



CINDY L. OTIS

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# chapter one

At least a dozen times a day, social media presents me with the chance to be a really terrible person, if I want to be. That's the thought that hits me at the boys' cross-country tryouts as I scroll through the pictures I just took and discover a series capturing the exact moment Michael Lai's shoelaces came undone, tripping him. Followed by the brutal few seconds after, when the four runners around him all collided and then landed in a giant tangled heap of arms and legs in the middle of the track.

As one of the fallen runners limps off the track, I flip through the pictures again before opening my Instagram account, *The Whine*. I could post the one of Michael Lai's humiliation that enabled junior Asher King's distant, *distant* third-place finish simply because he managed to avoid the pileup. Like, *the-winner-and-the-runner-up-were-already-at-the-water-stand-when-he-finished* distant third.

I finally settle on a few less dramatic ones of runners crossing the finish line from the accident-free previous heats, even though the pictures of the collision are pretty epic.

I stare at my screen for a minute before the right caption comes to me. Then my fingers fly as I tag the new boys' cross-country team. I look up from my phone to find Asher collapsed near me, guzzling water from a silver bottle and trying to ignore the argument two runners tripped by the errant shoelaces are having with Coach

Swensen, who's making notes on his clipboard with a frown. It's obvious to anyone watching that the results from the last heat were not what he wanted for his new team.

Even though Asher and I have chemistry together and are in the same grade, we've never spoken before, but somehow I find myself saying "Congrats" to him after I've hit post.

Maybe it's the embarrassed hunching of his shoulders or my love for a good underdog story that makes me say it. But Asher really is only an underdog when it comes to cross-country, because his parents own King Country Vineyards, a massive empire of vineyards, wineries, and tasting rooms across half of western New York. At least a third of the kids at school's parents work for the Kings in some way.

Asher turns toward me, looking a little dazed, his normally pale skin flushed red. "Thanks. I can't believe I'm on the team." He grins more widely than I would expect from a guy who only made the team because of an accident.

Coach Swensen blows his whistle in three long blasts to try to clear the field, but the runners who fell won't budge. Asher gets to his feet, suddenly becoming double my height, and sways a little.

"How long have you been running?" I ask.

Because of The Whine and my 3,272 followers (and counting), I make it my business to know everything, and I'm almost completely sure Asher wasn't on the team last year. Plus, his performance today screams *newbie*.

By the watercooler, one of the assistant coaches has joined in the argument over the fall and their voices get uncomfortably loud. If it

turns into an actual fight, I may have to rethink my plan to take the high road for my post on *The Whine*, but I kind of can't tear my gaze away from Asher King.

Asher's brown eyes flick to the scene and then back at me. "As long as I can remember. I mean, if you're not running, what are you even doing with your life?"

He chuckles like we're sharing some kind of inside joke, but then he looks down at me, in my wheelchair, and his smile crumbles.

His face was already red from the race, but it goes positively scarlet. "Uh, crap, I mean . . . there are plenty of other things people can do with their lives that I'm sure are, uh, very satisfying and . . . Oh god, I didn't mean it . . ."

I can feel my jaw tighten and my shoulders rise defensively. "No worries. I'll see you later."

When I turn around, my best friend, Ximena, is on the other side of the chain-link fence waiting for me. Thank god.

"Quuuu," Ximena calls through cupped hands like an announcer yelling "goaaaaaaal" during one of those soccer games her brothers always have loudly playing in the living room at her house.

"Be honest," I say when I'm near enough. "Are you here for me or just trying to scope out all the guys in itty-bitty shorts?"

"Duh, the guys in the shorts, *obviously*." She grins.

"Creeper."

"Don't tell Max. That's something my boyfriend should have to learn on his own."

“It’s adorable that you think he isn’t already fully aware of that fact.”

She laughs and opens the fence gate wide for me so I can come through. “Not gonna lie. When you texted you were coming to tryouts before the fair, I thought someone had hacked into your phone and was playing a prank,” she says, assuming my nearness to anything sports-related is the reason for my sour mood. And normally it’d be a good guess. I’m out of place among people who think running until you can’t feel your legs anymore is a fun way to spend time.

I shrug. “One of my followers kept complaining that I never covered sports stuff. They had a point, I guess. The Whine is supposed to be about all the happenings in the area. And in Canandaigua, this is basically the only thing that’s happening right now.”

