

Part Seven

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# Consciousness

"A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us . . . Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe."

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

## 66 · Connor

Connor regains consciousness with nothing but hazy confusion where his thoughts ought to be. His face aches, and he can see out of only one eye. He feels pressure over his other eye.

He's in a white room. There's a window through which he can see daylight. This is unquestionably a hospital room, and that pressure over his eye must be a bandage. He tries to lift his right arm but there's an ache in his shoulder, so he decides it's not worth the effort just yet.

Only now does he begin to piece together the events that landed him here. He was about to be unwound. There was an explosion. There was a revolt. Then Lev was standing over him. That's all he can remember.

A nurse comes into the room. "So you're finally awake! How are you feeling?"

"Good," he says, his voice little more than a croak. He clears his throat. "How long?"

"You've been in a medically induced coma for a little over two weeks," says the nurse.

Two weeks? With a life that has been lived day to day for so long, two weeks sounds like an eternity. And Risa . . . what about Risa? "There was a girl," he says. "She was on the roof of the Chop—of the harvest clinic. Does anyone know what happened to her?"

The nurse's expression doesn't give anything away. "That can all be sorted out later."

"But—"

"No buts. Right now you need time to heal—and I have to

say, you're doing better than anyone expected, Mr. Mullard."

His first thought is that he hasn't heard her right. He shifts uncomfortably. "Excuse me?"

She fluffs his pillows. "Just relax now, Mr. Mullard. Let us handle everything."

His second thought is that he's been unwound after all. He's been unwound, and somehow, someone got his entire brain. He's inside someone else now. But as he thinks about it, he knows that can't be it. His voice still sounds like his voice. When he rubs his tongue against his teeth, those teeth are still the ones he remembers.

"My name is Connor," he tells her. "Connor Lassiter."

The nurse studies him with an expression that's kind, but calculated—almost disturbingly so. "Well," she says, "as it so happens, an ID with the picture charred off was found in the wreckage. It belonged to a nineteen-year-old guard by the name of Elvis Mullard. With all the confusion after the blast there really was no telling who was who, and many of us agreed that it would be a shame to let that ID go to waste, don't you agree?" She reaches over and adjusts the angle of Connor's bed until he's sitting up more comfortably. "Now tell me," she asks, "What was your name again?"

Connor gets it. He closes his eye, takes a deep breath, and opens it again. "Do I have a middle name?"

The nurse checks the chart. "Robert."

"Then my name is E. Robert Mullard."

The nurse smiles and holds out her hand to shake his. "A pleasure to meet you, Robert."

As a reflex, Connor reaches out his right hand toward hers; and gets that dull ache in his shoulder again.

"Sorry," says the nurse. "My fault." She shakes his left hand instead. "Your shoulder will feel a bit sore until the graft is completely healed."

"What did you just say?"

The nurse sighs. "Me and my big mouth. The doctors always want to be the ones to tell you, but the cat's out of the bag now, isn't it? Well, the bad news is that we weren't able to save your arm, or your right eye. The good news is that, as E. Robert Mullard, you qualified for emergency transplants. I've seen the eye—don't worry, it's a decent match. As for the arm, well, the new one is a little more muscular than your left one, but some good physical therapy can even that out in no time."

Connor lets it sink in, playing it over in his mind. *Eye. Arm. Physical therapy.*

"I know it's a lot to get used to," says the nurse.

For the first time Connor looks at his new hand. There are bandages padding his shoulder, and his arm is in a sling. He flexes the fingers. They flex. He twists his wrist. It twists. The fingernails need clipping, and the knuckles are thicker than his own. He runs his thumb across the pads of his fingertips. The sense of touch is just as it ever was. Then he rotates his wrist a bit farther, and stops. He feels a wave of panic surge through him, one that resolves into a knot deep in his gut.

The nurse grins as she looks at the arm. "Parts often come with their own personalities," she says. "Nothing to worry about. You must be hungry. I'll get you some lunch."

"Yeah," says Connor. "Lunch. That's good."

She leaves him alone with the arm. His arm. An arm that bears the unmistakable tattoo of a tiger shark.

## 67 · Risa

Risa's life as she knew it ended the day the clappers blew up the Chop Shop—and everyone eventually did learn that it was clappers, not Connor. The evidence was indisputable.

Especially after the confession of the clapper who survived.

