

Don Wilber

Email:

**THE COMING COLLAPSE
AND RECOVERY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION**

by Donald Wilber

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	3
Chapter 1: A Nation in Decline.....	8
Chapter 2: The State of Schools.....	20
Chapter 3: A New Paradigm.....	28
Chapter 4: Teaching Students to Think.....	40
Chapter 5: ASEA Takes Shape.....	54
Chapter 6: Stoking the Fire.....	62
Chapter 7: A Cunning Strategy.....	73
Chapter 8: Polarization.....	84
Chapter 9: The Ruling.....	96
Chapter 10: The Education of Juan Rumesuela.....	113
Chapter 11: A Return to the One-Room School.....	120
Chapter 12: Seeking a New Strategy.....	128
Chapter 13: Inconvenient Truths.....	135
Chapter 14: The Power of the Unions.....	148
Chapter 15: Taking the Stand.....	169
Chapter 16: Cracking Down.....	180
Chapter 17: The Academe Is Born.....	195
Chapter 18: Working Behind the Scenes to Quash the Revolution.....	205
Chapter 19: Desperate Measures.....	213
Chapter 20: The Feds Threaten.....	222
Chapter 21: The Government Makes Its Move.....	233
Chapter 22: Hopelessness at Westside Middle School.....	240
Chapter 23: No Mind Left Behind.....	249

Chapter 24: Juan Dreams of a Career	256
Chapter 25: Judgment	261
Chapter 26: Desperation	267
Chapter 27: A Glimpse of Hope	271
Chapter 28: Inspiration Strikes	279
Chapter 29: Let the Best Education System Win	288
Chapter 30: A Reunion of Brothers	295
Chapter 31: Making the Case for Change	300
Chapter 32: The Last Straw	313
Chapter 33: The Best Education Ever Known.....	318
Epilogue.....	322

Isaiah 42 v. 9

Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and the new things I now declare;
Before they spring forth I tell you of them.

Prologue

“Bang-bang! Gotcha!”

Six-year-old Juan Rumescuela fell to the dusty ground, feigning injury. “I’m dying . . . dying!” he wheezed as he clutched his chest. “I need the Last Rites.”

His twin brother Manny ran up to him, transformed from enemy soldier to chaplain in the blink of an eye. Solemnly he began to perform his own impromptu version of the Catholic ritual. When he was finished, Juan spasmed once more and lay still. Manny poked him in the belly with a stick until he giggled and leapt up to give chase.

“Manny! Juan! Come inside for lunch.” Señora Gonzales waved to them from the doorway of the orphanage.

Juan glanced around the yard, which was no more than a square of hard-packed dirt scattered with a few well-used toys, surrounded by a chain-link fence. The other children had already gone inside. Lost in their own world, Juan and Manny hadn't noticed the call to eat.

The brothers retreated to the cool darkness of the dining room and joined the other children at the long table they shared at meals. After Señora Gonzales had led a prayer, they dug into their chicken tacos and fried potatoes. Most days they ate beans and rice; today was a special treat. Juan had heard that some people were coming to visit the orphanage this afternoon. He and the others were all on their best behavior.

From time to time, visitors stopped at the orphanage, hoping to find a child to adopt. They were usually American couples, who chose from among the youngest of the orphans without considering the older children. Having been at the orphanage for almost a year, Juan was becoming worried that he and Manny would be passed over just as the older children were.

The brothers were born in a small village about a day's drive from Mexico City. Like everyone else in the village, their family was very poor. Their father had worked as a laborer on the roads. He had traveled to wherever the work was needed and often did not come home for days. Then, when Juan and Manny were four years old, their father had been hit by a truck while he was walking on a narrow road. With no hospitals nearby, he had died before he could receive help. Only a year later, their mother had passed away with a fever.

Since Juan and Manny had no other relatives who could care for them, a couple of concerned villagers had taken them to an orphanage near Mexico City. Despite his grief over losing his parents and his village, Juan had come to accept the orphanage as his new home. Yet he still dreamed of the day when a family would

come and take him and his brother to a real home. At night before they fell asleep, he and Manny sometimes speculated about their new family – how many brothers and sisters they would have, the pets they would keep, and how many shiny new toys would be in their bedroom.

Life at the orphanage was much better than life on the streets, but sometimes it was hard. The staff were kind but strict and had little money for food, clothes, or toys for the children. They had a few old textbooks and picture books, some written in English and some in Spanish. The staff tutored them as best they could in reading, spelling, and math. Mornings were spent doing chores – feeding chickens, collecting eggs, tending the small garden, and cleaning the house. When they finished, the children were allowed to play for a while in the yard. After lunch, they sat down to their lessons.

Today, instead of lessons, they were allowed to return to the yard after lunch. Juan and Manny took up their game again, but like all the children, they kept their eyes on the house. Before long, a couple appeared in the doorway, observing them. The woman was beautiful and reminded Juan of his mother, with her dark skin and long black hair. She wore an ankle-length blue skirt and a ruffled white blouse. The man next to her was tall and pale, with light-colored hair.

As they watched the children in the yard, the man and woman talked to each other in low voices. Juan noticed that they seemed to be looking at him and Manny more than the other children. He in turn could not take his eyes from the woman's. She smiled, and he smiled back.

After several long minutes, she stepped out of the doorway and beckoned to them with her hand. Juan glanced at his brother, who returned a confused gaze. Hesitantly, Juan rose from the ground and approached the woman, followed by

Manny. Together they moved from the sunny yard into the shade of the makeshift patio.

Smiling, she bent down to speak to them eye to eye. “I am Maria,” she said softly in Spanish, and gestured to the man standing behind her. “This is my husband, Edward.”

He smiled at them, too.

“We live in the United States,” she went on. “Your name is Juan?”

He nodded shyly.

She turned her dark eyes on his brother. “And Manuel?”

Manny also nodded.

“It is very good to meet you.” She held out her hand, and he found himself extending his own hand and placing it in hers. She grasped Manny’s hand as well and held them both, smiling warmly. Juan liked this woman. He smiled, too.

Maria and Edward spoke with them for several minutes, asking them about their life before the orphanage and what they liked to do, the games they liked to play. Then Señora Cruz, the short, stout lady who ran the orphanage, appeared and dismissed the boys back to the yard. Before the adults went back inside, Maria gave them each a gentle hug.

While Manny was drawn into a game with some other boys, Juan lingered near the house, hoping for another glimpse of the couple. He soon heard raised voices from inside and drew closer to a window so he could listen. It sounded like the couple was arguing with Señora Cruz. Juan couldn’t hear all the words, but he thought Señora Cruz was saying that he and Manny might have to go to different homes – that some relatives in America wanted to adopt Manny, but couldn’t take both. Maria and Edward didn’t want them to be separated, but Señora Cruz said they had no choice;

the relative had a right to take custody of one or both of the boys. If Maria and Edward wanted, they could adopt Juan, but they would have to accept that he might be coming without Manny.

A strange feeling swelled inside Juan's chest. It felt like his heart was going to burst. He wondered who the relatives were and why they couldn't take him, too. He liked Maria and Edward, but he didn't want to go without Manny. He turned to look for his brother in the yard but couldn't find him. Tears filled his eyes. He felt such hope and such fear at the same time.

Chapter 1

A Nation in Decline

September 2014

Donna Kane walked to her bus stop as the morning sun began to light the sky. She passed a beggar sitting on the curb with a small sign balanced against his leg. The scribbled writing on the sign was a desperate plea for money or work.

Donna wanted to help the man, but knew that handing him a dollar bill wouldn't change his situation. There were many others like him. The shelters and food banks were having trouble keeping up. Pleas for help were epidemic all around the city. Many of the beggars were respectable citizens who had lost their jobs and were desperate to care for their families. They were simply hungry, not alcoholics or drug addicts.

After a few steps, Donna paused and turned back to the man. Digging a few dollars out of her purse, she handed them to him. "Good luck," she said. Donna was a

rational person, but sometimes the state of society was more than she could take.

“Thank you, ma’am.” His grizzled face showed gratitude.

Donna offered him a grim smile and walked on into the gathering dawn. Street lights were dimming as she approached the bus stop, where she caught her daily ride to Harbridge University several miles away. The autumn air was cool, the sky cloudy. A light breeze moved a few leaves along the sidewalk. On this peaceful Monday morning, these were the only signs of winter approaching.

As she stood alone under the bus stop shelter, Donna’s mind turned to the confrontation she knew was coming with Adine Dorson, a professor in her department at Harbridge. Ever since Donna had been appointed dean of the College of Education a year earlier, Adine had stonewalled her at every step. They disagreed about the direction of the public school system, the importance of critical thinking, and even the most basic tenets of education. On top of that, she knew Adine resented her for getting the appointment as dean. With each passing day, their professional relationship had grown more tenuous.

Then, the previous Friday, a leading journal had published Donna’s paper detailing the major problems in public education. She had gone so far as to suggest that the worsening economic decline might be the catalyst for a total overhaul of the bloated school system, forcing educators and legislators to consider a new paradigm in education. Such statements were considered heresy by most of her colleagues, and certainly by the National Teachers Association, with which Adine had close ties. Donna had no doubt that the paper would serve as fodder for yet another sparring match in their never-ending battle. The thought of meeting Adine in the hall filled her with a dull sense of dread.

The feeling was nothing new. Ever since Donna had begun airing her ideas

about reform, she had become a target. She supported private, independent schooling – even home-schooling – and openly criticized the increasing nationalization of curriculum. She advocated instruction in critical thinking within the university and at all levels of education. She knew very well that her positions made her unpopular within her department. Confrontation had become just another part of her job as she went up against colleagues who didn't share her view of the dismal state of the public education system or her “radical” ideas for improving it – or even replacing it altogether. The harder she pushed to promote changes in the establishment, the harder the establishment pushed back. Of course, this should have come as no surprise.

Adine Dorson was not only cozy with the establishment, but was a leading figure in her own campaign for a socially conscious but academically shallow curriculum. She had openly suggested doing away with grades and de-emphasizing “dry” academic subjects like math, science, and history, in favor of curriculum that taught students about equality, self-esteem, and how to be better “world citizens.”

Donna had no problem with encouraging students to be better citizens, but she firmly believed that a good citizenry must possess the ability to think, solve problems, and make decisions about important issues. For Adine, these skills took second place to the “progressive” agenda currently sponsored by the government and embraced by the National Teachers Association. She claimed that students didn't need to know how to think and had little interest in it, anyway. With the onslaught of new technologies and channels for entertainment, they had short attention spans and little patience for old subjects and methods. Most of the material learned through “mind-numbing academic drills,” as Adine put it, would not be retained, and would not be useful to students later. In her view, society now had electronic tools to do the

thinking. The role of the teacher was to make students feel equal and spoon-feed them ideas reflecting a modern world view, which meant the world view of Adine, the NTA, and the Department of Education. Unfortunately, many in the nation's school system appeared to agree with Adine.

Shivering in the cool air, Donna shook her head in disgust. While Adine and her allies busied themselves with these counterproductive agendas, the wisdom of the centuries was being methodically blotted out in classrooms across the nation. Schools were suffering from paralysis caused by students' lack of interest and discipline. Many teachers were retiring because of low pay and the danger of being physically assaulted. Little learning was being accomplished.

Donna was startled from her contemplation by the bus as it slid along its electric cables and came to a stop in front of her, brakes squealing. Picking up her briefcase, she boarded and took the only available seat beside a senior woman with a dour expression.

Trying to relax and put the stressful thoughts out of her mind, Donna smiled politely at the woman as the bus moved forward.

"You work at Harbridge, don't you?" the woman asked, a glint of recognition in her eyes.

Donna nodded. "In the College of Education."

The woman shook her head and sighed loudly. "I've been working in administration for almost twenty years, and we've nearly always gotten both a cost-of-living adjustment and a performance raise. It's been three years now since we got the COLA and four since we've been recognized for our performance. I'm not the only one. Only favorites have gotten raises of any kind lately." The woman eyed her suspiciously, as if Donna might be one of the "favorites."

Donna only half-listened as the woman continued to complain. The school's financial troubles were common knowledge. The pension fund had gone bankrupt the previous year, and everything the university had contributed to it was gone. Most had received only twenty percent of their personal contributions. Excessive fund expenses, early buyouts, and political campaign contributions had taken their toll, but the third drop in the stock market had finally wiped it out. No one had predicted that the market would take such a dive.

Ever since, the numbers of the jobless had continued to rise. Talented professors who had quit Harbridge over salary disputes were now working menial jobs. Some had gone back to campus as contract employees, teaching the same classes for lower pay. The university was no longer hiring many teaching assistants, and most research grants had vanished.

Donna watched through the window as the familiar shapes of the campus buildings came into view, and the bus slowed for her stop. Gathering her things, she excused herself from the older woman, who hadn't noticed that Donna had stopped listening.

Outside, Donna made her way down the paved path between the stately, ivy-covered campus buildings. School had started again for the fall semester. Students crossed the grounds, excited to be back on campus, though enrollment was lower than ever. Donna knew that many students, suffering financial trouble, wouldn't be back this year. Those who succeeded in graduating faced a bleak job market.

She entered the brick building that housed the College of Education and climbed the flight of stairs to her office, a small but comfortable room with a window overlooking a neglected expanse of lawn. Setting her things down on her desk, she grabbed her travel mug from her briefcase and headed for the lounge to boil water for

her daily cup of tea. Halfway down the hall, she neared Adine Dorson's office and heard voices. One of them belonged to Donna's cousin Roger Carlson, a vice president at Harbridge. The other, raised to a high pitch as usual, belonged to Adine.

Donna tried to pass by without being seen, but it was too late. Adine's reedy voice called out to her. "Good morning, Donna."

Turning, Donna breathed deeply and arranged her face into what she hoped was a neutral expression. "Hello, Adine."

Adine appeared in her office doorway and gave Donna a tight smile. Her straw-colored hair, cut into a chin-length bob, looked particularly frizzy today.

"I was just telling Roger about your paper," Adine said. "Congratulations on getting it published."

"Thank you."

"But Donna, merit pay? Abolishment of tenure? Non-certified instructors?" She raised her eyebrows. "You've really gone too far this time. Such notions have all been discredited. And it's nothing less than horrifying to imagine the results if they were to be implemented."

Adine's condescending tone immediately irritated her. "What's horrifying is the state of our schools and the curriculum being circulated to public school teachers," Donna rebutted. "Students are being brainwashed while their academic skills go down the toilet."

Adine narrowed her eyes. "Donna, you couldn't stop this nationwide phenomenon when you were in school administration, nor will you stop it now. You are being ostracized by the new staff. The need to accommodate all members of society eclipses the need for what you call 'real' education. We need to use our resources on what's best for the staff and the student body. You say they are being

squandered on frivolous subjects having little value to society. But what value lies in teaching rhetoric and differential equations when we're facing serious economic and social disparities?"

The lines that came out of Adine's mouth never ceased to amaze Donna. "What you're suggesting is that we sacrifice the opportunity for a superior education for the gifted in order to protect the self-esteem of the majority. Do you really consider the goodwill of the public to be more important than the loss of excellence?"

"The excellence you are promoting will perpetuate traditional inequalities. You are hung up on academic matters that don't matter nearly as much as does social progress. How can you ignore the critical need for power sharing among all cultures?"

Roger's face appeared in the doorway, startling Donna. She had forgotten he was even there. He usually hid whenever there was a conflict. Adjusting his glasses, he now made an attempt to intervene. "Donna, I mentioned your ideas about changes at the university to President Higgins. He nearly laughed me out of his office. The problems here are shared nationwide and are temporary. The recession is the cause of them all. It'll pass soon. Changing tradition here won't solve anything. Besides, we're doing better than most of our sister institutions."

Roger's lack of comprehension about the issues was mind-boggling at times. Donna knew that he really didn't care one way or another about the current debate in education. He had climbed the ladder to vice president by showing no preference on any issue except what was handed to him by those with the most power. Higgins, too, was useless. Donna had heard that he was planning to retire soon. He would wash his hands of the mess and leave it to the next figurehead who would do little, no doubt, to address the underlying problems facing higher education.

"You're in denial," Donna replied, crossing her arms. "The fact that we're not

yet financially broke has little to do with the fact that we're no longer delivering world-class education to our students. Many freshmen can barely read or write and are unwilling to learn. Yet everyone who attends classes is getting an A or a B because instructors no longer enforce academic standards. To do so would require that they fail some students, which would be politically unacceptable. Even employers are complaining about new graduates' poor academic skills and work ethic? Do you know that they have to be taught basic skills in addition to how to do their jobs? Do you wonder why employers instead hire foreigners who are literate and able to think? Our entire nation is facing decline, not only because of the recession, but because we cannot compete in the world market. Can't you see the bigger picture here, Roger?"

He raised a finger in the air. "Now, Donna—"

"I know you've never prized academic excellence," she continued over Roger's protestations, "but I studied hard in order to graduate here twenty years ago. I loved to learn. I was awarded a professorship here because I excelled in my academic work, and I accepted it because I saw it as an opportunity to make a difference. I'm not going to back down. I care too much about our students and our nation's future, which is in serious jeopardy."

Adine turned on her with renewed venom. "Your campaign will never prevail in the current environment. Just because you didn't benefit from the new diversity promotion campaign doesn't mean you should push for everyone else to earn their advancement as you did. The rules of twenty years ago are obsolete. Your outdated notions are destructive and exclusionary. The world is different now. Inclusion of those who have been left behind should be our priority."

As her temper flared, Donna looked both ways down the hallway to ensure that

the three of them were still alone. “Public schools today are not helping anyone,” she asserted, “neither the gifted nor those who have been left behind. They accommodate the less-than-average students only. Your suggestion that we simply give up on academic progress rather than fundamentally change our approach to it is sad.”

With her heart pounding furiously, Donna turned and retreated to her office before Adine or Roger could goad her further. Arguing with them made as much sense as beating her head against a wall.

As she shut the door, she noticed the mug clutched in her hand. She had forgotten to make tea. Rummaging in the bottom drawer of her desk, she found a half-full bottle of water and took a few gulps to soothe her throat, which was already sore from arguing. The tea would have to wait. She needed to gather her wits and prepare for the lecture she was expected to give in less than an hour.



It was lunchtime before Donna had a chance to scroll through the bevy of emails waiting in her inbox. She passed over the ones from colleagues responding to the publication of her paper; she wasn't ready to revisit the subject just yet. Then she came to one from Dr. Charles Langley, a colleague at Stanton University. She'd heard that he had taken a leave of absence to try out a new digital learning program that a friend had developed. Donna was interested to find out what he had learned about it, though she had seen plenty of educational software in the past. Years ago, some had believed that computer-based learning would replace classroom instruction, but the great revolution had not come to pass.

Charles, however, seemed very excited about a new program called SchoolTools. He wrote:

It's fantastic! The developer, my friend Aaron Isaacs, is an actuary for an insurance company but has been working with algorithms on the side for many years. One of his projects is this software, which makes it easy for almost anyone to design video-based educational software. The software captures the essence of existing movies for use as a substrate for creating exciting courses. His goal is to enable uniquely qualified educators and experts to routinely produce entertainment-quality courseware that liberates students from the traditional classroom, allowing them to learn at their own pace from authorities in many fields.

Only a brilliant mind like Aaron's could have produced this. He has perfected the art of substituting graphical images with other images in digitalized movies. He then modifies the background scenery in various ways to avoid copyright infringements of the original works. Courseware authors can then use SchoolTools to develop their own engaging video courses based on these substrates. The cost and training needed to produce original films are therefore avoided.

Aaron gave me a copy of the program so I could try it out. I was skeptical about how easy it would be to apply my knowledge to the new medium, but the Tools worked intuitively and beautifully. The key is to select the right video to accommodate the course material. I found an episode from *The Andy Griffith Show* and developed a course on the subject of ethics. It wasn't difficult to produce a short course demonstrating the benefits of applying ethical principles.

SchoolTools provides clip art of objects and people that you can

substitute for objects and characters in the original films. The clip-art virtual people become animated and can be displayed in three dimensions. Landscape scenes are modified and recreated simply and convincingly. Urban scenes are artistically altered with default algorithms that need no tweaking. Each new use of the Tools automatically produces a different product with unique colors, sounds, perspectives, and textures. All variables can be locked on for the duration of the particular course and stored for later use in making revisions. Mash-ups of two or more videos are easy to edit to create altogether new products.

I was so excited by my first successful use of SchoolTools that I immediately sent a copy to Aaron and asked for his critique. He hadn't applied the technique to social sciences and was gratified to see that it smoothly integrated the technology into the subject matter. I pored over my other publications and found other principles to which I could apply the Tools.

According to Aaron, students who have used the courseware are enthralled. It's a whole new approach to learning. The software adjusts the courses to the students' learning level and progress. There are too many features for me to list here. Suffice it to say that I believe this program could be the key to solving many of the problems in education which we have discussed. As I've said before, I consider you the leading visionary in education today. With your influence, you might be able to make SchoolTools the next big thing. It could serve as a tool for revolutionizing education.

I urge you to contact Aaron and speak with him about SchoolTools. If you can, see one of the courses in action. You won't be disappointed.

Donna sat back in her chair. She had known Charles for many years and knew he was not given to hyperbole. As both an instructor and an occasional writer for textbook publishers, he was well aware of the challenges involved in trying to gain and keep students' interest. He often complained about the watered-down, politically correct material he was expected to produce. It lacked substance and, more often than not, failed to engage students. If he thought this SchoolTools courseware had a chance of replacing such materials, Donna would certainly look into it. But recalling her conversation with Adine that morning, she tried not to get her hopes up.

Using the contact information Charles provided, she sent Aaron an email introducing herself and inquiring about the software. Then she moved on to more pressing matters, like the faculty meeting that afternoon. She sighed wearily. She was not looking forward to it.

Chapter 2

The State of Schools

October 2014

Twenty minutes before classes started on a Monday morning, Assistant Principal Mark Kimler walked into the teachers' lounge at Central High School in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Several teachers were drinking coffee and chatting as he headed for the bulletin board with a handful of announcements that needed posting. He tried not to feel resentful about this busywork Dorcus often handed him. He had expected to perform more important functions as a member of the administration. Nevertheless, he did what was expected of him. In this economy, he couldn't afford to make a fuss.

While stapling pages to the bulletin board, Mark couldn't help but overhear a nearby conversation between two teachers. Beth Johnson was lamenting the news that a fellow teacher was planning to retire that year.

“But why Amy?” she exclaimed to Susan Lang, a good friend of Amy Orendorf.

Susan shrugged. “She’s taking her buyout and getting out of here. She can’t handle it anymore.”

“But she’s the best teacher here. She loves the kids, and they love her. She’s only taught for fifteen years and could teach for many more. Why is she quitting?”

“Amy is gifted and loves teaching, but . . .” Susan’s eyes shifted sideways to Mark, who realized his eavesdropping had become obvious. He quickly stapled the last two fliers to the board and ducked back out into the hallway. Susan and Beth quietly watched him go.

As Mark headed back to his office through the bustling crowd of students, he mulled over the teachers’ conversation. He knew that more than a few teachers at Central were seriously considering quitting. They had already complained several times about mistreatment from the principal. Ever since Dorcus Cadbury had been appointed principal two years ago, it had become obvious that she was trying to force certain teachers to leave because they were “old-school.” They taught the old-fashioned way of repetition to encourage rote learning of the material. Some of the parents complained that their children were bored and unable to pass the old-fashioned exams. In one memorable confrontation with Dorcus, Amy Orendorf had boldly stated that the federally sponsored lesson plans promoted social and political agendas rather than education. The resulting pressure from Dorcus had finally persuaded her to leave rather than resist.

Dorcus was delighted to see the exiting of such teachers. She had a long waiting list of candidates with whom she could agree philosophically. Her heavy-handed and systematic cleansing of the ranks was working. However, the

administration was also being confronted by parents who wanted their children to learn under teachers like Ms. Orendorf. As there were fewer such teachers, the pressure to use them intensified. Some parents had become discouraged with the local schools, and those who could afford it found ways to send their children to private schools. Mark was still single and didn't have children of his own, but he had to admit that if he did, he would have second thoughts about sending them to a public school, too. Of course, he would never divulge such notions to his colleagues. He would be considered a traitor.

Mark's train of thought was derailed when he noticed a scuffle in progress next to the lockers. Two sophomores, known bullies who were big for their age, were pushing around a freshman. Mark had seen the older boys, Jared and Seth, in his office twice already since they had arrived at Central.

"Fag," Jared taunted the younger boy, who stared down at the ground as he tried to move around them.

Mark stepped in and put his hands firmly on the older boys' shoulders. "Seth, Jared, come straight to my office after first period," he said.

The freshman, a small, thin boy, quickly disappeared down a hallway. Mark made a mental note to learn the boy's name and touch base with him later.

He looked at the sophomores. "Did you hear me?"

They nodded sullenly. "Yes, Mr. K," they mumbled in unison.

Mark let them go and continued on his way. He should have brought the boys in immediately, but it wasn't even eight o'clock yet. His untouched mug of coffee was waiting for him in his office, getting cold. He was weary of disciplining difficult students. It seemed there were more of them every week. Of course, he had seen his share of bullying as a kid, but students today had less respect for authority figures and

each other. Behavioral problems had become epidemic.

As he turned down the hall to his office, he waved to Helen, the gray-haired receptionist, who gave him a motherly smile.

“Oh, Mr. K?” she said. “A parent, Suzy Parker, called earlier and said that she and her husband are pulling their son Jason out of school. He won’t be returning to finish the semester.”

Mark sighed. “Okay, thank you, Helen.”

In his office, he closed the door behind him and fell into his chair. The Parkers were a homeschooling family whose son had decided he wanted to try out a public high school. Jason was a very smart boy. Mark wondered if it was academic boredom or social problems that were the culprit.

He remembered the lecture Dorcus had given him the last time parents had pulled their child out of Central High. “We’re losing too many students. Our state subsidy is based on the student census, and it is slipping. We’re losing over ten thousand dollars with the defection of one family alone. Our salaries depend on that money. I want to talk to any parent who dares to remove their child. If public schools are good enough for most children, they are good enough for all children.”

He wasn’t looking forward to notifying Dorcus of this latest “defection.” Of course, she never bothered to inquire why the child was leaving or what could be done to improve the situation. In his experience, children who were homeschooled rarely stayed once they tried out a public school. In many ways, homeschooling appeared to provide a more effective learning environment, without all the distractions and challenges of interacting with hundreds of other students on a daily basis.

Remembering his mug of coffee, he took a sip and grimaced. It was cold, as

expected, but he drank it anyway.

He stared at the budget spreadsheet on his computer monitor. He was supposed to be finding room in the budget for necessary repairs to the school building, but his brain didn't want to work. Besides, the task was basically impossible. The funds simply weren't available. Instead, his thoughts turned back to his familiar worries. Three years into his career, Mark was still finding his place in school administration. In the growing conflict over curriculum and educational philosophy, he wasn't sure who was right. He did know that whatever they were doing now was not working. Teachers were quitting, students were becoming increasingly disinterested and disruptive, and grades continued to plummet. In response, Dorcus had recently proposed to the superintendent that they do away with grades altogether. Letting go of this "antiquated and unfair practice" would disguise the decline in learning, she said, and students would no longer be made to feel like failures. He didn't agree with this so-called solution, but there was little he could do.

In recent years, the educational culture of local schools had been changing rapidly. There was a clear divide in the positions taken. Tests were gradually becoming oral and covered opinions about subject matters rather than the learning of fact-based material. New teachers came in with no lesson plans and often deferred to those provided by federal agencies.

During his college years, Mark himself had questioned the value of many of his required education courses, some of which were the product of the National Teachers Association. Although the courses had contributed little to his qualifications to teach, they had fit the agenda to assimilate student teachers into the new teaching culture.

One trend was to avoid teaching American history. Teachers preferred not to

discuss what they called “embarrassing times” in the nation’s history. They didn’t want to dwell on individuals from the past who had owned slaves and otherwise acted with prejudice. The people and issues from past eras were not considered relevant now. The focus of many schools was to promote social progress, energy conservation, and loyalty to the world, including the United Nations.

Advanced math courses were no longer available at Central, even though some students wanted to take them – *needed* to, if they hoped to progress and compete with foreign-born students for admission to good universities. The funds were simply not there to cover advanced courses, and the philosophies of administrators like Dorcus made it easy for them to eliminate the courses as a first resort when facing a budget crunch. Meanwhile, schools in many other countries, such as India and South Korea, focused especially on STEM courses – science, technology, engineering, and math. At schools like Central, advanced students sat through basic classes feeling bored and unchallenged, while the skills of average students continued to decline to the lowered standards to which they were being held.

Students were increasingly saying they saw little value in studying subjects like algebra, since they could just use a computer program to get the results. Why waste their time learning such a useless skill? To make matters worse, mediocre teachers were teaching courses in subjects in which they had not majored. Most of the math and social studies courses at Central were taught by coaches who relied fully on textbooks. They were untrained in the content of the textbooks and unable to provide answers to questions not addressed by the teacher’s manual.

Average scores were all down, despite the fact that the SAT test had been recalibrated to show better results. The entire faculty was aware of the steady decline in the average student performance, but the problem seemed so complicated that no

one knew what to do about it. Mark, too, felt deeply uncomfortable that education had changed so drastically since he was a child.

Gulping his cold coffee, Mark forced his attention back to the budget. He spent the rest of the morning working on it, dealing with Seth and Jared, and planning an upcoming workshop for teachers and administrators. By afternoon, he was preparing for yet another meeting with disgruntled parents whose children attended Central. Dorcus was more than happy to hand off this unpleasant responsibility to him.

Absorbed in his task, Mark jumped when Helen opened his door and poked her head in. “Mark, school assembly in ten minutes. Just a reminder.”

He glanced at the clock. He had forgotten all about it. “Thanks, Helen.”

Moving into the hall, he joined the mass of students headed to the gym for the first school assembly of the year. He found a seat in the front row of chairs that had been set up on the edge of the basketball court, where Dorcus would expect him.

Once all the students had found seats in the stands, Dorcus took the podium, stylish as always in a red jacket and skirt, her thick brown hair pulled up into a French twist. After quieting down the room, she spent a few minutes welcoming the new students and teachers and attempting in vain to get the crowd “pumped up” about the upcoming school year. Then she announced some changes that would go into effect during the year. Mark already knew what was coming.

“As many of you know,” she said, “at the end of the year, we normally hold Honor Day to recognize those who have achieved successes during the current school year. Starting this year, Honor Day will no longer concern grades, but instead will recognize students who have learned the importance of being good citizens. The greatest achievement comes in understanding the rights of students and extending them to all members of the student body. Everyone is entitled to respect regardless of

scholastic achievement. Today, those who excel are the ones who grasp the need to save our planet and improve our self-esteem. Embracing these causes is our first goal.

“We also have gifted academic students in our midst, but they have already received their rewards by earning high grades. We mustn’t forget to recognize their efforts, too.” She flashed a charming smile at the crowd.

Mark wondered how those students would be “recognized” if the school did away with grades as well.

As Dorcus continued her speech, he shook his head. When had it become so unpopular to honor students who worked hard and achieved the most academically? How many more teachers would have to quit before Dorcus had the school she envisioned? It was increasingly difficult for him to stand by and watch while Central High was overhauled in such a way. But what choice did he have if he wanted any kind of a future in education?

Chapter 3

A New Paradigm

October 2014

Donna rolled her sedan to a stop in front of a two-story colonial house on a tree-lined street in Concord, a quaint historical town about a half-hour's drive west of Boston. A few toys scattered around the yard showed that children had been at play here. Though the sun was shining, the autumn air was chilly, and she pulled her wool sweater more tightly around her as she climbed out of the car.

She was here to meet Aaron Isaacs, the developer of SchoolTools, who had invited her to his house to see a SchoolTools-developed course in action. After several weeks, they had managed to find a time convenient for both of them. His email had been brief and to the point, so she hoped to learn more about him and his ideas in person.

She rang the doorbell several times and waited until she began to wonder if

anyone was home. Finally, on the fourth ring, the door opened, and a tall, thin man wearing wire-rimmed glasses appeared. His brown hair was disheveled.

“You must be Miss Kane. I’m Aaron,” he said as they shook hands.

“I’ve heard so much about you. It sounds like you’ve developed something quite extraordinary with this software.”

He smiled modestly as he opened the door wider for her to step inside. “Some might say that. I’m sorry if you’ve been waiting. My wife tells me that I become so involved in my work that I don’t notice anything else.” He smiled apologetically.

Donna returned the smile. “I understand. I can become quite focused, too.” Her mother had often rebuked her for her overabundance of academic focus and her resulting lack of a social life. But Donna was perfectly happy being immersed in her intellectual interests. She took an immediate liking to Aaron for sharing this weakness.

Aaron led her through a neat living area, decorated with simple, traditional furnishings, and down a hallway to a dimly lit office. Every surface in the room was covered with papers.

“Again, I have to apologize,” he said. “The rest of the house enjoys my wife’s touch. Unfortunately, she’s given up trying to keep my office organized. Remember how we predicted that the advent of computers would create a paperless office? So much for that.”

“Not to worry,” she said as she stepped over a briefcase.

He moved a stack of books and files from a chair and invited her to sit down. “Why don’t I start by showing you one of the courses? You can try it out for yourself and see what Charles was talking about.” “Certainly.”

Aaron opened a program on his computer. “This math course was created from

a NASCAR video.” The main menu screen showed a still frame of race cars on their way around a track. He clicked on a button labeled *Begin*, and a high-quality video of a NASCAR race was launched.

Donna found herself quickly absorbed. The eye-catching, action-packed video referenced the laws of thermodynamics regarding friction, kinetic energy, heat variables, and other practical applications, which were displayed as an overlay on the screen. The program allowed the student to play with the math as it applied to the cars and the racetracks. The student could experiment with variables such as vehicle weight distribution, tire size and shape, condition and slope of the track, and more. Though Donna was by no means a NASCAR fan, she was hooked. Immersed in the experience, she nearly forgot that she was using an educational program. As she proceeded through different levels, the course seemed to be tailoring itself to her ability based on her responses to embedded tests of repeated sequences.

When she said as much, Aaron explained, “The underlying algorithms adjust the program based on the student’s progress.”

“Have any students used the courses? What have their reactions been?”

“I loaned this course to a friend of mine whose teenage son had been struggling in math. He couldn’t say enough about the change in his son as a result of the course. The program made it clear to the boy for the first time that math is practical and vital. Presenting it in this form was all it took to focus his attention on learning it. The exercises fascinated him with the range of possibilities he had never considered before. He was eager to tackle virtual problems and see the results right before his eyes.”

The next course Aaron showed her, another variation on the NASCAR video which instead taught chemistry, was just as informative and gripping. Results of

investigating the changes in the chemistry of synthetic rubber tires allowed the student to compete in a simulated race against other users of the program. It showed a complex molecular display of atoms merging into molecules and allowed the user to change their shapes by modifying the chemical math formula. The practical effects of minute, real-time changes were displayed on-screen with readings as to endurance, traction, and so on. It was wonderfully dramatic.

One of the most impressive elements of the courses was the option of selecting the grade level for presentation to various students. The self-testing module which appeared at the end of each video, along with recommendations for needed review, were detailed and customized. The courses' versatility suggested the prospect of teaching students without the presence of a credentialed teacher.

Donna was amazed. The courses far exceeded any educational software she had seen before. They demonstrated practical applications of the skills being learned, while teaching those skills in an engaging way. She had never much enjoyed math or chemistry, but she was drawn in by the quality of the video and images. Already, ideas were swirling in her mind about the possible uses of the courses. What if they could replace traditional classroom instruction on a larger scale? If they were selected based on each student's interests and tailored to their learning needs by the software's automatic customization, they might serve as an alternative to the current one-size-fits-all classroom model and textbook-based curriculum.

"It's fantastic," she said. "Revolutionary. I can see why Charles was so enthusiastic."

Aaron smiled. "It was my intent to design software that could turn classroom instruction on its head. I've also seen a calculus course in which the student uses formulas to complete a trek through the Milky Way galaxy. Another course combines

basketball strategy with geometry and algebra. Kids who are into sports love that one. They forget they're even learning something."

Donna nodded thoughtfully. "It would be wonderful to give students a more effective method of learning, and one that they actually enjoyed. Even at Harbridge, we're increasingly disturbed by the lack of academic qualifications of the average freshman. Professors are faced with students who can't absorb the subject matters and have little interest in doing so. Of course, there are many fine student minds in the classes, but the instructors end up wasting so much time reviewing what should have been learned in high school, or even grade school."

"So I've heard. The SchoolTools courses even have the potential to address that problem at the college level."

Donna was intrigued by Aaron's apparent grasp of many of the issues in education. "Can I ask what made you begin developing this software?"

"Of course." Aaron grabbed a mug from his desk. "Can I get you some coffee? I need a refill myself."

They moved into the sunlit kitchen, with a view of the grassy back yard. Family snapshots on the refrigerator showed two beautiful, dark-haired children, a boy and girl aged about nine and twelve, Donna guessed. She slid onto a barstool while Aaron poured them two mugs full of steaming coffee.

"I began playing around with algorithms in high school," he said, passing her a mug. "After Rachel – our daughter – started school, I got a fresh look at the curriculum being taught. I remembered how bored I was in school. The classes moved so slowly. The classroom model was inefficient, and the textbooks bland. I resorted to teaching myself in my free time, reading everything I could get my hands on." He leaned against the counter and took a drink of his coffee.

Donna could relate. She, too, had excelled in school but often felt bored. Fortunately, advanced classes had been available in her Boston school district. Today, such opportunities for students were dwindling with each passing year.

“Rachel was also gifted,” Aaron continued, “but the local school had limited classes for gifted students. Also, Nora and I are Jewish, and we wanted religious lessons to be an integral part of her daily schooling. That just wasn’t possible in public school. Homeschooling seemed like the obvious answer. So we pulled her out, and Nora began teaching her at home. She taught Joshua, too, when he was old enough.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “Normally they would be here now, studying at the kitchen table or at their computers, but they’ve gone to the zoo today.” He grinned. “They love field trips. And I don’t mind them, either – I get the house to myself.”

They both laughed.

He paused for a moment. “Where was I . . . Oh, right. Homeschooling was a big improvement, but the conventional homeschooling curriculum was still lacking. I came to realize that the American tradition of teaching students from a book no longer works well for twenty-first-century students. They’re immersed in a digital world and simply can’t tolerate listening passively to an instructor for fifty minutes at a time. I thought that the skillful addition of a stimulating video component to courseware could be a solution to the problem. Of course, many have tried to incorporate video into curriculum, but I felt I had a new angle. Using algorithms to design customizable ‘smart’ lessons could offer a novel direction for digital teaching materials.

“I began by using old cartoons as an action-packed foundation for communicating social skills to children. I applied various themes taken from Aesop’s Fables to cartoon substrates. It was difficult at first to automate the swapping out of

cartoon characters with new, live characters and to coordinate dialogue. It took five years for me to produce a credible product that could be used as a template for combining films and courses.”

Donna shook her head in awe. “Wow. That’s commitment.”

Aaron smiled ruefully. “Nora uses the term ‘obsession,’ which is probably more accurate. I worked with thousands of algorithms in endless attempts and failures. Eventually, I perfected the art of substituting objects with other objects in digitized movies. Then I modified the background scenery in various ways to avoid all copyright infringements of the original works. A lot of patience was required to create the number of variables needed to make the digital tools work correctly every time.”

“So SchoolTools makes the modification of existing videos relatively easy for almost anyone – not just a software developer?”

“Right. Previously, no programs existed that allowed experts in any field to easily design their own courses. Now powerful courses are being designed in many subjects by experts like Charles in a wide variety of disciplines. I knew it had potential, but I didn’t imagine the extent of the creative applications. Some of the videos give entertainment-quality instruction in mundane subjects like reading and writing. A single outstanding educator can teach thousands of students remotely this way.”

Absorbing all this, Donna sipped her coffee. “What about the cost? How accessible is the software for educators?”

“I don’t have a system set up yet for sales, but the courses are inherently more economical to produce because authors don’t have to coordinate with other craftsmen such as film directors, actors, and support staff. Authors with a comprehensive

understanding of their discipline are given easy and automated control of all aspects of the video productions. In terms of price, I'd like to make it as accessible as possible."

Donna thought for a moment and smiled. "You know, it's ironic. I've always thought that technology was a major cause of the problems in education today. The advent of television and other communication devices has reduced students' attention span, and the affluence that came with technology seems to have destroyed much of the nation's work ethic. But maybe making better use of technology is the way to handle the problems that have come from it."

Aaron nodded. "Advances in technology have improved learning and enabled literacy in many ways. I'm optimistic that the software will only get better with the use of new and faster computers that make practical applications of artificial intelligence feasible. We can't make machines to replace the need for human ingenuity, but we can create educational software that excites the interest of young people to learn and know. I think the use of video rather than text will only grow in importance and effectiveness as a learning medium."

Donna gazed out the window as she absorbed all this. "Perhaps someday your work will entirely replace the current style of teaching. In the meantime, you're acting in the role of a pioneer."

He shrugged. "Maybe so."

As she swallowed the last of her coffee, Donna's mind turned to her critical thinking campaign and how those skills could be meshed with the SchoolTools paradigm. "Do you think it would be possible to design a critical thinking unit that could be incorporated into SchoolTools courses?"

"Critical thinking?" Aaron's brow furrowed.

“In simple terms, it is the process of actively analyzing information as a way to guide our beliefs and actions. Teaching it involves teaching the skill of inquiry, combined with the skill of argument.”

“Ah,” he said. “In other words, critical thinking is thinking for yourself -- forming your own opinions instead of just accepting someone else’s.”

“Exactly. Students must learn to reason effectively. It’s a special interest of mine. I’m concerned that children are uncritically accepting whatever they’re being taught in public schools, which includes erroneous material – even propaganda – about American history and other subjects created by the Department of Education. I’m a firm believer that more than one side of complex issues should be presented to students. They should be actively thinking in school, rather than passively absorbing material, so that they can learn to make informed decisions and trust their own judgment.”

Aaron was nodding. “I have to agree with you. A lot of the public school curricula we saw was full of errors and lacked intellectual rigor. Maybe adding a critical thinking element to the courseware could target this problem. No doubt the content of the courses will vary. This component would help to keep students actively thinking about the information being offered and the claims being posed. Just like in real life.”

“Exactly! But I wonder how it could be incorporated into a digital course. Training in critical thinking typically involves debate and discussion with the teacher and among students.”

Aaron leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Could you give me an idea of what it looks like in the classroom?”

Donna took a moment to imagine a scenario. “Well, an instructor might pose a

question or argument about the topic currently being taught, and then ask students to offer reasoned responses and discuss them with each other. For example, at the end of a section on the Civil War, the teacher might pose the argument that the Civil War was an unjust war of aggression against the Confederacy, and that the Southern states had every right to secede. The students, using what they have learned in class, give their own responses to this claim, and discuss them. The teacher coaches them to give reasons to support their arguments. They come to understand that there is more than one side to many events and issues that may seem black-and-white on the surface, and that claims should be supported with sound reasoning. This helps them understand the Civil War and the various sides of the issue in a much more complex way than they ever could by parroting back the names of generals and battlegrounds, or by simply absorbing a one-dimensional view pressed on them by authority figures.” She paused. “But how would this dynamic be worked into a remote digital course?”

Aaron considered this. “That’s a good question. Authors would definitely have to be involved in the design of the module. As advanced as the software is, unfortunately, I don’t think it would be able to automatically create a critical thinking section for each course. Not yet, anyway.”

“It might be difficult, but I’m willing to bet we can figure out a way to make it work.” She paused as something else occurred to her. “Most of the authors won’t be familiar with critical thinking or how to incorporate it into the courses. I’ll develop a manual or template for that purpose.”

Aaron grinned. “Sounds like this is important to you.”

She smiled back. “Sorry if I got on my soapbox. In fact, critical thinking *is* important. It’s vital to a good education. And we’re losing it in the classrooms of America.”

“Then we’ll just have to make sure it becomes part of SchoolTools.”

They agreed to meet again soon to develop the idea further. Donna was pleased by Aaron’s willingness to work together. He had a unique mind and a passion for learning. He was the kind of individual who was unfortunately quite rare. He wasn’t satisfied with the status quo and thought outside the box. Donna hadn’t felt this excited in a long time.

After they had said good-bye, Donna stepped outside to discover that clouds had obscured the sun and a light rain was falling. Walking to her car, she barely noticed the water that soaked her sweater.

Her imagination ran wild as she drove home, envisioning a new role for individualized, student-directed education. SchoolTools could be the key to offering true educational freedom to the nation’s children, and even adults. Not only were traditional subjects like math, science, and history being neglected in public schools, but traditional values, too, had been relegated to the dustbin. Respect for America’s founders and the founding principles, and pride in America as a nation, had been scrubbed from the classroom. Any discussion of religion or morality was banned. A secular humanist philosophy was part and parcel of the curriculum being doled out to teachers and students today. In contrast, a successful system of remote private education would allow students and their parents to design an education that reflected their own values and interests. This would be true freedom.

Her excitement was tempered as she also imagined the inevitable backlash. Many powerful interests would oppose these courses and the independence they offered – independence from government-sponsored philosophies, from inexperienced credentialed teachers, from the disruptions and distractions of fellow students, and from other barriers to learning imposed by the classroom setting. Students using the

digital courseware could advance at their own pace, neither being held back nor rushed, depending on their level of knowledge and rate of progress.

The NTA is going to hate this, she thought. If tensions are high in the department now, just wait until my colleagues hear about my new project.

Donna shook her head dolefully. This was going to be an uphill battle, but she was more than willing to take it on.

Chapter 4

Teaching Students to Think

November 2014

A month after their first meeting, Donna and Aaron met again to further develop the critical thinking module for SchoolTools. Aaron arrived at Donna's townhouse on a Saturday morning with freshly baked blueberry muffins his wife Nora had made. Donna accepted one with delight and invited him to sit at the dining table.

"You said you've developed a manual for the critical thinking component?" Aaron asked.

"Mm-hm," Donna said around a mouthful of muffin. After washing it down with a sip of orange juice, she added, "It still needs refinement, but it will help guide authors in developing the module for their courses." Donna showed him the manual she had printed out, about six pages long. As part of it, she had included a primer on critical thinking, which described what she considered the essential elements of the

skill. “To think critically about a subject, one must apply criteria,” she said, explaining one of the points in the primer. “This means that certain conditions must be met before an idea can be judged as believable. For example, relevant, accurate facts should be presented, based on credible sources. Another essential element is the ability to identify, evaluate, and construct arguments, which are propositions supported by evidence. It goes on to explain how the various elements can be translated into exercises for students working through the courseware.”

She gave Aaron a few minutes to peruse the manual. This approach was new to Donna, too. Although she had many years of experience in the field of critical thinking, she had never applied it to the digital realm.

In the manual, she had included a list of sample questions as a jumping-off point for the authors to use in developing questions of their own:

Why do you think . . . ?

What conclusions can you draw about . . . ?

What evidence can you find for . . . ?

What is the relationship between . . . ?

What ideas justify . . . ?

Why did ____ happen, rather than ____ ?

What do you see as other possible outcomes of ____ ?

How is ____ related to ____ ?

What are some of the problems of . . . ?

Can you distinguish between . . . ?

Can you identify any assumptions behind . . . ?

What was the turning point of . . . ?

What was the problem with . . . ?

What approach would you use to . . . ?

What elements would you choose to change in . . . ?

Do you know of another instance where . . . ?

For demonstration purposes, she had developed several critical thinking questions for a recently developed course on dinosaurs, aimed at grade levels 7-9, that had come in for licensing:

Choose two of the three extinction theories provided. What characteristics do the two theories have in common? How are the theories different?

Why are these extinction theories considered more valid than others that have been discarded?

Which theory do you considered strongest, and why?

How are the theories that scientists have developed about dinosaur extinction different from beliefs or guesses about what may have happened?

Aaron was clearly pleased. “I can see how these questions are not asking the student to simply parrot back information from the course, but rather analyze it and even come up with his or her own statements about it, with supporting arguments.”

“Exactly.” She paused, watching him as his expression turned thoughtful.

“You see a problem?”

