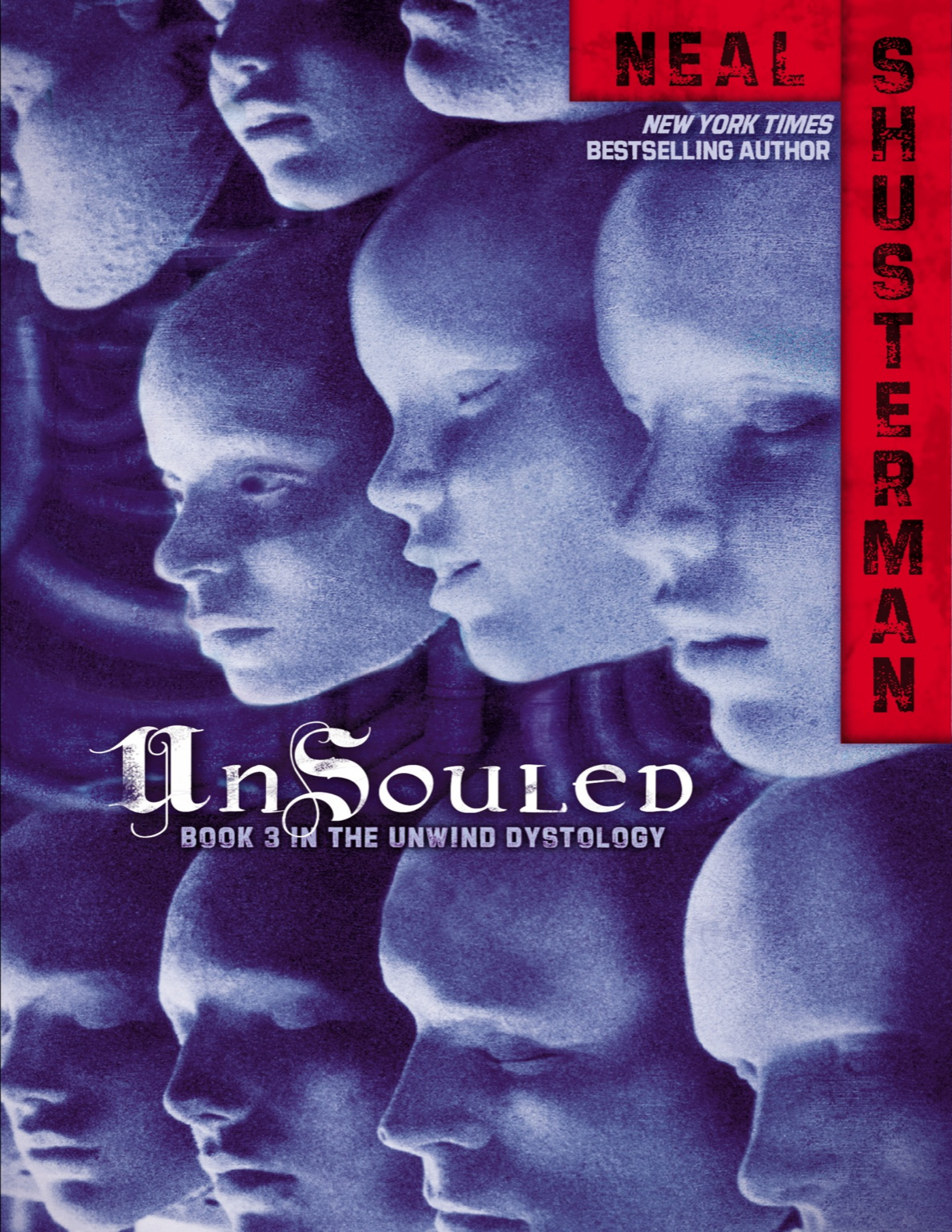




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UnSouled

BOOK 3 IN THE UNWIND DYSTOLOGY

*For Jan, Eric & Robby, Keith & Thresa, Chris, Patricia, Marcia, Andrea, Mark, and all of my
friends, who were there when I needed them most*

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Part One

Flightless

“Surely this new medical technology will free us rather than enslave us, for it is my firm belief that human compassion outweighs human greed. To that end, I hereby found Proactive Citizenry to be a stalwart watchdog over the ethical use of neurografting. I am confident that abuses will be the exception rather than the rule.”

—Janson Rheinschild

“I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

—J. Robert Oppenheimer

The Rheinschilds

"They signed it. The Heartland War is over."

Janson Rheinschild closes the front door, throws his coat on the sofa, and collapses into an armchair, as if all his joints have become internally undone. As if he's been unwound from the inside out.