Unlike Connor, Risa never lost consciousness. Even though she was pinned beneath a steel I beam, she stayed wide awake. As she lay there in the wreckage, some of the pain she felt when the I beam came down on her was gone. She didn't know whether that was a good sign, or bad. Dalton was in lots of pain though. He was terrified. Risa calmed him down. She talked to him, telling him it was all right—that everything would be fine. She kept telling him that right up until the moment he died. The guitar player had been luckier. He was able to wrestle himself out from under the debris, but he couldn't free Risa, so he left, promising her he'd send back help. He must have kept his promise, because help finally did come. It took three people to lift the beam, but only one to carry her out.

Now she rests in a hospital room, trussed up in a contraption that looks more like a torture device than a bed. She is riddled with steel pins like a human voodoo doll. The pins are held in precise place by rigid scaffolding. She can see her toes, but she can't feel them. From now on, seeing them will have to be enough.

"You have a visitor."

A nurse stands at the door, and when she steps aside, Connor is standing in the doorway. He's bruised and bandaged, but very much alive. Her eyes instantly fill with tears, but she knows she can't let herself sob. It still hurts too much to sob. "I knew they were lying," she says. "They said you died in the explosion—that you were trapped in the building—but I saw you outside. I knew they were lying."

"I probably would have died," Connor said, "but Lev stopped the bleeding. He saved me."

"He saved me, too," Risa tells him. "He carried me out of the building."

Connor smiles. "Not bad for a lousy little tithe."

By the look on his face, Risa can tell he doesn't know that Lev was one of the clappers—the one who didn't go off. She decides not to tell him. It's still all over the news; he'll know soon enough.

Connor tells her of his coma, and about his new identity. Risa tells him how few of Happy Jack's AWOLs have been caught—how the kids stormed the gates and escaped. She glances at his sling as they speak. The fingers sticking out of that arm sling are definitely not Connor's. She knows what must have happened, and she can tell he's self-conscious about it.

"So, what do they say?" Connor asks. "About your injuries, I mean. You're going to be okay, right?"

Risa considers how she might tell him, then just decides to be quick about it. "They tell me I'm paralyzed from the waist down."

Connor waits for more, but that's all she has to give him. "Well . . . that's not so bad, right? They can fix that—they're always fixing that."

"Yes," says Risa. "They fix it by replacing a severed spine with the spine of an Unwind. That's why I refused the operation."

He looks at her in disbelief, and she in turn points at his arm. "You would have done the same thing if they'd given you a choice. Well, I had a choice, and I made it."

"I'm so sorry, Risa."

"Don't be!" The one thing she doesn't want from Connor is pity. "They can't unwind me now—there are laws against unwinding the disabled—but if I got the operation, they'd unwind me the moment I was healed. This way I get to stay whole." She smiles at him triumphantly. "So you're not the only one who beat the system!"

He smiles at her and rolls his bandaged shoulder. The sling shifts, exposing more of his new arm—enough to reveal the tattoo. He tries to hide it, but it's too late. She sees it. She *knows* it. And when she meets Connor's eye, he looks away in shame.

"Connor . . . ?"

"I promise," he says. "I promise I will never touch you with this hand."

Risa knows this is a crucial moment for both of them. That arm—the same one that held her back against a bathroom wall. How could she look at it now with anything but disgust? Those fingers that threatened unspeakable things. How can they make her feel anything but revulsion? But when she looks at Connor, all that fades away. There's only him.

"Let me see it," she says.

Connor hesitates, so she reaches out and gently slips it from the sling. "Does it hurt?"

"A little."

She brushes her fingers across the back of his hand. "Can you feel that?"

Connor nods.

Then she gently lifts the hand to her face, pressing the palm to her cheek. She holds it there for a moment, then lets go, letting Connor take over. He moves his hand across her cheek, wiping away a tear with his finger. He softly strokes her neck, and she closes her eyes. She feels as he moves his fingertips across her lips before he takes his hand away. Risa opens her eyes and takes the hand in hers, clasping it tightly.

"I *know* this is your hand now," she tells him. "Roland would never have touched me like that." Connor smiles, and Risa takes a moment to look down at the shark on his wrist. It holds no fear for her now, because the shark has been tamed by the soul of a boy. No—the soul of a man.

