

CHAPTER ONE

POP QUIZ

The referee blows her whistle and points to the Joseph Johnston High School goal. It's a foul, just outside the penalty area. Hastily, several defenders form a wall. Liam Larsen, the goalkeeper, shouts directions.

"Block that kick, block that kick," the Johnston cheerleaders yell.

Melanie Montgomery, wearing her purple and gold cheerleader outfit, catches the eye of one of the boys on the squad. He nods as she runs toward him and then leaps, placing her foot into his waiting hands. Melanie's world dissolves into a swirl of color. She comes to earth with a thud.

"Nice landing," the boy says.

"Thanks." Melanie glances at the scoreboard and sees that despite their efforts, another goal has been added to the visitor's tally. "I hate these German schools," she pouts.

"Yeah, they act like they invented the game," one of the other cheerleaders exclaims.

There's no injury time added in high school soccer, so the match comes to a screeching halt when the clock winds down and the buzzer goes off. Most players line up to shake hands, but three of the Germans laugh and walk off. Their coach gives a Hitler salute to the Johnston stands. A chorus of boos greets his gesture.

"Everyone on the line," Sam Gorman, the Johnston soccer coach, shouts. He crosses his arms and glares at his players threateningly until the whole team is on the touchline. "All right, Ryan," he says to the team captain, "cool down."

"High knees," Ryan Walters shouts, and the JHS Rebels half-heartedly begin their after-game cool-down routine. Afterward, they form a circle to stretch.

"Why didn't you let Gerry take the penalty kick?" one of the boys asks Ryan. "She never misses."

"Sean's the one who got fouled, so he took it," Ryan answers. "Now grab a partner and do your hamstrings. One, two, three..."

"It was a good try, Sean," Liam grunts. He's standing on one foot with his hand on Ryan's shoulder. Liam uses his free hand to bend his other leg so the heel touches the back of his leg.

"Thanks," Sean smiles. "Their keeper just guessed right."

Coach Gorman approaches and hollers at the team. "If you don't all count together, we're going to start at the beginning. Only this time, I'll take the lead."

"Four," the players all shout in unison, "five, six, seven..." None of them wants to have one of Coach's lengthy stretching sessions.

Once the final stretch has been completed, Gorman calls the team together. Fortunately, he's not given to the lengthy post-game analysis many soccer coaches inflict on their teams. He

says a few words of encouragement and cuts the players loose. Soon, they're drifting across the field toward a stadium exit.

The cheerleaders have gotten a head start, so Ryan must run, carrying his bag, to catch up with Melanie. "Let's go," he says.

"Where to?"

"Jaybird's, I'm starved."

"It'll be packed."

"So what?"

Melanie and Ryan join the throng leaving the stadium. Gray-clad Confederate soldiers discourage those who try to shortcut past the cameras. "I forget where we parked," Ryan says once they're outside.

Melanie looks out at the sea of cars. She can't remember either. From the corner of her eye, she spots a middle-aged Black woman rushing over. "Oh no," she says, but it's too late.

"Law, Mel, what'd I tell you 'bout those backflips?" the woman says.

"Sorry, Versa, didn't think you'd see it from over yonder."

"See? Why, the whole town got a look at those purple bloomers."

"They aren't underwear; they're part of the uniform. I've told you."

Versa shakes her head disapprovingly. "Girl, you're goin' to put me in an early grave."

"You'd better hurry," Ryan tells Versa. He points to the slave entrance to the stadium, where several buses are rapidly filling. "You don't want to walk back to the quarter, do you?"

Versa gives a start, then turns to go. "We'll sort you out in the morning," she says over her shoulder.

By the time Melanie and Ryan arrive at Jaybird's, a line of cars is waiting to get into the drive-in. The two teenagers listen to the radio, and Melanie gets lost in her phone as Ryan inches his pickup along. Eventually, they reach the head of the line but must wait until a sports car backs out of a place and rumbles off. "Hallelujah," Melanie sighs as Ryan slides them into the spot. She puts her phone down and looks out her window at the menu.

Moments later, a slave girl roller-skates over. "Hi, Ryan," she says. "Let's see if I can guess. Two double cheeseburgers, a large chili fries, one cherry limeade slush, and a pineapple milkshake."

Ryan laughs and looks at Melanie. "We're in a rut."

"Then let's live dangerously and get onion rings instead of fries."