"You can't be serious," Sonia says. "No one in their right mind would sign that hideous Unwind Accord."

He looks at her with a bitterness that isn't meant for her, but it has nowhere else to go. "Who," he asks, "has been in their right mind for the past nine years?"

She sits on the arm of the sofa as close to him as she can get and takes his hand. He grasps it with a sort of desperation, as if her hand is the only thing keeping him from the abyss.

"The new chairman of Proactive Citizenry, that narcissistic weasel Dandrich, called me before they made any official announcement, to let me know the accord was signed. He said that I should know first 'out of respect.' But you know as well as I do, he did it to gloat."

"There's no sense torturing yourself, Janson. It's not your fault, and there's nothing you can do about it."

He pulls his hand away from her and glares. "You're right—it's not my fault. It's our fault. We did this together, Sonia."

She reacts as if he's slapped her across the face. She doesn't just turn away from him. She gets up and moves away, beginning to pace the room. Good, thinks Janson. She needs to feel a little bit of what I feel.

"I did nothing wrong," she insists, "and neither did you!"

"We made it possible! Unwinding is based on our technology! Our research!"

"And it was stolen from us!"

Janson gets up from his chair, unable to bear even one sedentary moment. Sitting feels like acceptance. It feels like admitting failure. Next he'll be lost in that armchair with a drink in his hands, swirling the ice to hear it clink, feeling the alcohol numbing him into submission. No, that's not him. It will never be him.

There's some shouting in the street. He looks out the living room window to see some neighborhood kids being rowdy with one another. "Ferals," the news now calls them. Feral teens. "Something must be done about the feral teens this war has created," the politicians bleat from their legislative pens. Well, what did they expect when educational funding was diverted to the war? How could they not know public education would fail? With no schools, no jobs, and nothing but time on their hands, what did they think these kids would do other than make trouble?

The mob in the street—barely a mob at all, numbering only four or five—passes without incident. They've never had trouble at their house even though theirs is the only home on the street without window bars and an iron security gate. On the other hand, several of the security doors on the street have been vandalized. These kids, they may be lacking in education since the school closures, but they're not stupid. They see distrust all around them, and it makes them want to deliver their anger all the more. "How dare you distrust me?" their

violence says. *"You don't know me."* But people are too wrapped up in their own fearful security measures to hear it.

Sonia comes up behind him now, wrapping her arms around him. He wants to accept her comfort, but can't allow himself. He can't be consoled or find a sense of peace until he's undone this terrible wrong.

"Maybe it will be like the old Cold War," Sonia suggests.

"How do you figure?"

"They have this new weapon," she says, *"unwinding. Maybe just the threat of it is enough. Maybe they'll never actually use it."*

"A cold war implies a balance of power. What do these kids have if the authorities start unwinding them?"

Sonia sighs, finally seeing his point. *"Not a chance in hell."*

Now at last he can take some comfort that she understands. That he's not alone in seeing the murky depths to which this new law could lead.

"It still hasn't happened," she reminds him. *"Not a single feral teen has been unwound."*

"No," Janson says. *"Because the law doesn't take effect until midnight."*

And so they decide to spend the rest of their evening together, holding each other close like it's the last night of civilization. Because in a very real sense, it is.

1. Connor

It begins with roadkill—an act so random and ridiculous that it boggles the mind to consider the events to which it leads.

Connor should have pulled off the road to sleep—especially on a windy night like this. Certainly his reflexes behind the wheel would be much better in the morning, but the burning need to get himself and Lev to Ohio keeps pushing him harder each day.

Just one more exit on the interstate, he tells himself, and although he had resolved to stop once they crossed into Kansas, that marker came and went half an hour ago. Lev, who is good at talking sense into Connor, is no help tonight, slumped in the passenger seat, fast asleep.

It's half past midnight when the unfortunate creature leaps into Connor's headlights, and Connor has enough time only to register a brief impression of it as he jerks the wheel in a desperate attempt to avoid a collision.

That can't be what I think it is

Even though he swerves wide, the stupid thing bolts right into the car's path again as if it has a death wish.

The “borrowed” Charger slams into the creature, and it rolls over the hood like a boulder, shattering the windshield into a million bits of safety glass. Its body wedges in the windshield frame, with a twisted wiper blade embedded in

its slender neck. Connor loses control of the steering wheel, and the car leaves the asphalt, careening wildly through the roadside chaparral.

He screams and curses reflexively, as the creature, still clinging to life, rips at Connor's chest with its talons, tearing fabric and flesh, until finally Connor pulls enough of his wits together to slam on the brakes. The abominable creature dislodges from the windshield, launching forward as if shot from a cannon. The car keels like a sinking ship, comes to a sudden stop in a ditch, and finally the air bags deploy, like a faulty parachute opening upon impact.

