

CHAPTER

3

The Grenade

The grenade exploded one day after my thirteenth birthday. I remember because that's the day I started counting.

Speaking of which, here's your latest update: I had 1,854,000 seconds left until the end of summer. School started on Tuesday, September 2nd, at 8 a.m. That was zero hour for me. The end of my freedom.

And then there was that bigger number.

The number at the top of the *List of Things I Know*.

Formula for Determining the Lights-Out Number:

1629 days to Lights Out

x 24 hours in a day

+ 4 additional hours

x 60 minutes in an hour

x 60 seconds in a minute

= 140,760,000 seconds until Lights Out

“That’s just the doctor’s estimate,” Mom had said. “You might have a lot more time than that.”

“I might have less time, too,” I said.

“Fine,” said Mom. “Be a pessimist.”

It was last January. My fourth eye appointment in three weeks. And it wasn't with my ordinary optometrist this time. It was with an ophthalmologist named Dr. Zhang. Both my parents came along, which was suspicious. Dad never came to those things.

After 90 minutes of eye drops and flashing lights, Dr. Zhang led me into a small, yellow room. “Wait here while I speak with your parents,” she said.

“They're my eyes,” I said. “Don't I get to hear?”

Dr. Zhang looked like a blob of white. I think she was smiling, but, thanks to those nasty eye drops, it was hard to tell. “You and I will have a follow-up meeting next week,” she said. “But right now, I need to speak with your parents alone.”

An hour later, in the car driving home, I still didn't have a clue what was going on. Mom and Dad were in the front seat, saying zilch. A Michael Jackson song was playing on the radio.

“I need glasses, don't I?” I said.

I already knew that my vision was messed up. Like, I couldn't remember the last time I'd scored a goal in ball hockey. My friends had been calling me *Blindfold Johnston* for months, because I'd only scored three goals all year, and they were lucky ones.

“No,” Mom said, “you don't need glasses.”

“Seriously?” I could barely believe it. “That's great!”

Mom and Dad glanced at each other. Then Dad pulled the car over to the side of the road. That's the moment I remember best. Dad — who never stopped for anything —

pulling the car onto the gravel shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. My stomach was suddenly in ropes.

Dad turned around and reached one arm over the seat. His eyes were red, as though he’d been crying. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” he said. “When you crashed your bike into the river. I should’ve listened. I should have been . . .”

I couldn’t take my eyes off his face. In thirteen years I’d never seen him cry. Mom was watching me through the sun visor mirror. Her face was as flat as a frozen pond.

“It just didn’t add up, the way you explained it,” Dad said. “How could anyone ride off a *cliff*? I just assumed . . . God, I’m sorry.”

Michael Jackson was singing about being really, really bad. Mom snapped the radio off. The car made ticking sounds as the engine cooled.

“But what did Dr. Zhang say?” I asked.

Mom sighed and stared out the passenger window and I could tell that she wanted to light up a smoke. She reached for a Kleenex. Her winter coat crackedled.

Suddenly Dad reached out. He tried to take my hand. I snapped my fist back, and his arm just hung there over the seat.

“Finn,” he said, “I’m so, so sorry.”

And that was how I found out I was going blind.

CHAPTER

4

Scrambled Eyeballs

You don't want to know about my stupid disease.

Believe me: YOU DON'T WANNA KNOW.

It's beyond boring. And totally depressing. And I am approximately five hundred per cent done with telling people about it.

Believe it or not, when I was first diagnosed, I thought it would make me a total chick magnet. I kept thinking about all those awesome blind musicians — Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles and Jeff Healey and . . . well . . .

Okay, so maybe there aren't so many. Still. I figured the girls at my school would feel sorry for me and want to take care of me and stuff. Boy, did I get that one wrong.

Attention passengers. We have a situation. Please make your way to the nearest emergency exit . . .

Slowly but surely, the Skid Marks all unfollowed me on Strava, which totally sucked, since it's basically Facebook for cyclists, and I spend half my life on the thing.

Suddenly I wasn't getting any comments or kudos, which I guess wasn't surprising, considering I hadn't uploaded a new ride in, like, forever. But then my friends started avoiding me

in the hallway at school, too, and sat at the far end of the caf. Finally even Minnow stopped hanging out by my locker. My disease didn't make me a chick magnet. It made me the opposite. Chick repellent.

It's called Stargardt disease, by the way. It's basically Kryptonite to your eyeballs.

"The retina is like a movie screen at the back of your eyeball," Dr. Zhang explained. "It's where all the images get projected. Unfortunately, the disease is causing scarring. It looks a bit like scrambled eggs back there."

Dr. Zhang showed me a picture of my eyeballs. You could see the veins and blood vessels and everything. There was all this yellow junk swirling around. That was the disease, firing paintballs at my retinas.

"So what's the cure?" I asked.

"I'm afraid there isn't one," Dr. Zhang said. "Not yet. But there are some promising experimental treatments. They've done stem cell therapy with rats, and it's been very successful. Possibly in twenty years we'll have a human treatment."

I'm sorry — did you say TWENTY YEARS?

"Hope for the best but plan for the worst," Dr. Zhang said. "That's what I always tell my patients."

"How long until I'm totally blind?" I asked.

Dr. Zhang sat down on a chair across from me. "You'll never be a hundred per cent blind," she said. "You'll always see some light and shapes. And your peripheral vision should remain pretty much intact. That's your side vision. The disease doesn't affect that at all."

I stared at the floor, saying nothing.

"I know it sounds bad," she said, "but peripheral vision

is actually pretty important. It helps you move around safely and avoid obstacles.”

“How much of my eyesight will I get to keep?” I said.

“Hard to say,” Dr. Zhang said. “Maybe ten per cent. Which means you’ll be legally blind.”

It felt like all the air had gone out of the room.

“But you’ll still have some independence,” she went on. “You might not even need a cane.”

“How long?” I asked. “How long until . . . *lights out?*”

Dr. Zhang leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. She was staring right at me, but I couldn’t bring myself to meet her eyes. “Every case is different, and stress can make things worse,” she said. “But in general terms, I’d say you’ve got five years, give or take.”

I looked at the chart of letters on the wall. I could read the big *E* at the top, and most of the second row, but then the third row was super fuzzy and I couldn’t read anything at all below that.

“Seriously?” I said. “Five years?”

“It could be longer,” said Dr. Zhang. “As I said, every case is different.”

When she said that, I felt like I was going to puke.

“Things will be challenging for a while,” Dr. Zhang said. “Some of your hobbies will probably have to change.”

Probably have to change? Who was she kidding?

I’d already had to quit mountain biking.

I was useless at ball hockey.

Even the Xbox was giving me headaches.

“It’s not an easy transition, I know,” said Dr. Zhang. “But you’ll find new passions to take their place. In time.”

TV shows — out.

Movies — out.

Basketball — don't make me laugh.

Playing guitar — who even knew?

Basically, my days of having fun were over.

Now, I had a little over two weeks left in the summer. I had to make it count.