"No way," Ryan laughs. He turns back to the window. "Don't pay any attention to her, Mish. Get us what we always have."

Melanie picks up her phone again, and now Ryan takes his out. Soon, he's texting with some friends on the team, trying to cheer them up after the loss. Glancing up again, he sees a school bus enter the drive-in and park in the back. It belongs to Erwin Rommel Gymnasium. "Uh-oh," Ryan says as the German soccer players begin getting off.

"Relax," Melanie says. "The game's over. You know the rule, 'What happens on the field, stays on the field.'"

"Yeah, sure," Ryan says doubtfully. He watches the Germans line up at the take-out window. They smile, laugh, and gaze at their phones like normal kids. Ryan relaxes again and checks to see if his latest text to Liam has been answered.

It doesn't take long for Mish to return holding a platter. She pirouettes skillfully and then places it on the car tray. "Thanks," Ryan smiles, and now the food commands his undivided attention.

After wolfing down the meal, Ryan decides to stretch his legs. "I'm going to see who else is here," he says, opening his door. Melanie nods distractedly. She's in a group chat with other cheerleaders, discussing one of the boys on the team. "With Stan, it's all about Stan," she types, fingers moving too fast to see.

As Ryan strolls around the drive-in, he passes several vehicles filled with Johnston soccer players. They wave but aren't in any mood to socialize after the loss. Ryan loops around the restaurant's rear to complete the circuit. Through a kitchen window, he sees the staff bustling to get orders ready. The door opens, and Mish skates out with a tray. She delivers it to one of the German soccer players seated at an outside table. "What took so long?" the boy asks.

"We're a bit overwhelmed," Mish admits.

"You're cute for a *Swartz*. My name's Dieter."

"I've got to go and get another order."

"What's your number?"

"That's not allowed." Mish spins on her skates, but Dieter is too fast. He jumps up and seizes Mish's wrist, twisting it to read the number tattooed on the inside of her arm.

Ryan sees what's happening and comes over. "Let go of her," he demands.

"Make me," the German sneers. Slowly, he increases the pressure on Mish's wrist. She gasps and her knees buckle.

Pulling out his phone, Ryan snaps a photo. "Fraternalizing with slaves is illegal," he says.

Angrily, the German releases Mish and lunges at Ryan, knocking the phone out of his hand. As the two boys ball their fists and circle each other, vehicles throughout the drive-in empty. Instantly, the German soccer team is surrounded by a crowd of irate Southerners. Dieter drops his hands and backs away. "Ha-ha, I was just joking." He smiles, but there's no laughter in his eyes.

“What’s all this?” the German coach bellows, bursting through the crowd. “I’m a party member.” He holds out his hand to show the Confederate swastika on his ring. The crowd grows quiet. “We are allies after all,” the Nazi says. “Let’s act like it.”

Muttering among themselves, the crowd breaks up, and people return to their vehicles. As Ryan bends to pick up his phone, Dieter taunts him. “I’ve got her number,” he says. “Dad will buy her for me.”

Ryan turns only to see Dieter and his friends jogging toward their bus. Melanie comes up beside him and takes his hand. “You OK?” she asks.

“Sure, nothing to it,” Ryan lies. He and Melanie kiss briefly and then return to where the pickup is parked.

Knowing Mish is busy, Ryan returns the tray to the restaurant. He pays the check inside. Afterward, Ryan drives Melanie to the gated community where she lives. They hug and share another, more passionate kiss before Melanie jumps down from the truck holding her bag. With a disconsolate feeling, she watches Ryan drive off. *He hasn’t even reached the end of the street, and already I miss him*, she marvels.

Melanie goes inside the darkened house and takes her things upstairs. Passing her parents’ bedroom, she hears canned laughter from a TV sitcom. Her room is at the end of the hall. Once inside, Melanie changes into a nightgown. Then she gets out her phone. Hours later, she goes to brush her teeth before finally getting under the covers.

The following morning, Melanie’s up early to get ready for school. When she goes downstairs to the kitchen, Versa is at the stove. “Smell’s good,” Melanie says, sniffing the air.

“That’s what you say every morning,” Versa smiles.

“Still mad at me?”

“No, I heard how y’all took up for Mish last night.”

“Ryan was the hero; the rest of us didn’t do much.”

“It was enough. Now, go sit down.”

