

“Dibs shotgun!” Sawyer screamed from halfway across the lawn.

“No way! Get outta here. You dingus, it’s whoever touches the door first.” Paige yelled back as she took off for Audrey’s dark blue sedan, the tank of a car that shuttled the five of us to every social convention this rinky-dink small town could offer.

“Seriously guys we’re all going to the same place, who cares.” Audrey said in her usual scolding manner.

“There’s no way I’m going to endure a whole ride with Sir Stink-a-Lot again. Who gave him that disgusting burger again?” I said, holding my nose. Somehow Wes was always eating the grossest, most expired foods, stinking up every possible confined space without access to fresh air.

“Good Lord let’s goooo already. I’m going to strangle all of you if I miss the previews.” Sawyer whined, clearly exasperated with us already.

“Alright, alright just get in.” said Audrey. Everyone started to pile in and thanks to my sluggishness, I got stuck in the very back row, a tattered up bench with no real padding and a floss-like seat belt. Notoriously known among us as the Drone Zone, it effectively excluded whoever was left with that seat from any conversation because they seemed to be miles away from everyone else in that mammoth car.

“How’s it going back there, Noah?” Paige practically yelled, peeking and smirking at me through the rearview mirror.

“Oh shut up. I’m exhausted so keep it down up there. Fella needs his sleep.” As I attempted to fold my ridiculously long legs underneath part of the seat belt while adjusting the rest, a sharp pinch reverberated at the base of my neck, slowly creeping up through my skull as finger-like patterns of pain ripped through my skull. [This seemed to happen all the time now; during class, at home, and it even woke me up sometimes. When I finally told Paige about it after she caught me grimacing, she insisted I go to the doctor, but really, who has time for that anymore? Plus I hated to admit that I was terrified of doctors and had a secret theory that they were controlled by this greater being that was trying to kill off the whole human race. But nobody would believe me.] Instinctively, my hand shot to the back of my neck and the pain instantly dissipated. Figuring I’d just leave my hand there to soothe the disappearing jabs, I

leaned across the seat and rested against the window, propping my feet up against the wall of the car. As I took one last glance around the tank, I caught a pair of greenish gray eyes peering through the front mirror framed with graduation tassels. Audrey pulled her eyes from the dark, twisting road for what seemed an eternity, bearing down into mine, somehow holding me there, rendering me unable to move. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, she unlocked my from her glare and my mind and vision grew blank, all rational thoughts disappearing, only capable of comprehending Paige wailing to the blasting radio and Wes chomping on whatever he just found in the seat cushions.

Flashes of trains, cars, and planes distorted my dreams, their lights blaring through my skull. Why was there so much noise? Ceaseless horns and crashing waves bombarded my senses, surrounding every thought with pure, brilliant pain. The greenish gray eyes appeared again, replacing the lights. Everything was just so blinding. The light subsided and my eyes strained through the new darkness, finally falling on a malicious face, its mouth grinning, slowly, painstakingly morphing into every single one of my friends' familiar features. First Paige, then Wes, then Sawyer, and finally Audrey, all with the same greenish gray eyes piercing through mine, challenging me to break my gaze. A lake appeared and I seemed to be standing on it. A shimmering sheet of black ice surrounded my feet, stretching as far as I could see. I looked up to see all my best friends but Audrey opening their mouths, foreign eyes burning and emitting high-pitched, wailing screams, sending massive cracks all across the lake's surface. As the ice shattered, its glass-like pieces tore apart my open skin, leaving strips of blood dripping from my arms and face. I sank through the frozen film in slow motion until the screams were dulled by the numbing water filling my ears.

Yet the screaming intensified as I returned to consciousness, the noise rattling my brain. I recognized that voice. What was Paige doing in my dream? My eyes adjusted through the suppressing darkness and I looked up to see Paige's contorted face, fumbling with her seat belt, beginning to climb over the passenger's seat toward the second row. I felt a sudden lurch and heard the car accelerate, the engine straining to keep up with the driver's demands.

What the heck was Audrey doing? I thought, still dazed from my disorienting dream. Paige's chortled scream was drowned out by the mounting warnings and yells of Wes and Sawyer as they stared through the front windshield, eyes growing wider and wider, internal terror

blatant across their pale faces. I looked up just in time to see the Grand Lake hurtling into view, the embankment growing closer and closer at inhumane speeds.