He smiled. “I’m just wondering about something.” He looked down at Donna’s

critical thinking manual in his hand. “These questions are for a science course, and you’ve already mentioned how it might work for a history course. But it seems like the critical thinking element doesn’t belong in every course. Not in most math classes, I’m thinking – right?”

Donna nodded slowly. “Right. Or music, foreign language, home economics, and some others. Critical thinking is an inherent part of many subjects, including math and sciences, but it takes different forms depending on its use. Lessons in algebra and physics use logic for problem solving. Other subjects that lend themselves more to argument and interpretation and would warrant the critical thinking I’m referring to. We want to encourage the kind of active thinking that gets students to engage in complex subjects where they are often expected to simply memorize the material instead.”

“Right. So I expect we would need to draw up some parameters for determining which courses require it.”

“Yes. Good thinking.” Donna jotted down notes in her notepad. “And the courses will need to go through an approval process to make sure the critical thinking element is developed properly. Critical thinking can be a challenge to teach, and not all authors are going to be on board with it. Quite a few might not get it right, or be rigorous enough.”

Aaron raised his eyebrows. “We could make that part of the licensing process. That’s an excellent idea.” He fell quiet, and Donna caught him gazing off into the distance with a slight smile on his face.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I think I could program a booby trap of sorts to ensure that every SchoolTools-made course that requires this element includes it. If we don’t disable

the mechanism, the author won't be able to duplicate the program for distribution. It'll be useless."

Donna smiled. "Could you really do that?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "I'm pretty sure I could."

"So even if they skip the licensing, they still won't be able to skip the CT module. That's pretty clever."

They fell silent for a moment.

"There's just one major problem with this," Donna said.

Aaron looked at her. "I think I know what it is."

"How to make it work in a remote, digital setting, where the student is working alone?"

Aaron nodded in agreement, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

Donna stood and began to pace the room. "What would normally be questions for discussion and debate in a classroom setting, or essay questions for evaluation for a teacher, now must be handled by the courseware. I just can't think of how. I was hoping that with your expertise in software engineering, you might have a solution."

"So, in answering these questions in the course on dinosaurs, for example, the student has to give reasons to support his statements or arguments, right? He's not just giving an opinion."

Donna stopped and leaned on a dining chair. "Right. Often, critical thinking does lead to an opinion, but it's supported by reasoning of some kind. It's not just pulled out of thin air. You develop an opinion after analyzing the information available, whether it be factual evidence or simply arguments from others that you've sifted through for fallacies and assumptions."

Now it was Aaron's turn to stand and pace. After a couple of minutes of

silence, he said, “Are you familiar with logic maps?” He bent over a notepad on the table and began sketching out text bubbles connected by arrows. “A logic map graphs out the elements of an argument to test whether the conclusion is supported by the premises.”

Donna looked at his illustration. “Yes, I know about them.”

“Well, a logic map is similar to a programming flow chart. Computers have to make decisions all the time, and programmers use flow charts to help computers make those decisions.” He paused, and Donna could tell he was trying to break the topic down into language she could understand. “They describe what operations are required, and in what sequence, to make a decision or solve a problem. A new ‘logic mapping’ technique in programming does a similar thing – but it evaluates narrative content to test whether statements in it are supported by arguments.”

“Logic mapping? But computers don’t use abstract reasoning like the kind a student has to go through in order to demonstrate critical thinking. Won’t it miss those kinds of subtleties?”

“Actually, the new artificial intelligence modules that Rex Anderson at Cal Tech recently developed are capable of measuring abstract relationships just like those.”

“Wow. Really?” The engineering terminology went right over Donna’s head. But at this point, if Aaron thought it would work, then Donna was tempted to believe it would. Before seeing his SchoolTools courses in action, she wouldn’t have believed learning like that was possible, either. “So you think you could use that technology for this critical thinking element?”

“I’ll get in touch with Anderson and ask him about it. I think it would be just the thing for our project.” He looked up at her with excitement in his eyes.

“And you think the authors will be able to easily work this critical thinking element in, along with the rest of the course?”

“You mean from a technical standpoint? Definitely. This should be one of the easiest elements to assemble. From what I can tell, the hard part will be developing the questions themselves. Once they insert those into the course, the software should do the rest.”

Donna took a deep breath and slid back into her chair, studying Aaron sketch of the logic maps. This sounded promising. It felt as if their two minds were perfectly suited for solving this unique problem. Already, new ideas for ways to improve the manual popped into her mind. She grabbed a pen and began writing.

~~~~

*January 2015*

Professor Adine Dorson stared at her computer screen as she clicked through the ASESAsponsored video course. She had heard about the SchoolTools program from other faculty and decided she should see one of the courses firsthand. This one, which she had borrowed from a colleague, explored the topic of American history, starting with a creative introduction involving various U.S. flags.

The introduction was based on an original video of a Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, although most elements of the film had been changed. The balloons had been digitally removed and replaced with U.S. flags, and the hosts were replaced with the likenesses of U.S. presidents, who sat on the reviewing stand and gave narrations regarding each passing flag designed during his term in office. The first flag, flown in 1777, had thirteen stars representing the thirteen colonies. The first commentator, George Washington, described how the colonies were formed into a tenuous union, filled with disagreements and challenges. The flag visually symbolized the colonies’

union as one nation for the first time. The thirteen-star flag was replaced in 1794 by the fifteen-star flag, the only flag that also contained fifteen stripes. As each additional flag appeared, it was accompanied by brief video snippets depicting historical events pertaining to the flag change.

Customized dialogue written for the course replaced the original dialogue. Different voice qualities were substituted, and the background was modified. Little of the original films remained recognizable after just a few reportedly easy manipulations of the SchoolTools software. The authors had only needed to find suitable videos with which to work. The usually difficult part of creating the video substrate behind a story line was no longer necessary. And this was only the introduction.

Moving into the first segment of the main course, which had been similarly constructed using altered videos, Adine was struck by the persuasive impact of the lesson. No PowerPoint presentation could have been as effective. It conveyed in images and plain language the principles underlying the formation of the Constitution and stirred patriotic feelings of pride in the founders of the country. It mentioned the domination of certain races over others in history, and suggested that the leaders had not fully protected the rights of women and minorities. Yet the authors failed to explicitly demonize the leaders of that time. Adine's view – that the founders were selfish and heartless fools who had screwed up their chance to establish and enforce a truly equal society – was not presented. As far as she was concerned, there was no room for debate on the subject.

The obviously high instructional quality of the program was not lost on Adine. Clicking through to the self-test section, she got a passing grade. She shuddered over the prospect that this material might be widely used without adequate oversight.



These days, such subject matters were rarely approved for instructional purposes in public schools and, if used at all, were only to be taught under the supervision of a trained instructor who could critique the patriotic tone.

She moved on to the final portion of the section, a critical thinking module which Donna Kane had reportedly had a hand in designing. This consisted of a series of questions calling for the student to analyze the lesson's content and to give his or her own well-supported responses to the material or conclusions presented. She read the questions:

What do you think the nation's first official flag represented for the colonists?

For the British? For American Indian nations?

If you were at the Constitutional Convention, which part of the document would you have worked to change, and why?

Why didn't the founding fathers abolish slavery when they wrote the Constitution?

The Louisiana Purchase was widely considered to be an illegal transaction, even by President Jefferson, yet it greatly benefited the United States. Do you think the Louisiana Purchase was justified? Are illegal actions by the government ever justified? Why or why not?

Adine felt confused by such questions. They didn't seem to fall on one side or the other of any of the issues raised. They left the reader in an uncomfortable middle ground, forced to figure out the answers for himself or herself. The questions suggested that there could be differences of opinion in regard to the content of the course – and in regard to American history itself. Debate and discussion over the

issues was actually encouraged. Indeed, this was just the kind of thing Donna would think up.

Adine knew how she would answer these questions – but in her opinion, the questions should never have been asked at all. These kinds of important philosophical quandaries should never be left up to the student to decide. Instead, the instructor should have answered them clearly. *The founding fathers failed to abolish slavery because they were cowards and racists*, she thought. *They cared about white men only. Today we know that everybody can be made equal by law.* These were the kinds of lessons and values she would put into her own course. But even if she did, the required critical thinking section might challenge her statements. It might bring up other reasons – *excuses*, as far as she was concerned – for why the founding fathers didn't abolish slavery, which could cause the students to question her ideas and undermine the entire lesson.

She felt a twinge of jeopardy gathering in her mind. Her professional confidence had taken a direct hit. What if the critical thinking element prompted new questions that teachers were unable to answer? Then there were the other disturbing features of the courseware, such as the ability to select the student's grade level at the beginning and to self-test at the end of each lesson. She had heard that some of the courses even had the ability to adapt intelligently to a student's progress. It appeared that this courseware had the potential to make a credentialed teacher's presence in the classroom unnecessary. She suddenly felt the reins of instruction slipping out of her hands.

With all the pending financial threats to education, this might be an area where cutting teacher input would be considered. If the courseware became widespread, the impact on the teaching profession could be devastating. Proctors might be allowed to

fill in as monitors of classes being taught by remote educators.

Another threat lay in the competitive advantage that an expert had in presenting in-depth information in his or her own field. This might look attractive and economical to outsiders, but Adine firmly believed nothing could take the place of on-site classroom teachers who could help guide and socialize the students.

Until now, she had felt little concern about the SchoolTools-developed courses. She had thought that perhaps she, too, could design courses promoting progressive philosophies. Now, having seen one of the courses in action, she realized that they could pose a serious threat to educational progress. They could undermine some of the core goals of public education, including the goal to produce world citizens liberated from exclusionary, patriotic ideas about the United States. Independent thought, encouraged by the critical thinking component, was likely to promote reactionary opinions from students that were contrary to egalitarian principles. Besides, the thought of painstakingly developing a course, only to have it picked apart at the end by some critical thinking mumbo-jumbo, was unthinkable. She was the instructor and authority figure; students were supposed to simply absorb the material.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Adine phoned Roger Carlson and asked him to meet her for lunch at the university cafeteria. She found him at a table in the courtyard, chatting with a shapely redhead. As Adine approached with her lunch tray, she recognized the young woman as a new teaching assistant in her department.

“Hello, Roger,” Adine greeted him loudly as she set her tray on the table. She turned to the redhead. “If you’ll excuse us, we have business to discuss.”

The woman curled her lip at Adine. “Thanks for your advice, Dr. Carlson. Hope to see you later.” Exchanging a final smile with Roger, she turned on her heel

and left.

“Adine,” Roger greeted her with a sigh. He donned his glasses and turned his attention to the hoagie sandwich in front of him. “What was it you wanted to talk about?”

Adine stared at him for a moment, searching his face for the elusive qualities that made female students and faculty alike gravitate to this graying, middle-aged chump. Was it his zany striped ties? Clark Kent glasses? Clearly he had some charisma she was unable to detect. She didn’t know how his wife Martha put up with his philandering.

Adine cleared her throat and turned her mind to the matter at hand. “We have to do something about this SchoolTools phenomenon,” she began. She described the course she had viewed and laid out her concerns. “From what I hear, it already has some momentum behind it. If you had seen one of the courses, you would know what I mean.” She shuddered.

Roger seemed more interested in his sandwich than on the urgent issue before them. “I’ve heard that they show more than one side,” he conceded. “Donna says she wants to train young minds to think.”

“Yes, I’ve heard her nonsense a million times. But imagine the disruptive effect these courses could have on the education system. Even universities could suffer. Aren’t you worried?” Adine glared at him.

Roger took a big bite of his sandwich and a long slurp of soda. It was well known that he never took a quotable position on anything whenever it was possible to avoid it. Finally, he swallowed and said, “I’m not in the education department, Adine, so I’m sure that your opinion is much more valid than mine.”

Adine’s face flushed as she proceeded to drive home her point. She felt herself

become indignant once again over the patriotic flavor of the course. “The subject matter should never be raised,” she huffed. “I’ve heard that there are even courses on various religions. If this thing catches on, every child could have remote equal access to the religion of their choice. Civilization will be set back hundreds of years. I wonder how long it will be before a SchoolTools author produces a course trumpeting the virtues of free enterprise and individualism.” She threw her hands up in exasperation.

“It’s hard to say,” Roger grunted noncommittally.

“I could produce a great course on equality and racism if they would allow me to do it without the critical thinking component. What is there to think about? Do you know that SchoolTools software is embedded with encrypted Trojan horses? At least, that’s what I’ve heard. They can be triggered to destroy any course that violates their rules. That critical thinking concept itself is destructive. Fairness is forfeited when alternative ideas and independent thinking are introduced into a course.”

Roger nodded as he stuffed the last bite of sandwich into his mouth.

Lowering her voice, Adine leaned toward him in a confidential manner.

“Donna is a liability to this school. Her ideas are inflammatory and counterproductive, and she’s taking our department in the wrong direction. She should be fired for her lack of commitment to the ideals of education.”

Roger was too busy ogling a passing student to answer. The blonde, wearing a miniskirt and a sweater that clung to her curves, smiled at him before turning back to her friend.

“Roger!”

He brought his attention back to Adine. “Listen, I know Donna gives you trouble, and I don’t like her philosophies any more than you do. But there’s really

nothing I can do about it. Why don't you two patch things up and end this feud?"

Adine crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. He had missed the point, as usual. Silently, she considered the situation. Her thoughts turned to her many allies within the National Teachers Association and the U.S. Department of Education. She even had a few friends in the textbook industry and on several school boards. It shouldn't be too difficult to gather these allies in a counter-movement against SchoolTools if it continued to gain in popularity.

Roger startled her as he spoke again. "If this SchoolTools thing has so much potential, maybe you should design your own course. You know, get in on it now. Make a few bucks."

Exasperated, Adine shook her head. "I already told you. I'm not going to submit to that critical thinking baloney. It's horrible."

As they sat there silently eating their lunches, Adine stewed over the problem. An idea began to coalesce in her mind. Perhaps there was another avenue for undermining SchoolTools. She would have to consult with her lawyer friends.

"Maybe you're right after all, Roger," she said. "Maybe I will try my hand at designing a course."

He smiled smugly and took another loud slurp of his soda.

While some misguided professors jumped on the SchoolTools bandwagon and others, like Roger, stuck their heads in the sand, Adine would set her own plans into motion. She intended to nip this SchoolTools phenomenon in the bud before it ever had a chance.

## **Chapter 5**

### **ASESA Takes Shape**

*April 2015*

On a Wednesday evening six months after she had first met Aaron, Donna sat down at her home computer and began preparing for the next ASESA web meeting. She and Aaron had organized the American Society of Educational Software Authors to serve the SchoolTools authors and to assist with the courses they were developing. With the help of a marketing consultant, news of the courses' entertainment quality and educational content had spread quickly, and demand for the courses was growing. More and more authors were clamoring for access to the Tools. They were directed to apply for a license that required disclosure of their credentials and evidence of their ability to produce quality instruction. A free membership in ASESA was required in order to purchase and have continuing access to SchoolTools software. A separate software license applied to each new course in order to control quality. After a course

was completed and licensed, it was transferred to the ASESAs website and made available to the public for free or for a fee determined by the author.

They had overcome the final hurdle in the development of the critical thinking component when Aaron successfully incorporated the AI module for evaluating student responses. Now, one of the requirements for licensing was that certain courses include a section for teaching basic critical thinking skills. Authors were informed that the software was embedded with a safeguard to ensure that such courses could not be produced without the section. As Donna had expected, most authors were not familiar with the concept at first, but quickly picked it up after studying the manual she offered on the ASESAs website. Some would-be Tools users with no experience or interest in critical thinking skills were aggravated by the requirement. She recalled her conversation with one who was unfamiliar with the concept of critical thinking.

“But why do the courses have to be critical?” the woman had asked. She sounded genuinely offended by the notion. “That’s such a negative approach. I want my course to be positive.”

“Ms. Toppaner, critical thinking is not ‘critical’ in the way the word is commonly used. It’s critical in the sense that it is analytical or insightful thought. Thinking critically doesn’t necessarily mean that you disapprove of something. It just means that you carefully consider ideas using reason and all the information available to you.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that’s okay.”

Donna offered personal guidance whenever possible to anyone having difficulty developing the component. She also explained that the component was still evolving as she and Aaron fine-tuned the concept.

Each ASESAs author retained all copyrights to his or her products and was able



to market them through the ASESAs digital catalog, which Donna had developed in the style of the paper catalogs traditionally used by colleges. ASESAs had assembled a growing stable of brilliant courseware authors for collaborating on the improvement of educational materials. Just that week, they had already sold four copies of SchoolTools to their newest members. For now, she and Aaron were able to operate ASESAs and Aloriginality, the company Aaron had set up as the owner of SchoolTools, from their home offices, but she knew that they would soon need to rent an office and hire staff to keep up with demand.

Some of ASESAs first customers had come from industry. Business owners and managers were purchasing ASESAs courses for in-house training. Werner Goetz, the progressive CEO of New Berlin Industries, had ordered ten copies of a basic math program, hoping to improve employees' skills. Common sense and common knowledge had become so uncommon that few new employees could be trusted with assignments requiring the use of either. He had noticed improvement in some employees in as little as four weeks. The future of his company was in jeopardy, he said, when he had to trust his investment in machinery to "people who have only arms and legs and no thinking skills to offer." The cost of ASESAs courses was quite low when compared with the rapid improvements they made in human resources.

Much of the courses' success lay in gaining and holding the attention of the student for more than a few minutes. Content was consistently informative, practical, and exciting. Little time was wasted on extraneous fluff included just to make boring courses more interesting. Core learning was presented in the context of problems which appeared to be real and not merely theoretical.

Donna had organized the ASESAs web meeting because she planned to start a blog that would enable the authors to assist each other, and she hoped to get

information about their current projects.

Donna signed into the virtual meeting and waited until the maximum number of twenty-five members had signed in. A box in the upper right-hand corner of the screen showed a video from the activated webcam feed. Right now, Donna's video stream appeared online as she prepared to begin the meeting. Most members had access to webcams. When a member wished to speak, he or she clicked a button to request a turn. As the moderator, Donna decided when each member was permitted to speak.

Over the next hour, many of the attending members contributed to the discussion. Donna took notes on the various courses currently in development. When she asked for feedback about SchoolTools, a psychologist named Sol Greenberg replied, "I'm excited to finally have a powerful medium for sharing my knowledge and enthusiasm for psychology. My previous paper texts were well received, but they never captured the interest of casual students. The film industry has produced many works which vividly portray the principles of human psychology. I'm easily converting my writings to video with SchoolTools."

Many of the authors reported having similar and rising enthusiasm for the products on which they were working.

In addition to the blog that Donna envisioned, one member suggested setting up a wiki to facilitate collaboration among the members to develop skill sets for using SchoolTools. "It's becoming more difficult to have quick access to Aaron's technical expertise as the group expands," he explained. Already the members were sharing their growing skills and relieving some of Aaron's burden of giving assistance.

Aaron, who was participating in the meeting from his home, agreed that it was a good idea. Donna would set it up.

“I’m gratified that more and better courseware videos are coming out monthly,” she said. “It appears that the promotion of critical thinking is gaining ground. Yet only a tiny fraction of the nation’s coursework is presently obtained through ASESAs. Ultimately, I’d like to expand that reach – possibly even to the public schools.”

Several authors who were also teachers warned her that teacher organizations were expressing concern about the long-term effects of the SchoolTools movement on its members and on students. Though the National Teachers Association or NTA – the nation’s largest teachers’ union – was not yet openly pressuring them to avoid the courses, such tactics could not be far off.

“It’s obvious that ASESAs are experts and the quality of instruction is superb,” one teacher explained. “Students are drawn to study various subjects as never before. Oral presentations of the same topics by teachers in the classroom may seem less impressive by comparison. The NTA feels threatened by anything that could interfere with teachers’ jobs. SchoolTools is being advertised as the ‘renaissance’ of education. The courses are just too impressive to ignore the possibility that they will replace teachers in the same way that robots have replaced factory workers.”

Another teacher became angered. “Replacing factory workers who make parts is one thing, but the sanctity of the teacher-student relationship can’t be overestimated,” she said, her voice raised. “The number of homeschoolers continues to grow, and these courses only encourage it. The economic decline is causing funds to be cut for public schools. The NTA is still fighting to end homeschooling by law so that all funds can be dedicated to public schools. Disrespect for teachers is already epidemic among students and parents. This trend will only make it worse.”

Donna's screen lit up with multiple requests to speak. Several who spoke challenged the teacher's comments. After a few minutes, Donna managed to rein in the debate to make her own statement. "No studies have yet been done regarding the teaching superiority of the courses, but anecdotal evidence is positive and rampant. The one-room public school concept first used early in America appears to be re-emerging as enthusiasm for the new courses grows and use of digital courseware is taken to its logical extension. The Boston Public Library has purchased copies of all available courses and is loaning them out to the public. Homeschoolers are reserving copies months in advance." This approach to marketing the courses was permitted by the software purchase agreement Donna and Aaron had given to libraries in order to promote the new industry. "I'm afraid that the NTA may have reason to worry. Their days of dominating education in this country could be numbered."

Donna's comments stirred a new round of arguments, questions, and recriminations. She took a deep breath and tried to remain calm and keep the discussion on track. One member who requested to speak by video, a friend of hers named Saul Johnson, worked as a writer for a leading textbook publisher.

"Some longtime textbook authors who have inquired about writing for ASESAs have been forbidden from doing so by book publishers," he said. "In letters to their writers and other contract employees, the publishers are claiming that the long tradition of studying from a book is too important to abandon. They say that textbooks have given education the stability needed to create a uniform national curriculum, and this new medium threatens the textbook industry and publishers' monopoly. They claim that they have developed tried and true strategies in the book format that can't be duplicated effectively on video. Textbook review committees have established reliability in the books and only have to review the annual changes.

They're very happy with this arrangement because it's less work and expense on their part.

“They're warning us that if we support the SchoolTools movement, entire industries built around books could go the way of the makers of buggy whips. It could signal the end of libraries and bookstores and could lead to the collapse of learning as we know it. They've told us we should do everything we can to discourage this new trend, even ostracizing authors of digital courseware as being the equivalent of book burners.” He laughed bitterly and shook his head. “Personally, after using SchoolTools, I can only agree that the textbook medium no longer has the ability to lead the pace of the student. I think this new technology may phase them out altogether.”

By the end of the meeting, it was clear to Donna that opposition to SchoolTools was building fast on several fronts. Thanking the ASESAs members for their input, Donna signed out of the meeting and leaned back in her chair, feeling drained. She tried to relax the tense muscles in her shoulders.

Looking outside, she saw a few snowflakes drifting down. New England had suffered an especially cold winter, and spring had brought several late snows. She shivered and pulled on a blazer draped over a nearby chair. She was looking forward to warmer weather, and had hoped that her duties with ASESAs might slow down soon so she could take a break. The first five months had been exhausting, on top of her normal duties at Harbridge. She hadn't gone running in nearly a month, and her body felt stiff.

Now it looked like opposition to SchoolTools might add yet another burden to her load. Although the leadership of the NTA had not spoken out explicitly against SchoolTools just yet, Donna had little doubt that they would move against it

eventually. Having the such a powerful organization as an enemy would spell serious trouble. Textbook publishers, too, held significant influence in education. Teachers themselves were clearly divided on the question of whether SchoolTools would prove to be a benefit to students or a detriment. She hoped that the flurry against SchoolTools would blow over, but she had a nagging feeling that things were about to get worse.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Stoking the Fire**

*May 2015*

Adine took a deep, calming breath and glanced down at her notes once more. A soft hush filled the small auditorium as a few more people trickled in and sat down for the biannual meeting of the board of directors for the National Teachers Association. Adine had flown in to Washington, D.C., to speak to the NTA about the rising threat of remote digital courseware. It would be her third appearance in a month for organizations with an interest in a healthy public school system. As a leading figure in the movement to modernize public education approaches and curriculum, she had been well-received, and there were already signs that her efforts were having an effect. It was reported that some authors were dropping out of ASESAs due to pressure from various interest groups. Even industries only tangentially affected by the software, such as those which supplied frozen foods and paper to public schools,

were supporting legislation to ban the new courseware. They rightly feared that as students left public schools and funding dropped, their institutional business would suffer.

The NTA president, Linda Poppe, stepped up to the podium to welcome them. A tall, thin woman with shoulder-length dark hair, she exuded friendly grace. As she made her opening remarks, Adine's thoughts drifted once again to the course she had spent over a month designing with the SchoolTools software. After purchasing the software, she had intended to put in the minimum amount of effort necessary to produce a basic course on equality, and then follow through on the rest of her plan. But once she had become involved in it, she found herself thoroughly engaged in the process. The software had features that allowed her to select a portion of an existing video or film and then alter it to suit the needs of her course and to avoid any issues of copyright infringement. Easy-to-use toolbars and menus let her easily change backgrounds and character appearances, and insert new characters, objects, text, and sound files from her own computer as she desired. She could review the video course at any time as it came together. It was exciting to see her ideas come alive on the screen. Templates were included for developing suggested student review and testing modules. And, of course, there was the critical thinking template. Naturally, she did not include this module.

When she finished, she was so proud of the course that she couldn't resist showing it to Roger. For the first time since Adine had known him, he had appeared genuinely interested in the learning process as he viewed the video. She'd had to remind him that it was courses like these that they were trying to eradicate.

She had then submitted the course for licensing through SchoolTools, knowing full well that it would be rejected since it did not include the critical thinking



component. But it had still hurt when the license was denied. In fact, she had stewed over it for days. Even now, the thought of her creation being rejected still rankled her. She had to remind herself that it was just part of the plan.

Her thoughts were interrupted as the board's chairman introduced her to the audience. "Welcome, Dr. Dorson."

Adine smiled at the woman as she passed by. Stepping up to the microphone, she laid her notes on the platform in front of her. She gazed at the audience, a group of about thirty diverse educators from around the country. Since they met in person only twice a year, this was certainly a privilege. They looked up at her expectantly.

She began, "Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today regarding an urgent problem facing teachers, administrators, and others who have dedicated their lives to our children's future. The problem lies with the introduction of rogue digital courseware produced outside of the firewalls of sanctioned textbooks by members of the American Society of Educational Software Authors, or ASESAs, using a software program called SchoolTools. The courseware is starting to catch on in private schools, homes, and even some public schools around the country, causing a disruption within academia.

"SchoolTools, invented by an individual named Aaron Isaacs, allows authors to adopt the basic structure of existing movies and disguise them by morphing the characters and backgrounds into a variety of entertaining informational videos. Borrowing the artistry of Hollywood, authors make convincing and engaging courses for students. The resulting videos are being used as educational courses without the sanction of this organization. The quality of the education is suspect, as are the pedagogical and social agendas lurking behind many of the courses. Some have acceptable content, but others promote discredited and shameful philosophies. In fact,

some are irresponsibly promoting hard-core capitalist propaganda. For example, abstinence is advocated as an alternative to birth control in one course, and the nation's founding fathers are heralded as outright heroes in another.”

Concerned murmurs passed through the group.

Adine continued, “These videos are being produced rapidly and are corrupting the process of review and approval by this august body. Most of the schools currently using these materials also use non-certified teachers. Homeschoolers are the most frequent abusers. But the courses are also sneaking into some public schools. If these courses are allowed to flourish, I foresee massive disruption to the educational system, both on a practical level and on a philosophical one. We must resolve to extinguish this serious threat.” She punctuated this by pounding the podium once with her fist. Some members of the audience sat up straighter in their seats.

“Compounding the problem,” she resumed, “is the fact that the interests of students are changing. As one advertisement for SchoolTools suggests, life is coming at us fast. The speed of communications has accelerated beyond what we could have imagined during our own childhoods. Video games and the Internet have gotten children accustomed to a fast pace. Live educators are unable to move quickly enough to keep their attention. Even when teachers are able to move quickly, they must moderate in order to accommodate the less gifted students. Students have never fully appreciated classroom instruction, but the problem is growing, and they are becoming more defiant. Few course materials can equal the excitement of a video game. That, unfortunately, is why the SchoolTools courses are such a threat. They present coursework based on the substrate of fast-paced, live-action films, as well as cartoons. There is a real threat that SchoolTools authors will achieve a monopoly in curriculum as schools and students choose these courses. Even some teachers may decide to

abandon their comparatively slow pace in the classroom in favor of the video courses.

“Another element to this threat is that the courses are capable of tracking students’ progress and relieving the teacher of the task of grading papers. The teacher/student relationship thus falls further into jeopardy. This deceptively attractive option may compromise the need to have a teacher at all.”

Adine saw the alarm growing on the faces of her audience. She felt confident that she was getting through. With her voice rising in a warning tone, she continued.

“All these problems have calamitous potential for teachers, textbooks, and society at large. Nobody benefits, except Aaron Isaacs, his company Aloriginality, and certain courseware authors. New courseware produced with SchoolTools is already spreading with the speed of the internet. School districts are beginning to respond to public demand for the courses. If you hope to preserve the sacred student-teacher relationship for future generations, I advise the members of the NTA to avoid any relationship with ASESAs and any use of the SchoolTools program, and I suggest a boycott of textbook companies that use ASESAs authors. Do not relent.” She paused to let her words sink in. “Thank you for your time.”

Several board members who spoke afterward had seen the courses or had used the SchoolTools program themselves and were quite worried about this new threat. One woman, a teacher at a New York grade school, recounted the arguments she’d had with her sister, who had pulled her children out of public school to homeschool them using ASESAs courses. She described how several instructors at her school had already introduced ASESAs courses into their classrooms. They had been swiftly disciplined; one had even quit.

Adine was gratified by the response. She had timed her appearance here just right. The furor over SchoolTools was growing, and soon the screws would be

tightened on those who supported this trend and on Aaron Isaacs himself.

~ ~ ~

Donna stepped out of her office feeling like a zombie. It had been an exhausting day. Between teaching her classes and managing ASESAs and its website, she had barely been getting any sleep. On top of that, tensions in the department had only grown worse.

As she opened the door to the stairwell, she ran into Adine coming up the steps.

“Donna,” Adine said, greeting her with a sour look. “Just the person I wanted to see.”

Donna’s heart sank. “What can I do for you, Adine?”

“I’ve been talking to some SchoolTools authors about the critical thinking element required in your courses.”

“Well, they’re not *my* courses.” Donna heard her words echo disconcertingly up the stairwell and lowered her voice. “Each course belongs to the author who writes it. ASESAs just provides the licenses.” She knew this was a sensitive subject. Adine had recently been denied a license for a SchoolTools course she had designed.

“From what I hear, you are the one who persuaded Mr. Isaacs to require critical thinking in the courses. Are you hijacking this new product to promote your personal crusade?” Adine stared at Donna through her wire-rimmed glasses.

Donna breathed deeply and resolved to remain calm. “Not at all. The development came naturally out of our mutual interests in high-quality education.”

“I’d like to know how you can justify forcing ASESAs authors to include this element in the courses. Surely it’s not applicable to the school environment.”

“It is applicable to whatever we might encounter in life, and that includes

subjects learned in school. Thinking is a learned skill just like memorization, but they are vastly different processes. We need to memorize materials, but we also need to be able to analyze the facts we learn. We need critical thinking skills to solve the world's problems, as well as everyday problems like what food to eat or which products to buy. Rational inquiry and debate can help us avoid bad choices.”

Unable to come up with a suitable reply, Adine brushed some lint off her gray blazer. “As a result of this relentless campaign of yours,” she said, “you and Mr. Isaacs are depriving some authors their rights to the new technology. Opposition to the critical thinking unit shouldn't be a basis for blocking access to it. Without the SchoolTools software, all authors cannot compete on a level playing field. You need to level that field and let all philosophies compete fairly.”

Donna set down her briefcase, preparing herself for an extended argument. “Your philosophies can have access to SchoolTools just like those of anyone else. All you have to do is acknowledge that there may be more than one way to view the subject matter of your course. Do you really believe that none of your material is debatable?”

“No, but the classroom is not the place for debate. Students are there to learn. There is already so little time for them to study that they don't have time to consider alternative positions as well.”

“You pride yourself on having the best position on issues, and you regard other positions as being a waste of time?”

“Yes, I do, when there is so little time available. And I don't care for my positions to be challenged in every classroom in my absence. It is unfair to attack me without providing an opportunity for my rebuttal.”

Donna thought she detected a note of paranoia in Adine's comments.

“Evaluating a claim or idea to determine what we think about it is not the same as attacking it – or the person who thought of it. Do you really believe that rigid indoctrination is the only way to educate, so you can never be questioned?”

Adine blew her breath out impatiently. “That’s not what I meant. I don’t indoctrinate my students. It’s called *learning* – the teacher teaches, and the students listen.” Her condescending tone made Donna’s skin crawl. “Classroom debate is distracting and unproductive. Most of our colleagues agree on this. Students become confused when they hear different opinions and don’t know how to answer questions on exams.”

“So you grade them down if their answer disagrees with your opinion?”

Adine’s face turned red. “Students come to my courses to learn what I believe, not the other way around. If they want to learn what someone else believes, they can study elsewhere. What’s the point of airing differences of opinion in the classroom?”

Donna crossed her arms. “That position is one of the clearest I have heard to justify inclusion of a critical thinking unit into each course. The unit is not designed to attack any particular philosophy being promoted, but simply to open matters to questions so that students can learn to draw their own conclusions and make educated decisions for themselves based on the information they are given.”

Adine sputtered. “So you want students drawing their own conclusions? Can you imagine what would become of the university – let alone the lower grade levels?” Now it was Adine’s turn to lower her voice. She brushed away strands of bleached blond hair that had fallen in her face.

“Filling minds with facts and opinions is not the ultimate goal of education,” Donna replied. “The goal is to learn to reason when faced with life as it comes. No one, not even you, can prepare a student with a set of rigid lesson plans that are

adequate for life. You might fill their heads with ‘correct ideas,’ but what happens when they come across a situation you have not prepared them for? Only the ability to think critically can prepare them for the future. In fact, it’s vital to the future of our nation. Haven’t you ever wondered how entire populations have been swayed in the past by charismatic leaders in ways that are difficult for us to believe today? Making an emotional response to a politician jeopardizes the forward progress of government. Choosing a candidate for office should be done by a thinking electorate. The public must be able to question the ideologies and information they are given and trust their own judgment.”

Adine’s eyes had glazed over. She appeared to have stopped listening, and Donna was wasting her breath.

Stepping closer, Adine said, “You will never succeed in this. You are fighting a losing battle trying to preserve old errors in education. You would be well-advised to back off from this campaign of yours. My friends with the NTA and the Department of Education aren’t going to let you off the hook. They’ll keep pushing until your little project is buried.”

“Your *friends*?” Donna realized that Adine must be one of the voices spreading rumors and hysteria about SchoolTools. “Are you behind that?”

Adine couldn’t have hidden her satisfaction if she had tried. She was duplicitous, but also proud. A small smile appeared on her lips. “You’ve been warned,” she said. Brushing past Donna, she disappeared through the door, letting it slam behind her.

On shaky legs, Donna made her way down the stairs. Although she had become accustomed to confrontations, they had not gotten any easier. Adine, who had long ago made it clear she opposed Donna’s efforts at Harbridge, had now become

fired up against SchoolTools – partly, perhaps, because her own course had not been approved under the license agreements. On top of that, she was cozy with the NTA and other educational organizations that apparently opposed SchoolTools courses on principle. Though her professional relationship with Adine had previously been strained, it now appeared they had become outright enemies.

Donna decided to work off some steam by foregoing the bus ride and walking home instead. As she strode down the sidewalk into the chilly spring wind, her mind inevitably worked over the argument, considering her positions and refining them. It was mind-boggling the lengths that Adine and others would go to avoid examining their positions. It was willful ignorance to claim that critical thinking served no purpose.

As Donna had explained many times, critical thinking was essential to maintaining a free society. Positions on political issues were often based on the bias of a majority or some other superior force. The Bill of Rights for U.S. citizens had been adopted in recognition of this historical problem. When citizens were subjected to unrestrained group-think, they were in jeopardy of losing their rights to think independently. That jeopardy was growing now as the educational curriculum for the nation was increasingly standardized and produced by federal agencies. Those who were not in agreement with dominant ideologies were being administratively hushed or shamed. Independent thinking was critical in order to keep those powers in check.

Regardless of Adine's rosy view of those currently in power, history showed that, inevitably, positions of power corrupted. That pattern of corruption had continued into the present day. The only defense to corruption was a public that could think its way to correction of abuses. Men and women with goodwill, common sense, and clear minds were vital to keep civilization alive.



Now that she thought about it, Adine's hysterical reaction to the critical thinking component in the ASESAs only reinforced how important it was. Adine feared it because she feared thoughtful analysis of the biased materials currently being spoon-fed to the nation's schoolchildren. The critical thinking component was working even better than she had expected in the courses – so well that individuals like Adine felt threatened by it. She decided that this encounter had not been all bad.

She let this train of thought carry her away for some time before halting abruptly on the sidewalk, realizing that she had passed her house. Returning to the walkway that led to her front door, she turned her thoughts to the prospect of dinner and a hot bath. After a good night's sleep, she would put her nose to the grindstone and develop a strategy for defending SchoolTools and ASESAs against the new attacks.

## **Chapter 7**

### **A Cunning Strategy**

*May 2015*

Adine fidgeted impatiently as she stared at the stream of water trickling hypnotically from the fountain in the corner of the waiting room. Attorney David Gershwin's office was well appointed with designer leather chairs, modern art, and a luxurious oriental carpet in shades of red and gold. The receptionist sat behind an expansive wooden desk polished to a high sheen. Adine had heard that Gershwin had become a multi-millionaire after winning several large cases in recent years, and it showed. He was reputed to be one of the best civil rights lawyers in the country, establishing his rebel reputation by challenging the status quo in civil rights and environmental law. After their initial consultation over the phone, Adine had not quite understood why he was so willing to take her case with such a low retainer. Then she had learned that he was well connected with the National Teachers Association and

had been encouraged – that is, paid – by that organization to become involved.

The door to his inner office opened, and Gershwin appeared, wearing a dark suit that set off his neatly combed blond hair. “Good morning, Dr. Dorson,” he greeted her with a charming smile and extended his hand.

Stepping across the plush carpeting, she shook his hand. “Hello, Mr. Gershwin.”

“Please come in.”

His office, decorated with mahogany furniture and exotic collectibles from around the world, offered a tenth-floor view of downtown Boston. He was clearly enjoying the fruits of his labors.

He invited her to sit in one of the leather armchairs positioned in front of his desk. “Can my secretary get you something to drink? A cappuccino or San Pellegrino?”

“No, thank you, I’m fine,” Adine said, sitting down with her purse in her lap.

He took his seat behind his desk and folded his hands in front of him. “Well, then, I’m eager to learn what it is that’s stirring up the education community enough for them to ask me to champion your case against Algoriginality. Why don’t you give me the nutshell summary?”

“Where to begin . . .” She thought for a moment. “What it comes down to is that Aaron Isaacs, the inventor of SchoolTools, is becoming a threat to the entire teaching establishment. He has developed an effective teaching product that’s taking the country by storm. It has the potential to replace many certified classroom teachers if it continues to grow.”

“I understand that it allows people to design their own software courses?”

“That’s right, and individuals can select their own curricula through ASES

and through the private school and homeschooling arena. The real threat is that it may take away our grip on a progressive education. It allows the public to choose the direction in which education is heading. We will have more difficulty in changing America for the better if Aaron Isaacs is not stopped.”

Gershwin gave her a concerned expression and nodded. “I see. Go on.”

Adine leaned forward in her seat. “One of the primary problems is that the courses are required to include a component that teaches critical thinking. This threatens teachers’ authority on the matter at hand and encourages students to challenge the principals being taught in school. Instead of just accepting the ideas they are given, critical thinking teaches them to question everything and come up with their own ideas, even attacking teachers in the classroom. It creates havoc. It’s dangerous. Course authors must even submit to being attacked in their own courses. Which is why I am bringing this suit.”

Gershwin’s eyebrows knitted together as he considered this. “Perhaps you can explain this to me a little more clearly. What does the critical thinking component consist of? Is it a list of criticisms of the course?”

Adine frowned and crossed her arms. “Well, no, not exactly. The course author designs it. It’s made up of questions about the course content that the student answers in essay form.”

“And how does it lead to attacks, as you were saying?”

Adine sighed impatiently. “Well . . . it just does. The classroom is my sacred space. The student is there to learn, not to over-think or analyze the ideas I am presenting. That is an attack,” she said, jabbing the air with her finger. “The answers to my questions are either right or wrong. I don’t want some part of the courseware interfering with that. I just want to be able to use the product without having my

conclusions challenged. Why should I be forced to subscribe to critical thinking if I don't believe in it?" She realized that her voice had risen to a fevered pitch. Scooting back into her seat, she pulled her purse close to her chest.

Gershwin gave her a friendly smile. "You're absolutely right. You shouldn't have to. I understand that you wrote a course on the topic of equality and that it was rejected because it lacked the critical thinking component."

"Yes. I did it knowing that it would be rejected. I want that rejection to be the basis of a mandatory injunction forcing them to allow my use of the software."

Gershwin got to his feet and clapped his hands together energetically. "Well, although this will not be an easy case, I am happy to take it on, Adine – if I may use your first name." He flashed her a charming smile as he strolled around the room to the picture windows. "We're going to have to use some novel theories to get the decision you want. I'm fascinated by the possibilities for making new law in this area. You see, we are asking going to ask a court to require the owner of intellectual property to sell a product that he does not want to produce."

Adine gave him a prim smile in return. "I'm well aware of that, David. That's why I sought you out. I also believe that we can financially damage Algoriginality by its having to defend the suit. Your talent should be able to accomplish our goals. The importance of this case could help you grow your reputation for legal genius."

He leaned on the desk, gazing at her with his piercing blue eyes. "I think we have a possibility to grow this into a class action suit, Adine. It has the potential of a much greater impact."

Adine raised her eyebrows. She hadn't considered this possibility. "A class action suit?"

"The theory of this type of suit is to include others in a suit where they are

equally affected by the same conduct of the defendants. Others have been denied use of SchoolTools for the same reason that you have, correct? They shouldn't have to file separate lawsuits when their rights can be more economically pursued in one action."

She nodded slowly. "I like it." This sounded like it was going to turn out even better than she had expected. Being part of an entire team of people suing Aaron Isaacs was infinitely better than going up against him all by herself.

Gershwin rubbed his hands together and settled back into his executive chair. "Then let's get started."

~~~~

June 2015

Donna was listening to the tail end of the morning news and tying on her sneakers when the phone rang. She considered letting the call go to voicemail. Having neglected her own health for too long now, she had resolved to take up her morning runs again. At the last minute, though, she picked up.

"Hello . . . Is this Donna Kane?"

"That's me."

"Hi, Donna, this is Maria Bright. You knew me by my maiden name, Reyes, when we were in college. I know we haven't talked in ages, and I hope you don't mind me calling."

It took a moment for Donna's mind to switch gears, but she quickly remembered her roommate from graduate school at Brown University twelve years ago: a petite girl with long, dark hair and the hint of a Mexican accent. "Maria. How are you?"

"I'm wonderful. It's been too long since we talked, hasn't it?"

It had been too long. They began filling each other in on the lost time. After graduation, Maria had moved back to El Paso, Texas, where her family lived, and started a job at a law firm that adjusted disputed property loss claims in both Spanish and English. There she met her future husband, Edward. A couple of years ago, they had adopted a boy named Juan from Mexico, now almost nine years old. The experience had been gratifying and eye-opening, she explained, but also difficult. Juan's twin brother Manny had been taken in by relatives, and she and Edward were unable to adopt him. Despite the painful separation, Juan seemed to be adjusting well. They had agreed that he should keep his Spanish surname Rumesuela and address them by their first names if he wished, out of respect for the memory of his birth parents. Recently, to Maria's pleasant surprise, he had begun calling her and Edward "Mom" and "Dad." Juan was fluent in English, though he and Maria frequently spoke Spanish to each other at home. Maria wanted to do whatever she could to preserve his connection to his homeland, while also providing him with a secure sense of belonging.

"We decided that we wanted to homeschool Juan," Maria said, "so I switched to part-time and began telecommuting so I could be home with him. He's made friends with other homeschoolers and kids at our church and is playing in a soccer league. He's doing great."

"What made you decide to homeschool?"

"Edward and I are disgusted with the quality of public schools today. They don't reflect our values, and test scores have been abysmal. The bullying that goes on is scary. We couldn't imagine sending him there. Actually, that's the reason I called. I'd like to know more about the SchoolTools program you're involved with. Another homeschooler mentioned it to me, and when I looked it up, I saw your name all over

it. It looks so exciting.”

Always thrilled to share her new passion, Donna told Maria about Aaron and explained how the program worked. “There are already hundreds of courses available. Just log in to the ASES website and browse the catalogue for courses in Juan’s age range. For homeschoolers, there are suggested schedules of courses depending on your focus and the state requirements where you live. Most courses are free or very affordable. As long as you have a fairly up-to-date computer and a room where Juan can use it undisturbed, he shouldn’t have any trouble going through them himself. You can supervise if you wish, or go through the first few together until he gets the hang of it.”

“Thank you, Donna. Juan has some catching up to do because of his background, and I think these courses would be perfect. He’s a smart boy and very curious about everything around him. I expect him to breeze through.”

“I’d love to hear how he’s doing in a few months. Will you keep me updated? We can use all the feedback we can get.”

“Absolutely.”

As soon as Donna hung up, the phone rang again. She sighed and picked it up.

It was Aaron. “Donna? Are you busy? I was wondering if we could meet.” He sounded worried.

“Sure, Aaron. Is everything okay?”

“Not exactly. I’d rather talk in person. I’m on my way into town anyway.”

Donna frowned and looked down at her running shoes. “How about in forty-five minutes at the Garden Street Café?”

“That will work.”

Garden Street was a casual coffee shop several miles away where Donna could

show up in sweaty running clothes and not feel too conspicuous.

She took the long way and jogged through Lincoln Park, her stiff muscles warming and loosening in the brisk morning air. After the extended cold season, the trees had finally leafed out, and bright red tulips were blooming along the path. The exercise felt good after weeks of hunching at her desk and sitting through meetings.

The pleasant scene took on a somber note, however, with the sight of homeless individuals curled up on park benches under improvised blankets made from newspapers, garbage bags, and old clothes. Donna's breath caught as she saw two teenagers huddled together in ratty coats. She resolved to donate more to the local shelters, which never had enough beds to meet the city's needs. Average citizens who once lived comfortable middle-class lives were now forced to stand in ever-growing lines at the food banks.

As she continued down the path, she noticed that the park itself was becoming more and more overgrown. It appeared that the usual spring maintenance had been neglected. Piles of leaves from the previous fall had been left to molder. Untrimmed tree branches hung low over the trail, and debris from recent storms lay where it fell. Trash had been piling up ever since city workers had removed most of the garbage cans from the park. Facing a restricted budget for several years now, the city no longer had the resources to maintain parks. In fact, most public services were suffering. This had come to Donna's attention when her usual bus route to the university had been cut. Now she walked several blocks to a different stop, and the buses were much more crowded. She usually stood for the entire ride.

So far, attempts to halt the downside in the economy had not worked. With the recession worsening, there appeared to be no end in sight to the problems facing society. Donna wondered how long she would escape the effects of the recession on

the university budget. She counted herself very fortunate and said a prayer of thanks for her circumstances. It was clear to her that traditional education required a lot of money and that the country could no longer afford it. Public school revenues continued to decline as governments were unable to raise funds to meet school expenses. Stagnant teacher salaries were eating up the declining tax revenues and the borrowed money so fast that nothing was left for construction or maintenance of buildings, payment of non-teacher salaries, or supplies and equipment, leaving only minimal amounts for utilities. Contributions to pension funds were terminated, and the funds were depleted. The valuation of property had been driven down by the economy, and tax revenues were lost due to the decline.

Realizing that she had allowed her worries to take over what was supposed to be a therapeutic run, she cleared her mind and focused on her body and the world around her.

When she arrived at the café, Donna stood outside the brick building for a few minutes to catch her breath and stretch. Inside, she ordered an iced tea and slipped into the restroom to comb her fingers through her wavy auburn hair. When she emerged, Aaron was seated at a table by the window. His concerned expression matched the tone of voice she'd heard on the phone. A tense smile flitted across his face when he spotted her.

