

CLOCKBREAKERS CHAPTER ONE

There are a few things you need to know about me. First, my name is Charles Kleis the 15th. And I'm a girl. My dad said that the first child in the family had to be named Charles – always had been, always will be – no matter what. So here I am: Charles Kleis the *Girl*.

Mom calls me Char. Dad seriously hates that. Everyone else calls me Charlie.

Maria looked my name up online. She says it means “free man,” and it's not just a boy's name. I reminded her it says “man,” but she ignored me. She thinks I'm breaking down barriers, taking down names, and one day, I'm going to rule the world.

Trent explained that the only thing I'm going to rule is the stupid name contest. But he was just mad because I clobbered him on the math speed test. Nobody ever beats me on the speed tests. Not even the fractions. I leave them in the dust.

But I'm moving too fast. Mr. Julian always says to tell them what they need to know first. Don't start right in the middle. So, like I said, my name is Charlie. I'm eleven years old with bright blonde hair and a big gap between my front teeth. It helps me whistle really loud.

I guess I should also tell you I'm in a wheelchair. I don't really care anymore, but other people seem to, so you'll probably want to know too. My legs don't work — not since second grade. But my wheelchair is wicked fast, all black wheels and shiny spokes, and I can outrun any kid in my class (except Maria – she's an all-star!). So the wheelchair's not that big of a deal. Seriously, it doesn't even get me out of gym class.

Nothing gets you out of Mr. Anderson's class. He has me doing push-ups against the wall, over and over again, even though I tell him it's not doing anything.

“Twenty more push-ups!” he yells.

“Yes sir!” I yell right back. That's fine with me. It's not like I'm missing anything with the leg stretches either.

Anyways, I have a dog named Cordelia and two yellow finches. I live at 232 Glastonbury Lane in Generation, Illinois. My teacher is Mr. Julian and my favorite color is blue.

Oh, and I met a minotaur.

I know, you want to know about the minotaur. I mean, body of a man, head of a bull? Who wouldn't want to hear about that? And I'll get to it. I will. But there's a lot more you need to know about first.

It all started the day I turned eleven years old. You see, my grandfather, Charlie Kleis the 13th, decided he was going to throw me a party. And not a regular party, either. He was planning one of those all-out torture-fests complete with singing, Aunt Melda's stories, and, of course, the slide-show. One hundred pictures of me eating, laughing, and trying to hide from Grandfather's camera. One hundred pictures of me I would rather everyone didn't see.

I could just imagine what Trent would say as Grandfather displayed pictures of me in my diapers. Probably something like "Nice shorts, Kleis." Then he would smile really big and everyone would laugh. Stupid Trent.

Whatever. It was going to be a long night, with no quick escape. Turning eleven is a real big deal in my family. When my cousin Rachel turned eleven, Grandfather bought her a pony. Seriously, a pony. She squealed.

"What's she gonna do with a pony?" I asked.

"Probably talk it to death," Maria replied.

"Yeah! She'll be all like, 'Hey pony! I love your hair. Where'd you get it done?'"

"And then she'd ask the pony about her shoes and what she thinks about blue eye shadow."

"Is it too much color for someone with brown eyes?"

Maria laughed. "We should go call the animal abuse hotline right now."

"Wait," I said. "Let's at least pet the thing first."

I have to give it to Grandfather – that pony was pretty cool.

You know, he's always giving presents like that. He loves throwing parties too: insufferable, never-ending parties.

Hey, don't get me wrong, his parties are usually awesome. I just hate it when all that attention is focused on *me*.

I've had enough of that these last few years. Counseling, physical therapy, careful conversations. And a party — well that was just bound to turn into an “Are-you-doing-okay?” festival.

That was everyone's favorite question for me. They'd see me and their brow would furrow and they'd look real serious and they'd say: “Oh, Charlie. Are you doing okay?”

I'm fine. And I am so sick of being asked.

Still, I was anxious to see what Grandfather was planning. You see, Grandfather lives on the rich side of town. The *really* rich side of town. Where there are gates around all the houses and each garage has more than four cars in it.

