Love is more than meets the eye.

A NOVEL BY

JOSH SUNDQUIST

AUTHOR OF *WE SHOULD HANG OUT SOMETIME*

LOVE AND F1RST SIGHT

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Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston

Also by Josh Sundquist

Just Don't Fall

We Should Hang Out Sometime

Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
Visit us at LBYR.com

Originally published in hardcover and ebook by Little, Brown and Company in January 2017
First Trade Paperback Edition: January 2018

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:
Names: Sundquist, Josh, author.
Title: Love and first sight / by Josh Sundquist.
Description: First edition. | New York : Little, Brown and Company, 2017. |
Summary: "Sixteen-year-old blind teen Will Porter undergoes an experimental surgery that enables him to see for the first time, all while navigating a new school, new friends, and a crush"— Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015044093| ISBN 9780316305358 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780316305334 (ebook) | ISBN 9780316305372 (library edition ebook)
Subjects: | CYAC: Blind—Fiction. | People with disabilities—Fiction. | High Schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S866 Lo 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015044093

ISBNs: 978-0-316-30536-5 (pbk.), 978-0-316-30533-4 (ebook)

CHAPTER 1

Vice Principal Larry Johnston extends his hand.

To clarify: I don't see this. I hear the swish of his shirtsleeve.

"Nice to meet you, William."

The fabric sound plays again—the hand retracting.

"I'm sorry, I guess you can't do that now, can you? You probably want to feel my face?"

He grabs my arm and smacks my palm against his cheek, knocking me off balance so I have to step into the musk of his aftershave.

"Where do you normally start? Eyes? Nose? Mouth?"

He shifts my fingers across the front of his face with each suggestion. His skin is rough and pockmarked, like the outside of an orange.

"No, actually, I don't do that," I say, pulling my hand away. "I identify people based on their voices."

"And . . . also . . ." I add. I can't resist.

"Yes?" he asks, all eager to please.

"Well, I don't usually touch faces, but I am gifted with a heightened sense of smell that allows me to recognize a person's pheromones, which are concentrated just below the ear, so if you wouldn't mind...?"

I touch my pointer finger to my nose.

His excitement drops. "Oh...you want to...smell... my ear?"

"Pheromones are like faces to me. Only if it's not too much trouble, sir."

"Oh, no, no trouble at all. I just...No trouble, certainly I would like to accommodate you."

He steps close enough that I can feel the heat of his body, which is a signal that (a) he is falling for it—sighted people always do, the suckers—and (b) I've taken the joke far enough. I don't actually want my nose anywhere near his old-guy earwax, after all.

"Mr. Johnston, I'm kidding." I hold a hand up to stop him. It sinks deep into fat rolls, presumably around his midsection. I hope. "A joke, sir. I don't want to smell your ear."

When I pull my hand away, I wonder if it leaves a visible handprint or even fingerprints in his squishy flesh. I've heard that happens when you press an open palm against a soft surface like sand, dough, or wet paint.

"Oh, right, yes." He lets out a forced chuckle that sounds like a wheezy smoker's cough. "A joke. Yes. Very funny."

Mr. Johnston's voice is deep and grizzly. If you listen carefully, you learn that a particular set of vocal cords produces audio vibrations unlike any other in the world. Voices are the fingerprints of sound.

"Shall we head to your first class?" he asks.

He grabs my arm from behind and starts to push me out of the front office. I'm sure he thinks it's helpful to lead me like that, but I instinctively swap our positions so I am holding his arm instead.

"I'd prefer we walk like this," I say. Now I'm in control. I can let go at any time.

"Yes, all right, that's fine," he says.

I've spent most of my sixteen years around other blind and visually impaired people, so this is the first time I've actually had to execute a Hines Break in real life. Fortunately, Mrs. Chin made me practice so many times I could do it automatically with Mr. Johnston. The main purpose of this little arm reversal is that it puts me in charge. To put it in dating terms, I can now be the dumper rather than the dumpee.

I've heard the horror stories: Blind people standing on street corners waiting for a crosswalk light to change, only to have a well-meaning but annoying stranger come up from behind, grab their arm, and say (overly loud, of course, because they always assume we are all deaf, too) "LET ME HELP YOU!" and shove them across a street they were not intending to cross. And then the stranger

lets go and disappears into the void ("YOU'RE WELCOME!"), leaving the blind person stranded on an unknown street corner.

I feel the floor change from the carpet of Mr. Johnston's office to the hard tile of the hallway as I follow him through the doorway.

"Can we start at the front door?" I ask. "That's where I'll be coming in each morning, I assume."

"Isn't that where you came in today?" he asks.

"Yes, but my mom took me from there to your office."

"Well, then, simply imagine that instead of turning into the office, you walked in this direction toward the stairwell, and you'll be on your way to first period."

He starts to walk, presumably toward said stairwell. But I stand still, gripping his arm tightly so he is forced to stop. (Behold the mighty power of the Hines Break!)

"It doesn't work like that. I can't . . ." I drift off.

I hate sentences that start with "I can't."

But as it happens, I was born completely blind, so one thing I truly can't do is imagine an overhead map and then make up different routes or shortcuts. I can walk from A to B, yes, but only if I memorize a list of actions: How many steps to take and when to turn and then how many more steps to take before I'm there. I can sniff odors like a bloodhound and echolocate sounds like a bat, but it is simply impossible for me to infer a new route using my imagination.

"Look, Mr. Johnston, can we just start at the front door, please? That would be much easier for me."

"Are you sure you don't want us to assign you a full-time aide? The state would gladly pay—"

"I know, I know, but that's not why I transferred here. Having a babysitter walk me around school every day is not going to help my street cred."

Honestly, it's not just about my street cred. I transferred because I want to prove that I can live independently in the sighted world. No dependence on charity. No *neediness.*

My parents sent me off to the school for the blind back when I was little. Right after the Incident. It was "for my own good," to "protect me," and blah, blah, blah. But if I want to eventually land my dream job, to make a name for myself as the Stevie Wonder of journalism, it's not going to happen within the confines of the blind bubble—excuse me, the *visually impaired community.* I have to go mainstream.

I hear Mr. Johnston sigh. But when he speaks, there's a hint of sympathy in his voice, as if maybe he was once young enough to care about his own street cred. Or maybe he still does. "Very well, William, to the front door we shall go."

He guides me there.

"First I need to get my bearings," I say.

"Well, the door is in front of you, the wall is beside—"

"No," I say, pulling my iPhone out of my pocket. "I literally need compass bearings."

My compass app tells me I will enter the building facing west.

Got it: west. (Seriously, how did anyone get by before talking smartphones?)

"Mr. Johnston, let's head to English. If possible," I say, "please walk in a straight line and tell me when we are going to change directions."

"Very well."

We walk twelve steps west, twenty-three steps south, and then turn west again. Mr. Johnston tells me we are at the base of a stairwell. I hear footsteps rushing by on both sides of us, students in a hurry to get to first period.

Up to this point, I've kept my white cane folded in my back pocket. No use drawing attention to myself if I don't have to. But I'll feel safer using the cane on stairs than relying on a vice principal with a lifetime total of three minutes' experience guiding a blind person.

I pull it out and, with a quick flick of my wrist, snap the whole thing open. People have told me this looks like a *Star Wars* lightsaber turning on. That's not a particularly helpful description for me, though. Which also makes me wonder why it's called a "white cane" in the first place, since the people who use them can't see its color.

Anyway, I reach out for the handrail, but my fingers grab something soft instead. A body part. Chest level. *Boob alert.*

"Oh, my God, I am SO sorry, I tooootally didn't see you there," says a female voice.

That's what a white cane will do for you: Not only can

you get away with copping a feel, the girl assumes it was her fault and *apologizes* for it. Let me assure you, random girl, you have nothing to be sorry about. Completely my fault. And my pleasure.

"No problem," I tell her. "I didn't *see* you, either."

She doesn't laugh. She is already gone before I say it, the sound of her footsteps lost in the shuffle.

I hate that. When I discover I'm talking to someone who has already walked away. Feels like when you tell some long story into your cell phone and you wonder why the person has been silent for a while and then you realize the call was dropped at some point.

At the top of this flight of stairs, Mr. Johnston tells me we are going to turn 180 degrees and go up another. I continue to climb with one hand on the rail and the other pencil-gripping my cane as it surveys the next step. Once we've reached the second floor, I fold the cane and return it to my right back pocket. I can feel how the fabric of my jeans has stretched around that shape, the form of my folded cane. For the first time, I wonder if this distortion is visible.

Footsteps drop all around us like a heavy rainstorm. As Mr. Johnston guides me eighteen steps east through the crowded hallway, he shouts, "Clear a path, people! Blind student coming through! Blind student coming through!"

Wow, thanks, Mr. Johnston. I'm sure this is gaining me *so* many popularity points at my new school. My election as Prom King is now all but assured.

We pause at the door to my classroom so I can dictate the directions into my phone. ("Enter building, walk twelve steps west, turn south, walk twenty-three steps...") I'll have Siri read them back to me after school until I've got the route memorized.

"Attention, everyone!" Mr. Johnston says as soon as we cross the threshold. His voice sounds pleased, maybe even surprised, by its ability to silence the chattering room. "This is Will, a student who has transferred to our school this year. He's blind."

Perhaps because this is English class, he adds a helpful definition of the word: "He can't see anything...nothing at all." He pauses to allow the gravity of my tragic situation to sink in. "Life is very difficult for him. Please offer him your assistance whenever you can, because—"

"You know I'm still standing right beside you, right?" I interrupt.

There's a snort of laughter from the students, and Mr. Johnston's arm stiffens against my fingers. It's probably unwise to make fun of your guide, the guy who has the capacity to lead you, say, directly into a brick wall. But come on, I don't need eyesight to know his speech was making the entire room squirm.

"Yes, William, I—I..." he stammers.

"Listen, sorry, I appreciate your help," I say. "Can you guide me to the teacher?"

"I'm right here, William. Or do you prefer Will?" asks a female voice standing maybe two arm lengths away.

"Most people call me Will," I say.

"I'm Mrs. Everbrook. I'll take it from here, Larry."

"Very well," says Mr. Johnston. "William . . . er, Will, I will meet you at the end of this period to escort you to your next class."

He shuffles out.

"The bell hasn't rung yet, boys and girls," says Mrs. Everbrook. "Until it does, you can go back to texting underneath your desks and I'll go back to pretending I don't notice you have your cell phones out of your lockers."

Unlike Mr. Johnston's, hers sounds like a voice people listen to.

"Will, there's a desk open immediately to your right," she says. I sit. She continues, "I was told you'd be in my class, so I've already talked to the library, and they can get you all the books we'll be reading this term. Do you prefer braille or audiobooks?"

"Braille, please. And thank you. For talking to the library, I mean."

"No problem. Whatever else you need, just ask. I'm happy to help. Otherwise, you get the same treatment as everyone else. This is Honors English, and I expect honors-level work from you."

"Thank you," I say. "That's very nice."

"You may change that opinion after I grade your first paper. No one has ever accused me of being nice. But I try to be fair."

"Then I hope this request appeals to your sense of

fairness: I type notes into my phone during class so that it can read them back to me later. Is that all right?"

"Fine by me. Just don't let me catch you texting your girlfriend during class."

If I had a girlfriend, I think.

I dated several girls back at the school for the blind. But it would be different here. Dating a girl without a visual impairment, I couldn't help but be beholden to her. Dependent. *Needy.*

"Oh, no girlfriend, huh?" she asks.

"How can you tell?"

"Your inability to see doesn't stop your face from speaking what's on your mind."

"Hmmm. Well, I did meet a girl downstairs this morning. She seemed nice."

"Anything else?"

"She was also very apologetic."

"I don't care about the personality of your crush, Will. I mean any other accommodations you need?"

"I wear one earbud in my ear."

