

Praise for the Unwind Dystology

Unwind

★ “[A] gripping, brilliantly imagined futuristic thriller. . . . The issues raised could not be more provocative—the sanctity of life, the meaning of being human—while the delivery could hardly be more engrossing or better aimed to teens.”—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“As with classics such as *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*, one can only hope that this vision of the future never becomes reality.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

UnWholly

“Perfectly poised to catch the Hunger Games wave and based on an even more plausible dystopian scenario . . .”—*Booklist*

“Smart, intense, and thought provoking, this series will stick with readers.”—VOYA

UnSouled

“Suspenseful . . . the overall premise is as hauntingly plausible as ever . . . electrifying . . .”—*Booklist*

“Shusterman effectively balances the big-picture ethical musings with scenes of the teens simply being teens. . . . New readers [will] . . . join the ranks waiting for the next installment.”—*Horn Book*

UnDivided

★ “The popularity of this series is warranted: it is smart, it is dark, it is riveting, and the characters are drawn with respect.”
—VOYA, starred review

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NEAL SHUSTERMAN UNWIND

BOOK 1 IN THE UNWIND
DYSIOLOGY

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*Dedicated to the memory of
Barbara Seranella*

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The Bill of Life

The Second Civil War, also known as “The Heartland War,” was a long and bloody conflict fought over a single issue.

To end the war, a set of constitutional amendments known as “The Bill of Life” was passed.

It satisfied both the Pro-life and the Pro-choice armies.

The Bill of Life states that human life may not be touched from the moment of conception until a child reaches the age of thirteen.

However, between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, a parent may choose to retroactively “abort” a child . . .

. . . on the condition that the child’s life doesn’t “technically” end.

The process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive is called “unwinding.”

Unwinding is now a common and accepted practice in society.

Part One

Triplicate

"I was never going to amount to much anyway, but now, statistically speaking, there's a better chance that some part of me will go on to greatness somewhere in the world. I'd rather be partly great than entirely useless."

—SAMSON WARD

1 · Connor

“There are places you can go,” Ariana tells him, “and a guy as smart as you has a decent chance of surviving to eighteen.”

Connor isn’t so sure, but looking into Ariana’s eyes makes his doubts go away, if only for a moment. Her eyes are sweet violet with streaks of gray. She’s such a slave to fashion—always getting the newest pigment injection the second it’s in style. Connor was never into that. He’s always kept his eyes the color they came in. Brown. He never even got tattoos, like so many kids get these days when they’re little. The only color on his skin is the tan it takes during the summer, but now, in November, that tan has long faded. He tries not to think about the fact that he’ll never see the summer again. At least not as Connor Lassiter. He still can’t believe that his life is being stolen from him at sixteen.

Ariana’s violet eyes begin to shine as they fill with tears that flow down her cheeks when she blinks. “Connor, I’m so sorry.” She holds him, and for a moment it seems as if everything is okay, as if they are the only two people on Earth. For that instant, Connor feels invincible, untouchable . . . but she lets go, the moment passes, and the world around him returns. Once more he can feel the rumble of the freeway beneath them, as cars pass by, not knowing or caring that he’s here. Once more he is just a marked kid, a week short of unwinding.

The soft, hopeful things Ariana tells him don’t help now. He can barely hear her over the rush of traffic. This place where they hide from the world is one of those dangerous places that

make adults shake their heads, grateful that their own kids aren't stupid enough to hang out on the ledge of a freeway overpass. For Connor it's not about stupidity, or even rebellion—it's about feeling life. Sitting on this ledge, hidden behind an exit sign is where he feels most comfortable. Sure, one false step and he's roadkill. Yet for Connor, life on the edge is home.

There have been no other girls he's brought here, although he hasn't told Ariana that. He closes his eyes, feeling the vibration of the traffic as if it's pulsing through his veins, a part of him. This has always been a good place to get away from fights with his parents, or when he just feels generally boiled. But now Connor's beyond boiled—even beyond fighting with his mom and dad. There's nothing more to fight about. His parents signed the order—it's a done deal.

"We should run away," Ariana says. "I'm fed up with everything, too. My family, school, everything. I could kick-AWOL, and never look back."

Connor hangs on the thought. The idea of kicking-AWOL by himself terrifies him. He might put up a tough front, he might act like the bad boy at school—but running away on his own? He doesn't even know if he has the guts. But if Ariana comes, that's different. That's not alone. "Do you mean it?"

Ariana looks at him with her magical eyes. "Sure. Sure I do. I could leave here. If you asked me."

Connor knows this is major. Running away with an Unwind—*that's* commitment. The fact that she would do it moves him beyond words. He kisses her, and in spite of everything going on in his life Connor suddenly feels like the luckiest guy in the world. He holds her—maybe a little too tightly, because she starts to squirm. It just makes him want to hold her even more tightly, but he fights that urge and lets go. She smiles at him.

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"AWOL . . ." she says. "What does that mean, anyway?"