We live on the other side of town. In a small house. With one car. Dad works as a production engineer, and Mom is an artist. Not the kind you're thinking of, though. She does *performance* art. That means instead of painting the Mona Lisa, she might reenact it — for four hours — dressed up as a giant bee.

Maria says Mom does charades professionally. I say I've never seen anyone actually pay her.

A couple of months ago, when we were eating take-out from the Golden Garden Restaurant, I asked Dad why we can't just be rich like Grandfather.

“We *are* rich,” he said. “In our own way.” He adjusted his glasses and smiled at my Mom. She smiled back at him, eyes glistening.

“I don't want to be *that* kind of rich,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I want to be rich like Grandfather. With cooks, and maids, and my own gatekeeper.”

Dad slowly placed his fork down next to his box of noodles. “Maybe you will be some day. But until then, you should be happier with what you have.”

I paused for a moment, thinking about what he said. “I *am* happy,” I said, sticking my fork into my fried rice. “But how do you know I couldn't be happier?”

Dad picked his fork back up and stirred his noodles. He had a distant look in his eyes. He opened his mouth, but then quickly closed it. He didn't eat anything, but he didn't say anything either.

“You know, Charlie,” Mom finally said, “not everyone wants to be rich like Grandfather.”

“That's stupid. *Everyone* wants to be rich like Grandfather.”

She sent me to my room.

But they were both missing the point anyway. You see, Grandfather's not just rich. He's *really* rich. Like Bill Gates rich. And his house is like nothing you've ever seen. There are tall spires and large windows and at least seven different wings.

But his house is real weird, too. Some of the doorways are super big, and others look like the only thing that could fit would be a leprechaun. And then there's the parlor. You have to slide open glass doors to get into it, and it has this disgusting orange shag carpeting and dead deer hanging on the walls. But on the other side of the room, there's this giant, sparkling green marble archway that leads to the Rose Wing and the cherub fountain. All the rooms and all those wings just don't fit together right. It's like someone kept adding them on over the centuries.

As we drove over to Grandfather's house on the afternoon of my birthday, I grilled Mom about why his house looked like that.

"Like what, Char?" Mom asked.

"Charlie," Dad said.

"Like it's not all one house," I said. "Like it's so many different houses."

"It's old," Dad said. "Ancient, in fact. Your grandfather's grandfather had it shipped over from the old country. It took over the top of a whole steamer. That must have been quite an enterprise! They sailed over the Atlantic and up through the Gulf of St. Lawrence and through the Great Lakes and down the Rock River and they didn't stop until the rivers did. And that's how the house got to Generation."

"It's old," I said.

"It is." Dad put the car in park and shut off the engine. "That house seems to have a life of its own. I remember—"

Dad paused and stared at the road ahead, his words gone.

He did that a lot. He would be right in the middle of something – usually something real interesting – and he would wander off. Disappear into his own head. I knew it was no use trying to bring him back. He'd never get through the rest of the story anyway.

"Who's going to be at the party?" I asked Mom instead.

"Your grandfather invited the whole family and all your friends," she replied.

“*Which* friends?” I asked, tugging on the edge of my new purple glove, already dreading her answer.

“Maria,” Mom said.

I sighed with relief, but in the silence afterward, I knew there was more. “And?”

“And Rowan and Grace.”

“And?” I asked again.

“Trent,” she said.

I groaned. “Mom! Trent? Why? I thought you said he invited my friends!”

“Trent’s your friend,” Dad said, a blank look on his face.

“No, he’s not!”

“Well, his mother works with your dad,” Mom said, unbuckling her seatbelt. “Such a wonderful woman. I’ve been thinking of performing with her—”

“But it’s *my* birthday. I don’t see why Mr. Pottypants has to be there.”

Dad snapped back to life. “Do NOT call him that, Charles. It’s rude.”

I knew it was rude. And childish. And immature. But you know what? I didn’t care. “Why not? He peed his pants in the second grade. Everyone remembers.”

“Then I don’t think you need to remind them, young lady,” Dad said, catching my eye in the mirror before opening his door.