"Because?"

"My phone reads everything on-screen to me—the names of apps, the selections on menus, all that. The earbud will let me hear the phone without disturbing the class."

"How about that? Anyway, it's fine. You can use your headphones. Just don't—"

"Let you catch me listening to music in class? Got it."

"I was actually going to say anything other than country."

"What?"

"Don't let me catch you listening to anything other than country music during my class."

"I'm not into country, so I guess I'll just be listening to you teach."

"I like you, Will. I think we're going to get along just fine."

Which is good, because it turns out I have her again for third period. And that class begins with a major social disaster.

CHAPTER 2

In between each class, Mr. Johnston takes me by my locker so I can learn the route from each classroom. On my locker, the school has replaced the standard spinning numerical padlock with one that opens when you press in a certain combination of up, down, right, and left on the face of the lock. Like unlocking a cheat-code with a controller on an old video game system.

On the way to third period, Mr. Johnston asks why I'm not wearing sunglasses.

"What do you mean?" I ask, playing dumb.

"Well, you know, many individuals with, um, your condition wear sunglasses. Are your people maybe sensitive to sunlight?"

"I think you are getting us confused with vampires," I say, and leave it at that.

He does his fake laugh-snort, but I know he's still desperately curious. Probably also wants to know if I can have dreams. Whatever. He can Google it later.

I don't wear sunglasses for the same reason I left the school for the blind: The vast majority of the world doesn't wear sunglasses indoors, and I want to fit in. I'm not trying to fake anything, but there's no reason to call attention to what makes me different.

I ask Mr. Johnston to leave me at the doorway to Mrs. Everbrook's classroom, and then I walk to the same desk I sat in during Honors English. I already know the route, after all.

When the bell rings, Mrs. Everbrook addresses the class.

"Boys and girls, welcome to journalism. This is unlike any other class you will take during high school. We don't have textbooks. We don't have tests. We don't have lectures. We work together to write, edit, print, and distribute a newspaper, and you will be graded based on how well you contribute to that goal."

I hear quick footsteps as someone walks in late.

"Do you have a note for being tardy, Xander?"

"No."

I recognize the sound of his voice from the morning announcements that played on the television in English during first period.

"Then don't let it happen again." She continues to the class, "As I was saying. In my English classes, you all are always asking me how diagramming sentences will help you in the real world. Well, I'll let you in on a little secret: It probably won't. But everything we do in *this* class *is* real world. We're running a real business funded by

the real money from the ads we sell. Our end product is a real print publication. Plus, as the school's most esteemed group of student journalists from each grade, some of you will play a role in producing the morning announcements show at the start of every day. You can even audition to be one of the hosts if you want to try to end the three-year streak of our tardy friend Xander and his cohost, Victoria."

I hear her get up from her desk and step in front of it.

"This is your staff handbook and our publishing schedule for the year. Take one and pass it on."

Something heavy thuds onto a desk several arm lengths in front of me. Sheets slide off, and I hear another thud, this time a little closer, on the desk in front of me. Paper is removed, and the pile hits my desk. It's not like I can do much with a printed handbook, but I don't want to stand out for not taking one, so I tug at the top sheet, and it pulls with it a stapled packet about ten pages thick. I pick up the remainder of the stack, which is big and heavy enough to require both hands, rotate in my seat, and drop it on the desk behind mine.

Only, there's no thud. I suppose if you calculated the acceleration due to gravity, you'd find that the time the stack traveled to reach the floor was inconsequentially longer than it would have had to travel to reach a desk, but in that millisecond, I live a thousand lives and die a thousand social deaths. The thump when the pages finally hit the ground—since apparently I am at the end of a row—is followed by the racket of pages bouncing and sliding off the pile.

The class erupts in laughter. After all, they don't yet know that I can't see. If they did, they probably wouldn't find it funny.

"Calm down, everyone, all right, that's enough," says Mrs. Everbrook. She's coming toward me, and she squats to rake up the pages. "That could happen to anyone on his first day at a new school. This is Will. He's . . . well . . . as you can tell, he's . . . a transfer student. So be nice to him."

She sets a soft hand on my shoulder as she walks by and returns to her drill sergeant voice.

"Now, some of you"—she pauses and repeats herself, projecting to various sections of the room—"*some* of you took this class because you thought it sounded easy . . . or maybe even fun. Well, it's only fun if you like hard work, because it certainly ain't easy. And yes, I know *ain't* isn't proper grammar, but we ain't in English class anymore. This here's *journalism*. So if you're looking for an easy A, go to your guidance counselor today and switch to one of those 'fun' electives"—she makes *fun* sound downright offensive—"like finger painting or basket weaving or yearbook or whatever they are offering these days."

There are some snickers, but they are interrupted by a shriek from directly across the room.

"Stop staring!" shouts a female voice.

I hear a chair push back with a screech before someone runs by me and out into the hall, crying.

"All right, boys and girls, I guess I should have told you this earlier, but I was trying to respect Will's privacy.

Seems I made a mistake. Anyway, Will, our new transfer student, is blind."

There are several loud gasps. It's a stronger reaction than I'm used to.

"Don't worry, people, it's not contagious," I say.

But no one laughs.

"All righty, then, big first day," says Mrs. Everbrook. "I guess this is as good a time as any to let you all know that Victoria is going to be our editor in chief this year. Her duties will include, among other things, chasing down crying staff members. Victoria, would you please see to it that Cecily is all right?"

"No problem," says a voice I assume belongs to Victoria. She marches efficiently out of the room.

Mrs. Everbrook approaches my desk and says quietly, "Will, you were staring at Cecily."

"I thought we just established—"

"Yes, I know that, but she didn't. So she thought you were staring."

"And that made her cry?" I ask.

"I'm sure you've heard before that some people are sensitive about being stared at," says Mrs. Everbrook. "Cecily is . . . she's just one of those people. Do you understand?"

"I guess."

But I don't, not really. I feel my face getting hot, and I wonder if the other students can see the temperature change on my skin. Are they all staring at me right now?

Mom *hates* it when people stare at me. Especially when I was little, before the Incident and thus before I went to the school for the blind. She would take me grocery shopping or whatever, and I'd be walking down the aisle with my little tiny white cane in one hand, the other holding her by the wrist—she always insisted I grip her like that instead of holding hands so that I would grow up comfortable with being guided—and some other kid would look at me funny, and Mom would go all Mama Bear, roaring, "If you stare, you'll go blind, too!" And the kid would run off crying.

She's always been that way. Overprotective. Not for my sake as much as for hers. I think she wants my life to be easy because it will make her life easy. She can't let me fail because then everyone would think *she* failed as a mother.

So that's why she yells at people for staring. And why she tries to make me "fit in" so they don't stare in the first place. She's actually always wanted me to wear sunglasses in public.

And I guess she was right about that one, because here I am now, making some girl cry because she thought *I* was staring at *her.* Wouldn't have happened if I had been wearing the glasses.

• • •

After journalism is lunch. Mr. Johnston invites me to eat with him in the staff lounge, but I decline. He deposits

me in the cafeteria, where I stand holding my cane in one hand and a bag lunch in the other. Is the entire room staring at me? Or am I invisible to them? I don't know. All I have to go on is the sound of hundreds of people talking at once, the voices blending together so that I can't pick out individual conversations.

The noise of the cafeteria is not unlike the *smell* of the cafeteria. It combines the long list of foods that are being consumed today, or have been consumed in this room at some point in the past, into one overpowering yet nondescript odor that welcomes you like a smack across the face.

I walk forward until my cane clinks against the metal legs of a chair. Further cane taps determine that the chair is already pulled out from a circular lunch table.

"Excuse me, is anyone sitting at this table?" I ask the void.

In return, I get nothing but the chattering voices of the room.

"No one?"

No response.

So I sit. But instead of a chair, my butt makes contact with another animate life-form. A pair of legs, I think. I jump.

"What the—" I holler, completely startled.

"AHHHH!" comes from the owner of the legs.

I drop my cane.

Mrs. Chin always said that a blind person losing a cane is like a sighted person dropping a flashlight and having it

turn off after it hits the ground in a dark room. Not only will I have to find the cane, I will have to do so on hands and knees because I've lost the very thing that normally helps me detect lost objects.

"Dude, let me get that for you," says the owner of the legs. With enviable quickness, he retrieves the cane and places it in my hand. "There you go. Sorry, bro. So sorry. That was majorly awkward and totally my fault."

"It's all right. But, I mean, did you hear me ask if anyone—"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you. Like I said, I'm sorry, it was totally messed up not to answer you. I just... I don't know, I saw you walking over here and froze. Look, you wanna sit down? The chair next to me is empty."

I hesitate.

He says, "I swear, no surprise occupants."

I sit down. "Okay, sure, thanks."

"I'm Nick, by the way."

"Will."

I reach my hand toward his voice, and he shakes it. (Side note, Mr. Johnston: I am perfectly capable of shaking hands.)

I hear more people sit down at the table.

"So, Will, before we have any more awkward butt contact, I should introduce you to my friends," says Nick. He's loud. Loud enough that I assume much of the cafeteria is forced to listen to his nasally proclamations.

"*Friend.* Singular," says a female voice to my right.

"I'm retracting my friendship with you, so you've only got one left."

"That's Ion. We've been feuding recently," Nick says to me. "Argument about time travel. Won't bore you with the details. She's just pissed because she knows I'm right."

"*Please.* Another dimension is the only explanation that—" says Ion.

"If you had the technology to travel in time, you could obviously figure out how to remain—" interrupts Nick.

"WHOA, WHOA," I say, overpowering their voices. "Too much talking at once. You are welcome to bore me with the details, but at least take turns, please."

"Okay," says Nick. "SparkNotes version: A while ago some geeks made a permanent monument out of stone or whatever that was inscribed with an invitation to a party that would be thrown in honor of time travelers from the future. The idea was that millions of years from now, when time travel exists, the stone invitation thingy would still be around, and humans of the future would see it and travel back in time to attend the party. The only problem was—"

"No one showed up," interrupts Ion. She continues at what I assume is the maximum words per minute a human is capable of pronouncing without compromising diction or dropping syllables. "From the future, I mean. But that doesn't mean that time travel will never be invented. Because anyone who has consumed *any* science fiction knows that there are paradoxes created when you travel

back in time and meddle with the past. So it stands to reason that if humans *did* travel back in time, they would be entering a time line of a parallel dimension. The first dimension would be the way things are now, without time travel. That's where we are living, obviously. The next dimension would be the version of reality that was created when they traveled back in time. So maybe a bunch of time travelers attended the party; it just happened in a different dimension."

"Which obviously makes no sense," says Nick. "Because—"

"It is the *only* explanation that makes—"

"Wow. So, Ion? Is that your given name?" I ask, trying to change the subject to something less volatile.

"Yeah," she says.

"No!" says Nick. "Tell him the truth!"

"Why do you always have to tell people this story?" she asks.

"It's endearing!" says Nick.

"It's embarrassing. That's why my parents started calling me Ion in the first place."

"So your given name is . . ." I prompt.

"It's Hermione, all right?" says Ion, eliciting peals of laughter from Nick. "Yes, like in *Harry Potter.* Only my parents were living under a rock and had never even heard of the books. It was, like, my great-aunt's name or something. Anyway, after the first movie came out, it didn't

take long for my parents to get tired of hearing jokes about how my baby talk was probably a spell I was casting."

"I can see how that would get old," I say.

"Right, so my parents decided to make a nickname out of Hermione. They couldn't use Her or Nee, obviously, so they used the middle sound: Ion."

"I like it," I say. "It's unique."

"Thanks," says Ion.

Nick says, "Will, I still feel bad about earlier, and I want to make it up to you by serving as your eyes at this table. Cool?"

"I guess."