The quiet that follows feels like the airless silence of space, but for the soulless moan of the wind.

Lev, who woke up the second they hit the thing, says nothing. He just gasps for the breath that was knocked out of him by the air bag. Connor has discovered Lev to be more of an opossum than a screamer. Panic makes him freeze.

Connor, still trying to process the previous ten seconds of his life, checks the wound in his chest. Beneath the tear in his shirt is a diagonal gash in his skin maybe six inches long. Oddly, he's relieved. It's not life-threatening, and flesh wounds can be dealt with. As Risa would have said when she ran the infirmary at the airplane graveyard, "Stitches are the least of all evils." This wound will take about a dozen. The biggest problem will be where a fugitive-presumed-dead AWOL can get medical attention.

Both he and Lev get out of the car and climb up from the ditch to examine their roadkill. Connor's legs are weak and wobbly, but he doesn't want to admit it to himself, so he concludes that he's merely shaky from the adrenaline rush. He looks at his arm—the one with the shark tattoo—and pumps the hand into a fist, coopting the brutal strength of that stolen arm for the rest of his body.

“Is that an ostrich?” asks Lev, as they look down on the huge dead bird.

“No,” snaps Connor, “it’s the freaking Road Runner.” Which was actually Connor’s first irrational thought when the giant bird had first loomed in his headlights. The ostrich, which had still been alive enough to rip into Connor’s chest a minute ago, is now very dead. Its torn neck is twisted at a severe angle, and its glassy eyes stare at them with zombielike intensity.

“That was some bird strike,” Lev says. He seems no longer fazed by it, just observational. Maybe because he wasn’t driving, or maybe because he’s seen things far worse than a roadkill raptor. Connor envies Lev’s calm in a crisis.

“Why the hell is there an ostrich on the interstate?” Connor asks. His answer comes with the rattle of a fence in a sudden gust of wind. Passing headlights illuminate the limb of an oak tree brought down by the wind. The bough was heavy enough to take out a piece of the chain-link fence. Long-necked shapes move behind the fence, and a few ostriches have already come through the breach, wandering toward the road. Hopefully they’ll have better luck than their comrade.

Connor has heard that ostrich farms were becoming more common as the price of other meat soared, but he’d never actually seen one. He idly wonders whether or not the bird’s death was suicide. Better roadkill than roast.

“They used to be dinosaurs, you know?” says Lev.

Connor takes a deep breath, only now realizing how shallowly he’s been breathing—partially from the pain, partially from the shock of it all. He shows Lev his cut. “As far as I’m concerned, they still are. The thing tried to unwind me.”

Lev grimaces. “You okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” Connor takes off his windbreaker, and Lev helps him fix it tightly around his back and across his chest as a makeshift tourniquet.

They look back at the car, which couldn’t be more totaled if it had been hit by a truck rather than a flightless bird.

“Well, you did plan to ditch the car in a day or two, right?” Lev asks.

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean in an actual ditch.”

The waitress who was kind enough to let them take her car said she wouldn’t report it missing for a few days. Connor can only hope she’ll be happy with the insurance money.

A few more cars pass on the interstate. The wreck is far enough off the road not to be noticed by someone who’s not looking. But there are some people whose job it is to look.

A car passes, slows a hundred yards up, and makes a U-turn across the dirt median. As it makes the turn, another car’s headlights illuminate its black-and-white coloring. A highway patrol car. Maybe the officer saw them—or maybe he just saw the ostriches, but either way, their options have suddenly been cut short.

“Run!” says Connor.

“He’ll see us!”

“Not until he shines his spotlight. Run!”

The patrol car pulls to a stop by the side of the road, and Lev doesn’t argue anymore. He turns to run, but Connor grabs his arm. “No, this way.”

“Toward the ostriches?”

“Trust me!”

The spotlight comes on, but it fixes on one of the birds nearing the road and not on them. Connor and Lev reach the breach in the fence. Birds scatter around them, creating more moving targets for the patrolman’s spotlight.

“Through the fence? Are you crazy?” whispers Lev.

“If we run along the fence, we’ll get caught. We have to disappear. This is the only way to do it.”

With Lev beside him, Conner pushes through the broken fence, and like so many other times in his life, he finds himself running blind into the dark.

FOLLOWING IS A PAID POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT

“Last year, I lost my husband of thirty-five years to a burglar. He just came in through the window. My husband tried to fight him off and was shot. I know I can never bring my husband back, but now there’s a proposition on the ballot that can finally make criminals truly pay for their crimes, flesh for flesh.