## 68 · Lev

Not far away, in a high-security federal detention center, Levi Jedediah Calder is held in a cell designed for his very specific needs. The cell is padded. There is a steel blast door three inches thick. The room is kept at a constant forty-five degrees Fahrenheit to keep Lev's body temperature from rising too high. Lev is not cold, though—in fact he's hot. He's hot because he's wrapped in layer after layer of fire-resistant insulation. He looks like a mummy, suspended in midair—but unlike a mummy, his hands aren't crossed over his chest, they're held out to each side and lashed to a crossbeam so he cannot bring his hands together. The way Lev sees it, they didn't know whether to crucify him or mummify him, so they did both. This way, he can't clap, he can't fall, he can't inadvertently detonate himself—and if for some reason he does, the cell is designed to withstand the blast.

They've given him four transfusions. They won't tell him how many more he'll need until the explosive is out of his system. They won't tell him anything. The federal agents who come visit him are only interested in what he can tell them. They've given him a lawyer who talks about insanity like it's a good thing. Lev keeps telling him that he isn't insane, although he's not even sure himself anymore.

The door to his cell opens. He expects another interrogation, but his visitor is someone new. It takes a moment for Lev to recognize him—mainly because he's not wearing his modest pastor's vestments. He wears jeans and a striped buttondown shirt.

"Good morning, Lev."

"Pastor Dan?"

The door slams closed behind him, but it doesn't echo.

The soft walls absorb the sound. Pastor Dan rubs his arms against the cold. They should have told him to bring a jacket.

"Are they treating you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," says Lev. "The good thing about being explosive is that no one can beat you."

Pastor Dan gives an obligatory chuckle, then awkwardness takes over. He forces himself to meet Lev's eyes. "I understand they'll only keep you wrapped up like this for a few weeks, until you're out of the woods."

Lev wonders which particular woods he means. Certainly his life will now be one dark forest within another, within another. Lev doesn't even know why the pastor is here, or what he hopes to prove. Should Lev be happy to see him, or should he be mad? This is the man who always told him that tithing was a holy thing from the time he was a small boy—and then told him to run from it. Is Pastor Dan here to reprimand him? To congratulate him? Did Lev's parents send him because he's so untouchable now, they won't come themselves? Or maybe Lev's about to be executed and he's here to give last rites.

"Why don't you just get it over with?" Lev says.

"Get what over with?"

"Whatever you're here to do. Do it, and go."

There are no chairs in the room, so Pastor Dan leans back against the padded wall. "How much have they told you about what's going on out there?"

"All I know is what goes on in here. Which isn't much."

Pastor Dan sighs, rubs his eyes, and takes his time to consider where to begin. "First of all, do you know a boy by the name of Cyrus Finch?"

The mention of his name makes Lev begin to panic. Lev knew his background would be checked and rechecked. That's what happens to clappers—their whole life becomes pages pasted on a wall to be examined, and the people in their lives

become suspects. Of course, that usually happens after the clapper has applauded his way into the next world.

"CyFi had nothing to do with this!" says Lev. "Nothing at all. They can't pull him into this!"

"Calm down. He's fine. It just so happens that he's come forward and is making a big stink—and since he knew you, people are listening."

"A stink about me?"

"About unwinding," says Pastor Dan, for the first time moving closer to Lev. "What happened at Happy Jack Harvest Camp—it got a whole lot of people talking, people who had just been burying their heads in the sand. There have been protests in Washington against unwinding—Cyrus even testified before Congress."

Lev tries to imagine CyFi in front of a congressional committee, trash-talking them in prewar sitcom UMBER. The thought of it makes Lev smile. It's the first time he's smiled in a long time.

"There's talk that they might even lower the legal age of adulthood from eighteen to seventeen. That'll save a full fifth of all the kids marked for unwinding."

"That's good," says Lev.

Pastor Dan reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. "I wasn't going to show you this, but I think you need to see it. I think you need to understand where things have gone."

It's the cover of a magazine.

Lev's on it.

Not just on it, Lev is the cover. It's his seventh-grade baseball picture—mitt in hand, smiling at the camera. The headline reads, WHY, LEV, WHY? In all the time he's had here alone to think and rethink his actions, it never occurred to him that the outside world had been doing the same thing. He doesn't

want this attention, but now he's apparently on a first-name basis with the world.

"You've been on the cover of just about every magazine."

He didn't need to know that. He hopes that Pastor Dan doesn't have a whole collection of them in his pocket. "So what," Lev says, trying to act as if it doesn't matter. "Clappers always make the news."

"Their *actions* make the news—the destruction they've caused—but nobody ever cares who a clapper is. To the public all clappers are the same. But you're different from those others, Lev. You're a clapper who didn't clap."

"I wanted to."

"If you wanted to, you would have. But instead you ran into the wreckage and pulled out four people."

"Three."

