

THE
Popularity Pact
**SCHOOL
SQUAD**
BOOK TWO

Eileen Moskowitz-Palma





For my father, the tough fire captain who wasn't afraid to take me prom dress shopping

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Running Press Kids
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
www.runningpress.com/rpkids
@RP_Kids

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: October 2020

Published by Running Press Kids, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Running Press Kids name and logo is a trademark of the Hachette Book Group.

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Print book cover and interior design by Marissa Raybuck.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019946931

ISBNs: 978-0-7624-6750-1 (hardcover), 978-0-7624-6747-1 (ebook)

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✂️ CHAPTER ONE ✂️

BEA

“I NEVER WANT TO GET OFF THIS BUS.” I WATCHED THE LAST

Burger King before the Mapleton exit pass by in a swirl of red and orange, the rich scent of greasy burgers and salty fries wafting through the open window.

Maisy focused her eyes on me. “It’s going to be okay,” she said.

I broke her gaze and looked down at my thighs. They were covered with so many freckle constellations, I almost looked tan. “Things are about as far from okay as you can get. My dad’s replacing my mom and me with new and improved models. My mom’s dating our old math teacher, and I’m about to start middle school with zero friends.”

“That last part’s not true,” Maisy said, as she held out a practically empty bag of Sour Patch Kids. “You have me.”



I popped a yellow candy in my mouth and felt the sour sugar crystals burn my tongue before the candy turned sweet.

"I can't expect you to give up the popular table for me," I said midchew. "So, if you want me, I'll be eating tuna sandwiches alone in the library."

"Tuna?" Maisy scrunched up her face. "No wonder no one wanted to sit with you."

"It's not funny. School starts in two days and I'm going to be just as invisible as I was last year," I moaned.

"You held up your end of the pact and made me, the least athletic and most anxious girl at adventure camp, popular. Now it's *my* turn to make *you* popular at school."

"How did I ever think we could pull this off?" I asked. "How could I ever fit in with the M & Ms?" The bus pulled off the highway onto the red maple tree-lined street that ran through the center of Mapleton. The other campers laughed and talked as if the end of the summer wasn't descending upon us like an apocalyptic plague. They may have been sad to say goodbye to the summer, but clearly they all had friends back home they were eager to see.

"We just need to come up with another plan," Maisy said. "So, put that freakishly big brain of yours to work."

I grabbed the last Sour Patch Kid. "I've got nothing."

Maisy licked her finger and ran it along the inside of the bag. "Let's list all the things we know about the situation. My dad says



to do that when I'm stuck on a word problem, which is pretty much every time I do math homework."

"There's unpopular, and then there's the level below unpopular, where you're so invisible, you aren't on anyone's radar to merit the label unpopular. That's what we're working with."

Maisy rolled her eyes. "And you call me dramatic?"

"Fine, I'll play along." I cleared my throat. "Here are the known variables. Having the right friend group is the key to middle school survival. If I can get in with the M & Ms, I won't have to spend the school year hiding in the bathroom during free periods."

Maisy nodded. "We also know the M & Ms are always out for themselves."

"Exactly." I sighed. "Why would they help *me*?"

"We just need to figure out what's in it for them," said Maisy. "There must be something they could get out of being friends with you."

But I couldn't think of one thing those girls needed, especially Mia, whose popularity was matched by her Queen Bee wardrobe. I thought about Madeline with her gel manis and hair even Beyoncé would envy. Then there were Meghan and Madison, who had the kind of friendship born of having moms who were lifelong best friends. Having a person who is more family than friend is the kind of safety net that can make the difference between middle school survival and failure. Let's not forget Chloe Bradford-Fuller, who



had swooped in and snatched up the spot in the group Maisy had carved out for me. These girls had everything I wanted. What could I possibly give them?

Maisy whipped her hair into a french braid at record speed. Anytime Maisy is freaking out, she plays with her hair, so this was a surefire sign she wasn't as confident about our strategizing as she was letting on.

"We need to figure out something they might want. Make them realize they want it. Then, convince them you're the only person who can give it to them," Maisy said, as she wrapped a rubber band around the bottom of her braid.

"That's genius." I stared at Maisy. "But what could I possibly give the girls who have everything?"

MAISY

As the bus thumped over the speed bumps in the parking lot, my heart pounded. I was acting calm for Bea, but the closer we got to our real life back home, the more anxious I felt.

It wasn't just about holding up my end of the pact. I needed to make up for ditching Bea last year and ruining her life. I needed to give her the one thing she wanted — a friend group at school, just like she has at camp.