“By legalizing the unwinding of criminals, not only do we reduce prison overcrowding, but we can provide lifesaving tissues for transplant. Further, the Corporal Justice law will allow for a percentage of all proceeds from organ sales to go directly to victims of violent crime and their families.

“Vote yes on Proposition 73. United we stand; divided criminals fall.”

They can't stay at the ostrich ranch. Lights are on in the farmhouse; more than likely the owner has been notified of the problem on the interstate, and the place will be crawling with farmhands and police to wrangle the birds.

Down a dirt road, a half mile from the farm, they come across an abandoned trailer. There's a bed with a mattress, but it's so mildewed, they both decide their best bet is to sleep on the floor.

In spite of everything, Connor falls asleep in minutes. He has vague dreams of Risa, whom he hasn't seen in many months, and may never see again, as well as dreams of the battle at the airplane graveyard. The takedown operation that routed the place. In his dreams, Connor tries dozens of different tactics to save the hundreds of kids in his care from the Juvenile Authority. Nothing ever works. The outcome is always the same—the kids are all either killed or put in transport trucks bound for harvest camps. Even Connor's dreams are futile.

When he wakes, it's morning. Lev isn't there, and Connor's chest aches with every breath. He loosens the tourniquet. The bleeding has stopped, but the gash is red and still very raw. He puts it back on until he can find something other than his bloodstained Windbreaker to cover it.

He finds Lev outside, surveying their surroundings. There's a lot to survey. What at night appeared to be just a lone trailer is actually the central mansion of an entire rust-bucket estate. All around the trailer is a collection of large, useless objects. Rusted cars, kitchen appliances, even a school bus so old it retains none of its original color, not a single window intact.

“You have to wonder about the person who lived here,” Lev says.

As Connor looks around the veritable junkyard, it strikes him as disturbingly familiar. “I lived in the airplane junkyard for more than a year,” he reminds Lev. “Everyone’s got issues.”

“Graveyard, not junkyard,” Lev corrects.

“There’s a difference?”

“One is about a noble end. The other is about, well . . . garbage.”

Connor looks down and kicks a rusted can. “There was nothing noble about our end at the Graveyard.”

“Give it up,” says Lev. “Your self-pity is getting old.”

But it’s not self-pity—Lev should know that. It’s about the kids who were lost. Of the more than seven hundred kids in Connor’s care, over thirty died, and about four hundred were shipped off to harvest camps to be unwound. Maybe no one could have stopped it—but it happened on Connor’s watch. He has to bear the weight of it.

Connor takes a long look at Lev, who, for the moment, seems content to examine a wheelless, hoodless, roofless Cadillac so overgrown by weeds inside and out, it looks like a planter.

“It has a kind of beauty, you know?” says Lev. “Like how sunken ships eventually become part of a coral reef.”

“How can you be so stinking cheery?” Connor asks.

Lev's response is a toss of his overgrown blond hair and a grin that is intentionally cheerful. "Maybe because we're alive and we're free," Lev says. "Maybe because I singlehandedly saved your butt from a parts pirate."

Now Connor can't help but grin as well. "Stop it; your self-congratulation is getting old."

Connor can't blame Lev for being upbeat. His mission succeeded with flying colors. He walked right into the middle of a no-way-out battle and not only found a way out, but saved Connor from Nelson, a disgraced Juvey-cop with a grudge who was hell-bent on selling Connor on the black market.

"After what you did," Connor tells Lev, "Nelson will want your head on a stake."

"And other parts, I'm sure. But he's got to find me first."

Only now does Lev's optimism begin to rub off on Connor. Yes, their situation is dire, but for a dire situation, things could be worse. Being alive and free counts for something, and the fact that they have a destination—one that may just give them some crucial answers—adds a fair amount of hope into the mix.

Connor shifts his shoulder and the motion aggravates his wound—a reminder that it will have to be taken care of sooner rather than later. It's a complication they don't need. Not a single clinic or emergency room will do the work without asking questions. If he can just keep it clean and dressed until they get to Ohio, he knows Sonia will get him the care he needs.

That is, if she's still at the antique shop.

That is, if she's even alive.

“The last road sign before we flipped the bird said there was a town just ahead,” Connor tells Lev. “I’ll go jack a car and come back for you.”

“No,” says Lev. “I traveled across the country to find you—I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“You’re worse than a Juvey-cop.”

“Two sets of eyes are better than one,” says Lev.

“But if one of us gets caught, the other can make it to Ohio. If we’re together, then we risk both of us getting caught.”