“Audrey what are you doing?! You’re not even driving this thing!” Sawyer screamed while attempting to throw herself over the driver’s seat. She was right; Audrey’s hands were nowhere near the steering wheel. She was fumbling with something underneath the seat, finally pulling out what looked like an oxygen mask. As she threw the mask over her jet black bangs and down around her mouth and nose, she seemed to gain sudden interest in the road ahead; or lack thereof. She swerved and accelerated, still set on course for the great black mass of water ahead.

“Just slow down! Get back on the road Aud!” Wes yelled attempting to hold Sawyer back from jerking the steering wheel.

In the midst of fighting to comprehend what was going on and why we were headed straight for the bottom of a lake, my head decided to pound like a blacksmith forging new battle armor. The consistent pain masked every rational thought and threw me blindly at those eyes again. As I lifted my chin over the edge of the back seat, Audrey’s fierce eyes locked with mine, obscuring every other object in my line of sight.

“Don’t out-do yourself, Noah.” she whispered through the mask, her voice somehow reverberating from the back of my skull, bouncing through the masses of pain. Audrey held my gaze for one long second then flashed back to the scene at hand, unphased by the fact that the entire car was about to be plunged into 30 degree water.

Panicked, Sawyer lashed out and grabbed the wheel, sending the speeding car careening toward the brush and trees that lined the banks of the lake, instead of toward the beach like we were.

“Arrrgghhh nooo! What have you done!” growled Audrey.

The car was most definitely out of control now, propelling us toward a thick oak tree with no intentions of sustaining damage.

“Oh my God look out for that branch! Aud it’s gonna hit us!” Paige screamed as she turned around to witness the horrors. The tank of a car swerved and bounced over the rocky ground toward the lowest lying, massively thick branch growing dangerously closer and closer until it suddenly punctured and shattered the windshield and driver’s side window, ripping open the left side of the car. Audrey’s pained groan filled the autumn air as a sickening crack

emanated from her chest cavity. Blood pooled around her collarbone full of gashes from the tree and glass fragments.

“She’s definitely broken something and is bleeding all over the place! How do we drive this thing?!” Paige yelled as she inspected Audrey’s muddled expression.

Then, just as Paige was about to grab the steering wheel, Audrey snapped back up, eyes refocusing, gripped the wheel with stark white knuckles, and attacked the gas pedal with all her might, sending us flying off the low bank into the threatening, dark water of the Grand Lake. The shrill shrieking was unbearable, especially with my head still pounding. Everything slowed to impossible speeds and millions of images seemed to pass before my eyes: cars, headlights, sirens, my friends’ faces, and finally, Audrey’s greenish-gray eyes. I glanced at her once more as the nose of the car dipped toward the surface of the water to find a grin playing across her mouth the whole drop, straight into the frozen layer of ice covering the lake’s surface. The jolt was unreal, racking my whole body, choking off the screams of my best friends, and sending earth-shattering shrieks of tearing metal through my rattling brain. A new form of pain prickled on the tip of my forehead and behind my neck sending numbing darkness through my skull as everything was plunged into black.

I woke, slowly, to an aching back. My head pounded and I gradually mustered the effort to sit up. My surroundings now included a short, stark white table with its wood grains showing holding a vase of what seemed to be perfume infused flowers since their fragrance filled the entire room. What room? Where the heck was I? And why was everything so bright? The light streaming through the dusty window shades didn’t even seem like real sunlight, it was much too intense. And what was with this fake snow falling within the four pale blue walls? It moved as I breathed, in, out, in, out. Even my body seemed heavier than it ever had been. I did a quick once over. These were my hands, my fingernails as short as ever. Those were definitely my monster feet, size 12 and a half, making it impossible to find shoes anywhere. Then why did I feel so different? Why did the world around me look so... pure? A steady clicking and dripping noise competed for my ears’ attention and I finally focused on the faint drip of an IV bag hanging by this bed, conveniently placed and attached to the fold in my arm. The clicking distracted me and I strained to hear every beat, finally distinguishing them as footsteps. They grew louder and

louder and finally stopped outside one of the walls. My walls. I heard metal sliding against wood and the delicate scrape of rings against a curtain rod as a stocky man dressed in a bleached lab coat stepped through a pale blue curtain, previously disguised as part of the wall.

