# CHAPTER 11

The news comes the next day when Mom picks me up from school.

"Will!" she shouts as soon as I get in the front seat of the Tesla. "I have the best news! Dr. Bianchi's office called. Your B-scan showed you are a candidate for the surgery!"

"Wait. Why did you talk to them? I told you I wanted to handle this myself."

"I *thought* you would be excited," she says coolly.

"Don't try to turn this around on me. We had an agreement."

"I haven't even told you the best part yet."

I know she's hoping I'll take her bait—*Oh, now I'm excited, Mommy, tell me the good news, please, please!*—which is exactly why I say nothing.

Eventually she gives in. "Fine, I'll tell you anyway. They have a stem cell donor!"

I can't help myself. "Really?"

"Really."

"Already?"

"Already."

"How long do I have to decide?"

"What do you mean, *decide*?"

I pause as it sinks in. "Don't tell me you already scheduled the surgery."

She says nothing.

"You did, didn't you?"

I hear her shift uneasily.

"Didn't you?"

"I'm sorry . . . I didn't . . . Why would you need to decide anything?"

I'm furious. This is *my* decision. Not Mom's. I can't believe she would just schedule it herself. Or actually, I can. I can totally believe it. It's just like her.

"We had a deal!" I say. "I'm canceling it."

"Will, you will do no such thing!" she snaps.

"Try and stop me," I say. I tell Siri to call Dr. Bianchi's office. A receptionist answers.

"Hi, this is William Porter," I say.

"Will! Stop this immediately!" Mom says.

"My mother spoke with your office earlier to schedule an operation. I'm going to need some time to think about it first—"

"William Porter, hang up that phone!"

"So I would like to put that operation on hold."

The receptionist confirms my request and says they can give me time to decide, but that if I want to move forward with this opportunity, I need to get back to them by Monday.

"One more thing," I say. "Please make a note on my account that my mother, Sydney Porter, is not authorized to speak with your office on my behalf."

The receptionist explains that since I am a minor, I can't prevent my mother from speaking with their office about me.

But since Mom is hearing only one side of the conversation, I reply, "Great. Thank you for making a note of that."

The receptionist counters that she did not make note of that, as she said, I am a minor—

"All right, thanks, bye!" I say, and end the call.

The car is quiet for a while.

"You didn't have to do that," says Mom eventually. She sounds more hurt than angry.

"We had a deal. You went behind my back."

We ride the rest of the way home in silence, without even normal car noises to cut the tension. Teslas—making awkward car rides even more awkward since 2008.

• • •

Dad gets home soon after we do. There's a knock on my door.

"Will? Can we go for a bike ride on the tandem?"

I know Mom sent him as a proxy to persuade me to have the operation. But a part of me wants to be talked into it. I do want to see, after all. So I agree.

We put on our helmets and push out of the driveway. Once we are a few seconds away from the house, he says sternly from the front seat of the bike, "Your mother told me about the incident earlier."

"I just felt like I needed some time to think it over."

"I think that's extremely wise."

Wait, what? This was not the talk I was expecting. "You do?"

"That's why I wanted to take you on a bike ride. I disagree with your mother on this, so I needed to get you alone to hear my concerns."

He's right. If Mom overheard Dad disagreeing with her like this, she'd flip out. He wouldn't get in a single word.

Dad continues, "Since we first heard of the operation, I've been researching the medical literature on the subject. I have to say, it doesn't look good, Will."

"Is that a pun?"

My dad is a serious man, so I know that it's not. I just like to mess with him sometimes.

"Um, no, sorry, no pun intended."

He warns me that we are going to take a left turn. After a few seconds of pedaling, I know we are passing Whitford's house.

He returns to his speech. "In all of recorded history,

there have been fewer than twenty documented cases of early blind gaining eyesight later in life. And in those twenty cases, the outcomes were quite poor."

"You mean, like, it didn't work?" I ask.

"No, those twenty are the few on whom it *did* work. But they all had difficulty recognizing certain objects for the rest of their life. Some of them lost their vision again later. More important, every single patient experienced major depression as a result of gaining sight."

I make a point to push harder on the pedals so Dad won't notice how unsteady and confused I'm feeling.

"They were depressed? After they could *see*?"

"Yes. Some had mental breakdowns. Many wished they could return to blindness or even considered deliberately damaging their own eyes. Most were reported to have undergone significant changes in personality, usually toward melancholy and sadness."

"But why?" I ask. "That doesn't make any sense."

"The world didn't look as good as everyone told them it would. One of the most famous cases, a man in England, was devastated to discover that both he and his wife were not as good-looking as he had always assumed they were. He was in otherwise good health, but he died just nineteen months after seeing for the first time. Apparently, he simply lost his will to live."

I try to reverse the dark tone of the story. "Dad, is this your way of telling me I'm really ugly?"

He doesn't take the bait. "No, son, I'm trying to say—"

"I know what you're trying to say. It was just a joke."

We ride in silence for a few seconds.

"Right turn."

As I feel the bike lean into the turn, my mind swirls with this new information.

I want it to work. I want to find a way to make things turn out differently for me. "But what if I—what if a person went into the operation with low expectations? About what everything looks like?"

"That would be wise, of course. There are other obstacles, though. You'd also have significant frustration while adjusting. Your visual cortex has developed atypically."

"Dr. Bianchi said that my brain could rewire itself," I counter.

"Maybe. But only after a very difficult adjustment period. Listen, Will, I don't want to come across like I don't believe in you. I think you have adapted tremendously well, and that's exactly why you *don't* need this surgery. For instance, where are we right now?"

"What?" I say, confused by the sudden topic change.

"Where are we in the neighborhood?"

I've been keeping track of the route as we ride. "The front gate is coming up on our left," I say.

"Correct," he says in a Proud Father voice. "And you know this without ever having seen a map of these streets. You know our location by estimating the distance and our

speed and tracking our turns. You already have a rich life, and you are perfectly capable of functioning in society."

"I guess," I reply, as if to say, *So what?*

"I myself figure out where we are by looking up from the handlebars and taking in the entire scene all at once. That's the thing, Will. You're a skilled navigator now, but if you have the surgery, it will be like starting over."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"When a blind person sees for the first time, it's not like he can suddenly process everything going into his brain. He can't identify faces, people, shapes, or colors. You'll have no point of reference for understanding the images. Slight left."

"So it's like a foreign language, then?" I ask, adding, "People learn new languages all the time."

"Not exactly. For an adult born blind, learning to see would not be like learning a new language, it would be like learning language itself for the first time."

Dad alerts me to an upcoming bend in the road. But I'm not paying much attention and find myself startled when the bike tips and accelerates through the turn.

"And, Will," he adds, "that's if the surgery is successful at restoring your vision, which still requires immunosuppressant drugs that could allow you to die of something like a cold or the flu."

That seems to be his trump card. Not only will the surgery not work, but even if it does, I might die of the flu.

Really subtle, Dad. "Well, I guess we know which side you are on here."

"I'm on *your* side, Will."

We coast a bit in silence, and I feel the breeze biting my face.

He adds, "I think you are a tremendous son, and I couldn't be more proud of you. I just don't know why you'd want to risk everything on this operation when you already have so much going for you. Think about it this way: What if instead of giving *you* sight, this operation made a clone of you. The clone had functioning eyes, but in order for it to live, you had to die. Would you agree to that?"

This strikes me as kind of extreme. "Come on, Dad, that's totally different!"

"Is it, though? Because currently you are a blind person. With sight, you would be a sighted person. If you gained your sight, by definition, you'd be a different person than you are now."

"I guess," I agree reluctantly.

"So the Will that is riding this bike with me would no longer exist. You would be a different Will. Who would that Will be?"

I count out a few seconds as we ride, his question hanging unanswered in the air.

"We're home, aren't we?" I ask.

"That's my son. That's my Will. See what you can already do? What would you need this operation for?"

I go back to my room and lie on my bed and think it over. When I first heard about this procedure and had my initial appointment with Dr. Bianchi, I immediately thought, *Yeah, I want that.* But after what my dad just said, I'm not so sure.

# CHAPTER 12

As I waste stomach space ingesting large quantities of pointless beta-carotene at lunch the next day, my friends and I discuss the homecoming dance. Ion suggests I go with Cecily.

Be the only blind person at a school dance? Um, no thanks.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I say.

"Why not?" she asks.

I don't want to tell her that I'm afraid of the event itself, though, so I share a different problem. "Well, for one thing, I came to public school to learn how to live independently. I don't have time for a girlfriend right now."

"Who said anything about a relationship? You can just go as friends. But if it makes you feel any better, Cecily doesn't want a boyfriend."

"Why not?"

"You'd have to ask *her* that," says Ion. "But seriously, what could better demonstrate how well you're mainstreaming than taking a girl to homecoming?"

"You have a point," I concede. As an afterthought, I add, "What does Cecily look like?"

"What do you mean?" asks Ion.

Her hesitation is a surprise—usually people jump at the chance to paint word pictures for me.

"You know, like, is she pretty or whatever?" I clarify.

"Does it matter?" asks Ion.

"If she's pretty? No, not really."

But sort of. I mean, I know it shouldn't matter. I'm just curious. And the way Ion's stalling, I'm beginning to think the answer is no.

Whitford jumps in. "It's not like that. Cecily is more of a sister to all of us. We don't see her in that way."

It's obviously a nonanswer. Even if you don't think of her like "that," you would still notice if she was pretty. Wouldn't you? I think so. Isn't that how eyesight works?

I always kind of assumed Cecily was pretty. Her voice is pretty enough. But maybe I was wrong. Again, it's no big deal. I'm just curious.

Nick says, "If you guys won't do it, I'll be the one to tell him."

Ion tries to interrupt. "Wait, Nick—"

"She's hot," he continues, undeterred. "Totally."

There's a pause.

"Yeah, all right," chimes in Whitford. "It's true. I mean, I've only got eyes for my girl Ion here, but if I was single, I would definitely look twice when Cecily walked by."

"Ion?" I ask.

"Cecily is lovely," she says slowly, carefully.

"So you think she'd say yes? If I asked her to homecoming?"

"I don't know, actually," says Ion.

"So you are trying to set me up with a girl who might reject me?"

"Didn't you just say you are trying to learn to live *independently*?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Well then, find out for yourself."

• • •

Two days later is the first round of auditions. I wear my new blue button-down shirt.

The announcements begin as normal. But after three minutes, Xander says, "Well, my fellow students, we have reached that exciting point in the year when you all decide who will have the distinct honor and privilege of bringing you your announcements every morning beginning in the spring semester. This year there are three teams of potential cohosts: team one, which is myself and Victoria; team two, Will Porter and Cecily Hoder; and team three, Tripp Atkinson and Connor Forthright."

I feel so nervous it's like there's a balloon expanding in my stomach and pressing against my insides. I told Cecily, and she said not to worry about it. Being nervous

was perfectly understandable. I was shocked by how calm she sounded. Honestly, I wanted to drop out. But her voice brought me back, and here I am, getting ready to go on camera.

"And now team two will take over the next section of today's announcements. Good luck to all the teams!" says Xander. He sounds sincere. Almost.

Cecily and I take our seats at the anchor desk. I feel heat from the studio lights on my face. I angle my head in that direction, knowing the lights are positioned near the camera. I'm wearing my glasses so people will assume that I'm making eye contact with them on their screens.

"Good morning, I'm Cecily."

"And I'm Will."

Cecily begins a flawless read of her first announcement, about the canned-food drive next week. I'm filled with dread. I know I'm going to screw this up for us. I'll probably puke all over the camera.