"So here's something you should know about Ion: She's like the nerd chick in teen movies who, if she brushed her hair and put on girl clothes, would suddenly be transformed into, like, a smoking-hot babe."

References to visual components of cinema are meaningless to me, of course, but I appreciate Nick's effort.

Ion says, "You realize I'm sitting right here, right?"

"I get that a lot, too," I say to Ion.

"About being transformed into a smoking-hot babe?" asks Nick.

"No, people talking about me like I'm not here," I say.

A new voice says, "Speaking of people who are actually sitting right here, Ion's boyfriend is sitting right here, too, and he's about to beat the crap out of you, Nick." It's male, positioned opposite me, in between Ion and Nick. The voice is deep and resonant, almost musical.

"My bad," says Nick. "Will, I would like to introduce Whitford."

"Pleasure to meet you," says Whitford.

"You too," I say.

"Now, based on his name and the sound of his voice," continues Nick, "you're probably thinking Whitford is a white dude, right?"

"Well, I . . . I mean . . ." I stammer.

"It's cool. I always say what everyone is thinking but knows isn't appropriate to share out loud," says Nick. "Obviously Whitford sounds white. I mean, jeez, it's right there in his name. Whitford. WHITE-ford. But no, good sir, our friend Whitford is a genuine African American."

"This is uncomfortable for everyone and amusing for no one," says Whitford dryly.

"Think of him as a young Tiger Woods," adds Nick.

"*So* uncomfortable . . ." says Whitford.

"Except without the girl addiction. And dressed even *more* preppy," concludes Nick.

Sighted people are always doing this: Imagining they are translating vision into words for me, but they're really just describing one image by comparing it to another image, neither of which I have a point of reference for.

"And finally, I'm your host, Nick, a clever lad with mild premature baldness and the potential to either graduate valedictorian or drop out of high school. I haven't decided which yet."

"Nice to meet you all," I say.

"So how does a wacky gang like us end up as friends?" continues Nick. "I mean, this lunch table packs the sort of uncanny diversity you normally only see in TV commercials, am I right?"

"I don't watch commercials," I say.

"I don't, either," says Nick. "Thank God for DVR."

"No, I meant because—"

"I know what you meant, Will. Jeez, I thought we were at a point in our relationship where we could joke about things like that. I mean, after the intimacy of our initial physical contact—"

"Okay, whatever," I say. "I'll bite: How did all of you become friends?"

"Will, I don't want to make you nervous or anything," says Nick. "But you are currently seated with the Toano High School varsity academic quiz team, defending district champions and regional runner-ups!"

"Varsity?" I ask.

"No," says Whitford. "We're just a club. Nick always tries to make us sound like a sport because he's bitter about being born white, which means he lacks the natural athletic prowess stereotypically associated with a black man such as myself."

"Don't kid yourself, Whitford," says Nick. "You're a nerd, too."

"I'm a geek," says Whitford. "There's a difference."

"Well, thanks for letting me eat with you guys," I say,

realizing I have forgotten all about the lunch Mom carefully packed into braille-labeled Tupperware containers. "I'm new here, and I don't know anyone, so—"

"Hey, it's the least we could do," says Nick. "I shouldn't have been silent like that when you asked if there was anyone here. I mean, we're the academic quiz team. Answering questions is what we do."

But even the defending district champion academic quiz team would have trouble answering the number of questions I get from my parents after school.

CHAPTER 3

I'm waiting at the edge of the curb.

"Right here, William!"

It's Mom's voice, startlingly close. Maybe two arm lengths. Yet I'm unable to hear the familiar hum of our family station wagon.

My hand reaches for the door handle, but my fingers jam into hard metal. I press my palm against the car, searching for the lever.

This goes on for a second or two, and I still can't seem to find it.

Mom says, "Surprise, honey! New car!"

She claps a few times, as if I need additional auditory cues that she is excited. She's been doing that since I was a baby, going out of her way to signal excitement to me when it just ends up making me feel like a toddler. And I think she still sees me that way: the same little boy who went off to boarding school in kindergarten. She doesn't realize I'm grown up now.

"We got a Teslaaaaaaaaaa!" Mom says in a talk-show-announcer voice.

Apparently I'm supposed to be excited about this, but mostly I just feel dumb because, like, where's the door handle? I grope around for a while, and finally she notices my struggle.

"Just a little to the left, honey," she says, returning to her normal voice.

I locate it and climb in.

"Your father finished early in the operating room today, so we just went out and bought it!" exclaims Mom.

"It was the new less-expensive model, and it will reduce our carbon footprint and save on gas," says Dad. "And we can install a bike rack on the roof."

"What do you think? You like it?" asks Mom.

I sniff as I feel us silently accelerating away from the school.

"It certainly smells like a new car," I say. "But it's electric?"

"That's right," confirms Dad in the same voice he'd use to describe his favorite road bike. "Zero emissions, no fuel costs, and it can run for hundreds of miles on a single charge. Cool, huh?"

It's so weird to hear your parents describe something as "cool."

"Well... yeah," I say. But really, it's not cool.

"You don't sound happy, Will," says Dad. "When you

were little, you used to love mechanical gadgets. I thought you would be impressed."

"Oh, no, I am," I stammer. "I mean, zero emissions, that's great."

"But?" prods Dad.

I came home to prove that I could live outside the blind bubble without burdening anyone. But here I am, already being an inconvenience.

"Well, electric motors are *silent*."

When I walk to an intersection, I decide whether it's safe to cross by listening to the flow of traffic. If an electric car is coming down the street, I might as well be blind *and* deaf.

Mom says, "Don't worry. I told the salesman—didn't you hear me ask him, Henry?"

"Yes, dear," says Dad.

"I said to him, 'Sir, I have a son who is visually impaired. Will he be safe with this vehicle?' And the salesman told me, 'Ma'am, don't worry, I don't think his condition will affect the performance of the air bags or the seat belts. And if your son is sitting in the driveway playing' "—Jeez. Sounds like she described me as a child or something—" 'it comes with a' . . . Hold on, I wrote this down." She smooths out a slip of folded paper. "The engine emits a 'sound like a gentle breeze' that should alert pedestrians to the car."

I say, "I was standing at the curb just now, and I didn't hear any gentle breeze."

After an awkward pause, Mom asks, "So how was your first day?"

"It was okay, I guess."

Parents ask you questions about your life the way police officers interrogate subjects on TV cop shows. No matter how much information you provide, they will always follow up a hundred times with slightly reworded questions. So you might as well give short answers and let them pry out the facts incrementally so they feel they are making conversational progress.

"Was Vice Principal Johnston helpful? He seemed so nice," says Mom.

"Sure," I say.

"What about journalism class? You're such a good writer, you must've had a ball."

I think about third period—the girl crying and running out of the room, my burning-hot face.

"Totally."

"Oh, good. I knew you would love it!" says Mom.

I feel us slow down, turn right, and then slow down again to wait for the gate to rise so we can enter our neighborhood. Despite how far away my mom imagines the "other side of town" to be, Toano, Kansas, is actually quite small. It only seems large to her because when she looks at it, all she sees is the giant divide created by this gate.

"Did you make any friends?" asks Dad.

"A few," I say.

"Nice kids?" he asks.

"Not bad."

"Right on," says Dad, a little too loudly.

My father is an uptight surgeon. He fools no one by using phrases he thinks are cool.

"Did your new friends like your sweater?" asks Mom. "It looks so perfect on you!"

"They failed to mention it," I say.

"Was it tough getting around?" asks Mom. "So much new territory. I mean, after ten years at the school for the blind—"

"It was okay. Mrs. Chin trained me well."

Mrs. Chin was the "orienteering and mobility" guide at the school for the blind, where I used to go. She taught us how to walk with an adult-size white cane, how to cross an intersection, how to orient in a new building using cardinal directions—almost everything we needed to know about living independently. I can't say for sure since we didn't talk about that kind of stuff, but I think Mrs. Chin was Chinese American. I assume so because I once heard a joke about a fat person having "more chins than a Chinese phone book."

It's amazing how jokes can teach you the things people *think* but are too polite to say aloud, prejudices I assume other kids absorb with the help of their eyes—racism, sexism, and the like. In the case of Mrs. Chin, I figured she was probably Chinese after I heard the phone book line. In fact, that very same joke also taught me that fat people

have multiple chins. Why this is, I don't know. I mean, why chins? Why not extra cheeks? Or foreheads?

"You didn't meet any mean kids, did you?" Mom asks.

I know why she's asking. It's the same reason she and Dad sent me off to the school for the blind in the first place: the Incident.

It happened back when I was around five years old.

My best friend at the time was a boy from the neighborhood named Alexander. He always helped me when I couldn't do something. He'd explain a playground or take my turn for me in a game. Like that day, when we were playing Candy Land at the kitchen table. Alexander offered to move my piece for me. I would flip a card, then he would say which color it was and move me down the rainbow road to that square. We played a few rounds, and he kept winning every single time. I was annoyed, but I didn't complain, because Mom had said I had to be nice to him.

Then Mom came into the kitchen.

"Will, what color is your piece?" she asked.

"Red," I answered, proud to be able to answer such a question.

"Why is your piece still at the starting area?"

"It's not. Alexander moves it for me when it's my turn."

Her head swiveled to face Alexander so abruptly that I heard the rustle of her collar.

She didn't speak, but something about her head swivel must have made Alexander know he should say something. "Who cares? He can't see the pieces anyway!"

"How dare you—" blurted Mom.

"He doesn't even know what *red* is. Do you, Will? Huh? What does red look like?"

He was right, of course. I didn't know.

Mom snapped, "You've just been moving your own piece? On both your and Will's turns?"

"Yeah. So? He can't see the board!" Alexander said defiantly. "It doesn't matter where his piece is."

Mom sent him home. I never saw him again.

That day, two things happened: First, I learned it was dangerous to rely on anyone other than myself. And second, my parents decided it would be better for me to enroll in the school for the blind rather than the neighborhood elementary school. I didn't particularly want to leave home. But Mom and Dad said I would have more fun at a place where everyone was more like me.

They were right, I guess. And yet...

Attending the school for the blind, day after day, year after year, it felt like I was trapped in the starting area of real life. Sure, I was safe there. But I was also bored. I wanted to break free and move forward on the winding rainbow road of life. I might not be able to experience those colors the way some people did, but I believed I could still make it. Make it, you know, to the Candy Castle. Or whatever. But for that to happen, I had to at least start playing the game.

CHAPTER 4

By my second day at my new school, I know all my routes. No more of Mr. Johnston moving me from class to class. I'm free to go as I please.

Before Honors English, Mrs. Everbrook asks me to come over to her desk. Usually, people assume it's rude to make the blind kid walk across the room, but blindness is an eye problem, not a leg problem. Mrs. Everbrook clearly gets this, which I appreciate.

"Listen, Will, the librarians have everything on my syllabus ordered for you, but it will be about a week before the small forest of literature gets here."

Braille books, I know, are pretty large. A single braille dictionary is composed of fifteen to twenty volumes.

Braille was a great invention for the world's blind population, but not so great for its tree population.

"All right," I say.

"In the meantime, I've arranged for you to have a digital audiobook of our first short story, 'The Gift of the Magi.'"

"You paid for that out of your own pocket?"

She's silent, which I take for a yes.

"You really didn't have to do that, Mrs. Everbrook."

"Now, don't get all mushy on me, Will. I wasn't trying to be nice. I just didn't want you to have any excuses if you turned in your first paper late."

• • •

After English is biology, and then journalism. There's a restroom right outside Mrs. Everbrook's classroom that Mr. Johnston showed me yesterday, and I stop to use it. I slip into my desk about ten seconds after the bell rings. At the school for the blind, our teachers didn't mind if we arrived a little late. But that's not the case with Mrs. Everbrook.

She stops midsentence and addresses me. "Will, do you have a note for being late?"