Melanie wanders into the dining room and finds her parents already seated at the table with their personal slaves standing behind them. Her mother, Dorothy, takes a sip of orange juice and replaces the glass on the lace tablecloth. Her servant, Natty, immediately gets a pitcher from the sideboard and refills the glass. Meanwhile, James is smiling at Melanie. “Morning, Miss,” he says. The white-haired Black man pulls out her chair. Once she’s seated, he spreads a cloth napkin over her lap.

“What was all the ruckus at Jaybird’s last night?” Dan Montgomery asks. He’s the mayor of Huntsville and knows everything.

“A German boy started it,” Melanie says defensively.

“Yes, and his father already called me to complain. He’s a big wheel at The Space Flight Complex.”

“Sorry!”

Montgomery points to the syrup. His slave, Parker, reaches for it and then pours. “Enough,” Montgomery snaps. He turns back to Melanie. “You and all the others will have a week of detention.”

Melanie gasps. “What about cheerleading practice?”

“You should have thought of that before you went to the drive-in. That’s where all the delinquents hang out and you with them.”

“I won’t go anymore. Please.” Melanie bats her baby blues at her father. His expression melts. “Go to detention after school today, and maybe we’ll see about tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Montgomery cuts off a bite of pancake and pops it into his mouth. That reminds Melanie to eat as well. It’s almost time for the bus.

It’s a short ride to Joseph Johnston High School. Melanie uses it to put the finishing touches on her calculus homework. She has it ready to turn in by first period when class begins. Over the next hour, Mrs. Carter, the teacher, reviews each problem. Time flies, and before she knows it, the bell rings. Melanie stuffs her bookbag and then goes out in the hallway to fight through the two-way stream of students to her locker. Moments later, Ryan comes over. “Hey,” he smiles.

“What are you so happy about?”

“I’m always happy to see you.”

Melanie puts her math book away and gets out the one for chemistry. “Dad’s mad about what happened at Jaybird’s yesterday.”

“Yeah, I heard. See you in detention hall.”

“He thinks we should be nicer to the Germans.”

“Most of the Germans are OK,” Ryan shrugs. “Except the Nazis.”

The bell rings, and footsteps quicken in the hallway. “Got to go,” Melanie says.

“Me too.”

Ryan goes down the hall to his “Confederate History after 1865” class and gets there before the teacher. The boy at the next desk is folding a paper airplane. He makes a slight adjustment to the nose, then shows it to Ryan, who gives the thumbs up. “I’m saving this baby for after school,” the boy says.

Just then, Mr. Dickens comes in wearing a harried expression. “Quiz today,” he announces. “Put away all your books and study materials.” Ryan experiences a momentary panic attack. He forgot all about the quiz. Still, history is his best subject. His pulse returns to normal as Mr. Dickens goes to his desk and taps on the keys of his laptop. Moments later, Ryan’s phone vibrates, and he finds a text with a link to the quiz.

The first half of the test is all multiple choice, and Ryan breezes through it. The next part is matching. That's also easy. All Ryan must do is match the correct answer with the corresponding question. Before beginning, Ryan looks over the entire section:

Section II: MATCHING

_____ Designer of Confederate Capitol	E. Erwin Rommel
_____ Name of first Confederate nuclear-powered submarine	A. Cuba
_____ Location of Confederate atomic research laboratory	B. Albert Speer
_____ Only Confederate leader to be assassinated	C. Kings Bay
_____ Reason martial law was declared in the CSA	D. Werner von Braun
_____ Father of Confederate space program	F. Hunley
_____ Home of Confederate submarine fleet	G. Huey Long
_____ First Chairman of the Combined Military Staff	H. The Resistance
_____ Last Confederate colony to gain independence	I. Oak Ridge

It takes several minutes for Ryan to feel comfortable with his answers in the matching section. Finally, he taps "SAVE" and continues to the last part. It's an essay question about the origin of the Confederate Nazi Party.