My fingers are in the ready position on the braille terminal. This is it. I'm about to read my first announcement.

When Cecily finishes the details about the food drive, I hear her hand move quickly to the iPad in her lap, where she scrolls the teleprompter to the next announcement. As she does, I feel the braille letters refresh under my fingertips.

I begin to read aloud, like a kindergartner nervously sounding out words for the first time. "Tickets for the homecoming dance are—"

At this point, there's a gap in the text where the next word should begin. Three empty characters instead of one space. Which is weird.

"—still for sale in the main—"

The line of text refreshes, but it begins with another set of three blank spaces. It's quite distracting, these typos.

"—office for only ten dollars. Get yours—"

I hit another empty slot where a word should be. What's going on here? Reading braille aloud is difficult enough if you are, say, in your bedroom all by yourself. But I'm on camera in front of a thousand pairs of eyes for an audition. And now I have to deal with problems in the script? Is there a glitch in the program? Or is Cecily not scrolling correctly?

"—today so you don't miss out on an unforgettable night this Saturday."

I hope my face doesn't show how upset I am. I'm speaking like a person who barely knows the language.

Everyone probably thinks I'm nervous. Like I'm stuttering because the whole school is watching. Or maybe they think I'm a slow braille reader.

I want to stop reading from the script and say, *This is not my fault! I don't know what's going on here, but there's something messed up with the script, not me!*

I *knew* this wouldn't work. I knew I shouldn't be auditioning for a position where my performance is entirely reliant on other people to hold their own. Lean on others

long enough, and eventually you'll fall. And in these auditions, I'm falling hard, crashing and burning in front of the whole entire school.

It also occurs to me that if I could see, none of this would've happened. My reading would have sounded just as smooth and confident as Cecily's.

As soon as our part of the broadcast is over, we return next door to Mrs. Everbrook's classroom. Cecily and I sit together while we wait for the announcements to end. Tripp and Connor begin their audition on the classroom television.

I whisper to Cecily, "When you were scrolling through my script, could you see those gaps between words?"

I'm trying not to sound as accusatory as I feel.

She pauses, then whispers back, "Those weren't gaps."

I'm confused. "They felt like gaps on my braille terminal. I wasn't sure what to say. I don't understand. What were they?"

"Don't worry about it, Will," she says, as if she's speaking to a child or something. Which only makes me feel worse. First I look stupid on the announcements, and now Cecily acts like she's doing me a favor by not telling me why?

"What *were* they?" I repeat, frustration creeping into my voice.

"They were images," she finally says.

That's not the answer I was expecting. "What kind of images?"

"They were, like, emojis. But not the normal ones," she says reluctantly.

"Meaning?"

She shifts uncomfortably in her desk. "They were, I guess you could say, X-rated emojis. Of, like, human... anatomy and stuff."

"Why did they show up as blanks for me?"

"Maybe your terminal doesn't translate emojis."

I consider this. "That's probably lucky. If it had, I would've read..."

"Some very inappropriate-sounding announcements, yes."

None of this makes sense. "But why were they only in *my* script? I can't even see them. Why not yours, too?" I ask.

"Oh," she says, "they *were* in mine."

"But your reading was flawless! How did you read them without getting distracted by the, um, you know..."

"That's the advantage of being bullied all your life, I guess. You get pretty good at tuning that kind of thing out."

I feel ashamed. Here I was, partially blaming Cecily for my audition going poorly when it had probably been much more distracting for her.

"I'm sorry," I say. The words aren't really enough, but they're all I can think of. I'm sorry about everything—sorry that I was awkward in our audition, sorry that I was

blaming her for it, and sorry that she, apparently, has had to put up with stuff like this for years. "I'm really sorry."

"Don't be."

We sit there quietly for a moment, listening to Tripp and Connor read from their own script. Now that I'm paying attention, I hear tension in their voices, like they are about to burst out laughing. Could be the nerves. Or maybe their script got tampered with, too.

"You think they have the same problem?" I whisper to Cecily.

"Looks that way," she agrees.

I sit back in my desk and wonder if maybe I did a *better* job reading the announcements because I couldn't see the images. Maybe my blindness actually helped me rather than hurt me. For once. And maybe there are other times in my life when this happens without me even realizing it.

I ask, "Did Xander and Victoria's script have the images? They sounded normal."

"Yeah, but they've got a few years of practice, you know?"

"So who would've done it?" I ask.

"Probably just some hacker wannabe trying to impress his hacker wannabe friends."

But then Xander walks by—all three of the teams have been hanging out in Mrs. Everbrook's classroom this morning during tryouts—and he leans in between our desks.

"Nice try, noobs," he says. "In live broadcasting, you have to be prepared for anything. I hope you learned that lesson today."

"Wait," says Cecily. "You put those in the scripts on purpose?"

"Who, me? I didn't say that. I just said I hope you learned something today."

After he walks away, I whisper to Cecily, "You think we have any chance of making it to the final round next week?"

"Honestly? Not really. Not with me—"

I interrupt, "Don't say stuff like that. You were great."

Cecily doesn't answer at first. Then she says, "Thanks." It sounds like the compliment really meant something to her. I decide to seize the moment and take Ion's advice.

"Hey," I say, "you got any plans Saturday night?"

"Um . . . no," she says.

"Want to go to homecoming? With me, I mean?"

"Uh, yeah, sure."

"Just as, you know, friends?"

"As friends?"

"Or cohosts. If you prefer."

"Whoa, let's take things one step at a time," she says. But I can hear that she's smiling.

# CHAPTER 13

On Saturday, as she is driving to my house to pick me up before homecoming, Cecily calls my cell.

"Are you all ready?" she asks.

"Yep."

"Wanna just meet me outside?"

"My mom really wants to get a photo of us together. Can you come in? Just for a minute?"

"Oh . . ." She pauses. "Yeah, sure, of course. Okay, I'm parking in the driveway now."

She hangs up, and I go to the front foyer. The doorbell rings, and I reach out and turn the knob. My parents are crowding in right behind me, apparently in a competition to find out which one of them can make this situation more awkward.

I swing open the door.

"Wow," says Cecily. "You look great."

I'm wearing a suit and tie. I even allowed Mom to comb my hair for the occasion.

"So do you," I say. "At least, I assume so. Let me ask my parents. Cecily, I would like you to meet my mom and dad."

They don't say anything. This is awkward. So, so awkward. What's wrong with them?

"Oh," says Mom. "Hi there."

*Hi there?* Seriously?

"Hi," says Cecily quietly.

"It's so very nice to meet you," says Mom, trying to recover.

I guess Mom and Dad are just as nervous as Cecily.

"Well, how does she look?" I ask, trying to bring back the festive mood I would've expected in this conversation.

There's another pause. Dad says, "She looks gorgeous, Will. Absolutely gorgeous. It's wonderful to finally meet you, Cecily. We've heard so much about you."

I hear them shake hands.

"We've got a dinner to get to," I say. "Mom, you want to get that picture?"

"Wait, I brought you a boutonniere," says Cecily. "Want me to pin it on?"

"Sure," I say.

She comes close. Her perfume floats in through my nostrils and fills my whole body.

"Careful, don't poke him," Mom says. I feel her lean toward us.

"Would you . . . like to do it?" offers Cecily.

"If you don't mind," says Mom.

Cecily steps aside as Mom's perfume enters my personal space, filling me with quite different emotions than Cecily's did.

"There," says Mom. "You look so handsome. And here's Cecily's corsage."

I reach my hand out to accept the floral arrangement, but instead hear Mom sliding it onto Cecily's wrist herself.

"Can we take the picture now?" I ask, feeling increasingly eager to ditch my parents.

Mom arranges us in a few different poses and, once satisfied with her photo collection, dismisses us.

"Be safe," she says.

"Have fun," adds Dad.

We go out to a fancy dinner with Whitford and Ion, and then go to the dance, which is in the school gym.

"I'm gonna show these folks how to dance," says Whitford as we walk through the doors. "We'll meet you out there."

Ion and Whitford walk away, leaving the two of us standing by ourselves.

"I'm nervous," Cecily says. The music is loud, and she has to put her lips right up to my ear so I can hear her. I feel her breath against my skin, warm and humid, like a breeze in the summer. It gives me chills, having her face so near.

"I've never been to a dance before," Cecily continues. I feel her leaning away, as if shrinking back toward the exit. "I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if it's a good idea," she says.

I reach down and give her hand a supportive squeeze.

I remove my sunglasses and turn my head so my mouth will be close to her ear. She's so close that my chin bumps lightly against her hair. "Keep your eyes on mine. Don't look away. It's just you and me."

I give her hand another squeeze. "Got it?"

Her head brushes against my face as I feel her nod.

"Then let's go dance," I say.

We turn toward the music. She walks slightly ahead, our fingers still intertwined. If someone saw us and didn't know better, I bet they'd think we were a couple, walking together, holding hands.

As we move across the gym, the music gets louder and the bodies closer.

"How's this?" she says, yelling above the music.

"Perfect!"

This is not my first school dance, but it *is* my first dance at a mainstream school. I try to start dancing, bouncing my shoulders and arms to the beat. But I feel self-conscious, like every student in the gym is staring at me, judging my inability to dance. If I could *see* my dance moves, and if I could look at everyone else to compare myself, maybe I wouldn't feel so insecure. Everyone else, everyone who can see—I know they aren't having such doubts. But I try to pretend I'm confident and having fun because I want Cecily to be comfortable.

"So... are you dancing now?" I yell at her.

"Yeah! My moves are incredible. Shame you can't see them!" she jokes.

"Let me feel them," I say.

"What?"

"Come closer!"

I reach out both of my hands, and she lays her fingers across them. It's a fast song, a club remix of a pop radio hit. I tug on her arms, and she steps one of her legs right up against mine, and then the other, her whole body following so that we press together from the ground up, like a closing zipper, until our faces meet, cheek to cheek. She wraps her arms around my neck, and I pull against the small of her back, tighter with every beat of the song. The silky fabric of her dress is stretched taut between her legs. I feel the strap of her camera, which is hanging over her shoulder even now, at this school dance and in this dress. I love that about Cecily. Always ready to capture beauty.

That's when I realize something: I want to kiss Cecily.

But does she want to kiss me?

If only I could see her, read her expression, look into her eyes. Then I would know.

I let my mouth brush over her ear.

She doesn't pull back. That's a good sign. Maybe there is something here. Something more than friendship. Something more than cohosting.

Suddenly a great holler rises up from the crowd, a collective protest. The music is still going, but I get the sense that everyone has stopped dancing.

"What just happened?" I say.

"The lights turned on," says Cecily.

"What? They were *off* before?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"So we've been dancing in the dark this whole time?"

"Pretty much."

That's not what I had imagined. I generally assume that wherever I go, there is light. If it was dark, people would stop moving. Wouldn't they? They'd get confused and start stumbling over each other. They'd be, well, blind. But apparently, it's been dark at this dance the whole time.

"You mean, people danced when it was dark, but when they could see themselves, they stopped dancing?"

"I guess you could say it that way. Oh, wow, the lights—this is a perfect shot."

Her camera lens pops off, and she starts clicking away.

"The students' expressions of frustration and unhappiness juxtapose with the formal attire and decorations . . ." She's narrating, like an art-museum tour guide, when there's a sudden cheer. I feel the vibrations of the crowd returning to their dancing.

"Let me guess. The lights are back off?"

"Yep."

But that moment before—when I was really considering kissing her—has passed.

