

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

⚠ WARNING:
MATURE CONTENT

THE GAME

BOOK 5

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.

CHAPTER 2

MARCUS

Check out Brennay,” Eva Morales said, looking across Cap Central’s cafeteria to a table crowded with girls. “She’s practically sitting on Remy Stevenson’s lap.”

Marcus DiMonte turned in his seat to look at Brennay. Remy Stevenson sat in the center of a table filled with Cap Central step team members. Brennay sat close to him, stroking his arm. Remy stared at his tray, not responding. His face did not show how he felt about the attention.

“Trying to rack up more Remy Points,” Lionel “Ferg” Ferguson said as he sat down beside Marcus. Ferg and Eva had been a couple for several years. Marcus shifted his chair a few inches to give Ferg more room.

“I hate that game,” Eva said. “I don’t think any of the Poms are playing it. Remy’s always with the Stepperz, so I’ll bet Lady Bay and Z-Grrrl and the rest are step team members.”

The poms team, which did dance routines using pom-poms, was just getting started. The step team had been around for years. It was well-known in the community. The Stepperz were often asked to perform in parades and various events around Washington, D.C. They had even performed in the last presidential inaugural parade.

“Looks like he’s in heaven,” Ferg said with a laugh. He unwrapped his hamburger and ate it in three bites. He picked up Eva’s hamburger off her tray. “You eatin’ that?” he asked.

“Give it back!” Eva said, grabbing it. “Yes, I’m gonna eat it. That’s why I bought it.”

“I’m still hungry,” Ferg said, looking down the line at everyone else’s tray. “Anybody got—”

“Don’t even think about it!” Marcus said, covering his tray with his arms. “Go buy something else.”

“Room for two more?” asked Joss White, Eva’s best friend, as she neared the table. She

was followed by her boyfriend, Carlos Garcia. They put down their trays and sat down. “Did you read in the *Chatter* that Thomas Porter and Brennay are together now?” Joss asked.

“Now there’s a combination,” Eva said jokingly. “I give that one about a week.”

“Yeah, nothing like jail to break a couple up,” Carlos added.

Thomas Porter had transferred to Capital Central after a shooting incident at another D.C. high school. Most of the kids considered him dangerous and left him alone.

“Brennay treats Remy like her pet dog. He’s showing up more and more in the pictures Brennay posts of the Stepperz. Honestly, I don’t know how those girls keep their grades up,” Joss said. “Brennay has them stage all sorts of photos, all around D.C. Last week, she had pictures of some of them in the reflecting pool. Remy was in a lot of the pictures.”

“Where’s the reflecting pool?” Ferg asked. Cap Central was in the Northeast quadrant of Washington, D.C. But the kids who attended the large high school had little contact with the Washington, D.C., that was the nation’s capital.

“Downtown, genius,” Marcus with sarcasm. “On the Mall. You need to get out more.”

“I saw those pictures,” Eva said. “I couldn’t figure out what they were doing. Or why Remy was all wet. It’s not as if you can go in the water down there.”

“I saw that too,” Carlos said. “I wondered if Remy had fallen in. There were lots of pictures of him dripping wet.”

“I know, right?” Joss said. “And after that, the point total increased in that horrible game on *Cap Central Chatter*. Obviously Brennay and Zakia are writing the blog and giving out points. I just can’t believe they use Remy that way.”

“You’d think they’d have gotten bored by now,” Eva said. “Why would they want to keep messing with a kid who’s—”

“I think he’s autistic,” Marcus said quickly. “He’s got special needs. That’s all.”

“Well, right now he looks like he’s got a special need for Brennay,” Eva said with a smirk. “Does autistic mean retarded?” she asked.

“Don’t!” Marcus said sharply. “Don’t use that word. I know you didn’t mean it to be, but it’s hurtful.”

Eva looked confused. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know,” Marcus said. “People don’t know. But trust me on that. It’s not something you should say. Anyway, autistic means ... well, it means different things to different people.”

