

# ***POWER*** ***PLAYS***

***Maureen Ulrich***

COTEAU  
BOOKS  
FOR TEENS



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CITY OF REGINA

*For Randy, Robin and Blaire,  
and the girls and parents of the Estevan Xtreme.*

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# *chapter* *one*

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**I** stare at the clock on the classroom wall. 3:27. Three minutes until two days of freedom. Mr. Wallis is droning on and on at the front of the class about our homework assignments for Monday. Then he rolls right into a lecture about the Halloween Dance at the Beefeater Hotel tonight and how we all have to behave and set a good example for Estevan Junior High. Everyone just smiles and nods because they've heard it all before. I haven't, but it doesn't matter. I wouldn't go to that dance if my life depended on it.

Believe it or not, Mr. Wallis is one of the few EJH teachers I like. He's usually in a good mood, and he tries to make his classes interesting. He uses cool expressions like "beware of Greeks bearing gifts" and "we're just two ships passing in the night." On the down side, he is obsessed with making us write out our daily assignments in our agendas.

Suddenly I realize that everyone's staring at me. What did I miss?

“Jessie, I don’t see your agenda on your desk,” Mr. Wallis is saying.

I start to reach under my chair to get it. As I do so, my plastic seat makes a squonking noise, just like a fart.

Of course this is timed perfectly with dead silence. You would have to be deaf not to hear it. Everyone starts to snicker and Derrick, who never hears anything Mr. Wallis says, starts laughing like a hyena. That really gets everyone going. While Mr. Wallis tries to regain control, I dig like a gopher in my backpack, pretending to look for my agenda. I can feel everyone’s eyes burning holes in my back.

Mercifully Natalie Wilgenbush’s cellphone starts playing Christina Aguilera’s latest hit single, and Mr. Wallis makes a fuss because there’s a school rule banning cell-phones – not that Natalie cares. She gives him this pathetic story about a family emergency, and he falls for it hook, line and sinker.

By the time I sit up, things are pretty much back to normal. And then I notice that Kim Scott is smiling at me. And not in a friendly way.

Why would she? She’s definitely not my friend.

Still smiling, she deliberately pinches the end of her nose between her thumb and forefinger and squints her eyes. I scratch the bridge of my own nose with the tip of my middle finger and return the smile. That’s for you, Bimbo.

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When the bell rings, I hastily gather up my books and knapsack, determined to be the first one to leave.

“Jessie, I’d like to speak to you for a moment!” Mr. Wallis calls from across the room.

Great. While everybody files out, talking excitedly, I sink back into my seat. What now? Kim grins smugly as she cruises past.

When everyone is gone, Mr. Wallis closes the door. His plump face radiates concern as he leans over my desk. Here we go again, I think to myself. Fireside Chat Number Seven.

“I’m worried about you,” he says abruptly.

I’m sure he is. Frankly I’m a little worried myself, but there’s no way I’m telling him that. I make a deliberate effort not to look at the door, where Derrick and Jason are standing on tiptoe with their faces pressed against the rectangular window at the top.

“Have you made any friends since you moved here?”

I give him a big smile. “The girls in this school are stuck-up.”

Mr. Wallis raises an eyebrow, then picks up a brush and busily begins erasing the whiteboard, which is scrawled with Norse mythology notes. I know I’ve ticked him off. When the board is empty – and I say empty because it’s never clean, he turns and says, “I know it’s tough making an adjustment to a new city and a new school. Adolescence can be a difficult time for students, and it can be especially difficult...”

As he rambles on, I cross my arms and stare at the graffiti on the cover of my English binder, which is, in my humble opinion, a work of art. My three best friends in Saskatoon used to draw pictures on it. Bailey's cartoon is my favourite. She sketched a dairy cow's rear end with the head looking back over its left shoulder. There's a huge bubble coming out of its mouth saying: "Luv ya, J!" Keisha, Tayja, and I became best buds in kindergarten. Keisha and I have played ringette together since we were six. Then Bailey moved next door to me in Grade Five and our trio became a quartet. Mr. Oldershaw, our Grade Eight homeroom teacher, called us "the Fab Four."

When I look up again, Mr. Wallis has placed the brush back on the ledge and is staring at me. "When you first arrived, there were a number of girls, including Kim, who tried to be friendly."

I'd like to tell him that Kim and Natalie and the rest of the girls in this class have him wrapped around their little fingers, but I don't.

"The staff is very concerned about you – especially Mr. Kowalski."

I give him a shrug to indicate my lack of concern for Mr. Kowalski's feelings. The man makes us copy pages of notes – day after day. My hand is throbbing by the end of the class. Aren't we supposed to do experiments in science?