"Three—but you probably would have gone in for more if you could have. The other tithes, they all stayed back. They protected their own precious parts. But you basically led that rescue effort, because there were 'terribles' who followed you in to bring out survivors."

Lev remembers that. Even as the mob was crashing down the gate, there were dozens of Unwinds going back into the wreckage with him. And Pastor Dan is right—Lev would have kept going back in, but then it occurred to him that one false move would have set him off and brought the rest of the Chop Shop down around them. So he went back out to the red carpet and sat with Risa and Connor until ambulances took them away. Then he stood in the midst of the chaos and confessed to being a clapper. He confessed over and over again to anyone willing to listen, until finally a police officer kindly offered to arrest him. The officer was afraid to even handcuff Lev for fear of detonating him, but that was all right—he had no intention of resisting arrest.

"What you did, Lev—it confused people. No one knows whether you're a monster or a hero."

Lev thinks about that. "Is there a third choice?"

Pastor Dan doesn't answer him. Maybe he doesn't know the answer. "I have to believe that things happen for a reason. Your kidnapping, your becoming a clapper, your refusing to clap"—he glances at the magazine cover in his hand—"it's all led to this. For years, Unwinds were just faceless kids that no one wanted—but now you've put a face on unwinding."

"Can they put my face on someone else?"

Pastor Dan chuckles again, and this time it's not as forced as before. He looks at Lev like he's just a kid, and not something inhuman. It makes him feel, if only for a moment, like a normal thirteen-year-old. It's a strange feeling, because even in his old life he never really was a normal kid. Tithes never are.

"So, what happens now?" Lev asks.

"The way I understand it, they'll clear the worst of the explosive out of your bloodstream in a few weeks. You'll still be volatile, but not as bad as before. You can clap all you want and you won't explode—but I wouldn't play any contact sports for a while."

"And then they'll unwind me?"

Pastor Dan shakes his head. "They won't unwind a clapper—that stuff never entirely gets out of your system. I've been talking to your lawyer. He has a feeling they're going to offer you a deal—after all, you did help them catch that group who gave you the transfusion to begin with. Those people who used you, they'll get what they deserve. But the courts are likely to see you as a victim."

"I knew what I was doing," Lev tells him.

"Then tell me why you did it."

Lev opens his mouth to speak but he can't put it into words. Anger. Betrayal. Fury at a universe pretending to be fair

and just. But was that really a reason? Was that justification?

"You may be responsible for your actions," Pastor Dan says, "but it's not your fault you weren't emotionally prepared for life out there in the real world. That was *my* fault—and the fault of everyone who raised you to be a tithe. We're as guilty as the people who pumped that poison into your blood." He looks away in shame, curbing his own growing anger, but Lev can tell it's not anger aimed at him. He takes a deep breath and continues. "The way the winds are blowing, you'll probably serve a few years of juvenile detention, then a few more years of house arrest."

Lev knows he should be relieved by this, but the feeling is slow in coming. He considers the idea of house arrest. "Whose house?" he asks.

He can tell Pastor Dan reads everything between the lines of that question. "You have to understand, Lev, your parents are the kind of people who can't bend without breaking."

"Whose house?"

Pastor Dan sighs. "When your parents signed the unwind order, you became a ward of the state. After what happened at the harvest camp, the state offered to return custody to your parents, but they refused it. I'm sorry."

Lev is not surprised. He's horrified, but not surprised. Thoughts of his parents bring up the old feelings that drove him crazy enough to become a clapper. But now he finds that sense of despair is no longer bottomless. "So is my last name 'Ward' now?"

"Not necessarily. Your brother Marcus is petitioning for guardianship. If he gets it, you'll be in his care whenever they let you go. So you'll still be a Calder . . . that is, if you want to be."

Lev nods his approval, thinking back to his tithing party and how Marcus was the only one to stand up for him. Lev

hadn't understood it at the time. "My parents disowned Marcus, too." At least he knows he'll be in good company.

Pastor Dan straightens out his shirt and shivers a bit from the cold. He doesn't really look like himself today. This is the first time Lev has seen him without his pastor's clothes. "Why are you dressed like that, anyway?"

He takes a moment before he answers. "I resigned my position. I left the church."

The thought of Pastor Dan being anything but Pastor Dan throws Lev for a loop. "You . . . you lost your faith?"

"No," he says, "just my convictions. I still very much believe in God—just not a god who condones human tithing."

Lev begins to feel himself choking up with an unexpected flood of feeling, all the emotions that had been building up throughout their talk—throughout the weeks—arriving all at once, like a sonic boom. "I never knew that was a choice."