Grabbing her tea from the service counter, Donna sat down across from him. "Hi, Aaron. What's wrong?"

He looked down at his hands. "I'm being sued."

Donna gasped. "By whom?"

"Adine Dorson has brought a class-action suit on behalf of herself and other authors who have purchased SchoolTools, but who have been denied use of their

courses because of agreement violations.”

Donna stared at him, open-mouthed. “But that’s ridiculous. It’s a contract!”

Aaron shrugged his shoulders. “Ruben says it’s frivolous, and they know it.”

Ruben Stoneburner was the lawyer they had hired when they established ASES and were working out the legal details. “They’re probably aiming to drain my bank account through attorney fees and court costs, not to mention waste my time.”

Her mouth had suddenly gone dry. Donna sipped her tea and felt the cool liquid slip down her throat. She sat quietly for a moment, absorbing this news.

Finally, she said, “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. We had an . . . encounter at work the other day, and Adine was very agitated. She attacked me for including the critical thinking requirement in the courses.” Because of the requirement, most objectors had simply opted not to purchase the Tools. Apparently, for some, it presented an opportunity to go after Aaron and his company. “But she also seems to oppose the SchoolTools courses on principle. I don’t know why she would want to design a course, anyhow.” Donna shook her head in disbelief. “How is Nora handling it?”

“She’s stressed, of course. Actually, she cried yesterday when we got the news. But she’s holding together. She’s strong. I know the development of SchoolTools has been stressful for her. I haven’t done a good job of limiting the time I spend on it, and our family time has suffered. This only makes things worse.”

“You and I are both workaholics, no question,” Donna conceded. “Class actions are a huge pain for defendants, aren’t they?”

“Ruben says they can get very expensive. He says it’s likely that the teachers’ union and textbook publishers are somewhere behind the case. They’re probably paying the plaintiffs’ attorney fees.”

Donna heaved a deep sigh. “Some authors have already dropped out of ASESAs because of the textbook boycott.” She had learned from ASESAs members that certain school and teachers organizations had launched a boycott of textbook companies that employed ASESAs authors. Donna was becoming increasingly worried as the movement against SchoolTools gained ground. She examined Aaron’s worried face. “You know, Aaron, you could sell a lot more software if you dropped the critical thinking requirement.”

He waved his hand to dismiss the idea. “We both agree it’s vital. Besides, do you really believe that would stop them? They would just find some other reason to go after SchoolTools.”

Donna thought about it. “I suppose you’re right. It’s the entire package they oppose. It threatens the entire system.”

They sat in silence for a long moment.

“When is the first hearing?”

“In about a month.”

“I’ll be there, of course,” Donna assured him. “I’ll support you however I can. This is our fight.”

Aaron looked up at her with gratitude.

Chapter 8

Polarization

July 2015

Donna took her seat near the stage in the hotel ballroom, fanning herself with a conference syllabus and wishing she had left her suit jacket at home. Her blouse stuck to her after her short walk from the bus stop, and the cold air blasting from the air conditioning vents was a relief. After an unseasonably cold spring, July had arrived hot and humid. It seemed New England couldn't get a break this year.

Donna had certainly never expected to attend one of the annual conferences of the National Teachers Association, given her often antagonistic relationship with the organization. But when she had been invited to speak and had learned that it was being held in Boston, she had jumped at the chance. She suspected that the invitation was merely a formality, to give the appearance of offering equal time to all sides of important issues. Nevertheless, Donna would do her best.

Adine Dorson, meanwhile, would be presenting an opposing view. Donna had noticed her seated several seats away. They did not look at each other. The looming lawsuit had cooled their relationship to the point that they barely spoke. Donna found Adine's tactics to be deplorable.

Meanwhile, Donna had ramped up her speaking engagements over the past few months in an attempt to counter such tactics. She and Aaron had also produced a series of television, web, and print advertisements aimed at correcting the distortions and falsehoods being spread about SchoolTools and ASESAs. In addition to the literature being sent to educational organizations around the country, the ads clarified the function of the software and emphasized that neither Aloriginality nor ASESAs discriminated against any authors or their courses based on personal philosophy or the topics being addressed.

As public schools became increasingly hostile workplaces, the remote learning paradigm gave qualified instructors the opportunity to reach a much bigger audience as courseware authors. The ASESAs author didn't have to deal with the disruptions and discipline problems endemic to today's public classroom. In addition, as ASESAs courses caught on and new private classrooms opened up to accommodate them, teachers and school administrators would have the opportunity to act as facilitators for students in an improved learning environment. Soon, ASESAs would begin offering training classes in administering the software in these classrooms. All of this was explained in the ads now appearing everywhere.

Here at the conference, though, Donna would not be promoting ASESAs or SchoolTools. Rather, this was an opportunity to address fundamental principles underlying educational policy and its ramifications for society at large. After all, the entire motivation behind the development of SchoolTools and ASESAs was to protect

Americans' freedoms and ensure a well-educated, thinking citizenry.

The crowd in the ballroom quieted as the president of the NTA, Linda Poppe, stepped up to the podium and made her opening remarks. A tall, slender woman with dark hair, she was an eloquent speaker and effective lobbyist for her organization. Donna had heard her speak before.

“This year, the directors of the association have decided to recognize the major differences of opinion among our membership regarding policies and positions. Sometimes we fail to clearly see the competing arguments. Our organization is a powerful advocate of our policies in education. We have invited two experts in education, each representing one of the major movements in the field, to address the assembly as keynote speakers. First, the chair proudly recognizes Professor Adine Dorson of Harbridge University. Professor, you may address the convention.”

Adine climbed the steps to the stage and set her notes on the podium, straightening her gray blazer. She wrenched the microphone downward, adjusting it for her petite height. Donna took out a pen and notepad and steeled herself for what she was about to hear.

“Thank you, Madam President, ladies and gentlemen,” Adine began, looking around at her audience with a friendly, relaxed smile. She was clearly in her element here. “It is indeed an honor to be here and speak to you concerning the direction we are moving in pedagogy. The statement I am about to make will shock some of you and console others. More and more of America’s teachers are adopting the principles that I will enunciate. The newer teachers are far more open to them than are the veteran teachers, by virtue of their recent training in college.

“The proud American tradition of free public education began in Boston, Massachusetts, in the year 1635. A school board led by Samuel Wilbore hired the

beautiful and wealthy Ann Hutchinson as the first teacher of the Boston Latin School. Since that time, the state-sponsored system of public education has grown exponentially. Americans have learned to cherish the concept of giving all children a free education. It has served the nation well as we became the most literate in the world. Civilization thrives on education, and we continue to encourage this long-honored tradition. There is no tradition more hallowed than that of a teacher opening young minds to the world of ideas.” Her voice took on a tone of awe, and she gazed around the room at the educators who would surely find such statements welcome. If nothing else, Adine knew her bullet points.

“The need for quality education continues today,” she continued. “The quality has been refined by the steady improvements in school texts in all manner of subjects – improvements that reflect enlightened ideas about our children’s social and cultural development.

“The salient principles underlying a modern education system are succinctly stated as follows: Every child in America entering school at age five is mentally ill, because he comes to school with certain allegiances to our founding fathers, or toward our elected officials, or toward his parents, or toward a belief in a supernatural being, or toward the sovereignty of this nation as a separate entity. It’s up to you teachers to make these sick children well – by creating the international child of the future.”

One might have expected an outcry to rise up from the audience at such bold and offensive statements, but the crowd accepted this without protest. As Adine indicated, these claims were part and parcel of the controlling educational philosophy, and Donna had heard it all before, although these underlying motives were never revealed to parents or the public. In fact, Donna had prepared her remarks with such outrageous claims in mind. She scribbled notes in the margins of her speech in

response to Adine's remarks.

"We are making rapid progress toward this goal," Adine went on with an optimistic smile. "Powerful media interests, educational foundations, the Department of Education, and many religious organizations are marching to the beat of this drum. The philosophy behind this goal is very old and enduring. That philosophy holds that there are natural leaders who can lead mankind into a Utopia-like society. Others need only to follow their lead.

"Another role of modern scientific education is to eliminate student failure by converting schools into labs of life adjustment and to mute intellectual standards for those who are not suitable for leadership. Educators are now better positioned to carry this challenge than ever before. Modern mass communication and the availability of sympathetic and powerful financial interests are poised to make it happen.

"The concept of morality is a problem causing frustration and neurosis. It needlessly interjects the crippling burden of good and evil on society in general and on individuals in particular. We are adjusting the student population to cure the illness called sin. The removal of all traces of religion in public pedagogy is nearly complete.

"In the last fifty years of modern education, we have focused more on teaching students to behave and less on teaching them to know. They must be counseled in self-esteem, conflict resolution, and aggression management in order for them to become good students, citizens, and employees. They need personal adjustment rather than academic skills in order to function in the coming world order.

"Most of the youth of America resist and always have resisted being taught. That is because they understand that the knowledge being pushed by teachers is mostly useless to them. We need only to train them to comply with their employers' instructions, which are often mindlessly repetitive and easy to pick up, with little need

for math, science, or reading above the sixth grade level.”

Donna shook her head in disgust as she jotted down additional notes. She resisted the urge to look around again and see how the audience was absorbing this assault on the concepts of knowledge and learning.

Adine pounded the podium. “We need to break the old loyalties and form new ones that advance the causes of world peace, environmentalism, and equality. The gap in educational attainment is a basic cause of social division and discord. It is a prime cause of inequality among people. A focus on the improvement of personal academic skills and competitive advantage is always disruptive.

“Many of you use the lesson plans professionally prepared by the Department of Education. These plans are designed to promote the goals announced above. Some can be used to document the progress achieved grade by grade by each student in adjusting to a modern scientific education.

“You are being asked to keep year-by-year records that reflect the progress of each student in this regard. Those records are useful in evaluating your performance in adjusting each student. Misplaced loyalty to the United States is measured by the tests administered, which are used to determine whether the child can be trusted to have allegiance to the world as compared with his country. As we know, loyalty to one’s own country and elected officials gives one a parochial view of the world and is the primary source of conflict and war. World peace cannot be achieved until this illness is cured.

Adine scowled. “There is no more pernicious problem than that of parents who instill prejudice in children at an early age. Removal of children early on from that environment and into the protective school environment is essential. Most parents desire special attention for their children. They must face the fact their children are no

more special than any other children. Children must learn to contend with the stress applied by others in order to homogenize them into the population.

“Parents are also the primary source of religious myths that have been difficult to eradicate. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and other myths fade early in life, but the grip of religion has a near stranglehold on a large percentage of the population. The concepts of good and evil infect children with neuroses and needless frustrations throughout their lives. This sickness needs inoculation early in life to limit its devastating effects on themselves and others.”

Donna heard a murmur pass through the crowd. Adine may have pushed too far this time. Although the public school environment was strictly secular, many teachers were still religious and no doubt objected to hearing their beliefs disparaged in such a way. Some in the audience seemed to be arguing now about Adine’s claims.

Adine quickly pressed on. “Each of these matters must be addressed in as many ways as possible in order to shape students into good world citizens. Continuous use of the lesson plans provided for free to all teachers will assist you in gradually adjusting the students so that they will someday create a peaceful world about which we can only dream today.

“You are the only hope for the future of the world. We need your advice and cooperation in these important matters. Within your packet of information, please find a survey of your opinions in regards to these matters. Please be sure to fill out the survey so that we can know how many of these principles you agree with either partially or entirely. This is our way of letting the public know the current status of education. Please enter your registration number in the space provided. No signature is needed.

“Thank you for your kind attention to these progressive concepts.” Adine

stepped down and strode past Donna, meeting her gaze briefly with a satisfied smile.

Linda Poppe took her place at the microphone. “Thank you, Professor Dorson. I am sure that all of you recognize the issues presented. We have invited Donna Kane, Dean of the College of Education at Harbridge, to present some counter arguments for the membership to consider. Dr. Kane, you may address the convention.”

Donna approached the podium with her notes in hand and looked out across the expectant faces in the audience. She wondered how many of them would listen to what she had to say, and how many had already made up their minds. She knew that some of the old guard were represented here and were surely as appalled as she was by Adine’s message. If she could rally them to the cause and persuade a few of those who were on the fence, she would have done her job.

She began, “Dr. Dorson has clearly and courageously articulated the elements of the new scientific agenda for the future of education. We are all familiar with the extensive efforts that have been made to promote these concepts. This agenda has often been presented in a subtler form in order to make it more palatable to teachers and to the public. It represents a change from old values and goals. Cultural change is difficult to accomplish, and many of us have resisted the trends being championed by Dr. Dorson. It seems the supporters of this new agenda are now sufficiently confident of having substantial support that they can clearly disclose their full agenda.” She glanced at her notes. “I’m sure that many of you are as appalled as I by the suggestion that our five-year-old students are sick when they arrive at school for the first time.”

Many heads in the crowd nodded.

“They do, after all, have the same beliefs as do many of us. We are offended by the obvious implication that we, too, are mentally ill. Some of us have fallen victim to portions of the agenda that have been actively promoted for years by this

organization through our schools. Many have been unaware of the overall agenda. The agenda in all its parts is a departure from that long held by the vast majority of Americans. Those who recognize the direction in which it is taking us as a country have resisted the subtle arguments that lead us toward internationalism and amorality. I wish to be as concise and clear about our traditional American philosophy with a statement that parallels Dr. Dorson's statement as follows . . ." Glancing at her notes, she stated decisively, "No American child should be judged as ill because he comes to school with allegiances to our founding fathers, or toward elected officials, or toward his parents, or toward a belief in a supernatural being, or toward the sovereignty of this nation as a separate entity. It is up to you teachers to accommodate and encourage these allegiances as being wholesome for the citizens of the United States of America." She looked at the crowd, carefully making eye contact with several audience members to ensure her point was heard.

She went on, "We are continually hearing the suggestion that parents are the problem in America. Our mental illnesses are thought to be infecting our children, and that illness must be 'adjusted' out of them in school. Ideas about values, individualism, entrepreneurship, integrity, and other principles of civilized culture are the hard-won products of generations of Americans. But modern social reformists like Dr. Dorson consider them to be a form of insanity inherited from past generations." Donna paused to draw proper attention to this shocking reality. "Loyalty of our citizens to the United States is being blamed for many problems in the world. National loyalty is derided as 'jingoistic.' Similarly, the concept of worshiping a supernatural being is being more frequently and openly ridiculed in school, even as the laws regarding public worship are tightening. Secular humanism is being substituted surreptitiously in public schools for established religions and religious

ethics. This is happening in spite of the fact that religion and religious activity remain pervasive in the nation. Believers are regarded as superstitious and ill, morality ‘a source of neuroses and conflict,’ as Dr. Dorson puts it. The amoral agendas being promoted in schools today by powerful forces are taking their toll on our society.”

Several heads nodded again, and Donna knew she had at least a few allies in the audience.

“Frightening progress is being made in the field of education to change the values of all students away from the traditions established by their parents and by the founding fathers of this country. Proponents of this agenda are raising an orchestrated effort to eviscerate pride in and produce shame in those principles. Our successful experiment in personal liberty is being portrayed as a wretched, embarrassing failure. The creation of the most prosperous citizenry in the history of the world is portrayed as a wicked hoax on those who are less advantaged. The solution to inequality in any form, as proposed by individuals like Dr. Dorson, is to bring all citizens and students down to a uniform, base level achievable by everyone.” By the disgust in her voice, Donna indicated what she thought of this approach.

“A critical analysis of such an agenda reveals how this imposition on a free society is bad for everyone. Every citizen must be allowed to develop his or her own skills and strengths and to have a voice in the governance of this nation.” Her voice rose. “In order to do that, our citizens must have access to a quality education so they can obtain the knowledge and thinking skills necessary to evaluate issues and make informed decisions.

“In contrast, the implication of the ‘scientific’ plan is that our citizens are unable to successfully maintain a government of the people, by the people, and for the people – and so they must be taught to passively accept their own artificially limited

role and the leadership of those few who have been deemed deserving of knowledge and power. We cannot allow this plan to be implemented. Our future hope will be reduced to that which is commonly enjoyed by slaves.”

Donna paused to allow this bleak reality to sink in. The members of the audience sat quietly, their faces somber.

She continued emphatically, “We *must* become alert to the jeopardy facing our children. We must also be aware that the momentum behind the trend toward scientific government is so powerful that the likelihood of escaping it is low. Those who would lead are pushing it forward with their vast resources. Our only hope lies with future generations, who will carry the responsibility of protecting personal freedoms and other dearly held principles of our Constitution. As we speak, those future generations of citizens are sitting in schools around the country, their minds being shaped by whatever they are being taught, or not taught, by teachers, textbooks, and government-sponsored curriculum.

“Our country was established by a minority of leaders who changed the history of the world. Another minority may now have the ability to change it back to the culture of Alexander the Great and intend to do so. It is time for those of us who believe in a sound education for our future citizens to stand up and demand it. Thank you.”

Full of passionate enthusiasm, Donna stepped down from the lectern and returned to her seat amid mixed applause, some of it enthusiastic, some of it tepid. Conversation had already begun among the members of the audience. Whether they were debating the merits of the speakers’ points, she couldn’t say.

Linda Poppe took the stage. “Thank you, Dr. Kane. This has been an eye-opening session on both sides of the arguments. We will now break for sessions

dealing with each of the major topics raised.”

The room erupted fully into conversation as the attendees stood and began milling around. She heard several nearby arguing about the topics she and Adine had just presented. Donna felt satisfied with her presentation, although there was much more she would have liked to say. Perhaps she would have her opportunity in the next session. Looking at the schedule, she saw that she was supposed to appear in room 8A, where she would sit on a panel to discuss curriculum. Considering the lively debate around her, it was about to get very interesting.

Chapter 9

The Ruling

July 2015

Donna joined Aaron when he went to his attorney Ruben Stoneburner's downtown office to prepare for the approaching hearing. Nora had been unable to get away from home at the last minute, with both of the kids sick. Ruben's third-floor office was modestly furnished with gray tweed chairs, an oak desk, and tall bookcases filled to overflowing. Portraits of his two children decorated several shelves. Donna found the surroundings comforting, given the circumstances.

Ruben, a compact man with thick, salt-and-pepper hair, poured them each a cup of coffee and advised Aaron to relax regarding the outcome of the case. "The purpose of filing it is to try to intimidate you into backing away from your stand," he said. "Many specious suits are filed for the sole purpose of bullying the defendants psychologically or financially."

“So you think we have a fairly good chance?” Aaron asked.

“I think we have an excellent chance of winning, as long as we don’t flinch.”

Ruben gave Aaron a measuring look. “How do you feel?”

“I’m prepared for the ordeal,” Aaron assured him, although he looked as if he hadn’t slept in days. “We’ve gotten a lot of support, even offers to assist in financing the costs of the trial if it comes to that.” Donna knew that the offers had come as a big relief to Aaron and his family.

While Aaron took notes, Ruben explained how the hearing and trial would unfold, and finished by presenting his routine witness preparation. This included rules such as, “Do not volunteer information”; “just answer the question”; “let the opposing attorney ask for more information if he wants it”; and “rely on me to bring out additional information in your favor if needed.” Then he sent Aaron home to wait for the trial. As they walked back out into the July heat, Donna couldn’t tell if Aaron felt comforted or rattled by the reality of what he would be facing in court.



The following Friday afternoon, Donna arrived in the downtown courtroom for the first hearing. She noticed several ASESAs seated in the gallery and smiled at them, appreciative of their support. She found Nora and sat next to her, giving her a sympathetic hug. Aaron was seated a few rows up, near the front of the chamber next to Ruben. When Aaron turned, Donna gave him a small wave and smile of encouragement. On the plaintiff’s side, Adine sat with her own lawyer and several other individuals Donna did not recognize. She could only assume that their courses had been rejected for not adhering to the licensing agreement, and that their names appeared on the lawsuit alongside Adine’s. She swallowed down her frustration and took a deep breath, reminding herself to stay calm. Letting these people get under her

skin would only help them achieve their purpose.

Donna turned her gaze away from Adine and took in the rest of the scene. It had been many years since she had been inside a courtroom – since her undergraduate years, in fact. She had gotten a speeding ticket and had gone to court to contest it. She had lost. She almost smiled as she recalled her weak argument, but quickly sobered when she thought of what would happen if Ruben’s arguments were found to be weak and this case was not dismissed as they hoped. What if it went to trial? What if Aaron lost? He could lose his business, his house. SchoolTools could disappear and this new hope for education shrivel as quickly as it had sprung up.

Once again, Donna took a deep, calming breath and shoved these worries aside. They would cross that bridge if they came to it. Right now, it was Ruben’s job to make sure those things didn’t happen. He was a good lawyer, and Aaron had a strong case.

The room was quiet as the previous case was wrapped up. Then the judge said, “Will the clerk please call the next motion for hearing?”

“The case of Dorson et al. versus Algor . . . Algorigin . . .”

Aaron and his lawyer stood and moved to the defendant’s table, while Adine and her lawyer moved to the plaintiff’s. “Your Honor, Ruben Stoneburner for the movant.”

The judge nodded. “Please proceed, Mr. Stoneburner.”

“This is a motion to dismiss the case of Dorson vs. Algoriginality, Inc., your Honor,” Ruben said, his tone confident. “The motion alleges that the complaint seeks relief that is not available to the plaintiffs. They ask for a mandatory injunction to force Algoriginality to give access to the software program known as SchoolTools in spite of the fact that they are violating the clear language of the software agreement.

The agreement provides that courses in certain subjects must include a component to teach critical thinking using the content of the course. They refuse to include the component and are therefore barred from using the Tools. They complain that this is tantamount to censorship. It is obvious that no governmental body is limiting their speech. The law does not forbid private parties from contracting for limited use of a product, and therefore the complaint is legally groundless.

“They also contend that the contract is unenforceable as an unreasonable restriction on freedom of expression. This is just another way to word the same objection, and it fails to state a cause of action. The product limiting the free exercise of expression is a private contract for a license to use the software, which they signed. There is no reason that they cannot do what they want to do if they can find another similar development tool with which to present their courses. SchoolTools is not in the public domain, and it cannot be taken without just compensation, as they are trying to do.” Ruben sat down.

The judge nodded. “The court will now hear the arguments for the plaintiff.”

Adine’s lawyer stood. He was an elegant blond man in an expensive suit.

“May it please the court, I am David Gershwin representing the respondents, Adine Dorson, et al, in this motion hearing. The current direction of education as it is now unfolding is in a precarious state with the introduction of SchoolTools. It is acknowledged that SchoolTools is educationally powerful and is sweeping the country in private schools. The concern is that it will be used to promote legacy values without the precautions needed to modify their undesirable effects. The impact it is likely to have on the nation’s students will possibly reverse the national agenda to bring fairness to society. The competitive human instinct to acquire more than one’s fair share of the world’s limited resources is so powerful that we cannot leave it to the

public to control. Higher-level thinking is required, and the motive of equalizing society is not yet acceptable to its greedy or aggressive members.

“There is currently no comparable medium for progressive authors and educators to present their issues to students as they wish. A ruling for Algoriginality is therefore tantamount to censorship.”

The judge considered the arguments and appeared to be highly unimpressed. “The suit is dismissed,” he ruled.

Donna breathed a long sigh of relief as she watched Aaron and Ruben hug. The ruling was so quick, she knew the judge must have reviewed all the materials prior to the hearing. She smiled at Aaron as he came down the aisle, looking as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. As she shook Ruben’s hand and thanked him, she caught Adine’s eye as she passed by. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips pressed into a thin white line.

“Will you join Nora and me for dinner tonight?” Aaron asked. “We’ll celebrate.”

“I would love to, but I already have plans,” Donna said, blushing. She didn’t want to go into detail with Aaron and Ruben, but for the first time in over a year, she had a date.



The man Donna was meeting was Wendell Thomas, a columnist for the *Globe* whose pieces she followed closely. Lately, his articles had focused on the problems in education. A mutual friend had suggested they meet. During her brief phone conversation with Wendell, Donna had been delighted to learn that he knew about SchoolTools and was eager to talk to her about it.

In fact, Wendell had tried to develop his own novel approach to education

some years back. As Donna got ready at home, she recalled reading about his arrest on charges of illegally dispensing drugs. He had developed an educational program under the name CogNation, which marketed courses targeted to those who believed they were deficient in learning ability. As he explained it, his program, Mindability, was designed to prove to such persons that they could learn easily and give them the self-confidence they needed. The “smart pills” associated with the program, known as Cognagra, were an important psychological component.

The charges against him had been dismissed when authorities realized that the pills contained no drugs, but not before his name had been splashed all over the news and he had gone out of business. She admired anyone willing to stand up and take a chance for what they believed. She knew from reading his columns that he dug deep for the truth. He was committed to exposing what lay at the heart of the growing controversies in public education. He had brought to light the increasing nationalization of the schools, making public what was previously known only within the halls of education departments across the country.

She had decided it was worth taking an evening out of her busy schedule to sit down with Mr. Thomas, even if all that came of it was stimulating conversation and a new friend.

She examined her reflection in the mirror above the vanity. Despite the summer humidity, she had managed to tame her chestnut-colored hair so that it lay in gentle waves. The sweetheart neckline of her pale gray sweater set off the sparkling silver necklace she had chosen on a whim; she had worn it only once before. Unaccustomed to seeing herself in lipstick, she almost grabbed a tissue to wipe it off, but resisted the urge. She needed to shake up her routine a little.

Two hours later, Donna walked into Lucca’s, an elegant Italian restaurant, and

found Wendell waiting at a table for two by the window. His tan skin and close-cropped curly hair were set off by a crisp white shirt and violet-colored tie.

He stood and gave her a wide smile, showing off bright white teeth. Donna was struck by his good looks. The small headshot of him that appeared in the paper didn't do him justice.

"You must be Donna," he greeted her.

"I am," she replied. "It's so nice to meet you."

They shook hands and sat down. The maitre d' poured a goblet of ice water for each of them. Donna was impressed by the atmosphere. In the candlelight, the table settings sparkled against the fine linen cloth. A lone violinist played in a corner.

A waiter approached. "May I bring you a bottle of wine or some cocktails?"

"I'll have a glass of the house red," replied Donna.

"A single barrel for me," chimed Wendell.

When the waiter had left, Donna said, "This is a beautiful restaurant. The view of the city is breathtaking."

"I agree. This is one of my favorite places to come and relax." He paused and captured her gaze. "But you certainly dominate the view."

Donna blushed. She wasn't accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner. Who knew that Wendell Thomas was so suave?

"I've been reading about Cognation and your smart pills," she ventured, changing the subject. "How did they work?"

He seemed happy to talk about the project, explaining that the benefit of the pills lay in their placebo effect. "Taking them prior to reading a one-hour lesson was part of the success. The lessons were based on the students' known interests, and the two worked together to produce a focus on learning. It seems that a large part of

failure to learn comes from the acquired belief that the student is incapable of learning well.”

“Coincidentally, that’s one of the issues SchoolTools is designed to address,” Donna said. “Engaging courseware, combined with the steady measurement of gradual improvements in learning, has shown to be very successful.”

“Yes, I want to know all about SchoolTools. Can I get the inside story?” he joked.

Donna smiled coyly. “I’ll consider it . . . if the food here is as good as you say it is.”

After they had ordered, Donna described how SchoolTools worked, the development of ASESAs, and her own critical thinking campaign.

“I’ve been working closely with Aaron to incorporate critical thinking modules into the new courseware,” she explained. “Demand is growing, not only from students and school administrators, but from businesses as well. We recently hired people for help in administrative duties, sales, and marketing to ease the burden on Aaron while he continues enhancing the program.” She paused. “I don’t know if you heard, but Aaron and Algoriginality were sued by a professor at Harbridge and others who were denied use of the courses because of agreement violations. In fact, I just came from the hearing. The suit was dismissed.”

Wendell raised his glass. “Let’s drink to that!”

They clinked glasses and sipped their drinks as the food arrived. Donna savored her first bite of the seafood risotto. Wendell watched her expectantly with eyebrows raised.

Swallowing, she nodded. “Yes, you were right. It’s fantastic.”

He smiled with satisfaction and dug into his own meal. “I’m fascinated by the

possibilities of this SchoolTools program,” he said. “Is there some way I could be involved?”

“Certainly. We would appreciate your input. You could serve as a voice for SchoolTools and ASESAs. Your columns are widely read.” She paused. “But you should know that we’re facing many obstacles. Boycotts, intimidation, maybe even more lawsuits. I know I shouldn’t be surprised that those who feel threatened by this new movement are putting up roadblocks wherever they can, but it’s exhausting. All the energy and resources invested in stopping it could instead be directed at reforming the system.”

“You’re trying to give progress to the world of ideas and then convince the public to get behind it. If it were easy, it would already have been done.” He gestured with his fork and knife. “Even when it has occurred in the past, it has often slipped away. Remember, civilization has progressed largely due to the efforts of a minority of independent, thinking minds. The most advanced civilizations have created beneficial systems for peaceful self-governance and homage to values that are greater than the self. But those systems are always under threat from those who wish to take power for themselves and deny their fellow citizens knowledge and understanding about the world.”

“Exactly,” Donna agreed, regarding him with interest. “You know, my father cautioned me about intellectuals. I’ve been leery of appearing to be one. It’s so nice when I can spend leisure time with someone else who would also be labeled as such.”

Wendell shook his head in dismay. “Don’t be afraid of being a genuine intellectual, Donna. Too many are pseudo-intellectuals. They absorb large quantities of information but are unable to analyze it critically. They give intellectuals a bad name. I’ve read that the intellectual mind is one possessing a mix of inquisitiveness,

creativity, and rationality.”

“We no doubt flatter ourselves in believing that we are the true intellectuals,” Donna said, and they both laughed.

“It’s true that I’ve never been accused of being too modest,” Wendell joked.

Their eyes met for a long moment as they fell silent. Then the waiter arrived to refill their water glasses.

The rest of the meal was punctuated by animated conversation. Talk soon turned to their personal lives. Donna explained that her mother lived in Florida, her father had died some years ago, and her brother, Eric, lived in California with his growing family. In turn, Wendell disclosed that he had been born in Detroit, where his parents owned a small restaurant, and that his unemployed younger brother had moved back in with their parents a year earlier. Wendell had moved to Boston to go to school and had never left. He had been so devoted to his journalism in recent years that it had left little time for much else. But when he did have free time, he enjoyed amateur photography.

“I’d love to see some of your work,” Donna said.

“I’d be happy to show it to you,” Wendell replied with another dazzling smile.

As they stood to leave, Donna remarked, “This was such a pleasant evening. I haven’t experienced this kind of personal talk for years. What was it that I’ve been wasting my time on? Oh, yes. Education.”

They both laughed.

“We sometimes forget about our other needs in order to focus on our professional interests,” Wendell said knowingly. “It’s refreshing to think about something else for a while.” He helped her put on her coat. “Could we get together again soon and continue this wonderful conversation?”

Donna found herself smiling coquettishly. “I would love to.”

~~~

Monday morning, Donna’s assistant, Frank Dolan, greeted her as she entered her office. “How are you this morning, Donna?”

“Wonderful,” she replied.

Frank paused in the middle of sorting files and looked up at her in surprise. She realized this may have been the first time he had received such a response in all the time he had worked for her.

Taking off her coat, she patted him on the shoulder. “I finally met Wendell Thomas,” she explained. “He is a rock. He is charming and has a presence like no one else I’ve ever met.”

Frank gave her a lopsided grin. “Love at first sight, huh?”

“Love at first sight is a myth, but infatuation at first sight is real,” she said with a laugh. “I’m having a hard time dealing with it rationally.”

A few minutes later, Frank was filling her in on her schedule that week when Roger Carlson poked his head in the doorway.

Donna frowned. “Hello, Roger. Can I help you?”

“I just happened to be passing by,” he said. “What is this I hear about you getting cozy with Wendell Thomas?”

Donna’s hands turned ice cold. How had he heard already?

He seemed to pick up on the impact his question had on her. “What are you thinking?” he asked with an evil grin. “Can we go to the pub tonight and celebrate your moral collapse?”

“I’m busy, Roger. Please find someone else with whom to exchange scandal.”

Roger did not move to leave. Leaning over her desk, he picked up a glass

paperweight and gazed into it. “So the Ice Queen finally cracks. Did you take him home, Donna?”

“Don’t you have better things to do,” she retorted, “such as meet with your divorce lawyer? I heard Martha is going to make you pay for humiliating her. That girl is not even half your age.” Donna did her best to stay away from gossip of any kind, but Roger’s multiple affairs with younger women and his subsequent divorce proceedings were a favorite topic among the faculty. Donna couldn’t help herself now, with Roger goading her.

He changed the subject. “How about that Senate bill that’s in the works – what’s it called? The Hilarity in Education Act?”

“The Unity in Education Act,” Donna corrected him humorlessly. “Yes, I am following it.” Among other things, the new bill would make use of remote, digital courseware illegal to use in the public classroom. It was a bold move by those who opposed education reform. She had learned about the bill over the weekend, but a phone call with Wendell the night before had turned her mind to more pleasant thoughts. Leave it to Roger to put a stop to that.

“What will you do if the bill passes?” Roger asked.

“The bill isn’t going to pass. We are hard at work talking with our friends in the Senate to oppose it. Speaking of bills, how is our funding doing? I hear enrollment is at an all-time low. I hope the administration has a plan for addressing this problem. Otherwise, you and I will both be out of a job before too long.”

Alluding to Roger’s responsibilities as vice president was a surefire way to derail his interest in any conversation. Ignoring her inquiry, he turned to her assistant.

“How about you, Frank? You work too hard. Want to get a coffee and donut with me down at the Hub? You could use a break.”

“But, Dr. Carlson, I just got here.”

“I’ll buy.”

Frank glanced at Donna awkwardly. His freckled face turned an even lighter shade of pale.

“Go ahead,” said Donna, thinking it would get Roger out of her office more quickly.

Frank gave her a long-suffering look and accompanied Roger out the door. Donna folded her arms in front of her on the desk and laid her head down wearily. She had phone calls to make and a Senate bill to defeat. Would it ever end?



OP-ED COLUMNIST

## The Paradigm Change

BY WENDELL THOMAS

Public schools in America today are facing a crisis. Everyone knows it – parents, students, faculty, and government.

Plummeting test scores, overcrowded facilities, and disciplinary problems in the classroom are referred to as “epidemic.” We all blame each other for this state of affairs, and yet no one has been able to put forward a viable solution to the overwhelming problems.

Academic achievement in our schools has never been “excellent” for a number of reasons. Historically, respect for learning among the general public has been modest at best, and was never as

respected as labor and “honest” work. Educators were often described as “eggheads” who never broke a sweat. The country was more manually oriented and less technically inclined. Few laborers respected the skills of scholars, nor would they tolerate doing a lot of book work. The dominant cultures and predispositions of the people who conquered the West had a limited respect for education. Many were intelligent but disguised any affinity they might have for learning. The population was expected to learn basic skills and then “get to work.” The failure to produce advanced academic skills was not an overriding national concern.

The consequences of rapid and paradigm changes in the production of goods and services have caught the nation with relatively little warning. The need to know has grown by orders of magnitude in response to the wave of new learning requirements. And yet, educational standards have declined. The period between the dominance of manual labor and the rise of technology-based production has been brief indeed. The relative affluence of the United States has cushioned the negative impact on most citizens so as to disguise the serious consequences of our lagging education – until lately.

Now, less affluent foreign countries are incentivized to seriously ramp up for the new learning requirements and opportunities.

Some of them are better positioned to use their less costly labor and are more energetically focused on forging ahead in education to adapt to the new circumstances. With seeming suddenness, they have been able to strip away much of the American productivity advantage and to siphon off our wealth. The inescapable conclusion is that Americans' standard of living will continue to decline until our incentive either to learn or "get to work" is restored. The decline is accelerating and will take less time than most can imagine.

The youth of today have become dedicated to consuming and more averse to producing. Many would not consider making bullets, but revel in the act of consuming them on human flesh. Others live in fear of these destroyers, without reasonable opportunities to escape the danger. For these and many other Americans, opportunities to obtain a decent education – and to escape from their dire circumstances – are rare. Meanwhile, as the hope of education recedes, its cost, to both students and taxpayers, continues to escalate.

The American education system remains in a state of paralysis regarding improvement. Students have little motivation to bear down on learning. In the school environment, an attitude of derision toward academic success is pervasive among students, discouraging those who could succeed if given the opportunity.

Good jobs for graduates are declining in number and quality. Taxpayers have little motivation to pour more money into an education system that shows little response to such efforts. Teaching professionals are unable to significantly improve the situation, regardless of their serious and valiant efforts. Many are jaded and no longer try very hard. Others are unqualified to make a difference because they were recently part of the lethargic student population. Many wish to indoctrinate rather than educate. Some serious and disaffected educators with superior talent have given up, abandoned teaching, and gone on to other pursuits.

The problem is us and not some of us. We cannot sanitize the contents of the education beaker by pouring more of the same into it. If we follow the current path, curriculum will continue to focus away from the basics of education. We will not be able to build bigger and more expensive school buildings to handle the growing student population and the demands of technology. The future will not provide for more teachers, nor pay them more; taxpayers will not tolerate the expense. Our vast army of teachers will not survive intact.

The paradigm changes of our society over the last one hundred years require a paradigm change in the educational establishment. It must involve removing government domination



from the educational landscape and extending to the nation's children the opportunity for a diverse education of their choice. The education establishment is about to implode. What kind of system will rise in its place? It is up to us to decide. I believe it will take the shape of the virtual one-room schoolhouse, revised and redesigned with twenty-first century technology for the twenty-first century student. With the advent of new affordable, remote digital courseware, produced through programs like SchoolTools, we have the opportunity to provide educational freedom and the potential for academic success to those who desire it. We must not let it pass us by.

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Education of Juan Rumescuela**

*August 2015*

“Juan, dinner is ready. Come down and wash your hands.”

Nine-year-old Juan Rumescuela turned from his computer and called out, “I’m not hungry, Mom.”

“You are a growing boy,” his mother insisted from the bottom of the stairs.

“Please pause your computer and come on down.”

“Can I just bring a plate up here?”

He heard his mother climbing the steps. A moment later, she appeared in his bedroom doorway wearing her red apron, with her long hair pulled back into a braid.

“We need to see you occasionally, honey. We almost forget what you look like.”

“I’m here all the time, Mom. I homeschool.”

“Yes, but you’re always working on your computer lessons or going to the rec

center.”

“What am I supposed to be doing?”

She laughed and ruffled his hair. “You’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. I’m proud of you. I just want you to be a part of the family at meal time. That shouldn’t be too much of a burden.”

It was hard for Juan to tear himself away from SchoolTools courses. He had made several friends in the online community who were also breezing through and competing with him on the same level in certain courses.

His mom bent down to look over his shoulder at the screen. “Are you enjoying your geometry class?”

“Mm-hm.” He toggled the controls, making the animated geometric figures move around like animals in the forest on the screen.

“Is this the one where each shape has a name and a personality?” she asked.

Juan nodded. “I can add a side to a shape, and it morphs into another animal with another name. It’s cool.” He demonstrated. “Each shape comes to me when I say its name.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

“Lloyd the trapezoid. He’s my pet. He has 360 degrees in his skeleton and cannot have any different number. Each of his joints can change from a few degrees to almost 180 degrees. Lloyd knows all the angles. Watch what happens if I try to trick him into having more than 180 degrees in one angle or less than 360 degrees in all angles.”

Juan fiddled with the controls. Lloyd fell apart into pieces with a loud moan.

“The resurrection button brings him back to almost a square. But Lloyd can’t be square, because then he wouldn’t be a trapezoid anymore. You should see the

trapezoids chase each other in the woods. Nothing crouches like a trapezoid.”

“Do you have a pet square?”

“Yes, but he’s boring. All he can do is grow larger or smaller. Sometimes he grows and scares the little squares, but he never changes shape. He always has four right angles of ninety degrees each. I just call him Square. If I give any one of his angles even one more degree, he changes into a trapezoid. Square has the same number of total degrees as Lloyd. Did you know that?”

“How about a pet triangle?”

“Sure. The triangles live in trees.” He demonstrated how the triangles chased each other like squirrels. “They even have baby triangles. They only have 180 degrees and are very flexible. You should see them hunt for nuts whenever trapezoids aren’t around. They turn very sharp and dig while a right triangle sits up and watches carefully for trapezoids. They make musical sounds like a triangle in an orchestra.”

“I’m glad you like your geo-menagerie pets. How are your virtual saxophone lessons going?”

“They’re okay.”

The plastic saxophone was Bluetooth-enabled to send signals to the computer software for pitch, tone, and duration control. He could watch the monitor to see what he was doing imperfectly. His virtual instructor would show him three more notes and then demonstrate how they could be used to play a tune. It would then follow up to demonstrate what could be done with practice and more patience.

“If you learn to like the virtual saxophone, we can think about buying you a real one.”

“Maybe, but I might want to play an instrument more native to Mexico.”

His mom patted his shoulder. “Okay. I understand. But first let’s give the sax a

chance. How about that new course we got you, Extreme Spelling?”

“It’s great!”

The words in the course were mostly those used in sports in various cultures. He was taking the Spanish course, which made him feel at home. He was learning a lot of game rules as he played the games and learned to spell the sports-related words. The courses were written by a famous coach and automatically upgraded the skill level when he improved enough. It was almost more exciting than a real game.

“Is this the one where you’re able to show yourself as one of the players?”

“Yep. I’ve replaced one of the players from the original hockey game, and now I’m a star. I’m racing the other kids in learning the words. There are seven other kids online trying to beat me. I’m so far ahead of anyone else, I don’t think they’ll be able to catch up.”

“Who are you playing against?”

“Two are Chinese boys in Taiwan. Another one is from England. One is from Israel, and the others are from the U.S.” The players listed their profiles online as a part of the course.

“It sounds exciting. I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“What time will Dad be home tonight? I want to show him something. He’ll freak out over the pickle ball game I found online. It requires some special equipment, though.”

His mother smiled. “Maybe I should check it out. I could use a little exercise, too.” They heard the sound of the front door opening. “There he is now.”

Juan followed Maria down to the dinner table and hugged his father. The house was filled with the smell of traditional Mexican cooking. When he saw the steaming dishes, his stomach growled. “Thanks, Mom,” he said with a big grin.

She had fixed chicken tacos and fried potatoes, with a colorful vegetable salad. A treat. He instantly thought of the orphanage and the special meals just like this one that they had enjoyed every so often. Thoughts of his brother Manny immediately followed. He wondered how Manny was doing. His mom had helped him compose a letter to Manny, but they hadn't heard back yet. Every night before going to bed, Juan prayed that he and his brother would be reunited one day.

Sitting down, Juan, Edward, and Maria joined hands around the table. "Juan, would you like to lead the prayer tonight?" Edward asked.

Juan giggled, suddenly feeling shy. "Okay."

~~~~

Adine was standing in line at an espresso stand on the west end of campus, waiting for her afternoon fix, when she caught part of a disturbing conversation between two professors in front of her.

"That Professor Chris Lindebrecht is a showman and a genius," said the younger man, shaking his head. "The graphics were incredible, and the way he integrated the formulas into the presentation . . . Where did you get the DVD?"

"I have a subscription to his courses," said the older professor, a man in a bow tie whom Adine recognized as Bernard Fuhrman. She and Fuhrman had gone on a date about a year ago, which had ended in a heated argument over pedagogical issues. Adine felt the urge to escape and get her coffee elsewhere, but she was curious about this video. It could be a SchoolTools course. Turning her back to the men, she pulled a university publication from her bag and pretended to read it while she listened.

"It comes from the Netherlands," Fuhrman was saying. "Lindebrecht is phenomenal as an instructor and a master of physics theory. He's so popular in Europe that he couldn't get a large enough campus lecture hall. He's developing these

videos through SchoolTools and making them available worldwide.”

“So you’re not even tending the students in your own classroom while the video plays?”

“Oh, I watched the lecture ahead of time, and we talked about it in class before starting it. We’ll show parts of it during the next class period and discuss the details if anyone has questions. There was no point in me watching it again today. I can guarantee you, the students are giving it their full attention.”

“I’ve never seen such a dynamic demonstration of scientific principles. It’s almost like the entire production crew of *Star Wars* was behind the scenes.”

“Well, I guess it was. Only you can’t recognize any part of the movie on which it was built.”

“What’s it called?”

“*The Periodic Table Wars*,” Fuhrman said. They both chuckled.

The younger man went on, “He combines the study of particles of elements with variables like nuclear energy, ions, light, and gravity in ways I’ve never thought about before. Even though I’m a professor, I almost felt ignorant by comparison.”

“I’ve followed his lectures for almost a year now,” Fuhrman said, “and I can assure you that he is dead-on unless he tells you that he’s speculating. He has a reputation to protect.”

“It’s too bad everyone can’t study under him.”

“I think it’s just a matter of time before all physics students will be learning this way. I can’t imagine competing with him as a lecturer. I can tell you, non-physics majors nod off within twenty minutes at my lectures. No one nods off under Lindebrecht.”

“How can I get a subscription?”

“He has a catalog online. The courses are priced very modestly. He doesn’t need a publisher, so he keeps all of the sales revenues.”

“Could these courses replace professors, then?” A note of worry entered the young man’s voice.

“Well, that is a concern. Some of us may soon be obsolete. We could stick around to give exams and grade them, but some of these courses even provide the tests and do the grading. Then they give recommendations for review and further study based on the student’s performance.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

The two settled into a thoughtful silence while Adine struggled to keep her mouth shut. This kind of behavior at the university, by tenured professors, was outrageous. How dare they cede the classroom to these glorified entertainers! She was just about to turn and challenge Fuhrman when the barista asked him for his order.

Flustered, Adine stomped off. She needed to find out how common these remote courses were becoming throughout the university. Something had to be done.

Chapter 11

A Return to the One-Room School

August 2015

“Wendell, look,” Donna said, pointing to one of the booths ahead of them as they strolled through the street fair. “This is an accessory that recharges laptop computers without the need to plug them into a wall socket.”

“That’s incredible,” Wendell agreed as they approached the booth. He picked up one of the chargers to take a look. The item was called a Computer Energy Commuter. “You could have a whole classroom of students using these units and not need to worry about them losing power or students tripping over cords. It looks like they have to be in close proximity to a power coil plugged into a wall outlet.” A sign explained that a low-power computer could pick up the electrical energy from a wall outlet using a coil plugged into its USB port.

Wendell shook his head, impressed. “Looks like another revolution toward

distance learning.”

“Someone will provide those coils to campus dorms and other buildings so that no one will ever be without computer power,” Donna predicted. “They could be installed in homes and offices as well. Aaron will be ecstatic to hear about this. It’s these kinds of developments that will help digital courseware survive and thrive.”

They walked on through the fair, stopping here and there at booths selling everything from kettle corn to hand-painted silk scarves.

Donna and Wendell had seen each other several times over the past month. Though her schedule normally included little time for socializing, she was finding it surprisingly easy to make time for Wendell. She was glad that today he had agreed to a low-key outing right in her neighborhood. She was looking for a birthday present for Aaron’s daughter Rachel, who was turning ten the following week, and she hoped to find something unique.

They were approaching the food vendors when Wendell stopped and turned to her. “Donna, I’ve been thinking a great deal about SchoolTools and ASESAs. I’ve done some research on this movement, and I want to be involved. What can I do?”

Donna couldn’t hold back a big smile. “I’m so glad to hear that. I know you’d be a great help to us. I want you to meet Aaron and see some of the courses. He truly is a genius.”

“I love the idea of a system that allows students to work at their own pace toward their own interests. Students seldom learn what they don’t want to know. The possibilities for this method of learning are endless.”

“If you’re sure about this, then I have a new development I’d like to share with you.”

As Wendell turned his dark eyes on her, Donna, who was normally calm and

focused, felt her thoughts scatter. She had never reacted this way to a man before.

Smelling the scent of fried food coming from the vendors nearby, she said, “But first, I want a corn dog. I feel like committing a gastronomical sin.”



An hour later, they returned to Donna’s townhouse and set their shopping bags on the dining table to assess their bounty. They had come back with a variety of summer squash, a crate of fresh apples, and a bottle of blackberry wine. Donna had chosen a colorful beaded necklace for Rachel.