• • •

After the dance ends, the four of us change out of our dress clothes and go to Mel's Diner and get a booth. It's

pretty much the only place open twenty-four hours a day in our town, and based on the volume of chatter inside the restaurant, it seems every other teenager at that dance had the exact same idea we did.

"Room for one more?"

It's Nick's voice.

"Well, look who it is!" says Whitford.

"Scoot over," Cecily says to Whitford. There's some sliding, and Nick sits down on the other side of the table from Cecily and me.

I smile. "I thought homecoming was for sellouts?" I say.

"This isn't homecoming. This is the after-party," Nick says.

"Who's up for an after-after-party at my place?" says Whitford. "Maybe a game of Settlers?"

"We can't play Settlers on a *Saturday*," I say.

Cecily pokes me. "It's past midnight, silly. Now it's *Sunday*. Very, very early Settlers Sunday."

We go to the Washingtons' house and play till six in the morning. I eat so many Skittles I think I might be sick.

"I can just walk home from here," I tell Cecily on the front porch. "It's right around the corner."

"I've got something else in mind," she says. "Are you free for a drive?"

"Sorry, can't," I say. "I have several predawn appointments on the calendar."

"Very funny."

She takes us to Mole Hill Park, and we walk up what seems like a million flights of stairs to the top of the hill this place is named after and sit down on the grass.

"You know this used to be a volcano?" she asks.

"And we're sitting on top of it right now?" I ask, slightly disconcerted.

"Don't worry, it's not active anymore."

"Hey, can I take a picture of you?" I ask.

"Of me?" she asks.

"Yeah. You're always taking mine. Seems only fair I should get a turn."

"I prefer to stay behind the camera," she says.

"Oh, come on," I say. "Just one photo."

"Fine," she says, handing me the camera and guiding my finger to the shutter button.

"Say cheese!" I say.

"Seriously?" she says flatly.

I press the button, and the camera clicks. I do it a few more times.

"Okay, that's plenty," she says, taking the camera back.

"Why are you supposed to say cheese?" I ask.

"I have no idea," she says.

"Nick would probably know," I say.

"Probably," she agrees.

I hear her move and sense warmth near my hand, as if her own hand is hovering nearby, thinking about grabbing mine.

Do it. Please. Grab my hand.

But then the warmth is gone. She must have pulled away. "Anyway, I wanted to take you here because this is the highest point in the city. So it's the best place to watch the sunrise."

First we almost kissed on the dance floor. Now we almost held hands. Or at least, I think that's what happened. And if so, she definitely *chose* not to hold my hand.

I guess it's like Ion said: Cecily's not looking for a boyfriend. And hand holding can definitely lead to boyfriends. Not to mention kissing. I guess it's a good thing the lights came on during the dance.

"Sunrises," I say, turning my attention back to the present. "I don't get it. They get all this hype. I mean, *I* rise out of bed every morning when my alarm goes off, but no one climbs mountains to watch and rave about how beautiful I am. What's so great about a sunrise?"

"All the colors. So many blended together."

"Like a painting?"

"Yes, but better."

"Why better?"

"It's bigger than a painting, for one thing. It's infinite, in a sense. A sunrise stretches across the whole sky, and behind it is the entire galaxy and the rest of the universe."

"Well, that's something," I admit, leaning back and feeling the grass with my fingers.

"Plus, a painting is only a representation of the thing. But a sunrise . . . a sunrise is the actual thing."

I shift my weight on the ground. "I'm not trying to be cynical or difficult," I say. "But why does a multitude of colors make it beautiful? Like a multitude of smells. Well, that's like the cafeteria at school... and that's not something I'd stay up all night and walk up that many steps for, I'll tell you that."

She chuckles. "The colors work together; they don't compete. It's not like the cafeteria. You know how it is at Thanksgiving dinner when there's all those smells from so many dishes, but they mix together into something wonderful?"

I imagine the scent and find my mouth watering. "Mmm, yeah."

"Or you could use sound as an example. The hallway at school is noisy, right? A cacophony of noises banging together. But a sunrise is more like an orchestra. Many different instruments harmonizing to create beautiful music. Does that make sense?"

I catch the wonder in her voice, and that, more than the words, lets me understand her meaning. "Yeah, actually, it does."

"So can you imagine a sunrise now?" she says hopefully. It makes me cringe a little, how earnestly she believes I am capable of imagining a sunrise. I don't want to disappoint her. But I don't want to lie to her, either.

"Honestly?"

"Honesty would be preferable."

"In that case, no." I try to say it playfully. I want to soften the blow of disappointment for her.

"Come on!" she says, touching my arm imploringly. "Just try."

"It's impossible," I say. "I'm sorry. I really wish I could."

After a beat, she asks hesitantly, "Can you imagine me?"

"Yes. I can."

She seems pleased by this. "How?"

"I've sensed you. I've felt your arm when you guide me. I've heard you speak, smelled your perfume tonight..."

I've kissed two girls in my life. One at the school for the blind. One at blind camp. My understanding is that people usually close their eyes just before contact is made, which makes kissing the closest Cecily and I can ever come to having an identical, shared experience: both of us feeling our lips touch, both doing so without sight.

"Do you want to touch my face?" she asks. "Would that help you see me?"

"Yes," I say. "It would help a lot."

She sits up and places my palms against her cheeks. I run my fingers over her skin, sensing the smoothness of her forehead, the texture of her eyebrows, the delicacy of her eyelashes, the resoluteness of her nose, the smallness of her lips, the downward angle of her chin.

She's beautiful. There's no doubt about it. And I want to tell her that. I'm so tempted to blurt it out. And—I want to feel that face against mine.

But I can't. Kissing would only make things complicated. Really, really complicated. What would we be, cohosts with benefits or something?

I remove my hands from her face and lean back in the grass.

I hear Cecily's camera.

"Photographing the sunrise?" I ask.

"Of course," she says with a note of humor in her voice. "I need some hype-worthy photos for my collection."

# CHAPTER 14

On the Monday after homecoming—the day I'm supposed to make a decision about my operation—Mrs. Everbrook calls me over to her desk.

"Will, I understand you have a mighty interesting opportunity," says Mrs. Everbrook.

"What do you mean?"

"The experimental surgery."

I'm confused. "How do you know about that?"

"Your mother called me this morning, said we should run a story about it."

I feel my skin grow hot all over. "My mom called you?" Of course Mom wants the paper to run a story about it. To get me to choose the operation because of peer pressure.

"Yep. Figured I should check with you first."

I groan. "I can't believe her. She's so . . . so . . ." I struggle for words. "No, don't print an article."

"It stays between us, then. You and Cecily have that bus driver interview today, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then hop to it."

But a thought occurs to me. One way or the other, I do have to decide today. And in front of me is one of the few adults that I trust to give me unbiased advice.

"Mrs. Everbrook, before I go..."

"Yes?"

"Do you think I should do it? The surgery?"

She pauses for a moment, considering her answer. "I think you're the one who will have to live with the decision. So no one else should make it for you."

"Thanks, Mrs. Everbrook."

"Here's your hall pass," she says. I reach out, and she puts the slip into my hand.

Cecily guides me as we begin our walk to the side parking lot to meet the bus driver. All the other students are inside classrooms, so our footsteps echo in empty hallways.

"My B-scan results came back a few days ago," I say. "I'm a candidate for the operation."

Her pace seems to slow for a second as she takes this in.

"Don't you still need a stem cell donor?" she asks.

"They already found one. I have to decide today if I want to do it."

She says nothing. The only sound is the squeak of our rubber sneaker soles.

Eventually I say, "I sort of expected you to be excited. If it worked, I could see colors and nature and everything."

"Yeah, no, I'm really excited for you," she says unconvincingly.

"But?"

"But nothing. It sounds great."

We walk through a set of doors.

"I can hear it in your voice. You think it's a bad idea."

"Not bad, just risky."

"There are risks, true," I concede. "Including a risk I could see for the first time."

"That was the risk I was talking about."

This surprises me. "Wait. You don't *want* me to see?"

"It's not that. More like . . . I think there could be unintended consequences to being able to see. Side effects, you might say."

"Such as?" I ask.

"It's like how people often feel worse about themselves after they have plastic surgery," she says.

"Because the surgery went wrong?"

"No, because the surgery went *right*. They look better on the outside, but inside they have the same self-image issues as before. And that's a problem no operation can resolve."

I'm about to ask why she knows so much about plastic surgery when she stops our movement.

"We're here," she says.

She opens a door to the outside and greets the bus driver, who is waiting for us on the sidewalk. He's friendly.

And old. I can feel his age when I shake his hand, and I can hear it in his voice. Also, there's the fact that he's been driving a bus for our school system for forty-two years. He's finally retiring. That's what my article's about.

I listen to Cecily pose him a few different ways around a bus—leaning up against it, sitting in the driver's seat, that sort of thing.

After the photo shoot ends, he asks, "Either of you want to take her for a spin?"

"No thanks," says Cecily.

"I'm blind," I say.

"No problem by me," he says. "I can direct you."

"Really?" I say.

"Today is my last day. What are they going to do, fire me?" He laughs heartily.

"All right, sure," I say. I've always wanted to try driving, and a school bus seems as good a vehicle as any.

"Will, I'm not sure this is a good idea," says Cecily, tugging at my arm. I shake off her hand and reach forward to locate the entrance to the bus. I climb the stairs. The driver stands and helps me find the seat.

"Put your hands out like this—there you go, that's the wheel. Now use your right foot to find the pedal. Nope, that's the brake. A little to the right. Very good. Okay, that's your gas. You'll press very slowly on that when I say go. You coming to join us, missy?"

"No, thank you," Cecily says, obviously displeased with this plan.

"Take some photos of this!" I say.

"I will do no such thing," she says.

"All aboard!" says the driver. I hear a sound of air hissing and then the noise of the outside is gone. He's closed the door.

"You sure this is a good idea?" I ask.

"We all got to start somewhere. Forty-two years ago, I had never driven a bus, neither."

"But you could see."

"That's true, that's true. We'll just go slow. And I'll keep a hand on the steering wheel so you don't hit anything. Okay, now press real gentle with your foot like I talked about."

I do, and the *rut-rut-rut* of the engine rumbles all around us.

The bus driver laughs.

"Are we moving?" I ask.

"Yes! You're driving a school bus!" he says.

I laugh, too.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, a little less gas."

I let up a bit.

"Turn coming up. This is the hard part. Let up all the way on the gas. When I tell you, turn the wheel to the left. Ready... now!"

I spin the wheel a little. "More! Turn it more!" I do. "Hold it there!"

The force of the turn pulls me slightly to the side, like when I'm riding in a car and it's going around a corner.

But now I'm not riding in a car. I'm in a *bus*. Also, I'm driving. That's kind of different.

It's way different than a tandem bike, where, sure, I have the sensation of movement, but the front rider is steering. Here, I'm in control. I'm moving fast and I'm driving a big heavy machine and it feels amazing. It is freedom and independence and control, not just of myself but of something much bigger than myself.

People with driver's licenses must feel this way, like, every day. They probably don't even notice how cool it is. And if I have the operation, I could get a driver's license. I could drive a bus or a car or the front side of a tandem bike. And if I did, I would never forget to notice how good it felt. I would always remember what it was like to be without that freedom, and I would appreciate it every time I grabbed the steering wheel or the handlebars and looked at the open road ahead.

After we complete a lap around the parking lot, he takes over at the seat to put on the parking brake and cut the engine.

"That was real good," he says. "You're a natural!"

"Thanks."

"I hear there's a job opening up around here. Maybe you should apply?"