Ryan stares at his phone for a moment and thinks about his answer. Then, his fingers begin to fly over the keyboard. "It started in 1933 when the Nazi Party took over Germany and signed a treaty with the Confederate States of America (CSA). Eight years later, the Nazi leader, Adolf Hitler, asked the Confederacy to help in his war against the United States. The CSA agreed but couldn't spare troops from defending its borders. Instead, the South provided Germany with military bases and manufacturing facilities. Confederate shipyards were used to build a fleet of speedy transports that became famous when they rescued the Afrika Korps from Tunis. With defeat looming, Hitler sent Field Marshal Rommel and his soldiers to bases in the CSA. The ships continued bringing Nazis plus loads of manufacturing equipment to the South until the war ended. The United States and its allies won, but today the CSA is home to many German manufacturers. German scientists have made the Confederacy a nuclear power and designed missiles for defense and exploring outer space. The German population of the South has grown but never assimilated. They maintain a separate school system and have their own housing compounds, clubs, and associations. In 1946, the Nazi Party was included in the CSA's ruling coalition. This decision was deplored by many Southerners and reignited a long-simmering resistance movement. So, the government declared martial law. All political parties other than the Confederate Nazi Party were banned. Now the CNP governs the CSA. Membership is equally divided between German Nazis and native Southerners. Only party members vote on The Leader, who is elected for life. By statute, The Leader appoints a Southerner to command the Confederate armed forces and a German to head the Security Service

(SS). Still, many Germans dream of leaving the heat, mosquitos, and ignorant farmers of the South to return to their European homeland. This is unrealistic since Germany is now a Federal Republic allied with Great Britain and the United States. It has repudiated fascism, made restitution for war crimes, and the government refuses visas for Confederate Nazis who wish to immigrate.”

Ryan scans what he’s written and thinks about deleting the last few sentences. *Nah, I’ll leave it*, he says to himself and clicks “SUBMIT.” Now he can check for messages and then scroll through his Instagram while waiting for class to end.

After school, Ryan joins the soccer team in detention. Several goths whistle as the clean-cut athletes come in. “Hi, Jeff,” Ryan says to a boy with fluorescent-green spiked hair.

“What are you goody-goodies doing here?” the goth answers. He’s rebelling against Confederate culture and his name—Jefferson Beauregard Perkins.

Ryan grabs a desk near the door and stows his bookbag. “We had a little go-round with some Germans after yesterday’s game.”

“Yeah, I heard.”

A gaggle of cheerleaders comes into the classroom, gaily chatting. The teacher hasn’t arrived yet, so they stand uncertainly at the front. “Come sit on my lap,” one of the goths calls out.

“Down boy,” Ryan growls. He’s a tall, sturdily built athlete, so the goth backs off.

“What’s all the racket?” Mr. Siren hollers, coming into the room. He’s the basketball coach.

Melanie leads the cheerleaders to a back corner, and they settle behind desks. “Get out your books and study materials,” Siren demands. “I have papers to grade, and you can work too.” The coach glares at the students until some get textbooks out and bury their faces in them.

An hour later, detention is over. “Want to go for a milkshake?” Ryan asks Melanie.

“No, thanks. I’m going home to see if I can get Dad to call off our punishment for the rest of the week.”

“Good plan. I’ll give you a ride.”

After dropping Melanie off, Ryan goes to Jaybird’s and finds several friends there. The soccer team members are in a better mood, so Ryan hangs out with them. Meanwhile, Mish glides back and forth across the pavement, gracefully delivering meals. It’s as though she’s floating.

Daylight is fading by the time Ryan leaves the drive-in. As he heads out of town, vast plantations, white with blooming cotton, line the highway on either side. In the fields, slaves wearing ragged overalls drag sacks full of the South’s cash crop. Overseers on ATVs race up and down the rows, sometimes stopping to prod a slow-moving field hand. Ryan glances at the dashboard clock. *Almost seven and they’re still at it*, he thinks to himself, shaking his head.

A sign for Ryan's turnoff appears, followed by another showing nearby options for refilling empty stomachs and gas tanks. Ryan takes the familiar ramp and then goes less than a mile up a secondary highway before turning onto the dirt road that leads to the tenant shack he and his father call home. In the fields on either side, stubble from the just-picked cotton crop is decorated with bits of white fluff left by slaves. *Seems like a waste*, Ryan thinks. But it's not his concern. The land no longer belongs to his family. An agribusiness now owns it.

Inside the shack, Ryan drops his bookbag onto the kitchen floor. Peering into the small living room, he sees that the door of the wood-burning stove is open. Flames flicker while Ryan's father, Bryson Walters, sits in an easy chair nearby. He's peering intently at his phone and doesn't notice his son come up from behind. Ryan looks over Bryson's shoulder and sees a man dressed in body armor throw an oddly-shaped ball. Another much larger individual knocks him down. "What in the world is that?" Ryan asks.