Pulling out a chopping block, Donna began washing and slicing the apples for the cobbler she planned to make after lunch.

“So tell me about this new development,” Wendell said as he joined her at the sink, taking over the job of rinsing the fruit.

“Yes. Well, it hasn’t actually developed yet. I need some help to make it happen. I’ve been thinking about the growing number of ASESAs courses and customers clamoring to get them. I think we need a corporation to handle the online distribution of courseware. We could provide courses in the style of rented ‘software as a service’ and not have to sell the programs. Students could matriculate through our online school of sorts. What do you think?”

Sneaking an apple slice into his mouth, Wendell nodded thoughtfully as he chewed. “I like it. I think it has incredible investment potential.”

“Do you want to be a stockholder?”

Wendell raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I would. In fact, I previously incorporated a company that I no longer need for my own educational program. We could get a name change and begin immediately.”

“I even have an idea for a name to use,” Donna said as she continued slicing

the apples. “A friend of mine adopted a young boy from Mexico a few years ago. He’s nine years old now, and his name is Juan Rumescuela. Maria, his mother, contacted me a few months ago to get help in homeschooling him. She has deep reservations about the quality of education in public schools, especially those in small towns like the one where she grew up in Texas. She believes that the lack of discipline in public schools greatly diminishes the potential for learning, as well as sabotages character building. Private schools seem better than public schools, but are too expensive for her family to afford. The other problem is that there can be no religious or ethical training in the public school. So I told her about SchoolTools and the courses available, and Juan has been using them.

“She says he loves them and is already moving through them faster than he has with any other curriculum. She’s going to keep me up-to-date on his progress. I haven’t met him yet, but from what she says, he’s an intelligent, curious, well-mannered boy. This may sound like I’m thinking too far ahead, but hear me out. I thought we could give him some time with the courses, and if it goes well, we could meet with him. If he seems like a good fit, and they agree to it, we could call the company the Juan Rumescuela Academe. Juan would get a royalty from the name that could go into a college fund. What do you think?”

“The name has a nice ring to it. Juan sounds like an ideal poster boy for the movement.”

“I envision a remote education system that will produce the epitome of an educated, thinking student, and do it as the renaissance of the one-room school.” She smiled. “Actually, Juan’s name is perfect phonetically to portray it.”

Wendell lifted his eyebrow again, a mannerism Donna found endearing. He sounded the name out. “Juan Rum . . . escuela. One room school. Brilliant!”

Donna's smile widened as she scooped the mound of apple slices into a large bowl. "Thank you. I think we need to personalize the effort, and Juan is our best opportunity."

"What if things get ugly? He could become a symbol of the threat public school educators see coming from homeschoolers and remote instruction."

"His mother is a determined person, also of Mexican descent, and will stand behind him in the event he is attacked by public school educators. And of course, so will we."

"I wonder if you could persuade your cousin Roger to support the effort."

Donna rolled her eyes. "You wouldn't even go there if you knew him. He gloats over the fact that I've made so little progress with critical thinking in academia. He scoffed when he heard about ASES. His lack of support for my efforts at Harbridge is widely known."

"Why does he like to pick on you, Donna?"

"I don't flatter myself in thinking he's picking on me. He has always laughed dismissively at anything good. He values nothing that is beyond his own self-interest and doesn't care to see any progress. He doesn't want reconciliation between parties, but avoids conflict affecting himself like the plague."

The doorbell rang, startling her. Setting down the paring knife, she wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and moved toward the front door. "Speaking of the devil . . . he's standing at my front door."

Her cousin's face appeared through the etched-glass window on the door. She opened it reluctantly. "Roger," she greeted him flatly.

He stepped inside. "Donna, how are you on this fine afternoon?"

"If I thought you cared, I would tell you what a nice time we had at the street

fair.” She gestured to Wendell. “I’d like you to meet my friend, Wendell Thomas. You may know him from his columns in the *Globe*. Wendell, my cousin Roger Carlson with Harbridge.”

“I’m surprised to find you with a *friend*, Donna,” he said, smiling evilly. “You’re always too busy for social matters.”

“Donna and I share some of the same interests in education, Dr. Carlson,” Wendell said cordially as he shook Roger’s hand, “and I find your cousin to be quite charming, as well.”

“A little advice, Mr. Thomas. Please don’t fall in love with my cousin. Love is a fantasy. We can only hope for a little enjoyment in our lives, so get it while you can, ol’ boy.” Roger slapped Wendell on the shoulder as he passed by on his way to the kitchen. “I can tell you from experience. I’m enjoying my life as a single man – if you know what I mean.”

“Roger, you’re barely even divorced,” Donna chided, following behind him.

He ignored her and began rummaging around in the refrigerator. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I’ve been appointed to replace President Higgins. Girls love a man in power. There was no need to put off dating. Others were already lined up, waiting.”

Donna was embarrassed to call this man her kin. “You should keep in mind that you’re merely a shill for the university. After they’ve used you, they’ll relegate you to the dustbin with former shills. Then what will your girlfriends think of you?”

Finding a glass in the cupboard, Roger poured himself some club soda and took a sip. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. My pension should be able to provide me with enough comforts. By the way, you really should consider keeping some liquor on hand for guests. Whiskey would be nice.”

Donna grabbed the glass from Roger's hand and set it down on the counter. "Why are you here?" she demanded.

He sighed loudly. "My purpose in coming here was to ask you to relent from your cause. The teachers' union is becoming agitated by the shifts they see and are going to move against you with everything in their power."

"As if they haven't already? They're now openly pressuring their members to avoid SchoolTools and ASESAs and have been coordinating boycotts with other organizations."

"You clearly don't grasp the full extent of their influence. I'm doing this as a favor to you. I don't wish you any harm, but I must warn you of the consequences of continuing your campaign and your involvement with ASESAs."

Donna shrugged. "Their attempt to outlaw use of the courses in schools is failing miserably in the Senate."

Roger waved his hand dismissively. "I hear they have plenty of other things coming down the pike . . . things that may even affect you personally."

"Is that a threat? Roger, I am fully aware of the risks of my work. Unlike some people, I do what I think is right, not what is convenient."

Giving her a humorless smile, Roger turned and headed for the door. "I hope to see you at the installation ceremony in a couple weeks. I've begun taking over some of the presidential duties already. If you need me, I'll be in the office of the president, watching you succumb to the crushing weight of mainstream education. Good evening, Donna, Mr. Thomas."

When the door had closed, Donna sat down on a barstool and rubbed her temples. She felt a headache coming on.

"You okay?" Wendell asked, putting his arm around her shoulders.

“I’ll be fine. I think I need a nap. Just wake me up when this is all over.”

Chapter 12

Seeking a New Strategy

September 2015

“Power. That is the only thing,” Adine announced as she stood at the lectern before a sizable crowd of students. “The answer to every question is power. Either you have it or you don’t.”

A girl near the front of the lecture hall raised her hand. Although Adine did not normally encourage discussion in the classroom, she called on the student.

“Surely you have power as a professor here at Harbridge,” the girl said.

“I have more power than you have, but less than many of my peers. If I had power, I would do something about global warming. I would shut down coal-fired power stations. I would end deforestation. I would end excess wealth among the affluent who consume enormous quantities of energy. I would equalize income to achieve equality among everyone. I would expand jobs for the poor with the savings

gained by cutting the salaries given to overpaid workers. I would spread the wealth around fairly.

“The money spent on religion is the most egregious waste of all. Self-appointed ambassadors of God take more of our money than does gambling. There is no way to win it back from churches. Superstition continues to prosper, with no benefit to anyone except to the leaders of religion. They have power over people. They organize with no purpose other than to manipulate and control. Society will advance immeasurably when religion is completely gone. It’s little more than a virtual drug administered for the control of people.” Adine was on a roll.

“Force is often the shortcut to success,” she continued. “When done successfully, none dare challenge it. Note the successful use of force against the Native Americans. Force is created by coordinating like-minded people for a planned adverse takeover of a power base. Universities are a prime target, as well as are local governments. Whole states and the federal government are the ultimate goal, because they have tremendous powers of taxation. In the meantime, gaining power through regulatory agencies is available for incremental progress. Regulations pertaining to equality need to be put into place on which to base standards of fairness. Fairness is the single salient signpost for all economic progress.”

Another student raised her hand. “But who should determine the standards?”

Adine was quick to respond. “We need to exclude the affluent from the process because of their built-in bias. They wield disproportionate power because of their wealth. There needs to be an upper asset limit on their right to participate in resolving matters of equality. We cannot expect them to exercise fair judgment and therefore must exclude their involvement with a means test. It is just the opposite of prohibiting those with no property to vote.

“Power is unlike wealth. Power preempts wealth. If one has more power, another has less. One can have wealth without limiting the wealth of another. A fair distribution of power among groups is the only sound basis for social and economic justice. Wealth will equalize when power shifts. Disproportionate sharing of power must be rectified.”

“Professor, you should run for political office,” a girl said with awe from the front row of the lecture hall. “We would vote for you.”

“Ms. Smalley, I appreciate your support. However, right now my best role is to fill fresh minds with the principles of justice and equality. You have lived long enough under the domination of the affluent that you’re in jeopardy of accepting the situation as being normal and just.”

“Wouldn’t you now be considered among the affluent?” interjected a male voice from the back of the room.

Adine strained to see who had spoken, but the auditorium was too dimly lit.

“Yes,” she replied, “but I still care about the poor. My writings and reputation depend on my caring.” She looked at the clock. “That’s all for today. I’m wrapping up early. See you on Monday.”

Adine hurried out of the lecture hall through a side door, avoiding the mass of students, and headed for her office to check the news. She knew the Senate vote was scheduled today for Bill 1025, also known as the Unity in Education Act. When the lawsuit was dismissed, her attempt to control the distribution of the courses had also fallen apart. So she had turned to education lobbyists, including her friends with the NTA, to persuade Senator John Safford to introduce the bill. The government had plenty of power to control curriculum; they just needed to harness it.

Despite all their efforts so far, the trend to use the SchoolTools-designed video

courses had been growing exponentially. The recent spate of SchoolTools and ASESAs ads, appearing everywhere she looked, seemed to be working. The crisis was approaching epidemic proportions. The public school community was divided, but most of Adine's colleagues rabidly opposed the trend. It had become a furor as the new courses poured into classrooms. The press was reporting concerns that an "underground" system of private education might fracture the long-championed conformity of political thinking.

Just as she reached her office, her phone began to ring. Dumping her blazer and briefcase on her desk, she grabbed the receiver. It was Joan, a lobbyist with the NTA and a close friend.

"I have bad news," she said without preamble. "The bill failed to pass. We did everything we could."

"Damn it!" Adine collapsed into her chair and blew out her breath in a loud sigh. She took a few seconds to tamp down her anger. "Who was it? Brady? Johnson?"

"Yes, and several other moderates. Frontmore made a speech about the failures of the system and how free enterprise might be what saves the schools. Apparently he persuaded some to join his side."

They mulled over their next move, tossing ideas around. "Have you considered the possibility of petitioning the Attorney General to file an action in eminent domain?" Adine suggested. She had made it halfway through law school before transitioning to education. Sometimes the knowledge she had retained still came in useful. "The real offender is SchoolTools, which the ASESAs authors use to make the courses. Several entities have offered to buy the software, but Aaron Isaacs will not sell. What about trying to take ownership of it by force of law? Eminent domain is a

legal way to force the sale of property to the government when it's needed for public purposes. Normally the property would be a parcel of land, but there are exceptions to every rule. If we can get it into the hands of the government, SchoolTools can be locked up and tamed."

"Interesting. I'm sure the government could afford to pay Isaacs whatever the court decrees for it. If you can get me some more information on this, I'll run it by my colleagues."

Adine's next stop was Roger's office, a five-minute walk from the College of Education. The muggy weather, combined with Adine's agitation over the failure of the Senate bill, left her sweaty and uncomfortable by the time she arrived. Her irritation mounted when she approached Roger's office and heard a high-pitched giggle. His receptionist was nowhere to be seen. As Adine knocked on the half-open door, she caught sight of a blonde girl in a bright red halter top sitting on Roger's lap.

"For God's sake, Roger," Adine exclaimed.

Startled, the blonde turned to see who was intruding on their private time, but she made no move to leave her position.

"Hello, Adine," Roger greeted her cheerfully as he gently nudged his pet from his lap. Standing, she straightened her denim mini-skirt over her tanned thighs. "I'd like you to meet Beyoncé. Beyoncé, Adine Dorson."

Adine kept her arms crossed and ignored the introduction. "Did you hear that the Unity in Education Act failed to pass?"

"No, I don't believe I did," Roger said. "I was tangled up in a meeting."

Beyoncé giggled.

Adine wanted to wipe the smirk off his face. "Can you please excuse us?" she said to Beyoncé. "I need to speak to Roger alone."

As the girl flounced out, Adine said to Roger, “I assume you received my memos regarding the use of ASESAs courseware at the university. I’ve identified nine professors who have used at least one of the videos in their courses. One foreign language instructor even introduced the courses into a lab, replacing approved language software.”

“Yes, I received the memos,” he said with a tired expression. “Why do you ask?”

“You will soon be President of Harbridge and will have a great deal of influence. My colleagues and I are very concerned about the direction in which things are going. The initiatives for social change are fading in many areas. The ASESAs courseware is not pressing adequately for civil rights concerns or social and environmental responsibility. Even when those concerns are addressed, the intensity is compromised. And above all, the role of the classroom instructor is being threatened.”

“I hear you, Adine.”

“The professionalism of the new instructors is measurably lower. The courses require less from them, and they are acting more like students than they are professors. The on-campus student population is already declining with the recession, and this remote learning will only hasten that decline.”

“Well, there isn’t much I can do about the economy.”

“The whole range of problems should be addressed, Roger. Education jobs are declining in quantity and quality. If you won’t do something, then I’ll call for a high-level conference on these problems. Administrators and instructors need to be made aware.”

“Feel free to organize something, Adine.”

She shook her head in disgust. “You’re pathetic. You should be leading the charge for these solutions. But I will do the necessary work and get things rolling.”

“I’ll see what I can do to get the university to back it financially, but keep it reasonable. I don’t want to have to go through any red tape.”

“The human resources department in each school could organize meetings at all levels around this subject. They would also enforce the laws in each state requiring that a credentialed instructor be physically present in all classes at all times. That will remove the temptation to let the DVD do the heavy lifting. Unfortunately, some schools are promoting the use of digital instruction both in and out of the classroom. They find it to be less expensive. More and more students are getting credits for attending class remotely.”

“Yes, yes. Well, do what you must.” Roger waved his hand at her dismissively.

Adine’s temper flared. “I will. And when it comes out later that education as we know it was saved thanks to the hard work of persons like myself, I’ll do my best not to blame you publicly for contributing to the downslide.”

“I appreciate it, Adine.”

Chapter 13

Inconvenient Truths

September 2015

Prior to the ceremony and reception for Roger's installment as president of Harbridge, Donna met with him in his new office. The spacious, stately room was well lit by afternoon light that streamed in through large, west-facing windows that looked out over the main lawn. Roger was lounging in a sumptuous leather chair behind an antique mahogany desk that looked like it could have belonged to the university's first president. His paisley tie was askew, and his suit coat lay over the arm of a nearby settee. He held a double Old-Fashioned glass filled with ice and whiskey, his favorite.

"Congratulations, Roger," Donna said cheerfully as she stood before his desk. "The installation has put you on top of the world's most prestigious university. Not bad for a man who started out teaching industrial arts in high school. Remember how

you despaired when they discontinued the course? Who would have believed you would now be sitting in a university president's chair?"

Roger beamed. "I must admit that this has taken me by surprise as well. There were many candidates. I guess I just got lucky. Fortunately, many of them had a record of standing for various things. The board is composed of people with diverse interests. At least one of them had issues with every other candidate. No one found any unwelcome position I've taken in the past. I've always tried not to be divisive."

"Your record on the issues is like a blank slate," Donna agreed. "As a family member, I haven't known of anything you were willing to stand up for, even me. When some boys at school ran my underwear up the flag pole, you just laughed."

He pointed at her jovially. "Now that was funny. You even laughed about it some years later."

She pursed her lips. "Maybe so, but if I had been on the board, it would have cost you my vote for the presidency. So are you going to get me fired for promoting critical thinking?"

"Of course not. That reminds me, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. Adine tells me that ASESAs courses have begun sneaking into the university. Is that your doing? You know, we pay our professors a lot of money to do their jobs. We don't pay them to show videos that someone else created."

Donna laughed. "No, Roger, that is not my doing. The courses are simply competing in the marketplace and finding users who are eager for a fresh approach to education. I realize they may cut into the university's bottom line. In fact, students can get some of the same courses outside the university without paying our ever-rising tuition. They just don't get the Harbridge course credit unless they register here. Sometime in the near future, though, you may have to relent and give students

credit for the courses. In the end, they might even save universities like Harbridge.”

Roger set his glass down on the desk blotter with a thud. “Genius is a pox on society, Donna. Do you have any idea how many ‘smart’ kids are giving grief to the administration of Harbridge? Nearly all of the leaders among them have high IQs. We don’t need to find ways to make them smarter. We already can’t anticipate what they will do next. They don’t need instruction in critical thinking. They rather need frontal lobotomies.”

“They are getting virtual lobotomies in many classes,” countered Donna. “Smart students are being dumbed down in college every day. I just read an in-school study regarding the declining quality of education in many departments.”

Roger shrugged. “Nevertheless, we’re still the standard by which the great universities are judged.” He took a deep drink of his whiskey.

Arms crossed, Donna slowly began walking around the room, examining the portraits of past university presidents that adorned the walls. “You know, some gifted students are electing to skip college because of the anticipated waste of their time. They now have the option of learning efficiently outside the classroom.”

“What about the socialization they’re missing while on campus?” Roger said. “That was the best part of my educational experience.”

She turned to smile at him wryly. “Yes, you learned that part well, but you haven’t caught up on the knowledge and thinking part of higher education. I can’t argue with your success, because not everyone can grow up to be president of one of the world’s greatest universities. You’re able to access the canned speeches from hundreds of years running. Innovation is dangerous for someone in your position. Progress has the strong potential for disaster.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Donna, in spite of the fact that you consider

your observations unflattering.”

Donna approached the windows and took in the magnificent view of the lawn and the surrounding campus buildings. “I just want you to remember that yours is not the only perspective. In the right context, genius is vital. In yours, it is a pox.”

“Good afternoon, Roger,” Adine’s voice rang out, causing Donna to turn. “And congratulations. I’m sure you will perform well as president.” Smiling at Roger, Adine ignored Donna. She wore an outdated burgundy dress that hung shapelessly on her thin figure; it was the same one she wore to every formal university function.

“Thank you, Adine,” Roger replied. “Donna and I were just discussing the use of those SchoolTools courses on campus.”

“Ah, yes. You and I were talking about how they should be banned.” Adine strolled into the room and perched on the corner of Rodger’s desk. “In fact, if I were the new president, I would do my best to elbow out the troublemakers introducing the courses, as well.”

“Let’s not talk about that right now,” Roger cut in, looking at his watch. “Taking sides is a vulgar thing. It offends people and makes enemies. I might have forfeited the presidency had I taken a firm stand at some time.” He drained his glass and stood to put on his jacket.

