

GORDON KORMAN

Level 13

a slacker novel



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CHAPTER ONE

CAMERON BOXER

Flying in on a battle bus—it didn't get much more ill than that.

The setup: On the wide-screen TV, the map—meaning the island—ready to be invaded by fifty battle royale players, including me. The *me* part was important, since this was my live game stream. A webcam captured my every move. On the coffee table, a laptop showed exactly what my online followers would be seeing—my amazing gameplay, and in a window in the top corner, a view of me working the controller like I was born to do it. Which I was.

The far side of the stream page was reserved for viewer comments. Right now there were none, because I hadn't gone live yet. Another possible reason for that was the fact that I only had eight followers, and one of them was my own phone. Everything has to start somewhere. Top gaming streamers could have hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of subscribers. Their every move was eagerly watched by hordes of fans all over the world.

My father always told me, "I know video games are your hobby, Cam, but they'll never be a real job." Wrong, Dad. If you had enough subscribers, you could make

truckloads of cash. Besides, I always found the word *hobby* a little insulting. Gaming was a lot more than a hobby for me. It was my lifestyle. And if I could start up a successful stream now—while I was still in middle school—I might never have to get a real job.

My guidance counselor, Mr. Fan-something, said that it was important to choose a career that gave you pleasure and satisfaction. Well, that was a slam dunk for me. I'd be getting *paid* to play video games!

It would all start with the flip of a switch. My thumb reached for the button on the controller in my hands.

Ding-dong!

I ignored the doorbell. There were no doorbells on the island.

The bell sounded a second time and then a third. This was followed by loud, persistent pounding on the door.

“Somebody get that!” I shouted, before remembering that I was alone in the house.

Next, my phone began to ring. That bothered me. With my phone tied up, my follower count went down to seven.

I answered it. “What?”

“Cam—I'm at your house!” It was Jordan Toleffsen, one of Sycamore Middle School's student government types.

“Yeah, it sounds like you're about to bust the door down.” We had a history of door problems at our house, so

I was kind of sensitive about it. It was mostly my fault—and the fire department’s. But that was another story.

“You’re *home*?” He was incredulous. “String’s party started half an hour ago!”

“String knows I might not be able to make it.” At least he’d figure it out when I didn’t show up.

“Don’t you know anything about *optics*?” *Optics* was one of Jordan’s favorite political words. “You’re head of the Positive Action Group. You have to be *seen* there!”

Positive Action Group. I had no one to blame but myself for that. In my own defense, I only invented the P.A.G. to make myself look like a student leader so Mom and Dad wouldn’t ban me from video games. It was never supposed to become a real club.

But there was no way to tell that to the 874 kids who joined, eager to pick up garbage, walk old ladies across the street, paint the orphanage, and do all kinds of other community service.

Not that there was anything bad about community service. We helped a lot of people. I even got kind of into it toward the end. The problem was community service took up a lot of prime gaming time.

The happiest day of my life was when the principal disbanded the P.A.G. last fall. Suddenly, I had my life back, and nobody could even blame me for it. It was Dr. LaPierre’s fault, not mine. It was paradise.

Then the P.A.G. got reinstated—just when my streaming career was about to take off.

Paradise lost.

“Tell String I can’t get away,” I told Jordan over the phone. “Better yet, don’t tell him anything. There are going to be a zillion people at the party. No one will ever notice I’m not there.”

“Are you nuts? *Everyone* will notice! You’re Cam Boxer!”

The kids in this town—they really knew how to hurt a guy.

“Listen—” A click signified that I was getting another call. “Hang on a sec.” As soon as I switched over, I could hear loud music and a lot of excited chatter.

“Cam?” I instantly identified the deep voice over the background noise. Xavier Meggett—another pagger, as P.A.G. members referred to themselves. And judging by the music, he was definitely at the party. “Where are you?” Xavier demanded. “You’re coming, right?”

My heart sank. It was one thing to blow off Jordan, but *Xavier*? He was two years older than the rest of us. He got held back a couple of times because his family sent him on “trips”—code for another stretch in juvie. For him, the P.A.G. wasn’t just community service; it was Community Service—the kind you got sentenced to by a judge. In Xavier’s eyes, the club had straightened out his whole life.

“Xavier—hi! How’s the party?”

“It’ll be better when you get here,” came his deep baritone.

Another click. “Sorry, Xavier. Gotta take this.” I switched to the third call, which was from Pavel Dyan, one of my two best friends. Along with Chuck Kinsey, we made up the Awesome Threesome—or at least that’s what we called ourselves on the gaming circuit.

“You’d better sit down, Cam. This is technically huge. And if you’re eating anything, spit it out. You’ll choke when you hear this.”

The background music was a perfect match for Xavier’s. I couldn’t believe it. “Are you at String’s party?” I challenged. “You’re supposed to be watching my stream! I go live any minute!”