“That may be the most depressing thing you’ve ever said to me. Thank god we’ll be living in New York City soon.” Ximena’s whole face brightens at the mention of our after-graduation plans.

“Soon? We’re only a month into our junior year, so we’ve got another—” My face scrunches as my brain tries unsuccessfully to do the math. “I don’t know, many hundreds of days, and we still have to actually convince a school to let us in.”

“Now, Quinnifred,” Ximena says in a dramatic voice, using her nickname for me when she thinks I’m being overly pessimistic about something. “Okay, true or false: Are track uniforms the most awkward sports attire of any sport played ever?”

“Definitely true. There was far too much dude leg hair on display

back there. And I practically broke my neck talking to Asher King to avoid looking at those tiny shorts.”

Ximena howls with laughter. After five years of being in a wheelchair full-time, I’ve learned to look down a lot. Otherwise, my life would be full of nothing but butts and crotches, which is tricky when people are standing right in front of me. That’s why I have bangs.

They’re not just normal bangs. When deployed properly, the mahogany fringe of hair across my forehead acts as magical blinders against potentially permanent mentally scarring images.

The parking lot is still mostly packed with cars as we cross it. It looks like most of the school stayed behind to go to the annual club fair, where the school’s clubs try to attract new members.

“So, what’s Asher like?” Ximena asks.

“I don’t know. Sweaty.”

“Sure, but also kind of cute, right? He’s so quiet at school, I don’t think I’ve ever heard him say more than a sentence or two.”

“He said plenty back there. Trust me.”

His words are still circling in my head like a swarm of angry hornets and Ximena is eyeing me curiously, so I tell her what he said.

“Oh my god.” Ximena’s lips pucker in annoyance. “I have my answer. The prince of the FLX is cute, sweaty, *and* a total idiot.”

“I mean, he seemed appropriately horrified when he realized what he’d said and everything. So . . . there’s that, I guess.”

“But it was a completely clueless thing for him to say. I hope you’re not letting it get to you. Like, clearly running is ridiculous and he’s in denial.”

I crack a smile. Ximena and I have been best friends since fourth grade, so I know she's been running with Max at least three days a week since they got together.

I can feel her brown eyes staring at me, waiting for me to respond, so I shrug. "I'm fine."

It's not that I haven't gotten those kinds of comments and worse before. In fact, I get them all the time. People tell me on the regular that their life would be over if they had to use a wheelchair like I do, or that they don't know how I get up in the morning. They don't ever seem to realize they're basically telling me to kill myself.

Sometimes I imagine I'm encased in bulletproof glass. Somehow just picturing a protective box around me makes all those thoughtless comments sting less.

But I can feel Asher's words chipping away at my box, spreading cracks across it like a spiderweb because in those few words he basically said my life has no value because I live it sitting down. The sound of Ximena's phone announcing a text interrupts my thoughts.

"Max says the fair's already started."

Ximena and I take the long, circuitous route to the gym with the one accessible entrance to our ancient two-story brick school—around the back, next to the dumpster, and about a million miles away from the accessible parking spaces in the front. It annoys me more than usual today, the whole making-accessibility-as-inconvenient-as-possible-for-the-disabled-person thing, when I'm still stinging from Asher King's words. But the feelings get sucked up by the noise of the gym that hits us as soon as Ximena opens the heavy door.



A sea of students move up and down rows of tables, each one hosted by a different school club, under the bright fluorescent lights. Ximena's eyes immediately scan the room, hunting for Max. She stands on her tiptoes to see over the crowd and squeals, like she didn't just see him at lunch.

"Max is at the student council table helping Adrian. Let's go say hi."

Even though Max is a linebacker on the Tigers football team and therefore approximately three times my size, I still can't see him or Adrian's much smaller frame in the thick crowd. I shudder inside at the thought of trying to push my way through so many bodies. Even magic bangs are no match for a packed high school gym.

"Go ahead. I'll be there in a minute. I want to take some pictures for my next post first."

I pull out my phone and make like I'm going to snap some pictures, but stow it back under my leg once Ximena jogs away in the direction of Max. I push lazily against my wheels, angling myself along the edge of the worst of the crowd, letting my eyes skim over the colorful posters each club has taped to their tables.