I laugh.

The hissing sound comes again, letting in the outside air. I walk down the stairs.

"Did you see that, Cecily?" I ask, giddy with excitement. "I drove a school bus!"

"Yes, I saw," she says dryly.

"That was so cool!"

She gives a sort of *humph* sound. I ask the driver a few questions for my article, recording our conversation on my phone, and then Cecily and I begin the walk back to the classroom.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" I ask Cecily once we are the only ones walking the corridor.

"If you ask it, do I have to answer it?"

"Not if you don't want to," I say.

"All right."

"That first day of school," I say. "How come you cried because I was staring at you?"

She hesitates. "What do you mean?"

"Now that I know you better, it just doesn't seem like you."

"I'd just had a big fight with my mom that day before school," she says. "I'd been crying already and was just on edge. And when I thought you were staring at me, it just set me off again."

"I'm sorry," I say. "Are you close with your mom?"

She laughs mirthlessly. "No, we don't really get along."

"What about your dad?"

"Yeah, he's much better than my mom, but they're divorced. I only get to see him a few times a year."

"Where does he live?" I ask.

"In Los Angeles," she says, her voice becoming more cheerful. "Near Venice Beach. He has this little yellow bungalow on a corner lot. There's always a bright red surfboard on the front porch."

"Does he surf?"

She laughs, for real this time.

"No, it must've come with the house or something. The closest he comes to exercise is watching football on TV," she says.

"He doesn't even go to the beach?" I ask.

"Sometimes, but he *drives* there. It's, like, six blocks away, and he refuses to walk," she says. "I'm always telling him to get in shape, but he doesn't seem to listen."

We walk in silence for a while. On a long, empty stretch of hallway, I hear two sets of footsteps approaching. Just as they pass us, a male voice says, "Hey, look! It's Batgirl!"

And then there's a cackle of laughter and the smack of a high five.

An intensity of feeling like I've never experienced shoots through my body. Anger, raw and pure, and the knowledge that I must fight, I must hurt, I must destroy the owner of that voice. I drop Cecily's arm and whirl toward the sounds of their laughter, letting fly an arm trained by years of swinging a cane, a fist strengthened by a lifetime of touching and gripping. But my hand only breezes through the air, and the force of the swing knocks me off balance. I nearly topple to the floor.

The misfire of my punch just makes me angrier. I spread my arms out wide and charge toward where I last heard their laughter, hurling myself with the intent to bring anyone in my path to the ground. Instead, I run face-first into something metal. I bounce off with a pop and land on my back, losing my balance for real this time.

"Oh, Will!" says Cecily. She's already crouched beside me, and I can hear that she's crying.

What I don't hear is anything from the boys who passed us in the hall. There's no jeering, no laughter, nothing. They just walk away. And that's what hurts the most, so much deeper than the smack to my face when I hit what must've been a wall of lockers: that my attempt to fight doesn't even warrant mockery. It's not serious enough even to be made fun of. I lost myself in rage and set my mind for combat, and it resulted in exactly nothing.

I'm shaking with anger. They called her Batgirl because she's associated with me, because she was walking with me, and I'm blind. Like a bat. They ridiculed her for being my friend, and I couldn't stop them.

And that's when I come to two realizations. Number one, I will have the operation. I want that freedom I felt driving the bus. The freedom to move through the world without a cane. I want that every day. And I want to experience the pigments on a painted canvas and soak in the texture of a sunrise. I want to examine every floor tile in the hallway at school and watch water gush out of the

faucet in a bathroom sink. I want to see it all; I want to savor every fiber of this other layer of reality.

And number two, I recognize that I had a weirdly strong reaction to those guys. I'm not the kind of person who usually gets in fights. So why did I swing at them? There's only one possible explanation, one that I've been trying to ignore but now must admit to myself: I am definitely falling for Cecily.

# CHAPTER 15

The stem cell transplant happens three days later, on Thursday. I had my tonsils removed when I was a kid, so this is not my first time under anesthesia. This first operation, then, doesn't feel like a big deal. And it's not like I'll wake up being able to see. I have to wait for the second operation for that. Until then, I will wear bandages under my sunglasses. My eyes will be sensitive from the trauma of the transplant and need protection to heal.

Mom comes with me. She wouldn't take no for an answer this time.

Dad isn't here. Well, actually, technically he is in the same building. Working. Tying up some old guy's testicles or whatever he does. He said he couldn't reschedule his operating room time today, but I think he's really just unhappy with my decision and didn't feel comfortable being here.

I go to the operation prep area, and Mom and I sit down, me on the hospital bed. A nurse slides a curtain around us, the hooks grinding along their track on the ceiling until the

fabric surrounds us like a little bubble, dampening slightly the sounds from the rest of the room—soft voices, whirring machines, beeping monitors. Several different people cycle through, asking me a bunch of questions to make sure I'm not allergic to anesthesia, that I don't have a history of breathing problems, I haven't eaten in the last twelve hours, and on and on. Each question implies a potential complication, something that could go wrong. And these aren't even issues related to eyesight; they are just the general risks of surgery. I'm starting to wonder if maybe Dad was right, maybe there are too many risks here, and I can feel my heart racing as they put the IV in my arm. Then I start to feel really good, just relaxed and calm. Mom strokes my hair like I'm five years old, but I don't even care, because I feel wonderful and I love my mom.

• • •

The next thing I know, I am waking up, the beeps and whirs slowly coming back to life in my awareness.

"Honey?" says Mom, apparently noticing I'm awake from the movements of my hands (it's not like she can see my eyes opening after all, not with these bandages over them). "How do you feel?"

I feel great. Pain meds are awesome. I should have surgery more often.

"Fine," I say.

It's an outpatient surgery so Mom drives me home that afternoon. Over the weekend, I just chill. As the medicine wears off, my eyes start to hurt more and Mom's doting starts to get annoying, so I spend most of the weekend in my room, poking around the Internet on my laptop.

• • •

During morning announcements the next Monday at school, Xander reveals that the schoolwide votes have been tallied for the first round of auditions. Tripp and Connor are eliminated. Cecily and I advance. We have our second and final audition Friday.

Mrs. Everbrook gives Cecily and me a copy of the script in advance, and we spend the week practicing so we can memorize it ahead of time instead of reading it on air. Unlike the first audition, where we just sat behind the desk, the next one includes a green-screen segment.

Victoria hosts that segment for Xander and herself, standing in front of a green wall that, Cecily explains, runs through a computer that makes the background look like something else. Apparently it's the same technology meteorologists use on television to show maps of weather patterns. It all means nothing to me. For now.

Xander wraps up their audition with a reminder to cast votes for their favorite pair of hosts during lunch. The winners will be announced in a few weeks. Then it's our

turn. Cecily begins with a few announcements from the desk and then tosses to me at the green screen, where I'm standing wearing my usual sunglasses. No one knows the bandages underneath are from a surgery that may soon result in eyesight. For now, I'm still just the blind kid. I launch into my thirty-second explanation of the upcoming school renovations. A series of floor-plan diagrams is appearing behind me, and I point out different areas as I speak.

"A little higher, now to the left—perfect," says Cecily in my ear.

Last night we decided that I should be the one to do the green-screen segment. Because it's the exact opposite of what everyone would expect. The blind kid standing in front of a green wall—a color he's never even seen—and gesturing at imaginary pictures as if he knows where they are. It seems like the perfect trick to get people talking about us, and maybe even voting for us, too.

Just as we practiced yesterday at his house, Whitford gave me a wireless earpiece that he said looks something like a hearing aid. From off camera, Cecily turned her television mic off and turned on another hidden mic that sends a signal to the device in my ear. That way she could direct my hand movements as I recited the script, and all the while I look like I know where I'm pointing. Pretty clever, right? We thought so.

At lunch everyone agrees that we nailed the audition.

But the winners won't be announced for a few more weeks. By then, I will have already had my second operation. Or not, depending on whether they find a cornea donor. My future, or more specifically the future of my eyesight, lies with the destiny of one unfortunate organ donor. Somewhere out there right now, presumably, is a healthy person looking through a pair of functional corneas with no idea of the future that awaits him. I wonder what he's looking at right now. A spreadsheet at work? A documentary on Netflix? The cracks in a sidewalk? He could never imagine that in a matter of days, someone else will be looking through those very same eyes. Or maybe it's a she. Either way, something calamitous will have to occur in order for those corneas to become available to me. Is it wrong for me to hope for such a thing?

# CHAPTER 16

The weeks tick by slowly. First I have to wait a month for the stem cells to (hopefully) be accepted by my body and begin to replicate into daughter cells. I still go to school, do my journalism work, hang out with my friends, and sometimes with just Cecily. But I never really feel completely there because in the front of my mind, right behind my eyes, in fact, is the uncertainty of my future. After the month of healing is up, it's a waiting game. There's a two-week window in which I can receive a transplant. If no corneas become available, game over. The procedure fails. So the wait is painful, that buzzing anxiety even louder in my mind. It's tough to concentrate at school or on my homework. They seem so mundane compared with the breathless narrative of my mind. I sit in my room and jump at the slightest sound, hoping it's the telephone with the call from Dr. Bianchi's office. Finally, after almost two weeks, just as my window is closing, the call comes. A donor has been found. My corneas are en route.

This is a strange feeling, discovering that I might gain a new sense. I've gone my whole life without eyesight, assuming that I wanted it, assuming that my life would be so much better if I had it. But now that it might possibly happen, I'm actually kind of afraid. Afraid of all the stuff that could go wrong, the complications, the side effects, the chance of infection. And there are the difficulties adjusting that Dad told me about. The possibility of confusion, stress, headaches, depression.

Who will I be when I am no longer Will Porter, blind teenager? What will I be like? And the other kids in school—the hundreds of voices I pass by each day in the hall—what will they think? To me, they're an undifferentiated and anonymous mass of chattering, but to them I must be memorable. I mean, I'm the only blind kid in the school. The one with the sunglasses and the long white cane that swings shin-whackingly wide through the hallway, the guy who occasionally makes wrong turns, who uses the girls' restroom, and who's trying to host the morning announcements. Will they think that I am a sellout, giving up the life I was meant to live, the body I was born with, not accepting my place and my condition and my community? Or will they accept me as one of their own, without question?

Cecily comes over and sits with me in my room the night before my operation. "You know what bothers me?" I find myself telling her as we sit beside each other on my

bed. "Blind people have a difficult time because most people have eyesight. But if the whole human race had evolved *without* eyesight, we would have adapted to it. Like bats. That species figured out how to survive without it."

"Bats?" That word seems to catch her off guard.

"Yeah, like bats. I mean, sure, if the entire human race went blind all at once tomorrow, the world would fall into chaos. But if it happened very gradually, we'd figure it out. We'd find a way."

"I guess," she says reluctantly.

Then I realize what I'm hearing in her voice: She's remembering the incident in the hallway, when those guys called her Batgirl because she was hanging out with me. I don't want her pondering the price she's paid for being my friend, so I abandon the bat example and move on to a different line of reasoning, speaking quickly to distract her.

"You probably think blindness is really difficult, but that's just because you have adapted to your situation. That would be like if Superman looked at you and he was like, 'Cecily's life must be so terrible because she can't fly.' He's only saying that because *he's* used to flying. He doesn't know that you can get along just fine with the abilities you have as a normal human."

"Are you having second thoughts?" she asks, interrupting my train of thought.

"I guess. Maybe. I don't know," I say slowly. "I mean, sure, I'm fine the way I am. But I think things could be better."