"It's an old military term or something," Connor says. "It means 'absent without leave.'"

Ariana thinks about it, and grins. "Hmm. More like 'alive without lectures.'"

Connor takes her hand, trying hard not to squeeze it too tightly. She said she'd go if he asked her. Only now does he realize he hasn't actually asked yet.

"Will you come with me, Ariana?"

Ariana smiles and nods. "Sure," she says. "Sure I will."

Ariana's parents don't like Connor. "We always knew he'd be an Unwind," he can just hear them saying. "You should have stayed away from that Lassiter boy." He was never "Connor" to them. He was always "that Lassiter boy." They think that just because he's been in and out of disciplinary school they have a right to judge him.

Still, when he walks her home that afternoon, he stops short of her door, hiding behind a tree as she goes inside. Before he heads home, he thinks how hiding is now going to be a way of life for both of them.

Home.

Connor wonders how he can call the place he lives home, when he's about to be evicted—not just from the place he sleeps, but from the hearts of those who are supposed to love him.

His father sits in a chair, watching the news as Connor enters.

"Hi, Dad."

His father points at some random carnage on the news. "Clappers again."

"What did they hit this time?"

"They blew up an Old Navy in the North Akron mall."

"Hmm," says Connor. "You'd think they'd have better taste."

"I don't find that funny."

Connor's parents don't know that Connor knows he's being unwound. He wasn't supposed to find out, but Connor has always been good at ferreting out secrets. Three weeks ago, while looking for a stapler in his dad's home office, he found airplane tickets to the Bahamas. They were going on a family vacation over Thanksgiving. One problem, though: There were only three tickets. His mother, his father, his younger brother. No ticket for him. At first he just figured the ticket was somewhere else, but the more he thought about it, the more it seemed wrong. So Connor went looking a little deeper when his parents were out, and he found it. The Unwind order. It had been signed in old-fashioned triplicate. The white copy was already gone—off with the authorities. The yellow copy would accompany Connor to his end, and the pink would stay with his parents, as evidence of what they'd done. Perhaps they would frame it and hang it alongside his first-grade picture.

The date on the order was the day before the Bahamas trip. He was going off to be unwound, and they were going on vacation to make themselves feel better about it. The unfairness of it had made Connor want to break something. It had made him want to break a lot of things—but he hadn't. For once he had held his temper, and aside from a few fights in school that weren't his fault, he kept his emotions hidden. He kept what he knew to himself. Everyone knew that an unwind order was irreversible, so screaming and fighting wouldn't change a thing. Besides, he found a certain power in knowing his parents' secret. Now the blows he could deal them were so much more effective. Like the day he brought flowers home for his mother and she cried for hours. Like the B-plus he

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brought home on a science test. Best grade he ever got in science. He handed it to his father, who looked at it, the color draining from his face. "See, Dad, my grades are getting better. I could even bring my science grade up to an A by the end of the semester." An hour later his father was sitting in a chair, still clutching the test in his hand, and staring blankly at the wall.

Connor's motivation was simple: Make them suffer. Let them know for the rest of their lives what a horrible mistake they made.

But there was no sweetness to this revenge, and now, three weeks of rubbing it in their faces has made him feel no better. In spite of himself he's starting to feel bad for his parents, and he hates that he feels that way.

"Did I miss dinner?"

His father doesn't look away from the TV. "Your mother left a plate for you."

Connor heads off toward the kitchen, but halfway there he hears:

"Connor?"

He turns to see his father looking at him. Not just looking, but staring. *He's going to tell me now*, Connor thinks. *He's going to tell me they're unwinding me, and then break down in tears, going on and on about how sorry sorry sorry he is about it all.* If he does, Connor just might accept the apology. He might even forgive him, and then tell him that he doesn't plan to be here when the Juvey-cops come to take him away. But in the end all his father says is, "Did you lock the door when you came in?"

"I'll do it now."

Connor locks the door, then goes to his room, no longer hungry for whatever it is his mother saved for him.

* * *

At two in the morning Connor dresses in black and fills a backpack with the things that really matter to him. He still has room for three changes of clothes. He finds it amazing, when it comes down to it, how few things are worth taking. Memories, mostly. Reminders of a time before things went so wrong between him and his parents. Between him and the rest of the world.

Connor peeks in on his brother, thinks about waking him to say good-bye, then decides it's not a good idea. He silently slips out into the night. He can't take his bike, because he had installed an antitheft tracking device. Connor never considered that he might be the one stealing it. Ariana has bikes for both of them though.

Ariana's house is a twenty-minute walk, if you take the conventional route. Suburban Ohio neighborhoods never have streets that go in straight lines, so instead he takes the more direct route, through the woods, and makes it there in ten.

The lights in Ariana's house are off. He expected this. It would have been suspicious if she had stayed awake all night. Better to pretend she's sleeping, so she won't alert any suspicion. He keeps his distance from the house. Ariana's yard and front porch are equipped with motion-sensor lights that come on whenever anything moves into range. They're meant to scare off wild animals and criminals. Ariana's parents are convinced that Connor is both.