“Well, you’ve achieved this milestone by whatever you haven’t done in your life,” Donna said, heading for the door. “Now you need to get ready for the reception tonight. As you know, I’ll be giving your welcoming speech. No doubt you will do a fine job as president, Roger. See you at the ceremony.” She acknowledged Adine with a polite nod. “Adine,” she said, and walked out.

~~~~

An hour later, Donna stood before the assembly seated at dining tables

throughout the ballroom as Dean Walden introduced her. The event had supposedly been delayed until fall because of budget issues, but Donna saw no sign that any budget had been involved in its planning. She was appalled by the funds that had been wasted on this overblown affair. Floral centerpieces decorated the tables. One long buffet table was piled with hors d'oeuvres, while another held several flavors of cake. Red and white wine were flowing. Roger would be presented with an engraved watch to commemorate the occasion. Clearly it had not occurred to the board of directors that the funds were badly needed elsewhere.

Smoothing her blue silk skirt, Donna gazed at the expectant faces in the audience. She knew what she had to say would not be popular, but at this point, she had little patience for decorum or empty ceremonies celebrating the appointments of figureheads. When an opportunity arrived to confront the thuggish intimidation she and other reformers were being subjected to, she couldn't let it pass.

She took the lectern. "Thank you, Dean Walden. This gathering of many prime movers in academia is to acknowledge the continuation of a long tradition in American education. We observe that tradition tonight by honoring Dr. Roger Carlson as the new head of our revered Harbridge University. Dr. Carlson has earned this honor by supporting many of the traditions which have developed since the establishment of this school nearly four hundred years ago. He will represent the university well by supporting those traditions as they are evolving.

"The founders of this school believed in the importance of education in perpetuating a free society. Over time, knowledge has grown exponentially and been disseminated throughout the world. The relatively colloquial school has become more conscious of the world's social vagaries and more tolerant of them. Moral imperatives have become options. Gradually, religion becomes less relevant to the university

tradition, and the drive to become tolerant of other cultures has grown into a fetish designed to denigrate traditional American culture. Only traces of the origins of successful American progress remain in formal education. They have been crowded out in favor of a political agenda ignoring or debasing the people and principles from which that progress emanated. Instilling pride in Americans is now discouraged as immodest and in derogation of the goal to develop world citizens.”

Expressions of confusion were forming on the audience members’ faces as they realized this was not going to be a typical speech. Donna pressed on.

“In order to achieve the goal of homogenizing the people of the world, a great deal of knowledge has been expunged from curriculum or has been reinvented. The perceived urgency to create world citizens has brought an era of intolerance of various traditional views within academia. The newly developed agendas are being fiercely advanced. Critical thinking is discouraged by forbidding independent inquiry and debate. Students are encouraged not to deviate from the current popular wisdom and are even graded down for non-complicity with the agendas found in the proffered course materials. Traditional education and values are now harshly attacked in the intolerant style with which the traditional deviances were once attacked. The university’s intolerance toward students who think independently lies at the root of its motivation to avoid teaching critical thinking.”

Some in the audience began murmuring in alarm at this.

Donna raised her voice slightly and continued talking over them. “When new agendas are exposed to critical thinking, their validity may be called into question. This is considered unacceptable, and therefore, those in charge seek to protect them from exposure to criticism. Courses are often cleverly devised, and their underlying agendas disguised, in order to obtain gradual acceptance of these agendas. The

vehemence and collusion of members of the new order is on a plane with that of fanatical religions.”

The murmur in the crowd grew louder.

She went on, “One mission of this great university should remain that of preserving the democratic government of our nation and freedom of thought. Only citizens who are capable of critical thinking about the directions in which we are moving can be reliable leaders and supporters of good public policy. Destructive or unwise policies need to be exposed and ended. The collective wisdom of an independently thinking population must be cultivated. The techniques of inquiry and critical thinking should be taught wherever possible in the nation’s system of education. Logic alone is insufficient. The purpose should be to develop thinking skills among citizens who can then reach a consensus of good policy for government and other common concerns. This effort is not at all popular with many students, who prefer the comparatively effortless role of absorbing spoon-fed opinions. Learning to think is challenging, and many tend to resist it.

“The effort to promote independent thinking has always been resisted and ridiculed by those who wish to rule arbitrarily. The attempt to control the masses is as old as history itself and is for the empowerment of the self-serving few. They believe that they are better able to direct government and civilization than are an electorate. Despotism is always lurking behind this ruse. Civilization suffers when thinking is stifled, debate is restricted, and peaceful options are taken away.

“Unfortunately, I cannot foresee much progress in the future of the teaching of critical thinking in our schools as they are now constituted. The growing agendas of radicals are too fixed and aggressive to expect acceptance of teaching this essential skill. As a consequence of this rigid control movement, there is no alternative other

than to wait for the collapse of our beloved, but rotting, public educational system. It is both losing its effectiveness for learning and becoming prohibitively costly. Only collapse can break its inexorable slide and eliminate this last governmentally imposed monopoly in America.”

As some in the audience began to speak out with raised voices, Donna continued on despite their objections, her voice strong.

“Acceptance of the current circumstances of American education will not save it from destruction. Students, the intended beneficiaries of education, have been relegated to the position of an afterthought in favor of those who deliver public educational services. Alternatives are beginning to appear which will produce the best and least expensive system of education that the world has ever known. The grip of the self-serving education aristocracy and their support apparatus will be broken by a financial collapse of the system. Can it be saved by the raw power of money and the number of supporters? There is no army which can withstand the power of an idea whose time has come. The inexorable economic power of cost versus benefit will prevail as the radical new paradigm of electronic delivery of a just-in-time education system sweeps away the rotted system.”

Donna turned her gaze from the confused and disgruntled faces in the crowd to her cousin, who sat at a nearby table, looking furious. She waited until the chattering had died down, then said, “Dr. Carlson, congratulations on your prestigious appointment. Enjoy your term as President of Harbridge. You are perfectly suited to uncritically lead Harbridge University at this time in history. Harbridge has always been the pinnacle of the educational system which has well served our country for centuries. You will have little ability to change this powerful and increasingly burdensome system. You can court it in the meantime with a serene and unhampered

procession toward its certain end. Thank you.”

A stunned silence greeted Donna as she took her notes and stepped down from the stage, feeling satisfied and unrepentant. The silence was quickly followed by a resurgence of outraged murmuring and some scattered applause. Donna met the angry stares of Adine, Roger, and several others as she took her seat at a nearby table.

After another speech and the official installation ceremony, the crowd was dismissed to the reception. Adine confronted Donna as she was serving herself some punch. “Donna, I cannot believe that egregious address you gave in front of these people. It was offensive. I will bring the matter up to the disciplinary committee as soon as possible.”

“Why can’t you bear to hear what I said, Adine? Don’t you believe in free speech in a university setting? Do we have to censor ourselves to protect your sensibilities? Do ideas offend you to the point that you cannot bear to hear them?”

Adine followed along as Donna moved back to her table, away from the crowd jostling for refreshments.

“We are trying to extirpate such outrageous ideas,” Adine said. “Bringing them up in a public gathering is unconscionable. It only stirs up controversy.”

Donna turned back to Adine. “Your ideas also stir controversy, but you only present them to captive students in classrooms. You won’t risk debating my ideas in a public setting, so you classify them as unmentionable.”

“I enjoyed hearing the remarks,” Wendell commented pleasantly as Donna sat down beside him. It was comforting to have him there.

Roger rushed up to her, punch sloshing in his cup. “I was mortified, Donna,” he choked. “This is not the setting for such comments. You’ve embarrassed me and yourself in front of the entire administration.”



A young blonde appeared at Roger's side in a shimmering red dress that fit like a second skin. "Donna," she said as she extended her hand. "I would say that it's a pleasure to meet you, but you seem to have upset Roger."

Donna gave her a polite smile. "You must be Beyoncé. I've heard so much about you, though not from Roger, I'm afraid. I'm sorry if I've upset him, but it couldn't be helped. When do you expect to graduate?"

Beyoncé waved her hand in the air as she took a long drink of wine. "I have all the time in the world. The tuition will soon be free"—she glanced at Roger with a gleaming smile—"and I expect to be living here long after I graduate. I hope never to hear another horrible speech like yours again. It was totally inappropriate."

Wendell intervened. "Donna bravely said what many of us believe, but most dare not say in this culture."

"I may be messing in my own nest," Roger said, "but I am so tired of not saying what I think. I'm saying it now in spite of myself. As president of this university, I feel confident in expressing my opinion that free will, achievement, and the regard for man as a heroic being are laughable." He paused, seeming to realize that his voice had grown too loud. "Beyoncé, have I had too much to drink?" He squinted at his girlfriend, but turned back to Donna without waiting for a reply. "I don't think so. I'm excited that I can announce my feelings without having to *think critically*." He looked pointedly at Donna. "That nonsense should be banned for creating too much conflict."

Donna ignored him as Aaron approached, looking sharp in a dark suit. She had invited him to stop by the reception if he had time. Nora and the kids were in New Hampshire visiting relatives, and Donna was afraid Aaron didn't get out much when left to his own devices.

Donna laid her hand on his arm. "I'm glad you came," she said. She turned back to the others. "Roger, I'd like you to meet Aaron Isaacs, the developer of SchoolTools. He is the one whose genius in algorithms may prove to be the salvation of our schools."

Roger shook his hand stiffly. "Mr. Isaacs, I understand that your education courses are poised to take over schools around the country."

Aaron smiled politely. "Good evening, Dr. Carlson. Congratulations on your promotion."

Adine hovered nearby, the tension thick. Until now, the only time she and Aaron had shared the same space had been in a courtroom. Wisely, she kept silent.

Roger pushed on. "I've been told that the critical thinking promoted by your courses often leads to misguided attacks on others, just as we saw here tonight in Donna's speech." His speech sounded a little slurred. Donna remembered the glass of whiskey on his desk and wondered just how much he'd had to drink today.

Aaron glanced at Donna with his eyebrows raised. "Well, I've been working with Donna now for some time, and I've seen no evidence of misguided attacks. Donna has a remarkable intellect. I'd say she's a force to be reckoned with in the future of education."

Roger snorted. "I regret that I must agree with you, Mr. Isaacs."

Donna smiled at Aaron gratefully.

A local news reporter attending the event approached Aaron. "Mr. Aaron Isaacs?" He offered his hand. Aaron reluctantly shook it. "Walter Mudd with the *Times*. You seldom appear in public and regularly refuse to talk to reporters. Your SchoolTools software is creating a lot of ill will and divisions among educators. Is it your intention to destroy education as we know it?" He pushed the microphone in

Aaron's direction.

Aaron sighed. "SchoolTools will only supplement traditional education unless it is so superior that it replaces it," he replied. "That is a function of the marketplace and not within my power to control."

The group broke up as others came to congratulate Roger, and the reporter was pushed away. Donna looked at Aaron apologetically. It hadn't been her intention to bring Aaron here to be interrogated. Nevertheless, despite the contentious atmosphere, Donna was pleased. For once, it was interesting to hear real opinions and conversation at a university function, instead of the usual superficial chatter.

She accepted the slice of red velvet cake Wendell brought her and had taken one decadent bite when Aaron turned to her and said, "Donna, can we talk for a moment?" His expression was serious.

"Sure," Donna said through a mouthful of cake, and they sat down at the table. She washed down the cake with a swallow of punch. "What is it, Aaron?"

"I got a call this afternoon from an assistant attorney general of the United States," he said.

Donna's mouth fell open. "What's wrong now?"

"He proposed to purchase SchoolTools and all of its copyrights. Of course, I have no intention of selling, and I told him so. Unfortunately, he put the offer in the form of a threat to file a complaint for eminent domain to force the sale."

"But . . . but if the government gets SchoolTools, they'll treat it the same way energy companies treat patents for energy-saving devices. They'll bury it."

"The impetus is no doubt coming from the education lobby. The government doesn't want SchoolTools for a public education purpose; they want it for the protection of teachers."

Donna nodded somberly. “From what I’ve heard, the issue has become so important to the union that its officers have threatened to change political loyalties unless the campaign to smother us is successful.”

This was a problem of a whole new magnitude. Aaron’s legal expenses could go through the roof if the government pursued this strategy.

Of course, the news didn’t totally surprise her. Since the launch of their marketing campaign, demand for SchoolTools and ASESAs courses had skyrocketed. Courseware authors had been stampeding them and requesting special effects. Finally, Donna had persuaded Aaron that they needed to hire more staff and delegate all but the most sensitive parts of the business to others. The seeds for effective remote learning had been planted. Donna had found office space to rent and hired a sizeable staff of like-minded people to carry on the important, but less critical parts of the business. Now, with the explosion of SchoolTools-made courses onto the market, their opponents were resorting to ever more outrageous tactics. Donna knew the entrenched education forces would spare nothing to win this case.

Once again, she recalled Roger’s warning. She wondered how long it would be before she came under the microscope and they found something to throw at her, too. She lost her appetite and pushed the cake away.

## **Chapter 14**

### **The Power of the Unions**

*October 2015*

Mark Kimler donned his nametag and left his hotel room, heading for the elevators. The second day of the convention for the National Organization of High School Administrators promised to be just as tumultuous as the first. Now that he was in his third year at Central High, he was thrilled when Dorcus Cadbury had decided to send him to the conference. His friend Amir Dhupia, another assistant principal from a neighboring school, was also able to come, and the two had flown to San Diego together. They frequently commiserated about the worsening situations at their schools and were hungry for new ideas. From what Mark had heard, the problems they faced were shared by schools nationwide.

Some parents had met with him and Dorcus to complain about the decline in “real education.” They didn’t like that much of the curriculum being taught was

consumed with the building of self-esteem and controlling relationships among students. They were concerned that skills in math, reading, and writing were not being effectively developed. It was true; SAT scores had been falling for years. Few were happy with the obvious decline, and teachers saw the same problems, albeit from a different perspective. They despaired of holding students' attention to classroom instruction. Constant disturbances had become the norm in many classrooms. Fights among students were increasingly common, and an attitude of disrespect for teachers was epidemic. There was a growing culture of accepting, and even defending, lower academic standards. Some teachers were still committed to teaching the basics, but too many freshmen coming from middle school lacked the skills needed to do high school work. They became disruptive and destroyed the learning environment for those who wanted to master a subject. Some serious students who were continually mocked simply gave up. After a while, few people, even teachers, expected any real learning to happen.

Since teachers didn't like being observed by administrators, Mark had little opportunity to see exactly what went on during the typical school day. The students who were sent to his office gave him an idea, though.

"I'm getting all A's in my classes, even though I never study," a girl named Jessica had told him. "We review the material in class if we have time. We mostly have discussion groups, and the teacher works on her own projects. We get better grades if we leave her alone. She says to keep the noise level 'down to a low roar.'"

Jessica had gotten pregnant later that year and dropped out. Unfortunately, Mark had little time to follow up on a single student. With new budget cuts every year, they were cutting employees left and right, and his responsibilities kept increasing. He could only hope that those who dropped out found a safety net of some

kind – or a job. If they were lucky.

After Mark had waited a couple of minutes at the bank of elevators, a pair of doors slid open. “After you,” he said to a sharply dressed young woman waiting next to him. She smiled, and he followed her inside. He couldn’t help but notice her glossy dark hair, which fell halfway down the back of her white blouse. In high heels, she was as tall as Mark.

“Main floor?” he asked as he punched the button.

“Yep,” she said, gesturing to the syllabus in her hand. “Going to the conference.”

“Same here.”

As the elevator began its descent, he mulled over the various theories about the decline in schools. Many had been discussed the previous day. Teachers blamed parents and voters. Parents and voters blamed teachers. Everyone blamed the administration. Administration blamed everyone else. Without useful solutions on the horizon, the problems would continue to worsen. Mark dreaded to predict how it all would end. He had no answers, either, for those who demanded explanations and change. Blind hope was the only solace, even though hope was not a plan.

The agenda for the conference had been assembled from suggestions submitted by members. Schools from all areas of the nation were represented by their principals and vice principals. Breakout sessions today would deal with various topics, with a panel of four leading each of the sessions, after electing one of their number to act as moderator.

Meeting Amir in the lobby, Mark watched the young woman disappear into the crowd. Amir followed his gaze.

“Did you get her name?” Amir asked with a mischievous grin.

Mark rolled his eyes. “No. I’m not a ladies’ man like you.”

“True. But there’s always tomorrow. How’d you sleep? Get any help from the mini-bar?”

“Are you kidding? No, I didn’t feel like paying twelve bucks for a tiny bottle of bad wine. Besides, I need to be fresh in case I have to dodge any flying projectiles from the audience.”

“It sure got nasty yesterday,” Amir agreed.

The first session for the day, entitled “Excellence in Public Education,” promised to be a good one. They found seats in the audience while the four panelists took their places behind a table up front. Mark noticed the woman from the elevator sitting a few rows up.

The two older members of the panel started off the session with traditional introductory remarks lamenting the loss of excellence and the decline in scholarship among students. They cited repeated studies that appeared to document their views.

The third member of the panel, Ron Jacobs, a small man with thinning gray hair, openly expressed contempt for the views of the other speakers.

“The opinions I’ve been hearing for the last twenty minutes are the traditional laments heard about education for over the past two hundred years. Scholars have engaged in this form of snobbery for centuries. We’re seeing the seeds of learning equality growing in our schools, and this phenomenon is being criticized as regressive. This is a nation of people from all over the world, not just from Europe. The European perspective is rapidly losing to the world perspective. The use of ‘correct’ English and the romanticizing of tradition handed down from long-dead European ancestors are fading as a goal of education. The point of learning impractical and useless information in order to prove intelligence is the height of



vanity. We are now in the twenty-first century. Wake up!” Jacobs’ voice rose sharply, and he pointed a finger in the air to emphasize his point.

He continued, “We are emerging from the fog of a self-righteous culture that is no longer honored by the majority of the leaders of public education. Most are directing their energies to avoid redundant learning of matters that the tech industry has preempted with computers, such as math, spelling, and the preservation of history. Obsolete economic theories, rugged individualism, jingoistic patriotism, and other traditional biases are being rethought, and new ideas are being offered to students who do not cherish the mistaken directions of the past. New directions are being pursued by teaching the skills of sharing, playing together well, and accepting the equality of all people and their philosophies. The teachers of tomorrow reject religious myths in favor of realistic encouragement of students to honor themselves and each other. We encourage them to build a concern for the earth and for its survival.” This prompted Jacobs to smile as he gazed through his wire-rimmed glasses at the audience.

*Obsolete theories? Religious myths?* Mark thought, raising his eyebrows. This debate was getting off to a good start as Jacobs ridiculed his opposition right off the bat. Mark heard a few dissenting comments around him as Jacobs went on.

“The practice of grading children on merit and compensating them on merit when they become adults is now a philosophical dinosaur and an ethical lapse. No child should be left behind as a practical matter, but this should not apply regarding competitive educational matters. Academic achievement and personal initiative are no longer a fair basis for valuing a person or sharing resources with them. The excellence we are moving toward is not narrow scholarship, owned by those who are so inclined, but rather the excellence inherent in the common men and women of the nation and

the world. They are excellent due to the fact that they are human. They should be able to enjoy life without suffering those stifling social constraints imposed by outmoded educational theories.” He held up both hands and concluded with a flourish, “Our manifest destiny as a nation and in the world is to homogenize people into a blend of citizens who equally accept and value those who may not be equally talented. You are hearing the future of educational philosophy. Rejecting it will relegate you to the dustbin of educational history.” He glanced at the moderator. “I yield the floor.”

Conversation in the audience increased as the moderator rose to acknowledge the comments. “Mr. Jacobs, your insights are shared by more educators than it might appear. Ms. Greenberg? Do you have a response?”

A blond, heavy-set woman on the far right of the panel leaned toward her microphone. “I do. Success in pursuing this philosophy that Mr. Jacobs promotes cannot be accomplished without changing many current educational policies. The battles over No Child Left Behind are really about this issue. The tests are designed to expose academic failure, and the resistance to them comes from educators who know they cannot achieve the goals regardless of how hard they try. They resent the exposure of this to the public. By changing the academic standards to those more suitable to the average student, far fewer will ‘fail’ academically. This is the unspoken but growing consensus which we are afraid to face or verbalize. It concedes our failure in pursuing the goal of academic excellence for all students and accepts the reality of the situation.”

She turned to look at Jacobs. Her voice was stern. “Mr. Jacobs, your misguided modern philosophy of education is being exposed to the light of day. The time has come to face our fears, to realistically redefine our goals, and to change educational policies that impede reaching them. We see the failure to reach important goals in

every venue. I believe that the main issue we are overlooking is that students differ in their interests, initiative, and academic abilities. Each possesses different kinds of intelligence. The differences hinder them from having the same level of success in their various academic goals. The eager student and the defiant student, placed in the same class, are educationally co-debilitating. Personality differences among people are often stark and are blindly ignored at the peril of all concerned. We must find a way to differentiate the aptitudes of students to accommodate their differences without labeling some as failures and without orchestrating failure in others. The definition of excellence depends on the person and the situation. Education must be individualized in order to serve the students.”

A smattering of applause greeted her comments. Mark found himself agreeing with her. Amir leaned toward Mark and whispered, “It would be great if it wasn’t a fantasy. Who’s going to pay for it?”

The session ran long, and Mark and Amir hurried to the second session of the day with only a few minutes to spare. This session, which pertained to change needed in traditional approaches to education, was moderated by Lyle Stephenson, superintendent of a New Jersey school district. Four members gathered at the head table, prepared to present their views.

Samuel Wallen, a superintendent from Ohio, spoke first. He took the modern, politically correct position that there was nothing wrong with education in America today. He listed the planks of the National Teachers Association platform for advancement of the profession and said nothing about the state of learning. He did criticize external problems, such as the lack of funding and the lack of support from parents and voters.

Another panelist named Gwen Harris, an administrator from California with a

shock of curly red hair, leaned toward her microphone to speak. Frowning, she seemed dismayed by Wallen's remarks. "The bulletproof arguments of the educational establishment are so deeply ingrained that few can think outside of them. They are bulletproof because no one is permitted even to suggest that they are flawed. The steamroller of unified sentiment levels dissent of any kind within the broad, controlling power of the education cartel. At the risk of inviting serious ridicule, I must suggest that education find a way to pursue the following eight currently unthinkable changes." She paused to review her notes, then gazed at the audience with a challenging stare. "Number one, abolish tenure."

A commotion erupted as many in the crowd began talking at once.

Ms. Harris's voice rose over the noise. "The abolishment of tenure is the single most potent change that can occur for the improvement of learning in schools. We know that any efforts in this direction will be viciously resisted by the teachers and the union. The political power of the education lobby and the difficulty of producing such a paradigm change makes the suggestion appear preposterous and not worth serious consideration. In reality, tenure benefits only teachers, not students. These benefits to teachers now override the interests of students and learning. Teachers have come to believe that whatever benefits them ultimately benefits the students. As with most people, they can believe nearly anything when their jobs depend on it.

"The proposed retreat from tenure is not crazy talk. It only appears to be such. Foreseeable major economic shifts will be so powerful as to be game changers. A stressed public and private economy is a rising force that cannot long be withstood by any group. The need to find economy in the world's most expensive governmental service cannot be ignored beyond some critical point.

"The reduced benefit of the educational enterprise is the other falling shoe.

Old-fashioned cost/benefit economic principles cannot be resisted forever. Reality is approaching with a vengeance. The decline in our combined abilities and efforts compared with those of others in foreign countries is creating a climate for crisis.

“America’s unionized teachers are sending more of their own children to private schools that have no union teachers. This is a reality forced by reduced ‘benefit.’ Teacher quality is often better in the private venue, partially because the teacher’s freedom to shirk his or her duties is not protected.

“Performance and excellence matter. We talk the excellence talk in public schools, but often do not walk the walk. We have lost the power to enforce it. Efforts to enforce performance and excellence are often portrayed as teacher abuse. Learning progress suffers demonstrably as a result, and another notch is cut from the trunk of the public education tree.”

Harris glanced at her notes. “Change number two: provide merit pay.”

Someone behind him laughed loudly. Mark saw several heads in the crowd shaking in disbelief. He knew that the unions would never allow such ideas to be considered. School administration never raised them as possibilities, even in private meetings.

“Yes, merit pay,” Ms. Harris went on, “an old idea with a future. It has been hysterically resisted by teachers’ unions as being unfair. Again, they are considering the best interests of the teachers rather than the best interests of the students. Teacher merit is properly intended to produce better student learning. The typical response is that merit cannot be objectively evaluated. This is true to a small degree. Small degrees of merit can be overlooked. However, the large differences among teachers are blatant. The clearly qualified and the clearly unqualified are easily grouped. Testing and other means of evaluation are available if they are permitted to be used.

Arbitrary decisions are likely to occur. Some occur in private schools. Many public school teachers who are unfit to teach would never survive the private school environment. The educational threat to students from those teachers is now given secondary importance.

“Change number three: avoid grouping, or inclusion, of students with diverse intelligence levels. One of the problems in public schools is the policy of including students of all levels of intelligence in the same classes. More rigorous courses for gifted students are increasingly being cut because the less prepared students cannot benefit from them or comprehend them. The gifted students quickly become bored with the slower pace. This dilemma serves only those who want to teach behavior modification instead of academic content. For those who want to teach academic content, the fact is that all students have varying degrees of interest in different subjects and are motivated to learn differently.

“Promoting competitive learning is discouraged because teachers worry about challenges to self-esteem. These problems are real. The debilitating effect on some students of getting behind discourages their incentive to learn. These students can benefit from classes with lower academic requirements without forcing them to intellectually drop out.

“Foreign students are not insulated from these problems. Most fail in their own school systems to some degree in relation to others. In that environment, the strong, whether by determination or intelligence, rise academically, while the weak fail. In our system, the strong fail by never being given the opportunity to reach their potential.

“Change number four: Accommodate for individual interests. After intelligence, interest is the greatest facilitator of learning. In a world where

information is expanding exponentially, focus is required. No one can learn everything. The propensity of people to have diverse interests is a given. Some like to talk about people, some are more interested in events, and there are others who care little about either, but who dwell on ideas. Each group is less motivated when studying outside their interests. Some have a strong aversion to wasting their time in the studies outside of their type of interest. People who care more about relationships may have little interest in sports. People interested in sports are less likely to spend time reading about political theory. All three categories overlap, but their primary interest skews and misdirects the perception of the observer. For example, courses in spelling could be designed around these individual interests. By learning to spell a word as applied to a particular topic of interest, the importance of spelling becomes more readily apparent to the student.”

*What a unique approach*, Mark thought. He could imagine how students could become instantly more engaged in a subject. He wondered if the remote digital courseware he had heard about allowed for this kind of personalized study. It suddenly dawned on him that this was probably part of its allure.

“Unfortunately,” Ms. Harris was saying, “our current system of education cannot accommodate this sort of customized need for its students. We are deep in the pedagogical ruts of the past. One problem lies in trying to teach individuals generically. Computers are the current and coming answer to meeting the diverse needs of students. Teachers benefit from the generic approach, but students suffer. Education fails to reach its potential. Finding a way to solve this problem is critical to the future of learning.

“Change number five: Control student conduct. Another vital point of needed reform is separation of students based on their conduct. Defiance from students

alienated by the mere concept of classroom learning explains much about the compromised progress we see in education. Attitudes in the classroom are as catching as viral infections. Jaded students can cripple the interest of others with a single jeer. Those who insist on disrupting the pace of a class should be excused and sent to a class where students have like attitudes. They operate as saboteurs of the minds of their classmates. They take away, often forever, critical opportunities to timely learn the material being taught.”

Mark couldn't agree more. This was the number one problem he dealt with on a daily basis at Central. He felt so powerless in trying to solve it, and he felt such sympathy for the students caught in the middle, who were just trying to learn – or even merely to survive.

“The detractors may not be willing to learn,” Ms. Harris continued, “but it is not their prerogative to compromise the educational progress of their peers. The point is not to run unreasonable Gestapo-style classrooms, but rather to give everyone a reasonable opportunity to learn.

“Change number six: Do away with indoctrination courses. Many non-traditional courses have been introduced as a part of the standard curriculum. Moreover, the promotions of ‘con-traditional’ political and moral agendas are the point of most non-traditional courses. One of the goals is to extinguish various beliefs learned at home. The school classroom holds a captive audience of young minds on which to impose current agendas. This is indoctrination.”

Mark thought of the curriculum he had seen for several of the science, history, and health classes at Central High that could easily be labeled indoctrination. Some of it had been controversial, such as the sex-ed materials teaching sexual good manners and techniques. Several parents had complained about the materials. But no students



had seemed to notice the rewriting of American history in their textbooks or the environmentalism that took the place of traditional studies in their science classrooms.

“Many supposedly innovative and urgent agendas have been pressed and quickly abandoned as being mistaken,” Ms. Harris was saying. “For example, the campaign against nuclear energy was fought until it compromised our national economic strength. Other countries have successfully adopted the improved nuclear technology. Hysteria dominates many current issues before reason wins out. These issues are better left to adults who are already educated. The first business of schools should be promoting academic skills, not political agendas or controversies.

“Change number seven: Use non-certified instructors. The need to provide qualified instructors and deliver effective learning is epidemic. This is true especially in the hard sciences. Qualified instructors – experts in their fields – without certification are a valuable source of knowledge. ‘Certification’ no longer certifies qualifications to teach, but is often just a political license to teach. The certificate is issued by the respective state governments solely upon the recommendation of a non-governmental association. Cartel organization and member orientation are the salient goals of the process. Solidarity of the profession is better assured. This solidarity is good for the profession, but does not necessarily promote the educational needs of students. Organization membership trumps ability to teach. This rule is strictly enforced unless no certified person can be found to fill a teaching vacancy. The needs of the students in the classroom are disregarded in deference to the eligibility policy. Inferior performance by the certified instructor is not a matter for consideration if a certified person is available. The resulting lost educational opportunities for students are disregarded with the reputed callousness of a wicked stepmother. The point of teaching is missed in order to accommodate the instructors.”

This was an idea he hadn't heard before. He glanced at Amir with his eyebrows raised. Harris made some good points. Mark knew from experience that a teacher's credentials were no guarantee that he or she had applicable skills or knowledge.

“And finally, change number eight: Allow discussion of morality and religion. Morality and religion are so essential to the human experience that excluding them from the educational experience is like removing the soil from under our souls. The wisdom of the ages has ongoing value to each new generation. Spirit matters. Experience is dearly won, and the fact that morality is never completely pure and never perfectly replicated is a poor argument for ignoring it. The fact that differences have and always will exist is not a good argument for throwing out all such instruction. Every person should have access to organized instruction in this discipline just as readily as any other category of accumulated knowledge. Many parents send their children to any faith-based school because the teaching of any ethics on a daily basis is better than the teaching of none. The improved moral quality of the students is evident. Public school must adapt to and provide this kind of instruction or lose out to the private sector. The trick is to *allow* individual instruction rather than control it. We have a long way to go before this will occur in public schools. Thank you.”

“Gwen Harris is a radical with no common sense,” Ron Jacobs erupted from the other end of the table, without being recognized by the chairperson. “The abolishment of tenure would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to administrators. The routine of filling positions would be so disrupted by the existence of vacancies that chaos would rule. We would be constantly bombarded with requests to replace those less-than-adequate teachers. We could never get this past the NTA or the legislatures they have cultivated.”

Lyle Stephenson, the moderator, stood and tried to interject. “Mr. Jacobs, if you’ll please—”

“Merit pay is an entrepreneurial concept that doesn’t belong in the field of education,” he continued, ignoring the moderator. Stephenson gave up and sat back down while Jacobs ranted. “No administrator could survive the challenges of rating teacher performance when pay is involved. The job of judging teacher performance is highly subjective. Here again, we see the onslaught of lawsuits second-guessing our decisions. We could not survive the barrage of requests we would get for merit pay raises. We keep the teachers who cannot find better alternatives to teaching. They are more controllable and are a more dependably stable of workers.

“Having and using the ability to hire non-certified instructors is the equivalent of union-busting. Such personnel are not oriented to serving the interests of the pedagogical profession. We must maintain a cohesive structure that is manageable by the administration. Opening up jobs to an unorganized workforce has many scary aspects. They are typically less controllable and more independent thinkers than are union members. We have some rogue teachers already, but nothing like what might appear from out of the public. Hiring experts from various disciplines would fracture our exclusive hold on the direction of education.”

Hearing this, Mark knew it was exactly the kind of thing Dorcus Cadbury would say if he were to suggest any of the innovative changes Ms. Harris had presented.

“Gwen Harris should be removed from her position as administrator,” Jacobs bellowed. “Her wild ideas pose a serious threat to education. The suggestion of separating highly motivated students from the others has the potential for great harm. The gap between gifted students and typical students causes typical students to have

feelings of inferiority. Their self-esteem may be damaged, and their potential as confident and independent decision-makers can be crippled for life.

“There is no way public education can accommodate the individual interests of the students. Ms. Harris may be right that learning improves when there is greater interest in the subject matter, but it is inconceivable to seriously suggest that this is a deliverable. We have maxed out our resources just serving up the common-denominator courses. It is impossible to provide classes for each of the myriad interests of students. We couldn’t find the courses or teachers to teach them. The small numbers of students with common interests would multiply the needed number of classrooms. Gwen is engaging in science fiction and wasting our time bringing up these problems with no answers.” He scowled derisively.

“The idea of controlling the behavior of modern students went out with the introduction of Bart Simpson to America’s students. The idea of separating students based on conduct in class is as archaic as is using the proverbial dunce cap. We cannot regulate incorrigible attitudes and cannot command student respect for the job teachers are doing. Controlling violence is a challenge today, especially when some parents admonish their children not to ‘take any crap from your teacher today.’ Society has changed to the point that Gwen’s ideas are preposterous.

“We live in an information society where students are impacted by adult ideas from the home and the media. Our teachers are conscientious in trying to fix incorrect thinking brought from home. They try to act as surrogate parents in molding student minds regarding lifestyles and values. The U.S. Department of Education provides handy and expertly prepared lesson plans of every kind that support the public good. Teachers gravitate toward using them, even if they conflict to some degree with their own beliefs. No administrator dares to bar the use of these teacher aids.”

A commotion had arisen in the audience as several who agreed with Jacobs tried to shout down those who disagreed with him. Meanwhile, Gwen spoke in rebuttal.

“Each and every one of your arguments is directed to the impracticality of implementing my ideas,” Gwen said into the microphone. “You haven’t made one point against the *virtues* of those goals. Your sincere desire to better educate students is hobbled by the current system of education. No, these goals are not practical in the present pedagogical context. The point of expressing them is to suggest that the context needs to change. None of us can change it by anything we do. Only the irresistible force of economic necessity will cause the changes. These forces are gathering. They are gathering like storm clouds that we are mostly ignoring, hoping that they will not come to our neighborhoods. We, as leaders of education, need to have a contingency plan for the time when their fury strikes us. Most will claim there was no warning. At some point, we will look back and acknowledge that we were willfully blind to the signs. My suggestions will surface more frequently in the future and will suddenly become ‘practical.’ They will be self-evident when irresistible economic reality destroys what we now consider to be immovable policies. All that will remain will be the ashes of a failed teaching methodology which will be overtaken by the coming digital revolution. The seeds of that revolution have been planted and are bursting with energy toward improving learning in the world.

“None of these ideas about education are mine. They are being implemented in private schools all over the nation without my input. Private schools are outperforming public schools on the whole and not because they have smarter students. They are just teaching them smarter by applying the very concepts I have just mentioned, which you deem “impossible.” They will continue to surpass public

education by correctly applying the new genre of digital courses that are already becoming available.”

Stephenson stood and waved his arms in the air to gain the attention of both the speakers and the audience. Several of those sitting in front of Mark and Amir had stood and were walking out, perhaps too uncomfortable with the tone of the discussion.

“We’re out of time,” Stephenson announced. “Thank you to our panelists for sharing their ideas. We’ll have a lunch break now, and the next session will begin at one o’clock.”

Mark and Amir looked at each other in shock as they stood up. “Wow,” Mark said as they filed out with the jabbering crowd. He knew that many of the ideas presented were hotly opposed by the NTA and other educational organizations, but he’d had no idea they could spark such strong emotions. Gwen Harris’s points seemed reasonable, and she had made an excellent argument for reform. Her closing comments about the digital courseware being used by private schools reminded him of the ads he had seen for SchoolTools courses. He had never actually seen one of the courses, and Dorcus made certain that none of them made it onto campus at Central. But he was intrigued, especially if they opened the door to the kind of innovations mentioned here today. But he didn’t see how the digital courseware or Ms. Harris’s changes could ever get a toehold. The NTA’s control over public education was powerful, and teachers and administrators alike had been taught the same entrenched ideas for years. What would it take for reform to begin? Would it ever be possible?

He and Amir agreed to get lunch at a café down the street, away from the contentious atmosphere of the conference. He noticed the woman with the long hair standing alone near the revolving door, looking indecisive.

Mark glanced at his friend, who raised his hands in surrender. “She’s all yours, man. Invite her to lunch.”

Setting aside his usual inhibitions, Mark approached her. “Hi, again.”

Her smile seemed genuine. “Hello.”

He stuck out his hand. “I’m Mark.”

They shook. “Maggie,” she replied.

“Would you like to join my friend and me for lunch? We’re heading to that sandwich place a few doors down.”

Glancing at Amir and back to Mark, Maggie thought about it for a moment. “Okay. Sure.”

Mark tried not to let his excitement show. He gestured toward the door.

“After you.”

~ ~ ~

OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Looters of Civilization

BY WENDELL THOMAS

The observance of certain rules is essential to maintain a functioning civilization. These are not religious laws, as such, but they are signs of a healthy culture. Most of them are itemized in the twelve points of the Boy Scout law: *A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.* The intellectual looters of today, however, attack many of these values as archaic.

Because they tend to stifle the selfish lifestyles of the looters, every one of these values has been ridiculed at one time or another. In fact, the looters consider many of them humiliating, obscene, and counterproductive to their modern agenda. As fewer and fewer citizens follow the rules for a healthy culture, society becomes more dysfunctional. The looters do not accept the principle that any group of people can be uncivilized. “They just have their own standards,” it is claimed.

Modern pedagogy, too, is stymied by the difficulty of agreeing on cultural standards. The risk of offending some students is so high that most schools have abandoned any attempt to deal with the subject. Even many homes avoid the subject. The looters believe that no cultural opinion should be shared with others. Yet the abandonment of giving instruction is an invitation to abandon civilization. The looters want to destroy the wisdom of the ages as being deleterious to society. They prefer to start from nothing rather than try to reform what exists. As a result of this reduced instruction in cultural values and standards of behavior, the health of civilization is declining.

One solution to this problem, a way of exposing students to the wisdom of the ages, is to teach them individually on their own computers. The remote digital courseware that has recently exploded onto the educational scene offers this opportunity. Undoubtedly, courses on culture, religion, morality, and value systems will all contain bias of a



sort. Bias exists in every circumstance of culture. Yet it should be expressible openly and properly by any courseware author or instructor as long as it is not imposed on unwilling students.

Those who cherish their culture and want to preserve it now have an opportunity to present it privately in compelling ways within their homes or schools. They can furnish it with their choice of remotely accessed courseware. No teacher in the classroom need participate in what might be a conflict of cultural views. These superb digital courses, presenting a variety of viewpoints, can help preserve culture. Only the best offerings will survive in the marketplace for long.

Since few can agree about culture in our multicultural world, many have decided that none of it matters. "None can agree, so they must all be wrong." Many who would like to preserve their culture do not want to insensitively impose it on others. But they have not been successful in stopping the looters from moving forward in the guise of nonpartisans. The only solution is to bring back cultural instruction to those for whom you have responsibility and to oppose the interjection of cultural poison into their young minds. We cannot expect sensitivity from the looters, so we must challenge them in the same way that sexism and racism have been challenged. Civilization depends on it.

## **Chapter 15**

### **Taking the Stand**

*November 2015*

It was a drizzly afternoon when Donna and Wendell arrived at the courthouse in downtown Boston for Aaron's eminent domain hearing. The assistant attorney general had filed the complaint just as he had threatened to do in his attempt to seize SchoolTools. Attorney Ruben Stoneburner had in turn filed a motion to dismiss the complaint, but the motion had been denied. Fortunately, a large and growing group of interested compatriots had come forward to support Aaron, Aloriginality, and ASESAs. Donna hoped this issue would put many people on their side of the fence. A representative of a friendly think tank had contacted Donna and offered to back them as far as was necessary, promising the services of experienced counsel and support staff, and they had been working with Ruben on the case ever since.

As Donna and Wendell ascended the steps to the courthouse, she saw Aaron,

his wife, and his lawyer conferring outside. Nora and Aaron looked exhausted, with dark circles under their eyes. Donna thought Nora's hair was looking a little grayer lately.

"Donna," Aaron greeted her wearily as she approached.

After they had all exchanged pleasantries, Donna asked, "What happened at the previous hearing on your motion to dismiss?"

Ruben, characteristically animated and warm, was happy to explain. "Well, the motion was based on grounds that SchoolTools is not the kind of property that can be taken in this kind of action. This is typically used to acquire real estate needed for public improvements. Another issue is the fact that property of this kind cannot reasonably be valued for the purpose of paying just compensation. Finally, the government could simply buy copies of the courses instead of purchasing the engine on which they're built. The engine is unique and has no comparable for valuation purposes. But the motion was denied because the court wants to hear testimony on the issues in contention."

"How do you think the jury will decide?" Wendell asked.

"We don't have to worry about that. Eminent domain cases aren't allowed to have a jury. We already know that the case is assigned to Judge Harris Lampert. He has a reputation for honesty and wisdom. We may get a fair hearing. He's mature and independent. He has no concern about keeping his job and was appointed by a former president twenty years ago."

"Ruben intends to call Adine Dorson as a witness," Aaron said.

Donna's eyes widened. "This should be interesting."

As the time approached for the proceedings, they entered the courtroom and took their respective seats. Donna inhaled deeply as she and Wendell sat in the gallery

and looked around the stately chamber. She always got goose bumps when she entered a place where justice was being decided. She took Wendell's hand nervously. Adine Dorson sat on the far side of the gallery. Donna noticed several employees from Algoriginality in the audience and smiled at them. A friend and colleague from Harbridge, Jamila Shahi, was also sitting nearby and reached over to squeeze Donna's hand.

Judge Lampert began, "Before we take evidence regarding the value of the property sought to be taken, we will take testimony on the matter of whether SchoolTools is an appropriate kind of property to be the subject of eminent domain. There are few cases in point to guide the Court. Part of the consideration is to determine exactly the nature of the product. Are counsel ready to proceed?"

"Yes we are, Your Honor."

"Mr. Muscarella, you may call your first witness."

The attorney for the government stood. "I call Mr. Dominic Jimenez."

Mr. Jimenez was a round man dressed in a gray sport coat and a red bow tie.

After he was sworn, Mr. Muscarella proceeded with his questioning.

"Please state your name and place of residence."

"I am Dominic Jimenez. I live in Baltimore, Maryland."

"What is your occupation, Mr. Jimenez?"

"I am Assistant Secretary of State of the United States of America."

"Please describe to the Court the reasons you have filed this petition for eminent domain."

"We are seeking to protect the essential role of public education in America. We have become the most powerful nation in the world by providing free education to our children – not only in the delivery of knowledge, but in the nurturing of youth

in the time-honored routine of providing suitable school rooms, teachers, and books. This tradition is currently in jeopardy with the eruption of SchoolTools onto the scene. This phenomenon has created rips in the fabric of pedagogy. Sound curriculum is being compromised and fractured by private sources outside of the traditional leadership. Storms of protest to the legislatures and to the Congress have been unsuccessful in stemming a tide of rogue and unapproved courses. These courses have the potential to cause counter-cultural and regressive thinking. The cultural progress of especially the past forty years is in great jeopardy. Unscientific thought regarding the environment is lying in wait to capture impressionable minds. This technology is capable of wrecking the advances in thinking regarding social policy. The availability of inexpensive digital instruction has allowed the proliferation of these problems at an unprecedented rate. A fast and complete cure for this new curse is urgently needed. This tragic turn of events can be stopped by the Court by granting the prayers of the petition.”

“You may cross examine, Attorney Stoneburner.”

“I have no questions, Your Honor.”

When Mr. Jimenez had stepped down, the judge said, “Mr. Stoneburner, you may proceed with your witness.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. May it please the Court, I call Dr. Adine Dorson to the stand as an adverse witness.”

Adine approached the stand, dressed in a beige pantsuit, looking cool and composed.

The bailiff said, “Please raise your right hand and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God.”

“I affirm only.”

“Very well. Please take the stand.”

She sat down.

“Please state your name and place of residence for the reporter,” Ruben began.

“I am Adine Dorson, and I reside in Boston, Massachusetts.”

“What is your occupation?”

“I am a professor of education at Harbridge University.”

“Have you become familiar with courseware products from ASESAs members?”

An expression of disapproval appeared on her face. “Yes, I have.”

“About how many of the courses have you reviewed?”

“Over one hundred.”

“What have you determined about the courses?”

She shrugged. “I am appalled by them.”

Hearing this, Donna blew out her breath in irritation.

Ruben crossed his arms. “Really? Why?”

“They very often present issues in a way that supports outdated traditional views of society. These views are dangerous.”

“Why do you consider them dangerous?”

“Many of the traditions which have long been glorified in this country are, in fact, shameful.” She paused, as if weighing her words, then seemed to pick up steam. “From the time Columbus landed to the most recent abuses of women and minorities, incalculable harm has been heaped on us by the dominant culture. Modern educators and curriculum are helping to reverse students’ outlook to expose these offenses. Such views are not as sharply pressed in the SchoolTools courseware. In fact, some of the courses turn back the clock on educational progress by glorifying those very

values that must be rejected today. It is also worrisome that all agendas are challenged by the process of critical thinking taught in the courses. This exercise confuses students, who need to hear an unqualified right answer from a teacher. Students go to school to learn their lessons, not to learn how to think and question authority. It's outrageous." Her voice rose to a shrill level. "The National Teachers Association is united in its opposition to the use of SchoolTools courses and is opposed to the concept of teaching solely by digital media in or out of the classroom. The best form of education is that spoken by a teacher in front of students. This tradition is sacred." Apparently realizing that she had begun to ramble, Adine settled back in her seat and looked down at her hands sheepishly.

"No more questions, Your Honor," Ruben said with a slight smile.

"Thank you, Dr. Dorson," said Judge Lambert. "You may step down. You may call your next witness, Mr. Stoneburner."

While Adine scurried to her seat, Ruben said, "I call Aaron Isaacs."

Aaron was sworn and took the stand, looking nervous and out of his element.

Donna felt for him.

"Please state your name and place of residence for the reporter," Ruben said gently.

"My name is Aaron Isaacs, and I reside in Concord, Massachusetts."

"What is your occupation?"

"I am the owner of Aloriginality, Inc., a corporation that has developed SchoolTools."

"What exactly is SchoolTools?"

Aaron cleared his throat. "SchoolTools is a software program based on algorithms," he answered carefully. "Its primary attribute is its ability to enable

courseware authors to use the substrate of movies and modify them into educational videos.”

“Who uses this software?”

“Experts in many fields use the software to create courseware in their particular disciplines.”

“What are the most common objections to the courses?” Ruben asked.

Aaron thought for a moment. “Well, one is the charge that the courses teach undesirable philosophies. Another is the challenge to the traditional procedure of having a classroom teacher personally present the content of a lesson.”

“Any others?”

Aaron rubbed his chin. “I guess a third objection is that the courses provide for training in critical thinking. The objection to this lies with the fact that the author’s ideas, and state-sponsored materials as well, are being left subject to question. Some educators are uncomfortable with questions about the fallibility of opinions being taught.”

Ruben nodded and paced for a brief moment, giving Aaron a chance to collect himself. “Do you require authors using SchoolTools to comply with your philosophies, Mr. Isaacs?”

Aaron shook his head. “No, not at all. A review of our courses will show that opinions cover the full range of philosophies and opinions. We do require the inclusion of a critical thinking module in subjects which will allow it. This is intended to help students actively engage with the material and think about more than one side of issues.”

“Thank you, Mr. Isaacs. Your witness, Attorney Muscarella.”

Muscarella shook his head. “No questions.”



The judge nodded to Aaron. “You may step down and have a seat at counsel’s table.”

After a brief recess, the judge returned and addressed the courtroom. “The court is reconvened for the decision of the case of *The People vs. Aaron Isaacs*. I hold as follows:

“That the philosophical differences of the parties are of no legal consequence in the right of Algoriginality, Inc., to make SchoolTools available to courseware authors; that the tendency of the software to displace teachers is not a fatally defective attribute of the product; and that the requirement of using a critical thinking component in each course is within the rights of the seller of the proprietary software.

“I rule that the software behind SchoolTools is not a proper subject of eminent domain, because the true intention of the Petitioner is not to take the product for public use. Rather, it is being pursued for the purpose of depriving the public of its use. This is clearly an attempt at censorship. Judgment is awarded for the Respondents, Aaron Isaacs and Algoriginality.”

Donna realized she had been holding her breath and let it out with relief. Wendell smiled at her and squeezed her hand. They met Aaron and his wife Nora in the aisle and hugged them both.

“Congratulations,” Donna said to Aaron. “It was the only decision that made sense. And you got through your testimony.”

Aaron looked a bit pale. “Barely,” he said.

They agreed to celebrate with lunch at a nearby steakhouse, and invited Ruben to join them.

At the restaurant, they discussed the development of the Juan Rumesuela Academe and the growth of the remote learning movement.

“Public pressure for reform is deep and wide,” Wendell was saying. “Just in the past week, I recruited two author friends to join ASESAs and write courseware for it.”

“That’s great news,” said Nora.

“Unfortunately, I also contacted several other friends who turned me down. They write for mainstream publishers. The word is out that anyone who writes for ASESAs will be blacklisted by the old-line textbook companies and barred from future contracts.”

“I guess they want to protect their niche of paper textbooks,” Nora said. “But online courses are so much less expensive to distribute. Why don’t the textbook companies just switch?”

Donna explained, “They have well established contracts with school districts nationwide and a huge financial incentive to sell paper books. They also have longstanding allegiances with the education cartel to conform to their philosophies. The power of the presses isn’t easy to challenge, and royalties are easier to protect. One change in a paper book requires selling a whole new book. Many authors and publishers are shameless in revising textbooks and making used books obsolete. It’s much easier to make digital book revisions, and they command far less revenue.”

“On the other end, they have a lock on authors by giving them advance royalties,” Wendell added. “We can’t offer that at this time. We’re seeing the most interest from authors who write for private school curricula. Religious topics are not approved for public schools, so the impact of public school disfavor is less on those authors.”

Ruben spoke up, looking confused. “Surely there are courseware authors out there who don’t have contracts with book publishers.”

“There are,” Wendell said, “but there are apparently quite a few courseware authors who are not open to the scrutiny of including the critical thinking component in their work. They consider themselves to be experts in their discipline, and they don’t want to be second-guessed by students. At least, that’s the way they see it. The need to teach students to think falls a distant second to that of dumping supposedly incontrovertible information.”

“But the point is not to show that the authors are wrong,” Donna said. “The point is to practice teaching inquiry and debate for the purpose of learning to discover error wherever it exists in life. It also serves to discover better answers whenever there is more than one answer. The evolution of knowledge never ends, and few courseware authors, even our friends, want to acknowledge that there may be better things to know or better ways to learn them. Many experts rely on repeating accepted concepts without critically reviewing them. Errors taken for granted have plagued education forever.”

“You’re right, Donna,” Wendell agreed. “But so many people prefer to accept error because it is comfortable rather than do the hard work to seek out truth.”

They ate in silence for several moments. Finally, Donna turned to Aaron, who had barely spoken a word through dinner. “You’ve been awfully quiet, Aaron,” she said. “Are you okay?”

Aaron wiped his mouth with a napkin and nodded, but his eyes had a faraway look to them. “I’m fine. Thanks, Donna.”

Nora smiled knowingly. “I think he’s a little shell-shocked from his appearance on the stand. We never expected all this when Aaron started his project with SchoolTools years ago. It seemed like an innocent program to help kids learn. We had no idea it would become such a high-profile target.”

Donna nodded in understanding. Cutting herself another bite of rib-eye, she said wryly, “Sometimes I wish I had gone to culinary school instead. I could be in Paris right now making éclairs.”

Wendell leaned toward her. “Sweetheart, everyone knows you would have flunked out of cooking school by the end of the first semester,” he teased.

They all laughed.

Donna elbowed him, causing the wine to slosh in his glass. “You know me too well.”

## **Chapter 16**

### **Cracking Down**

*November 2015*

“The most aggravating part of formal education is the practice of grading students on their performance,” Adine was saying. “Some will excel and some will fail under such a regimen.”

“And what is so horrible about that?” Donna challenged her. Quiet tension filled the university meeting room as she waited for Adine to respond.

The weekly department meeting had devolved, as it often did, into a heated discussion about one of Adine’s pet topics. This time the topic was grading. The issue of performance measurements was an ongoing subject of debate in pedagogical circles, and now Adine was lobbying to do away with grades altogether in the College of Education. Several professors at the meeting had taken Adine’s side, while one defended Donna’s views. The younger assistant professors observed the proceedings

silently, too scared to make waves by contributing their thoughts.

“The emotional consequences to both groups are devastating,” Adine answered after a moment. “Those who succeed tend to take on a ‘better than thou’ attitude that socially separates them from the others. Those who frequently fail are so negatively impacted that they begin to accept a status of inferiority and even drop out. Donna, you know that academic differences do not determine inferiority.”

“Yes, if all you look at is the academics, then inferiority exists in fact. However, we know that life is more than academics, even though you and I are academic types. There is a place for us and there is a place for people with other strengths. We don’t wish to diminish athletes who excel because they negatively impact those who may be less athletic, do we?”

“We do not need to draw attention to academic competition among students,” interrupted Iris Dunavan, a senior professor aligned with Adine’s philosophy. “The ill effects occur among those who succeed and those who fail intellectually. Feelings of superiority and inferiority rise and separate the students.”

“That is a regrettable phenomenon,” Donna responded, “but it cannot be allowed to eliminate competition. Competition is the impetus for producing greater progress in civilization. Lack of competition is the signal for decline and failure. Those who fail to compete fail to improve within their potential. There are countless examples of those who have less native ability, but succeed by giving more effort toward improvement. The game of life is no different.”

“But society becomes fragmented when citizens compare themselves to each other,” Dr. Dunavan countered. “Everyone has different skill levels, and those should not be allowed to surface, especially in the lower grade levels. It causes permanent damage to both the winners and the losers.”

Donna rubbed her temples in frustration. “This is precisely one of the reasons for teaching critical thinking. Those differences at many levels should be acknowledged and celebrated in order to enrich society with the gift of the best of whatever arises. Critical thinking allows us to acknowledge the differences and the great advantages of those differences. The fact that some students take pride in their gifts or may be chagrined by their having less of a gift is less harmful to society than is hiding those differences.”

“Clearly you do not understand the gravity of the negative social consequences of allowing competition,” Adine blurted. “For example, why do we allow discrimination in favor of attractive people?”

Jamila Shahi, a friend and senior professor who had supported Donna through her difficult two years as dean, stepped in. “Society gains when those who have fewer natural gifts work harder and then contribute more to society. The cumulative effect on human welfare is huge. Take your example of physical appearance. Most girls do not become runway models. They may suffer for a while as a result, but can go on to excel in other ways. They are more likely to refocus if denied access to the runway.”

“But it isn’t fair that appearance alone obtains advantages,” Adine persisted.

“That’s true philosophically,” said Jamila, “but it’s a fact of life. Training in critical thinking is a means of neutralizing those effects and offsetting the fact that life is unfair. Non-critical thinkers need to understand the reasons for their failures and the reasons that some students succeed in various areas of life. The point of critical thinking training is not to teach knowledge or to rank students academically. Those matters have always been taught or dealt with in school. Never before have we taught students to inquire about, question, or debate the things they are being taught. We have access to a growing mountain of information that requires that education address

the specific needs of each student. They will only learn what they have an interest in. Whether we like it or not, they and not their instructors are in charge of what they learn. They have widely proven this. Critical thinking training applies to all disciplines in school and thereafter. It is the process of learning to think, which will help the student with every effort they undertake. The goal is to use good judgment in changing or not changing our beliefs. It is an awesome goal achievable only incrementally.”

Donna was impressed by Jamila’s explanation of a complex subject, but Adine gave back only a blank stare. She turned to Donna. “You understand that you are out of step with modern educational theory, correct?”

“Of course I do. And the result of that theory’s application is a serious decline in learning.”

Adine threw her hands up. “Why do we decry that decline? It makes everyone more equal. It helps homogenize society.”

Donna shook her head in amazement. Adine was becoming bolder every day with her agenda to bring all citizens down to the same base level. “It also lowers our cumulative quality of life. Individuals who improve with encouragement can rise from poverty. The compromised educational opportunity for all students is the penalty all are now paying.” Glancing at her watch, Donna said, “I have to go. This meeting is adjourned.” She looked around apologetically at the others from the department as she gathered her things. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to the other matters on the agenda. We’ll have to address them next time.” She saw the other professors glancing at each other in exasperation and knew she was going to have to rein in Adine – and herself – before she entirely lost the confidence of the rest of the department.

She hurried outside toward Massachusetts Hall, taking a deep breath to try to



release some tension. Roger had sent a memo yesterday requesting her attendance at a meeting where he intended to make some kind of announcement. She wondered what it could be.

She arrived at the meeting room down the hall from Roger's office and joined the group of staff and faculty waiting around for him to arrive. Feeling harried and out of breath, she tried to smooth her flyaway hair. Refreshments had been set up at a long table, prompting more speculation about the nature of the announcement. After a few minutes, Adine appeared and stood on the opposite side of the room.

When Roger walked in five minutes late, Beyoncé was on his arm. "Greetings, everyone," he said. "Thank you for coming. Beyoncé, please meet my staff. These are the people I'm always bragging about. I know you've met some of them before. They have been here for an average of twelve years and know my job better than I do. Gerald here writes my speeches." He extended his arm to an older man wearing suspenders. "Debbie is my personal assistant. Dorothy is my administrative assistant. The others are doing important jobs that keep me looking good."

"It's nice to meet all of you," said Beyoncé with a little curtsy. Her clingy, floral-print dress swayed around her knees. "I guess I'll be in your neighborhood more in the future."

"Yes," Roger said. "I invited Beyoncé here to make an announcement. We plan to be married in about six weeks. I wanted to do it sooner, but you know how women want to plan these things. What do you think?"

Donna's mouth dropped open. The stunned staff congratulated the couple with forced applause and cheers.

"Cake and punch are served," he said, gesturing to the refreshments table. "Just an intimate little event here, before we announce it in the papers. You all are the

first to know.”

“What kind of a wedding will you have, Dr. Carlson?” inquired Dorothy.

“Oh, whatever Beyoncé wants. She would like the full deal. It isn’t every day one can marry a president.”

“Details to come,” chirped Beyoncé, flashing a smile.

Exchanging glances with a colleague, Donna rolled her eyes and headed for the punch bowl. So much for the important meeting she had expected. Of course, such self-absorbed pomp was typical of her cousin.

After spending what she considered the minimum amount of time required of her at such a function, Donna headed for her bus stop. She called Wendell to see if he wanted to meet her for dinner.

“I just came from a ‘meeting’ that Roger called at the last minute,” she told him. “You won’t believe what it was about.”

“Let me guess. A meeting to decide when to hold the next meeting?”

“He announced his engagement to Beyoncé. They’re to be married in just a few weeks.” Donna sighed. “That girl is going to clean him out.”

~~~~

December 2015

Straightening her jacket, Adine stood at the podium at the head of the spacious, sunlit meeting room and looked out at Harbridge’s board of directors. Composed of a diverse group, the board sat at tables arranged in a U shape, waiting expectantly. She had asked to meet with the board to discuss the rise of SchoolTools-designed courses in university classrooms, and intended to convince them that Harbridge’s administration should ban it entirely. Smiling pleasantly, Adine leaned toward the microphone and made her case.

She described SchoolTools and the courseware for those who were unfamiliar with it, and explained the dangers it posed to the university's historic traditions. She concluded, "In the past three months, I have identified no fewer than fourteen instructors at this university who have used SchoolTools-produced courseware at one time or another in the classroom. The topics covered by the courseware ranged from physics and calculus to sociology and ethics. Such courseware should be banned from the campus, and any instructors caught using it should be disciplined." Adine stepped away from the microphone and took a seat at the rear table.

"Thank you, Dr. Dorson," said Eva Barton, chairman of the board. "We also now have an opportunity to hear from the chair of the Department of Physics. Professor Bernard Fuhrman will address the board concerning these courses and his observations of the state of education at this university. Dr. Fuhrman."

Adine rolled her eyes as Fuhrman stepped up to the microphone, dressed in a dark sport coat and tie. She'd had no idea he would be here when she requested to speak at this meeting.

"Thank you," he said, adjusting his wire-framed glasses and glancing down at his prepared notes. "As a thirty-five-year veteran of the Physics Department here at Harbridge, I can say with confidence that our department has always maintained the highest academic standards. Only the most qualified students have been admitted to and graduated from our department. Over the years, we have seen a decline in the number of American students who can be included in the description of 'most qualified.' Gradually, the number has dropped to single-digit percentages. Some of those admitted have barely qualified or have been given special consideration for admission. Unfortunately, many of those admitted have failed to graduate because of the high demands of the coursework."

Adine could already tell where this was going. *How did Fuhrman manage to get an audience with the board at the same time I did?* she wondered. He was going to sabotage her efforts.

“The Physics Department remains among the finest in the world,” he continued. “However, the faculty and student body are comprised mostly of talented foreigners. The courses we teach require precedent mental discipline and training that are not commonly found, I am sorry to say, in the United States. Skilled and intelligent foreign instructors are being hired for lack of qualified domestic instructors.

“We have seen a change in the pattern of student applications which indicates that the brightest foreign students are no longer seeking our classrooms, Instead, they are applying to highly accredited universities located in their own countries. We are rapidly losing our exclusive hold on advanced knowledge as our foreign faculty migrates back to their homelands. We are not able to replace them with equally qualified domestic instructors or students.

“Advances in science are occurring more frequently in other countries as our native students fail to meet the challenges of progress in our schools. There is a continued and growing influx of foreign students who outperform American students. There is a consequential loss of opportunity for our citizens to attend our schools.

“The problem does not lie in an inherent lack of intelligence in American students. For example, American students of Korean heritage, but who are third-generation citizens of the United States, show limitations similar to American students of European origin. The performance problems begin early in grade school and become more acute annually. Many factors contribute to this phenomenon, but that is beyond the scope of my talk here today. Suffice it to say that the business

world now has the option of using the best talent from around the world, and that talent comes less and less from U.S. citizens. The solution lies in giving students unhampered freedom to learn, freedom from unwanted distractions and unnecessary restrictions.”

Adine shook her head in disgust. This was the typical propaganda coming from the remote schooling supporters.

Fuhrman looked up at the members of the board with a serious gaze. “The opportunities we provide at great cost are often tied to diversions which eat into educational momentum, focus, and eventually interest in excellence. Unskilled educators in grade schools and high schools discourage our students and cripple their incentive to excel. We have few world-class students because they are forced to learn in lockstep with average or below-average students. Our drive to homogenize our student population limits any possibility of producing adequate numbers of top performers. As a nation, we produce many high average students, but very few of them can successfully compete with top foreign scholars. Those who could successfully compete are typically forced to learn and work beside lesser qualified people who do not generate supportive intellectual harmony and teamwork.

“The best route to the desired goal is to remove the roadblocks erected by our stifling education system. It is the nature of some students to attach themselves to higher-level learning paths and to move ahead as fast as possible. They thirst for knowledge. They become bored with a slower pace and soon become discouraged. We are losing our most intelligent students to boredom and discouragement.” He punctuated this point by slamming his hand on the podium. “Instead, we must allow them to follow the educational path used by foreign countries and have access to the minds of the best instructors.

“Of course, the best instructors are not ubiquitously available to our best students. A potential solution lies in the developing technology to which Dr. Dorson refers.” His voice took on rising enthusiasm. “We need to make political and cultural changes which will open up our best educational resources to our student population. Currently there is no practical way to accomplish this goal. We cannot accurately identify the varied potential talent in young students or ship them off to superior boarding schools for the term of their youth. The answer is to divide students into smaller and more compatible learning groups and to bring uniquely qualified instructors to them as remote teachers. At the university level, students can continue to learn from the best minds using courseware that matches their academic progress. The technology is here and improving quickly. Our resistance to the idea is the problem.” His tone became angry. “And I’m sorry to say that the potential loss of income to the university plays a significant role in shaping this resistance.”

These were bold statements. Adine clenched her jaw, resisting the urge to make a rebuttal. It wouldn’t be wise to lose her cool in the presence of the board of directors.

“Fortunately for me,” Fuhrman said more calmly, “I will not have to face this resistance. I am announcing my retirement from the university.”

Adine heard a few quiet gasps from the board.

Fuhrman continued, “Those with more stamina than I will carry this burden forward. I plan to join the effort for education reform and work full-time on digital courses of my own, which will have the potential to reach students all over the world, unrestricted by the bloated university system. Even as we realize that education must improve, we must also realize how we must change the approach to improvement. The American system of education has failed. Our population has failed the system as

well. Those who are financially dependent on the failed system, including many in this room, will not easily understand the need to change it. Nearly everyone in education will be adversely affected to some extent, while students will benefit. Thank you for your time, and I wish you all the best as you move Harbridge forward into this new era.”

The board members looked on in shock as Fuhrman walked out. Meanwhile, Adine stifled a smile. She knew his statements might cause a few to be swayed to his way of thinking, while offending others. Personally, she was happy to see him go. The resignation of professors like Fuhrman could only benefit the university. As more and more of the “old guard” left, new professors with more progressive ideas could step up to take their places.

“Dr. Fuhrman is right,” said one board member, a young African-American woman. “We should embrace technological advancements like these that bring together the best academics from around the world and improve student access to high-quality education. Isn’t that an essential part of our mission here?”

Another member, an older man with white hair, disagreed. “This digital curriculum threatens careers, not only of professors, but of everyone at Harbridge. If it catches on at the university level, it could shrink the student population here considerably. We need to defend our traditional model of learning against these new, unproven methods.”

Adine listened to the debate with interest. She was in the process of organizing the conference she had spoken to Roger about, which addressed the invasion of SchoolTools-related courses into the classroom. She jotted down notes that would be valuable in quashing whatever debate might arise from SchoolTools supporters at the conference.

The board spent a full hour debating the merits of the courses on campus. Finally, a vote was called. A ban on the courses passed, though a few stubborn individuals voted no, including the chair, Dr. Barton. Adine couldn't have been happier.



January 2016

The invitation said the Carlson-Danning wedding would be held in Garner Hall. Donna led Wendell through the dimly lit campus, shivering in her plum-colored formal gown. Wendell put his arm around her as they found the right building. She had not wanted to attend, but Wendell had cajoled her, saying it would be entertaining to see if Roger managed to pull it off.

A greeter met them just inside the hall and gestured to the table beside her, which was stacked with programs and pre-printed badges. "Welcome. Please locate your nametag."

Donna found tags for herself and Wendell, and they moved into the crowded space, which was decorated with extravagant floral arrangements and twinkling string lights.

"Wow," she whispered. "It looks like everybody who is anybody has been invited."

They found seats on the left side, near the middle. Donna looked around and saw many of her colleagues. She waved half-heartedly to a few of them.

"This probably won't take long," Wendell said. "Look at the program. I've never seen anything like it."

The order of service for the wedding consisted of only three lines. Clearly, Beyoncé was more concerned with stylistic choices than with the ceremony itself.

Indeed, in less than ten minutes, the nuptials were over, with much of that time spent watching Beyoncé's cadre of bridesmaids march down the aisle in their bright pink gowns. The reception was held in the next room. No one mentioned the unremarkable ceremony.

Donna and Wendell stood in the greeting line next to a friend and colleague from the College of Education, John Russell, and his wife Judy. The two were commenting on Beyoncé's dress, with its precipitous neckline and silk bodice cinched to enhance her hourglass figure.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Russell," Donna greeted them cordially. "How nice to see you." She introduced them to Wendell.

"Dr. Thomas, we enjoy reading your columns," John said. "We certainly wish the establishment was more receptive to your ideas."

"I appreciate that," said Wendell.

"You would think that we were trying to wreck education, rather than improve it," Donna remarked.

John nodded gravely. "Change of any kind is generally resisted, especially when so many have so much invested in the existing system. We heard the board voted to ban ASES courses here on campus. It's a shame . . . I've heard such good things about them."

"Yes, it was very disappointing," Donna agreed. She had learned of it just that morning. She was certain that Adine had a lot to do with the decision. "I hate to say it, but as far as the board is concerned, improving education falls a distant second to maintaining the status quo here at Harbridge. Higher income and less work are the primary goals of many. Better student performance is mostly used as a decoy to promote the first two."

“It appears that way.”

They moved up in line until they reached the bride and groom. Beyoncé was radiant. Beside her, Roger looked a bit like a wrung-out dishrag, but he appeared happy.

“Hello, Mrs. Carlson,” Donna said, shaking Beyoncé’s perfectly manicured hand. “Best wishes to you in your new marriage.”

“Thank you, Donna.” Beyoncé leaned toward and added under her breath, “Roger has informed me that I am now the queen of this family, so you can expect to meet up with me the next time you have a dispute with him . . . or make any more of your little speeches.” She narrowed her eyes.

Caught off-guard, Donna glanced at Roger, but he didn’t appear to have heard. Searching for a reply, she said finally, “I look forward to having a smooth relationship with you, Beyoncé. I’m sure that both Roger and I will appreciate his having a new ally in you.”

Straightening, Beyoncé was all smiles once again. “I hope you’ll join us for Thanksgiving. It’ll be at our place this year. We’re going all out.” She fanned her hands out to indicate a decadent spread.

“Thank you for the invitation,” Donna said, “but unfortunately, I believe Wendell and I will be busy that day.”

As they walked away from the couple toward the reception hall, Wendell muttered, “That was bizarre.”

“You can say that again. Maybe Roger really has found his dream girl. I can’t tell if she’s really prepared to leap to his defense, or just clueless.”

“Do we actually have plans for Thanksgiving?”

Donna grinned and looped her arm through his. “I think it’s time you met my

mother. She's been hounding me for months now. Or maybe we could make a visit to Detroit. I'd love to thank the couple who brought such a handsome, brilliant man into this world."

Wendell beamed and pulled her close. Suddenly the wedding didn't seem like such a drag, after all.

Chapter 17

The Academe Is Born

June 2016

Donna and Wendell stepped out of their air-conditioned rental car into the hot, dry air of El Paso, Texas. The Brights' Spanish-style stucco house was located in a quiet neighborhood, its well-kept yard landscaped with cacti and ornamental grasses. Several tomato plants growing in pots on the front patio were heavy with fruit. A portable basketball hoop stood in the driveway.

Months ago, Donna had spoken with Maria over the phone about her idea for the new software distribution company and the possibility of using Juan's name. She seemed intrigued and had invited Donna and Wendell to come out and meet Juan, now ten years old. He had been using the courses for almost a year.

Maria answered the door, and the two friends embraced before Donna introduced Wendell. Maria was as beautiful as ever, her bronzed skin still smooth and

her long, dark hair streaked with silver. Her colorful skirt swirled around her ankles.

“Come in, come in!” she beckoned them.

The interior of the house was cool and comfortable. Well-worn leather furniture filled the rooms, and the walls were covered with art. Donna recognized the work of several famous Mexican artists.

“Edward had to go into work at the last minute,” Maria said. “He hopes to be home in time to meet you.” As she had explained to Donna, Edward worked as the manager of a local retail store. He wasn’t happy with the job, but given the state of the economy, he couldn’t afford to look elsewhere.

Maria stepped toward the stairwell. “Juan, come down please!”

“What smells so delicious?” Donna asked.

“I put some enchiladas in the oven for lunch,” Maria answered. “I’m sure you must be hungry.”

Donna’s stomach growled. “Thank you. We haven’t eaten since before the flight.”

Maria invited them to sit down and served them glasses of ice water with lemon. She took Donna’s hand across the table and squeezed it.

Maria had always been such a warm person. Donna recalled their many long nights spent studying at the crowded townhouse they had shared in Providence, Rhode Island, with two other students, who had often teased them for staying in on weekends. Maria had been there for her when her father died suddenly during her second year at Brown. Donna wondered why they had ever drifted apart.

The three of them chatted for a few minutes before they heard the sound of feet thudding down the stairs, and Juan appeared. A thin boy with a mop of black hair and beautiful brown eyes, he smiled politely and stepped forward to shake their hands.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said after the introductions. He turned to Maria.

“Mom, can I make salsa for the enchiladas?”

“Of course, sweetie.” She explained to Donna and Wendell, “Those tomatoes out front are his. We’ve been having fun learning to grow our own food. Haven’t we, Juan?”

“We grew squash last year,” he said, his eyes animated. “And I have some habañeros and jalapeños in the back yard. They’re *really* hot. Remember when Dad mixed up the jalapeño relish and the pickle relish? I made it too hot, and he put it all over his sandwich and his lips swelled up. He could barely talk.” He laughed. “It wasn’t funny. But it was.”

Maria laughed along with him. “Yes, Daddy didn’t find it as funny as we did. Why don’t I pick some tomatoes for you while you talk to Dr. Kane and Mr. Thomas? You can show them your learning center upstairs, and the courses you’re taking.”

Juan led them up the stairs to a bedroom festooned with posters of planets, dinosaurs, and basketball heroes. A map of the world hung on one wall, while bookshelves covered another. A computer and iPod sat on a desk, next to a table stacked with art supplies. An acoustic guitar hung in a stand in the corner.

Juan gave them a tour and began opening programs on his computer to show them the latest math and science courses he was taking. His bubbly personality delighted Donna. He seemed to possess maturity beyond his years, and yet his childhood curiosity and enthusiasm were apparent. Their hopes about Juan seemed to be confirmed.

They returned downstairs, and Juan began chopping tomatoes and onions and putting them into a food processor. Donna was impressed by his skills in the kitchen.

“Have you talked to Juan about our idea?” she asked Maria as she took her seat

at the table.

“Yes, we have.” Maria glanced at Juan, who looked back at her with a shy grin that suggested he was embarrassed but pleased by the attention. “He doesn’t fully understand it, but he asked if this would make him famous.” She laughed. “I told him in a way, it would. Edward and I talked it over and understand the concerns, but we’re in love with the courses and your idea. We’re happy to do what we can to move it forward.”

Donna exchanged smiles with Wendell. “We’re so glad to hear that,” she said. Leaning forward, she added softly, “Juan is absolutely adorable.”

Maria’s response was drowned out by the whir of the food processor. The scent of cilantro and chilies filled the air. Soon, they were enjoying chicken enchiladas and homemade tortilla chips with fresh salsa. As they began ironing out the details of the new project, Donna was filled with a strange mix of contentment and anticipation. It felt so good to be sharing a meal with such lively, warm-hearted company, all of them part of something new and exciting.

Edward arrived home just as they were finishing their meal. A tall man with sandy-blond hair and a moustache, he wore a button-up shirt and khaki pants. He looked tired, but cheerful. Juan ran to him and greeted him with a hug. Maria rose to fix him a plate.

“I’m glad I made it home in time to meet you,” Edward said as he shook Donna’s hand, then Wendell’s.

“The feeling is mutual,” Donna replied. “We’ve been delighted to meet your son and enjoy this delicious food he helped Maria prepare.”

He nodded. “They’re good together in the kitchen. I’m a very lucky man.”

As Edward ate, they reviewed what they had discussed, and the conversation

wandered to the topic of public education and its role in society. Edward had a unique point of view as a retail manager.

“Over the past few years, the quality of our job applicants has definitely gone down,” he said with an air of disappointment. “The new graduates we’ve been interviewing don’t seem to have an independent thought in their heads. They lack personal discipline, common sense, integrity, and basic math skills. They expect higher wages than we pay our senior employees. They don’t have the experience we need, and we don’t have what they want. Yet they demand their rights to a job. Where did this generation of kids come from who only want to have fun and get something for nothing? I’ve often wondered what, exactly, they’re learning in school.”

“I’ve heard the same sentiments from many people,” Donna said. “The problem appears to be reaching epidemic proportions. Some business owners and managers are even buying ASES courses to teach their employees those basic skills. It’s no wonder many companies are hiring workers from overseas.”

“Absolutely. I can’t leave the new hires unsupervised for fear of what they might do. They seem to have reached a new level of incompetence. Even when they try, they’re not oriented to doing an honest day’s work. Where are the well-educated, motivated new graduates?”

“In my opinion, our best hope is to reorganize education toward the goal of restoring the values that built our nation,” Donna said. “Many parents are unable to do the job. They themselves are products of the new culture and cannot be expected to correct the situation. Unfortunately, our declining standard of living may be the only motivation that works. Our goal is to provide other motives through critical thinking and a more effective education through a system of remote learning.” *If the government doesn’t succeed in derailing it all*, she thought. The hearing on eminent

domain was coming up, and it had been on her mind constantly.