All his life there was only one thing Lev was allowed to believe. It had surrounded him, cocooned him, constricted him with the same stifling softness as the layers of insulation around him now. For the first time in his life, Lev feels those bonds around his soul begin to loosen.

"You think maybe I can believe in that God, too?"

## 69 · Unwinds

There's a sprawling ranch in west Texas.

The money to build it came from oil that had long since dried up, but the money remained and multiplied. Now there's a whole compound, an oasis as green as a golf course in the middle of the flat, wild plains. This is where Harlan Dunfee grew to the age of sixteen, finding trouble along the way. He was arrested for disorderly behavior twice in Odessa, but his



father, a big-shot admiral, got him off both times. The third time, his parents came up with a different solution.

Today is Harlan Dunfee's twenty-sixth birthday. He's having a party. Of sorts.

There are hundreds of guests at Harlan's party. One of them is a boy by the name of Zachary, though his friends know him as Emby. He's been living here at the ranch for some time now, waiting for this day. He has Harlan's right lung. Today, he gives it back to Harlan.

At the same time, six hundred miles to the west a wide-bodied jet lands in an airplane graveyard. The jet is full of crates, and each crate contains four Unwinds. As the crates are opened, a teenage boy peers out of one, not sure what to expect. He's faced by a flashlight, and when the flashlight lowers he can see that it's not an adult who opened the crate but another kid. He wears khaki clothes and he smiles at them, showing braces on a set of teeth that don't seem to need them. "Hi, my name's Hayden, and I'll be your rescuer today," he announces. "Is everyone safe and sound in there?"

"We're fine," says the young Unwind. "Where are we?"

"Purgatory," says Hayden. "Also known as Arizona."

The young Unwind steps out of the crate, terrified of what might be in store for him. He stands in the processional of kids being herded along, and, against Hayden's warning, bangs his head on the door of the cargo hold as he steps out. The harsh light of day and the blistering heat assault him as he walks down a ramp to the ground. He can tell this isn't an airport, and yet there are planes everywhere.

In the distance a golf cart rolls toward them, kicking up a plume of red dust. The crowd falls silent as it approaches. As it comes to a stop, the driver steps out. He's a man with serious

scars over half of his face. The man speaks quietly for a moment with Hayden, then addresses the crowd.

It's then that the young Unwind realizes this is not a man but just another kid, one not much older than himself. Perhaps it's the scars on his face that make him look older—or maybe it's just the way he carries himself.

"Let me be the first to welcome you all to the Graveyard," he says. "Officially, my name is E. Robert Mullard. . . ." He smiles. "But everyone calls me Connor."

The Admiral never returned to the Graveyard. His health would not allow it. Instead, he's at his family's Texas ranch, in the care of a wife who left him years before. Although he's weak and can't get around well anymore, he hasn't changed much. "The doctors say only 25 percent of my heart is still alive," he tells anyone who asks. "It'll do."

What has kept him alive more than anything else is the prospect of Harlan's big party. You could say that those terrifying stories about "Humphrey Dunfee" are true. At last, all his parts have been found, all the recipients have been gathered. But there will be no surgeries here—in spite of the rumors, rebuilding Harlan piece by piece was never the plan. But the Dunfees *are* putting their son together in the only meaningful way they can.

He's here even now, as the Admiral and his wife step into their garden. He's in the voices of their many party guests, talking and laughing. There are men and women of all ages. Each wears a name tag, but there are no names on those tags. Today, names are unimportant.

RIGHT HAND reads the sticker on one young man's lapel. He couldn't be any older than twenty-five.

"Let me see," says the Admiral.

The man holds out his hand. The Admiral looks it over until he finds a scar between the thumb and forefinger. "I took Harlan fishing when he was nine. He got that scar trying to gut a trout."

And then there's a voice from behind him—another man, a little bit older than the first.

"I remember!" he says. The Admiral smiles. Perhaps the memories are spread out, but they're here—every one of them.

He catches that boy who insists on calling himself Emby milling around at the edge of the garden by himself, wheezing less now that he's finally been put on the proper asthma medication. "What are you doing over here?" the Admiral asks. "You should be over with the others."

"I don't know anybody."

"Yes, you do," says the Admiral. "You just don't realize it yet." And he leads Emby toward the crowd.

Meanwhile, in the airplane graveyard, Connor speaks to the new arrivals as they stand outside the jet that brought them here. Connor is amazed that they listen to him. He's amazed that he actually commands their respect. He'll never get used to that.