He pulls out his phone and dials the familiar number. From where he stands in the shadows at the edge of the backyard he can hear it ring in her room upstairs. Connor disconnects quickly and ducks farther back into the shadows, for fear that Ariana's parents might be looking out from their windows. What is she thinking? Ariana was supposed to leave her phone on vibrate.

He makes a wide arc around the edge of the backyard,

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wide enough not to set off the lights, and although a light comes on when he steps onto the front porch, only Ariana's bedroom faces that way. She comes to the door a few moments later, opening it not quite wide enough for her to come out or for him to go in.

"Hi, are you ready?" asks Connor. Clearly she's not; she wears a robe over satin pajamas. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"No, no, I didn't forget. . . ."

"So hurry up! The sooner we get out of here, the more of a lead we'll get before anyone knows we're gone."

"Connor," she says, "here's the thing . . ."

And the truth is right there in her voice, in the way it's such a strain for her to even say his name, the quiver of apology lingering in the air like an echo. She doesn't have to say anything after that, because he knows, but he lets her say it anyway. Because he sees how hard it is for her, and he wants it to be. He wants it to be the hardest thing she's ever done in her life.

"Connor, I really want to go, I do . . . but it's just a really bad time for me. My sister's getting married, and you know she picked me to be the maid of honor. And then there's school."

"You hate school. You said you'd be dropping out when you turn sixteen."

"*Testing* out," she says. "There's a difference."

"So you're not coming?"

"I want to, I really, *really* want to . . . but I can't."

"So everything we talked about was just a lie."

"No," says Ariana. "It was a dream. Reality got in the way, that's all. And running away doesn't solve anything."

"Running away is the only way to save my life," Connor hisses. "I'm about to be unwound, in case you forgot."

She gently touches his face. "I know," she says. "But I'm not."

Then a light comes on at the top of the stairs, and reflexively Ariana closes the door a few inches.

"Ari?" Connor hears her mother say. "What is it? What are you doing at the door?"

Connor backs up out of view, and Ariana turns to look up the stairs. "Nothing, Mom. I thought I saw a coyote from my window and I just wanted to make sure the cats weren't out."

"The cats are upstairs, honey. Close the door and go back to bed."

"So, I'm a coyote," says Connor.

"Shush," says Ariana, closing the door until there's just a tiny slit and all he can see is the edge of her face and a single violet eye. "You'll get away, I know you will. Call me once you're somewhere safe." Then she closes the door.

Connor stands there for the longest time, until the motion sensor light goes out. Being alone had not been part of his plan, but he realizes it should have been. From the moment his parents signed those papers, Connor was alone.

He can't take a train; he can't take a bus. Sure, he has enough money, but nothing's leaving until morning, and by then they'll be looking for him in all the obvious places. Unwinds on the run are so common these days, they have whole teams of Juvey-cops dedicated to finding them. The police have it down to an art.

He knows he'd be able to disappear in a city, because there are so many faces, you never see the same one twice. He knows he can also disappear in the country, where people are so few and far between; he could set up house in an old barn and no one would think to look. But then, Connor figures the police probably thought of that. They probably have every old barn set up to spring like a rat trap, snaring kids like him. Or maybe he's just being paranoid. No, Connor knows his situation

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calls for justified caution—not just tonight, but for the next two years. Then once he turns eighteen, he’s home free. After that, sure, they can throw him in jail, they can put him on trial—but they can’t unwind him. Surviving that long is the trick.

Down by the interstate there’s a rest stop where truckers pull off the road for the night. This is where Connor goes. He figures he can slip in the back of an eighteen-wheeler, but he quickly learns that truckers keep their cargo locked. He curses himself for not having forethought enough to consider that. Thinking ahead has never been one of Connor’s strong points. If it was, he might not have gotten into the various situations that have plagued him over these past few years. Situations that got him labels like “troubled” and “at risk,” and finally this last label, “unwind.”

There are about twenty parked trucks, and a brightly lit diner where half a dozen truckers eat. It’s 3:30 in the morning. Apparently truckers have their own biological clocks. Connor watches and waits. Then, at about a quarter to four, a police cruiser pulls silently into the truck stop. No lights, no siren. It slowly circles the lot like a shark. Connor thinks he can hide, until he sees a second police car pulling in. There are too many lights over the lot for Connor to hide in shadows, and he can’t bolt without being seen in the bright moonlight. A patrol car comes around the far end of the lot. In a second its headlights will be on him, so he rolls beneath a truck and prays the cops haven’t seen him.

He watches as the patrol car’s wheels slowly roll past. On the other side of the eighteen-wheeler the second patrol car passes in the opposite direction. *Maybe this is just a routine check*, he thinks. *Maybe they’re not looking for me*. The more he thinks about it, the more he convinces himself that’s the case. They can’t know he’s gone yet. His father sleeps like a

log, and his mother never checks on Connor during the night anymore.

