

Jessica
Darling's

★ ★ ★ IT LIST ★ ★ ★

THE (totally not) GUARANTEED
GUIDE to POPULARITY,
PRETTINESS & PERFECTION

A NOVEL BY MEGAN MCCAFFERTY



poppy

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Chapter One

What happens when EVERYTHING you know about ANYTHING is ALL WRONG?

That's what I'm about to find out.

Today is the last day of summer. I'm supposed to start seventh grade tomorrow. I say "supposed" to start seventh grade because I don't know if I can show up for my first day so tragically unprepared for Pineville Junior High.

My sister would say otherwise. She'd argue that I'm way better off now than I was before I received her big sisterly wisdom. She promises that if I follow her must-do IT List I won't merely survive junior high—I'll *thrive*.

And she would know better than anyone what it takes to make it in seventh grade. Ten years ago Bethany Darling was the IT Girl at Pineville Junior High School. All the

boys wanted to date her and all the girls wanted to be her. I was only a baby at the time, but I've seen the pictures and I swear her life was as perfect as a shampoo commercial.

My life isn't like a shampoo commercial. But don't feel bad for me because it isn't like the educational films about bullying that we're forced to watch during Be Kind to Each Other week at school either. I have plenty of friends. And until my sister gave me the IT List, my best friend, Bridget, was the one freaking out about starting junior high—not me. I guess if I had to describe myself, I'd say I'm very witty, medium pretty, and a little bit zitty. I'm not the worst off but there's definitely room for improvement.

So when Bethany surprised me this morning by taking time out of her busy social schedule to give me life-changing advice before my first day of seventh grade, I wasn't exactly in a position to refuse. Besides, Bridget is in a state of total discombobulation about junior high. I figured I could share any valuable information that could help her, uh, *recombobulate*. If such a thing is even possible.

"It must be so hard to have your big sister away at college during such an important time in your life," Bethany said with a cluck of her tongue and a sympathetic shake of her head.

Despite my best efforts, my sister and I have never really been that close. That's what happens when you're

born in different decades. When she was my age, I was still wetting my pants. That will put a wedge in any relationship. I've always admired my sister from afar in the same sort of way Bridget looks up to certain celebrities. We see the teensiest bit of ourselves in our idols, but their lives are so glamorously out of touch with our boring reality.

"The transition from elementary school to junior high school can't be taken lightly," Bethany continued. "The choices you make during the next two years directly affect your popularity in high school, which directly affects your popularity in college, which directly affects what sorority you get into, which directly affects who you meet and who you marry, which directly affects your popularity every day thereafter until you *die*."

Bethany paused just long enough for the seriousness of her speech to sink in.

"Choices. So many choices."

Then she dramatically took me by the shoulders.

"So many chances to make *so! many! mistakes!*"

I'm not exaggerating when I say a shiver shot up my spine when she said that and not just because she grabbed me so hard my back was thrown out of whack.

"And that's why I'm going to share my wisdom with you, my little sister."

Then she patted me on the head, which was kind of

funny because I'm already as tall as she is and she had to reach up to do it. Then, with the grace of a professional game show hostess, she reached into her designer handbag and pulled out a three-by-five card. She teasingly dangled the small piece of paper in front of my grabby fingers before finally letting me have it.

Here! In my hands! The sacred document containing all the secrets to a lifetime of awesomeness! I thought.

Until I actually looked at it.

"Uh, your old Pineville Junior High Cheer Team travel schedule?"

"The life-changing advice is on the back," Bethany said with a deep sigh, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world.

And when I *did* the most obvious thing in the world—flip it over to see the life-changing advice for myself—she slapped my hand away.

"Not now!"

"Ow!" I cried, rubbing my stinging wrist. "Why not now?"

"You need to take in this life-changing advice all on your own, without me there to spell it out for you." She spoke sagely. "That's part of the process."

I stared down at the card in my hand. What sort of life-changing advice could be on the flip side of a decade-old Pineville Junior High Cheer Team travel schedule? How

much could there possibly be to spell out? There's barely enough room to spell out G-O, J-E-S-S-I-C-A!

My sister pulled a pouty face.

"Why am I not being embraced with gratitude right now? Why am I not being celebrated as the most awesome big sister of all time? Why am I feeling like the recipient of this great life-changing advice does not appreciate the gift I have given her?"