“Mr. Noah Hadley? I am Dr. Wes Lang and have been assigned to your intriguing medical case.” The doctor said casually. I would have been a little more interested in him if this snow would stop distracting me. Why was it still falling? And in a room at that?

“I regret to inform you of the grave events following the inappropriate decision of select minors on the evening of November 11th, 2012 regarding a large vehicle launched off an embankment and into a 28 degree body of water. First responders deemed three victims dead at the scene and two in critical condition, you, Noah Hadley, included in the two. Shall we begin with the late Wesley Shard, Paige Abrahms, and Sawyer McLay? Unfortunately, these three seventeen year olds were all trapped within the confines of the vehicle suffering massive water intake to the lungs and hypothermia.”

“What? Wes and Sawyer are... Paige is... dead?” I stuttered, refusing to believe any of it. Who was this guy?

“Please, I prefer no interruptions. Audrey Hessinger arrived at this hospital in critical condition with multiple bones and organs within her chest cavity broken or severely damaged, most likely by a limb of a tree and the initial impact of the car on the surface of the water. Her brain however remained remarkably unscathed and incredibly healthy due to the access to an oxygen mask for more than the 4-6 minutes it takes a brain to decay when harmed. Because of the severe condition of Ms. Hessinger’s body, the hospital staff was given permission to remove the brainstem, cerebellum, and most of all four lobes of her brain, including half of the frontal lobe.” Dr. Lang said, ignoring my looks of utter disbelief and disgust.

“You sir,” he continued, “suffered from unknown pre-existing tumor conditions, amplified by the distress a car accident presented but with only a few minor abrasions on your body because you were ejected from the vehicle. For this reason, we replaced your cancerous brain with the new donor segments and are required to keep you resting in the hospital for 24 more hours. If you would please sign here, I would be most grateful.” He finished, seemingly bored and anxious to leave.

“Hold on a second. Four of my best friends have just died, I had a brain tumor, and you replaced my brain? What?! So this... this is Audrey’s brain? You can’t do this! Where is mine?!” I screamed, terrified at the prospect of losing my identity and all I’ve ever known.

“That is partially correct. The functioning gray matter in your skull currently is not yours and belonged to Ms. Hessinger yet you still possess most of your frontal lobe, containing all memories and personality traits you enjoyed just two days ago. Please, do not yell. I assure you, the only difference might be changes in acute motor functions, visual and audio sensitivity, and select recollections.” The doctor said calmly, still pushing a pen and medical form in my face.

Now the brain shot brilliantly pure images to my eyes; Wes and Sawyer climbing into the car, Audrey’s greenish-gray eyes piercing through the mirror into mine, hands on a steering wheel, trees flying by, all of us laughing, her conscious decision to veer off the road and toward the icy lake, her striving to beat a record, to overcome some obstacle. She wanted to kill. Audrey drove that car into the lake on purpose. She wanted to see the life drain from these people. She wanted more. The brain wanted more. Now it was my brain. Now I realized Sawyer had messed up the plan. We weren’t supposed to go through the trees. Audrey was supposed to survive. But she hadn’t. This left me an even bigger job to complete her task and mine. The brain wanted me to.

This was all too much. I just couldn’t take it anymore so I tore out the IV tube, shoved the doctor aside, and jammed open the door, hidden by a stupid curtain. Without second glances, I hurtled down the stark white hospital hallways, pushing and shoving to get through the emergency doors. Brilliant sunlight stung my newly sensitive eyes, courtesy of Audrey’s brain. Wait. A prickling sensation recalled new images, unfamiliar to both Audrey and I. This brain had a past. We weren’t the only two who possessed it. What seemed like hundreds of photo albums flipped through my vision, showing thousands of people, accident reports, and obituaries. As my vision cleared, I noticed a giant black Greyhound bus, doors wide open and unsuspecting driver smoking and talking on his phone, his back to the hospital doors. I took my chance, crossed the distance, jumped onto the bus, threw the bus into gear, and drove off, leaving a befuddled driver silently swearing in my rear-view mirror. My plan was unfolding. Now, to outdo Audrey and all before her to please the brain. Not Audrey’s brain, not my brain, *the* brain. With my hands gripping the steering wheel, I controlled a massive killing machine, and I was about to direct it

toward the always hectic main street gas station, perfect for a little wake-up call to all those shoppers strolling along the street. I was a martyr, I was a hero and the next owner of my brain would soon know it.