Hastily, Bryson pockets his phone. A quart of Tennessee whiskey is nearby, and he reaches for it. Ryan watches his father's Adam's apple dance as bubbles fight their way to the surface of the inverted bottle. He shudders as he replaces the cork. "You need to make yourself something to eat," Bryson belches. "I'm going out."

"With The Resistance?"

"Yeah."

"Can I go?"

"Better not."

"Why? I mean, if you're caught, they'll punish me as well. So, I might as well go."

"Not 'til you're done with high school."

"Oh, come on."

Bryson rises from the chair. "Did you put any fuel in the pickup?"

"Yeah, she's full." Ryan watches his father put on a ragged Carhartt and open the door. "Don't wait up for me," the old man says over his shoulder. A moment later, the pickup's diesel motor clatters to life. The sound slowly fades as Bryson drives off. With a sigh, Ryan goes into the kitchen and gets his bookbag. He sits at the table and reaches for a textbook. That's optimistic since it's difficult for him to concentrate when his father's out with The Resistance.

It snows overnight, but snow in North Alabama is not all that rare. A dusting of the white stuff fails to generate much conversation among The Resistance members who greet the dawn at Hardee's the following morning. "They call this good soccer weather," a heavy-set man named Harper says.

Bryson blows on his coffee to cool it. "Guess playing in the snow beats battling the heat in August," he comments.

"And the gnats," Harper laughs.

“I ain’t innerested in seein’ a bunch of grown men kick a ball around in their underwear,” Gary Wright says. “Even if it’s Clemson coming to play ’Bama.” Gary raises his eyebrows when he’s not out with The Resistance.

“Keep it down,” Bryson whispers. He looks meaningfully at one of the cameras mounted on the wall. “You’re talking about our national game. The Leader loves it.”

“I’ve got to go work on my hay baler,” Gary says loudly. He gets up and pops a toothpick into his mouth. The others hurry to finish what’s left of their breakfast.

Soon, the men are all gathered behind the restaurant next to their trucks. “You’ve got to watch every dadgum word nowadays,” Harper complains. He shields his mouth to prevent a light pole-mounted camera from reading his lips.

Bryson reaches into his pickup to turn on the radio. “Pittsburgh’s on the way to another Super Bowl.” He grins as a country song partially drowns out his voice.

“Now that’s real football,” Gary mutters.

“Best not get caught on the dark web watching it,” Harper warns.

“What’re they gonna do to me they ain’t already done?” Bryson shrugs. “Put my wife in a labor camp, took my farm. What else is there?”

“What about Ryan?” Gary whispers.

“That’s all I think about,” Bryson nods. “Onliest thing that keeps me goin’.” Abruptly, Kenny Chesney’s voice is cut off to be replaced by that of The Leader. “Fellow Rebels,” General Van Dorn intones, “our glorious cause continues triumphant. Yesterday, SS agents foiled an assassination plot against me. Rest assured that the scum behind it are on the way to Andersonville.”

“Oh, too bad,” Harper whispers.

Bryson switches the station, and more music comes on. “Probably another Resistance cell,” he comments. “Mighty ambitious of them.”

“We’d better keep ’em in our prayers,” Gary says, “where they’re headed.”

“I don’t want to think about it.” Harper shudders. A momentary silence ensues as the three men reflect on what they’ve heard about Andersonville Death Camp. “Well, so long,” Harper finally says.

“Same time, same place, next week?” Gary asks.

“You got it.” Bryson watches his friends climb into their vehicles. Out of habit, he waits for them to depart, checking to see if anyone is taking undue interest. *I’m gettin’ too old for this*, he thinks, opening the door to the pickup.

While Bryson and his colleagues head home to rest, most people in Huntsville are on their way to work. At Johnston High, the teachers’ parking lot slowly fills. Buses line up to disgorge students into the early morning chill. Groups form as friends who ride different buses find each other to hang out until the bell rings. Melanie, who comes from the rich part of town,

looks for Ryan who normally approaches from the student parking lot. Instead, she sees him among some kids emerging from a bright yellow school bus. She waves and he hastens to her. “Hey, good morning.”

“Hi, Melanie.”

“Where’s the pickup?”

“Did you forget? It’s Friday.”

“Oh, that’s right, so your father is using it.”

“Yep.”