"Thank you, Bethany. Seriously. But..."

Bethany checked the time, already more concerned about leaving than actually being here.

"Hey, has the mail arrived yet?" she asked.

And before I could say yes, she was already at the front door, elbow deep in the mailbox. She rifled through the catalogs, bills, and miscellaneous junk, sighed, and then put the whole stack back.

"Are you looking for something?" I asked.

"No!" she yelled. "I mean, yes!" She relaxed and pinched my cheek. "I mean, mind your own business, Little Miss Seventh Grader!"

Bethany gets all jumpy when she's in Pineville for too long, and I could tell she was beyond eager to head back to campus before my parents even realized she was home. Bethany loves college so much that she's taking a fifth year to graduate.

“I just can’t imagine how whatever is on the back of this card is going to change my life.”

Bethany tossed all her blond hair over from one shoulder to the other.

“Are you questioning my authority? I was voted Most Popular, Prettiest, and Miss Perfect in the Pineville Junior High yearbook. If I’m not an expert on such matters, then who is?”

She had a point there. I followed her off the front porch, followed her down the driveway, and followed her to her boyfriend’s convertible. At that moment I would’ve followed her anywhere. Bethany has that effect on people. If I follow her rules, will *I* have that effect on people? Is that what it means to be popular?

“Didn’t you keep a diary that, I don’t know, explains *how...*”

My sister cut me off with knowing laughter.

“Popular girls don’t keep diaries, because they’re too busy being popular to write about being popular,” she said, opening the car door and sliding inside. “Which is a shame because popular girls are the ones with juicy stuff worth reading.”

I’d actually considered buying a diary to document the momentous occasion that was the start of seventh grade. Bethany just saved me \$1.99.

“Just follow my advice and remember who you are,” Bethany said with familiar finality as she fluffed her hair in the rearview mirror. “You’re a Darling.”

“I’m a Darling,” I repeated.

“Darlings aren’t dorks!”

Then Bethany slipped on a pair of dark sunglasses and backed out of the driveway.

The irony is this: I wasn’t at all worried about being a seventh-grade dork until my sister said that.

Chapter Two

Bethany Darling's IT List The Guaranteed Guide to Popularity, Prettiness & Perfection

1. Wear something different every day.
2. Make the CHEER TEAM!!!
3. Pick your first boyfriend wisely.
4. Stick with the IT clique.

That's it.

That's *IT*?

Twenty words (I'm counting "!!!" as its own word) written on the back of a Pineville Junior High CHEER TEAM!!! travel schedule in smudged scarlet lip liner? It reminded

me of Bridget's disastrous eyebrow-plucking tutorial: so simple and yet totally impossible to follow without scarring myself in some permanent way.

I only had about ten seconds to wrap (warp?) my brain around the IT List before I heard my best friend's footsteps kicking up gravel in our driveway. I quickly hid the old schedule inside a copy of *The Outsiders*. That's the novel the entire incoming seventh grade was supposed to read over the summer. I'd already read it once, but I wanted it to be fresh in my head. I've heard that teachers give quizzes on the first day of school to find out right away who's a star and who's a slacker. I bet there won't be any slackers in the seventh-grade Gifted & Talented classes, though. You don't get into G&T by being a slacker.

Anyway, *The Outsiders* is set in the 1960s and it's all about cool versus uncool kids, which goes to show you that people have been preoccupied with popularity since the olden days, an idea that has already taken on whole new significance in my life since my sister decided to **TOTALLY MESS WITH MY HEAD ON THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER BEFORE I START SEVENTH GRADE.**

This was also Bridget's last day to freak out about starting seventh grade and she was going to make the most of it. Her pale skin screams red when she's under emotional duress so she came careening across the yard like a fidgety

zinnia in full-bloom freak-out. She barreled through the pleasantries and got right down to business.

“Is it too late for you to change your last name?” she asked.

Did Bridget eavesdrop on the conversation with my sister from across the street? Bethany’s voice was loud and clear in my ears.

You’re a Darling. Darlings aren’t dorks!

Bridget nervously braided and unbraided her waist-length white-blond hair as she babbled on.

“I was thinking that you could change it to something that starts with the letter *M* so we can at least be in the same homeroom!”

Whew. Bridget hadn’t overheard my sister after all.