"Like because you'd enjoy seeing things?"

"Yeah," I say. "And I'm tired of the way people treat me. Like the way people are so overly nice to me because they assume I can't do stuff for myself." I pause, thinking back on the Incident. "And sometimes the opposite. Sometimes they're . . . cruel."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

So I tell her the whole story. About Alexander, about Candy Land, about my parents' decision to send me to the school for the blind.

"And after that," I conclude, "I eventually realized I just couldn't rely on other people. Maybe that sounds stupid."

"It's not stupid," she says. "I've had a hard time trusting people, too, because . . . well, I was bullied a lot when I was a kid."

I pause, waiting for her to elaborate. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

It's quiet again, and eventually she says, "Do you want me to take your picture?"

"With bandages over my eyes?"

"Just in case you want to look back and see what you looked like before."

"Not really, thanks. But can I take a picture?" I ask.

"Of what?"

"Anything. How about my savory wall?"

"All right."

I hold the camera in front of me, and she flips out the

monitor so she can see the picture. She directs my aim and takes my hand in hers, guiding it to the lens. She lets go so I can adjust the focus myself, but I wish she had kept her hand on mine.

"Rotate slowly, slowly, right there. Now press with your pointer finger."

I do and hear the familiar snap of the shutter.

• • •

That night, I barely sleep. When I do, I dream about Cecily. I can see her, and it's very strange because I'm not actually *seeing*. Still, this one feels different from my usual dreams, which are just hallucinated representations of my everyday experience, loosely chronological narratives of touch, sound, and smell.

Dad takes the day off so he and Mom can accompany me to the hospital. Which must suck for him, using a vacation day to go hang out at his place of work.

The three of us sit in a waiting room for a while. Mom fills out my paperwork. I wonder what it will be like when I can fill out my own paperwork. I hear Dad shuffling through the newspaper. I imagine how it will feel to read with my eyes. I run my fingers over the upholstery of my chair and wonder what color it is. Sure, I could ask Mom. Or I could use my iPhone app that identifies colors. But that's not the point. I don't actually care what color the chair is. I just want to be able to determine it at a glance. Like a normal person.

We are called into another room and go through the same pre-op conversations as we did six weeks ago for the stem cell operation. The anesthesiologist asks me a million times if I'm allergic to anything. He knows Dad, and they exchange pleasantries. Dr. Bianchi comes by for a final check-in. He says he is hopeful the operation will succeed, but he reminds me that "we cannot predict outcomes with certainty." The stem cells have been in my eyes long enough now to have created daughter cells, which will hopefully get my retinas to function. The stem cells are like a foundation, he says, and the corneas are like the house. Assuming my body doesn't immediately reject the new corneas, it's possible I might be able to sense light as soon as he takes the bandages off after this operation.

The anesthesiologist puts an IV in my arm. He tells me things are going to get blurry. I start to remind him that I won't know the difference, but I'm fast fading into sleep and the words get stuck in my throat.

• • •

All of a sudden, there's this incredible noise pounding into my brain. It's louder than anything I've ever heard, like a jet engine, endless, incessant, painful. It sounds like static, feels like a continuous slap to my face, and tastes like acid.

"AHHHHHH!" I yell. "Turn it off! Turn it off! Turn it OFF!"

"Will! It's Mom! It's okay. It's okay."

I struggle to move and find my body still lagging behind my brain's commands.

"TURN IT OFF!" I yell, gaining enough control to thrash and jerk.

"Nurse!" Mom says. "Nurse!"

Some more words are spoken—I hear "sedation"—and the sound gets foggy, and I fall asleep. When I wake up again, it's back, pounding me, demolishing me, demanding my attention.

"The sound! Turn off the sound!" I say.

"Will, sweetheart, calm down!"

"Mom?" I say, my hands groping, finding her face. "Mom, make them turn it off!"

"Turn off what, Will?"

"That sound!"

"There is no sound, Will. It's very quiet in here."

"You can't hear it?" I ask desperately.

"No."

"Dad?"

"I don't hear anything, either, Will. What does it sound like? Are your ears ringing?"

And that's when I realize that the sound is not coming through my ears. In fact, it's not actually a sound at all. It's something else, some other sensory fist pummeling me with its volume and intensity. *Is this eyesight? Have the bandages already come off? Am I seeing? Is this my very first sight?*

But I lift my hands to my eyes and find bandages. If my eyes are bandaged, what could I be seeing? Unless . . . is this what the inside of bandages look like?

No, my eyelids are shut. I can feel that. They are taped closed by these very bandages.

What, then? What is this?

Then I remember how once Mrs. Chin explained that complete blindness is not like a person with normal eyesight covering his eyes. Because even then, that person still sees darkness. Blindness is like trying to look at the inside of your shoe through the bottom of your foot. It is an absolute lack of sensory input.

And that's when it hits me: I'm seeing darkness for the first time.

My heart starts to pound from excitement. I can hear it on the monitor, which just proves to me that I'm right. What I thought I heard before wasn't sound.

"OH MY GOD!" I say. "I can see! Mom! Dad! I can see!"

"Honey—" Mom says sympathetically.

"No, really! I can!"

"You still have bandages over your eyes, sweetheart," she says. "I'm sorry."

"No, that's just it! I can see the darkness! I can see the blackness! It's unlike anything I've ever felt!"

I don't know how to describe it to them. Metaphors rush through my mind: It's like a new arm is growing out

of my face and getting electrocuted! It's like I have a second nose and it's snorting wasabi!

"Oh my God, Sydney, he can see!" says Dad. "His retinas are transmitting to the optic nerve! They are sensing the absence of light!"

Mom and Dad start laughing, and so do I. We laugh and laugh, and Mom starts crying, and the laughs and cries blend into each other. But none are louder than the sound of the blackness pouring into my brain from my eyes. I keep telling myself, no, it's all right, this is a good thing. But my brain keeps saying, *What is happening? What is this mass intrusion of static?* The overload of sense from my eyes, plain and dark though it may be, is so strong that I can barely pay attention to Mom and Dad. Eyesight is asserting itself as king over my other senses. It is enacting a coup d'état against hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. And I can already tell it's going to be a bloody revolution.

# CHAPTER 17

The next morning, on Friday, Mom takes me to Dr. Bianchi's office to get the bandages removed.

At the medical building, Mom and I walk back to a little examination room.

"Mom, can you just wait outside?"

She doesn't say anything. She's stonewalling, trying to guilt me with her silence.

For a moment, I consider the situation from her perspective. I think how special this moment must be for her. Her blind son is about to see for the first time. How many parents get to witness something like that?

"Fine, you can come in," I say.

"Thank you," she says, sounding genuinely appreciative.

I sit down on the crinkly paper of the examination table, and we wait in silence for Dr. Bianchi. After about ten minutes, I hear the door swing open, and he says, "How is my star patient feeling?"

"Pretty good," I say. "But there's a lot of weird stuff going on."

I tell him about the pounding darkness, about what I assume are the first transmissions from my upgraded eyes to my brain.

"That means it worked, right? I will be able to see?"

"Possibly, possibly. Although this will take time to develop. You will come back to see me on Monday and we will begin your therapy. For the weekend, just rest and take note of what you experience."

I hear him scrubbing his hands in the sink. He walks over to me and starts to tug at the tape gripping my temple.

My mom is quiet. Too quiet. "Mom, are you videotaping this on your phone?"

She says nothing, which tells me I'm right.

Dr. Bianchi pauses.

Annoyed, I say, "I don't want all your little friends at the country club crying tears of joy while watching a video of me on endless loop. Turn it off."

"William, this is a moment you will treasure forever. You will want to show it to your own children someday! And your grandchildren!"

I know that "you will treasure" is Mom's code for "*I* will treasure," but hey, in the history of the world, fewer than twenty mothers have seen their blind child gain sight. Why not let her enjoy it the way she wants to?

"Fine," I say. "Keep filming."

"All right. But I am starting a new recording now. I don't want that little, um, altercation on the video."

"Whatever," I say.

Dr. Bianchi removes enough of the bandages that I am able to lift my eyelids. But my view still seems to be blocked by the remaining gauze.

*This is it! I'm about to see!*

I try to slow down my excitement so I can soak in every detail. This is a moment I want to remember forever. This is the moment I go from blind to seeing. This is the moment I step into the light.

Dr. Bianchi has stopped peeling back the bandages. I feel his face move very close to mine.

"Why did you stop?" I ask. He says nothing. "Dr. Bianchi?" Still he doesn't reply. "Can you finish taking off the bandages, please?"

He steps back. "I'm sorry, Will," he says.

"What? Is something wrong?"

"The bandages are already removed several moments ago. Your eyes are open and blocked by nothing."

I blink. I feel my eyelids move up and down, just as they always have done when I blink. And I sense that raging current of black noise that I have felt since yesterday. But there is nothing more. There's nothing else that signals of color or movement. I close my eyes and press them tightly shut. Then I open them. Nothing different: It's the same sensation whether my eyes are open or closed.

"Turn it off!" I say. "TURN IT OFF!"

"Do you hear the noise again?" asks Mom. "It's quiet in—"

"No, the camera! Turn it off!"

"Oh, yes, sorry," she says quietly.

I grab at the paper cover of the examination table with both hands, fingernails clawing through it, ripping it, balling it into my fists.

"Delete it, Mom! No one can ever see that video! Ever!"

"I already did."

I feel my lower lip quiver. I'm about to cry. (My eyes may have never performed their primary function, but my tear ducts have always worked just fine.) No, I will not cry. I'm sixteen years old. I won't cry in front of my mother and my doctor.

"Let's go," I say. I have to leave. I have to leave immediately and go home and lock my door and sit in the darkness and never come out.

"Wait for one minute, please," says Dr. Bianchi. "You must allow me to examine you."

"It didn't work, can't you see that?" I spit the words at him. "Can't you *see* that with your *eyes*?"

"Will, I gave you the warning about how the cortex must take time—"

I stand and put my hand out, a signal for Mom to give me her arm as a guide.

"We're leaving," I say.

Mom is as upset as I am. I can hear it in the way she

snatches her purse and jumps to my side, ready to lead me out of the office.

In the car ride home, I hear her sniffle.

"Are you crying?" I ask, rank hostility in my voice.

"Of course I am."

"*I'm* the one who can't see!" I say. "What are *you* crying about?"

"Don't you know how hard this is for me?"

"How hard it is for you?" I demand. "For you? Why is everything always about you?"

"No, Will, it's about you. It's hard because I can't do anything for you. It's hard because I would give anything to be able to switch eyes with you, but I can't."

That wasn't the response I expected, and it shuts me up. I want to be angry at Mom, but I can't be. It's not her fault. The surgery was her idea, sure, but I chose it. I wanted it.

Once we get home, I go to my room and shut the door. I cry and punch things for hours. I break some stuff. I don't even know what. Just random stuff.

The absurd part of all this, I realize, is that I am now so much worse off than I was before the operation. I had convinced myself I wouldn't be one of those people who got depressed when the sight of the world wasn't what I expected. But I went through everything, two surgeries, and I didn't even get that far. I was blind two weeks ago, and I'm still blind now, but at least before I was relatively

happy with my life. I was adjusting to a mainstream school, had friends, a possible cohosting gig, good grades. I had it all, really. And then I got this fantasy that I could have sight, that I *should* have sight, and it made me feel like what I had wasn't enough anymore.

That's why I had the operation.

And guess what? It didn't work. I'm still blind. And it's worse, too, a more unbearable blindness. Before, my blindness felt like nothing, and now I have this loud static in my brain that offers only distraction and pain.