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Mr. Wallis rests his round bottom on the edge of the desk and clasps his hands around his bent knee. “You were in a gifted program last year. But you now appear content with 70s. You go home every day for lunch, and you don’t take part in extracurriculars. Wouldn’t you like to get the most out of Grade Nine before you head off to the Comp next year?”

Yeah, well if I still lived in Saskatoon, I’d be in Walter Murray Collegiate, and we would not be having this conversation.

He takes a deep breath and launches into a long speech on the importance of adaptation to a new environment and what it means to have school spirit and a bunch of other stuff I don’t pay much attention to.

When he stops to take a breath, I abruptly stand up and stuff my books into my backpack. “Can I go home now?” I ask him. “I have to babysit my sister.” That’s a lie, because Courtney figure skates after school every weekday.

“Of course.” He looks hurt, but he steps aside so I can pass. “Have a nice weekend. We’ll talk again on Monday.”

Don’t count on it.

The hallway is vacant. I throw my backpack on the floor and open my locker, grabbing my blue hoodie. As soon as I start to pull it over my head, I notice the huge brown stain, still wet. My binders and textbooks are soaked too.

Crap! Somebody’s poured Coke on my stuff – again.

I wipe up the mess as best I can with my hoodie and dig through the bottom of my locker in search of a plastic shopping bag. In the process, I find my ringette jacket, which I quit wearing weeks ago. At least it's dry, and since it's too cold to walk home in my t-shirt, I put it on. I shove my English books and agenda in the top of my locker, then roll up the hoodie and stuff it in my backpack, which I throw over my shoulder. I slam the locker shut and reattach the combination lock, even though it's pretty much useless because Kim and Natalie obviously know my combination.

Instead of using the Grade Nine entrance at the front, I head for the main staircase, thinking that I'll duck out the gym doors at the back of the school. What a stroke of luck that the only person I encounter along the way is Mr. Saxon, the custodian. As I hurry down the steps leading to the gym, the sounds of laughter and squeaky gym shoes drift upwards. One of the volleyball teams must be practising.

When I turn the corner, I nearly run into three girls standing beside the pop machine. They're all wearing gym shorts and t-shirts and holding bottles of Gatorade. The one with her back to me is Kim. I thought I recognized her laugh. Another is tall and broad-shouldered with her long, blonde hair pulled up in a ponytail. The third one has a slight build and short, dark, very curly hair.

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“He had a lot of good players to pick from,” the dark-haired girl is saying. “Maybe you didn’t have a good tryout.”

“Are you kidding? Jodi Palmer made that team because her dad’s the coach!”

Ah yes, everyone in our class knows about the global conspiracy to keep Kim off the Bantam AA boys’ hockey team.

I try to walk around them without being noticed, but Kim immediately calls out, “Hey, Jessie, how come you’re not wearing your hoodie?” The sarcasm in her voice is unmistakable.

I shrug my shoulders. “None of your business,” I reply. I try to step around her, but she moves too fast.

“Going to the dance tonight?” Kim asks.

“I have to stay home and babysit my sister.”

“That’s too bad. You really should get out more, Jessie. Get involved in school activities.”

Wouldn’t she just love that?

The dark-haired girl points at the crest on my jacket. “You play ringette?” she asks.

“Used to.”

I try to squeeze between them, but the tall blonde says, “You’re the new girl, right? What’s your name again?”

“Jessie McIntyre.”

That’s right. Six weeks later and I’m still the “new girl.” And probably will be until somebody else comes along. I hope it’s soon.

“I heard you’re a good setter. How come you didn’t try out for the volleyball team?” the dark-haired girl asks.

Kim laughs in a nasty sort of way, but I ignore her. “I moved here after tryouts,” I reply. Where did she hear about my setting? I’m lucky if I can get through a PE class without having a ball served at my head.

“That’s too bad. We could have used you. Kim here sucks at passing,” the blonde says, punching Kim lightly in the shoulder.

Kim’s face turns red. “Maybe you’d like to try winning at districts without me!” She screws the lid back on her Gatorade and walks off in a huff.

“Whoa, who peed in her cornflakes?” The dark girl turns to me. “Hey, Jessie. I’m Tara Brewer and this is Shauna Langley. We’re in 217.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I say it, but I don’t mean it. This whole thing could just be another set-up. Like the time Kim got Nicole Brown, one of the girls in Room 216, to hang out with me after school. Thanks to Nicole, Kim had enough information to humiliate me for a week.

“Ever think about playing hockey, instead of ringette?” Shauna asks, exchanging glances with Tara.

What did I tell you? Another set-up.