"No," I say. "I was, uh, using the restroom."

"For today, I'll just give you a verbal warning. Next time, make it come out faster, or I will have to mark you as tardy."

Mrs. Everbrook returns to discussing story assignments.

"We've got two events that need a photographer this week. The first is the touring Vincent van Gogh exhibit that just came to PU."

PU is the unfortunate, but widely used, abbreviation for Plains University, the institution of higher learning that keeps the economy afloat in our little city. The marketing

people at the school are always trying to "rebrand" it as PSU, as in PlainS University, but it never sticks. Everyone keeps calling it PU. It doesn't help that the school has an agriculture department that does something with fertilizer and stinks up the whole town a few times per semester.

"I know none of you probably give a hoot about art, but Toano's a pretty small place, and van Gogh's a pretty big deal, so I think it's worth covering. Cecily, you know more about art than the rest of your philistine classmates put together, so you'll be shooting that."

Cecily—the girl from yesterday. Who thought I was staring. The one I made cry.

"All right," says Cecily. "Thanks."

"We need a staff writer to accompany Cecily and cover the event. Volunteers?"

No one speaks. No volunteers. Why not? Then I wonder: *Is it because of me?* Is it because I stared at her yesterday and made her cry, and now everyone thinks she's weird? I start to feel sorry for her.

The seconds stretch like minutes, each sharp *tick*... *tick*... *tick* of the wall clock ringing painfully in my ears. I consider how she must feel.

She probably hates me for what I did to her, for embarrassing her like that. And I can't stand the thought of someone hating me. The art museum visit would be a chance to win her over, to prove that I'm a nice guy, a guy people like if they get to know me.

"I'll go," I say.

"Great, thanks, Will," says Mrs. Everbrook. "This will be for the news section."

A few minutes later, I hear someone approach and sit down at the desk beside me. I wait. Nothing happens. And then I feel a single finger brush the outside of my hand, requesting my attention.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," she says. "It's Cecily, by the way."

"I know. I know your voice," I mean. "Sorry. It won't happen again." I say.

"You mean because you're wearing sunglasses today?" she asks.

So she noticed. I absently push them up the bridge of my nose.

They feel clunky and awkward on my face. They are as tall as my thumb on the front and the sides, only tapering at the part that sit on my ears. It's like a megaphone calling attention to my blindness. But yesterday I realized that what Mom has always told me was correct: I should always wear my sunglasses. My eyes *do* make people uncomfortable. People like this girl Cecily.

"Yes, that's why I'm wearing them."

She shifts in her seat.

"If you want, I can drive us," she offers. "To the museum."

"You have a car?"

"My mom does. How about maybe we go tomorrow?"

"It's a date," I say, immediately cringing at my word choice.

As I head from journalism to lunch, I wonder if I will be able to sit with everyone from yesterday. I mean, if they decide they don't want the blind kid joining their table on an ongoing basis, it would be oh so easy for them to *just happen* to sit at a different one. I'd have no way of ever knowing where. Or why.

At the school for the blind, the loners moved silently, rarely giving away their voiceprint and remaining mostly unknown to all but their roommates. The opposite, having everyone recognize your voice, meant you were either notorious or popular. I happened to be popular.

At this school, though, I have no idea how many people have even noticed me so far. And if they have, it's probably only because I'm an anomaly.

I notice how much less obstructed my path is now that I'm walking alone, as opposed to when Mr. Johnston was guiding me through the hall yesterday and my cane was folded and hidden in my back pocket. Then I was merely a new student. Now I'm obviously a *blind* new student.

I walk to the same table as yesterday and set down my lunch bag.

"Hey, guys," I say, pretending I'm confident, that I'm not worried I might be speaking to an empty table.

"Yo," says Whitford.

"What's up?" says Ion.

"You're back!" says Nick.

They're still here, I think with a great sigh of relief.

"How's your second day of mainstreaming going?" asks Nick.

"I like how that can be a verb *or* an adjective," says Ion. "You *are mainstreaming* at a *mainstream* school."

"Or a noun," adds Whitford. "The *mainstream* school will funnel you into the *mainstream*."

"Exactly why this place sucks," says Nick. "Mainstream always equals suckitude."

There's a gap in the conversation, but I sense that it has continued in a wordless exchange of facial expressions. I read the braille label on a Tupperware container from my lunch bag. Carrots. Mom always packs carrots. I think she secretly believes my eyesight can be salvaged if I just consume enough beta-carotene.

Eventually Ion says, "So what do your parents do, Will?"

"My mom is a professional helicopter parent and country clubber. And my dad's a doctor."

"What kind of doctor?" asks Nick.

I was afraid he'd ask this. I try to avoid answering directly. I don't know Nick all that well yet, but I already know that if he finds out, he'll have a field day.

"Like, you know, sick people come to his place of business, and he makes them feel good," I say.

"A statement that could also describe a prostitute," says Nick. "I mean, what kind of medicine does he practice?"

I'm cornered. "He's a urologist," I admit.

"No!" says Nick in a tone of gleeful mock disbelief.

"Oh, grow up!" says Ion.

"A urologist? Like he—" says Nick.

"Yes," I say.

"So he's gay?" Nick asks.

"Seriously?" scolds Ion. "Just because you're a complete dick doesn't mean you have to be a homophobe."

I say, "He did create me with my mom, so I don't think—"

But Nick's on a roll now. "I don't get why any medical student would choose urology, you know? Like, why not plastic surgery? Now there's a job for you. Play with boobs all day and get paid big bucks for it."

"What are we? Schoolchildren?" says Ion.

But Nick's still going: "I just wonder about any straight male who says to himself, 'You know what I'd like to do for the rest of my life? Examine penises.' "

By way of changing the conversation, I tell them about the museum visit I have scheduled for tomorrow with the girl from journalism.

"What's her name?" asks Nick.

"Cecily."

"Wait. *Cecily Hoder?*" asks Whitford, surprised.

"Yeah."

No one says anything.

"What?" I ask.

"If she didn't have a different lunch period than us," Ion says, "Cecily Hoder would be sitting here. She's the fourth member of our academic quiz team."

CHAPTER 5

In the art museum the next afternoon, each click of my cane on the hard, smooth floor reverberates like a shotgun blast. It's so quiet I can hear a faint buzz overhead, presumably from the ceiling lights. That's a funny thing about artificial light: You can hear it. But I've never heard the sun, moon, or stars. Natural light, it seems, travels in silence. Like a Tesla.

Cecily and I stand in front of a painting, silent. No snaps of her camera yet. She's just looking at it, I guess.

Remembering that I'm here to make things up to her after our disastrous first encounter, I try to break the ice by asking her how she got into photography.

"Through painting, actually," she says.

"So why not..." I say. I speak carefully, lest I induce another tearful breakdown.

"Paint?" she suggests.

"Well, yeah."

"Oh, I can't paint."

"No?"

"Definitely not."

"I've never painted, but how hard can it be? You hold the brush and then you rub paint on the paper until it looks like what you see. Right?" I ask.

"Yeah, but it's not like that. You are *re-creating* the image. That takes talent."

"To paint what's right there in front of you?"

"Of course."

"I don't get it."

"Um, let me think of an example." She pauses. "Okay, it's like how you can be looking at something, a person or a beautiful landscape like, I don't know, the Grand Canyon, but then you take a photo with a cell phone camera and it doesn't look the same. It takes skill even to create photos that represent what the eye sees."

Sigh. Will people never learn? "Still doesn't mean much to me."

"Oh, right, sorry. I guess it's like... You know what my voice sounds like, right?"

"Yeah." I ponder her voice for a moment. It's controlled and pressurized, like the water flowing through a turbine in a dam. But dams don't just generate power. They are a barricade. They hold back a flood.

"And the sound of my voice is very clear coming through your ears?"

The question interrupts my thoughts about hydropower. "Sure."

"Can you imitate it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Like, can you re-create the sound of my voice using your own vocal cords?"

"Oh... I think I get it now."

"Right, and that's what's so cool about art," she says, speaking faster. "Van Gogh was an impressionist, so he wasn't even trying to paint scenes that look like what a person would see with their eyes. Sorry, is this weird to talk about? Like, seeing and stuff? I don't mean—"

"No, it's fascinating, actually. Please continue."

"All right, so a *realist* is an artist who paints an image that looks similar to what a good photographer could capture on film. That's, like, if you could imitate the sound of my speech with near-perfect accuracy using your own voice. But an *impressionist* paints not what the scene actually is, but what it *feels* like."

"It's distorted?"

"No, not distorted. It's... interpreted... represented in a different way. Like a metaphor. Like an impressionistic version of my voice might not sound like me at all, at least not in a literal sense. It might be a piece of music that when you hear it makes you think of my voice. You hear it and say, 'Yes, that captures the essence of what Cecily sounds like.'"

I'm silent.

"Sorry, did I lose you?" she asks. "I know I kind of geek out about—"

"No, I just—wow, that's a really good description.

Thank you. No one has ever explained art to me like that before."

"You're welcome," she says, more softly.

She removes the lens cap from her camera, and the shutter clicks a few times.

Trying to keep the conversation going, I ask, "So what sort of stuff did van Gogh paint?"

"Landscapes and plants, mostly."

"Not people?"

"He painted people, but that's not what he's known for."

"How come?"

She's silent for a moment. "Maybe because what is considered beautiful in nature has remained constant throughout history, but the definition of human beauty changes every few years based on how the media defines the so-called perfect body."

Just then a set of footsteps approaches and a voice interrupts us.

"Excuse me, sir, may I ask you a personal question?" he says.

"Yes, I'm blind," I say.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude."

"What gave it away? Do my socks not match or something?"

"Well, no . . ." he stammers.

"I'm kidding. I've got a cane and sunglasses. Of course I'm blind."

"Listen," he says. "I'm a security guard. *The* security guard, actually. I travel with this exhibit. I just wanted to say that if you're interested, you are welcome to touch these paintings."

I'm stunned. It's not unusual these days for museums to allow the visually impaired to touch some artwork. But a van Gogh?

"For real?"

"Yes, sir. This is the personal collection of Edward Kramer. Mr. Kramer has a son with special needs, and he wants to be sure that people of all abilities can appreciate them. But you have to be really, really gentle. The paint is a century and a half old. Touch it as lightly as possible. And wash your hands first. Gets rid of the oil on your skin that can damage the paint."

"Fair enough. Where's the restroom?" I ask.

"I'll show you," says Cecily. "I want to make sure you go into the right one."

The guard walks away.

"Wait," I say, taken aback. "What was that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"Were you making fun of blind people?"

"No, I would never—" She stops and sighs. "Yesterday, before journalism, you..."

"What?"

"You went into the girls' bathroom."

That hot feeling builds in my face. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I wish I was," she says.

"At least tell me you were the only one who saw."

"Uh..."

"How many more?"

"It's really not that big—"

"Two? Three?"

"Don't worry about—"

"Ten?"

"Twenty. Okay, more like twenty-five," she says. "Absolute max: thirty."

"THIRTY?"

"It was basically the whole journalism class, with the exception of Mrs. Everbrook. Everyone felt really terrible about it, if that's any consolation. And the doors are right beside each other, so you aren't even the first person to make the mistake."

"Well, you were the only one who told me," I say. "You took the hit. Thanks. That couldn't have been easy."

"The truth has a price," she says. "That's what my mom always says."

Her mom is right. It stings, knowing all those students were watching me make a fool of myself.

I go to the (correct) restroom and wash my hands. The first painting I touch is called *Les Alyscamps*.

"Let's play a game," I suggest. "I'll touch it and try to guess what it's a painting of."

"Okay," she says.