“I’ve had Remy in classes,” Joss said. “There’s something sort of ... well, off about him. I tried talking to him a couple of times, but it didn’t go very well. He’s just not quite—I don’t know. He kept looking to the side of me as I talked to him. I finally gave up.” She turned around in her seat and craned her neck to look over the crowd of students eating lunch. “That’s why it’s so odd to see him hanging out with the step team.”

“I thought I saw Remy down at the track last week,” Carlos said. “Can someone in special ed be on the track team?”

“Did you actually see him run?” Marcus said with a laugh. “Probably not. He’s so fast he’s pretty much a blur. Running is a perfect sport for him. Not much social contact or having to read people’s intentions by their expressions.

Not like in football or baseball. He may one of the top ten racers in the Mid-Atlantic.”

“How do you know so much about it?” Joss asked.

“Because I’m a runner too,” Marcus said. “And what I usually see of Remy is the back of his jersey as he passes me by!”

“No, I mean the other thing. How do you know so much about autism?” Joss asked.

“Because—” Marcus stopped suddenly, his sentence unfinished. “I just do,” he said. He didn’t feel like telling his friends about his cousin Sam. Sammy had learning difficulties. He was in special education classes. Many of Sam’s classmates were autistic. Marcus loved Sam. He knew how much it hurt when anyone used the word “retarded” to describe him.

Just then, Cecilia Calhoun stood up from where she was sitting. She had been at the very end of the step team’s table. She walked over to the trash can.

“Hey, you want this?” Marcus asked, putting a cookie on Ferg’s tray. He stood up and picked up his tray.

“Yeah, but what’s your hurry?” Ferg asked, grabbing the cookie.

“I’ll see you all later,” Marcus said. He threw away his trash and walked out of the cafeteria.

He looked down the hallway just in time to see Cecilia disappear behind the wall with the trophy case. He walked around the wall. She was sitting on the floor.

“Hey!” he said, joining her. “You hiding back here?”

“Sort of,” she said.

He sat beside her. “Haven’t seen much of you lately,” he said. “You don’t sit on your porch anymore.”

Lyman Place was filled with row houses with matching porches. Marcus’s family lived at one end. Cecilia’s family lived halfway down the block, in a house with a porch swing. Families often gathered on the porches in the summer.

After Cecilia had moved in, Marcus could stand on his porch and look down the row of porches to see her rocking back and forth on her porch swing. He became so used to seeing her there that he automatically looked for her whenever he walked onto his porch.

“Wish it were still summer,” Cecilia said, shaking her head. “I had no idea this year would be so hard.”

The bell rang, indicating the end of lunch. Cecilia and Marcus stood up. Cecilia brushed off the seat of her jeans.

“Where are you going?” Marcus asked as they climbed the stairs.

“Art,” she said. “You?”

“Chem,” he said. “Art sounds nice. Wanna switch?”

Cecilia shook her head.

“Hey, it was a joke,” he said. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Perfect,” she said sarcastically.

“What’s up?” he asked with concern.

“Nothing,” she answered. “Just a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

The warning bell rang. Cecilia started for the art room.

“Hey, Cecilia!” Marcus called after her.

She turned around.

“You know I love that porch swing of yours,” he said.

Cecilia put her hands on her hips. “You want it?” she teased with a smile. “I could ask my mom if you could borrow it sometime.”

“How about I just use it on your porch?” he responded.

Cecilia tilted her head slightly and looked at him, like she was trying to read something on his face. Whatever she saw seemed to be okay. “Any time,” she said with a smile. She gave a little wave and walked into the art room.

Marcus watched her for a moment, then turned the corner to the chemistry lab.

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

CAP CENTRAL

THE GAME

Cecilia Calhoun's transition to Cap Central has been rough. She joined the school's step team to make friends and keep busy. But the team's co-captain, Brennay Baxter, is a dictator. She makes life miserable for any girl who doesn't do what she says. Worse, Cecilia is convinced Brennay is behind an anonymous online game that awards points for every interaction with an autistic student. And she's disgusted with herself for not putting a stop to the bullying.

▲ WARNING:
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