I spot my sister's rainbow Love Is Love patch on the back of her purple backpack, almost as bright as the purple streaks in her hair, as she lingers at the Model UN table, where she's the lone visitor at the farthest end of the gym. As I near, she bends over a clipboard and signs her name in her looping scrawl.

"See you Tuesday, Ava," Bryce Marks, a senior, says. She smiles widely at my sister from under a black beret, behind the table. "We're going to have so much fun."

“What’s a future biochemist need Model UN for?” I ask.

“It can only help to show colleges I’m well-rounded.” Ava hands the clipboard back to Bryce and tucks her shoulder-length hair behind her ear.

“Oh, I see.” I pick up a blue bound booklet from the table with the title “Model UN: A Guide to Parliamentary Procedure and Negotiation.” “Well, maybe I can grab a few pictures for The Whine of you and Bryce discussing this fascinating tome.”

Ava rolls her eyes. “That’s a no.”

“There’s really nothing to it,” Bryce says. “Parliamentary procedure is actually a blast once you get the hang of it.”

“I’m sure.” I struggle to hold back a laugh. Even though I don’t actually know what parliamentary procedure is exactly, I feel pretty confident that it’s not a blast.

“See you Tuesday,” Ava says.

Ava and I turn toward the crowd. “I think the only club left you haven’t officially joined is Chess Club,” I say.

“Ooh, Chess Club.”

Ava doesn’t just have wide interests. She’s naturally good at anything she tries. After a month of being in chorus, she got cast as Cinderella in last year’s production of *Into the Woods*.

She glances around the gym but then nods at the empty space beside me. “Where’s Ximena?”

“One guess.”

“They’re really cute together,” Ava says in that pushy-big-sister tone

she gets from thinking the eleven-and-a-half-month lead she has on me in age means she always knows best.

“I’m not saying they’re not.”

It’s not that I don’t like Max. He’s actually really cool. But it’s like Ximena grew an internal compass when they started officially going out at the end of last year, and it’s forever pointing to him. So when we’re together, it’s like she’s killing time until she’s with him again. I mean, she spent all of our free period in the library today texting him under the table and stifling giggles at his replies.

At least Ava’s never disappeared into a relationship. Whether she’s gone out with boys or girls, her relationships have always been reliably short.

We start slowly wandering among the tables, and I stop to take a few pictures. I have to be stealthy about it because people start posing as soon as they see me with my phone. It makes it almost impossible to ever get candid shots for *The Whine*.

“What are you signing up for this year? You could always rejoin the newspaper,” she says.

I shrug. “Between *The Whine*, working at the store, and homework, I’m not sure I’ve got time for anything else.”

“You really need to step it up this year, Quinn, if you want to stand out to colleges.”

“My only Bs have been in math classes, and I accepted the fact long ago that I’ll never go into a career that requires numbers. As long as I keep the rest of my grades up, I’m not worried.”

I could lie to myself and pretend that my confident tone comes from Ximena's unshakable belief in our post-high school plans or that I really do think I'm a shoo-in for NYU, my dream school, but it's definitely because Ava has been on this relentless college kick with me lately and I'm over it.

My sister is in the running for valedictorian or salutatorian. So next to her almost 5.0 of basically all AP classes, participation in every school club, and volunteer work at the food bank in Geneva, I, the mostly all-As student who works part-time at her family's gift shop and runs a moderately successful social media account with three paying sponsors, come off looking like a slacker. I keep my eyes focused ahead so I don't accidentally plow into someone, but I can feel Ava's disappointment.

"Ladies," Principal Stewart says to us as he passes. He's wearing a short-sleeved blue button-up shirt and a tie printed with text slang, like *LOL* and *TTYL*. I'm sure he thinks it makes him look cool and approachable, but it doesn't because he's neither. He glances disapprovingly at my phone, which I just picked up to take a picture of the Drama Club, who started posing as soon as they saw me lift my phone.

"I wonder if Principal Stewart finds it as funny as I do that his favorite student and his least favorite student are sisters," I say as I snap a few more pictures after he's disappeared into the crowd.

"You're not his least favorite student." Ava doesn't bother to argue that she secured the favorite spot as a freshman.

"Oh, she is," Ximena says, suddenly appearing behind us with a trailing Max.

“It’s because he hates free speech,” I say. “He can’t stand The Whine because it’s not an official school social media account he can control.”

Even though my name isn’t in the profile, it’s no secret I run The Whine. I’ve been doing it since seventh grade.