Lev opens his mouth to say something, but closes it again. Connor’s logic is irrefutable.

“I don’t like this at all,” Lev says.

“Neither do I, but it’s our best option.”

“And what am I supposed to do while you’re gone?”

Connor offers him a crooked grin. “Make yourself part of the reef.”

• • •

It’s a long walk—especially for someone in pain. Before leaving, Connor had found some “clean” linens in the trailer, as well as a stash of cheap whiskey, perfect for cleaning a wound. Painful, too, but as all the world’s sports coaches say, “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” Connor always hated coaches. Once the stinging had stopped, he created a more secure dressing, which he now

wears under a faded flannel shirt that belonged to the trailer's final resident. It's too warm a shirt for such hot weather, but it was the best he could do.

Now, sweating from the heat and aching from the wound, Connor counts his steps along the dirt road until it becomes paved. He has yet to see a passing car, but that's fine. The fewer eyes that see him, the better. Safety in solitude.

Connor also doesn't know what to expect ahead of him in this small town. When it comes to cities and suburbs, Connor has found that most are fairly identical—only the geography changes. Rural areas, however, vary greatly. Some small towns are places you'd want to come from and eventually go back to: warm, inviting communities that breathe out Americana the way rain forests breathe out oxygen. And then there are towns like Heartsdale, Kansas.

This is the place where fun came to die.

It's clear to Connor that Heartsdale is economically depressed, which is not that uncommon. All it takes these days for a town to give up the ghost is for a major factory to shut down or pick up its skirt and do an international waltz for cheaper labor. Heartsdale, however, isn't just depressed; it's ugly in a fundamental way and on more than one level.

The main drag is full of low, flat-faced architecture, all in shades of beige. Although there are farms in abundance that Connor had passed, thriving and green in the July sun, the town center has no trees, no green growth except for weeds between pavement cracks. There's an uninviting church built out of institutional mustard-colored bricks. The sermon message on the billboard reads WHO WILL ATONE FOR YOUR SINS? B NGO ON FR DAYS.

The town's most attractive building is a new three-story parking garage, but it isn't open for business. The reason, Connor realizes, is the empty lot next to it. There's a billboard for a modern office building to be erected there, which may one day need three levels of parking, but the forlorn state of the lot betrays the fact that the office complex has been in the planning stages for perhaps a decade and will probably never be built.

The place isn't exactly a ghost town—Connor sees plenty of people going about their morning business, but he has an urge to ask them, “Why bother? What's the point?” The problem with a town like this is that anyone with even a rudimentary survival instinct managed to get out long ago—perhaps finding themselves one of those other small towns in which to live. The kind with the heart that Heartsdale lacks. Left behind are the souls that kind of got stuck to the bottom of the pan.

Connor comes to a supermarket. A Publix. Its blacktop parking lot shimmers with waves of heat. If he's going to jack a car, there are plenty here to choose from, but they're all out in the open, so he can't do it without the risk of being exposed. Besides, his hope is to find a long-term parking lot where a stolen car might not be missed for a day or more. Even if he manages to get away with a car from this lot, it will be reported stolen within the hour. But who is he kidding? A long-term parking lot implies the owners of the vehicles parked there had somewhere to go. The folks in Heartsdale don't seem to be going anywhere.

It's hunger, however, that pulls him toward the market, and he realizes he hasn't eaten in half a day. With twenty-some-odd dollars in his pocket, he reasons that there's nothing wrong with buying something to eat. It's easy to remain anonymous in a market for a whole of five minutes.

As the automatic door slides open, he's hit with a blast of cold air that is at first refreshing, then makes his sweaty clothes cold against his body. The

market is brightly lit and filled with shoppers moving slowly through the aisles, probably here to get out of the heat as much as they are to shop.

Connor grabs premade sandwiches and cans of soda for himself and for Lev, then goes to the self-checkout, only to find that it's closed. No way to avoid human contact today. He chooses a checker who looks disinterested and unobservant. He seems a year or two older than Connor. Skinny, with straggly black hair and a baby-fuzz mustache that just isn't working. He grabs Connor's items and runs them across the scanner.

"Will that be it for you?" the checker asks absently.

"Yeah."

"Did you find everything all right?"

"Yeah, no problem."

He glances once at Connor. It seems he holds Connor's gaze a moment too long, but maybe he's been instructed to make eye contact with customers, as well as ask his standard rote questions.

"You need help out with that?"

"I think I can handle it."

"No worries, man. Keep cool. It's a scorcher out there."

Connor leaves without further incident. He's back out in the heat and halfway across the parking lot, when he hears—

"Hey, wait up!"