“You’ve got to reschedule, man. This is an emergency. Chuck—”

Someone cranked up the volume, drowning out Pavel’s voice.

“What about Chuck?” I shouted into the phone. “Is he there with you?” Pavel and Chuck were two of my eight followers. If they were both at the party, that left only six—and one of the six was *me*. Even if my entire fan base showed up online, I’d be streaming for, at most, five people. Eight was nothing to write home about, but five was pathetic.

Obviously, I couldn't start streaming until I put in an appearance at this party.

I shut off everything and headed upstairs, shrugging into a jacket. I threw open the door and rushed outside, slamming pretty hard into Jordan and sending the two of us rolling across the lawn. Who knew the guy would still be there after I blew him off? If I'd gone out the back way, would he have still been standing on my stoop tomorrow morning?

"Sorry," I mumbled as we brushed ourselves off.

We walked the four blocks to the home of Freeland "First String" McBean, star wide receiver and flanker back of the Sycamore Middle School Seahawks.

Jordan talked nonstop every step of the way. "I want to go into politics when I grow up. That's why I joined the P.A.G. in the first place—I thought it could help me get elected student body president. But elections are all about beating the other candidate. And in the P.A.G. we learned that cooperation is what gets things done and makes the world a better place . . ."

He went on and on. The closer we got to the McBean house, the harder it was to hear him. The music was blasting through the whole neighborhood. Halfway up the front walk, he stopped, regarding me expectantly.

"What?" I asked, mystified.

"So what do you think I should do?"

I hadn't listened to a single word for the past three blocks. I remembered something about politics, but after the first couple of minutes of boringness, my mind automatically filed it under Who Cares? Part of my lifestyle was filtering out all the white noise so I could keep my focus razor-sharp on video games, where it belonged.

But Jordan looked so serious, so anxious to hear my viewpoint, that I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd tuned out. "Why would you ask me about—you know—that?"

My answer seemed to baffle him. "Because you're Cam Boxer. The P.A.G. is your baby. If anybody's got his head screwed on straight, it has to be you."

I was staring at him when the door burst open. "Cam!" String reached out his long receiver's arms, locked them around my neck, and hauled me into the house. "Hey, everybody! *Cam's here!*"

The roar of "*Cam!*" drowned out the blaring music. I was pulled through the crush of bodies, my back pounded, my hands high-fived, and my shoulders slapped. I was very nearly hugged breathless. It was a perfect example of why I hadn't wanted to come in the first place. It was nice to be loved, but not to be loved so much that you didn't have five seconds to get your streaming career off the ground. I almost started to wish people would hate me a little bit—or at least leave me alone.

String gave me a numbing chest bump. “Is this fire or what?” he roared in my ear. “Nobody throws a party like The String!” He always talked about himself like he was talking about somebody else—somebody really great.

“Yeah, fire.” Looking around, I had to admit it. The living room was packed with kids dancing, bouncing up and down to the beat, because there wasn’t enough space to move side to side. Every hand held a soda can or water bottle, filling the air with a fine spray that came down like mist. Half-eaten pizza slices covered every surface in the house—tables, chairs, couches. I could feel, but not see, the layer of chip crumbs covering the carpet. The McBeans were going to have a major cleanup on their hands once this party ended—if it ever did. It showed no sign of slowing down. And now that the head of the P.A.G. was here, things could really go off the chain.

I followed a conga line into the kitchen, where the pizza boxes were stacked to the ceiling and kids were starting to help themselves to slices of a six-foot hero sandwich. The clock on the microwave provided a depressing reminder that I should have been eleven minutes into my stream. What if the five followers I didn’t know got discouraged and stopped following me? Gamers weren’t very patient. They were used to nonstop action.

My eyes fell on the kitchen door, which led to String’s backyard. Escape—that was the plan. I could be home in

five minutes and online in another two. This party was so jam-packed and crazy that no one was going to notice that I'd walked in, walked through, and walked out. All they'd remember was that they'd seen me.

I fist-bumped Kelly Hannity, slipped between two girls who were eating half-melted ice-cream cake with chopsticks, and stepped through the door.

Grass under my feet. Freedom.

A very large hand closed on my shoulder. "Hi, Cam." The deep voice moved air.

Xavier. What was he doing outside the party instead of inside it?

He thrust a shoebox into my arms. "This is for you."
"Shoes?"

In answer, he tipped open the lid so I could see into the box. It was piled high with sugar cookies, each one decorated with a little flower drawn in pink and white icing.

"Uh—thanks," I managed.

"I baked them myself," he informed me proudly. "My mom had to help crack the eggs."

Who knew that cracking eggs was so much harder than cracking skulls? "They're great. But I'm going to get pretty fat eating all these."

"They're not for *eating*," Xavier explained. "They're for the P.A.G."

I was mystified. "Why does the P.A.G. need cookies?"