“Or it’s because he may or may not have heard you call him a dictator under your breath last year after he told you that you couldn’t post anything from inside classrooms,” Ximena says.

“He definitely heard you,” Max confirms. “I was there to witness that blue vein in his forehead popping out more than normal.” He draws an invisible line straight across the light brown skin of his forehead with his finger.

“But where was the lie? When I did newspaper freshman year, every issue of the *Daily Stripe* read like one long advertisement for him and the school.”

“Like any benevolent dictator, you know Little Stewie can’t have anyone questioning his authority.” Ximena’s voice rises into a high-pitched chirp when she says her nickname for Principal Stewart.

When we turn a corner to head up the next row of tables, a large hand shoots out in front of my face, displaying a chocolate chip cookie wrapped in gold cellophane. I grip my wheels hard to stop before I slam into the set of legs in front of me. I look up sharply.

“Cookie?” Cade Bird asks, looking back down at me with unnervingly friendly gray eyes and a smile stretched across his pale white face.

“Uh—” The last time Cade spoke to me directly was in seventh grade, when he called me Skeletor after my rheumatoid arthritis had

been raging, killing all the good parts inside me, like bone marrow and cartilage, and leaving me with swollen, knob-like joints and persistent pain. He then promptly shoved my chair, and therefore me, into the nearest wall.

He drops the cookie into my hands before pulling more out of a canvas tote bag and passing them to Ximena, Ava, and Max. “My friends and I started a new school club called Defend Kids. We’re having a bake sale to raise money to help find two kids from Rochester who went missing a couple weeks ago. We’re going to have a table outside the cafeteria this week during lunch selling baked goods, but this one’s on the house.”

Behind him, Brayden Masterson is also passing out cookies, and Lily di Agostino corrals anyone passing into adding their name to their clipboard. The signs at every other club table are nothing fancier than butcher paper or poster board, but Cade’s table is draped in an expensive-looking black vinyl banner that says *Defend Kids* in gold lettering.

“You should come by. If you like the cookies, you’ll love my cupcakes.” Cade’s smile widens, and it occurs to me that this may be the first time I’ve seen his mouth move into any shape other than a snarl.

Still, I hold the cookie out in front of me, trying to keep a little distance from it in case it’s poisoned or something.

“Thanks,” Ava says. “We’ll check it out.”

Cade smiles again and weaves through the crowd, handing out cookies to people looking as startled as we are.

“Okay, what just happened?” Max blinks dazedly at the cookie in his hand.

“Careful. He and his minions probably mixed dog poop into the batter and are going to announce what they’ve done as soon as everyone’s eaten them.” Ximena brings the cookie up to her nose and cautiously sniffs it. “It’s not worth the risk.” She collects our cookies and dumps them in the nearest trash can.

Ava eyes the table.

“You’re not actually going to check out a club run by Cade Bird, are you?” I ask Ava. “I know you’re on a join-everything kick, but you’ve got to have *some* standards.”

“Maybe he’s changed?” she offers.

I don’t even try to hold back a snort. “Cade Bird doesn’t do organized school activities, unless you count bullying classmates in a group. It’s probably some new punishment Principal Stewart came up with because detention wasn’t working. Like mandatory community service or something.”

“I don’t know. He actually seemed legitimately into it.” Max wraps his massive arms around Ximena from behind her and she leans into him.

“A club about *kids*? I don’t buy it,” Ximena says, and I nod in agreement.

I’m pretty sure Cade Bird was born a jerk and he’ll die a jerk. But here he is volunteering his time, participating in an actual school activity, and . . . baking apparently?

“I’m going to do another lap before it’s over,” Ava says, like circling

the gym one more time will magically produce a new row of clubs she can join. "I'll catch you guys later."

Max reluctantly pulls away from Ximena. "I better get back to help Adrian start packing up the booth."

"Okay, but please remind him that *he's* the junior class secretary, not you," she says, and Max laughs.

"Got it." But a second later, Max starts packing up the booth while Adrian stares down at his phone.

Ximena and I visit a few more tables, and as the crowd thins, I take more pictures for my post.

"Okay, I've officially had enough school for one day. Think Ava wants a ride home, too?" Ximena asks.

I see Ava at the Chess Club table, with a clipboard and pen in her hands. I shake my head. "She's probably going to be here awhile."