Still, the police cars circle.

From his spot beneath the truck Connor sees the driver's door of another eighteen-wheeler open. No—it's not the driver's door, it's the door to the little bedroom behind the cab. A trucker emerges, stretches, and heads toward the truckstop bathrooms, leaving the door ajar.

In the hairbreadth of a moment, Connor makes a decision and bolts from his hiding spot, racing across the lot to that truck. Loose gravel skids out from under his feet as he runs. He doesn't know where the cop cars are anymore, but it doesn't matter. He has committed himself to this course of action and he has to see it through. As he nears the door he sees headlights arcing around, about to turn toward him. He pulls open the door to the truck's sleeper, hurls himself inside, and pulls the door closed behind him.

He sits on a bed not much bigger than a cot, catching his breath. What's his next move? The trucker will be back. Connor has about five minutes if he's lucky, one minute if he's not. He peers beneath the bed. There's space down there where he can hide, but it's blocked by two duffle bags full of clothes. He could pull them out, squeeze in, and pull the duffle bags back in front of him. The trucker would never know he's there. But even before he can get the first duffle bag out, the door swings open. Connor just stands there, unable to react as the trucker reaches in to grab his jacket and sees him.

"Whoa! Who are you? What the hell you doin' in my truck?"

A police car cruises slowly past behind him.

"Please," Connor says, his voice suddenly squeaky like it was before his voice changed. "Please, don't tell anyone. I've got to get out of this place." He reaches into his backpack,

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fumbling, and pulls out a wad of bills from his wallet. "You want money? I've got money. I'll give you all I've got."

"I don't want your money," the trucker says.

"All right, then, what?"

Even in the dim light the trucker must see the panic in Connor's eyes, but he doesn't say a thing.

"Please," says Connor again. "I'll do anything you want. . . ."

The trucker looks at him in silence for a moment more. "Is that so?" he finally says. Then he steps inside and closes the door behind him.

Connor shuts his eyes, not daring to consider what he's just gotten himself into.

The trucker sits beside him. "What's your name?"

"Connor." Then he realizes a moment too late he should have given a fake name.

The trucker scratches his beard stubble and thinks for a moment. "Let me show you something, Connor." He reaches over Connor and grabs, of all things, a deck of cards from a little pouch hanging next to the bed. "Did ya ever see this?" The trucker takes the deck of cards in one hand and does a skillful one-handed shuffle. "Pretty good, huh?"

Connor, not knowing what to say, just nods.

"How about this?" Then the trucker takes a single card and with sleight of hand makes the card vanish into thin air. Then he reaches over and pulls the card right out of Connor's shirt pocket. "You like that?"

Connor lets out a nervous laugh.

"Well, those tricks you just saw?" The trucker says, "I didn't do 'em."

"I . . . don't know what you mean."

The trucker rolls up his sleeve to reveal that the arm, which had done the tricks, had been grafted on at the elbow.

"Ten years ago I fell asleep at the wheel," the trucker tells him. "Big accident. I lost an arm, a kidney, and a few other things. I got new ones, though, and I pulled through." He looks at his hands, and now Connor can see that the trick-card hand is a little different from the other one. The trucker's other hand has thicker fingers, and the skin is a bit more olive in tone.

"So," says Connor, "you got dealt a new hand."

The trucker laughs at that, then he becomes quiet for a moment, looking at his replacement hand. "These fingers here knew things the rest of me didn't. Muscle memory, they call it. And there's not a day that goes by that I don't wonder what other incredible things that kid who owned this arm knew, before he was unwound . . . whoever he was."

The trucker stands up. "You're lucky you came to me," he says. "There are truckers out there who'll take whatever you offer, then turn you in anyway."

"And you're not like that?"

"No, I'm not." He puts out his hand—his *other* hand—and Connor shakes it. "Josias Aldridge," he says. "I'm heading north from here. You can ride with me till morning."

Connor's relief is so great, it takes the wind right out of him. He can't even offer a thank-you.

"That bed there's not the most comfortable in the world," says Aldridge, "but it does the job. Get yourself some rest. I just gotta go take a dump, and then we'll be on our way." Then he closes the door, and Connor listens to his footsteps heading off toward the bathroom. Connor finally lets his guard down and begins to feel his own exhaustion. The trucker didn't give him a destination, just a direction, and that's fine. North, south, east, west—it doesn't matter as long as it's away from here. As for his next move, well, first he's got to get through this one before he can think about what comes next.

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A minute later Connor's already beginning to doze when he hears the shout from outside.

"We know you're in there! Come out now and you won't get hurt!"

Connor's heart sinks. Josias Aldridge has apparently pulled another sleight of hand. He's made Connor appear for the police. Abracadabra. With his journey over before it even began, Connor swings the door open to see three Juvey-cops aiming weapons.

But they're not aiming at him.