“Our Juan is certainly benefiting,” Edward replied, ruffling his son’s hair.

“Let’s hope that the rest of America’s children have the same opportunity.”

Wendell held up his water glass. “A toast – to SchoolTools, to the future of our nation, and to the Juan Rumescuela Academe.”

“Hear, hear!” Donna joined in.

They all clinked their glasses together, smiling.

~~~~

*March 2017*

Nine months after registering their new company, the Juan Rumescuela Academe, Donna and Wendell appeared to have a successful enterprise on their hands. Private classrooms using ASES courses obtained through the Juan Rumescuela Academe were popping up everywhere. The number of courseware authors had grown exponentially and were flooding the Academe with high-quality courses. They now had eighty employees reviewing the offerings, editing their handbook, registering students, giving advice to authors and parents, and handling the back office. Despite the recession, they were making quite a bit of money for such a new venture and were considering hiring a chief financial officer to pull the back office together. A good CFO could help them proactively expand the growth of the company in ways they might never think of.

Having overcome many of their opponents’ efforts to sabotage the remote learning movement, Donna nevertheless knew they could be blindsided by issues they didn’t see coming. Their business model was in an enviable position right now because of the growing discontent of the public and many teachers. The relatively low cost of providing remote and effective education had captured public sentiment by

storm. The Academe also did not incur many of the typical private school expenses. Their entire curriculum was “outsourced” to private authors who handled the fees themselves, though many of the courses were offered for free. The Academe’s only function was to provide an umbrella certified school which students attended remotely. Matriculation fees were low, but the cost of operating the Academe was low as well, and a nice profit was coming from the volume of registered students.

Whenever she found free time, Donna hunkered down in her home office to work on the first draft of her new book, which analyzed the problems facing the U.S. education system and offered a framework for a new system based on the renaissance of the one-room school and remote digital courseware. Eventually, she predicted, other technologies would rise up to further expand the opportunities available to students at home and in private classrooms. Aaron, still hard at work further developing the SchoolTools software, had already proven this with new features and variables which made the courseware ever more realistic and exciting.

Donna was wrapping up her day at her Harbridge office when she received the latest report from *The School Review*, announcing the results of their national school survey. The report said that the current course offerings, though still limited, were nevertheless giving students of the Juan Rumescuela Academe a significant learning advantage over their public school counterparts. The analysis was based on both the functional and academic quality of the ASESAs courses. Students simply learned faster when using the customizable, self-testing digital courses.

Donna thought of calling Wendell to share the good news. They should celebrate that evening; they so seldom got any positive press. Typically, the media printed only the negative propaganda coming from the NTA. They hammered away about the lack of socialization received by students of the Academe but never talked

about the negative socialization experiences of public school students. Journalists, politicians, and school spokespersons were giving less and less attention to incidents of school violence and the cultural decline. Students who acted up were extended respect for their cultural rights. The lowest common denominator was the controlling standard, without regard to the higher standards of other students.

At the same time, Donna had to acknowledge that the continuing decline of the public schools did have a benefit. The flight from that environment provided a stimulus for the rapid growth of the Juan Rumesuela Academe and remote private schooling.

Wendell had planned to meet her at her townhouse after work and make dinner – a favor she had grown accustomed to but never took for granted. Although she could cook, she didn't especially enjoy it and rarely had time for it. For years she had subsisted on salads and frozen dinners. Fortunately, Wendell was a skilled cook, and his specialty was lasagna. He'd said he might make it tonight.

Her stomach growled as she got off the bus at her stop. Seeing Wendell's car parked at the curb in front of her house, she imagined she could smell the tomato sauce simmering.

She found Wendell in the kitchen, stirring tomatoes into a large saucepan on the stove. The scent of garlic and onions filled the air. They greeted each other with a kiss, and Wendell offered her a glass of Cabernet that he had already poured.

"Have you seen the report by *The School Review*?" she asked.

"I have," he said with his characteristic wide smile. "Congratulations."

"Congratulations are in order for you, too. You helped make this happen."

Wendell dismissed the comment. "I'm just the brawn behind the operation. You and Aaron are the brains."

“Oh, nonsense, Dr. Thomas.”

Wendell added fresh spices and continued to stir until the concoction was bubbling. He always made his tomato sauce from scratch. When he'd first seen the jars of pre-made sauce in her cupboard a year ago, he had chided her jokingly and vowed never to allow such a travesty again.

Two hours later, they were finishing off a leisurely dinner with slices of chocolate torte that Wendell had picked up from a local bakery as a surprise. After Donna had scraped the last bit of frosting from her dessert plate, Wendell leaned across the table and took her hand.

“There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about,” he said.

Donna looked up at him, surprised by his serious tone. But his expression was warm, and a smile tugged at his lips.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small velvet box. Donna's breath caught.

“I've been carrying this around with me for a week,” he said, “trying to find the right time. But I realized I needed to create the right time.”

She set down her wine glass as he stood up and gently pulled her from her seat. Opening the box, he extracted a slender gold band with a sparkling princess-cut blue sapphire – her favorite stone.

“Donna, will you make me the happiest man on earth and marry me?”

She didn't need time to think. She said yes and put her arms around his neck. Though she was far from a traditional woman, her heart swelled at the love behind this special evening that Wendell had orchestrated. She had never wanted an engagement ring, but as he slipped it on her finger, she suddenly understood the power of its symbolism.

They celebrated with glasses of Champagne that Wendell pulled from the refrigerator. There was a warm sensation in Donna's chest that she had never felt before she met Wendell. Who knew that Donna Kane, the workaholic, would ever get married? Her mother would be thrilled.

At this moment, it seemed to Donna as if everything was going right . . . too right. She wanted to be optimistic and simply enjoy it, but it felt a little too much like the quiet before the storm.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Working Behind the Scenes to Quash the Revolution**

“It is in the public interest that all non-public instruction be made illegal. It is dangerous financially, socially, and academically.”

So began the annual conference of the Intercollegiate Policy Council, a group composed of forward-thinking educators from around the country. The first speaker was a female professor of education from Stanton University. Glancing around the hotel meeting room, Adine witnessed no outraged protests in reaction to such bold statements, and felt reassured that this group would be receptive to her ideas.

She had recently been selected to sit on the board of the National Teachers Association, an appointment that thrilled her, and this conference would be her first speaking engagement in her new capacity. She had flown all the way to Denver for the opportunity to speak at the event. It was an opportunity to continue her warnings about the remote schooling movement which, to her dismay, had continued to grow.

Over the past year, ASESAs had been popping up everywhere, in both private and public schools – although, thanks to her efforts, not on the Harbridge campus. Many public schools had likewise been warned and were now banning it as well. According to rumors, Donna’s little project, that Juan something-or-other Academe, was taking off. Worst of all, it had been legitimized by a *School Review* report claiming that those poor, brainwashed children hooked up to JRA were actually learning something. Despite the defeat of all attempts to stifle SchoolTools so far, the fight was far from over. Support for modern ways of thinking and teaching was still strong in the establishment, and Adine had been busy doing what needed to be done. Eventually, it would pay off.

“Rogue private schools compete with public schools for students,” continued the speaker, a petite woman with close-cut dark hair and a surprisingly powerful voice. “Funds pour into them, leaving less for public education. Many such schools are myth-based, creating confusion and false teaching. Many have conflicting positions on settled matters of science. There is no federal oversight of their curricula. Homeschooling is worse, if possible. Most parents have no training as teachers. Some even try to dodge accountability for not teaching at all. They escape the duty of contributing to the teachers’ union and the common good. These practices create unfair competition with public education. The time has come to declare that non-public schools are subversive to the cause of education. This action is essential for the public interest.”

Adine couldn’t agree more. The group discussed various methods for achieving this goal, with lobbying efforts at the top of the list.

“There is even discussion of repealing the laws that allow private school teachers and homeschoolers to teach without joining the union,” Adine contributed.

“This would help end the loss of funds to the private sector and give the union some leverage if these teachers violate established educational standards and requirements.”

They agreed that this was a key strategy that would be put before their legislators.

The next session addressed the topic of education finance. One speaker, a female professor from Bale University, declared that reform in finance was vital now.

“It is time to end the scandal of allowing children to attend school in life-threatening old buildings,” she argued, “while providing some students with palatial facilities. The unfairness is shameful. There is only one way to solve this conundrum. We must abandon the unequal local sources of educational funding and pool the proceeds from all sources into the national treasury. There is no way to impose fairness at the local level. The best and most fair resource is the income tax. Those who can afford to pay the most would then do so. We already have a system for the taxing of income. All we need to do is add a surtax to it.

“A flat surtax added to the already graduated income tax would be a simple, fair, and effective solution to the problem. The vast increase in available school funds would be offset by abolishing all local education property tax. Of course, if the income tax solution should prove to be inadequate, a federal tax could be levied on real estate as well. The nation has matured to the point where funds for the purpose of educating children should not be randomly allocated.”

Adine thought this was a brilliant idea. She and a fellow lobbyist with the NTA were scheduled to meet with Congressman Jack Skinner to air their desires as his reelection campaign was winding up. They were already planning on presenting him with this idea of the surtax.

The next session turned to the topic of academic standards. This time, it was Adine’s turn to speak. She moved to the lectern with her notes.



“The practice of giving grades to students based on academic performance is outdated,” she spoke into the microphone. “There is little value in failing most of a class based on average national performance. Effort, insight, and adjusting socially to the class should be the standards for successful matriculation. The vast disconnect between the interests of many students from the traditional courses makes the content of those courses irrelevant. Classes need to deal with practical issues such as saving the planet. Since few of the students can do much in this regard, they should be judged on how well they show concern for the earth. Languages, math, and science have little to do with everyday life. Rigorous, competitive academics are fine for some people, but they should not become the be-all and end-all of pedagogy. Grading coursework is the most vicious attack on self-esteem experienced by our children.”

Several heads nodded in assent.

“I completely agree with Dr. Dorson,” contributed Pauline Turner, a former grade school teacher. “I long ago abandoned giving grades based on academic performance. When necessary to do so, I inflated them in order to meet the children halfway. Most of my peers did the same, and our administrators advocated that we do it. There is no reason the charade should continue. We need to eliminate academic grading for courses and stop the pretenses. Who will be hurt by this change when it is, after all, a failed system we are dealing with, and not failed children?”

At the conclusion of the session, the council’s president stated that a report of the consensus of the council would be delivered to the national Department of Education and to the NTA. “I’m sure they are ready to adopt our position on the matter and impose it on schools. Until then, the continuing plague of comparisons will never end.”

The subject of teaching critical thinking was the topic of the next session.

Adine was scheduled to appear on the panel. No matter how many times the topic was dismissed in the public arena, it always reared its ugly head, thanks to the efforts of people like Donna Kane.

“We educators are given the job of teaching our students,” Adine said when it was her turn. “It is not our business to teach them to seek alternative opinions by the use of this technique called critical thinking. Much mischief results when the student population tries to generate ideas instead of just learning the ones we provide. There are enough ideas already to keep students occupied. Many are tried and true and should not be second-guessed.”

Another panelist, Rashida Jones, a teacher from New York, spoke up. “Dr. Dorson, I agree that critical thinking can be difficult to teach in the classroom compared to other approaches, and no teacher should be required to implement it. You’re right that students should be learning the ideas we provide. But I can’t believe you are so opposed to students generating ideas of their own, as well. What is so horrible about that?” The woman’s eyes challenged her from across the table.

Adine felt her face grow hot. She forced herself to remain calm. “The innovation and confusion of inquiring minds can disturb the conduct of our classrooms. It’s better to keep the status quo than to risk dealing with diverse opinions. There is no end to the grief that can arise from students who think too much. Some endanger the goals we strive for. No doubt some students will conspire to think critically. In the classroom, the perpetrators must be identified and monitored for infractions. They should be given additional school work with voluminous, but less cerebral subject matters. No one can think about more than one thing at a time, and the thinking time of critical thinkers should be diverted to harmless trivia.”

Ms. Jones tried to interject, but Adine spoke over her. She felt her voice rising,

but was powerless to stop it. “As a matter of policy, schools should not allow critical thinking, much less teach it. It’s a dangerous concept that will dismantle all we have been working for in education for the past thirty years. Students must not be allowed to challenge their teachers or the curriculum we have so carefully constructed for them. It’s intolerable. If this critical thinking baloney is allowed to flourish, and you do nothing to stop it, then every one of you will be to blame for what follows.”

Running out of steam, Adine sat back in her chair and took a breath. It seemed that every time she talked about this subject, she lost her composure. It was infuriating.

Unexpectedly, a man in the audience stood up to speak. “My name is Don Savant, and I’m a high school teacher in Illinois. I’m getting a better understanding of why I am increasingly dissatisfied with my role as a teacher. We’re hearing proposals to eliminate grading, discipline, and thinking. The consensus among the delegates makes it clear that I am part of a shrinking minority of educators who seek academic excellence. I will not even be able to teach privately if your proposals are implemented. There is no push toward bringing up the lower performing students. The only momentum is to reduce the level of achievement among the better performers. Development of better performers is considered a threat to the public welfare.”

Another attendee stood up to argue with him, but he spoke over the woman. “I have been frustrated by these trends for some time,” he said, his voice rising. “Now I am declaring surrender. I will resign from my teaching post as soon as I return to Rockford. You are leading a march from civilization, and I will not participate in it. When you abandon the search for excellence and an appreciation for the struggles of our historical leaders, you are sending our next generation blindly down a path to disaster. My walking out of that door is my demonstration of a protest against all of

you who stay and lend your support to the coming travesty. Good-bye.”

He strode out with righteous indignation. The panel immediately began debating the disruption and the issue of critical thinking. Adine hung back and simply observed, having participated as much as she wanted to. Remembering Dr. Fuhrman’s retirement announcement over a year ago, she wondered how many educators around the country were simply giving up as the tide turned against them. It must mean that people like herself were ruffling the right feathers.

In another session, a member of the council asked Adine about the latest efforts to outlaw remote courses.

“Our greatest ally in backing off ASESAs is the teachers’ union,” Adine said. “They have huge influence with legislators and consider ASESAs a threat to teachers’ jobs. Even Christian teachers will protect their jobs before they will defend the freedom of students to study their choice of subjects.”

“The Juan Rumesuela Academe is the worst offender,” said another member. “Can’t we just shut them down?”

Adine nodded. “I think we can do so, at least partially. The threat of remote teaching is so severe that the Department of Education can invoke its emergency powers. In these perilous economic times, the fragile economy can be used as a reason for supporting the public system rather than the illicit private sector. The department will soon issue new emergency rules prohibiting private schools from using ASESAs courses for more than two hours a day. Gradually, this can be reduced to no use at all. If we succeed in requiring private school teachers and homeschoolers to join the union, they’ll be up a creek.”

No doubt Donna and Aaron thought they had won this battle as the legal challenges failed and their little project picked up steam. But Adine had been busy

working behind the scenes to ensure that the public education system was saved.

There was more than one way to skin a cat. With the Department of Education now sufficiently warned of the threat and firmly in their court, many new avenues were open to them. A few deluded activists with a software program and a website would never prevail against the spending power and brute force of the federal government.

## **Chapter 19**

### **Desperate Measures**

*April 2017*

On a warm spring afternoon, Wendell arrived at one of the private classrooms that had opened up in Boston offering studies through the Juan Rumescuela Academe. He was there to interview the school's supervisor as part of his research for the Academe and for a series of articles he was writing about the phenomenon for the *Globe*.

The supervisor, a woman named Andrea Ryman, met him at the door and invited him inside. A former public school teacher with twenty years of experience, she had taken an ASESAs workshop on how to facilitate the courses and had now been running the school for six months. A woman in her mid-forties, she was dressed in a conservative blue dress and wore her dark hair pinned up neatly.

“It's so nice to meet you,” she said with a warm smile. “Come on back.” She

led him down a hallway to a large, dimly lit room set up with tables and individual computer workstations occupied by students wearing headphones. The equipment appeared to be the most modern and up-to-date available. The room was strangely silent except for the quiet clicking of keyboards.

“We have twenty students here between the ages of eight and ten,” Ms. Ryman explained softly as she led him on a brief tour of the room. “Classes meet four times a week, from nine-thirty a.m. to three p.m., with a lunch break at twelve-thirty.”

“Not a very long school day.”

“You’d be surprised what can be accomplished when students are engaged and time isn’t wasted by typical classroom distractions.”

“What are your duties here, Ms. Ryman?”

“As you know, the courses grade themselves. However, I still have plenty of work to do. I supervise the students and give them academic and personal assistance. I chart their progress using the software and send reports to the parents. I also perform the occasional disciplinary action. Disruptive behavior is not tolerated. Most students who act up are removed from the school. So, for the most part, it’s pretty quiet.”

Wendell walked around the classroom. An occasional student looked up as he passed, but most were absorbed in their studies. He glanced at the programs in use: a course on physical sciences, one on math, and one on writing. Videos played on some of the screens, while others displayed the self-tests.

“After this period, the students join in several groups for a brief discussion on what they’ve been learning,” Ms. Ryman explained. “Then they go home or to their respective extracurricular activities.”

Wendell was impressed by what he saw. As they moved back to Ms. Ryman’s office, he took out his notebook and glanced at the questions he had prepared. “How

does your experience here compare to your long career in public schools?”

“There’s no comparison,” she replied. “It’s very rewarding to witness children learning so quickly and enthusiastically. All the stress of trying to manage multiple classrooms of mixed students is gone. Not to mention trying to balance my loyalties between the students, school administration, and teachers’ union. It was a never-ending battle. Here we can concentrate on learning. Many of the complicating factors have been removed. And the parents are happy, too. That makes a huge difference.”

After the interview, Wendell returned to his car to head home. This week, he had visited several other schools that were pursuing the private classroom model with varying degrees of success. Some of the schools enabled or encouraged student interaction, while others did not. Some worked with other private schools and homeschoolers to arrange for extracurricular activities for students. One of the private classrooms he had visited taught only girls; another accepted Spanish-speaking students only. Both offered courses in a second language. There appeared to be a wide range of approaches. If this model of learning was not successfully sabotaged by its opponents, no doubt it would continue to be refined as demand increased, more classrooms opened, and more students enrolled.

Over the past year, as public schools continued to decline and news spread about the increasing variety of digital courseware available, it had become clear that there was a substantial movement toward the use of private classrooms. Courseware was being ordered in record numbers.

So many diverse schools were springing up now around the country that quality was irregular. Some were quite good, and others were not. It seemed that the best measure of each private school was the quality of the organizer of the school. There were no enforceable state regulations for private schools and no means of



enforcing quality, so the variety was endless. The only quality control came from the parents of the students, who could opt out or change schools if they were of a mind to do so. They could also do nothing. Of course, there were no true quality controls over public schools, either, and parents had significantly fewer options within the public school framework. Many of the standard procedures in public schools were irrelevant and wasteful, and few objected because everyone conformed. In this new format, only the consciences of the private school organizers, teachers, and parents dictated standards.

Most of the teachers or supervisors in the private classrooms were non-certified. But many certified teachers, like Ms. Ryman, were also migrating to the private sector, in spite of the low compensation. The labor of love was the only remaining hook onto which education was hanging. Few of the remaining teachers or students complained because it was the best there was. Those who did complain had no other option except to pursue opening their own schools.

Wendell had noticed that some of the new schools were quite crowded. The organizers were unable to accept all applicants. Malcontent students and parents were denied admission, which had vastly reduced discipline problems. Those who refused to study and exercise good conduct were simply dropped. Some of them applied to other private schools or returned to the public school, which had to accept them.

He had visited one large public school and was shocked by what he saw. As he had heard, discipline had declined precipitously. All hope of a good education appeared to be lost. Learning was sparse at best. A number of public schools had simply closed as the economic situation deteriorated. The remaining schools became more and more crowded, while increasing numbers of students were out on the streets, turning to crime, or working low-paying, entry-level jobs. It was depressing.

But his visits to the private classrooms had raised his spirits considerably.

When he arrived at home, he found Donna slumped at the dining table, arms crossed, staring dolefully into space.

“Donna, what’s wrong? What’s happened?” he set down his briefcase and coat and went to her.

She motioned to the laptop open on the table before her. “Look at this headline. The Department of Education has issued an ‘Equal Time – Fairness Document.’ You cannot believe what it does.”

He joined her at the table and began skimming the article. He had heard some rumblings about actions at the DOE but hadn’t had an opportunity to find out more.

“They’re requiring all private schools to give equal time to all department social agendas,” Donna said. “The presentation must be documented, and each student must sign an acknowledgment of participation. They can’t do this!”

““The failure to provide department-approved courses is defined as a hate crime,”” he read. “They’ll probably de-certify any school which fails to comply, and apply criminal penalties as well.”

“That is what the article suggests.”

Wendell stood and went to the kitchen pantry, searching it absent-mindedly as he mulled over the implications of this news. “Apparently the culture found in some of the ASESAs courses is becoming so popular that the department feels forced to intervene into the expanding private school arena. Of course, they call it ‘enforced fairness’ rather than ‘indoctrination.’ Is there any language indicating that the department agendas must also be met in public schools with equal time?”

“Of course not. Fairness is a one-way street. If you can believe it, they’ve also limited the use of ASESAs courses to two hours a day in any one school.”

“On what do they pretend to base that?” Wendell brought a package of crackers and cheese to the table and gestured for Donna to have some. She didn’t seem to notice as she skimmed the article yet again.

“They say something about protecting the health and safety of students,” Donna said. “The DOE condemns ASESAs products by issuing warnings about the potential harm which they may be causing to children. They also mention appeasing classroom teachers who are having trouble competing with ASESAs courses.” She stood up and began to pace. “They can’t compete with our program, so they’re trying to outlaw it. Even as we locate the best minds to remotely teach millions of students, they’re looking for ways to abort our success. Distance learning works, but political sabotage might kill it.”

Wendell caught Donna as she passed and wrapped his arms around her waist. Her eyes were marked by dark circles, and she looked pale. He worried about her.

“Would dinner out make you feel better?” he asked. “How about Giacomo’s on Olive? It was just reviewed in the newspaper. They’re supposed to have the best Bolognese sauce in the city. I’ll tell you all about what I learned today, and then maybe we can talk about something other than work. At least, for a couple of hours.”

Finally, Donna’s worried expression relaxed. She smiled at him gratefully. “Okay. You’ve got a deal.”



Op-Ed

## Reaching the Gifted

By Wendell Thomas

The human mind is a terrible thing to waste. We treat it as though

there is an endless supply. There are billions of people on the earth. And yet, where among them are the minds with the capacity and training to produce new solutions to the problems facing humanity?

We have long known that the powerful human brain has immense potential, but that we use it only marginally. In American society, as in others, many have the innate capacity to think, but never have the opportunity to think creatively or develop an interest in doing so. A good system of education should provide the opportunity to think and should stimulate the interest of thinkers. The required ideal environment is too often withheld from gifted students by combining them with unmotivated or less gifted students in the classroom and failing to provide challenging coursework.

We cannot teach the increasingly complex disciplines of science or prepare young students to study them under the conditions typical in public schools today. Schools have adopted the same philosophy held by many in the news industry, that they must reduce the level of presentation to that of a given grade level. In this context, the gifted never have an opportunity to rise higher than the predetermined level of the presentation.

Higher levels of learning are possible only in certain environments. On a practical level, we cannot determine in advance which minds are open to special training. As a consequence, the common good of

our nation is best served by giving all willing students the opportunity to excel. This is possible only by offering a system unlike any we have previously known. It must permit individual choices. Excellent teachers, superior customized coursework, and a learning-friendly environment are required. Until now, this combination has not been possible for the general population.

Here in the U.S., we have never been able to produce adequate numbers of excellent teachers. Children are gifted with different kinds (yes, “kinds”) of intelligence, various stages of maturity at a given age, varying interests, and unpredictable motivations. Their chances of finding the resources they need to succeed as students are no better than those of the roulette wheel. Even resource-rich schools often fail to effectively deliver high-quality coursework to students. Gifted students with fewer resources have even fewer opportunities to interface with the required components for excellent learning. We can all agree that this inequity is wrong, but that solves nothing. Many want to terminate the advantages of resource-rich schools and mix gifted students with those less endowed academically. Instead of raising the opportunities for all students, this strategy further compromises their chances of academic success.

The answer is to assemble small, compatible groups of students, or even to address single students, and provide them with instruction by uniquely qualified remote instructors. That option is growing and

will soon become the obvious choice of gifted students, as well as many others in need of specialized attention. Ultimately, it could be the choice of all students, with their varying goals, interests, and needs.

As technology continues to improve, digital solutions will become more and more attractive and are potentially scalable to the world. As we face the opportunities and challenges of a globalized society, we cannot afford to ignore the potential of America's gifted young minds.

## **Chapter 20**

### **The Feds Threaten**

*April 2017*

Adine climbed out of a taxi in front of the U.S. Capitol with her good friend Joan, a fellow lobbyist with the NTA. They had flown into Washington to speak with Congressman Skinner, chairperson of the Education Committee, who had close ties to the education lobby and could generally be counted on. Gazing up at the magnificent Capitol building as they began to climb the steps, Adine felt her chest puff up with pride and an uncharacteristic sense of patriotism. This was where all the important decisions happened, where the wheels of politics turned. And now she was part of it.

Lobbying efforts by interest groups in education had been ramped up in recent months. The worsening economy was tearing a hole in public school pension plans, and pay raises were distant memories. The NTA could barely operate with things as they were. The convention budget and many perks had been scaled back. Taxpayer

strikes, failed building bond referendums, and other deleterious events were having serious effects. Teachers were increasingly turning to employment with private schools, some of which were adopting affordable digital courses from the ASESAs catalog to replace traditional classroom teaching. The NTA board of directors had agreed that they needed to craft counter-insurgency plans to cope with the loss of dues.

Inspired by the brainstorming sessions at the Intercollegiate Policy Council meeting, Adine had suggested that the NTA focus its efforts on requiring private school teachers and homeschooling parents to join the union. The organization had tremendous credits built up with various politicians whose elections they had funded almost single-handedly. They needed to begin new initiatives aimed at the organization's preservation. Their most recent achievement had been the Equal Time – Fairness Document, limiting private schools' use of ASESAs courses and requiring the use of DOE-approved courses in their place. It was a brilliant stroke. Adine smiled proudly as she thought of it. It was a big step in the right direction.

She and Joan walked into the Capitol and, after passing through security and obtaining ID badges, they were ushered to the congressman's office. They waited for twenty minutes before his secretary emerged and invited them in. Heavy blue curtains pulled back with gold cord hung around the window, and photographs of the congressman with important people hung on the walls. A large oak desk dominated the room. Skinner was a tall, thin man with graying hair and striking blue eyes.

“Congressman Skinner, thank you for responding to our request for an audience,” said Joan. “I don't believe you've met Adine Dorson, a professor in education at Harbridge and the newest addition to our board of directors.”

After they had shaken hands, Skinner sat behind his desk, and Joan dove right



in, knowing their time was limited. “We want to talk to you about the crisis that is occurring in public education. State government has always carried the primary financial responsibility for education. But with the economy in dire straits, the power of the federal government needs to be tapped for assistance. We know the power of the law in protecting the rights of students for a quality education. Quality will only happen when those at the top have the power to marshal resources.”

Skinner leaned back in his chair and pinched his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “Go on.”

“We know that you and your colleagues can invoke emergency legislation to save the education system,” Joan continued. “We are ready to press you for solutions to the current problems. No time or resources should be spared in taking decisive legislative action. It’s up to us to save education as we know it. We are concerned with having inadequate funds for campaign contributions unless this situation can be turned around.” Her meaning was clear.

“I understand, Ms. King. The NTA has always been one of my biggest supporters.”

“The problem we are facing is monumental because of the massive economic decline. We have already tried every tactic we know to cover the problem. Now we need to invent new solutions if we’re going to turn this around. We propose a surtax on the income tax to help fund the schools.”

Skinner nodded. “You mentioned that in your letter. Tell me more about it.”

“We suggest that the entire financial resources of American education be focused on saving the public sector. Millions of dollars are being squandered on private education facilities used by affluent parents. More millions are being spent on digital courseware having highly questionable value. The NTA does not want the

phenomenal American education system to erode in the path of changing distribution and presentation technology. Not only are educators' careers at stake, but also a vast network of supporting ancillary services is threatened. The devastating effects of losing this juggernaut are incalculable. We need to limit all educational activity outside the public sector. All resources must be focused on preserving our greatest resource, the traditional caretakers of the minds of American students. We need to use the inventive resources of the Department of Education to find ways to accomplish this goal. A surtax on the income tax would help facilitate this."

Absorbing this, Skinner leaned forward, his elbows on his desk. "Income tax is a potent source of revenue. There are no technical limits on its taxing power. Discretion has been used in the past to limit rates, but this has been by policy only, not by actual barriers."

Adine took the opportunity to chime in, using the bullet points they had rehearsed beforehand. "An education surtax added to the existing income tax structure would create no new taxpayers, only add to the rate of existing payers. The tax rate would start low and would cover only those who are in the middle and upper tax brackets. The revenues could be earmarked to an education reserve and be used for that purpose only. The DOE could administer it so that there will be no new costs for overhead."

Skinner appeared impressed. He stood and moved around his desk, pacing thoughtfully. "Increasing taxes is never popular, but neither is the state of the school system. If it creates no new taxpayers, I might be able to push it through, especially if it's for education. The idea might have some merit."

Joan and Adine exchanged hopeful glances.

Joan added, "Education is such an essential service that it's only fitting that it

should benefit directly from this revenue source.”

Skinner pointed a finger at her and grinned. “I can always depend on you to lend me a good line for the press.” He glanced at his watch. “Thank you, ladies. I have another meeting in two minutes. But I assure you I will work out the details with my staff and fellow legislators to see if I can get this proposal started.”

Joan stepped forward to shake his hand again. “Thank you, Congressman. Your support means so much.”

Adine followed Joan back out into the hallway, feeling exhilarated by the encounter. Her first taste of lobbying brought with it an intoxicating sense of influence. Gazing up at the historical paintings on the walls and the awe-inspiring dome of the rotunda as they passed underneath, she sensed her proximity to the most powerful individuals in the country. Perhaps one day this place would be an everyday part of her job. *Who knows what could happen?* she thought. Certainly she did not plan to languish at Harbridge for the rest of her career. She had bigger plans.



*June 2017*

Donna was looking over her department’s budget when she received an email from a colleague with a news article attached. Opening it, she found an Associated Press report on the latest move by the government to rescue the nation’s crumbling public school system.

Congress has come to the rescue of the nation’s children. The funds for needed education support and reform are now assured by the passage of the Skinner-Philpot Education Reserve Act. The law takes effect on January 1, 2018, and will add a four percent surtax on

all incomes over \$30,000. The IRS is scrambling to prepare a new Form RES-1 for the use of those who are otherwise exempt from filing income tax returns. Others will notice a new line added to form 1040 for calculating the surtax on their regular tax. That form has been shortened by taking away lines for tax credits. Most former credits other than withheld tax are being abolished, because the revenue lost to credits was too burdensome on the tax system.

This reform is the biggest advance since the income tax laws were passed in 1913 under the Sixteenth Amendment. While it is true that the flat rate tax hike is somewhat regressive, the lower income families are likely to have children who benefit from the tax.

“A big increase in federal revenue for education is about to flow,” said National Teachers Association spokesperson Joan King. “Much of the revenue will be used to restore pension plans that were depleted by the stock market decline. The Department of Education will absorb much of the reserve for use in purchasing curricula, training teachers, and preparing lesson plans for all schools. Many schools are using old, outdated materials and are suffering from crumbling facilities. It is for the common good of America to preserve quality education. The battle for the minds of our youth never ends, but we have just been financially re-armed.”

Donna felt sick to her stomach. *Anything to prop up the failing system*, she thought. The DOE and NTA were already doing their best to eradicate all alternatives. Private schools were being subjected to virtual rack-and-screw terrorism. Even

though public schools were disintegrating all around, the federal government was strong-arming the states into requiring all children to be registered into public schools. Those who didn't attend were counted as truant, and some parents had been subjected to criminal charges. Many had little choice but to send their kids back to public school to avoid fines and jail time. The school districts were even keeping track of which children were attending private schools and were prohibiting them from participating in extracurricular activities on public grounds.

On top of all this, private school programs had recently been forced to surrender their income to the state, to be redistributed back on a "pro rata" basis – what a laugh. To top it off, they were required to use teachers who were members of the union. Dues were being raised from remote teachers who didn't even work in public schools – it was called a "convenience fee" for the inconvenience of monitoring them. There was almost no oversight of public school teachers, and yet remote teachers were required to submit detailed lesson plans for every school day. That way, the government knew whether they were using SchoolTools-designed courseware. More and more administrative reports were required, and the penalties were increasingly severe. Many of the paperwork requirements approached CPA level. It was easy to expel a remote teacher from the union, and tenure laws did not apply to them.

As a result of these tactics, orders for ASESAs courses and enrollment in the Academe had begun to drop. The intimidation was working. Donna was deeply worried about the direction things were taking.

Heaving a sigh, she glanced over at the new photograph of herself and Wendell that graced her desk. She hadn't had a chance to frame it yet, so it leaned against the portrait of her young niece, Janna, a toddler when it was taken. Since the girl was now

six, it was clearly time to do a little updating in her office.

Donna looked around as if noticing the room for the first time. A shriveled fern sat forlornly in the corner, a victim of sporadic watering. The room's other spare furnishings – two utilitarian visitors' chairs, an overflowing bookshelf, and a framed Monet poster – were coated with a thick layer of dust. She couldn't remember the last time she had given a thought to the room. At home, she did what was necessary to keep the townhouse clean and livable, but even it had suffered from her nonstop work schedule over the past couple of years. She chided herself for neglecting it. Now that Wendell had moved in, there was even more clutter. He had brought along a number of his professionally framed photographs, mostly black-and-white shots of the city, and she wanted to display them. She should take a few days off to organize and make their home a proper nest. It might just save her sanity.

She reached forward and picked up the unframed photograph by its corner. Nora Isaacs had taken the snapshot a month earlier after Donna and Wendell's brief wedding ceremony. Wendell looked dashing in a sleek gray suit, and Donna had to admit that she, too, had cleaned up nicely for the occasion. Her mother had flown in from Florida, and her jaw had dropped when she saw Donna in the ivory silk gown she had found for a steep discount at a local department store. Donna had allowed her mother to take her to a salon for some pre-wedding primping, and the stylist had transformed her unruly waves into an elegant chignon that set off her cheekbones. What Donna loved most of all about the portrait, however, was the obvious joy and affection she and Wendell shared for each other. Their faces glowed.

They had both agreed to skip the expense and effort of a formal wedding, opting for a courthouse ceremony officiated by a judge. They had invited only a few witnesses, including Aaron and Nora and Donna's mother, Katherine. Afterward, they

had gone out to dinner at a nearby seafood restaurant. The honeymoon consisted of a day off from work, of which Donna had taken full advantage, sleeping in late and indulging in the pancakes that Wendell had brought to her in bed.

Donna gazed at the photograph, holding on to the warm feeling of contentment for another moment, before setting it down and returning reluctantly to the matters at hand. She closed her email program, putting the news of the surtax out of her mind, and glanced at the clock. If she dilly-dallied any longer, she would be late to her meeting with Cedric Whitecotton, a representative with the Department of Education. He had said that he wanted to talk with her about something that could be of mutual benefit to them both. Though she had her doubts, she had agreed to meet with him. There was always a chance, however slim, that she could make a persuasive argument for her side and put a dent in the armor of the DOE.

She hurried to the university cafeteria, nearly empty at this time of the afternoon, and found him at a window table, sipping a cup of coffee. Taking a deep breath, she struggled not to blame him personally for the news she had just read about the education surtax. She had to keep this civil if she hoped to achieve anything.

They shook hands. "So, how can I help you?" she asked as she sat down across from Whitecotton, a middle-aged man with thick silver hair and a moustache. He did not smile.

"Dr. Kane, I will come straight to the point. The department has been tracking your progress with the Juan Rumesuela Academe. We know that you are an officer in the ASES organization as well. We have decided that your ventures are significant to the progress of American education. We are prepared to purchase your rights in both organizations and allow you to retire comfortably."

Donna stared at him. She was shocked. "Surely you know that I will not

consider such a transaction, Mr. Whitecotton.”

“Your compensation would be in the millions, Dr. Kane.”

She narrowed her eyes, struggling to contain her indignation. “Neither you, nor anyone else will be able to bribe me into giving up this effort. This is part of my life’s work. Surely you know better.”

He sighed and set down his mug. “Now, think carefully about this, Dr. Kane. The United States government is very serious in its commitment to a quality education for its citizens. We are prepared to do whatever it takes to persuade you. Are you certain you would not consider a sale?” He gazed her probingly.

She caught herself as she prepared to make another impassioned rebuttal. She wondered exactly what kind of threat lay beneath Whitecotton’s words. “Yes, I am quite sure,” she said more soberly.

He carefully folded his hands. “We surmised that you might take that position. Therefore, we are prepared to seize your interests as being a clear and present threat to public education.”

“Are you serious?” Donna exclaimed. She glanced around and noticed a couple of people looking in their direction. She lowered her voice. “Isn’t it enough that laws are being passed left and right to restrict competition between the public schools and the private sector? It’s become impossible for citizens to comply with the draconian rules.”

“Dr. Kane—”

“It is individuals like yourself who have created this situation so you can end the competition under penalty of law. You people have no shame in tightening the screws, do you?”

Mr. Whitecotton was unmoved. “You appear to be on the wrong side of



history, Dr. Kane.”

“We’ll talk about who’s on the wrong side of history after the public system collapses. It will happen despite your efforts to persecute those like myself.”

“And when do you propose that this collapse will happen? It seems you’ve been predicting the demise of public education for many years.”

“It will happen when the growing costs of the system overcome the weakened financial condition of the state and federal governments. There are already strong indications that it is happening. All great collapses in history have happened ‘without warning,’ after the obvious signs have been present for years. You might recall the fall of the Soviet Union and the bursting of the housing bubble.”

Whitecotton opened his briefcase and extracted a business card, which he slid across the table toward her. “Let me know if you change your mind, Dr. Kane. But be prepared for a subpoena to be delivered if I don’t hear from you soon. We are not taking this lightly.”

Donna took the card and remained sitting as he strolled away. Her chest felt tight. The tide seemed to be turning against them. Those in charge were determined not only to run the government and public schools into the ground, but to take the private sector down with them. Would the Academe and the remote learning movement be able to hold together in the face of these attacks? What if the government succeeded in its campaign to seize SchoolTools? She did her best to ignore the sensation that everything was crashing down around her.

## **Chapter 21**

### **The Government Makes Its Move**

*October 2017*

The Isaacs' front door swung open, and Aaron beckoned Donna inside. The house was warm and smelled of cinnamon. No doubt Nora had been baking again.

“Hi, Donna,” Aaron said. “I was just finishing the technical key to converting all SchoolTools courses to 3D format. No glasses will be required to bring out the depth.”

“You mentioned you were working on that. I can't wait to see it.”

He grinned like a child with a new toy. “I'll show it to you before we get started on the campaign stuff.”

Aaron had invited Donna over to his home office to discuss expansion of their campaign to promote SchoolTools. Despite the recent setbacks, including the federal limits on use of the ASESAs courses and the recent not-so-subtle threats from the DOE

representative, they were still moving along at a furious pace. In fact, their success appeared to be tied to the economic recession. Parents were desperate to continue the education of their children, but could not afford to send their children to public schools. Donna had heard that the fees were becoming prohibitive for middle-class families who had to pay them in order to enroll their children into school. The cost of textbooks had escalated. Meanwhile, ASESAs courses were mostly free, and matriculation fees through the Academe were still low. Lunches served at schools are also unaffordable. The income of the typical family had dropped as the economy continued to decline. Those who had jobs were worried about layoffs and were carefully watching their expenses. Homeschooling had mushroomed in spite of the legal restrictions and taxes. Donna, Aaron, ASESAs authors, private-schoolers, and homeschoolers across the nation were seriously challenging public education without costing it anything.

Aaron led her down the hallway into his office, which was surprisingly clutter-free. The wood surface of his desk gleamed, and the books on his shelves were neatly arranged. No files or stacks of papers had to be moved from the upholstered guest chair.

“What happened in here?” Donna asked. “It looks fantastic.”

“Nora happened,” Aaron replied sheepishly as he sat down in front of his computer. “She couldn’t take it anymore. She organized everything . . . again.”

“Well, you owe her a very special favor.”

“I know. I’m still trying to figure out what that could be.” He pulled up a program on his computer and began clicking through the setup functions. “Have you heard anything yet from the DOE? Do you think they’re going to follow through on their threat?”

Pulling up a chair, Donna shook her head. “No, not yet.” Though she was extremely busy, the thought was never too far from her mind. The threat that Whitecotton had made hadn’t kept her from continuing with her campaign; far from it. But she had to admit she remained worried. “No subpoenas have been forthcoming. Maybe it was an empty threat. On what grounds will they pretend to seize my rights in ASES or the Academe? They can’t hold us accountable for the users who violate the laws limiting homeschooling. There’s no clear consensus as far as the public is concerned. The NTA is beating its drums for action against us. The authorities are threatening to take new action in response to the outcry of the teachers. But it’s clear that there is a demand for a new system.”

“Maybe that’s why nothing has happened. They couldn’t get a judge to sign off on it.”

Just as Aaron moved aside to let Donna use the 3D program, the doorbell rang. A second later, it was followed by forceful pounding on the door. They glanced at each other.

Following Aaron down the hallway to the living room, Donna looked through the front window and saw several uniformed officers standing on the porch. Her breath caught. Aaron looked at Donna uneasily.

“Aaron?” Nora said from the upstairs balcony. Joshua and Rachel appeared at her side, their eyes wide with curiosity as they peered down from the railing.

Aaron halted in midstep. “I’ve got it, Nora. Kids, go back to your rooms.”

With a worried glance back over her shoulder, Nora escorted them back down the hallway.

Continuing to the door, Aaron swung it open.

“Good afternoon, sir. I’m Detective Martin for the State of Massachusetts. Are

you Aaron Isaacs?" he inquired with authority, flashing his badge.

"Yes, I am," Aaron said, maintaining his calm.

Another officer entered the room and scanned it carefully.

"May I ask your name?" Martin asked Donna.

"I'm Donna Kane."

"Is anyone else here?"

"My wife is upstairs with the kids," Aaron answered.

"What's this all about?" Donna asked.

Detective Martin continued without directly answering her. "Sir, ma'am, we have warrants for your arrest for the crime of civil disobedience. You have the right to remain silent . . ."

Donna did not listen to the remaining recitation of their rights. She was relieved when Nora reappeared, demanding to know what was going on. At least somebody else was present to witness the charade. She immediately contacted Ruben Stoneburner. By then, the officers had already cuffed Aaron and Donna and were moving them out the door into a waiting squad car.

Donna sat numbly in the back seat, trying to grasp what was happening. This was not what she had expected. The authorities must have decided that seizing her interests in the Academe was not enough; for the crime of offering an alternate to public education, they must now take away her freedom and brand her a felon. No doubt a trial lay ahead that would drain their resources and put their lives on hold for the next year or longer. She felt enraged and powerless.

When they arrived at the jail downtown, she and Aaron were booked and ushered into separate cells. Ruben appeared shortly thereafter and began working toward their release. Donna spent several long, miserable hours in her cell, wondering

if she was going to spend the night in jail, but to her relief, Ruben was able to arrange for their release late that afternoon. Bail was set at \$20,000 each, with ten percent due in cash. Nora and Wendell appeared before the clerk and paid the bail after signing a bond for the remainder.

Donna met Wendell in the foyer and fell into his reassuring hug, remaining there for a moment before turning to thank Ruben. Nora was sobbing as she held Aaron. They all agreed to touch base later and then quickly left, exhausted by their ordeal.

On the drive home, Donna assured Wendell she was all right and stared out the window in a daze, unable to make conversation. She had not yet been able to process what had happened – or what lay ahead. She was grateful that Wendell, too, had not been arrested. Aaron had speculated that although Wendell was a part owner of Juan Rumesuela Academe, he wasn't a big enough fish to fry, as far as the government was concerned. What this all really came down to was SchoolTools and the remote schooling movement it had spawned. The authorities wanted to get their hands on the program and put a stop to Aaron and Donna's activities, even if they terrorize them in order to do it.

Exhausted by her anxious thoughts, Donna gazed at the store fronts passing by, more than half of which were empty. The recession had taken its toll on businesses. The streets were sorely in need of repairs, but there were inadequate funds to fix them. Sewage filled a ditch near the street as the result of a broken sewage line. A stench filled the air. She had begun to notice that street lights were frequently left off at night in many areas in an effort to save the cost of electricity. Public services were diminishing. The nearest firehouse had been closed, as well as the grade school on Mill Street. The city was unable to keep up with maintenance, much less add any

needed improvements.

At home, Wendell took off her shoes and plopped her down on the sofa.

“Just rest and relax while I fix you something to eat,” he ordered, disappearing into the kitchen.

As usual, relaxing was not what her brain wanted to do. Pulling her notebook computer into her lap, she went to the site of her education wiki and checked to see how many copies of recently released book, *The New One-Room School*, had sold. Surprisingly, five copies had been downloaded already, two of them purchased for the suggested donation of five dollars, with the amount going to the Juan Rumescuela Academe. Several publications friendly to SchoolTools had promoted the site and the book.

She clicked over to the ASESAsite but found that it would not load, no matter what she tried. The site appeared to be down. How could that be? They had paid their monthly web hosting bill as usual. She became alarmed. Could this have something to do with the government’s latest move? Suddenly she noticed that her email inbox was full of new messages, some of them were regarding her arrest, and some of them from authors who were unable to access the website. Her stomach twisted into a painful knot.

Wendell strolled into the room carrying a tray, which he set on the coffee table. “Scrambled eggs, wheat toast, fresh-squeezed orange juice, hot tea,” he announced. Then he noticed her expression. He put his hand on her back and sat beside her. “Everything’s going to be okay, Donna,” he said softly. “I promise.”

Looking into his kind eyes, she so badly wanted to believe him, but she wasn’t sure if she could.





## Chapter 22

### Hopelessness at Westside Middle School

*November 2017*

Principal Mark Kimler beckoned another student into his office at Westside Middle School in Bloomington, Illinois. It was Manny Rumescuela, a seventh grader he had seen twice already. He knew that Manny had been taken in by relatives after his parents died. His teachers had been complaining that he slept or talked through class and was regularly disruptive. Like many students, he seemed to have lost all interest in learning. Mark had already met the boy's legal guardians, an aunt and uncle who seemed concerned and committed to Manny's success. They felt they had done all they could to encourage their nephew in his schoolwork. Today, the note said that he had gotten into an argument with Mrs. Sanchez.

Manny slumped into the chair in front of Mark's desk, wearing a faded red T-shirt and torn blue jeans. Running a hand through his shaggy dark hair, he avoided

Mark's gaze.

"Hi, Manny," Mark said with a friendly tone. "How's it going today?"

Manny shrugged and looked into the corner.

"Why did you talk back to Mrs. Sanchez again?"

Manny groaned. "That class is so boring. What difference does it make what happened in the eighteen hundreds?"

"If you want to graduate and get a job, you need to sit down and learn for a few years. You need to learn to speak and think well."

Manny shook his head. "It's too hard. What do these classes have to do with my life? I'll just try to do good in baseball. I think I could make it as a shortstop." His eyes lit up as the topic turned to his favorite sport. "I can catch and hit better than most of my friends."

Mark sighed. "Manny, you're very intelligent, but that's not a wise choice. Few people end up succeeding in big league sports. Do you know how many try and never make it?"

Manny shrugged again. "Maybe I'm different."

"You are different. You have special skills that can help you develop a career, but you need to find out what they are."

"My uncle and most people I know don't have a job. Why should I bother trying if I'm just going to sit around doing nothing anyway?"