"Mapleton girls!" Bob, our bus driver, called to the back. "This is your stop! Don't leave any garbage behind!"

I shoved the empty chip bags, candy wrappers, and deflated Capri Sun pouches into my bag. Bea and I stood up and brushed the Dorito crumbs and Sour Patch Kids dust off our shorts and grabbed our drawstring bags.

As I walked past the other kids, I heard another bus pull into the parking lot. I leaned out the window to get a closer look.

Bob growled, "Let's go, girls! I still got two more states to drive through today!"

I hurried down the aisle. The parking lot was filled with parents. I put my hand over my eyes to block out the sun and looked around but didn't see Dad or Bea's mom.

"We're the only two kids getting picked up from Camp Amelia," I said. "Why are all these other parents here?"

"This is where all the camps have drop-offs."

Bea sighed as our bus pulled onto the main road. "Just like that. Our summer is over."

"Not true." I dumped my duffel bag down on the hot blacktop. "We still have two days before school starts to figure out our plan."

"There won't be a plan if I can't think of something I can give the M & Ms," Bea said, just as another yellow bus rumbled across the parking lot and pulled up in front of us.

As soon as the bus door opened sweaty boy smell hit us. It was





even worse than the time Addy left a pile of dirty leotards in the back of our minivan during a heat wave.

Bea wrinkled her nose. "You thought I had questionable hygiene at camp when I counted swimming in the lake as my shower? You haven't been around when the Scouts get back from their annual camping trip. We're talking about seventh-grade boys running around the woods for two weeks without running water or soap."

I shuddered. "We are so lucky we don't have brothers."

Bea squished up her whole face. "Agreed."

"That smell, though." I tried not to breathe through my nose. "It's like moldy cheese, feet . . . and . . ."

Bea gagged. "Rotten garbage."

I felt a dry heave coming on. "Ugh. That's it."

Bea grabbed my arm and pulled me a few steps back. "Let's give them a wide berth."

"Why do you always have to use big words?" I dragged my stuff back far enough so we could check out the guys without smelling them.

"It's called reading." Bea smirked. "You should try it sometime."

"You are sooo funny," I said.

Marshall Cooper was the first guy off the bus. With his thick glasses strapped around his greasy hair, his dirt-streaked Mapleton School Chess Club T-shirt over cargo shorts, and bright orange Crocs, he could've been cast in any eighties remake as head of the nerd herd.



“Things could be worse.” I jerked my head toward the bus as another grubby geek walked off and said, “You could be one of those guys.”

Bea shrugged. “At least they have their place in the world.”

I rolled my eyes, even though she was right. “We literally just got off the bus. Give me a chance to come up with a new plan before you have a nervous breakdown.”

Suddenly, a bright ray of sunshine broke through the fluffy white clouds and shone down on the bus steps. Clark Rutner stepped into the light like a superhero in a Marvel movie. He had gotten teenager tall over the summer, and his tan arms were thick with actual muscles. His red Mapleton Scouts Troop 523 T-shirt stretched across his wide chest. He had grown out his sun-streaked blond hair from a babyish crewcut into a longish surfer-boy hairstyle.

I knocked Bea’s arm with my elbow and hissed, “OMG! Do you know what’s happening here?”

“Ow!” Bea rubbed her arm. “What? What’s happening?”

“Sometimes I wonder how someone *so* smart could be *so* dumb,” I whispered. “We are getting the first look at Mapleton Middle School’s Summer Glow Up.”

Bea wrinkled her forehead and practically shouted, “What the heck is a Glow Up?”

“Keep your voice down,” I whispered. “It’s when someone goes from the awkward, ugly stage to super cute overnight.”

“Oh, now I get it.” Bea nodded slowly. “I’m pretty sure Hans Christian Andersen invented that.”

“Who?”

Bea threw her hands up. “‘The Ugly Duckling’?”

Before I could answer her, Clark turned toward us and smiled. His teeth were bright white and perfect, like a row of peppermint Orbit gum. I was just lifting my arm to wave back when he said, “Hey, Bea.”

“How do *you* know the Glow Up?” I asked, trying not to move my lips.

“We were both in accelerated science and math last year,” Bea said. “We’re in all the honors classes together this year.”

I held out my phone and pretended to be taking a selfie. Instead, I got a pic of Clark walking toward us, his blond hair flowing, his golden skin soaking up the sun.

“I think I figured out what you can give the M & Ms,” I said.