I start from the bottom, running my hands softly across the canvas the way I read braille. The paint has a dry, layered texture to it. There are places where the paint is globbed on smooth and thick, and others where it has tiny canyons of texture. I spread my fingers wider to absorb the shape of the bottom half of the canvas. The object in the painting starts out covering the entire width of the canvas, and then as it moves upward, it gets smaller and smaller until it ends in a point. I think of objects I know of with this shape.

"Is it a slice of pie?" I guess.

"Nope," she says.

"A piece of pizza?"

"Nope."

"A Dorito?"

"When was your last meal?"

I laugh. "But am I close?"

"No, it's not any kind of food. And for the record, I don't think Doritos had been invented yet."

"But it's triangle-shaped, right?"

She thinks for a moment. "Well... yeah, I guess it is," she says, as if she hadn't noticed this before.

"Fine, I give up. What is it?"

"A road."

"But roads are straight lines," I say, confused. "Is it an impressionistic street or something?"

"No, it's just the perspective."

I don't understand.

"You know," she adds when I say nothing. "Like, it gets smaller in the distance. Well, the street's not *actually* getting smaller—it's just how it looks when it's far away," she says.

"Yeah, I just don't understand what you're saying," I admit.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says, a note of sensitivity entering her voice. "I just assumed...So I guess you don't know what perspective is?"

"I know what the word means," I say, sounding a little more defensive than I intended. "Like people have different perspectives on issues. Or people look at things from different perspectives. But how does that make the road a triangle?"

"Well, okay. Basically, as things get farther away, they look smaller," she explains patiently.

"They change size?"

"They don't actually change size. Just how much space they take up in your field of vision."

"Why?"

"Um, I don't really know, actually. It just is."

"So why is the street in the painting pointy?"

"Van Gogh is painting as if he's looking along the road, so the farther away it gets from him, the smaller it looks to him, until it disappears completely at the horizon."

"It just *disappears*?"

"Well, sure. You can't see forever."

"I know that the eyes can't see forever. But if I stand right beside this painting and touch the frame, and then step back to arm's length and touch it again, the frame feels like the same width in my hand. So this perspective thing... wow... that kind of blows my mind, Cecily."

"You're welcome, I guess?" she says, like a question. "I'm surprised you've never heard that before."

"Well, I mean, I moved away to the school for the blind when I was in kindergarten. I spent most summers at blind camps. So basically all my friends my whole life have been blind. Even many of the teachers at my school had visual impairments. So it was literally—"

"The blind leading the blind," she interrupts.

I touch a few of the other paintings, and she explains each one to me. Listening to descriptions of art in this way lights up distant, rarely used corners of my brain.

"There's another room," she says. "Do you want me to, um, lead you there? Like with your arm?"

"Guide. We call it guiding. And yes, please."

"So how does it work?"

"Just reach your elbow a little toward me, and I'll hold it."

When I grab her arm, I feel this tingle, almost like touching something that has an electric current running through it. It's not painful. Just sort of shocking. I jerk my hand away.

"I'm sorry," she says, her voice shrinking. "Did I do it wrong?"

"No, that was fine. I just... Never mind. You did great."

I reach for her arm a second time, and when I touch her sweater, I feel that charge again.

Cecily guides me into the other room.

"You know how many paintings van Gogh created?" she asks.

"No idea."

"Almost a thousand."

"Wow."

"And you know how many he sold?"

"All of them, I guess. I mean, he was a really famous painter, right?"

"Not till long after he died. In his entire life, he sold only one of his paintings."

"One?" I ask in disbelief.

"One."

"That's why I relate to him, I think," she says thoughtfully. "He was born at the wrong time."

"So you're like some kind of unrecognized genius, too?" I realize I'm still holding her arm, so I squeeze it playfully.

She laughs, and it works its way into my brain, reminding me of what she said earlier. Her laughter is like impressionist art. Because it captures the essence of itself, the essence of laughter.

"No, just born at the wrong time in history."

"A lot of blind people feel that way, too," I say. "Hundreds of years ago, most people were doing manual labor,

like working farms or pulling plows or whatever. You didn't need extremely clear vision for stuff like that. You could go a lifetime without realizing you couldn't see as well as everyone else."

"But now we are in the information age," she fills in.

"Exactly. Which started with the printing press, and now our society is based on communicating by words and pictures. It's called 'the tyranny of the visual.' Sorry, I didn't mean to regurgitate everything from my seventh-grade History of Visual Impairment class."

"No, not at all," she says, and sounds like she means it.

"Although in the last couple years, technology *has* been making things a lot easier," I add.

She guides me up to a painting, and we stop. Normally at this point, I would let go of a guide's arm. But I don't. Instead, I loop my hand through the wrist strap on my cane so I can touch the painting with that hand while my other one stays connected to Cecily.

And then I catch myself. Why am I still holding on to this girl's arm? I've already reached point B.

So I let go as I examine the painting with my other hand.

Cecily describes the painting to me in between snaps of her camera. One of van Gogh's many self-portraits, she explains. He looks gaunt and soulful. She says there are hints in his eyes of the depression that will eventually claim his life, when he committed suicide at age thirty-seven.

"It has a lot of oranges and reds in it," she says. "But I guess you don't know what those look like, huh?"

"Not so much."

"Those are considered warm colors. So they're like the heat of the sun or the smell of the fall."

"Sorry," I say. "That's poetic, but it doesn't help me."

"Can you not even . . . like, imagine a color?" she asks.

I hear more visitors shuffle into the room, voices soft as they comment on the artwork.

"Even if I could, how would I know I'm imagining a color when I've never seen one before?" I ask. "It's, like, how do you know that when you see red, it's the same red as everyone else sees? Maybe what they call red looks to them like what you call blue? There's no way of knowing if your experience of a certain color is the same."

"But I can close my eyes and see a color in my mind. Can you not do that?"

I chuckle.

"What?" she asks.

"Let me put it this way: Try to imagine a color you've never seen before. Like, a brand-new color that was just invented and has never before existed. What would it look like?"

She is silent.

"Well?" I ask.

"You're right," she says. "It's impossible."

"That's how it is for me. Except with all colors. And all two-dimensional shapes. And everything you see in these paintings. You have to understand that my mind

developed differently because, unlike most blind people, I have never seen anything with my eyes."

"You were completely blind from birth?"

"Right," I say.

"So you're trying to tell me you belong to a pretty exclusive club?" she says playfully.

"I'd show you the membership card, but you wouldn't be able to read it. It's written in braille."

She laughs, but then says seriously, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That you have to live that way. It must be so frustrating."

If there's one thing I don't like, it's people feeling sorry for me.

"What do you mean?" I say, trying to limit the irritability creeping into my voice. "You think my experience of the world is less rich because I'm blind?"

"Well, you're missing out on so many—"

"That's sightist, Cecily. Assuming that blind people can't have a full life because they don't have eyesight. My sensory experience isn't *less* than yours. It's just different."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Why don't you take your pictures so we can get out of here? I'll go interview the guard to get some quotes for my article."

"Want me to guide you back to him?"

"No, I remember the route."

CHAPTER 6

After I get home from the museum, I go to my bedroom and plop down on the bed to listen to music. It's the bedroom I grew up in before I went to the school for the blind. Other kids, I guess, have posters on their walls with photos of stuff they like to look at. Cecily's probably has paintings. No, forget Cecily. She was rude to me. I don't care what her room looks like.

When I was a kid, Mom helped me decorate my bedroom walls with scratch-and-sniff stickers. Each wall has its own category. The wall with my closet is sweet food (fruit, desserts, and the like), the wall with my desk is savory food, and the one by my bed is scents of nature.

In total, I have 187 different fragrances on the walls of my room. When I was a kid, I wished I had that many fingers so I could scratch them simultaneously and find out what all the scents in the world smelled like together. (As it turns out, I'm able to experience this by simply walking into Toano High School's cafeteria.)

My bedspread is covered in wispy threads like the fur

of a freakishly fluffy pet. Lying on my back, I rub the pine-scented sticker on the wall and inhale through my nose. I moved away soon after we put the stickers up, so they've just been chilling here for ten years, waiting for their fragrance to be scratched open. The softness of the bed and the whiff of the sticker, however, keep getting interrupted by the echo of Cecily's laugh. I keep thinking about how much I liked being with her at that gallery. Which is annoying, because I'm still mad about what she said. I claw at a grass-scented sticker in an attempt to drown her out with olfactory overload.

Seeking a different distraction, I open my laptop to write my article about the van Gogh exhibit. I don't include anything about what it felt like to touch Cecily's arm or how it felt to be insulted by her at the end, of course, because that's not anyone's business, but I do write about how the owner has a special-needs child, which meant I was allowed to touch the paintings. I describe the feel of the crackled paint under my fingertips. As for the museum itself, I note the way our footsteps reverberated through the museum's reverent silence as we walked through its heavily air-conditioned and dehumidified climate.

The garage-door opener downstairs cranks to life. Mom and Dad must be back from their errands. I used to hear the car engine before the garage opened. Now it just starts to lift with no warning. Stupid Tesla.

A minute later, I hear Mom climbing the stairs and then there's a knock at my door.

"Will, come down to the family room!" she says. "We have a surprise for you!"

"I'm doing homework."

"Just finish it later."

This is quite possibly the first time my mother has ever encouraged me to procrastinate on my homework. (Even at boarding school, the long arm of the mom-law followed my studies and grades with the utmost care.) So I leave my laptop and walk downstairs.

In a voice more appropriate for giving a speech to hundreds, she announces, "Your father and I wanted to be able to start going on family bike rides. So after your dad got home from the operating room today, we purchased a tandem bike for you and me to share!"

Great. Just what I've always wanted.

We go out to the garage, where I find Dad has been checking the tire pressure and lubricating the gears on the bike.

"Guys, I've never even ridden a bike before," I say.

"It's all right," says Dad. "As the front rider, your mother can keep you balanced as long as you maintain speed."

"If you say so," I mutter.

"You have to pedal at the same time," instructs Dad. "Sydney, warn Will before you turn or brake so he is prepared. Be careful."

We push off, and Dad gets on his bike to follow us.

"Stop sign," warns Mom. I feel the bike decelerate. Before we tip over, she puts a foot down on the pavement to steady us.

We've gone only one block, and I already officially hate Dad's beloved sport of cycling. I mean, yeah, the breeze feels kind of nice, but I can replicate that sensation by putting my face in front of a house fan. Riding on a tandem bike mostly makes me feel like a prisoner. The rider in the back has no brakes, no steering, no choice.

We ride mostly in silence for a few minutes, aside from Mom's occasional outbursts ("Isn't this great!").

Then she says, "I have something else exciting to discuss."

Because of course she does. There had to be a *reason* to trap me on this bike other than the ride itself.

She continues, "There's an experimental operation being tested at your dad's hospital. It has to do with retinal stem cell transplants. If you are accepted as a candidate, it could give you eyesight! Full eyesight! Can you imagine?"

Unwittingly, my pulse quickens. "Dad, is this true?"

His tone is far more sober. "It's not even a stage-one clinical trial yet. Still completely experimental. Honestly, there's a very small chance of success."

"But if it did work, I mean—it could give me eyesight?"

"I would wait for them to test the procedure on other patients first. There are so many risks associated with an operation. People don't even realize—every time a surgeon

opens an incision, you are subjecting yourself to risk of infection, physician error, complications—"

"But just think, Will," counters Mom. "If it *was* successful, you could have twenty-twenty vision. Isn't that worth at least considering? Just go in for an initial consultation. I've already made the appointment for you next Thursday."

Hold up. She already made the appointment?

I'm tempted to say no just out of principle. I'm sixteen years old. She can't go around making appointments for me without asking me first.

But on the other hand, what if it worked? What if I could... see?

"I guess it can't hurt to talk to them," I say. "I'll go to the consultation. But under one condition."

"What?" asks Mom.

"I go by myself. This is my decision, and I don't want you or anyone else making it for me."