In fact, their backs are to him.

Across the way, the cab door swings open of the truck he had hidden under just a few minutes before, and a kid comes out from behind the empty driver's seat, his hands in the air. Connor recognizes him right away. It's a kid he knows from school. Andy Jameson.

My God, is Andy being unwound too?

There's a look of fear on Andy's face, but beyond it is something worse. A look of utter defeat. That's when Connor realizes his own folly. He'd been so surprised by this turn of events that he's still just standing there, exposed for anyone to see. Well, the policemen don't see him. But Andy does. He catches sight of Connor, holds his gaze, only for a moment . . .

. . . and in that moment something remarkable happens.

The look of despair on Andy's face is suddenly replaced by a steely resolve bordering on triumph. He quickly looks away from Connor and takes a few steps before the police grab him—steps *away* from Connor, so that the police still have their backs to him.

Andy had seen him and had not given him away! If Andy has nothing else after this day, at least he'll have this small victory.

Connor leans back into the shadows of the truck and slowly

pulls the door closed. Outside, as the police take Andy away, Connor lies back down, and his tears come as sudden as a summer downpour. He's not sure who he's crying for—for Andy, for himself, for Ariana—and not knowing makes his tears flow all the more. Instead of wiping the tears away he lets them dry on his face like he used to when he was a little boy and the things he cried about were so insignificant that they'd be forgotten by morning.

The trucker never comes to check on him. Instead Connor hears the engine start and feels the truck pulling out. The gentle motion of the road rocks him to sleep.

The ring of Connor's cell phone wakes him out of a deep sleep. He fights consciousness. He wants to go back to the dream he was having. It was about a place he was sure he had been to, although he couldn't quite remember when. He was at a cabin on a beach with his parents, before his brother was born. Connor's leg had fallen through a rotted board on the porch into spiderwebs so thick, they felt like cotton. Connor had screamed and screamed from the pain, and the fear of the giant spiders that he was convinced would eat his leg off. And yet, this was a good dream—a good memory—because his father was there to pull him free, and carry him inside, where they bandaged his leg and sat him by the fire with some kind of cider so flavorful, he could still taste it when he thought about it. His father told him a story that he can no longer remember, but that's all right. It wasn't the story but the tone of his voice that mattered, a gentle baritone rumble as calming as waves breaking on a shore. Little-boy-Connor drank his cider and leaned back against his mother pretending to fall asleep, but what he was really doing was trying to dissolve into the moment and make it last forever. In the dream he did dissolve. His whole being flowed into the cider cup, and his par-

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ents placed it gently on the table, close enough to the fire to keep it warm forever and always.

Stupid dreams. Even the good ones are bad, because they remind you how poorly reality measures up.

His cell phone rings again, chasing away the last of the dream. Connor almost answers it. The sleeper room of the truck is so dark, he doesn't realize at first that he's not in his own bed. The only thing that saves him is that he can't find his phone and he must turn on a light. When he finds a wall where his nightstand should be, he realizes that this isn't his room. The phone rings again. That's when it all comes back to him, and he remembers where he is. Connor finds his phone in his backpack. The phone ID says the call is from his father.

So now his parents know he's gone. Do they really think he'll answer his phone? He waits until voicemail takes the call, then he turns off the power. His watch says 7:30 a.m. He rubs the sleep out of his eyes, trying to calculate how far they've come. The truck isn't moving anymore, but they must have traveled at least two hundred miles while he slept. It's a good start.

There's a knock on the door. "Come on out, kid. Your ride's over."

Connor's not complaining—it was outrageously generous of this truck driver to do what he did. Connor won't ask any more of him. He swings open the door and steps out to thank the man, but it's not Josias Aldridge at the door. Aldridge is a few yards away being handcuffed, and in front of Connor is a policeman: a Juvey-cop wearing a smile as big as all outdoors. Standing ten yards away is Connor's father, still holding the cell phone he had just called from.

"It's over, son," his father says.

It makes Connor furious. *I'm not your son!* He wants to shout. *I stopped being your son when you signed the unwind*

order! But the shock of the moment leaves him speechless.

It had been so stupid of Connor to leave his cell phone on—that's how they tracked him—and he wonders how many other kids are caught by their own blind trust of technology. Well, Connor's not going the way Andy Jameson did. He quickly assesses the situation. The truck has been pulled over to the side of the interstate by two highway patrol cars and a Juvey-cop unit. Traffic barrels past at seventy miles per hour, oblivious to the little drama unfolding on the shoulder. Connor makes a split-second decision and bolts, pushing the officer against the truck and racing across the busy highway. Would they shoot an unarmed kid in the back, he wonders, or would they shoot him in the legs and spare his vital organs? As he races onto the interstate, cars swerve around him, but he keeps on going.

"Connor, stop!" he hears his father yell. Then he hears a gun fire.