“Well, I’ve got news. We don’t have any more detention. Dad fixed it.”

“Great, we can have soccer practice today.”

“Cheerleaders, too,” Melanie smiles.

Because winters are mild in Alabama, the snow doesn’t take long to melt. By noon, the Johnston students have shed their coats and left them in lockers. As the school day drags on, they gaze longingly out the windows at the cloudless sky. Then the final bell rings and it’s like a jailbreak.

In the soccer locker room, several phones blare competing tunes as athletes get into their training uniforms. “Move it,” Ryan yells. “If we’re late, Coach will double the run.” He heads for the door, followed by the others.

Before long, the soccer players are warming up. Meanwhile, Coach Gorman uses a stack of plastic cones to mark places on the field. Once the athletes have stretched, he has them dribble balls from one cone to the next. “Keep your head up,” he hollers. “Right foot only. Use inside and outside touches.”

The players begin to breathe heavily as they make repeat trips through the dizzying array of red and yellow cones. “I wonder if we’ll get to scrimmage today,” Ryan pants as Gerry crosses his path. She’s the only girl on the team and wasn’t allowed to play until her parents sued. “Hope so,” Gerry exclaims.

“Water break,” Coach Gorman hollers, but the players know to keep going until they reach the end. Then they jog over to the Igloos. Immediately, competition develops to see who can be first in line to get water. Elbows and insults fly as the players jostle for advantage. Size matters in the melee, so it’s no surprise when Liam stakes his unshakable claim to the spigot. As the goalkeeper fills his water bottle, he sees Gerry waiting nearby. “Come on, Gerry, I’ll hold it open for you,” he offers.

Gerry blushes a bright red. Hanging her head in embarrassment, she walks away. Ryan leaves the line and follows. “Hey, are you OK?” he asks.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Liam was just trying to be nice.”

Gerry kicks the ground, taking a divot with her cleats. "I know," she says. "But I wish he wouldn't treat me like a girl."

"Why? I mean, you are a girl, right?"

"Wrong!" Gerry exclaims. She glances around nervously and then shields her mouth. "I may look like a girl, but that's it." The shrill blast of a whistle interrupts. On the field, Coach Gorman beckons the team to a new cone array he created while the players were on break.

After another hour, soccer training is over. The cheerleaders have already gone in and only a few track and field athletes are still practicing. With the sun now low in the sky, most soccer players quickly return to their warm locker room. However, Liam and Ryan stay behind to help Gorman pick up cones. Afterward, Liam takes the ball bag and goes toward the gym. Ryan strolls beside him. "I wonder where Coach Gorman finds all his drills," he muses. "Seems like he has a new one every week."

"I asked him that once," Liam says. "Coach told me he gets ideas from other coaches. If he sees one doing something he likes, he makes notes and then uses the drill with us."

"In other words, he steals from other coaches."

"Coach said it wasn't stealing. He called it 'adaptive creativity.'"

Everyone else is gone when Liam and Ryan get to the locker room. Liam puts the balls away and then starts to change out of his uniform. "Sometimes I wish I could just stay here and not go home."

"Are you kidding?" Ryan asks.

"Yeah, in a way. But you have no idea what it's like at the orphanage."

"That bad, huh?"

"I mean, they try, but it's four of us in a small room, long waits for a shower or to use the toilet, meals that make the free and reduced-price lunches here seem tasty ... well, you get the picture."

"Yeah, sounds grim." Ryan throws his sweaty training uniform into his gym bag, then laces up his sneakers. "What happens after you graduate?"

"I'll have thirty days grace, then have to move."

"Where?"

"No idea," Liam shrugs.

The locker room door opens, and Gorman sticks his head inside. "Security will be around in a minute to lock up," he says. "You guys need to git."

Outside the school, Ryan is gratified to see the pickup waiting in the mostly empty parking lot. Bryson is standing outside talking on his phone. He pockets it as the boys approach. "Can we drop you?" Bryson asks, even though it's become routine to take Liam home after practice. "Appreciate it," Liam says.

Conversation in the truck cab is muted on the way to the orphanage since all the occupants are tired. Bryson knows the way, so there's no need for directions. Before long, they pull up in front of what used to be a railroad hotel but is now the area's only orphanage for boys. It's a soot-stained edifice on the wrong side of the tracks. "Thanks so much," Liam says, happy to untangle his long legs and swivel them out of the truck. "See you tomorrow."