“Ever seen a ringette game?” I challenge her.

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“Two teams from Saskatoon and Regina did a clinic here a few years ago, and I watched for a while. It looked like fun.” Shauna quickly adds, “But I wouldn’t be caught dead doing it. Kind of like riding a moped – when you can ride a motorcycle.”

“Are you girls coming to practice or not?” an adult voice demands.

The three of us look over at Ms. Franklin, who stands at the gym entrance, hands resting on her hips and whistle dangling from her neck.

“Sure, Coach,” Shauna says quickly, heading for the gym. Tara is close on her heels. “Bye, Jessie. Talk to you again.” Not if I can help it.

**T**he crisp October air chills me as I step outside, but the sun is warm on my face. I cut across the school grounds and head east along the road which winds like a snake beside the edge of the valley. The baseball diamonds below are deserted.

The sun glints on the holding ponds just past the diamonds, and the prairie landscape beyond is pimpled with brown spill piles, remnants of the coal strip mining operation. The Shand and Boundary power stations puff streams of white smoke across a pale blue sky. I try not to look at the Shand, where my dad now works as an electrical engineer.

“I know this move will be hard for you,” he told me after he accepted a SaskPower transfer last May, “but you’ll have the entire summer to adjust. Maybe you can play some softball and make some new friends. By the time you start Grade Nine in the fall, you’ll be glad we moved.”

He lied. We didn’t arrive in Estevan until the second week of classes.

Two blocks from the school, there’s a small playground and paddling pool, which overlook the valley. I like to stop there on my way home. School gets out earlier in Estevan than it does in Saskatoon, so there’s no point in going on MSN until after four o’clock. I move to the south side of the brick change shack, so I can’t be seen from the street, then shrug off my backpack and dig out last year’s agenda from a zippered pocket on the side. Sitting down, I open the agenda and start flipping the pages. Every square centimeter is covered with notes Tayja, Bailey, Keisha and I wrote to each other during math class, like:

*J-girl ur 2 kewl Isaac thnks ur hot cul8r K*

I should show this to Mr. Wallis. Then he’d know what an agenda is for.

When Mr. Wallis introduced me to my homeroom, I felt like a total geek. I just knew everyone was staring at my

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mouth, which is way too large for my face. I wore my Stars jacket because I thought it would give me status.

I was so wrong.

The girls in my homeroom were nice enough at first. They were curious about Saskatoon, mainly wanting to know what the boys were like. Kim never said much. She just watched and listened while I babbled on and on about “the Fab Four” and Hugh Cairns Elementary and volleyball and ringette and softball. I must have sounded like an idiot.

The boys gave me a lot of attention too, and I guess I let that go to my head. I started going out with Riley the first week, then switched to Jason the next. My second major mistake. Suddenly the girls got all protective of “poor Riley.” Natalie Wilgenbush told me that Kim called me a tease, and I dissed Kim right to Natalie’s face. Mistake number three. Natalie just happens to be the biggest mouth at EJH and Kim Scott’s BFF. Thanks to MSN, word of my faux pas reached the Kremlin by nightfall.

The next day the girls stopped talking to me and started talking ABOUT me. I didn’t eat lunch at school because I had to walk Courtney home at noon and make her a sandwich. Noon is an important time at EJH. The students who stay at noon eat together in the gym and then go outside for twenty minutes to socialize. Everything happens at lunch. The flirting. The rumours. The breakups.

At first, I begged my mom to let me take a lunch, but she said I needed to look after Courtney. My mom can't seem to get used to the fact that Estevan is a much safer city than Saskatoon. She's way too protective of both Courtney and me. She won't let me have my own cellphone or computer or get a part-time job. And I can only go on MSN for one hour a day. That really sucks.

In the end, it turned out to be a good thing that I didn't eat lunch at school because I wouldn't have anyone to sit with anyway. For a while, the girls in my class pretty much ignored me.

And then things started to happen.

My shirt ended up in the toilet during PE class. My pencil case kept getting ripped off. Feet suddenly appeared in the aisle, tripping me. Nasty notes showed up in my locker. *Brown-noser!* they said. *Suck-up!* I quit trying to get good grades.

I know Kim is behind it all. She never misses the chance to stab me in the back.

Because of her comments on MSN, I blocked everybody except for my friends from Saskatoon and my cousins in Ontario. And I stopped accepting emails from Kim and her pals weeks ago.

I close the agenda and carefully return it to my backpack, then head for home. A pair of little girls rides past me on their

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bikes, giggling and talking in their high-pitched voices. Suddenly I feel very tired.

What did I ever do to make Kim hate me so much?