He feels the impact, but not in his skin. The bullet embeds in his backpack. He doesn't look behind him. Then, as he reaches the highway median, he hears another gunshot, and a small blue splotch appears on the center divider. They're firing tranquilizer bullets. They're not taking him out, they're trying to take him down—and they're much more likely to fire tranquilizer bullets at will, than regular bullets.

Connor climbs over the center divider, and finds himself in the path of a Cadillac that's not stopping for anything. The car swerves to avoid him, and by sheer luck Connor's momentum takes him just a few inches out of the Caddy's path. Its side mirror smacks him painfully in the ribs before the car screeches to a halt, sending the acrid stench of burned rubber up his nostrils. Holding his aching side, Connor sees someone looking at him from an open window of the backseat. It's another kid, dressed all in white. The kid is terrified.

Unwind

With the police already reaching the center divider, Connor looks into the eyes of this frightened kid, and knows what he has to do. It's time for another split-second decision. He reaches through the window, pulls up the lock, and opens the door.

2 · Risa

Risa paces backstage, waiting for her turn at the piano.

She knows she could play the sonata in her sleep—in fact, she often does. So many nights she would wake up to feel her fingers playing on the bed sheets. She would hear the music in her head, and it would still play for a few moments after she awoke, but then it would dissolve into the night, leaving nothing but her fingers drumming against the covers.

She *has* to know the Sonata. It *has* to come to her as easily as breathing.

"It's not a competition," Mr. Durkin always tells her. "There are no winners or losers at a recital."

Well, Risa knows better.

"Risa Ward," the stage manager calls. "You're up."

She rolls her shoulders, adjusts the barrette in her long brown hair, then she takes the stage. The applause from the audience is polite, nothing more. Some of it is genuine, for she does have friends out there, and teachers who want her to succeed. But mostly it's the obligatory applause from an audience waiting to be impressed.

Mr. Durkin is out there. He has been her piano teacher for five years. He's the closest thing Risa has to a parent. She's lucky. Not every kid at Ohio State Home 23 has a teacher they can say that about. Most StaHo kids hate their teachers, because they see them as jailers.

Ignoring the stiff formality of her recital dress, she sits at the piano; it's a concert Steinway as ebony as the night, and just as long.

Focus.

She keeps her eyes on the piano, forcing the audience to recede into darkness. The audience doesn't matter. All that matters is the piano and the glorious sounds she's about to charm out of it.

She holds her fingers above the keys for a moment, then begins with perfect passion. Soon her fingers dance across the keys making the flawless seem facile. She makes the instrument sing . . . and then her left ring finger stumbles on a B-flat, slipping awkwardly onto B-natural.

A mistake.

It happens so quickly, it could go unnoticed—but not by Risa. She holds the wrong note in her mind, and even as she continues playing, that note reverberates within her, growing to a crescendo, stealing her focus until she slips again, into a second wrong note, and then, two minutes later, blows an entire chord. Tears begin to fill her eyes, and she can't see clearly.

You don't need to see, she tells herself. *You just need to feel the music*. She can still pull out of this nosedive, can't she? Her mistakes, which sound so awful to her, are barely noticeable.

"Relax," Mr. Durkin would tell her. "No one is judging you."

Perhaps he truly believes that—but then, he can afford to believe it. He's not fifteen, and he's never been a ward of the state.

Five mistakes.

Every one of them is small, subtle, but they are mistakes nonetheless. It would have been fine if any of the other kids' performances were less than stellar, but the others shined.

Unwind

Still, Mr. Durkin is all smiles when he greets Risa at the reception. "You were marvelous!" he says. "I'm proud of you."

"I stunk up the stage."

"Nonsense. You chose one of Chopin's most difficult pieces. Professionals can't get through it without an error or two. You did it justice!"

"I need more than justice."

Mr. Durkin sighs, but he doesn't deny it. "You're coming along nicely. I look forward to the day I see those hands playing in Carnegie Hall." His smile is warm and genuine, as are the congratulations from the other girls in her dorm. It's enough warmth to ease her sleep that night, and to give her hope that maybe, just maybe, she's making too much of it and being unnecessarily hard on herself. She falls asleep thinking of what she might choose to play next.

One week later she's called into the headmaster's office.

There are three people there. A *tribunal*, thinks Risa. Three adults sitting in judgment, like the three monkeys: hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil.

"Please sit down, Risa," says the headmaster.

She tries to sit gracefully but her knees, now unsteady, won't allow it. She slaps awkwardly down into a chair far too plush for an inquisition.

Risa doesn't know the other two people sitting beside the headmaster, but they both look very official. Their demeanor is relaxed, as if this is business as usual for them.

The woman to the headmaster's left identifies herself as the social worker assigned to Risa's "case." Until that moment, Risa didn't know she had a case. She says her name. Ms. Something-or-other. The name never even makes it into Risa's memory. She flips through the pages of Risa's fifteen years of life as casually as if she were reading a newspaper.