"Well, sweetie, of course it's your decision, but you'll need me in the room—"

"No," I say. "Not even in the building. You drop me off, I go in by myself. That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

"Fine," says Mom. "But I'll wait in the parking lot so you can text if you need me."

• • •

That evening, I'm sitting on my bed listening to the recording of "The Gift of the Magi." It's actually really

short, and after it's finished I listen to some blog posts on my phone about how the invention of the iPod led to a boom in the audiobook industry when Siri interrupts to say, "Notification: Message from Cecily." I tap my phone and listen to the text.

"Hi."

I tap once more and Siri reads it again.

"Hi."

Really? That's it?

"Hi."

Just one word: *Hi.* What does that mean? Does she want to apologize? Is she trying to initiate conversation but doesn't know what to say? Does she pity poor blind Will and feel obligated to send condolences via text?

How do I respond to such a vague opening statement? I run through a variety of options in my mind. I scratch a sticker and soak up its aroma of campfire. Finally I settle on a proportionate response.

"Hi," I reply.

Her next text comes back almost immediately.

Cecily: I feel really stupid.

Me: Why?

Cecily: About what I said at the end.

Me: It's OK.

Cecily: No, it's not. I was wrong.

Me: Thanks for saying that. Consider yourself forgiven.

I migrate from my bed to my desk. The wall of the savory. I scratch the pizza sticker and take a big whiff. I scratch a hot dog sticker and find it blends surprisingly well with the waning aroma of pizza.

Then she writes back.

Cecily: That's really nice to hear.

Me: I'm a pretty nice guy...when I'm not accidentally staring at people.

Cecily: Can you do emoji?

Me: I don't know. How do you do it?

Cecily: They're little pictures you send by text. Here I'll send you one and you can tell me what your phone says.

On her next message, my phone reads, "Smiling face, dancing monkey, cat face with wry smile."

I text her what it said.

"Cool," she replies. "So it's reading you the names of the pictures. What does this one say?"

I listen to her next message and tell her what it said: "Smiling pile of poop."

I wonder what that could possibly look like. And, for that matter, why would anyone ever send it?

Then she sends me three more. Siri reads me the message: "Small up-pointing triangle, large red down-pointing triangle, black left-pointing double triangle."

I write: "?"

There's a pause before Cecily replies with a long text: "Before today, I never noticed how roads look like triangles as they disappear into the horizon. I only saw roads getting smaller as they got farther away. Now, thanks to you, I'm seeing triangles everywhere."

I smile. I open Facebook and send her a friend request.

There's a knock on my door. My door, by the way, is covered on both sides with scratch-and-sniff stickers that fall more into the "odor" category than "scent." Rotten eggs, gasoline, smelly socks, skunks. That kind of thing. Sort of an olfactory-based KEEP OUT sign.

"William, time for dinner," says Dad.

"Okay, just a sec."

I text Cecily, "Gotta go, family dinner."

I get one more text from her before I head downstairs to dinner. "Just accepted your request. Glad we are officially friends now."

CHAPTER 7

That Friday I sit alone at lunch. The academic quiz team is at an away tournament all day. So Cecily's not in journalism, either.

But after school, Ion texts me to say that they won, so they're going out for a celebratory dinner and would I like to join them?

I've never been to the restaurant before, so after Mom drops me off—I decline her offer to park and guide me in—I stand outside and hope someone from the group will arrive to show me inside.

A door swings open, dinging a bell. I recognize the next sound: the deliberate but controlled steps, treading gently, as if she's trying not to leave footprints. I've never seen a footprint, of course, but my understanding is that the harder you press, the more of an impression you leave behind.

"Hi, Will, it's Cecily."

"I know," I say.

"I was waiting inside and saw you standing here, so . . ."

Her voice drifts off as she guides me inside, and we wait in the front of the restaurant, me still holding her arm.

Then I get a text from Ion. She's so sorry, but Whitford is sick and she is going to have to skip the dinner so she can take care of him.

"That's weird," says Cecily.

"What?"

"He didn't seem sick at the tournament today."

Then Cecily's phone buzzes. It's a text from Nick. His mom is going out, and he has to babysit his brother.

Well, this is awkward. No longer is it a celebration dinner with five people. Now it's like . . . a date.

And I mean, Cecily is a nice person and all, but dating is the last thing on my mind at the moment. I've had girlfriends before, and it was cool and everything, but it brings all kinds of drama. And I've got plenty of drama to deal with already, thank you very much.

As if she were reading my mind, Cecily asks, "Do you want a ride home?"

But I realize, if I go home, Mom will think my new friends stood me up. Cue the hints about returning to the school for the blind. So leaving early is far worse than a possibly awkward dinner with the photographer girl from journalism class.

"How about we just stay for dinner?"

"You sure?" she asks. "I mean, it'll just be . . . you know, me."

"Yeah, definitely," I say. "We're already here. Might as well eat."

She guides me in a pattern of ninety-degree turns, left, right, left, right, around the tables in the diner. We end at a countertop bar with tall stools covered in smooth plastic. Across the counter, a mere arm's length away, I hear the sizzle of meat on a grill and the hiss of boiling oil in a fryer.

I hear Cecily pop the lens off her camera and snap a few photos. There's a whisper of plastic twisting over plastic as she adjusts the lens—zooming or focusing or something—and takes a few more.

I ask, "For Instagram? Hashtag food porn?"

She laughs a little.

"You're on Instagram?" she asks, surprised.

"Yeah. I like the captions. Anyway, what's your picture of?"

"Us," she says simply.

"You and me?"

"Well, mostly you. The camera is covering my face. There's a mirror across from us."

"What I would give to have a mirror," I say. "I'm constantly wondering if my shirt is on backward or if my hair is sticking up or something."

"You're not missing out. Mirrors just make people overly concerned about their appearance," she says dismissively.

"Really? I've always assumed that if I could see myself

in a mirror, I would be less concerned about my appearance. Because I wouldn't have to wonder what I looked like anymore. I could stop worrying about it."

"In my experience, it's usually the other way around."

"Is that a mirror joke?"

"What?"

"*The other way around.* Because isn't everything flipped in mirrors? Like upside down?"

"Close. Wrong axis. Everything is flipped left to right. It's backward, not upside down. But no, that wasn't a joke. I mean, I think it works the opposite of what you're saying: Mirrors make everyone *more* worried about their appearance."

I hear the swish of a waitress walking by on the other side of the counter. (And yes, I infer her gender based on the sound of her footsteps, an educated guess I'm usually right about.)

I want to get the waitress's attention to ask for menus. It's silly, but part of me hopes this will impress Cecily—that she will notice how sensitive my hearing is, or at least that she'll feel like she's hanging out with a normal person who knows when a waitress is walking by, not a helpless blind kid who needs someone else to flag down a server for him.

"Excuse me, can we get some menus?" I ask.

"What are you, blind?" the waitress snaps.

I squirm. Her tone implies that she was using that word *blind* to mean my question was stupid.

She wouldn't be the first, unfortunately. One time, for a paper at my old school, I searched *blind* in the thesaurus app on my phone. The synonyms included *ignorant, oblivious, irrational, mindless, reckless,* and *violent.* Kind of rude if you are actually, you know, blind. But her accusation also happens to be factual enough to stand up in a court of law: I am 100 percent legally blind.

"Yes, actually, I am blind."

"Oh my *God,* I am *so* sorry!" she says, realizing. "Holy... oh, wow... I am the worst person ever. I am so sorry. *God.* That was so rude. I'm just having the worst day—not that that's any excuse—I just wasn't thinking."

"It happens," I say.

"The menu is already on the counter. I'm sorry we don't have it in braille or anything. Do you want me to, like, read it to you?"

"I'll read it for him," Cecily says coolly.

Cecily talks me through the menu. A few minutes later, the waitress returns for our orders.

"I'm not really hungry," says Cecily. "I'll just have a Diet Coke, please."

"And what will he be having?" the waitress asks Cecily.

"*I* will be having the grilled cheese," I say.

"Oh, get it cut into triangles instead of rectangles," suggests Cecily. "It tastes so much better that way."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Please prepare the sandwich as the lady suggests."

"One grilled cheese, sliced into triangles," repeats the waitress, making audible scratches with a pen.

After the waitress walks away, Cecily asks, "So how come you signed up for journalism class?"

"I want to be a writer. Seemed like good practice. You?"

"Same. Except I want to be a photographer."

"Of nature, I assume?"

"Yeah. I want to see the world through the lens of my camera. That's everything to me, everything I want."

"No house with a white picket fence and two-point-four babies?"

"Well... it's not like I don't want those things. It's just that I've always assumed..." She trails off.

"What?"

"That I will never be in a relationship," she says. And then she adds quickly, "If I was, you know, traveling that much."

A few seconds later, the grilled cheese arrives. Cecily is right. It does taste better this way.

"Are you going to audition for the morning announcements show?" I ask, mouth still partially full of grilled cheese.

"On the school TVs?" she asks. "Definitely not."

"Not your thing?"

"No. I mean, there's a vote. You know that, right?

The school elects the next semester's hosts based on the audition."

"So?"

"I just don't think I could ever win a vote like that."

"How come?"

"Weren't there popular kids at the school for the blind?"

"Sure, there were." In fact, I was one of them. But I don't tell her that. "That doesn't matter, though. I think you have... well, a really nice voice. I would vote for you."

"Why don't *you* audition?" she says.

"Me?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"I can't read printed text. I mean, I assume they are reading scripts or something, right?"

"Oh," she says, her voice dropping. "You're right. They read off teleprompters that scroll the words in front of the camera."

"So yeah, there's that. I mean, it would be cool and all, but I just don't think it would work."

"But what if—what if we could find a way to *make* it work?"

"Like what?"

"Like, I don't know. I could read the announcements into a little microphone that would play them into an earpiece you were wearing. Something like that?"

"No way," I say, imagining all the ways that could go wrong. "It would never work."

"Whitford is pretty good with tech stuff. Maybe he can figure out a way that you could read the script yourself."

I'm not sure how this conversation got so turned around. The point was that I thought *Cecily* should try out. *She's* the one with the beautiful voice.

"Fine," I say. "I'll make you a deal."

"What?"

"I'll try out if you will."

"But I'm really not—"

"That's my offer," I say.

She hesitates for a while.

"Fine. We'll both audition."

"If we figure out a way to make it work for me."

"We'll find a way. Don't worry. I'll help you."

CHAPTER 8

Dr. Bianchi, the doctor who is doing the experimental surgery, works in an office building at PU's med school. True to our agreement, Mom drops me off at the curb after school on Thursday.

"There's a revolving door," she warns. "You sure you don't want me to guide you in?"

"I'm sure."

"How will I know you made it safely to your appointment?"

"I'll text you when I'm there, okay?"

"If I don't hear anything within ten minutes, I'm going to come inside and find you."

"Fine."

I try to walk at a normal pace from the car to the building; I don't want Mom to see me hurrying to beat her ten-minute deadline. Once I've navigated the revolving door, however, I hustle across the lobby to the elevator.

Because of the way the braille numbers are staggered

on the inside of two columns of buttons, it's not entirely clear which button corresponds to the twelfth floor.

I press one, and the elevator goes up. When it stops and the doors open, I walk across the hall, only to discover that the first door I come to is 602. I'm looking for office 1239.

I quickly review my training with Mrs. Chin, hoping I can fix this problem before Mom helicopters in, no doubt with a full SWAT team in tow to rescue me.

If the braille was lined up better, I could use a basic blind ninja trick: hold my hand on the button I pressed and wait till the doors open and then start to close, then press it again to see if they reopen.

Of course, it's possible that I pressed the wrong button in the first place. It's also possible someone on the sixth floor pressed the Up button, but when my elevator stopped for him and he saw a blind guy standing in it, the guy froze, not wanting to infringe on my space, but also not wanting to make noise, lest I detect his presence and think him blind-phobic.