“Jessica *Marling* has a nice ring to it!”

The thing about Bridget is that I’ve known her my entire life and I still can never be sure when she’s kidding or not.

“Why don’t *you* change *your* last name?” I asked.

Bridget’s last name—Milhokovich—is never pronounced correctly. Bridget has heard it so many ways (Mill-HOCK-O-vitch, Meel-HOE-KOE-vitch, Mill-HOCK-O-LOOGIE) that she answers to all of them. I’m not sure she even knows the right way to say it anymore.

“My mom just got this monogrammed for me.”

She pulled her backpack off her shoulder and thrust it

in my face for inspection: *BMB* embroidered in pale pink on hot pink canvas.

“Sooooo . . . what do you think? New school, new name, new you!”

Bridget grinned hopefully, and I pretended to be blinded by sunlight bouncing off her braces.

“SHUT MOUTH. TOO BRIGHT.”

I rolled myself into a ball to shield myself from the killer orthodontic glare. She retaliated by kicking me in the butt. It was all silliness for a few seconds before Bridget got dead serious.

“What if we don’t have any classes together, Jess?” she worried. “I wish I wasn’t so stupid!”

“Bridget!” I protested for the bazillionth time. “You aren’t stupid!”

“Fine,” she settled. “I’m not stupid. But I’m two points shy of Gifted and Talented and that’s enough to keep me out of all your classes.”

Sigh.

Bridget and I both took the entrance exam that determines which students get accepted into Pineville Junior High’s Gifted & Talented program. I got in. Unfortunately Bridget missed the cutoff by two points. Two points! Mrs. Milhokovich called the school hoping they’d make an exception, but the spaces are limited so, no.

That two-point deficit was one of the biggest reasons why Bridget was freaked out about seventh grade.

I've tried not to be too bummed about it because I've never had problems making friends and that's kind of the point of junior high, right? To make new friends and keep the old? Isn't that what I learned in Girl Scouts before I was asked to leave the organization because one too many orders of Thin Mints were delivered with a poorly taped-up box top and a missing cookie sleeve?

(In my defense: Thin Mints are delicious and my mom is always on a diet.)

"What if no one talks to me?" Bridget worried. "Who will I talk to?"

When I heard that tiny voice, I knew it wasn't time for messing around anymore. Plus her whole body was like a sunburn, even though she had joined me in the safe shade of our oak tree. I wasn't so psyched about tomorrow either, but Bridget was my best friend and I was determined to make her feel better.

Unfortunately, this wasn't a role I was born to play. Bridget was the natural cheerer-upper, not me. Even back in our Pack 'n Play days my mom says that Bridget would offer me her pacifier, her sippy cup, even her beloved stuffed octopus when I was cranky and crying for no apparent reason. I always took whatever she was offering and calmed

down. This is pretty much the way our twelve-year friendship has always worked.

There's really only been one time in her life when it was my turn to make her feel better. It was a bit disturbing that starting seventh grade seemed to upset Bridget almost as much as her parents' divorce three years ago. But I had helped her through that, so I could get her through this.

Right?

"I'll talk to you," I promised. "We'll see each other every morning on the bus to school and every afternoon on the bus home."

Bridget smiled, her face cooling to a light pink that matched the *BMB* embroidered on her backpack. It was working. *I* was making *her* feel better for a change.

"We'll always live across the street from each other, Bridge," I said. "You can show up at my house uninvited anytime you want."

And then I kicked her in the butt just to show her how much I really cared.

Chapter Three

Sufficiently un-freaked-out, Bridget spent the next half hour presenting me with photos of her first-day-of-school fashion options.

We were in my dad's office, otherwise known as the Techno Dojo. Whatever the latest bleep-blooming gadget there is to have, my dad has it. He's baffled by my indifference to all things technological. He gets paid to fix computer problems all day, but I swear he would totally do it for free. I think Dad prefers computers to people.

Anyway, Bridget was bleep-blooming in front of the largest screen, all the better for side-by-side critiques of mix-and-match combinations of hairstyles, tops, bottoms, and footwear.

“So I'm pretty sure I'm almost, like, one hundred

percent-ish decided that I think I've narrowed it down to these four hairstyles, these four tops, these four bottoms, and these four pairs of shoes!"