It was hard to argue with that logic. Mark knew the outlook was bleak. But he had to try. "I know the economy looks bad now, but by the time you graduate, it will be better. You should be preparing for that time so you can support yourself. Aren't there things you want to do in your life? Something you want to be, other than a shortstop?" He paused, waiting for a response, then continued. "In any case, I need

you to be respectful of the other students and your teacher, and stop disrupting the class session. Can you do that for me?”

He and Manny sat regarding each other for a long minute.

There was little else Mark could do to motivate Manny and others like him. Calling parents usually just invited trouble. Parents blamed teachers or the administration. Students could be expelled, but they simply went on to another school or returned during the next school year, if they didn't drop out altogether. It was no solution at all. Mark knew this, and yet changing the culture at Westside was far more complex and difficult than he had ever imagined it would be when he came on board as the new principal.

Mark cleared his throat. “Manny, if you could change this school in any way you wanted, what would you do?”

The boy sat up straighter in his chair, and a reluctant smile appeared on his face. Certainly this was not a question he had expected. “The classes are so boring. Maybe we could play video games instead. And I would make every day a half day. And less homework. And . . .” He suddenly looked embarrassed. “I would send all the bullies away to their own school,” he mumbled, gazing down at his hands.

Mark was caught unprepared by this. He rubbed his jaw with his hand. “Yes, Manny, I think we would all like to do that.” He paused, searching for something else to add, but finally said, “You can go now. Please try to behave in class.”

When Manny had gone, Mark looked at his schedule numbly. In ten minutes, he had a meeting with the parents of a girl who complained that her social studies teacher, Miss Harper, had embarrassed her in class when she asked why they didn't study America's founding fathers. Kate Harper was fresh out of her teaching program and very much aligned with the modern educational philosophies promoted there. He

wasn't looking forward to the meeting.

As he began straightening up the papers and files spread across his desk, he remembered the optimism he had felt when he finally secured a position as principal. He had thought it would allow him to make changes. When he had come on board at Westside, though, he'd learned that he had little power to do anything that would substantially improve the school, which was following the same trends as those at Central High. Anytime he had challenged the long-held assumptions of teachers or other administrators, or attempted to undo the acts of the previous principal, he had gotten a clear message that this was not his job. He had the power to hire new teachers, but it was almost impossible to know which of the applicants would excel. They all took the same classes in their teachers' colleges, and most got high, if inflated, grades. Their record of misconduct in college was confidential and not available for reference. All received uniformly outstanding recommendations from their deans. The only basis he and his fellow administrators had for selecting one over the other was their observation of the candidates in a brief interview. Gut feeling was about his only guide.

All candidates had been forewarned to beware of the school board members, superintendents, principals, older teachers, parents of students, and taxpayers. They came prepared to join the teachers' union and to depend on it as their only friend. They wanted to protect themselves from probing questions about their scholastic interests. Once hired, they accepted extracurricular duties until they attained tenure, especially if they were only marginally qualified. Few would do anything more than necessary to help students excel.

He had also confirmed what he had suspected while he was at Central High – that it was next to impossible to remove under-performing teachers who had tenure.

There was a lot of entrenchment in mediocrity. The union rabidly defended teachers even when their conduct was heinous. Occasionally, parent protest against a teacher became so strong that the district would move the offending teacher to another school. The union insisted that teachers were all professionals who needed little or no supervision. Few teachers made an effort to create lesson plans, but instead took them from the NTA or the Department of Education. Efforts to modify a teacher's approach were futile, particularly after they reached tenure.

The newer teachers, like Miss Harper, were more concerned with passing on the political agendas they had acquired in college than with teaching standard skills and knowledge. Many focused on the need to build self-esteem among students. Certainly, Mark wanted to support students' self-esteem, but not at the cost of their academic development.

Before he had arrived, grading had been abandoned at the school for all practical purposes. The grades that were handed out were inflated. At this point, there was little significance to recording them. Student performance was well camouflaged.

"Grades are just a convenient way to enable discrimination," Jane Dunning, the outgoing principal, had told him. "Employers and colleges no longer rely on them, anyway."

The only important scores were ACT and SAT test scores. Some teachers shamelessly assisted the class by going through the tests in unison one question at a time and agreeing on the correct answers. The coordination was poor enough that no one could be sure that this was done. Meanwhile, the school district and the state appreciated the improved test scores as an important way to earn school ranking in the nation. Mark had even heard a teacher justify it by assuming that some of the students learned just by hearing right answers to which they might never be exposed.

Mark didn't need to attend another administrators' convention to know that the declining state of education across the country had become serious. Schools were losing many of their best teachers because of low wages and slipping benefits, discipline problems, and the rise of private schools. Due to the decline of revenues resulting from falling real estate valuations, the district was barely able to meet current payroll commitments. They had trimmed non-teaching staff to the bone and were unable to give raises to teachers. Pension funds were going unfunded for lack of cash. They continued to owe the pension funds, but had to wait until the economy and revenues improved in order to address the issue. They were skimping on supplies and activities of all kinds. The electorate was refusing to approve building fund bonds. Westside's district was approaching the same crisis other districts experienced as they had gone into insolvency. Most sports, music, and art programs had been eliminated, and physical education programs had been drastically reduced. Hot lunch meals were history. Field trips were rare. Janitorial services were provided by volunteers whenever available. The teachers' union had retreated from demanding raises in the face of impending school bankruptcy.

Some schools were now closing because of bankruptcy and crumbling infrastructure, leaving other schools to pick up the slack. Of course, many students simply stopped attending school altogether. School attendance was compulsory, but the law was becoming difficult to enforce given the financial shortfalls. Meanwhile, the academic performance of students still in school continued to drop.

Massive new resources at the federal level had been dedicated to the problem, but so far had done little to reverse the trend. In the past week, emergency legislation had been passed in the state senate to increase the education budget once again. The new funds were to come from an education surtax on the state income tax, mirroring

the recent change to federal taxes. This was to be supplemented by higher spending and borrowing limits on all local education funds and the abolition of the requirement of a local referendum on building proposals. Mark wondered if it would do any good. Could any measures, no matter how extreme, save the system?

A germ of hopelessness had been growing in him over the past year. He wondered if those promoting a new privatized system might be right. He had heard that many students were finding success with the remote digital courses that had exploded onto the market a few years earlier. Unfortunately, the courses had been banned by the school boards at both Central High and Westside.

His wife, Maggie, tried to encourage him, but she was all too aware of the realities of the situation. After only two years in high school administration, she had been let go when her school was forced to cut its staff by another budget shortfall. At the time, they had been carrying on a long-distance relationship after meeting at the conference in San Diego. Unable to find another job in education, she had moved to Illinois to be near him and found a part-time office job. Soon afterward, they had married. Though she had handled the change with calm dignity, Mark felt badly for her. She shared his passion for education and deserved to make use of her degrees. At the same time, considering the stress he felt every day when he arrived at work, he wondered if leaving the profession might be the right idea. He didn't know what he would do if Maggie wasn't there for him at the end of the day.

His office door opened, and the receptionist poked her head in. "Mr. K, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson are here."

"Okay, Sandra, thank you."

An attractive African-American couple entered with their daughter, Monique, a sixth-grader. After he had introduced himself and invited them to sit down, he asked

them to explain what had happened in class between their daughter and Miss Harper.

“Go ahead, Monique,” Mr. Johnson prompted.

Monique looked at him shyly. “I found an old history book in my grandma’s closet, and she let me bring it home. It has a lot of stuff in it that we don’t talk about in school. So I asked Miss Harper why we don’t talk about the Consi—Constution?” She glanced at her father.

“Constitution,” he corrected.

“Yeah. And the guys who wore white wigs. I thought they were funny. There was all this stuff about England and people who came here to get freedom. Miss Harper said that the people in the wigs had slaves and perc—perscute—” She looked at her mother.

“Persecuted, honey,” said Mrs. Johnson.

“Yeah, persecuted people who didn’t believe the same. They set up governments and did whatever they wanted. They didn’t let black people or women vote or do anything important. She said those people were embarrassing and we shouldn’t talk about them. And I said why not, and she got really angry.” Tears crept into her eyes, and her voice trembled.

“We are very concerned about Miss Harper’s treatment of our daughter,” said Mrs. Johnson. “She was asking simple questions that her teacher should have been able to answer. But we are also appalled that Monique is not being taught this material in school. She is a smart girl and eager to learn.”

“As an American citizen,” Mr. Johnson added, “she deserves to learn the history of her country and not be humiliated in front of the class for wanting to do so. We would like to look at Miss Harper’s curriculum. She should be ashamed to call herself a teacher if she thinks she can simply edit out whatever knowledge personally



offends her. She should be disciplined or removed.”

Mark sighed. If Monique’s account of the events was accurate, he could not disagree with their assessment. But he didn’t know what he could do about Miss Harper.

He spent the next half-hour assuring the Johnsons that he would look into the matter and address their concerns. He made a follow-up appointment to meet with them in a week to review the situation and assess any measures that were taken. But he recognized the look in their eyes. They were sick and tired of the public schools. He predicted that Monique would not be returning to the school next year. It was embarrassing, but a reality he had to face.

As they left, he began preparing for his confrontation with Miss Harper. He would review the school district’s curriculum and testing guidelines. Surely there was some way to help students like Monique get at least an adequate education. An excellent education was clearly too much to ask for.

## **Chapter 23**

### **No Mind Left Behind**

*December 2017*

Adine strolled down the sidewalk in her long wool coat, clutching her shopping bags and trying to tuck her chin into her scarf. Downtown Boston was chilly on this gray winter day, but she was willing to brave it for a rare shopping trip. She knew she shouldn't spend money on clothes, but she was in a celebratory mood. She couldn't be happier about the news that Aaron and Donna had been arrested for civil disobedience; the photos of them, particularly Donna, being hauled into jail in handcuffs were priceless. Convicting them of felonies would surely bring an abrupt end to their attacks on public education and, she was sure, an end to Donna's overly long career.

Moreover, Adine had just been offered a position as dean at Waltham College and had been walking on air for the past few days. She was thrilled by the proposition

of finally being out from under Donna, of finally being recognized for her relentless efforts on behalf of education, and of working with faculty who supported her views one hundred percent. With all the new laws that had been passed to discourage private schooling and the use of digital courseware, Adine felt that the movement had finally been put to rest. The public system was still struggling, given the recession, but once the economy recovered, she felt certain that education would revive as well.

Looking through her closet for something to wear for her first day on campus, however, she had been dismayed by her collection of outdated pantsuits, fraying sweaters, and beige polyester skirts. Her wardrobe was badly in need of updating. Her clothes should reflect the authority of her new position. She wanted her new colleagues to know that Adine was a force to be reckoned with.

As a gust of frigid wind hit her full in the face, she came to a stop outside Cleo's, a boutique whose front windows featured a mannequin wearing what Adine considered a "power suit." She swept inside, sighing with relief as the warm air blasted her. She quickly peeled off several layers and signaled to the shop girl for help.

Twenty minutes later, Adine retreated to a dressing room which the girl had filled with her selections.

"I told you I wanted the red one, not blue," Adine snapped when she saw the silk blouse hanging on the door. She tossed it on the carpet.

The girl scurried away with a mumbled, "Yes, ma'am."

After several failed attempts at putting together a successful outfit, Adine emerged in the black power suit she had admired in the window, a charcoal pinstriped number which she paired with the red blouse and high heeled black leather boots. Turning this way and that in the three-way mirror, she couldn't resist a self-satisfied

smile. She imagined herself striding through the halls of Waltham, the sound of the heels echoing powerfully. Perfect.

An older saleswoman walked by and paused to examine Adine's look. "That fits you perfectly. You should think about a new haircut, though. Something more current. Having all that frizz hanging around your face doesn't do anything for you. Just think about it," she concluded with a saccharine smile and hurried off into the back of the store.

Adine's own smile disappeared, and she flushed with embarrassment. Taking another furtive glance into the mirror, she ducked back into the dressing room.

When she brought her selections to the counter, the shop girl curtly rang them up and asked for an amount of money Adine had never before spent in one place. On her way out, she scowled at two women trying on hats together, their high-pitched laughter ringing through the store. Though Adine had a knack for networking, somehow she had never had any close girlfriends. She thought of her sister in Arizona, who had made it clear she had no desire to live within 2,500 miles of the family. There was certainly no love lost between them.

Bracing herself against the cold, Adine juggled her bags as she made her way back outside. She intended to catch a taxi and head home, but just a few storefronts away from Cleo's, she came upon a salon. On a whim, with the saleswoman's "constructive criticism" echoing in her head, she ducked inside. The svelte young woman behind the reception counter informed her that she was in luck; they had an opening in just twenty minutes with Marie, if she cared to wait.

Two hours passed while Adine's head was colored, highlighted, shampooed, conditioned, trimmed, and doused with a chemical mist Marie claimed would keep her new coiffure intact amid the ravages of the winter weather. When Marie

suggested a session with the salon's cosmetologist to complete the makeover, Adine agreed.

Finally, her chair was swiveled to face the mirrors, and Adine did a double-take. With her hair cut short and dyed a glossy shade of reddish-brown, and lipstick and mascara gracing her face for the first time in years, she looked at least ten years younger. She rummaged around in her bags for the pinstriped suit jacket and threw it on. Staring at her image, she felt exhilarated. Reborn.

It was time to show everyone what she was made of, especially those fuddy-duddies at Harbridge who had passed her over for promotion to dean. She was more than happy to take her talents to another institution where they would be appreciated. Visions of crushing Donna swam in her head. Adine saw herself in her suit, standing at a microphone before thousands of supporters, giving her acceptance speech at the conclusion of her congressional campaign. She would be heralded as the savior of the public schools and the nation's children, a leading figure in the new world order.

Realizing that her imagination had gotten away from her, Adine thanked the stylist, paid the exorbitant tab, and left with her cluster of shopping bags. During the taxi ride home, she noticed some laborers working on a billboard, replacing a haggard-looking SchoolTools advertisement with one for antacids. The ad displayed a cartoon army of antacid tablets, dressed in suits of armor, besieging a fire-breathing ulcer. Adine smiled.



Donna was sitting by the fire in her townhouse, taking a break from her work on the new ASESAs website, when she heard her cell phone ring. She thought it might be Wendell calling to tell her he was on his way home from his interview with a representative from the Department of Education.

Jumping up, she found the phone on the kitchen counter and answered it just before it went to voice mail. She instantly regretted her decision when she heard the voice on the other end of the line.

“Donna, it’s Roger. My secretary just handed me your letter of resignation.” He sounded inordinately pleased. “I don’t know whether thanks or congratulations are in order.”

Donna wasn’t in the mood for her cousin’s inane banter. “There’s nothing to talk about. I’m done with Harbridge. I’m moving on.”

She had dropped off the letter just before leaving campus the day before, hoping to avoid a conversation with Roger – or anyone else. The pressure to leave had been building ever since her arrest months earlier, with some at Harbridge saying she should step down, and it had become difficult to concentrate on her duties while preparing to defend herself in court. But she had to admit she had been mentally preparing to leave Harbridge for a long time. She had no higher aspirations within the university environment, and the encroachment of government into education had been growing worse and worse.

Then, a few days earlier, news had come about H.R. 537, a bill passed by Congress that had, for all intents and purposes, nationalized education in the United States. Schools from grade school to college, including private schools, would be required to adopt curriculum designed by the Department of Education, and students would be tested on their knowledge of it. As always, the bill was heralded as a move toward equality and improved educational success for the nation’s children. In reality, the act had taken what little local and individual control remained over education and put it all in the hands of the federal government. With public schools now largely dependent on federal funds to stay afloat, they had little choice but to abide by the

new rules. Private schools and parents could also be penalized in a variety of ways for not complying. The government no longer showed any constraint in forcing its agenda.

Donna felt extremely discouraged. At this point, staying at Harbridge would have meant propping up the existing system and parroting the nonsense that the government required her to teach. Besides, she knew that most of the faculty in the department were eager for her to leave. It was time to move on.

“Donna? Are you there?”

“Yes, Roger. What were you saying?”

“I assume you heard about the No Mind Left Behind Act,” Roger said smugly. “That must be traumatic for you.”

“Well, yes, I am furious, but I should have seen it coming. I simply can’t participate in promoting the propaganda we will see coming out of Washington.”

“Maybe you should just acknowledge defeat for your ideas and participate as a competent educator in the future of education. If you manage to stay out of prison, that is.”

“And promote the direct opposite of my philosophy? No. My conscience would hemorrhage from the dichotomy of practice and belief.”

“So what will you do?”

“I will continue to fight for alternatives to the rotted system.”

“It will be illegal to do so. You will be a criminal. The penalties are high, and you will continue to be targeted as a leader of the opposition.”

“I accepted the risks long ago. I don’t believe that the public will stand for this power grab by the government. I intend to lead a movement against it. If they are so desperate that they decide to throw me in prison, so be it.”

Roger sighed loudly. “You were brought up better, Donna. I never thought we’d have a criminal in the family.”

“Spoken by a paragon of righteousness,” she said with sarcasm. “Enjoy the process of choosing a new dean. I’m sure there are plenty who will step into my place and won’t give you any grief.”

“I’m certainly looking forward to that. It’s too bad Adine left. She’s been angling for your job for years now. Ironic, wouldn’t you say?”

Donna sighed. “I think the university is probably better off without her.”

“Yes, well, you may be right. Enjoy your vacation. I sincerely hope that you don’t spend it in the can.”

“Thank you, Roger. I don’t intend to.”

As she hung up, she wondered if her bravado was convincing. Although she remained committed to the cause, things were not looking good. Little recourse remained for homeschoolers, private school students, and ASESAs. An underground movement was still alive, but many seemed to be losing heart. Donna wondered how much longer she would be able to keep the movement together. Would it survive until the public system finally collapsed? Would they last through the economic recession? She couldn’t predict what might happen. But what else could she do? This was her cause. If it went down, she was going down with it.

Sinking back into her armchair, she pulled her grandmother’s afghan into her lap, searching for some elusive comfort. She couldn’t help but worry about losing her precious freedom and evenings like these, and spending them in a prison cell instead of in the comfort of her own home. Despite the warmth of the fire, she shivered.



## **Chapter 24**

### **Juan Dreams of a Career**

*March 2018*

“Edward, dinner is ready,” Juan’s mother called down the hallway. “We’re here at the table waiting for you to join us.”

At the dining table, she and Juan sat looking at each other for a moment, listening, but all that came back was silence. Twelve-year-old Juan gazed hungrily at the pot of chicken stew that sat steaming in the center of the table.

“Juan, would you please go get your father while I get the bread out of the oven? I think he’s so absorbed in that course that he can’t hear a word I’m saying.”

Juan bit back a complaint as he got up from the table and sauntered down the hall. Edward was sitting at the computer, absorbed in his new metallurgy course, just as Maria had predicted.

Edward had lost his job several months earlier when the retail shop he

managed had closed down. Like many other companies, the entire chain had been suffering from declining sales. Edward had talked about going back to school for some time, but the state of the economy had put that on hold. Recently, Juan had been looking through the ASESAs catalog for an advanced biology course to add to his schedule, when he had come across the course on metallurgy and suggested it to his father. Students were able to subscribe to any portion of the comprehensive course and start learning about metals. The tuition for the on-demand course was only \$19.95 per section, and it had received excellent reviews from users. It was so affordable that Edward hadn't thought twice about it.

Juan had watched his dad using the course several times. It allowed the student to manipulate virtual metals with heat, cold, impact, and torsion, while testing the sample for its properties to resist fatigue. The math was built into the program with examples. Hundreds of practical applications were covered. Molecular changes occurred as the student manipulated the metal. Differences were displayed as the student combined metals to make alloys.

“Dad,” Juan said, “we’re having dinner. I’m really hungry.”

His dad turned. “Thanks, Juan. I’m coming.” Saving his progress, he followed Juan to the table. “Sorry, hon,” he said, kissing his wife on the cheek.

They began passing around the dishes of food. Conversation revolved around the course that had absorbed Edward’s attention for most of the day. “The courses monitor your progress and adjust incrementally to accommodate you,” he raved to Maria. “You don’t have to be embarrassed about not getting it the first time. The courseware is automatically patient with presenting, testing, and reviewing the new information. The pace increases or decreases to match your understanding and ability. It even suggests taking a break every now and then when you’re getting tired and

begin to forget. It somehow knows.”

Maria and Juan exchanged wry smiles.

“Yes, Edward,” Maria replied, “Juan has been using the courses for . . . let’s see, almost five years now. You already knew they were effective and fun.”

“Yes, but I hadn’t seen one geared toward adult students. I’m surprised by how well it handles such complicated subject matter.” He paused to take a bite of fruit salad. “You know, I’m jealous of the coming generation of students. It’s like comparing the simple toys I played with when I was a kid with the electronic toys kids have today. It just isn’t fair. I would have been motivated to learn if I’d had these courses. No doubt things will be different for future generations. The joy of learning will triumph over the burden.”

“You almost quit high school in your junior year, didn’t you?”

Edward nodded. “It just didn’t seem like what I was learning could make any difference in my life. But these graphic demonstrations of the applications of knowledge are so different from textbooks. They show students the value of learning.”

“How about all those baseball stats you’ve memorized? You think they’ll ever figure out a practical purpose for that?”

Edward narrowed his eyes playfully at her. “Ha ha.”

Juan listened to the banter quietly as he wolfed down his food. At thirteen, it seemed like he was always hungry. He had grown two inches just in the last year, and the growing pains had kept him awake many nights. But he was happy about it; he had joined a community basketball team and was now the team’s captain. He was also playing guitar in a small band formed by other homeschoolers from around the area. But he still dedicated most of his time to his studies. Dr. Kane, with whom he kept up

a regular correspondence, said he might be ready to start a couple of college courses as early as next year. Of course, he was getting straight A's in all his courses.

After his dad had lost his job, the family had had to cut back on spending. Maria and Edward had always been frugal, so they were able to get by on Maria's income alone, and there had been no interruption in Juan's studies. He knew that laws had been passed to discourage homeschooling and the use of ASESAs courses, but his parents had been adamant that he continue. Dr. Kane had even been arrested, and he had said a prayer for her. He was worried that ASESAs would be shut down and that he would not have access to new courses.

Despite the laws, his parents had been adamant that he continue. They were taking a risk for him, and he was grateful. Most of the kids in their neighborhood attended public school, and Juan had heard of the student fights that happened on a daily basis. The kids complained about their classes and homework constantly and seemed to know very little about current events, science, or even books. He felt out of place among those kids and seemed to have little in common with them. But he had plenty of friends. He had no desire to attend school with thousands of other kids, some of whom would no doubt tease him for his academic skills.

"Juan, don't you have band practice tonight?" Maria asked, glancing at the clock.

"Yeah," he said. Looking down at his empty plate, he asked, "May I be excused? Connor's mom is picking me up in five minutes."

"Go ahead." She smiled at him as he ran to his room to retrieve his guitar. He sometimes daydreamed about being in a popular band, making a lot of money, and going on tour all over the world, like some of his favorite guitarists. It would be fun, and he loved playing music. But he knew that only a small fraction of those who tried

to make it big actually succeeded. He kept his eyes on his real dream – to be a doctor. One day he hoped to return to Mexico and help people in rural areas, like his birth father, who needed advanced medical care that wasn't currently available. He would work hard in his studies so that one day he could save lives.

## **Chapter 25**

### **Judgment**

*May 2018*

In courtroom #3 at the federal courthouse in Boston, which had been chosen in anticipation of there being a significant crowd in attendance, Aaron and Donna sat with their attorneys behind the defendant's table, waiting for the trial to begin. Having barely slept the night before, Donna was feeling a little ragged. Now, as she looked around the courtroom crowded with familiar supporters, a few detractors, and reporters, her anxiety increased. The judge's bench seemed to rise up impossibly high before her. Their fate would be decided by the man who took his seat there. She squirmed, feeling suddenly claustrophobic. Thoughts of prison flitted through her mind, and her stomach wound into a tight knot. She wanted to be anywhere but here. She moved her gaze to the small windows letting in the morning light, offering glimpses of leafy tree branches outside. She breathed in a calming, deep breath. She

reminded herself that Wendell sat behind her in the gallery and would be there for her no matter what happened.

She and Aaron had hired a Chicago law firm accustomed to defending politically-inspired frivolous cases. The firm's retainer fee had forced Aaron to mortgage his home, and Donna and Wendell had dipped well into their savings. Other interests had anonymously contributed \$400,000 to the law firm. The case was important for public interest reasons. Those who had donated anonymously wanted to avoid facing unnecessary wrath toward themselves from the adverse interests.

Because Donna was charged as a co-conspirator, they were being tried together. They had decided against a jury trial and had waived it earlier. To their relief, they had gotten a judge, Martin Keating, who was known for his fairness and common sense. She reminded herself of this, too, and found some measure of comfort.

Donna jumped as the clerk of the court asked them to stand as Judge Keating entered and took his seat behind the bench. A slender, middle-aged man, his dark hair streaked with silver, he gazed through wire-rimmed glasses with sharp eyes. The clerk then called the case of the People vs. Isaacs. Donna's heart pounded; it had begun.

The assistant attorney general was the first to speak, methodically laying out his entire case against Aaron and Donna. He called several witnesses who uniformly denounced SchoolTools and confirmed that the defendants had caused civil discord. She had never realized how demoralizing it would be to hear such distortions and lies be presented about herself and her work in a court of law. She wanted to shout out a rebuttal, but of course, she couldn't.

"We rest, Your Honor," the attorney general concluded.

"Are you ready to present your defense, Attorney Dilling?" Judge Keating

asked their lead defense lawyer.

Dilling stood. “We are, Your Honor.”

“Please call your first witness.”

“We move for a directed verdict. Assuming that all of the allegations are true, the facts presented do not constitute a crime. The allegations that SchoolTools is causing civil disturbance are specious. None of the factual evidence presented amounts to criminal conduct.”

The court reserved judgment and ordered the trial to continue. Attorney Dilling called witnesses to discount the allegations of civil discord.

“The defense rests, Your Honor,” Dilling announced.

After a brief recess, which passed in a blur for Donna, they returned to the courtroom. Keating returned to his bench, his face unreadable. “The court has reached a decision,” he announced. “Please rise for the verdict and sentencing.”

He paused while Aaron, Donna, and their lawyer stood. He looked Aaron in the eye, then Donna. By his expression, it seemed to Donna that he found the entire proceedings distasteful.

Finally, he said, “I find the defendants guilty of all charges.”

There was a collective gasp from the audience. Donna’s breath caught. She felt light-headed. *Guilty?* It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be.

The judge continued, “The sentence is one day in federal prison to begin immediately, one additional day of probation, and a fine of one hundred dollars, plus court costs, for each of the defendants.” He waved a hand. “Take them away.”

The crowd in the courtroom erupted. She and Aaron glanced at each other in shock and confusion. The verdict surely had to be “not guilty,” or else “guilty” with a heavy sentence and fine.



As Donna and Aaron were ushered into the jail holding facility, Donna saw the press funneling outside to wait for their attorney to come out. Her eyes met Wendell's briefly as he stood a short distance away, his face showing anguish. Nora stood next to him, her face wet with tears.

The night spent in jail was difficult, even though Donna had prepared herself for it. She tossed and turned on the hard, narrow cot, trying to tune out the strange noises around her and fighting back an overwhelming sense of humiliation inherent to the experience. Deeply grateful that the sentence was not longer, she spent much of the night in prayer.

The next day, after being released, she read their attorney's statement to reporters in the paper. They had agreed on the general spirit of the statement beforehand, but when she read it, she still smiled at the gumption it showed. No matter what the authorities threw at them, they would not be put down.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the press, the court has convicted my clients of the charges, and they are now protected from the authorities, who cannot again raise the supposed offenses of the past. They are constitutionally protected from double jeopardy. They are ready to continue with their separate businesses, and they challenge the authorities to try to stop them. The court's verdict speaks to the fact that the allegations are specious. Another failed prosecution will further embarrass the nation's criminal law system. They have already survived every civil suit thrown at them and expect to survive any

further unlikely criminal prosecution that might be urged by the public education industry.”

Donna was not surprised that the media was unable to chase down Aaron, who was characteristically camera shy and had no interest in speaking to reporters. Donna, however, agreed to say a few words to a group of reporters waiting outside the offices of the Juan Rumesucuela Academe.

“Dr. Kane,” one reporter ventured, “the press wants to inquire about your intentions for the future of ASESAs, SchoolTools, and the Juan Rumesucuela Academe.”

“Certainly. I have no doubt that our efforts to continue the expansion of the remote schooling movement will be viciously opposed, but we do not intend to back down. The importance of improving education in our world is beyond our current comprehension. It is greater than the value of my own freedom and life. If special interests are able to take both, I will not regret my efforts to continue until they do, in fact, stop me. The paradigm changes in education are already in motion, and many educational edifices are being shaken to their foundations. This cataclysmic change has disastrous consequences for some people. It’s no surprise that they will complain bitterly and take drastic efforts to stop the shifting of their personal fortunes. The unprecedented size of their collective interests makes them an awesome adversarial force. The only counter force powerful enough to overcome them is the simple economic one. Their costs to the public have become greater than their benefits. The replacement of those benefits with a greatly superior education system at significantly less cost will in time overturn the existing system.

“The enabling algorithms for SchoolTools have been hidden in a safe place so

that future generations will be able to revive them if we are stopped or destroyed. There are many who would stop at nothing to stop this quantum leap in the progress of education. I am confident that history will vindicate us. The future of better learning and human progress hang in the balance.”

Later that evening, she watched her performance on the evening news with Wendell.

He whistled. “That almost sounded like a challenge,” he said.

She nodded soberly. “Yes, I suppose it was.”

“It looks like this is turning into an all-out war.”

“That was the government’s choice, not ours.”

Wendell put his arm around her shoulders. “Whatever happens, we’re in this together.”

“I know.” Given all that happened in the past twenty-four hours, she wondered what their adversaries would try next. Despite her confidence in front of the cameras, she hoped they had enough resources to survive the coming storm.

## **Chapter 26**

### **Desperation**

*June 2018*

Despite the nationalization of the nation's schools and the increasing persecution of anyone using non-approved curriculum, including the remote digital courseware, alternative education methods were still alive. Private schooling and homeschooling had increasingly gone underground, with individuals still acquiring courseware anonymously. Aaron was hard at work further developing the SchoolTools program, and Donna continued improving the critical thinking module and the Juan Rumesuela Academe, although it was struggling given the state of affairs. Both of them believed it was only a matter of time before the current system collapsed; the government simply couldn't sustain things the way they were. When that time came, they would be ready.

Donna was at the Algoriginality offices with Aaron, working to integrate a

new version of the critical thinking module into the courses, when they heard the sound of multiple vehicles pulling up outside. Moments later, several men in dark suits entered. One of them approached Julie, the receptionist, and flashed a badge, just as Aaron and Donna moved into the foyer to investigate.

The man turned to Aaron. “Sir, I’m Agent Brian Rossi with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I’m looking for Aaron Isaacs.”

Donna’s heart sank. This felt all too familiar.

Aaron stepped forward. “I’m Aaron Isaacs.”

Rossi presented him with a search warrant obtained ex parte and asked him to step aside. Armed federal agents swarmed inside as Aaron and Donna protested futilely. Going over every inch of the offices, they began unplugging computers and filling boxes with files and other materials. Employees were asked to move aside. Aaron and Donna watched with their mouths open, speechless.

Aaron’s cell phone rang. He answered it and listened for a moment. “Okay, Nora,” he said, “just try to stay calm and comply with the officers. I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

When he had hung up, he looked at Donna wearily. “Another raid is going on at home. Nora sounds scared. I’m calling our attorney. Thank goodness the kids aren’t there. They’re visiting their grandmother today,” he added as he dialed. He stared at Donna with worry in his eyes and rubbed his hand over his jaw. Donna had seen him make the gesture before in moments of extreme stress.

“Is this legal?” Donna exclaimed as an agent carried a box out the front door to a van in the parking lot of the office park. But even as she asked it, she knew that they had been waiting for an action such as this in the weeks since their convictions, as they went about their business like before. Surely Aaron’s challenge had not gone

unnoticed by the NTA and the authorities. When they noticed that there was no slowdown in their activities, the attorney general had probably ordered a raid on their organizations.

Suddenly wondering if the same scene was being played out at her own house, Donna stepped outside in a panic and dialed Wendell on her cell phone. He assured her that he was the only one at home and would alert her if – or when – any agents showed up. “They probably just want to get their hands on the SchoolTools program,” he speculated. “It’s their main target. Just stay calm and cooperate.”

Aaron had followed her outside and called his attorney. While he talked in a low voice, Donna stared at the agents lugging boxes from the front door of the office and into waiting vans. They were efficient – she had to give them that. She wondered what would be left when they were done. How many hours, days, months of work would be lost as a result of this intrusion?

After a few minutes, Aaron hung up and turned to her. “Ruben says it’s an illegal confiscation of my property,” he said quietly, “but given the conviction and court order requiring me to stop all SchoolTools activities, he suggested that I would be wise to comply. As if I have a choice.” He leaned close to her and said softly, “Of course, copies of the program are stored in a safe place, but I’m not sure I’ll be able to use them. At least, not for a while.”

She nodded, but felt her eyes uncharacteristically filling with tears. “They must think they’ve finally won,” she said, leaning against the warm brick wall of the office building. Even she was beginning to believe it. The federal government’s raw power was now dominating the course of events. This felt like the final nail in the coffin. The government had restricted the use of their courses in schools, made it almost impossible to homeschool or operate a private school, devoted huge new taxes to the

public system, convicted both Aaron and her of felonies, and were now taking away SchoolTools. The NTA and others had barred public school teachers from using the ASESAs courses and bullied authors away from designing them. What was left? She envisioned their movement petering out as their options increasingly diminished. With their seemingly unlimited funding and power, perhaps the federal government could keep the public school system limping along indefinitely, achieving little but maintaining appearances, keeping teachers employed, and preventing the rise of a simpler, more streamlined alternative.

Donna turned away and watched the agents load a few last boxes into the van. She wiped furiously at her wet cheeks. It was embarrassing to cry in front of others . . . and, finally, to feel so defeated.

## **Chapter 27**

### **A Glimpse of Hope**

*February 2019*

“The sun rose in the east today. That is about the only thing we can still count on.”

That was how the news began one evening when Donna turned on the radio. She was working on the latest blog entry for the ASESAs website, while Wendell labored over his latest column in the next room. Times were tough, and purchases of ASESAs courses had been stagnant for some time. She placed her hands on the laptop keyboard, but she was stumped. Was there any good news on the horizon? Any encouraging thoughts she could share?

She glanced up at the framed piece of art that hung on the opposite wall, a painting of a golden eagle soaring over a sunlight canyon. It was no doubt intended to be inspirational, but given the circumstances they were facing, she felt anything but.



The painting left her cold.

Standing, she went to the front windows and stared out glumly at the frigid, dead-looking landscape. The economy had not recovered as politicians and “experts” had been predicting for years. Instead, over the past year, it had taken an even more precipitous turn downward. Some were finally admitting what everyone knew: that it had become a full-fledged depression. Government services had become irregular, and some had disappeared entirely. Public transportation schedules were unreliable. Waste disposal was spotty. Public officials were becoming unavailable for comment and were unwilling to hear complaints. They seldom followed up when they did. Street sweeping schedules had been reduced to once a month instead of every week. Homeless shelters were overflowing. When Donna went out, she saw the unemployed huddled around piles of burning waste to find warmth. Law enforcement was paralyzed in many areas, and crime had increased. Though she had long prided herself on her independence, Donna no longer felt comfortable walking alone in the city.

Donna was grateful that she and Wendell had saved enough money to remain comfortable for a while, as long as they were frugal. Wendell was having difficulty finding paid writing assignments, and the occasional income from Juan Rumescuela Academe subscriptions had dropped because of the economy, combined with pressures from the laws passed in the last few years aimed at eradicating their efforts. Of course, now, the disintegration of public schools could no longer be hidden. Once seen as the most secure of all employers, the public education system was faltering. Revenues for schools had declined to the point that many schools simply had no choice but to close. At the surviving schools, teaching staff were being cut, and for the first time, wages were being slashed. Morale was very low. Discipline could not

be enforced, and a lack of police personnel meant that many schools were unsafe. The environment had become so bad that children were simply dropping out. The government had no extra resources available for enforcing truancy laws or any of the myriad other laws that had been passed to crush the revolution in education. After all of the effort aimed at destroying it, all that was left was chaos.

“America is rapidly becoming a third-world nation,” the radio commentator was saying. “Many who have prayed for better times have given up hope, and they now have a new prayer. They are praying for the ability to tolerate things as they are. Humility has become the new pride. The president has declared a long-term solution to the despair that is spreading throughout the nation. His advice is that everyone ‘adjust.’ Since no one else has proposed any better solution, his advice appears quite sage.

“The comforts citizens have always taken for granted are no longer available. Yet many Americans are adapting in ways never thought possible. Wives are tolerating live-in mothers-in-law. Families are caring for their own. Leftovers are never left to spoil in the refrigerator. People are wearing clothing styles from previous years. Teenagers are happy to go to J Mart. People are wearing shoes purchased at Good Salvation. Everything that is worn is growing patches. The word ‘used’ is no longer synonymous with the word ‘trash.’ More people are attending church via the Internet and are turning their attention to matters of integrity and self-sacrifice. At the same time, some are becoming more vicious and calloused.”

It was true. There had been several notable riots around the country. Fueled by anger, frustration, and fear, they had started as protests in front of government buildings and ended with broken storefronts, looting, and fires. As Donna had learned when she tried to travel around the city, many streets and bridges were falling

dangerously out of repair. Some were clearly unsafe and had been closed. This had caused serious congestion, worsening tempers already fanned by the stresses of everyday life. Accidents and deaths caused by road rage had increased.

Meanwhile, the state of Massachusetts was out of money and could no longer borrow because of a huge debt load. No one had planned well enough for this, and yet, no one accepted fault for the lack of foresight. There were rumors that the local government might declare martial law and a curfew due the riots. In fact, at this point, it might be the only way for government officials to protect themselves from the unemployed and frustrated citizens.

There was also talk that the coming nationwide elections might be cancelled. It would be a drastic step that would no doubt incite even more violent opposition. Those who belonged to the dominant political party argued that this was no time for a change in leadership, saying the president's recovery program had not had sufficient time to work. Meanwhile, his opponents had curiously called for repeal of the program. These days, Donna did her best to avoid political news altogether. Legislators were clearly more concerned with keeping themselves in office and parroting the party line than enacting painful but necessary solutions to the nation's woes.

Ironically, the situation had become so desperate that the unfair laws against digital courseware and private schooling were now basically toothless. The laws could not be enforced. There was still the chance that government officials would use every opportunity to rake in fines for violations, but the threat was becoming less and less real. She thought back on her conviction and Aaron's. Perhaps her blog entry today would center on the potential positive results of civil disobedience. It was risky, but now was the time to act. She had to rally the troops – whatever troops remained.

Moving back to the computer sitting abandoned on the coffee table, she got to work.

Two hours later, when she had posted her finished article to the restored ASES website, Donna headed to the kitchen to begin preparing dinner for tonight. She and Wendell had been enjoying frequent meals with Aaron and Nora, usually a big pot of soup or stew and freshly baked bread. It was a way to spend time together and share resources now that everyone was cutting back. There were no more dinners at Lucca's or takeout from their favorite Chinese restaurant. Donna regularly cooked dinner now and had even learned how to bake bread. She enjoyed the camaraderie of those cozy evenings spent at home with friends, and she felt gratified when she could take some of the load off Nora, who had been forced to take a part-time job to support the family.

As she put the water on to boil and began chopping vegetables for the stew, Donna felt a strange sense of contentment. Despite all the problems that surrounded them, she and Wendell still had each other, a warm home, food to eat, and good friends. Oddly enough, the economic depression and its attendant problems had helped narrow her focus to the things that really mattered. Unlike many others, she had all that she needed – love, hope, shelter, food to eat, and clothes on her back. The Juan Rumesuela Academe was functioning, though at a low level. It might all fall apart tomorrow, but right now they were surviving. They had to take it one day at a time.



*April 2019*

When one of Adine's friends with the National Teachers Association offered Adine a bootleg copy of the SchoolTools program, she was surprised. She had been overjoyed when she learned that the government had confiscated the SchoolTools

program from Aaron Isaacs. The Justice Department was said to have destroyed all copies they could find, but a previous author had apparently sent copies of the main program to the NTA. They intended to keep them for the use of public schools under the direct supervision of public school teachers.

Sitting in her small home office one evening, holding the CD case in her hands, she felt torn. She dialed Roger's cell phone. He answered just before it went to voicemail.

"Adine?" he said with surprise. "Why are you calling my cell?"

"I—uh, well, I just wanted to chat. Aren't you at home? It's almost eight."

"I'm still at the office. The days never seem to end here once you become president. What was it you wanted to talk about?"

Adine explained that, after all these years, she was considering using SchoolTools to design another course.

"But . . . I thought you were opposed to SchoolTools," he said.

Adine tapped her fingers on her desk. "I was opposed to the uses to which they were being applied. The outdated philosophies being promoted were especially objectionable, and before the current laws, they posed a challenge to public schools. But now we can focus on building fascinating courses about topics like equality, environmentalism, and cultural oppression, and the courses will have to be administered by public school teachers."

"With the public schools failing, it may be the only thing left to do."

Adine scowled. "That's not what I meant. This is what the technology should have been used for all along. In Isaacs's hands, it was nothing but a dangerous nuisance."

"And now that he and ASES don't have a corner on the technology, you can

avoid that critical thinking bit you despised so much.” Roger sounded amused. Adine got the feeling he really didn’t care one way or another.

She turned in her chair to look out the window of her third-floor apartment. Pedestrians were hurrying across the street, shielding themselves against a spring downpour. “I have a course on oppression that I started developing years ago using an earlier version of SchoolTools,” she said. “I’m thinking about working on it again. It turns the Nazi monsters in a World War II movie into New York landlords who cruelly evict non-paying tenants.”

“Sounds delightful. How are you enjoying your post at Waltham? It’s too bad you left Harbridge just as Donna was getting ready to resign. Ironic, wouldn’t you say? After all these years.”

Adine blew her breath out in a huff. “Harbridge had its chance,” she answered defensively. “I got tired of waiting for the recognition I deserved.”

“I hear Waltham is also facing a severe budget shortfall. How many of the faculty in your department have been cut?”

She paused. “We’re fine. I’m handling it.”

This was a sore subject for Adine. Letting people go was more difficult than she had expected. Not because she felt sorry for them, but because the job had quickly made her the bad guy in the department. No matter what decisions she made, somebody was unhappy, and Adine’s popularity slipped. She’d had difficulty navigating the minefield of loyalties and well-established relationships in the department. On top of that, everyone was cranky and frightened as more and more programs were cut, projects canceled, and campus facilities closed. It appeared she had made the move into administration at just the wrong time.

Adine knew things were not looking good for the nation’s schools. The public

sector was facing unprecedented budget cuts across the board. With incomes continuing to fall, funding through the income tax was no longer sufficient. Dropout rates were sky-high. If Adine could get this SchoolTools thing working for her – for all of them – her goals for the student population might still be within reach. There was plenty of hope left for a modern, progressive education. They just had to work with what they had. And now Adine had SchoolTools.

“Well, I’ve got to get going,” Roger said. “Beyoncé has been giving me hell for staying late. She thinks I’m cheating on her.”

Adine snorted. “Are you?”

“God, no. I’m too tired for that. Being in charge isn’t any fun these days. It’s a lot of work. Beyoncé doesn’t appreciate what I do to provide her with the luxuries she’s become accustomed to.”

Adine was surprised Roger and Beyoncé had even made it this long as a couple. As the rest of society scrimped and sacrificed, the girl must have realized just how good she had it.

After they had hung up, Adine slid the SchoolTools CD into her computer and got to work.

## **Chapter 28**

### **Inspiration Strikes**

*August 2019*

“Distance from the old system is the salient virtue of the new system,” Donna announced to the crowd of private school educators. “Students are so unique that the effort to well educate a random roomful of them is impossibly difficult. We should expect only a clumsy effort to deliver the most basic concepts and accommodate the various levels of mental and emotional maturity.”

This presentation to the American Association of Private Schools, or AAPS, was an important one. Though the schools were illegal, meetings regarding them were not. It was an opportunity to make an impact on a vital group of allies as she built momentum for the renaissance in education she hoped was coming.

“The half-life of information retention for oral delivery is horribly brief,” she continued, glancing down at her notes. “The long-term memory images delivered by



ASESA products are immeasurably stronger. The fact that no two people learn at the same pace is understood, but is necessarily ignored by educators in traditional classrooms. It is rare that all of the students in a classroom are ready to learn any particular fact or about any issue at the same time. Knowledge often comes in layers resting on other layers. Those who miss out on a layer leave class with a precarious foundation on which to build their knowledge. Absenteeism compounds the problem. A classroom teacher does not have time to go back and teach a concept to just one student. A student may not have been paying attention when a concept was covered. The teacher doesn't know for sure who is learning during each segment of the class period. She may find out at examination time, but it is then too late to go back and re-teach the material. An attendance hiatus of a week or a month can forever forfeit the opportunity of a student to learn the content.”

Heads nodded knowingly in the audience.

“These and myriad other group learning problems are inherent flaws of the traditional education system,” Donna said, “which now requires us to abandon it as a teaching forum in deference to the new one. Even conscientious teachers who must teach under the old constraints cannot overcome them. Many have less knowledge and are less skilled in presenting the content than are remote, expert educators. It is understandable that traditionally trained public school teachers would deny their deficiencies. Unfortunately, their good intentions do not solve the problems.

“The old system has failed overall in its goal to educate.” She no longer shied away from stating the obvious. “We now have an option to build an effective and economical system. We must change the system to meet the needs of the students, rather than continuing the failed approach of changing students to meet the needs of the system. The solution is freeing people to seek the progress they need without the

hobbling effects of social agendas. I am working to organize and expand the Academe nationally and feel confident that it will succeed. As we build momentum, we will see that nothing succeeds like success. Thank you.”

Donna took questions from the audience. A young, blond woman in the front row raised her hand.

“Are you going to get your revenge on the NTA?”

Donna smiled. “I have no time to seek revenge. The success of Juan Rumescuela Academe is my revenge. Their defense of the old system is understandable, even after it became clearly indefensible. I will not be a small person about the small offenses they have committed. I will save my energy to respond to the bigger offenses that are coming.”

Donna called on another woman in the back, who stood and asked, “Do you really think the public school system is vulnerable enough now that the general public will accept that it must be replaced?”

She nodded. “We are to the point where there is no reasonable basis to let the system live on. Public school teachers are a remnant of what they once were, the pay is terribly inadequate by former standards, learning is at the lowest level in history, student discipline is an oxymoron, and the education going on there is at best a sick joke. The public is clamoring for solutions and change.

“We are in a position now to kill it off as a failed governmental service. Few are left who will try to defend it, except those who receive financial benefits from the rotted system. We can surely bring the private education sector out into the public eye once again and expect support to grow. Resistance from the disgraced former education empire is at low ebb. Their propaganda has fallen into disrepute. Even those who still mouth the words are neutralized by lack of faith in it. Few of the

formerly faithful have any fear of losing their commitment to the failed policies.”

After a few more questions, Donna was out of time and stepped down. The goal of her efforts here today was to persuade the members of the AAPS to join her in a concerted effort to overthrow government education. Despite all of the opposition’s efforts, the AAPS had an underground base that now exceeded that of the National Teachers Association and had a vested interest in dismantling the failed public school system. At the same time, the incomes of private schools had dropped precipitously with the declining economy. A solution that allowed them to accept funds from the government, while maintaining their autonomy, was very attractive.

Donna enjoyed a positive reception from the audience, and after a book signing and a productive lunch with the group’s directors, she boarded a crowded subway car for home. Things were starting to look up again for the Juan Rumescuela Academe and the remote learning movement. After the depression had settled in and the virtual collapse of the public school system could no longer be denied, she and Wendell had spent months investigating the status of the movement. What they discovered surprised them. Private schools were surviving, even growing again in number. Despite the depressed economic climate, students had continued to enroll in and matriculate through the Academe, while private schools were making surreptitious copies of the ASESAs courses. Donna’s book had been selling well and had become a kind of handbook for parents, educators, and other supporters of the movement. The feedback from her readers had been gratifying.