"Let's see . . . you've been a ward of the state from birth. It looks like your behavior has been exemplary. Your grades have been respectable, but not excellent." Then the social worker looks up and smiles. "I saw your performance the other night. You were very good."

Good, thinks Risa, but not excellent.

Ms. Something-or-other leafs through the folder for a few seconds more, but Risa can tell she's not really looking. Whatever's going on here was decided long before Risa walked through the door.

"Why am I here?"

Ms. Something-or-other closes her folder and glances at the headmaster and the man beside him in an expensive suit. The suit nods, and the social worker turns back to Risa with a warm smile. "We feel you've reached your potential here," she says. "Headmaster Thomas and Mr. Paulson are in agreement with me."

Risa glances at the suit. "Who's Mr. Paulson?"

The suit clears his throat and says, almost as an apology, "I'm the school's legal counsel."

"A lawyer? Why is there a lawyer here?"

"Just procedure," Headmaster Thomas tells her. He puts a finger into his collar, stretching it, as if his tie has suddenly become a noose. "It's school policy to have a lawyer present at these kinds of proceedings."

"And what kind of proceeding is this?"

The three look at one another, none of them wanting to take the lead. Finally Ms. Something-or-other speaks up. "You must know that space in state homes are at a premium these days, and with budget cuts, every StaHo is impacted—ours included."

Risa holds cold eye contact with her. "Wards of the state are guaranteed a place in state homes."

Unwind

"Very true—but the guarantee only holds until thirteen."

Then all of a sudden everyone has something to say.

"The money only stretches so far," says the headmaster.

"Educational standards could be compromised," says the lawyer.

"We only want what's best for you, and all the other children here," says the social worker.

And back and forth it goes like a three-way Ping-Pong match. Risa says nothing, only listens.

"You're a good musician, but . . ."

"As I said, you've reached your potential."

"As far as you can go."

"Perhaps if you had chosen a less competitive course of study."

"Well, that's all water under the bridge."

"Our hands are tied."

"There are unwanted babies born every day—and not all of them get storked."

"We're obliged to take the ones that don't."

"We have to make room for every new ward."

"Which means cutting 5 percent of our teenage population."

"You do understand, don't you?"

Risa can't listen anymore, so she shuts them up by saying what they don't have the courage to say themselves.

"I'm being unwound?"

Silence. It's more of an answer than if they had said "yes."

The social worker reaches over to take Risa's hand, but Risa pulls it back before she can. "It's all right to be frightened. Change is always scary."

"Change?" yells Risa, "What do you mean 'change'? Dying is a little bit more than a 'change.'"

The headmaster's tie turns into a noose again, preventing

blood from getting to his face. The lawyer opens his briefcase. "Please, Miss Ward. It's not dying, and I'm sure everyone here would be more comfortable if you didn't suggest something so blatantly inflammatory. The fact is, 100 percent of you will still be alive, just in a divided state." Then he reaches into his briefcase and hands her a colorful pamphlet. "This is a brochure from Twin Lakes Harvest Camp."

"It's a fine place," the headmaster says. "It's our facility of choice for all our Unwinds. In fact, my own nephew was unwound there."

"Goody for him."

"Change," repeated the social worker, "that's all. The way ice becomes water, the way water becomes clouds. *You will live*, Risa. Only in a different form."

But Risa's not hearing anymore. Panic has already started to set in. "I don't have to be a musician. I can do something else."

Headmaster Thomas sadly shakes his head. "Too late for that, I'm afraid."

"No, it's not. I could work out. I could become a boeuf. The military always needs more boeufs!"

The lawyer sighs in exasperation and looks at his watch. The social worker leans forward. "Risa, please," she says. "It takes a certain body type for a girl to be an Army boeuf, and many years of physical training."

"Don't I have a choice in this?" But when she looks behind her, the answer is clear. There are two guards waiting to make sure that she has no choice at all. And as they lead her away, she thinks of Mr. Durkin. With a bitter laugh, Risa realizes that he may get his wish after all. Someday he may see her hands playing in Carnegie Hall. Unfortunately, the rest of Risa won't be there.

* * *

Unwind

She is not allowed to return to her dormitory. She will take nothing with her, because there's nothing she needs. That's the way it is with unwinds. Just a handful of her friends sneak down to the school's transportation center, stealing quick hugs and shedding quick tears, all the while looking over their shoulders, afraid of getting caught.

Mr. Durkin does not come. This hurts Risa most of all.

She sleeps in a guest room in the home's welcome center, then, at dawn, she's loaded onto a bus full of kids being transferred from the huge StaHo complex to other places. She recognizes some faces, but doesn't actually know any of her travel companions.

Across the aisle, a fairly nice-looking boy—a military boeuf by the look of him—gives her a smile. “Hey,” he says, flirting in a way only boeufs can.

“Hey,” Risa says back.

“I'm being transferred to the state naval academy,” he says. “How about you?”

“Oh, me?” She quickly sifts through the air for something impressive. “Miss Marple's Academy for the Highly Gifted.”