I didn't have the heart to tell her that math was against her: Just those items alone gave her 256 options. And if accessories were involved, her choices could easily run into the thousands.

She hadn't bothered asking me what I was going to wear because I pretty much have one look: a T-shirt and jeans. Mom took me shopping at the mall and after a "tempestuous debate" (her words) and a "major blowout" (my words) regarding a certain flowered skirt that was "so adorable" (her words) and "so gagtastic" (my words), we came home with a fresh supply of T-shirts and jeans in Mom-approved colors and patterns. That I'm not a fashion person is a great mystery and disappointment to my mother. Anyway, we all assumed my first-day-of-seventh-grade outfit would invariably involve a T-shirt and jeans.

That is, until I remembered #1 on the IT List.

1. Wear something different every day.

Nothing in my closet qualifies as "something different." Everything I own is from the mall. Sameness is the whole point of buying stuff at the mall. You buy stuff at

the mall knowing that lots of other girls will buy the same stuff at the mall so you won't be ostracized for dressing like a freakazoid. Why would my sister encourage me to wear "something different" unless that uniqueness would have a positive impact on my popularity? Was she actually encouraging me to stand out instead of blend in?

That didn't sound like the Bethany I knew. At all. But she was the undisputed queen of junior high and I most definitely am not.

"Jess! Are you even listening to me?"

"Of course I'm listening," I lied. "That's it! Hair half-up, half-down. Striped top. Capris. Slip-ons. Awesome."

That must have been the right thing to say because Bridget blew out a huge sigh of relief. Well, at least *one* of us had solved our first-day-of-seventh-grade wardrobe crisis. I was about two seconds away from blabbing to Bridget about the IT List and the possible negative repercussions of my unimaginative closet when my parents' car honked for my attention.

"Yikes," I said with a groan. "You better get out of here or they'll make you help put away the groceries."

They would, too. Bridget spends so much time at my house that my parents treat her as annoyingly as they do their own flesh and blood. Only Bridget doesn't think my parents are the least bit annoying. She says I should appre-

ciate how lucky I am to have two parents around to annoy me all the time. I shut my mouth when she says that, as I usually do whenever Bridget so much as hints at her parents' split, which isn't very often because she doesn't want to bum everyone out. My parents just love Bridget's positive personality and ever-pleasant disposition, and pointing this out to me just happens to be another one of the annoying things they do.

"Oh! I have to get home, anyway," Bridget said as she scooped up her backpack.

Bridget flashed a particularly tinny grin and waved at my parents through the open window. Honestly, she's always as happy to see them as they are to see her.

"Today's such an important day!" she shouted to my parents.

"It *is* an important day!" Mom called out in agreement. "So much to do!"

"The last day before seventh grade," Dad announced unnecessarily, the way dads who don't know how to talk to kids tend to do.

I watched Bridget skip back across the street to her house. She seemed oddly carefree for someone who was so stressed out just moments before. I guess I'm pretty good at being the supportive friend after all.

"Help your mother with the groceries, Notsol!"

Notso is what my dad calls me, as in Jessica “Notso” Darling. Ha-ha. I pretend to hate it, but it kind of suits me, to tell you the truth. Darling really is a tough name to live up to, more than ever since Bethany shared the IT List. Never before had I been so tempted to change it to something a little less cutesy: Jessica Disappointing. Jessica Duh. Jessica Dork.

“Come on,” Mom coaxed. “Most of this stuff is for you.”

I was actually grateful for an excuse not to obsess over the IT List. But I dragged my feet just long enough to make my parents think that helping them was, like, the hugest inconvenience of my life. You can’t let parents think they can bother you to do stuff whenever they want or they’ll start bothering you to do stuff whenever they want.

Which they already do anyway, now that I think of it.

Chapter Four

For someone who makes a point not to eat very much, Mom was very excited about all the back-to-school food.

“I didn’t get the chocolate chip cookies you asked for, but I did get these *wonderful* cranberry granola bars. And I didn’t get the sugary cereal you asked for, but I did get these *delightful* Flax Flakes. And I didn’t get the soda you asked for, but I did get this *flavorful* seltzer...”

The rest of the unpacking went exactly like that: “ful” of crappy food I didn’t ask for and didn’t want.

“You just missed Bethany this morning,” I said, wincing at the stinky Brie that must have been a substitute for the Cheddary-product-in-a-can I’d requested.