"You're all here because you were marked for unwinding but managed to escape, and, thanks to the efforts of many people, you've found your way here. This will be your home until you turn seventeen and become a legal adult. That's the good news. The bad news is that they know all about us. They know where we are and what we're doing. They let us stay here because they don't see us as a threat."

And then Connor smiles.

"Well, we're going to change that."

As Connor talks, he makes eye contact with every one of them, making sure he remembers each of their faces. Making

sure each of them feels recognized. Unique. Important.

"Some of you have been through enough and just want to survive to seventeen," he tells them. "I don't blame you. But I know that some of you are ready to risk everything to end unwinding once and for all."

"Yeah," screams a kid from the back, and pumping his fist in the air he begins chanting, "Happy Jack! Happy Jack!" A few kids join in, until everyone realizes this is not what Connor wants. The chants quickly die down.

"We will not be blowing up chop shops," he says. "We're not going to feed into their image of us as violent kids who are better off unwound. We will *think* before we act—and that's going to make it difficult for them. We'll infiltrate harvest camps and unite Unwinds across the country. We'll free kids from buses, before they even arrive. We will have a voice, and we will use it. We will make ourselves heard." Now the crowd can't hold back their cheers, and this time Connor allows it. These kids have been beaten down by life, but there's an energy now in the Graveyard that's beginning to fill each and every one of them. Connor remembers that feeling. He had it when he first arrived here.

"I don't know what happens to our consciousness when we're unwound," says Connor. "I don't even know when that consciousness starts. But I do know this." He pauses to make sure all of them are listening. "We have a right to our lives!"

The kids go wild.

"We have a right to choose what happens to our bodies!"

The cheers reach fever pitch.

"We deserve a world where both those things are possible—and it's our job to help make that world."

Meanwhile, excitement is also building at the Dunfee ranch. The buzz of conversations around the garden grows to a roar

as more and more people connect. Emby shares his experiences with a girl who has the left match to his right lung. A woman talks about a movie she never saw, with a man who remembers the friends he never saw it with. And as the Admiral and his wife watch, something amazing happens.

The conversations begin to converge!

Like water vapor crystalizing into the magnificent, unique form of a snowflake, the babble of voices coalesces into a single conversation.

"Look over there! He fell off that wall when he was—"

"—six! Yes—I remember!"

"He had to wear a wrist brace for months."

"The wrist still hurts when it rains."

"He shouldn't have climbed the wall."

"I had to—I was being chased by a bull."

"I was so scared!"

"The flowers in that field—do you smell them?"

"They remind me of that one summer—"

"—when my asthma wasn't so bad—"

"—and I felt like I could do anything."

"Anything!"

"And the world was just waiting for me!"

The Admiral grips his wife's arm. Neither can hold back their tears—not tears of sorrow but of awe. If the rest of his heart were to stop now, in this moment, the Admiral would die more content than any man on Earth.

He looks at the crowd and says weakly, "H-Harlan?"

Every eye in the garden turns toward him. A man raises his hand to his throat, touching it gently, and says in a voice that is most definitely Harlan Dunfee's, just a bit older, "Dad?"

The Admiral is so overwhelmed by emotion he cannot speak, and so his wife looks at the man before her, at the

## Unwind

people beside her, at the crowd all around her, and she says:

"Welcome home."

Six hundred miles away, in the airplane graveyard, a girl plays a grand piano sheltered beneath the wing of a battered jet that was once Air Force One. She plays with a rare sort of joy in defiance of her wheelchair, and her sonata lifts the spirits of all the new arrivals. She smiles at them as they go by and continues to play, making it clear that this furnace of a place, full of planes that cannot fly, is more than it seems. It is a womb of redemption for every Unwind, and for all those who fought the Heartland War and lost—which was everybody.

Connor lets Risa's music fill him as he watches the new arrivals being greeted by the thousands of kids already here. The sun has begun to set, taking the edge off the heat, and the rows of jets at this time of day create pleasing patterns of shadow on the hard earth. Connor has to smile. Even a place as harsh as this can be beautiful in a certain light.

Connor takes it all in—the music, the voices, the desert, and the sky. He has his work cut out for him, changing the world and all, but things are already in motion; all he has to do is keep up the momentum. And he doesn't have to do it alone. He has Risa, Hayden, and every Unwind here. Connor takes a deep breath and releases it along with his tension. At last, he allows himself the wonderful luxury of hope.