair net, and fastened the leather strap on her helmet with an angry snap.

Just then Lill piped in over the camp loudspeaker in her shaky old-lady voice. “Galwaugh Farms’ fifty-seventh annual JACC is about to commence. Spectators, take your seats. Riders, mount your horses,” instructed the head equestrian.

The Galwaugh Girls squealed with nervous delight while Massie prayed.

Instead of thanking Gawd for the usual—her ah-mazing teammates, their trusted horses, and their guaranteed spot in the winner’s circle—she looked up at the dark wood rafters and stuck out her tongue. *That’s for sending me Selma.*

“It’s showtime.” Alessandro clapped. “Everyone in formation—Whitney, Selma, Jacqueline, then Captain Massie in the rear.”

“Massie in the *rear*,” Whitney, Jacqueline, and Massie all repeated in a fit of laughter, just like they did every year when their groom called their procession order.

Selma rolled her droopy eyes.

“Chip-chip!” Alessandro barked his Euro version of “chop-chop” while swatting at a circling fly.

Without another word, the girls speed-glossed, buttoned their black velvet blazers, and reached for the brown suede reins on their gold-dusted horses.

Once outside, they climbed into their new saddles and joined the silent ceremonial parade of sixteen riders down the lush tree-lined path toward the arena. Galwaugh Farms had over a hundred acres of winding trails and grassy meadows, but the exclusive riding camp was on the north side of Hunter Lake, where Massie had met her on-again, off-again crush Chris Abeley almost a year ago.

The collective clip-clopping of horseshoes against the gravel synched with the rhythm of Massie’s speeding heartbeat, delivering a hint of harmony to a situation that had been stressing her out for days. She took, deep cleansing breaths: *Inthrougthenose . . . aaaaand . . . outthrougthemouth . . .*

The fresh, leafy smell of a new summer and the familiar bobbing of her A-cups calmed her. Casually, she sneaked a peek at the competition in her new side-mirror. None of the other girls had coordinated helmets or saddles. Some had pimped their rides, but the yellow tulip tiara on Aspen's over-size white head and the pink polka-dot bow in Lightfoot's tangled locks were no challenge for Massie and her sparkling Galwaugh Girls. They would clean up in the style category. And surely *her* score would elevate Selma's, so . . .

A round of flashbulbs went off as they entered the holding ring—a circular pen with a sliding metal gate that led to the hurdle-filled arena. Local reporters and family members clung to the guardrails shouting good-luck wishes to their favorite riders. Massie's parents were preparing for a charity party at their house in Southampton and couldn't make it. Which was fine. Parents could be so distracting, and she had more important things to worry about.

"Over here!" called a chubby redheaded woman wearing a hunter green visor with the iconic *Horse & Rider* Clydesdale printed on the brim.

More important things, like her *Horse & Rider* cover.

Massie offered the reporter a winning grin. But before she could remove the lens cap from her Nikon, Brownie stopped suddenly, jerking Massie forward and ruining her photo op.

"Whoa!" Whitney hollered, slapping one white-gloved hand over her glossy mouth and pointing to the ground with the other.

Massie gasped.

Selma was on the ground, rolling across the dusty ring like

a wayward clump of tumbleweed stuffed in tight, oat-colored jodhpurs.

A team of medics raced toward her crumpled form.

Spectators stood. Cameras clicked. The Mane Mamas, the Giddy-Ups, and the Hot2Trots snickered. Latte stood in place, looking a little embarrassed for his rider.

Massie squeezed her suede reins until her knuckles turned white. “We’re so done,” she muttered, angling her body so the reporter couldn’t capture her panic-sweaty forehead.

“I know what she needs.” Jacqueline spit a wad of sticky yellow gum into her glove and chucked it onto Selma’s saddle. “That should hold her for a while.”

“Very funny,” Selma said as two overdenimed female stable hands lifted her back up. She flicked the gum away with a ragged-cuticled fingertip.

Whitney and Jacqueline snickered into their white-gloved hands.

Massie wanted to laugh with the rest of her teammates but couldn’t. There was no time. Her reputation, her ribbon, and her magazine cover were about to ride off into the sunset and leave her in the dirt—just like Jacqueline’s chewed-up sticky wad of Forever Fruit Stride. Just like Selma’s dust-covered behind every time she mounted Latte.

Unless . . .

“I forgot Brownie’s face mist,” Massie announced as she leaned left and tugged on his reins. “Be right back!”

“Whoa! Where are you going?” Whitney called as her captain charged toward the exit.

Alessandro urged Massie to stop—the competition was about to begin—but she ignored him. Seconds later she was tearing down the deserted trail: butt lifted, knees bent, and abs tight, two words propelling her forward—the same two words that gave her life meaning:

Number and one.

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