“To *sell*,” he insisted. “For the fund-raiser. Remember, Mr. Fanshaw said . . .”

That explained a lot. If Mr. Fan-whatever had said it, for sure I’d paid no attention at all. Whenever the P.A.G.’s faculty adviser opened his mouth, my brain went into hibernation mode. Although I did remember something called the New Approach. If you sent all 874 paggers out to do community service, so many middle schoolers had a fifty-fifty chance of wrecking the place they were supposed to serve.

So the P.A.G. was switching to fund-raising for good causes. Instead of helping people directly, we would give them money so they could help themselves. For example, the Sycamore Public Library needed a new building on account of the fact that the old one had been condemned by the town engineers. It was really just an old mansion, built in the 1800s. The fact that it hadn’t collapsed decades ago was a miracle. In my opinion, the part that really should have been condemned was their video game collection, which was so old that if you wanted a system to play it on, you’d have to dig it out of a time capsule.

Xavier’s cookies were to meant to be sold at a P.A.G. fund-raiser for the library. There was a chance that I was supposed to be planning the fund-raiser, since I was president of the P.A.G. That’s why Xavier gave the cookies to

me instead of someone who had the faintest idea what to do with them.

There was no way I could escape now—not with Xavier breathing down my neck. So I thanked him and headed back into the house to search for another exit.

Navigating the crowd while holding the shoebox in front of me was practically impossible. I barely managed to get the box down on a kitchen counter so it wouldn't get battered and crushed. One thing I never wanted to have to do was to tell Xavier that his hard work had never lived to earn money for the library.

Almost everyone I bumped into asked about the big fund-raiser I was working on. The more people I talked to, the more depressed I became. It just served to remind me how the P.A.G. was holding back my streaming career.

Pavel grabbed me by the arm. “Dude, where have you been?” he hissed. “Wait till you hear this—”

I cut him off. “Can't it wait? I've got to get home to my stream!”

“No!” he insisted. “Technically, this is world-changing.”

“Will you cut it out with the ‘technically’—”

Then I spotted it, and my entire chain of thought disappeared in a puff of smoke. The lid of the shoebox sat beside it on the kitchen counter. A small crowd had gathered around, a forest of arms reaching inside. Pink

flowered cookies were disappearing into mouths at an alarming rate. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Xavier stepping in from the backyard. If he saw this . . .

I turned my back on Pavel and lunged for the counter.

“Where are you going?” Pavel wailed.

There was no time to answer. Xavier was only one long stride away. And the cookie box? Empty.

All I could do was get the lid back on to hide the fact that the cookies were gone. At the last second, I tossed my phone in there just in case Xavier nudged the box and didn't feel his cookies rattling around. Yes, I knew—one phone didn't equal a load of baked goods. But there was no time to think it through. Anyway, it had to be better than nothing.

With Xavier a few people behind me in the kitchen, I had no choice but to push out into the mobbed living room. Now that I didn't have any more cookies to worry about, I used the shoebox as a battering ram. More high fives and hugs, but the good news was that String was nowhere in sight. A Plan B formed in my mind: I would plow straight through the heart of the party and out the front door.

I almost made it. By the time I hit the front foyer, I had the shoebox out in front of me like a cowcatcher. The front door yawned open directly in front of me. Only two people blocked my way.

“Cam—we’ve been looking all over for you!”

Chuck—my other best friend, the third member of the Awesome Threesome. With him was Daphne Leibowitz, who’d been the first person to join the P.A.G. without knowing it was a fake club. In my mind, I always blamed her for what had happened. But I also gave her credit, because the P.A.G. wasn’t all bad; it was just all bad for my lifestyle.

“We’ve got big news,” Daphne announced with a wink at Chuck.

It was never good when Daphne had big news. Chuck knew that as well as I did, but you couldn’t tell from the goofy grin on his face.

“We’re a ship,” he said, beaming.

“What—like the *Titanic*?” I asked.

“A *relationship*,” Daphne corrected. “We’re going out.”

Chuck put an arm around her, looking as proud as I’d ever seen him.

It took me a split second to realize that the crash I heard was just in my head. It was the sound of the entire world turning upside down.

At that very instant, the cookies rang. I was so stunned by the Chuck and Daphne bombshell that I fumbled my phone out of the shoebox. As it fell, I read the caller ID—Pavel, probably trying to warn me about the big announcement and save me a nasty shock.

The phone hit the tile floor with a bang. I scrambled to pick it up. Distorted by a jagged screen crack, Pavel's caller ID disappeared and was replaced by the picture of my streaming setup. The gaming part was blank, but there was a new posting on the comment feed. I squinted to read it: *Why isn't anything happening? This stream stinks! UNFOLLOW!*

If there was a word no streamer ever wanted to see, it was that one.

I had to do something about the P.A.G. My lifestyle depended on it.