"Sounds good," Ryan smiles.

Liam goes to the front door of the building and lets himself inside. Only then does Bryson turn the truck's steering wheel toward home.

Over the weekend, the dreary weather is ideal for the Johnston High School students who need to catch up on school work or with virtual friends whom they haven't hit up in a while. But on Monday, they're forced to deal with reality again. For seniors like Ryan Walters and his friends, it's not that tough since most only have one or two required courses left to finish. The rest of their classes are easy electives.

Ryan's favorite subject is history, and it's his last class before lunchtime. Often, he stays behind to ask Mr. Dickens questions, but not today. When the bell rings, Ryan gathers his course materials, stuffs them into his bag, and goes to the cafeteria. He looks for Melanie and finds her at a table reserved for seniors. She has started eating, so he drops his bookbag on the floor next to her and then joins the line for students in the free and reduced-price lunch program. After filling his tray, Ryan goes back and takes the seat next to his girlfriend. She and her well-to-do friends are having chicken fried steak with all the trimmings. Ryan's spaghetti, topped with a watery red sauce, is not as appetizing. Melanie waits until her friends get up to go, then slides a piece of steak she's been saving onto Ryan's plate. "That's not necessary," he protests.

"Oh, hush."

Ryan holds a forkful of food in front of his mouth. "We need to talk," he says quietly.

Melanie nods. "See you outside." She stands up and leaves her tray for a slave to get.

A few minutes later, Ryan joins Melanie behind the school in an area the students call "the corner." It used to house Special Education but is now abandoned and camera-free. Still, Ryan looks around nervously. He takes Melanie's hand and leads her between two modular classroom buildings. They find several goths there vaping. "What are you two doing here?" Jeff asks.

"Must be slumming," another goth says, glancing up from his phone.

"I'm doing a project for biology," Ryan jokes. "Trying to determine if goths are animal, vegetable, or mineral."

"Hilarious," a girl with a dog collar around her neck sneers.

Ryan leads Melanie farther back among the decrepit buildings. "So, what's up?" she asks.

"I'm worried about Gerry," Ryan says.

"Really?"

"I think she's trans."

“Omigod.”

“Yeah, and she’s not bothering to hide it.”

“Then it’s only a matter of time before she disappears.”

Ryan glances at their surroundings—cracked walls, broken windows, doors falling off their hinges. “Just like the kids who used to attend classes here.”

“We have to do something,” Melanie says fervently.

“Yes, but what?”

“I don’t know. Can’t you shut her up?”

At the far end, Jeff peers around the corner. “Uh-oh, they’re coming,” he hollers, then runs off. The other goths scatter, leaving Melanie and Ryan alone. “Which way?” she asks.

“Let’s hide,” Ryan suggests. He takes Melanie’s hand, and they go into one of the classrooms. Outside, several four-wheelers driven by soldiers pull up. “In the closet,” Ryan points. Hastily, the pair heads for the rear of the dirty building. Ryan opens the closet door and then closes it behind them.

In the dark, Melanie wraps her arms around Ryan. He holds her close and can feel her heart thudding. They kiss, and at that moment, the closet door is flung open by an armed soldier. Behind him, another guard holds the leash of a snarling attack dog. “What have we got here?” the first one wonders. “Looks like a couple of lovebirds.”

“I’d shore like one of them kisses,” the other man says, licking his lips. The Confederate uniform he wears is too small for his bloated belly. “Best take ’em to the office, though.”

Raymond Dunsford doesn’t stop tapping on the keyboard of his desktop when Melanie and Ryan are brought into his office with zip ties around their wrists. Dunsford is the high school’s principal and has seen it all. But when he finally looks up to find the mayor’s daughter in front of him, his face blanches. “Found these two swappin’ spit in one of them old trailers back yonder,” one of the soldiers says. “They thought they was smart but all we had to do was foller their footprints in the dust.”

“Take off those restraints,” Dunsford snaps. He reaches for his phone while the soldiers clumsily cut off the zip ties. “Good afternoon, Mayor,” the principal says. “How are things downtown?” Dunsford wrinkles his brow as he listens, then says, “That’s great news. However, I called because of a situation that’s come up with Melanie. She was caught in a restricted area with a boy.” Again, Dunsford listens as Melanie’s father talks. After a moment, he says, “Yes, sir, I’ll keep them in my office ’til you get here.”