Dad was right. I'm a different person now. The operation *did* change me. It changed the way I see my life, from the inside. Now I know I will never be happy as a blind person. Now that I have had a sample—not of full eyesight, per se, but of believing that it could be mine—and then had it ripped away from me, I will be forever stuck in this twilight world of dissatisfaction.

My phone buzzes intermittently. Just-checking-in-on-you texts from Cecily, Ion, Whitford, and Nick. But I don't want them to know. I'm not ready for them to know. I'm not sure I'll ever be.

I spend the rest of the day wallowing on the floor with my door locked, not even coming out for meals.

# CHAPTER 18

When I wake up Saturday morning, I am immediately assaulted by insanity.

It's like music, except with a thousand different instruments that are all out of tune. It's like the taste of every food group at once, like the smell of all the cafeterias in the world.

*Am I having a nervous breakdown? Am I dying?*

And then I move my head, roll it to the side, and everything changes. Now it's a completely different swirl of madness.

I blink.

And it all shutters for a second, shakes like an explosion inside my brain. I blink again, another explosion, like a single blow to a bass drum, like jumping into an ice-cold lake. I close my eyes, and the overload regresses, simplifies itself back to that pounding darkness I've experienced for the two days since the surgery.

I open my eyes, and the flood pours into me again,

choking me with its power. I shudder, from my feet to my head, and it all changes again, shakes like an earthquake. I start to feel dizzy, and I fall on the floor, and my head gets lighter—*this is it, I'm dying*—and without warning I feel my stomach empty itself up through my throat. Vomit spills all over my face, and I recoil, which changes the world again. Then I'm coughing, and with each gasp, the torrent changes. I blink.

*BOOM.*

It breaks over me, a tsunami-level wave of sensory input.

I know it, deep down, below gut level, in the deepest region of my instinct.

These are colors.

I can see.

The colors shake and tremble, move in and out like a radio with a spinning dial. I retch again, bucking with the force from within. Compared with that pounding darkness I was experiencing, this is so much faster and louder and more stupefying. It's like nothing I've ever experienced, a nonsequential mishmash of percolating aliveness.

The colors shimmer. They shift. They *move.*

I can see!

My eyes are working!

These are colors, and they are moving every time my head moves, and I can see them move, and I can see colors and movement!

"Mom!" I yell. "Help! Come quick! Mooooooom!"

Within seconds, she bursts through the door. At the very moment I hear the sound of the door opening, there is a violent change in the colors, and seeing it causes me to heave once again.

"Oh my God, Will, what happened!?" she cries, her feet rushing toward me, the colors moving so wildly now that I close my eyes and fall backward. "Henry! Henry! HENRY!" she calls for my dad.

"No, Mom, it's all right!" I say. "I can see! I can SEE!"

"Henry, call 911!"

"Listen, Mom!"

"Henry, get an ambulance! Something is wrong with Will! Oh my God, my poor baby, what is happening, what is that all over you?"

"No, Mom. Listen to me—"

"What is it—oh my God, Will, what happened?" says Dad, his voice going from loud to earsplitting.

Mom is hysterical, screaming from all directions at once. "Did you call an ambulance?" she yells.

"No, I—here, I will do it right now," says Dad in a panicky voice I've never heard before.

"Dad!" I say. "Stop! I'm fine! I just threw up! That's it."

"What?" he asks, a little calmer.

"Look at me! I'm fine. It's just puke. That's all," I say the words slowly, emphasizing each one, trying to get my parents to slow down and listen.

But my eyes are closed. I can't let in the colors. They are too much. They overwhelm me; they're drowning me.

"What's wrong with your eyes?" asks Dad.

"Call the ambulance!" Mom is still screaming.

"What?" I ask. I try to open my eyes again, just a little.

"Your eyes—why are you squinting?" says Dad.

"Because, Dad. Because I can see!"

"You what?"

"HENRY, DO SOMETHING!"

"I can see, Dad! I see colors and movement! I can't open my eyes, because it makes me dizzy. That's why I threw up."

"Oh my God," he whispers. Then he snaps into action. "Sydney!" She keeps screaming about the ambulance. "SYDNEY!" I hear him grab her, hold her still. "Stop! Stop! He can see. Will can see!"

She quiets down, and after a long pause, says almost reverently, "Will... you can... you can see?"

"Yes, Mom, I can see!"

I hear her collapse on the floor and start crying. But they are tears of joy. I can hear that much. Tears of joy.

"Can someone get me a towel or something?" I ask. "I need to get cleaned up."

I take a shower with my eyes tightly shut, afraid to let in the overwhelming power of new sight. After drying and dressing—with my eyes still closed—I make my way to the kitchen table by touch. Mom and Dad gather around. I open my eyes.

"Well?" says Mom. "What do you think? Do we look how you expected?"

"Uh..." I say.

I'm not really sure how to explain it. It's not that my family doesn't look how I expected. It's that they don't look like anything at all. Or rather, I have no way of knowing which part of the soup of color and movement represents their bodies. Each splash of color bleeds into the next.

I do notice certain movements while Mom is talking. Is that her face? Or is it the ticking grandfather clock on the wall by the door? Or the bubbling goldfish tank? Or any number of other moving objects in the room? I start to feel dizzy again and have to close my eyes. I don't want to return to the puking.

"I have no idea what you look like," I say. "I don't even know what a human being looks like."

"But you've *touched* people," interjects Mom. "You know how we are shaped."

"By touch, yes. Not by sight."

I hear something slide across the table. "Here, let's start with a simpler object," Dad says. "I've put it right in front of you. Open your eyes."

I do. I see a churning mass, each color bleeding into the others.

"Recognize it?" Mom asks.

"That's what I'm saying. I don't know where to look. I don't even know *how* to look," I say.

"You sure you don't know what it is?" says Mom.

"Know what *what* is?" I retort.

"There, right in front of you!" says Mom, as if by the intensity of her voice she can compel my pupils to focus, to rewire the nerve connection between my retinas and cortex. "Look where I am pointing! With my finger!"

"I don't think you're quite getting this. I don't know where you are pointing. I don't know what pointing looks like. I don't know what a finger looks like."

"You have fingers on your own hand!" says Mom.

She's right. I do have fingers. I lift my arms, putting my hand out like I am going to shake with a new acquaintance. At the exact same moment I make the movement with my arm, I perceive a shimmer of color, and a resulting surge of nausea passes through me. I gulp down the impulse to throw up again.

That shimmer: It must be my hand. Or my arm. Some part of my body, moving through my field of vision. It is my first glimpse of myself.

I close my eyes again.

"Hold it right in front of my face so I can see it," I say.

Mom picks up the object, and I sense it just in front of my face. I open my eyes. It's obvious the scene has changed, but I can't tell in what way exactly.

"You don't recognize it?" she asks, shocked.

"Not at all," I say.

"Touch it," she says. I put my hands out and touch it. It takes less than a second, less than a millisecond.

"A saltshaker," I say. "It's the saltshaker we keep on the kitchen table."

"This is what I was telling you about before the operation," says Dad. "Object recognition is not instinctual. You will have to learn how to identify objects by sight in the same way you've learned to do it by touch."

"Oh, hush, Henry," says Mom. "This is hardly the time for I told you so."

"Fine, but I did warn him," says Dad. "Color perception, however, *is* instinctual. Maybe you should start there?"

"Do we have any Skittles?" I suggest.

Mom's voice is excited. "Let me get some."

With my eyes still closed, I hear Mom go fetch a pack of Skittles from the cupboard where she keeps the candy stash. She tears it open and pours its contents—*clink clink clink*—into a cereal bowl that she places on the table in front of me. I reach in and pick up one of the candies. I hold it under my nose, eyes still closed.

"Lemon," I say, sniffing.

"Right!" says Mom.

I open my eyes. Every color bubbles in every direction. Which one is the Skittle?

"Hold it closer to your eyes!" suggests Mom.

I close my left eye and move the candy immediately in front of my right. There's an earthshaking shift of color as I move it so near.

"That's yellow," says Mom.

"Yellow," I repeat, examining the hue. "I always expected yellow would be . . . quieter."

Mom and Dad laugh. And then I do, too.

I go through each flavor like this: strawberry (red), orange (the only flavor with the same color as its name), apple (green), and grape (purple). I try to associate each smell and taste with its color so I can remember it. But as soon as I close my eyes, the colors meld into a psychedelic rainbow in my mind, and I can't remember which one is which.

"Pop quiz," says Mom, and I look at one of the candies she holds close to my eye.

"Uh . . ." I say. "Orange?"

"No, it's green apple," Mom says, disappointed.

"Go easy on him," says Dad. "He's never learned his colors before."

I practice with Mom and Dad until I can correctly guess the color of the Skittle about half the time.

More important, the dizziness seems to be settling down.

"Let's try some objects," Mom says. "Real fruit. Much healthier than candy."

"I don't think he's ready for shapes," says Dad.

"Of course he is," says Mom.

I hear several pieces of produce plop down in front of me. Simultaneously I notice a change of colors. I

could be seeing either the fruit rolling onto the table or any movements Mom and Dad are making. The world is nothing more than a confusing cascade of living color, an infinitely large waterfall of Skittles pouring out in front of my eyes.

"There," says Mom. "Do you recognize any of this fruit?"

I stare blankly, trying to home in on the fruit that is now apparently in front of me. But all I can sense is the pulsating chromatic glow coming at me from every direction. I have no idea where to look to find the fruit.

"Your eyes will probably cue in on movement," says Dad. "Here, son, I'm picking up a piece of fruit now and waving it. Can you see it?"

I observe a flux of color, a yellow ripple in my perception. What fruit is yellow? A lemon. But we don't keep lemons in the house. What else?

"A banana!" I exclaim.

Mom squeals with delight.

"Can I touch it?" I ask.

Dad places it in my hands, and immediately it becomes not just a guess based on color, but a real, actual banana. I know this shape. I know this texture and weight. I know the firm grippiness of the skin, the pointy taper of each end. As I examine it with my eyes, I attempt to record and catalog: This is what a banana looks like.

"How about this one?"

I spot another flow of color darting around.

"It's red, right?" I ask.

"Yes!" says Mom.

"An apple?"

"No," says Dad.

*What else is red?*

"A strawberry?"

"No."

"A watermelon?"

"No."

"I give up."

"Come on, Will!" says Mom. "You can do it!"

"Sydney, listen to him! He didn't know whether it was a strawberry or a watermelon! He can't even judge relative size," says Dad.

"You know I'm sitting right here, right?" I say.

"He's not identifying the fruit," Dad continues. "He's just guessing based on the color. His brain is not equipped yet for visual object recognition."

"I'm not one of your patients, Dad," I say bitterly. "I'm your son."

"I'm right, though, aren't I?" he counters. "You just saw it was red and listed fruits you know are that color?"

"Of course," I say. "How else do people recognize things?"

He drops it into my hand. I immediately identify the small spherical shape and the protective outer skin.

"It's a grape," I say.

"Right," he says quietly.

"I thought they were green?" I ask.

"They can also be red," says Dad.

"Dad's right," I confess to Mom. "I was just guessing based on the color. Maybe I can't see after all."

"Of course you can see!" says Mom. "You got all those Skittle colors right! You just need to learn your shapes! I taught you shapes once before, and I'll do it again! I'll get your baby toys out of storage!"

*Baby toys?*

"No, thanks," I say.

"Will, just give it a try!" pleads Mom.

"Whatever. Maybe tomorrow. I'm exhausted. I can't do any more right now."