I get back on the elevator and press the Lobby button, which is helpfully embossed with a five-pointed star. From there I press every single button and count the number of times the doors open. I am painfully aware of how each wasted floor is another few seconds closer to Mom's humiliating arrival, but it's the only way to be sure I'm on number twelve.

I find the office, and a receptionist ushers me into an examination room. I sit and wait on a soft bench covered

with crinkly paper. I check my phone. Good news: That elevator ordeal took only five minutes. Bad news: I get no service in here and can't text Mom. So to prevent her from bursting in at some point and making me look like a child in front of my new doctor, I have to make the only slightly less childlike request of using the receptionist's phone to call her and say I made it to the office safely.

"Hello, Will," says Dr. Bianchi when he enters the examination room, bringing with him a whiff of cigarette smoke. "Or do you prefer William?"

"Will is fine."

"Nice to meet you. You want to touch my face?"

He has an accent. *You wanta to toucha my face-ah?*

"I'm just kidding," he adds. "That is a little of the blind humor for you, yes?"

I chuckle. "Good one."

"You like music, Will?"

"Music? It's okay."

"I love music. I shall turn it on for us. You like the opera?"

"Sure."

"Here is another thing all the people believe about visual impairment," he says. "You all love to touch the faces, and you are all musical geniuses? Yes?"

"Yeah, people are always surprised that I want to be a writer instead of a musician."

"You wish to be a writer?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

He presses a button, and opera music turns on. He turns down the volume so it's just a background.

"There we go," he says. "One thing that is true, though—those who were born blind have a more developed sense of touch and hearing. For how long have you lacked eyesight, Will?"

"I was born without vision."

"In my office, Will, we always say *eyesight,* not *vision,*" he explains. "Because they are not the same, yes?"

"I guess not," I concede.

"Eyesight is in the eyes. Vision is more. It is in the mind. The heart. The soul. But I digress. Let me ask you. Why do you want eyesight?"

"Why not?" I say, as if the question is pretty self-explanatory.

"Yes, why not? But again. This is the important question." He emphasizes those two words: *important question.* "Why do you want eyesight?"

"I think it would make my life better. Like, you know, reading and stuff. Have you heard of the 'tyranny of the visual'?"

"Yes, of course. Since so many of us in today's world rely on sight because of the mass media, living in our society is now more difficult for the blind."

"Right. So I think having vision—that is, *eyesight*—would improve my life."

He pauses and then says, "Will, do you know why I came to this country?"

"No."

"I have lived here for twenty years. I moved to America from Italy because PU has one of the best medical research programs in my field in the entire world. So I want to live here for a better career so I can give the better life for my family. So I understand this. When you say you want the better life, I understand this."

I don't say anything. The opera singer's voice shakes with vibrato.

"And I am one of the few surgeons who practice this surgery because I think it can offer a better life. Another reason humans have evolved to rely on eyesight as the primary sense is because it has the best spatial resolution."

"Sorry," I say. "I don't think I know what that is."

"Say you are in a restaurant, listening to another table. Easy enough to accomplish. But if you try to listen to two different conversations at different tables simultaneously, you find the limitation of hearing. You can't concentrate on both at once. But a person with eyesight can see and process hundreds of objects and colors at the same time. This is spatial resolution."

He pauses and then says, as if closing his argument, "So this is why I think eyesight can give you the better life."

I ask, "Can you help me see, Dr. Bianchi?"

He thinks for a moment. "It is a possibility," he concludes, in a tone that suggests I've cleared his first hurdle. "But several things stand in our way."

"Like what?"

"First, we must get the B-scan. To see if your congenital blindness makes you a candidate for the stem cell operation."

"Okay. A B-scan. Then what?"

"Then we must find a stem cell donor."

"If we do, that's it? Then I can see?"

"If only, Will, if only. No, then we must give your eyes a month to heal. After this, then we look for a cornea-transplant donor."

"So there are two surgeries?" I ask.

"Yes. First you need retinal stem cells. After that, we wait one month for you to heal. Then we have a two-week window. During that time, you can get corneas."

"So we need to find a donor? Um, how about one of my parents?"

He chuckles. "No, you cannot ask someone to do this for you. Not a living person. You need an organ donor, a cadaver who is recently deceased due to traumatic accident. But with the eyes intact. And for this donor we can only wait."

"What if we don't find a donor within the two weeks?"

"Donors are relatively easy to find. Sadly, accidents happen every day. And rarely are the eyes damaged."

"But if it did happen? If two weeks passed without us finding a donor?"

"If we miss the window, this is not a surgery we can do for another time. You would be staying blind forever."

Yikes.

I'm not sure how to take this. "Okay, let's assume we

find a donor, and I have the operation. Then I can see? Is that it?"

He chuckles again. "Oh, no, Will, that is only the beginning. After the operation, this is when the real work must begin."

"What do you mean?"

"Because you have never had eyesight, your visual cortex, the region of the brain that processes sight, has developed differently. If the visual cortex is stimulated with magnetic waves, the person with eyesight sees a flash of light. But for the person born blind, when the visual cortex is stimulated with the magnetic waves, he feels a tingling on his tongue or his fingers. Do you understand why?"

"No," I admit.

"The brain rewires itself to solve the problems it is given. This is called neuroplasticity. In a blind person, who does not need the visual cortex for processing eyesight, the visual cortex will instead be used to process taste or touch."

"Is that reversible?" I ask. "Would I be able to use that part of my brain for eyesight?"

"This is what we hope. I would provide you therapy and monitor your progress, but mostly it would just take time. You would be like, if I may say so, a newborn baby. After the surgery. You would have to *learn* how to see."

"But I *could* learn? With practice?"

"Hopefully. There are a number of risks. You may also lapse into confusion for some time, or for all time."

That catches me off guard. "I'm sorry. Did you say 'for all time'?"

"It is a possibility," he says reluctantly.

"Like, for the rest of my life? You mean I might go crazy?"

"The operation is full of risks, Will. It is a decision you must make for yourself."

I've had fantasies about eyesight. Like, if I could just magically have eyesight given to me or whatever. Of course I have. I think about it sometimes. And I've always just thought that it would all happen instantly. I'd open my eyelids and—poof—the world would open up to me.

Dr. Bianchi just crushed that dream.

"So can I think about it for a while?" I ask.

"I insist that you do. Think as long as you need. And discuss it with your family. But as long as you're here, would you like to get a preliminary B-scan to see if you are a candidate?"

"Sure, but can I, um, use your phone?" I ask. "I need to, um, call my mom and tell her I'm going to be a bit longer."

"Of course," he says.

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On the drive home, I get a text from Whitford inviting me to "Settlers Sunday" this weekend. The entire quiz team will be there, he says.

There are many board games made specifically for blind

people. We have a few downstairs, in fact. I'm not going to bring one of those over and force everyone to play, but I do want to make friends. I want to fit in at this school. And Whitford lives just around the corner anyway. So I agree to go. I'll be "playing" Settlers, even though I won't really be able to participate at all. Hey, maybe one of them can move my piece for me. Yeah, that plan always works out *great.*

It makes me wonder, though. What if I could one day play board games without help? What if I could use my eyes to see where my own piece on the board should go?

The truth is, I've always wanted eyesight. I mean, obviously. I'd love to be able to see. It's not like I'm unhappy with myself the way I am or bitter about being blind or anything. I get along all right. I'm fine with who I am.

But if there's a chance I could gain eyesight, I mean, come on. Plenty of people go from sighted to blind. But how many people can say they've gone from blind to sighted? And how many details does most of the world take for granted, colors and shapes that I would be able to notice and appreciate? Normally, you learn to see for the first time as a baby and don't remember it. But getting eyesight for the first time as a teenager, when you can observe and remember every moment of the experience, that's much more than a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It would be like winning the lottery. I could live a thousand lifetimes or a million lifetimes and not get the chance to try something as cool as that again.

CHAPTER 9

On Sunday, it takes a while to persuade Mom to let me walk to Whitford's by myself. It's literally only three houses away. Perhaps, I think, living independently is something of a lofty goal, after all. Not because it is so terribly difficult for me to get by on my own, but because my mother simply won't let me.

I leave the house and walk left down the sidewalk. My mind keeps rewinding to the appointment with Dr. Bianchi. Would I really want to try the operation? Will I even qualify as a candidate? I count two driveways and then turn left at the intersection. Whitford's house, Siri tells me, is now on my left.

But at the end of the driveway, I stop. Do I seriously want to go to a *board game party*? I won't be able to play the game. Which will be awkward. Probably even more so for everyone else than for me.

This was stupid. I am going to walk back home.

"You just going to stand there all night?" a voice says

from about ten feet away. "Or are you going to come inside?"

I jump. "Jeez! You scared me!"

Cecily laughs.

I ask, "How long have you been standing there?"

"The whole time you have. I saw you coming and thought I would wait for you to come inside with me, but, uh, you never did. Were you waiting for someone who could guide you in or something?"

"Actually—yeah, that's what I was doing, I guess."

I don't tell her that I could have navigated to the front door without a guide. There's almost always a sidewalk through the front yard that leads directly to the entrance of a house. Or at least, that's what Mrs. Chin taught us.

"Come on, let's go in," she says, offering her arm.

At the front door, I meet Whitford's parents, both professors at PU.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Washington and Dr. Washington," I say.

"You can call us *Mr.* and *Mrs.* Washington," says Whitford's dad. "We're not so pretentious as to require the use of honorifics in our home."

He and Mrs. Washington burst into peals of laughter. Cecily and I chuckle politely.

They show us to the kitchen table.

"Hey, Nick, Ion, Whitford!" says Cecily. At first I think naming each person at the table is an odd greeting.

Then I realize it was for my benefit, to tell me who is in the room.

"Cecily, I see you've brought us a new Settler of Catan!" says Nick in an affected English-narrator voice.

Cecily replies in kind. "Indeed I have, good sir."

As I sit down in a wooden chair beside Cecily, I hear the rattle of game pieces inside a cardboard box.

I shouldn't be here. What a disaster waiting to happen. If only I'd gone back home before Cecily saw me outside!

As if she somehow knows how I'm feeling, Cecily grabs my hand and gives it a quick squeeze.

"Will and I will be on a team together," she says.

I tense up. I'm torn between my bad memories of the last time I relied on another player and the cold hard truth that I can't actually play at all if I don't have help.

"Good, because I don't have the expansion pack," says Whitford. "We can only have four players."

Well, then. My hand has been forced. I guess I'm on a team.

Whitford says, "Cecily and Will, you guys want some snacks? I've got cookies, Doritos, Skittles—"

"Sweet! Skittles, definitely," I say.

Whitford pours some Skittles into a bowl and sets it in front of me. I eat them one at a time, smelling each candy first to guess the flavor before I put it in my mouth. I'm usually right. Skittles are my favorite. Always have been, since I was little.

"It's my week to set up the map, right?" asks Ion.

"Indeed," says Nick.

"In that case, I'll take the terrain hexes and harbor pieces, please."

"You got it," says Nick.

"I'll teach you to play as we go along," Cecily says softly to me.

"If I ever invent a board game," Nick says, shuffling through the box, "I'll make sure the title starts with the same first letter as a day of the week. I think that's the key to success: an alliterative title so people naturally have a weekly standing game night."

"That's probably why Settlers has blown up," says Ion. "They've got the whole weekend on lockdown. Settlers Sunday *or* Settlers Saturday."

"Ditto for Scrabble, Snakes and Ladders, and Sorry," says Whitford.

Nick adds, "It continues with Monopoly Monday, Trivial Pursuit Tuesday, et cetera."

"What about checkers?" asks Whitford. "Isn't that the most popular board game of all time?"

