

L e s l i e M c G i l l

A close-up portrait of a young Black woman with long, thin braids. She is wearing a white, short-sleeved top with a scalloped edge. The background is a textured, light-colored surface with faint, embossed architectural details. The bottom portion of the cover features a dark blue background with a pattern of gold stars, similar to the European Union flag. The title 'THE GAME' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the bottom. Below the title, the text 'BOOK 5' is written in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters, enclosed in a thin white rectangular border.

THE GAME

BOOK 5

THE GAME

Leslie McGill





CAP CENTRAL

Fighter
Running Scared
Hacker
Gearhead
The Game
Hero



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CHAPTER 1

CECILIA

Cecilia Calhoun opened the door to the girls' locker room. She almost bumped into Remy Stevenson. Remy was standing about three feet from the door. He practically blocked the doorway. The rest of the step team pushed up against Cecilia as they tried to leave.

“Brennay! Your lover is here waiting for you!” Zakia Johnson called out in a singsong voice. Several of the girls laughed. Remy didn't respond. He scanned the crowd of girls leaving the locker room.

Cecilia knew he was looking for Brennay Baxter, captain of the Stepperz, the Capital Central High School step team. Remy idolized Brennay. He waited for her every day. Most days, Brennay just told him to go home.

Brennay pushed through the crowd of girls. “There you are, Remy!” she said sweetly. “I’m so glad! Did you bring me your Washington Wizards sweatshirt like I asked you to?”

Remy handed over a sweatshirt.

“You ready?” Brennay said to Zakia.

Zakia pulled out her cell phone. “Go for it,” she said, holding it out to use the camera.

Brennay put on the sweatshirt. Then she reached up and hugged the tall, skinny boy. “My hero!” she said.

Remy looked uncomfortable. He stared at the floor. Zakia snapped a picture.

More points for Lady Bay, Cecilia thought to herself.

Remy was the focus of an online game. Someone had started a blog called *Cap Central Chatter*. The blog reported on all the gossip: who had hooked up, fights, complaints about teachers, and other tidbits going on at school. The last item in the blog each time was the same: a chart labeled “Remy Points.”

Under the chart’s title was a list of girls’ nicknames. Points were awarded for interactions with Remy Stevenson. Last night’s installment

had given four points to “Z-Grrrl” for taking Remy’s e-reader. The day before, “Lady Bay” received three points. Remy had put his arm around her.

The blog even listed “official” rules for how the Remy Points would be awarded. All points had to be documented by a picture sent to the blog’s moderator. The photos weren’t actually published. The moderator—whoever he or she was—awarded the points and updated the total for each name.

So far, Lady Bay was in the lead with thirty-two points. Cecilia assumed that Lady Bay was Brennay. Z-Grrrl, who had twenty-eight points, had to be Zakia Johnson, Brennay’s best friend and co-captain. Cecilia suspected that Brennay and Zakia wrote the blog, invented the game, and were holding on to all the photos.

Cecilia knew the super-sweet tone Brennay used with Remy was a lie. The whole purpose of the game was to get laughs at Remy’s expense. Everyone at Cap Central was in on the joke.

Everyone except Remy Stevenson.

Remy truly believed Brennay when she told him she loved him.

Believed her when she called him her hero.

Thought she meant it when she said he was the step team's good luck charm.

Remy believed everything Brennay said. He didn't hear the insincerity or the fawning tone.

Because Remy was autistic.

Cecilia knew people with autism had trouble reading social cues. They had trouble understanding the meaning behind other people's words or expressions.

For the past several years, Cecilia had volunteered at Crossroads, an after-school program for little kids with special needs. Many of the children she worked with were autistic. She enjoyed the work so much that she had already decided to be a special education teacher. She would have done anything to protect the children she worked with from bullies.

Yet here at Cap Central, she was a member of a team whose captain was using an autistic boy as the focus of a cruel game. A boy who didn't understand that the girl he idolized was just pretending to like him.

Every time she saw Remy with Brennay, Cecilia vowed she would put a stop to the game. She knew she should tell a teacher at the school what was happening. But as captain of the Stepperz, Brennay had a lot of prestige. And it seemed like the whole school was in on the game.

Cecilia had moved into the neighborhood near Capital Central over the summer. She still didn't know other students well enough to enlist their support. The girls she knew best were the Stepperz. They went along with anything Brennay suggested. The last thing Cecilia wanted to do was turn in the only girls she'd gotten to know so far.

And she really didn't even know whom she could tell. Mrs. Hess, Capital Central's principal, relied on the Stepperz to entertain at pep rallies, fund-raising kick-offs, and other school events. Her support had to mean she approved of the team, its activities, and its captains.

Cecilia wished she could come up with a way of making Brennay, Zakia, and the rest of the school understand how wrong the game was. Or even just a way to make it stop. She hated

herself for being so weak. By not doing anything to stop the game, she felt like she was no better than those who played it.

She felt helpless.

And angry.

And disgusted.

With herself most of all.