It's true. Vision is draining. I can barely hold my eyes open now. They close on their own, like heavy automatic garage doors. Fatigue overwhelms me, the result, I assume, of an information onslaught my brain is not used to.

I go to my room and shut the door and close the blinds and curtains. Even so, there is still light seeping in through the window. Bright, confusing, exhausting light. I take the blanket from my bed and, standing on my chair, I tuck it in around the curtains, sealing off the window so my room is totally dark. Peaceful, calming, logical darkness.

It's not as pleasant as the "darkness" of being blind, of course. Now that I've had the operation, there is a constant broadcast from my eyes to my brain, even in pitch-black. But at least in my lightproofed room, that communication

is relatively simple. At any rate, sitting alone in the dark like this is the closest I can come to the life I am accustomed to, the life that feels most familiar, the life of a blind person.

I check my phone. Texts from everyone on the academic team asking how I am doing. I compose a group text: "Recovery is going well. But I can't really see much yet. Sight is very confusing. I don't know how you guys handle it."

Cecily is the first to respond: "Can you see this?" I observe a yellow color beside her text, but I have to have Siri read to me to figure out that it's an emoji. A smiling face.

Nick adds, "Can you see... YOUR MOM?"

Whitford: "LOL"

I do some homework for a bit, then I get another text from Cecily. "Just dropped something off for you."

"Why didn't you come in?"

"Your mom. That's not a Nick joke btw."

At that very moment, Mom knocks on the door.

"Cecily just dropped this off," she says, setting a cardboard box on the floor beside my bed with a thud.

"You didn't let her in?" I ask.

"Sorry, I figured you were probably asleep. You need to rest, Will."

After Mom leaves, I open the box and reach inside. It seems to be filled with a disorganized pile of small paper. I pick one up. It's the size of a greeting card. I rub it between

my fingers. It's so smooth that it's almost sticky to my touch. My phone vibrates. Text from Cecily. "Come to the window."

I open the window and stick my head out.

"Cecily?" I say in a loud whisper.

"Hey," she says, and I can hear a smile in her whisper. "How you feeling?"

"Okay," I say, angling my ears down to hear her better.

I've been so caught up in all the Skittles and colors and dizzying sensory overload that I had forgotten how nice it is to hear Cecily's voice.

"Did you get the box?" she asks eagerly.

"Shhh, keep it down," I say. "I don't want Mom and Dad coming in and finding us acting out *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Sorry," she says.

"So what's in the box?" I ask.

"They're photos," she says. "Of everything we've done together this fall. So, like, our trip to the museum, homecoming, the sunrise. Every picture I've taken when I've been with you."

I don't know how to respond.

She says, "I know you probably can't recognize stuff in photos yet. But when you can, I want you to be able to go back and see everything we've done together."

"Wow," I say. "Thanks. That's really cool. Are there any photos of you?"

"I do my best work on the other side of the camera," she says.

"What about that one I took?" I ask.

"Oh, that one... turned out blurry," she says uneasily.

"Don't worry, I'm neither insulted nor surprised to discover a photo I took didn't turn out," I assure her. "As a photographer, I'm really more of an impressionist."

She laughs a little.

We say our good nights. She says she'll see me at school Monday. I say I will see her then. What I don't tell her is that I have a surprise planned: I'm going to practice all day tomorrow, and if my skills have progressed to board game readiness, I'll be seeing her at Settlers Sunday tomorrow night.

# CHAPTER 19

I wake up the next morning alone in my dark room. I sit there for a while, not moving. Then it hits me: Today is Sunday. *Settlers Sunday.* For the first time in my entire life, I have the chance to play a board game like a normal person. If I can learn some basic shapes today, I can play this very night.

I would be able to move my own pieces, make my own decisions. I mean, I wouldn't be able to read the words on the cards, not tonight and maybe not ever—Dr. Bianchi said that people like me rarely learn how to read printed text, which was disappointing to hear. But other than that, I should be able to play in the game independently. Without assistance. On my own.

I walk downstairs and sit at the table where Mom and Dad are eating breakfast.

"I want to learn the other colors," I say. "More than the five basic Skittle flavors I saw yesterday. All the other flavors of Skittles—you know, tropical, sour, darkside—they're all different colors, since they're different flavors, right?"

"Yes," says Dad. "I think so."

"Can you go to the store and get those? So I can learn them, too?"

"Of course."

"And, Mom, can you get out my baby toys from the attic? I want to learn shapes."

She agrees. After they finish eating, Mom and Dad depart on their errands, and I eat breakfast alone with my eyes closed. Soon Mom returns, smelling of dust and old cardboard.

"I'm not sure if you remember this toy," she says, setting a box in front of me. I hear the box opening. Plastic pieces tumble out on the table. "Each shape fits with a corresponding hole in this board. You have to match the shape with the hole, and then you can push it through. Make sense?"

"I think so."

"All right, let's start with this shape. Open your eyes."

I do, and I discern exactly nothing.

"Here, look where I am waving my hand."

A flutter of motion catches my attention. Lowering my head shifts the motion into the center of my field of vision. Bending at the waist to get nearer makes the motion take up more space. The object—presumably Mom's hand—actually seems to grow as I get closer to it. *Maybe that's what perspective is?* Perspective. Which reminds me of Cecily. I'm back in that museum, Cecily teaching me about perspective.

Mom's voice interrupts. "All right, I am going to move my hand away. Look at the shape. What do you see?"

I keep my head still and focus on the mass in front of me, the toy block that is left in place where Mom's hand was waving.

"It's red."

"Very good. What shape is it?"

I look intently. To me it is a mere red blob, shifty, formless.

"I have no idea."

"Look harder."

"How do I do that?"

"I don't know, just keep looking."

I stare for a good thirty seconds. But I have no image data bank, nothing in my memory to compare this image to that would help me understand what I am looking at.

"I really don't know, Mom."

"Touch it, then. See if you can feel it."

I put my hand on the block and recognize it instantly.

"It's a triangle," I say, deflated.

"Yes," says Mom. "A triangle."

"How could I not see that? I know what a triangle is shaped like. I've been touching triangles all my life. How can I not recognize one by looking at it?"

I shake my head and sigh.

Mom says, "You just started, Will. You'll get it. It's going to take time." She gives my shoulder a sympathetic

squeeze. "Now, look at the board in front of you. Find the triangle-shaped hole and push the block through it."

I hold the triangle in my hand and search for a similar shape nearby. I look and look and look, but see nothing. Not the triangle-shaped hole in the board, not even the board itself.

Finally I give up on my eyes and reach for the board, which I discover by touch to be standing upright, like a computer monitor. My fingers brush over the cutout holes, identifying each shape in an instant—a square, a circle, and yes, here's the triangle. It's so simple. So easy. How could I not *see* that triangle-shaped hole?

"I have to relearn everything. Everything. Even shapes. Even shapes that I know," I say, more to myself than to Mom. I begin to wonder if maybe the surgery was all for nothing. I mean, sure, I can see. But I can't do anything useful with that vision, and I'm not sure I ever will.

"You're smart, Will. If anyone can do it, it's you."

At this moment, Dad walks in from his trip to the store and sits down at the table. "Don't let me interrupt," he says, and then falls silent, watching me, I guess.

Before I press the triangle through the hole in the board, I examine it carefully. I close my eyes and try to imagine it. A red triangle. I repeat this process several times until I'm sure I've got it. Yes. A red triangle. I know what that looks like. I push the block through the hole in

the board, and I hear it plunk down on the table. But a crazy thing happens: Even though I sense the red motion as it falls, and even though I *hear* it land, the triangle itself disappears. I scan the table for the missing block. There are various red masses of unknown shapes. But no triangle. I close my eyes. Can I still picture that triangle? Yes, I can. I know what it looks like. So where did it go? How did it disappear?

"What happened?" I gasp. "Where did it go?"

"Where did what go?" says Mom.

"The triangle! It's gone!"

"No, it's not," says Mom. "It's right here."

I hear her arm slide across the table and see a smudge of red as she nudges one of the blocks.

"See?" she asks.

"No!" I insist. "That's not the triangle I was just holding! I *know* that triangle! I memorized it. That is *not* the same one!"

"Oh," she says. "Wait. Look at it now."

I hear her arm move again. There's a click from one of the blocks, and then—What? How is this possible?—the triangle appears! In the very same spot where just a moment ago sat an indistinguishable red mass, there is now a triangle! Is this how vision works? Is this how shapes work? They disappear and materialize, twist and morph, shift in and out of your field of vision without warning?

"What just happened?" I ask. "How did you do that?"

"Honey," says Mom, "it's a triangle-shaped block, not a pyramid. The triangle was just on its side. So from your perspective, it looked like a rectangle. I just turned it so the triangle shape is facing toward you again."

"Rotated? Rectangle?" I stammer. "How can a triangle look like more than one shape? How can it appear and disappear?"

"It didn't disappear, Will. It was there the whole time. It just looked different because it was rotated."

"Objects change shapes if you rotate them?"

"Yes, it depends on the angle you are looking at them from."

"So how many angles are there?"

"Three hundred sixty. You know that," Mom says.

"So to recognize a single object, I have to learn it from three hundred and sixty different positions?"

"I don't know... I never thought of it that way. I don't think it's that many. But I suppose you will have to learn the shapes of objects from different angles, yes."

"What about people?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"Do they change shapes from different angles?"

"I guess so. You might see someone from the front. Or profile—like a side view. Or the back."

"I told you this would be difficult," says Dad, unhelpfully.

I sigh, closing my eyes and slouching in my chair. The idea that something can shift into different shapes depending on where you're standing is a completely new concept to me. Until now, the world has been limited to what I could place my hands on. And what I could place my hands on I sensed from all sides at once. The object did not shape-shift if I rotated it. It still occupied the same discrete tactile points, the same shape of space in my hands.

But vision, I now understand, is so much more complicated, full of so much more information. Not only will I have to memorize every shape, every object, I will have to memorize every object and every shape *from every angle.*

It's a task so overwhelming it makes me want to cry.

Maybe, just maybe, I can learn a few basic shapes from enough angles that I can play Settlers tonight. I can play a board game with my friends like a normal sighted nerd would do on a Sunday night. So I press on, all morning and all afternoon, memorizing the shapes of the blocks, associating the touch sensation of each shape with a new kind of shape, a shape I can see.

Fortunately, the colors come easier. I learn each standard and special-edition Skittles flavor, and by the end of the afternoon, I can identify those colors with close to 90 percent accuracy.

Next stop: Settlers Sunday.

# CHAPTER 20

The muscles around my eyelids get tired from closing them so often, which I do to give my eyes a rest and block out the dizziness. Back when I was blind—I say that like it was another era when really it's been, what, three days?—I kept my eyes open all the time under my sunglasses. But now the light overwhelms me if I don't give my eyes a periodic break by shutting them. Mom loans me her sleep mask to wear to Whitford's. It covers my eyes, allowing me to open them without having to deal with their dizzying spatial resolution. Figuring people don't usually wear sleep masks in public, I put on my sunglasses to cover the mask. So now I look exactly as I did before the operation. Just your average blind guy.

My friends don't know I'm coming over. I want it to be a surprise. We've been texting a lot over the past couple of days, but I asked them not to visit or anything. I didn't want anyone seeing me until I was able to, you know, see them. I want to make a good first impression with the new

me. I want to completely replace their old image of me as a disabled guy with that of an ordinary teenager who recognizes colors and shapes and plays board games with ease.