“Fine. I won’t call him Mr. Pottypants,” I said. Dad slammed his car door shut and I crossed my arms, sliding deeper into my wheelchair. “But I’m not going to be nice to him.”

Dad pulled my door open and unclipped the tie-down on my wheelchair. “Yes,” he insisted, “you are.”

His jaw flexed and his eyes narrowed.

I clenched my teeth. “Fine, I am.”

But I wasn't. Not really. If Dad knew the real Trent Baran, he'd understand why.

Trent's a jerk. Pure and simple. He whispers bad things about me behind my back. He says my blonde hair is stringy. That my clothes don't fit. That I'm weak. That I'm dirty. Last month, he told our entire homeroom that I tried to kiss Bobby after the football game. He said I pulled Bobby into my lap and wouldn't let him out of my wheelchair until he laid one on me. So gross. Like I would. I can't stand Bobby.

But Trent doesn't care. He's stupid and he's awful.

He wasn't always that way, though. He used to hang out with me and Maria all the time. We'd play cards during recess, go to the movies, and fight to sit next to each other in math class. We were inseparable.

But that was last year – before his parents got divorced.

After his parents got divorced, I tried to talk to him about it.

“You doing okay?” I asked. I didn't mean to ask that question. I *hated* that question. But it was the only thing I could think of.

“I'm fine,” he said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

Not the most revealing conversation. But I didn't want to press too hard. I wanted to give him his space, right?

After a couple of days, I asked him if he'd seen his dad lately, which I thought was a much better question, and, well, I guess you could say he lost it. He started saying mean stuff to me. Super mean stuff. Stuff that got him sent to the office. Stuff I shouldn't repeat. Stuff I don't want to repeat.

My therapist, Geneva, she says I put up too many walls — that I don't deal with my emotions. That I should talk to Trent about what he said and how it made me feel.

I told her, “I'm so sick of talking about it. We are *always* talking.”

“That’s the point of therapy, Charlie. We talk things through.”

“Well, it’s not very therapeutic for me.”

“Interesting. Let’s talk about that.”

Talk, talk, talk. I didn’t want to talk about what Trent said. I didn’t even want to think about it.

And it didn’t matter anyway. Right after that, Trent started missing school and getting in trouble. He even got suspended one time for breaking our classroom door. With his fist.

I still kept trying to be friends with him, but honestly, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be. He wasn’t the Trent I grew up with.

When he came back to school this year, though, something had changed. He was different. Funny again. Smiling more. But distant. That didn’t change anything, though. He still ignored me and Maria. Or was a total jerkface.

Last week, at school, Maria and I walked past the soccer field, and Bobby yelled at us to go back to computer class.

Trent joined in. “Nobody wants you here!” he yelled. “Go play with your laptop!”

Maria threw her fist in the air. “*Chicos*, I’ll show *you* how to play with your laptops!”

I’m not really sure what that meant, but Trent turned back toward the field and suddenly got really into putting on his cleats.

That’s the New Trent. He’s all into sports now. Soccer, baseball, hockey. He even started doing judo after school.

And I’m cool with that. Honest. It took a while, but I am. I mean, I’m happy he’s happy again.

But...I don’t get why he can’t just be happy with us.

When he does decide to talk to me, it’s all sass, smirks, and side comments. With his stupid brown hair that always gets in his stupid blue eyes when he’s glaring at you. And his smile. Ugh. You know that if you see his teeth – his perfectly white, beautiful teeth – he’s up to something. And it’s not going to be good.

Geez, stupid Trent.

My parents don't realize a thing though. He's always super-nice in front of them. And, for some dumb reason, he answered the door for my party.

He locked eyes with my Dad and stuck out his hand. "Oh, Mr. Kleis! It's great to see you." He pumped Dad's hand while Dad nodded his head.

"Good to see you too, Trent," Dad said.

"And good evening, Mrs. Kleis," he said, pulling my mom into a hug. She laughed, and then I saw it. Just as Trent pulled back, his beautiful white teeth broke into that smile. That awful smile. That dangerous smile. "And you brought your beautiful daughter," he said, and his eyes caught mine. "Happy Birthday, Charlie!"

Happy birthday, indeed.