“She's lying,” says a scrawny, pale boy sitting on Risa's other side. “She's an Unwind.”

Suddenly the boeuf boy leans away, as if unwinding is contagious. “Oh,” he says. “Well . . . uh . . . that's too bad. See ya!” And he leaves to sit with some other boeufs in the back.

“Thanks,” snaps Risa at the scrawny kid.

The kid just shrugs. “It doesn't matter, anyway.” Then he holds out his hand to shake. “I'm Samson,” he says. “I'm an Unwind too.”

Risa almost laughs. Samson. Such a strong name for such a mealy boy. She doesn't shake his hand, still annoyed at having been exposed to the handsome boeuf.

“So, what did you do to get yourself unwound?” Risa asks.

"It's not what I did, it's what I *didn't* do."

"What didn't you do?"

"Anything," Samson answers.

It makes sense to Risa. Not doing anything is an easy path to unwinding.

"I was never going to amount to much anyway," Samson says, "but now, statistically speaking, there's a better chance that some part of me will go on to greatness somewhere in the world. I'd rather be partly great than entirely useless."

The fact that his twisted logic almost makes sense just makes her angrier. "Hope you enjoy harvest camp, Samson." Then she leaves to find another seat.

"Please sit down!" calls the chaperone from the front, but no one's listening to her. The bus is full of kids moving from seat to seat, trying to find kindred spirits or trying to escape them. Risa finds herself a window seat, with no one beside her.

This bus trip will be only the first leg of her journey. They explained to her—to all the kids after they boarded the bus—that they would first be taken to a central transportation center, where kids from dozens of state homes would be sorted onto buses that would take them to wherever they were going. Risa's next bus would be a bus full of Samsons. Wonderful. She had already considered the possibility of sneaking onto another bus, but the bar codes on their waistbands make that an impossibility. It's all perfectly organized, and foolproof. Still, Risa occupies her mind with all the scenarios that could lead to escape.

That's when she sees the commotion out of her window. It's farther up the road. Squad cars are on the other side of the freeway, and as the bus changes lanes, she sees two figures in the road: two kids racing across traffic. One kid has the other in a chokehold and is practically dragging him. And both of them have run right in front of the bus.

Unwind

Risa's head is slammed against the window as the bus suddenly pulls to the right to avoid the two kids. The bus fills with gasps and screams, and Risa is thrown forward, down the aisle, as the bus comes to a sudden, jarring stop. Her hip is hurt, but not bad. It's just a bruise. She gets up, quickly taking stock of the situation. The bus leans sideways. It's off the road, in a ditch. The windshield is smashed, and it's covered with blood. Lots of it.

Kids around her all check themselves. Like her, no one is badly hurt, although some are making more of a fuss than others. The chaperone tries to calm down one girl who's hysterical.

And in this chaos, Risa has a sudden realization.

This is not part of the plan.

The system might have a million contingencies for state wards trying to screw with things, but they don't have a plan of action for dealing with an accident. For the next few seconds, all bets are off.

Risa fixes her eyes on the front door of the bus, holds her breath, and races toward that door.

3 · Lev

The party is big, the party is expensive, the party has been planned for years.

There are at least two hundred people in the country club's grand ballroom. Lev got to pick the band, he got to choose the food—he even got to select the color of the linens: red and white—for the Cincinnati Reds—and his name, Levi Jedediah Calder, is stamped in gold on the silk napkins for people to take home as a remembrance.

This party is all for him. It's all *about* him. And he's determined to have the best time of his life.

The adults at the party are relatives, friends of the family, his parents' business associates—but at least eighty of the guests are Lev's friends. There are kids from school, from church, and from the various sports teams he's been on. Some of his friends had felt funny about coming of course.

"I don't know, Lev," they had said, "it's kind of weird. I mean, what kind of present am I supposed to bring?"

"You don't have to bring anything," Lev had told them. "There *are* no presents at a tithing party. Just come and have a good time. I know *I* will."

And he does.

He asks every girl he invited to dance, and not a single one turns him down. He even has people lift him up in a chair and dance with him around the room, because he had seen them do that at a Jewish friend's bar mitzvah. True, this is a very different kind of party, but it's also a celebration of him turning thirteen, so he deserves to get lifted up in a chair too, doesn't he?

Lev finds that the dinner is served far too soon. He looks at his watch to see that two hours have already gone by. How could it have gone so quickly?

Soon people grab the microphone and, holding up glasses of champagne, they start making toasts to Lev. His parents give a toast. His grandmother gives a toast. An uncle he doesn't even know gives a toast.

"To Lev: It's been a joy to watch you grow into the fine young man you are, and I know in my heart that you'll do great things for everyone you touch in this world."

It feels wonderful and weird for so many people to say so many kind things about him. It's all too much, but in some strange way it's not enough. There's got to be more. More food. More dancing. More time. They're already bringing out the birthday cake. Everyone knows the party ends once the