I still use my cane to walk to Whitford's house, though. His dad answers the door and shows me into the kitchen. There are gasps when I enter. I recognize one of them above the others: It's Cecily.

Cecily shrieks, "Will!"

"Oh my God," whispers Ion.

"Did it work?" asks Nick. "Can you see?"

I tell them about the last three days, the unexpected difficulties, my slow but steady progress.

"Um, is that a sleep mask under your glasses?" asks Nick.

"It's showing?" I ask. "I thought maybe my sunglasses would cover it."

I explain how I'm wearing it because light and colors can be so overwhelming.

"Wait, so you know colors now?" Nick asks.

"Most of them."

"What color shirt am I wearing?"

This is a test I think I can pass. I take off my glasses and the sleep mask. I blink a few times. The light is disorientatingly bright. I close my eyes.

"Can we turn some of the lights off?"

"Sure," says Whitford, jumping up from his seat to flip a few switches. "How's that?"

I open my eyes. "Better."

I rotate in my chair to face Nick. "You'll have to bring your body right up to my face. I won't be able to pick out your shirt otherwise."

"Jeez, Will, I didn't know we were at that stage in our relationship," says Nick.

Nick stands up and steps closer to me. A single color takes over my field of vision.

"Red," I say confidently.

"HOLY CRAP!" exclaims Nick.

They show me a few more colors, and I get them all correct. Their minds are blown. And mine feels pretty darn good about itself.

"So," I say. "How about a game of Settlers?"

"Let's do it!" says Whitford with a clap of his hands.

"Should we set up the map?" I ask.

Awkward silence.

"Will, we already set up the map before you got here," says Ion.

"You can't see it?" asks Nick, confused.

"I...well...I can see colors, and I know some shapes, but it's hard for me to identify objects," I confess.

"Can you see me?" asks Nick.

I swallow. "No, I can't really pick out people yet."

"Don't worry about it," says Ion. "Let's roll to see who goes first. Will, do you want to do the honors? The die is right in front of you."

It's thoughtful of her to tell me where the die is. But even so, the concept of "right in front of me" is vague at best. Furthermore, I know a die is small, and small equals hard to see. If I can't pick out a person, how will I ever see a die on the table?

I look around for it, but all I see is the usual waterfall of colors. I am able to identify them better now than I could yesterday—there's blue, that's green, here's brown—but I can't pick a small die out of the background.

"Here," says Nick, picking it up and placing it in my hand.

I know he's just trying to be nice, and I appreciate that. I mean, Nick's not exactly known for his niceness. But at the same time, it feels like a regression. When I was blind, he never would have handed me a die after Ion had just told me it was right in front of me. Nick would have known that I could simply reach out and find it with my fingers.

"Thanks," I say, trying to sound grateful but probably not pulling it off.

I roll the die and hear it tumble across the table. And as I do, I lose track of it. It disappears into the vortex of my confusing vision, one tiny white cube among millions of pixels.

"Can you see it?" asks Nick cautiously.

It pains me that I can't, and that my friends are now realizing that I can't.

"Uh... well, I can see movement better than stillness. Can you wave your hand over it?"

"Like this?"

I see the blur of white that must be Nick's hand.

"Yes. Great."

I stand up and lean over the table, pressing my nose almost to its surface so the die becomes large.

"Found it!" I say. It's ridiculous, pretending this is a victory after Nick just showed me exactly where it was.

"Can you..." Nick says. "Can you see the number?"

The number of dots. Here's something I should be able to do. After all, the dots on a die are kind of like braille. I've been reading dots all my life. Surely I can count dots on a die.

Except that I can't.

It's not that I can't *see* them. I can see the white square of the die, and I can see little black circles on it. But the dots wiggle and shift when I try to count them. *One, two...* but then I can't figure out which dot I was looking at, and I lose count.

This is absurd. Now I can't count? Toddlers can count! I'm sixteen years old. How am I unable to *count* up to a number of dots between one and six on a stupid little piece of plastic?

"I... I..." I stammer.

They say nothing.

"I have to go home."

I grope around the table with my hands, searching for

my sunglasses and sleep mask. No reason to bother trying to find them with my eyes. That could take all night. Touch is much faster, much more natural. I find the objects and stuff them in my pocket, close my eyes, and flick out my cane, hurrying out the front door before anyone can argue.

Cecily follows and calls after me.

"Will, wait!"

"I'm sorry, I have to go," I say. I don't stop. If I stop, if I talk to her, if I try to look at her and just see that blurry image instead of her actual face, I know I will implode.

• • •

I missed Thursday and Friday because of my operation, but the next morning, Monday, I have to go back to school. It's not exactly the triumphant return I had hoped for, in which I would shock my classmates with my miraculous ability to walk down the hall without a cane. No, it seems my fantasies were just that. Fantasies.

I keep my eyes closed as I walk because seeing makes me too dizzy and confused to move. I turn left, take twenty-three steps, turn right, go up the stairs, turn the corner, ascend more stairs, and walk eighteen steps toward Mrs. Everbrook's classroom. It's the same route Mr. Johnston taught me on the first day of school. That day I remember being so excited about my future as a blind student at a mainstream school. Today I feel only

disappointment. It's the same school, the same route, and even essentially the same disability—I'm still legally blind, just like I used to be—but today, the walk feels completely different. Fortunately, no one at school besides the academic quiz team and Mrs. Everbrook knows I had the surgery. So they won't give my apparent postoperative blindness a second thought.

I'm sitting at my desk listening to Xander and Victoria read the announcements from the studio next door.

"And finally today," says Xander's voice from the television behind Mrs. Everbrook's desk, "we will announce the cohosts of your morning announcements show starting next semester."

His voice has all the confidence of someone whose victory is all but assured.

In all the details leading up to my surgery and then missing school last week, I forgot the winners would be named today. Great. Just what I need. A crushing defeat. On the day when I'm already totally defeated.

"And your cohosts are . . ."

I listen to the sound of a sealed envelope being torn open. And then silence. I strain to hear, waiting for the names. Instead there's the sound of a sheet of paper being crumpled up, and the sound of Xander's footsteps as he leaves the studio.

"Sorry about that," says Victoria calmly. She smooths out the ball of paper. "Your cohosts next semester, chosen

by schoolwide vote, will be... Will and Cecily. Congratulations to the new hosts."

I'm shocked. The whole school elected us, chose us, voted for us.

After the announcements are finished, Mrs. Everbrook says, "Well, class, let's give our new cohosts a round of applause!" and I hear the patter of clapping around the room.

At the start of third period, journalism, I approach Cecily.

"I'm sorry about last night. I'm still getting used to all this," I say.

"It's fine. Take all the time you need."

"Thanks," I say. I pause, then add, "So, hey, we won."

"How about that?" she says happily.

I hold up my hand. A blur of movement suggests she's moved out hers. I bring my arm down and, in a surprising miracle of accuracy, our palms connect.

"High five," I say. "Or was that a low five? I can't really tell."

She giggles. "Wanna do something to celebrate?"

"I thought we just did," I say.

"I mean, in addition to that midlevel five," she says.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Today happens to be the last week of the van Gogh exhibit. Wanna go after school?"

"Sure," I say.

At lunch, Nick, Ion, and Whitford pile all their bodies and arms around me in a tangled hug of celebration.

"How does it feel to be a winner?" asks Ion.

"Amazing," I say, flashing a thumbs-up.

• • •

After school, Cecily takes me to the PU art museum. The security guard recognizes us.

"Back for more, huh?" he says. "You can still touch the paintings. Just make sure no one sees you."

"Actually," I say, "I had an operation. I can sort of see now."

He's momentarily speechless. "You can see?"

"Yep."

"Then why are you still wearing those glasses?"

"I can't see that great yet. Just sort of colors and shapes."

"Wow, I never heard of nothing like that."

"It's pretty rare," I say.

"Well, I'll be," he says. "I think you'll be the first blind person to ever see a van Gogh."

Cecily guides me to *Les Alyscamps,* the painting with the road in it that I touched last time, when she taught me about perspective.

"Okay," she says. "We are standing in front of it now. You can take the mask off."

I do. It's so bright in here it stings my eyes.

"What am I looking for?" I ask, trying to ignore the pain of the intense light. "How can I recognize the painting?"

"Um, it has a road, some trees—"

"Whoa, slow down. Let's start with basic shapes."

"Okay. The painting is a rectangle on the wall about ten feet in front of us. Does that help?"

"Yeah."

I search my field of vision for a rectangle. The colors shift and shimmer as I move my head.

"Ah! I think I found it!"

"Really?" she asks gleefully. "What do you see?"

"It's white, mostly. Almost entirely white. But there seem to be some colors in one part."

She sounds disappointed. "White?"

"Why? Is that wrong?"

"There's no white in *Les Alyscamps.*"

"Hmmm . . . I don't know. I guess I'm getting my colors confused."

"Actually, maybe something else. Can you point at the edge of the painting for me?"

"I can try."

I lift a hand into my field of vision and wave it. I see a flash of white. But it's not the same as the white of the painting.

"What color is my skin?" I wonder aloud.

"Sometimes it's just called 'flesh.' But if I had to describe it, I'd say like a tan or a very light pink."

"Tan," I repeat, waving my hand.

I bring it closer to my face and see it grow larger. I can't decipher its construction; it's not shaped like any of the toy blocks I memorized yesterday. It's difficult to comprehend or describe. Apart from knowing, intellectually, that I'm holding my own hand in front of my face, I don't think I could recognize it. But still, it is fascinating. My whole life I've relied on my hands to be my eyes, my connection to the world of space. And now I can actually see them, those fingers, those tactile probes.

"Will?" says Cecily.

"Huh?"

"The painting?"

"Oh, sorry, right."

I point my hand so it lines up with one edge of the rectangle of the painting. "Here's one side." And then up. "That's the top."

"Okay, let me stop you right there," she says.

"What?"

She touches me gently. "Will, that's the *wall.* You are pointing toward the edges of the wall."

I'm puzzled. "How can you tell which is the wall and which is the painting?"

"The painting is much smaller. Here, let's walk closer."

She leads me up to the painting. And indeed, as

we draw nearer, the colors in the middle of the white rectangle—which it turns out are the painting in the center of the wall—become larger as we approach.

"Now. Can you see the road in the painting?" she asks.

I look very closely but all I see is a dance of colors. Orange, red, blue. But no road.

"It's a triangle," she hints.

"Sorry, I can't find it."

"Are your hands clean?"

"Yeah."

She lifts one of my hands and traces my fingertips across the paint.

"These are the edges of the road."

I feel the shape, and as I do, it jumps out at my eyes.

"Wow! I see it! The triangle! It's a yellow triangle, right there, a yellow triangle!"

I have no idea how a person could know this is a road, or how she would know by looking at it that this road is supposed to seem like it's getting further away on the flat canvas of the painting. But I know there's a triangle. I can see that much.

She hugs me, the protruding lens of her camera squeezing against my chest.

"Will! This is so exciting!"

Though I can't see the tears, I can hear that she starts to cry a little. "I can't believe it worked! You can see!"

"Yeah," I say. "I can."

She gushes, "I'm so happy right now. You can see! It worked! AHH! This is crazy. Here, we need a picture. A selfie of this moment. Smile!"

We stand in front of the painting, and she snaps a few photos.

Later that day, I have a follow-up appointment with Dr. Bianchi. I put on goggles and press a button when I see dots of light, and I identify colors on flash cards for him. Upon seeing me successfully recognize a color for the first time, Dr. Bianchi makes several happy exclamations in Italian and throws his hairy arms around me.