"So glad you brought that up," says Nick. "Checkers was actually invented in ancient Egypt to amuse King Ramses, the pharaoh. Homer references the game in his writings, as does Plato. But for most of history, checkers has been referred to as 'draughts,' and while I can't attest to all languages where the game has flourished, in English

we can see that following our alliterative formula, every single day can be named a Draught Day. Thus it can be played daily, explaining its position as the king of all board games."

There's a stunned silence after Nick finishes his speech.

"Drops microphone, walks away," says Ion.

"How do you *know* stuff like that?" asks Whitford.

"I'm on the quiz team, bitches," says Nick.

"So am I...but seriously...*the entire history of checkers?*" says Whitford.

"Okay, fine. I just read about it the other day," admits Nick. "I basically brought up that whole thing about the board games on certain days hoping someone would ask about checkers. But you have to admit...it sounded impressive."

"If you're done showing off now, I'll take the number tokens and robber, please," says Ion.

Nick's fingers return to rummaging the box for the requested items.

"So, are you guys going to homecoming?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"Stand around with a bunch of awkward adolescents trying to dance while listening to sellout pop music under the Orwellian eyes of a hundred chaperones? Count me out," says Nick.

"Whitford and I are going," says Ion. "Cecily, are you?"

"I don't think it's really my scene," says Cecily.

The game begins, and Cecily narrates what's happening and explains each decision we have to make in our turns. The game has something to do with a map. The object is to build roads and establish settlements in order to accumulate something called victory points. Cecily consults with me about whether to build a road or a settlement depending on the resource cards we have. I touch the little rod piece that represents a road and the house-shaped one that represents a settlement. Apparently settlements can be turned into cities, which are represented by the most complex-feeling piece of all.

Cecily takes a bunch of photos while we play. She's testing a macro lens she just got off Craigslist. The lens, she explains, is designed to focus up close on tiny objects like game pieces. Gathering around the screen on her camera, the others agree that it does create a cool effect as Cecily tries to describe it to me.

Ion ends up winning the game, but if there were victory points for trash talking, Nick would have had it in the bag.

As my friends slide the game pieces across the table and drop them back into the box, I mention the meeting with Dr. Bianchi.

The packing of the game comes to an abrupt halt. The group is riveted.

"That's way cool," says Nick.

"Is it something you want?" asks Cecily.

"I have to get the test results to see if I qualify. That's step one. Then, I don't know. We'll see."

There's a pause, and Whitford says, "Well, I've rigged up a new reading device for you, but maybe you won't need it for much longer after all."

"Need what?" I ask.

"Cecily told me you wanted to try out to host the morning announcements."

I didn't so much *want* to as agreed to if she would do it, too.

"I might have figured out a way to make it work."

"You have?"

"Ever heard of a 'refreshable braille display'? It's pretty cool. I mean, I'm a gadget guy. I just love stuff like this. But it's this flat tablet that has a bunch of tiny rods in it that pop up to form braille letters in real time. When you finish reading a line of the braille, the rods reassemble to create the surface for the next line of text."

"Wow, that's so cool," says Ion.

"I know, right?" says Whitford. "I found a way to make it all work together. I found an app that allows a teleprompter on this iPad"—I hear him tap the device—"to be controlled by an iPhone. So another host could control the script on the teleprompter by scrolling on the iPad with her finger off-camera, which controls the text on a refreshable braille terminal that Will would have on a desk in front of him."

"That's tight," says Nick.

"Wow, cool," I say, though I have mixed feelings. I hadn't expected Whitford to actually think up a functioning system for this. Now I really have to audition.

"Good luck," says Nick. "You'll need it. I mean, *we'll* all vote for you. But you've got, you know, pretty steep competition. Xander Reusch-Bag has been host for, like, three years."

"Wait," I say. "We have class together. Isn't his last name just Reusch?"

"Well, yeah, technically it's just Reusch," says Nick. "But, hey. If your last name rhymes with *douche*, you really should know better than to also act like one. Otherwise the nickname is inevitable."

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After Nick and Ion head home, Whitford suggests that Cecily and I try out his braille terminal.

Cecily holds an iPhone and I have the terminal on a desk in front of me. I feel the braille and start to read.

"It was the year 3017 and the Doctor was walking through the empty streets of a mysteriously abandoned city floating on what appeared to be a cloud..." I read. "Dude, what *is* this?"

"Doctor Who fan fiction," says Whitford, as if this should have been completely obvious. "You don't like it?

Do you think the scene should've started with him stepping out of the TARDIS?"

"Wait, did you write this?" I ask. "You write fan fiction?"

"Uh . . . no . . . I mean, my friend wrote it, I just thought he might want feedback on it," says Whitford.

"Right," I say, completely unconvinced. "Your *friend*."

"Let's keep practicing," says Cecily. "We need to get this down for the audition."

As we continue through the text, the Doctor still wandering around a postapocalyptic wasteland in search of someone called his "companion," there are times when Cecily gets a bit behind or ahead in her scrolling. After a while, though, my reading speed and her scrolling harmonize into the perfect match.

CHAPTER 10

On Monday, at the start of journalism class, Mrs. Everbrook asks everyone who wants to audition for the morning announcements to raise a hand.

I raise mine, wondering if Cecily is raising hers, too. I better not be the only one challenging Xander and Victoria. Cecily better not be backing out. I'm doing this for her, after all.

The way she spoke at that museum—the energy in her voice as she described each painting, her belief that art means something more than brushed-on oils dried and chipping on stretched canvas—that's a voice that deserves to be heard. That needs to be shared. And if I have to audition in order for her to give it a try, then so be it.

But then I return to panicking. I'm probably the only one raising my hand. This was a bad idea.

"Don't try to pull your hand down, Will. I already saw you," says Mrs. Everbrook. "All right, so we've got Xander and Victoria running for reelection, I see. And they will be challenged by Will"—she pauses while scribbling

my name on paper, and for a moment of dread, I am sure that I am the only one, that Cecily backed out—"as well as Tripp, Connor, and Cecily."

I exhale in relief. She raised her hand.

"I'm going to go ahead and pair you off as cohosts," says Mrs. Everbrook.

"Tripp and Connor, you guys are buddies, right? I'll make you the first pair. And Cecily and Will, you did great work covering that van Gogh exhibit, so I'll put you together."

Mrs. Everbrook goes over some rules about the audition process, including what to wear. Then she gives us the rest of the period to work on our journalism assignments.

I hear Cecily's footsteps approach and listen as she slides into a desk beside me.

"So we've got a problem," she says.

I turn my head toward her, alarmed.

"I don't own any button-down tops."

"What?" I say, not used to hearing a girl describe her wardrobe as *our* problem.

"Were you listening? Mrs. Everbrook says that's what we're supposed to wear. Nothing else works well with a clip-on microphone."

"Oh, right," I say. "Well, come to think of it, I don't think I have any button-downs other than white dress shirts. That's what my mom always tells me she buys. But Mrs. Everbrook said white looks bad on camera, right?"

"Yeah."

I sigh. Shopping for clothes is basically my least favorite activity.

"Well..." I say hesitantly. "Maybe we could go to the mall together? Help each other pick out an audition outfit?"

I realize how absurd the phrase "help each other" sounds. Like she could use *my* help picking out an outfit.

"Can you go right after school today? Might as well get it over with as soon as we can."

"Sure."

"I just have to get back for a quiz-team practice thing at five, though."

"No problem," I say. "How long can it take?"

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Malls are full of hazards: unimaginably large parking lots, shoulder-bumpingly dense crowds, shin-bangingly low fountains. And escalators.

Ugh. Escalators. When it comes to motorized floor transport, elevators are pretty annoying, but escalators are much worse. They are one of those rare obstacles that make me kind of wish I had a guide dog to help. But today I don't need one. I have Cecily.

I tell her, "Okay, put my hand on the rail and tell me when to step forward. On a count of three."

She does.

"One... two... three," she says. I step. "Oh, no, no, no, you're on a crack, move back, move back!"

I step backward, only to land on the flat part of the moving floor, which is steadily sliding out from under me. I feel myself losing balance, tipping... but Cecily stops me from behind and shoves me upright.

"There," she says. "Now you are standing on a step. Hold still."

I notice the feeling of her hands against my back as I regain my balance. Her palms and fingers are small but firm against the fabric of my shirt.

As we go up, the scrolling motion of the escalator reminds me of Whitford's braille terminal.

"Listen, Cecily, if you'd rather have another cohost, I can drop out of the audition," I offer.

"No, you can't drop out," she says.

"I don't think you need me anymore," I say. "You can do this on your own."

"No," she says. "I mean, *neither* of us can quit. I already tried to switch partners."

That feels like a slap, but before she can explain, she tells me we are at the top of the escalator, and disembarking requires both of us to concentrate.

We go into a Forever 21—it has a small men's section, Cecily says—and she picks out a few shirts for me to try on and finds some for herself before heading for the fitting rooms.

"It's a long line," Cecily warns.

We stand in silence for a while, stepping forward every few minutes.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing," I say.

"You seem upset."

"I'm fine."

"Why don't you tell me what's wrong?"

"What do you care?" I snap, displaying more anger than I mean to.

"I'm . . . your friend. I'd like to help."

"How could I *not* be upset? You just told me you tried to dump me as soon as you heard we were paired together today."

She's quiet for a while. Synthesizer-heavy pop music pulses out of speakers above us.

"Will, I asked to be switched to a different partner because I want you to win."

"What are you talking about?"

"I told you. I'm just not the kind of person people would vote for to be on television first period every day. But it doesn't matter anyway. Mrs. Everbrook said once we raised our hands, there was no dropping out, and once she assigned partners, there was no questioning her 'infallible matchmaking.'"

I say, "No way. *You're* the one who would carry this team. As a blind person, I consider myself an exceptional judge of the human voice. And you, Cecily, have a lovely voice."

We listen to the next five tracks of ceiling music in silence. But the beats sound happier than before.

"Jeez, it's almost five o'clock," says Cecily.

"Already?"

"Yeah. I'm supposed to be back at school in twenty minutes."

"We can just leave."

"No, we waited this long. Might as well just try these on and buy something as fast as we can. I'll text our adviser that I might be late."

Even after we finally make it to the front of the line, we wait another ten minutes until one of the dressing rooms finally becomes available.

"Thanks for your patience," says the employee working the area. "Which of you is next?"

Knowing we're short on time, I turn to Cecily.

"Tell me if this is too weird," I say. "But want to just share a room to save time? I can't, you know, watch you or anything."

She hesitates for a moment. Okay, maybe too weird.

But the employee cuts in.

"I'm sorry, we have a strict one-person policy."

"Well—I'm blind," I say.

"Oh," she says. "I guess that's all right, then."

People will accept blindness as the rationale for all sorts of exceptional behavior.

"Cecily?" I ask.

"Yeah, I guess that's a good idea. It'll be faster, like you said."

From the reverb of the door clicking shut, I judge the fitting room to be about two arm lengths across.

"I don't need the mirror, obviously, so you can stand in front of it," I say.

"Okay," she says.

We shift around in the small space, bumping into each other.

I listen to her slide her T-shirt over her shoulders and drop it on the floor. I'm not going to lie: I am immediately on high alert, my senses piqued.

When referring to bikini models or whatever, I always hear that certain parts are "left up to the imagination," and those are the parts that are especially intriguing.

Well. Just think if it was *all* left up to the imagination.

When I suggested we share a fitting room, I was just trying to save time. I didn't anticipate I'd be so, well, *turned on* by the experience. After all, I can't actually imagine what I've never seen. But now... the idea that I'm standing so close to this girl who is in the process of changing shirts... mere inches away from my own body...

I try to control my quickening breath, hoping she doesn't notice. I don't want her to think I'm a perv or something. And I don't want her to think I like her, you know, in *that* way. This is just hormones. I'd feel this way under these circumstances with any girl getting undressed mere inches from me. Wouldn't I?