My mother almost dropped an economy box of organic green tea bags on her tennis shoes.

“Bethany was here? Didn’t her classes begin weeks ago? Shouldn’t she be in class? Where’s she getting the money to pay for gas to cruise around town without a care in the world? Why wouldn’t she tell me or your father? Why didn’t she stay?”

Gee, Mom. I have no idea why she wouldn’t want to stick around for one of your classic interrogations.

Dad entered the kitchen with the last of the groceries.

“Dar!” That’s what she calls my dad. It’s short for Darling, obviously, but to me it sounds like the name for a caveman. “Dar! Bethany was here this morning!”

My father almost dropped a bag of produce on his cycling shoes.

“Bethany was here? Didn’t she start classes a few weeks ago? Shouldn’t she be in class? Where’s she getting the gas money to go on joyrides? Why wouldn’t she tell us? Why didn’t she stay?”

Say what you want about my parents. Call them dorky and uptight, clueless and pushy. (I do.) But they are meant for each other.

They both turned to me for answers. For a split second I was tempted to mention how she’d spied through the mail, but I thought better of it. My sister’s business was none of my business.

“She came to see me. To offer me, you know, big sisterly life-changing advice before starting school.”

My dad barked a laugh and muttered, “Maybe you should offer her little-sisterly life-changing advice about *finishing* school.”

My mom got a wounded look and swatted him on the shoulder with a supermarket circular.

“She changed her major, Dar. You can’t expect her to graduate in four years if she changed her major.”

My mom always defends Bethany. Fortunately, my dad usually sides with me. I think these allegiances are based on appearances.

Mom and Bethany are both blond and blue-eyed, petite yet curvy in the way that looks just right to me, but they are always complaining is too fat. Mom says she has to look good because her picture appears on real estate signs in front yards all over Ocean County. She says it’s an “occupational hazard,” but that doesn’t explain why Bethany worries about her looks even more than Mom does, because my sister doesn’t have a job. If my mom and my sister are any indication, it seems to me that the prettier you are, the more you worry about how pretty you are, which doesn’t make any sense at all.

Maybe that’s because I look more like my dad. We’re dark-haired (or what’s left of my dad’s hair is, anyway) and brown-eyed, with skinny arms and legs attached at awkward angles to our gangly bodies. Prettiness is not something I spend a lot of time thinking about because I’m too

busy thinking about other things. Thinking about things is my primary hobby. As hobbies go, it's kind of a weird one. Thinking about things isn't like taking dance classes or playing soccer or crafting or something normal like that. People can go to a performance or cheer at a game or ooh and ahh over a birdhouse made of Popsicle sticks or whatever. But when thinking about things is your hobby, there's nothing to show for it. No "Hey, take a look at all the stuff going on inside my brain!" So whenever someone asks what I like to do in my free time—and that someone is usually a grown-up because it's exactly the kind of question grown-ups love to ask—it's just way easier to say that I like to read because I can direct them to all the books on my shelves.

Obviously, this is something I've thought about. A lot.

So what other kinds of things do I think about? It's hard to say. I think about whatever pops into my head and it's very hard to stop thinking about it as soon as it does. There are two categories of thinking: Deep Stuff and Dumb Stuff.

Like, the other morning I woke up wondering about all the background people who are in my dreams. I'm talking about the people I don't know or recognize from real life. Am I making those people up or do they really exist somewhere? Are they people I might have seen one time in my life, like, at the mall, but my brain captured their images

and held on to them just to use them later as extras in my dreams? Or are they people who exist somewhere in the world who I haven't ever seen or met, but we're connected through some deeper human consciousness?

That's a pretty good example of Deep Stuff.

And then there's the Dumb Stuff, like when I spent an hour ranking my favorite ice-cream flavors (#1: Cookie dough).

My dad is a thinker, too. Stress sweat was just starting to shine on his balding head.

"Did Bethany have to wait until second semester of her junior year to change her major? And from Public Relations to Image Marketing and Management? I don't get the difference. You're good with words, Notso. Do you understand the difference between Public Relations and Image Marketing and Management?"

I did NOT understand the difference between Public Relations and Image Marketing and Management, which is why I immediately excused myself to the privacy of my bedroom to figure it out.

And by that, I mean I called Bethany.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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