After realizing that the movement was still alive, Donna and Wendell had made a decisive move to take control of it and press forward regardless of laws, policies, and people. Once again, Donna had gone public with a campaign to promote SchoolTools products and the Academe. She did not try to hide her activities from the

authorities, who were well aware that the legacy education system had collapsed and that it could not be defended in good conscience. Besides, the government no longer had the resources necessary for prosecutions and intimidation, which had dropped off as a result. It was now focused on simply surviving. ASESAs authors, too, were saying that they felt less pressure to avoid SchoolTools. With many of them now unemployed or their employers no longer holding the sway they once had, authors were once again producing courses.

Wendell was reporting their progress in his syndicated column, and Donna felt confident that the forces of public education were being neutralized. Operating as a rogue educator, with Wendell's help, she was gaining more attention for their message every day. Her voice was dominating the educational scene, even as the voices of others, like the NTA, were declining in influence. As the economy slowly recovered, Donna was confident that the Academe would grow and overcome the current hurdles.

After two subway transfers, Donna walked the last mile home, enjoying the exercise and fresh air. As she walked, her mind turned over an idea that had been nagging at her for some time. She had been so busy, she hadn't had time to give it proper attention. Arriving home at last, she assembled herself a quick sandwich and sat down at the dining table to jot down some notes.

A constitutional amendment was what they needed. Nothing less than this would obtain the results they sought. The time was right for it. She knew the idea had merit, yet the wording had eluded her.

Now, it came to her. She wrote furiously. Going to her bookshelves, she pulled out a volume on constitutional law and flipped through the pages. She revised her draft, made additional adjustments, wrote out a new draft, and reviewed it again:

## PETITION FOR EDUCATIONAL LIBERTY

We do solemnly publish and declare that the Constitution of the United States be amended to provide as follows:

### ARTICLE XXVII

Section 1) The Congress shall provide a uniform system of tuition credits for all minors.

Section 2) The Congress shall make no law establishing curriculum.

Now that the floodgates had been opened, she was able to consider the possibilities. The public educational credits provided by such a program could be funded by a surtax on the income tax, just like the one that already existed to support the public school system. The rate might be adjusted from time to time as needed. Credits could be uniformly issued for each minor and paid to the private or public school of choice based on hours of actual attendance at the particular school.

In the spirit of amendment, to help give the movement direction, she also drafted a “Declaration of Educational Liberty” for students:

We hold these truths to be self-evident:

- 1) Universal education promotes liberty.
- 2) All justly share the cost.

- 3) Universal curriculum diminishes liberty.
- 4) Uniform thought is liberty lost.

The declaration reflected that the first step in going forward was to ensure that the cost of universal education was fairly shared by the public. However, they did not want the government to control educational content. She could post the declaration to the websites of ASES and the Academe and distribute it to supporting organizations around the country in anticipation of moving forward with the proposed constitutional amendment. Perhaps it would help build support and momentum for the cause.

When Wendell arrived home, Donna beckoned him to the dining room and showed him what she had developed.

He nodded slowly, his expression intense. "This is excellent." Taking off his sport coat, he tossed it on a chair and began to pace. "Each school would establish its own curriculum and hire staff to teach it. Students would apply to the school of their choice and attend any that might accept them. Private schools could charge additional fees for their classes and let the market set the rates. Some schools would have no additional fees and might provide only basic education services. They would compete with other similar schools to give the best service without added fees. True entrepreneurs would control the cost and content of education. Competition, rather than government regulation, would be the order of the day."

Donna nodded. "The initial chaos of such a system would be unmatched, I'm sure, and there would undoubtedly be some horror stories. But it would gradually settle into a well-functioning system."

"Much like any other competitive market," Wendell agreed. "Students would have an opportunity to matriculate as they wished with the consent of the private

school operators. Easy procedures for expelling a student would address the matter of discipline. Expelled students would have the option to go to any other private school that would accept them or attend an alternative public school. Private schools would establish their own disciplinary standards.”

“All students, from the academically advanced to those struggling with basic subjects, could study together and not interfere with each other’s education. The system would adjust to all students economically, academically, and socially.”

They stared at each other excitedly.

“We should move forward with this as soon as possible,” Wendell said. “We need to get the amendment before Congress somehow.”

“I thought about that. Senator Garmin has supported the cause in the past. I can ask him to bring it before the Education Committee.”

“Yes. Do that.” He looked at her with a twinkle in his eye. “Have you thought about running for office yourself?”

Donna’s eyes widened. “Are you crazy?”

“I’m serious. You’re widely respected now as an expert in education. You may be able to lead the effort more effectively from a position within the government. You could work on reversing the policies that have overtaken common sense. This is the time to do it, when the electorate is hungry for solutions and the current officeholders are vulnerable.”

“Wendell, I’m overwhelmed with just my duties for ASES and the Academe. Besides, what about my felony conviction? My opponents would eat me alive.”

He waved it off as if it were high school gossip. “Everyone knows that was a witch hunt.”

Donna loved her husband, but considered him dangerously optimistic at times.

Right now, she would concentrate on her role behind the scenes before she even thought about stepping into the ring with the lions.



## **Chapter 29**

### **Let the Best Education System Win**

*September 2019*

Early one morning, Donna went outside to water her plants and was startled to find her cousin standing on her front walkway. “Roger!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?” She glanced around and saw his blue BMW parked at the curb nearby.

“Hello, Donna. I’ve just been thinking we should see each other more often,” he replied with a wan smile. “As family, you know. Family should stick together in these tough times.” He strolled up the walk toward her, taking a good look at the townhouse and the small flower garden by the front steps.

Donna laughed. “That’s the first time I’ve heard such a sentiment pass your lips.” She set down her watering can. “I’m sure you won’t blame me for suspecting some other motive.”

He avoided her gaze. “You know me too well. I . . . uh, well, actually, I have nothing better to do, so I came to see you.”

She folded her arms. “What do you mean, you have nothing better to do? You lead the most prestigious university in America.”

Roger’s practiced expression of smug indifference collapsed. He sighed, and his shoulders slumped. “*Used* to lead,” he said. He sat down on one of the front steps. “They did not renew my contract as president of Harbridge. I’m unemployed.”

Donna was loathe to express any sympathy toward her cousin, who had never offered it to herself or anyone else. Nevertheless, she managed to say, “I’m sorry, Roger.”

“It was a cost-cutting move. There are financial pressures on the university, and they’ve hired Adine Dorson at half my former salary. She left Waltham in a heartbeat.”

Donna suppressed a smile as she sat down beside him. “She would have taken the position gratis, Roger. You know that what she really wants is power and status.”

He nodded. “Well, I suppose she has it. After all I’ve done for her, she can’t even call to offer her condolences. Now I’m unemployed with no marketable skills, my pension is gone, and . . . Beyoncé left me. She’s seeing to our divorce.”

*What a surprise.* Donna was about to make a smart comment regarding his situation, but looking at him slumped on the stairs, his gray hair mussed, she felt sorry for him. He was pathetic.

“You brought your things?” she asked.

He nodded. “Suitcase is in the car.”

Donna considered this for a moment before heaving a reluctant sigh. “All right. You can have the guest room.” She rose and went back to watering the plants while

Roger retrieved his suitcase from the car. She knew Wendell wouldn't mind having a guest for a while, given the circumstances. He was always more tolerant of her cousin than she was.

“Thanks, Donna,” Roger said as he returned. “I . . . I know I haven't been a very good cousin. I didn't support you in your critical thinking campaign or the Juan Rusca – Rumsca – you know, the Academe.”

“Yes, I'm well aware of your shortcomings. On the other hand, I've never had the occasion to be disappointed in you. I never expected anything, and never got anything.” She opened the door and moved back inside. “Come along. Coffee is brewing, if you want some. Until you find a new home, you can make yourself useful in the house and the garden. The activity will make you feel better. Maybe you can even learn some new skills, train for your next career as a handyman.”

Following her into the foyer, Roger didn't respond to her flippant tone with his usual sarcasm. “Maybe you're right,” he conceded. “I haven't been feeling well. It's become a chore to sit up in my chair all day.” Setting down his suitcase, he took off his sport coat and hung it on the hall tree. “So where do you keep the dust mop?”

~ ~ ~

“Mr. Muscarella,” Adine said, trying to maintain a patient tone, “you have the authority as assistant attorney general to prosecute Donna Kane for violating the laws restricting private schooling and remote digital courseware. She is openly advocating the use of ASESAs courses in non-certified schools throughout the nation. I demand that you indict her as a leader of the spreading rebellion against public education.”

From her presidential office at Harbridge, Adine was following up by phone with Edward Muscarella after her formal letter to him had gone unanswered. He had succeeded in bringing the charges of civil disobedience against Aaron and Donna, and

Adine expected it be a straightforward matter to move against her on this matter as well. The woman was blatantly breaking the law.

“Yes, Dr. Dorson, I understand your concerns, but we have prosecuted the leaders of this movement in the past and accomplished little. The movement continues to grow in influence. I’m still licking my political wounds since the last embarrassment. It looks like the competing forces will have to fight it out, and let the best education system win.”

“That’s outrageous,” Adine replied. “The NTA—”

“The NTA is essentially broke and is no longer providing the mother’s milk of political power,” Muscarella said calmly. “Traditional approaches to the problems of public education are having even less success than they did in the past. State and local authorities are not pressing me to act.”

Adine seethed. “The consequences to you personally will be devastating, Mr. Muscarella. I have friends in high places. I will personally see to it that your career is over.”

“Good luck with that, Dr. Dorson. Please don’t call me again.”

Adine slammed down the phone. It seemed that the lies being spread by Donna and her minions were now influencing some important officials. Adine viewed Donna’s little movement as the prime cause of the impending collapse of public education. Donna was actually voicing demands to scrap all laws requiring student attendance at certified schools and was calling for the end of required curricula that had been carefully crafted to achieve social progress. Society and the schools had advanced so little, even with such agendas in place; they still needed time. Equality was far from being achieved, despite the laws designed to achieve it. Education was their only hope. There was new jeopardy that some laws forcing compliance with

social mandates might be modified or entirely repealed as those in power were voted out by a disgruntled electorate. The public was fixated on the economic problems and might be persuaded to support new ideas that would dismantle all Adine had worked to build for the past twenty years. Some were saying that the present economic situation was the result of lowered standards of quality. But Adine firmly believed that the educational “freedom” offered by private schools and digital courseware was, in fact, just the resurrection of fascism.

When elected to Congress, Adine would fight to hold the hard-won ground for true freedom and equality. Adine would propose legislation to make Donna’s activities illegal as crimes against the state. Donna’s campaign to seek defeat of all representatives who opposed the changes was the last straw. She was clearly a traitor to the cause of equality.

Feeling the need to vent, Adine called out for Judy, her secretary, before remembering that Judy had left early that afternoon for a dentist appointment. Adine cast about for someone else to talk to. In the many years she had been at Harbridge, she had made only a few friends among the faculty, and they had quickly grown cold after her departure to Waltham. Everyone seemed to be keeping their distance from her in her new capacity. She suspected that they were talking about her behind her back.

Then she thought of Roger. She hadn’t spoken to him since her appointment last month. It was only right that she should check in on him now that the dust had settled. She had heard that Beyoncé had left him, and there were rumors that he had moved in with Donna. Adine shook her head in pity. *Oh, how the mighty have fallen . . .*

Roger answered on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Roger, it’s me, Adine. How have you been?”

“Adine, so nice of you to call.” Adine thought she detected sarcasm in Roger’s tone. “I’ve been better. How are you enjoying the presidency?”

“It’s fine, Roger, just fine. What are you doing? You sound out of breath.”

“I’ve taken up gardening. Donna’s asked me to care for the yard to earn my keep here.”

“So it’s true. You have moved in with Donna.”

“That’s right. No one else offered to help.”

“Yes, well, I’m sorry, but I had my hands full preparing for my new position. Speaking of Donna, just now I was talking to the assistant attorney general about pressing charges against her for breaking education laws and encouraging others to break them.” She described her conversation with Muscarella. “Can you believe it? The government is just . . . giving up.”

“Maybe it’s the prudent thing to do. Donna’s been telling me all about the new ‘education paradigm,’ as she calls it, and I’m beginning to think she’s on to something. The ideas of the establishment have been tried for many years. Perhaps it’s time for a change.”

Adine felt her face flush. “What are you talking about? The economic and social freedoms I’ve been working for have hardly been given a chance.”

Roger continued on blithely. “Some are even saying the public school system and the teachers’ unions are partly to blame for this mess we’re in now. They say Americans are too ignorant and ill-prepared to compete in the global market. They can’t read or think for themselves. Schools are closing, and crime is up—”

“We are not to blame, Roger!” Adine erupted. “We’re not to blame for outsourcing and falling literacy rates. The wretched state of the economy is not our

fault. The chaos in government is not our fault. The lack of ethical standards is not our fault. We were just trying to stop discrimination at all costs. We are not to blame.”

Roger fell quiet for a moment, and Adine realized she had been shouting.

“Whatever you say, Adine. I’ve got to get these bulbs in the ground. Good luck with the presidency.”

Roger hung up. Adine stared at the receiver and set it in its cradle. She wondered if she had any friends left at all.

## **Chapter 30**

### **A Reunion of Brothers**

*April 2021*

Juan and Maria stood in the Greyhound bus terminal, watching the stream of disembarking passengers as they came through the entryway. After all these years, Juan and his parents had finally been able to track down his twin brother Manny, who was living in Illinois. Juan and Manny had talked to each other several times and exchanged photos. Juan had even talked to his Uncle Luis and Aunt Inez, Manny's legal guardians, and they were eager to meet him, too. Juan's mother suggested that Manny come for a visit. When Manny asked if his girlfriend Chariti could come, Maria and Edward had agreed, although they found the request a little surprising. Like Juan, Manny was only fifteen years old.

Juan knew Manny's family struggled financially, as many did these days. Juan's family, too, had had to cut back after Edward lost his job. To their relief, he



had found a job at a research laboratory after completing his studies and an internship in metallurgy. It was an entry-level position, but it was a start. Meanwhile, Maria had been able to increase her workload at home to support the family.

Juan recognized his brother immediately when he appeared in the doorway, carrying two overstuffed duffel bags. Of course, the brothers looked almost identical. Manny wore his hair longer, and his clothes were trendy but well worn. When Juan saw the girl at Manny's side, however, he was shocked. Chariti, a slender girl with long brown hair and striking dark eyes, was obviously pregnant.

They introduced each other, and Juan's mother embraced them both warmly, disguising any shock she must have felt about Chariti's condition. Juan helped them load their bags into the car.

When they arrived home, Edward came out to greet them. "Welcome," he said, hugging both of their guests.

"Please make yourselves at home," Maria said. "The bedrooms are at the top of the stairs on the right."

"We're planning to go to a Passion play tonight," Juan said. "Would you like to come?"

Manny and Chariti exchanged glances. "We don't normally do that kind of thing back home."

Maria shrugged. "You may want to stay in and rest after your long trip, anyway. We can go out tomorrow. But Juan is in charge of the live crèche and needs to be there tonight in case a cow kicks over the manger."

"What's a cr . . . crèche?" Manny struggled to pronounce the word.

"Don't you have one at your church?" Maria asked.

"Well, we don't go to church."

Juan jumped in. “The crèche is a depiction of the scene where Christ was born in a manger.”

Manny nodded thoughtfully. “Oh yes, I remember seeing one in front of a church once. I didn’t understand what it was about.”

“Edward has dinner ready,” Maria said. “We can eat, and then you both can relax while we go on to church.”



Over the next few days, it became clear that Juan and Manny had very different interests. Manny joined Juan at the gym but didn’t seem to know how to work any of the machines or which exercises he should do. Juan showed him a few moves. Manny wasn’t interested in joining Juan for the youth prayer breakfast that he attended every Tuesday morning. Instead, he and Chariti went to the mall. He lit up, though, when Juan invited him to play basketball. He had played it when he was younger, along with baseball, but ever since his school had dropped extracurricular activities, he hadn’t done much of it.

When Juan mentioned that he was a Junior Assistant Scout Master, it was Manny’s turn to look shocked. This all seemed to be an alien world to him. While Maria and Chariti got pedicures together, Manny went along with Juan to the Scout meeting in a church basement and watched them demonstrate camping skills, including the use of axes, knives, fire, and ropes.

“Do you actually like doing this stuff?” Manny asked skeptically during the walk home.

“Well, sure,” Juan said. From what he could tell, it seemed that all Manny did in his free time was hang out with Chariti and drink beer on the sly with his friends.

“I love being outside and swinging an axe or building fires,” Juan explained.

“Knot-tying is a useful skill. You know, Mr. O’Connor, our scout leader, can tie the right knot for any situation. He must be over forty years old, and he learned it in the Boy Scouts years ago. We have contests for speed in order to memorize the knots better.” He glanced at Manny to gauge his reaction. “You’d be surprised how many times a knot can come in handy.”

“What about those computer classes you take?” Manny asked. “What are those like?”

Juan had mentioned the courses in one of his emails when they were talking about school. “Well, I’ve taken them in all the usual subjects, like algebra, chemistry, biology, physics, history, and Spanish and French. There are also courses in first aid, theater, dentistry, cinematography, and communications. Rosa is working on theater right now.” Rosa was Juan’s girlfriend, whom he had met through the local homeschooling organization. “They make these short studies in practical subjects that let you think about a career you might want to pursue. I just finished earning a merit badge in dentistry. As part of the requirements, I had a private session with our dentist at his home. He talked about the profession, told me what he likes and doesn’t like about it, and how to succeed in it. I also had a session with a doctor. I’ve been interested in medicine since I was a kid.”

“Wow, that’s really great.” Manny looked at the ground. “I could never do that. I quit going to school a few months ago. It just isn’t for me.”

Juan stopped walking. “You quit school? What are you going to do?”

Manny shrugged. “I been trying to get a job, but there aren’t too many of those now.”

Juan was worried about his brother. How was he going to manage, with no diploma and a baby on the way?

“At my school you spend most of your time just watching your back, anyway,” Manny said as they walked on. “We don’t really learn anything in school.” He laughed to himself. “I guess me and Chariti will have to learn a lot when we have the baby. She said a baby will help keep us together our whole lives. We’ll be a team against the rest of the world.”

Manny fell silent, waiting for Juan to respond, but Juan wasn’t sure what to say. “I hope that’s true, Manny,” he said finally.

“What about you and Rosa? When are you guys gonna . . . you know.”

Juan stared at his brother. “Well, we’re pretty busy right now. We both need to finish our education. It’s probably too soon for us to think about marriage or kids. It can be a challenge for any teenager.” He tried to be diplomatic.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Juan put his arm around Manny’s shoulders and resumed walking. “Life sure took us in different directions, didn’t it? But it’s okay. We’ll be brothers forever, no matter what happens. I hope we can see each other more often and keep in touch.” Privately, he hoped he could somehow influence his brother to make something more of himself. He worried that with a baby on the way, Manny and Chariti were headed for a lifetime of struggle.

## **Chapter 31**

### **Making the Case for Change**

*May 2021*

The Senate Education Committee hearings were about to reconvene after a short recess. The subject of today's hearing was improving and financing public education. Awed once again by the fact that she was finally in this stately chamber, making her case to elected officials, Donna located her seat in the audience beside Juan Rumesuela and his mother Maria. Juan looked handsome in a dark gray suit, his thick black hair neatly combed. Maria grasped Donna's hand and smiled, eyes wide with nervousness and excitement. Juan and Donna were both scheduled to testify next before the committee. Donna admired Juan for the courage he showed by being here. When she had asked if he would be willing to appear, he had readily agreed. Although he didn't desire the attention such an appearance would garner, now that he was fifteen, he understood the impact the SchoolTools-designed courses had had on

his life. Although he looked a bit tense, Juan was surprisingly composed given the circumstances.

They were here today because legislators finally had no choice but to hear new points of view on the topic of education. Since the depression had taken hold, there were no longer adequate funds to support public schools. The individual states, which had always borne the primary burden of education, were broke. School buildings were crumbling nationwide from lack of maintenance, and many schools had closed, while others were paralyzed by violence from out-of-control students. The public was calling for solutions from Washington. All points of view were welcome, since all but a few ideas had already been tried, and all had failed.

Supporters of traditional public education had already testified, including witnesses sponsored by the National Teachers Association, who had made desperate pleas for renewed financing of the legacy education system. The focus of their testimony was on the plight of educators who could not find suitable jobs in the teaching industry. They emphasized that students of all ages were losing several years of opportunity to learn, passionately pleading with the committee to find a way to restore the legacy education system. Yet none gave ideas on how this could be accomplished, and none could credibly address the cost/benefit conundrum. They all called for immense financing in order to put things back together.

Once the members of the committee were seated at the front of the room, the committee chairman, Senator Bingham, called the hearing to order and asked Donna to come forward as the next witness. “The chair recognizes Dr. Donna Kane, former dean of the College of Education at Harbridge University. Please address the committee, Dr. Kane.”

The room was quiet as Donna moved to the witness table with her prepared

notes and sat down. Though she was an accomplished public speaker, this setting was entirely new to her. Much depended on her persuasive presentation today. She took a deep breath and leaned toward the microphone, feeling suddenly intimidated by the line of senators regarding her impassively.

“Mr. Chairman and members of the esteemed committee,” she began, “I have been an advocate for and critic of student education for all of my adult life. For ten years now, I have been active in promoting private education and am an owner of the Juan Rumesuela Academe, a company which distributes remote digital courseware for use in homes and private schools. The success of students participating in the Academe’s programs is remarkable. Academic testing shows incontrovertible evidence of a high level of successful matriculation among its students. Senators, this approach holds the attention of students and promotes learning. Now that the legacy school system is in shambles, we have an opportunity to adopt an effective and economical system based on this model.

“Let me explain how this approach works. Most courses are available online to individuals or small groups, which are often supervised by non-certified personnel. Most groups are housed in private buildings that are homes or former business locations. Some are in houses of worship. The organizers of these groups are typically small-business entrepreneurs. They can accept or deny anyone as a student. They can expel a student for any infraction of their rules, or forgive the infraction if they so choose. They can accept students of only one gender if they wish.”

“How do you achieve quality instruction without using certified teachers, Dr. Kane?” interrupted Senator Bingham, an older man with a full head of white hair.

“The teaching is done by remote instructors who are experts in their fields and have mastered the subject matter. They engage the students and hold their attention

with novel approaches to teaching through the use of digital courseware. The courses demonstrate in exciting ways that the information is useful and valuable.”

“As a practical matter, how do these courses regulate the children’s conduct?” asked Bingham.

“Senator, there are always going to be challenges involved in educating children. The difference with the affiliated schools of the Academe is that they have broken down the six most formidable barriers to education. The first barrier is lack of discipline. Discipline is achieved by enforcing rules. Private schools that are part of the Academe make clear rules and enforce them by using the tool of easy expulsion. If they cannot obtain discipline in a student, then that student can be removed and does not continue to compromise the learning of the remainder of the class. Some classrooms have less strict rules.

“A second barrier is boredom. This is generally avoided in the Academe because students’ cognitive involvement in the class materials is exhausting. Greater time is allowed for recreational breaks, whether in or out of class.

“A third barrier is classroom distractions. Smaller classrooms with disciplined children provide fewer distractions.

“A fourth barrier is inclusion of various ages and mental abilities in a single classroom. This has often been a hindrance to the achievement of students who are either ahead of or behind the progress of their fellow students. The customizable nature of the Juan Rumesuela Academe rejects the traditional philosophy that all children in the classroom must be taught simultaneously. This formerly embedded protocol is based upon the practical impossibility that a classroom teacher could teach each student individually at his or her own pace. Now this has become possible. In the Juan Rumesuela Academe, each student learns independently, at his or her own



pace, using remote digital lessons. Using our patented Textbook computer, the child becomes an apprentice of the remote instructor. There is no better educational model than that of master and apprentice. No lessons are left unlearned because other students are learning faster, and no students are bored while listening to repeated instruction for those who have not absorbed the information.”

“Excuse me, Dr. Kane,” said Senator Fiorini, a slender woman with large, red-framed glasses. “How do you achieve the needed interaction between the remote instructor and the student?”

“That problem was solved long ago by the interactive power of digital courses. Few questions asked by any student are unique. Searchable answers are posted for easy access by the students or their classroom guides. Truly unique questions are emailed to the author of the course for responses as needed. Gamers who are stuck for answers regularly send their questions to the authors of games.”

Fiorini considered this and nodded for Donna to continue.

She found her place in her notes. “The fifth barrier to learning is indoctrination of students by government entities that control the public school system. In public schools, agendas of content have often been given priority over the teaching of communication and thinking skills. Many agendas are controversial and have little consensus. Government officials looking to impose their own views and culture on America’s children have presented these views as fact without allowing for their examination. With the Juan Rumesuela Academe, students and their parents are free to explore the views and cultural mores they wish, and courses are designed to include a critical thinking element to help the students critically examine the views that are presented. Those who wish to pursue religion and morality in coursework have the liberty of doing so individually without violating the consciences and rights

of other students.

“The sixth barrier to education is ‘one size fits all’ courses. In the Juan Rumescuela Academe, students can pursue the subjects that interest them even if few or no other classmates are interested. All students are unique. The incentive to excel is greatly increased when students can take courses in subjects that match their interests.

“All of these barriers can be overcome if we have the courage to accept the failure of the old system and take steps now to create the possibility of a real education for future generations. Those who are calling for restoration of the failed legacy system are callously attempting to preserve their own interests rather than the educational interests of future students.”

“How do you propose that this system be adopted, Ms. Kane?” asked Senator Panetta, a round man with a shiny bald head.

“I have proposed a constitutional amendment, which you can review in my prepared remarks. The amendment process is often cumbersome, but not if the time is right. The amendment addresses two salient issues. First, the public craves universal education for its youth in a system that fairly shares the cost among taxpayers. Second, whether or not it is recognized, the public has a mind of its own regarding the content of instruction and wishes to have a say in what their children learn. The proposed amendment addresses these issues, which are vital to gaining the consensus of the public for an agreeable education system.”

She waited while the senators flipped through the pages before them, reviewing the amendment.

“How do you know this system will work the way you say it will?” asked Fiorini.

Donna smiled. “I know that the program works for individuals because we

have been following students in the program for many years. In particular, I have been acquainted with a young man named Juan Rumescuela, the namesake of the Academe, for eight years. I met him when our small group was being organized to launch the effort. He is here today and is scheduled to testify regarding his private school experience.”

A number of other questions followed. Although the committee was tough, the hearing was not as difficult as she had expected. Donna had been immersed in these matters for so many years, the answers came to her easily. When Senator Bingham thanked her and dismissed her, she returned to her seat with a mixed sense of relief and satisfaction.

“The chair recognizes Juan Rumescuela as the next witness,” Bingham announced. “Please have a seat at the witness table, young man.”

Donna smiled at Juan with reassurance as he stood and moved past her. “Thank you, Mr. Chairman,” he said when he was seated. His voice sounded even and calm.

“Mr. Rumescuela, if you would, please tell us about your experience studying the courses produced by ASESА for the Juan Rumescuela Academe.”

“Yes, sir.” He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. “I was born in Mexico and lost both my parents by the time I was five years old. When I was almost seven, I was adopted by my American parents. My adoptive mother, Maria, is of Mexican descent as well.” He glanced at Maria, and she smiled at him. “She and her husband brought me to El Paso, Texas, and she began homeschooling me in the early grades. She worked remotely from home while tutoring me.

“As my courses became more time-intensive, she began ordering digital courseware produced by ASESА authors, which I could use to study while she

worked in her home office. The quality of the courses grew in step with my progress growing up. I was blown away by the content and presentation of the ASESAs courses. Every author was an expert on the topic of the course presented. I enjoyed the courses in the way many people enjoy watching movies. The best part was that I was learning things that were enriching my life.”

“Hold on, young man,” Bingham interrupted. “You seem to be mature for your age. My information says that you are now fifteen years old. Is that correct?”

“Yes, Mr. Chairman.”

“Is your mother still tutoring you?”

“Yes, to the extent that I need her assistance.”

“Who taught you the poise and etiquette we are seeing?”

“That comes from my parents and from a series of remote courses on etiquette we studied together at home. I also took advice from Dr. Kane as she mentored me.”

“How far are you along in your secondary education?”

“I have graduated from the equivalent of high school and am finished with the college sophomore level. I have an A average.”

A murmur spread around the room. The senators leaned toward each other and conferred.

Adjusting her glasses, Senator Fiorini spoke next. “How did you manage an A in every class?”

Juan was starting to look somewhat uncomfortable. “Well, the courses self-test each section of material and require repetition in any aspect that is not clearly understood. There is no reason to get less than a perfect score unless a student has a cognitive impairment or attention deficit. Many of the courses also accommodate these, except in severe cases.”

“What if the course is too difficult for you?” Fiorini asked.

He thought about this. “Each course has a pre-test feature that measures the cognitive ability of the student and assesses the students’ readiness to take the course. If I’m not ready for the course, another preparatory course is recommended. Usually, though, all courses on a particular subject have levels assigned by the courseware based on the student’s qualifications. For example, astronomy courses begin with basic information and then continue with more advanced concepts as the student is able to absorb them. This is modeled on the computer game industry’s most advanced games.”

Senator Panetta leaned toward his microphone. “Do you play computer games, Juan?”

Juan grinned. “Yes, I do. I compete internationally on the web. I’ve actually made a lot of friends there.”

“Don’t the games interfere with your educational progress?” Panetta asked.

“It does require discipline to allocate only a reasonable amount of time to games. It isn’t too difficult, though, because the courseware is interesting, too, and my friends collaborate with me on answers. They often compete with me in taking the exams. I’ve learned how to limit the game time with my mom’s help.”

Senator Jones, an African-American woman sitting on the far right, smiled at Juan and asked, “What can we expect from you as a result of this fine education?”

“I plan to go to medical school and move back to Mexico City,” Juan answered confidently. “I want to practice medicine in my native country.”

“Your future looks bright, Juan,” Jones said. “Hopefully we can adopt an affordable and effective system of education for the entire population of American students.”

He smiled back. “I pray that you can. Thank you for your kind attention.”

Donna was impressed by Juan’s composure and testimony. She could see that he had made an impression on the committee members. No one had challenged him when he said he was prepared to be a college sophomore at age fifteen. He was a homeschooler from beginning to end and presented confident testimony in support of remote instruction for individuals and small groups. His religious faith was evident when he volunteered to pray for the endeavor of the committee.

Unfortunately, it appeared that the testimony might not be enough to sway the committee. In the discussion that followed, some committee members argued that changing the Constitution was simply asking too much. Others had political motivations for opposing the move, or argued that the legislature needed to focus solely on repairing the economy. By the end of the hearing, most had agreed to put the question off until a later session.

Regardless of the results of this hearing, Donna was encouraged. For the first time, government officials had heard and considered the option of sponsoring an economical, nationwide program of remote digital education. Significant changes in educational philosophy would have to be made in order to implement the program, and she did not expect those changes to be made easily. She knew they had won several important new allies in their fight for the new system.

After the hearing, some expressed revulsion toward Juan’s and Donna’s testimony. It seemed that they felt threatened by Juan’s calm demeanor and his obvious intelligence. The contrast between Juan and the students of typical public education was stark. The failure of the legacy system could not have been more evident. The truth hurt.

In a tirade that appeared on her blog the next day, Adine Dorson ranted about

Juan's testimony at the hearing:

Juan Rumescuela is the epitome of the problems created when discipline and religion are pounded into youth. He is completely oblivious to the mistreatment to which he has been subjected. He no doubt suffers from deep social disorders due to being segregated from other students and kept in private school confinement all his life. He has obviously suffered from religious indoctrination, evidenced by his pompous suggestion that he would pray for the committee. The suggestion was an unconscionable violation of the privilege extended to him by the committee. He and his handlers are a showcase for the need to stamp out the older, reactionary order.

The preposterous suggestions mouthed by Dr. Kane and Juan Rumescuela have the potential to destroy fifty years of social progress. Uncontrolled private educational access to students could suddenly break the cooperative group mentality that has been holding the public schools together. This kind of publicity could embolden closet adherents to these private school programs to emerge from hiding. Many could be deceived by the novelty of their ideas. We have already lost most of our educational infrastructure. More than ever, we must protect our modern philosophical foundations and the

basic principle that all people should be made equal.

Donna didn't bother to respond to the ludicrous criticisms. Doing so would only lend them more credibility and stir the desperate opposition into a greater frenzy. Donna had done what she had set out to do. Supporters of the public school system would continue to rigidly hold onto their faulty premises as they crashed and burned. She had planted a seed. When the time was right, it would grow and blossom.



## Collapse

by Wendell Thomas

Reform in public education has been pursued from many perspectives. Implementation of every idea for improvement in pedagogy has been tried. They have all either failed from the beginning as bad ideas or have enjoyed a brief subsidized blip on the performance charts. Special efforts have had limited success, but no significant progress has been made in stopping the slide. Like a glacier moving down a mountainside during a period of global warming, the decline is an irresistible force. Nothing can stand in its way. Nearly everyone is unhappy with the situation, and most blame someone else. Few are willing to accept that the system comprising everyone is to blame, including taxpayers, parents, administrators, and teachers, as well as the students themselves. Society has changed to the point that it can no longer benefit from the current



education system.

Despite all signs to the contrary, many maintain that the existing system is adequate or that no credible alternatives exist. The jobs of millions of people have depended on believing this myth. Anyone who has dared challenge it has faced scorn and even retribution from the establishment. The fact is that most people can believe anything if their jobs depend on believing it. It is no wonder, then, that so few mention that “the emperor has no clothes.”

The ultimate answer, for many, is too unspeakable to mention. We cannot save the system. Public education as a whole must be allowed to collapse. This is our only hope of creating a new educational system that will work. As with functionally obsolete buildings, the infrastructure must crumble in order for a replacement to rise. The old order has fought any challengers and will continue to fight them until the system fails, in the mode of all past empires that have had exorbitant costs and low benefits. Only then will there be room – assets – available to start over. We now have the opportunity to assemble the best learning system ever known. It is time to take the leap.

## **Chapter 32**

### **The Last Straw**

*October 2021*

Adine leaned back in her office chair and sighed contentedly, letting the soft sounds of the piano music wash over her. She had been working all afternoon on the SchoolTools course, and she was more than happy with the results. Sure, plenty had been going wrong lately, but finally it looked like something would go right.

It had been a difficult couple of years at Harbridge. In order to survive the economic depression, difficult decisions had been made. Adine was certain that she had put in many more hours than any presidents before her – certainly more than Roger. As a result, she hadn't been able to devote time to any side projects, such as the SchoolTools course. Finally, now that they had their heads above water again, she'd been able to squeeze in a few hours here and there to work on her course using her illicit copy of the program.

After completing the course, however, she had discovered she was unable to make copies of her work. Figuring it was a minor computer issue she would deal with later, she had moved on to other ideas, developing two additional courses on racism and global warming. But these, too, stalled when she was unable to copy them for distribution.

She had brought the problem to the Harbridge tech squad, who had recommended she talk to Joe Haverkamp, a talented programmer employed by the university. Joe had concluded that the problem lay with the critical thinking component of the program. Because Adine had skirted around it, the program would not allow her to make copies of the courses she had developed. Apparently Aaron Isaacs had added this clever little safeguard for just such an occasion. She had assumed that such protections had been disabled once the program was out of Isaacs's hands.

"Find some way around it," she had told Joe.

Although Joe had expressed some misgivings initially, Adine let him know that his job depended on it. He had quickly complied. A few weeks later, he had come back to her with a slightly altered version of the main program, saying he had "hacked into it." She didn't care what he had done, as long as it enabled her to sell the courses she had spent so much time creating. Finally, after all these years, the miracle software was in *her* service. No longer would her views be excluded from the canon of advanced digital courseware. With Aaron Isaacs's hands tied, people like Adine who had fought for the public school system might finally have a corner on the technology.

Adine had spent the past week recreating one of her courses using the new and improved version of SchoolTools that Joe had brought her. She couldn't help but

admire the course anew as she went through it once more. It was even better this time.

Now came the moment of truth. Holding her breath, she executed the command to copy the file. The computer hesitated for a moment, and then Adine was startled as an image of Benjamin Franklin popped up on the screen. He shook his finger at her like a schoolteacher admonishing a small child, his expression one of grave disappointment. Then the screen went black, and the piano music emanating from the computer speakers stopped abruptly.

She wiggled the mouse. She pecked at the keyboard. She pushed the power button and checked to make sure the power coil was still plugged in. She saw nothing but a blank screen. She felt a little bit of panic starting to rise.

“Judy!” she bellowed. Her secretary, a waif-like brunette, came running in with an expression of concern. “Get Joe. Now.”

It turned out Joe had the day off. But when he heard that Adine needed him urgently, he hurried in, trailing his two young children behind him. Both wore plastic bibs from Pete’s Pizza Palace, and the girl, clutching a stuffed monkey, was crying forlornly. Joe left them with Judy and sat down at Adine’s desk while she sank into the leather sofa.

“So you say Ben Franklin appeared?” Joe said. “And he wasn’t part of your course?”

“No, you idiot. What would Ben Franklin have to do with a course about landlord-tenant laws?”

Joe mumbled something and turned back to the computer. By the time Judy brought Adine a cup of tea several minutes later, Joe was leaning back in the leather chair with his arms crossed, wearing a frown.

Adine sat up straight. “What’s wrong? And how are you going to fix it?”

Joe rubbed his chin nervously and avoided her gaze. “Well, President Dorson, I don’t know how to tell you this, but . . . your hard drive has crashed. It’s dead.”

Adine felt something clutch at her heart. “Dead? No. No, it can’t be.”

“I’m afraid it is. Isaacs must have had a booby trap hidden somewhere that I missed.” The look on his face suggested he admired Isaacs’s cleverness. She was about to reprimand him when he sat up straighter and added, “But we can get you a new computer by tomorrow. As long as you’ve been backing up your system like we discussed, we can restore most of your files, no problem.”

Adine stared at him silently. She had been meaning to do the backups, but she had gotten so busy . . .

“Dr. Dorson? You’ve been backing everything up once a week, right?”

Adine stood and advanced on him, the fury inside bubbling up like magma. Joe leapt from her chair and shrunk back, stumbling out of her way.

Looking down at the mug of tea in her hand, she emptied it in Joe’s direction. “A lot of good you are!” she screamed.

Joe looked down in disbelief at the large wet stain on his shirt. “Ma’am—”

She grabbed the keyboard and flung it past Joe’s head at the painting that hung on the opposite wall. It was the portrait of some dead white guy, a former president of Harbridge, and she had always hated it. The impact knocked the painting askew, and pieces of the keyboard pelted the sofa as Joe scurried from the room. Adine felt herself suddenly overcome by the endless frustrations over the years. Just when it seemed that she had Donna and her ilk by the throat, something always came along to sabotage Adine’s success.

A sound like a roar came out of her throat as she picked up the slim computer monitor with both hands and slammed it on the desk, cracking it in several places.

She tossed it aside and turned her attention to the CPU, that little gray box where Isaacs's damned program had wiped out all of her work from the past six months.

Ignoring the bits of glass that littered the desk, she reached for the CPU, pushed open the window, and heaved the gray box into the crisp fall air. It made a satisfying *crunch* as it hit the concrete below.

Exhausted and breathing hard, Adine fell into her chair. This was the most physical activity she had done in ages. As her rage faded, she felt hot tears coursing down her cheeks. Everything was wrong. All wrong. Despite her superhuman efforts over the years, the public school system was collapsing right before her eyes. Her enemies were surviving, even thriving, and the authorities were letting it happen. On top of that, being president of Harbridge wasn't at all what she had expected. Every day, a new problem raised its ugly head, daring her to find a solution that didn't exist. The university was losing money. No one liked her. Even Roger no longer returned her calls.

That terrible word popped into her head, blazing like a neon sign: *FAILURE*.  
*Adine, you're a big, fat failure.*

Judy's meek voice broke the silence in the room. "President Dorson, uh . . . can I do anything . . ."

"Out!" Adine screamed. "Get out!"

## **Chapter 33**

### **The Best Education Ever Known**

*January 2023*

Standing before a microphone in the chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives, Congressman Donna Kane paused in her speech. The room was quiet as the other legislators in attendance listened attentively. Taking a deep breath, relieved that her presentation was almost over, she concluded, “House Joint Resolution 65 will revive our nation’s long and honored tradition of offering education to our children, while preventing the economic and ideological abuses of the past. This amendment provides a solution to the worsening problems we have been grappling with for decades, and an alternative to the broken system we are faced with today. A system of tuition credits and a law against federally-established curriculum will provide the freedom that our citizens need to fulfill their potential and compete in the global arena. Your vote for this amendment is a vote for the future of

education and the future of our nation. Thank you.”

Donna returned to her seat as the Speaker of the House called for the period of debate to be opened. The constitutional amendment which she had drafted all those years ago was finally being considered in the United States Legislature. She couldn't have been happier. Her fellow members of the Committee on Education and Labor smiled and nodded at Donna encouragingly. She knew she had argued her case well and hoped that everyone who had agreed to vote for the bill would come through.

After a lively debate, the Speaker read the text of the bill once more. “House Joint Resolution 65 proposes that the Constitution be amended to provide as follows: that the Congress shall provide a uniform system of tuition credits for all minors, and that the Congress shall make no law establishing curriculum. I ask you now to please cast your vote.” For the next hour, legislators moved around the House Floor to vote electronically at the many voting stations located in the chamber.

Donna had been elected to the House just a few months earlier after a contentious campaign. It had come as no surprise when her opponent had tried to use her felony conviction against her, although her arrest was now widely viewed as part of a witch hunt orchestrated by an overly confident federal government. Instead of trying to downplay the story, Donna's campaign had embraced it, playing it up as evidence of her commitment to her ideals in the face of overwhelming odds – a kind of David and Goliath narrative. It had worked, and she had swept to victory on a platform of education and economic reforms, also vowing to bring a much-needed dose of integrity to Congress.

Because of her extensive background in education, she had been appointed to the Committee on Education and Labor. Having promised her constituency that she would legally reverse the oppressive policies that had been put into place over the



past ten years, she had quickly proposed the constitutional amendment. Along with her fellow committee members, she had spent months speaking with representatives, informing them about the bill and what was at stake, and ensuring enough votes for it to pass. The public had been clamoring for their legislators to do something about the crumbling school system. The movement for a publicly funded but ideologically free education system had grown stronger and stronger. Finally they had arrived at this moment, when groundbreaking legislation would change the face of education in the United States and bring new hope, ideas, and opportunities to a declining society.

Gazing up at the large American flag which hung above the rostrum, Donna felt her chest swell with passion and gratitude. What they were achieving here had only been possible with the help of many supporters and revolutionary thinkers, especially Aaron Isaacs and her husband Wendell, who had helped draft the beginnings of the legislation years ago and had sustained her through the most discouraging times. She recalled how, a few short years ago, she had believed the cause to be hopeless.

Donna held her breath as the votes were reviewed.

Finally, the Chair stood and announced, “House Joint Resolution 65 has passed.”

A great cheer went up. Smiling jubilantly, Donna shook hands with her fellow committee members and thanked them. The measure was looking good in the Senate, and she felt sure it would pass there as well. After that, the final waiting game began as the resolution went to the states for ratification. Considering the groundswell of support across the nation for the educational overhaul, she had little doubt that the amendment would be ratified. The best education ever known would soon be offered to all the nation’s children. With the economic depression also lifting, the country was

on its way to a much brighter future.

## Epilogue

Adine watched the momentous proceedings from home via the live video feed with a familiar sense of helpless anger. As the president announced the ratification of the Twenty-Ninth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, she poured herself another mugful of wine and took a deep drink. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, late enough that she didn't feel too guilty.

Slumping back into her reading chair, she turned off the television. She couldn't bear to watch the back-slapping and mutual congratulations that would ensue now that Donna and her crowd had achieved this milestone.

For the umpteenth time, Adine let her mind wander back over the events of the past few years, grasping for a moment when things could have gone differently, when she still had a chance to do it right. Should she have turned down the appointment to the presidency at Harbridge? When they offered her the option of resigning voluntarily, should she have fought it? Truth was, she never really wanted to be

president of Harbridge. It was supposed to be just a stepping stone to bigger and better opportunities, and ultimately, to Capitol Hill. But her campaign had crashed and burned.

Glancing down at the navy-blue mug in her hand bearing the Harbridge seal, she wondered why she kept it. It only reminded her of the office she had held for just over a year, and of that day when Aaron's Trojan horse program had ruined everything.

After her little spat with Joe and her accident with the computer, she had been called in to meet with the board of directors. They claimed that there had been a number of complaints about Adine abusing her position as president and coercing employees like Joe into doing personal favors on university time. There were complaints that she had been neglecting her duties and using university resources to pursue her own business enterprises, including the SchoolTools courses. Finally, they had said she needed to learn how to better "manage" her anger – that her outbursts were upsetting the staff and causing them to fear coming to work. The board then condescended to offer her an opportunity for improvement, a probationary period in which she would attend anger management counseling and cease the activities of which she had been accused.

She had no intention of submitting to any kind of monitoring by busybodies and underlings. Considering all the nutjobs at Harbridge, she believed she was the last one who needed counseling – and said so. *She* was the one who had spent years designing behavior-modifying curriculum for schools. *She* didn't need instruction. Everyone else needed to grow a backbone and learn to do their jobs.

Later, when the board had presented her with a prepared resignation letter to sign, they had said her behavior demonstrated she was "not able to conform to the

necessary standards of conduct at the university.” They had “no choice but to take this step.” Allowing her to resign, according to the board, was the kind thing to do. It would allow her to quietly move on.

She had tried. Washing her hands of the university, she had set her sights on a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. As the next election cycle rolled around, she had gathered together a campaign staff and pursued the nomination with gusto. But the good ol’ boys on the board of directors had lied when they said the details of her resignation would remain confidential. Details had been leaked, rumors had gathered momentum, and the campaign had gotten ugly. Her opponent suggested that she would abuse her power as a legislator just as she abused it at Harbridge. He even suggested she would steal taxpayers’ money and put it toward her pet projects, doing the bidding of her friends in the unions and funneling precious funds into the “hopelessly broken” school system. The campaign had disintegrated from there, and Adine had lost the nomination. It was humiliating.

Ever since, she had struggled to find a permanent job position. She had gotten a few consulting gigs, but those had dropped off in the year after the campaign. Finally, she’d had no choice but to move in with her mother. They had been getting by on her savings and the income from her mother’s part-time work as a records clerk at the local hospital. She continued her attempts to network, had even looked for another teaching position at a small college, but so far she had gotten no bites.

Worst of all, Donna Kane was riding a wave of public enthusiasm. She had waged a congressional campaign in her own district on a platform of economic improvements and educational freedom, claiming to be a founder of “the most effective education system the country had ever known.” She had won her party’s nomination and, to Adine’s horror, the election, vowing to bring this education

system to all the nation's children through a new constitutional amendment. And now she had done it. Adine had been hoping that the state legislators would come to their senses in time to reject ratification, but it was clear that she was now on the losing end of the argument.

Sighing, Adine finished her wine and dug through the pile of papers on the dining table for her resume. The preschool down the street was hiring aides. With a little tweaking of her "Work Experience," she might be able to get the job.



At eight o'clock in the morning, Mark Kimler stepped off the bus just half a block down from the remote learning center where he served as an administrator. Strolling through the pleasantly landscaped office park, he entered the code at the front door to the former office building and took the stairs to the second floor. After starting the coffeemaker in the break room, he moved to the classroom to get it ready for the students who would arrive soon.

He enjoyed being the only one here for a while each morning. Sunlight shone through the maple trees outside the windows which spanned one side of the classroom. Student art decorated the opposite wall, while posters chosen by the facilitators covered another. The room was colorful and comfortable. He turned on the overhead lights, which were kept dim to enable viewing of the computer monitors. Walking down the rows between the long tables, he checked the twenty-five workstations to confirm that each was equipped with a monitor, keyboard, graphics tablet, and headphones. Most of the students brought their own Textbook computers, which plugged into the monitors for use in the classroom. Several computers were kept on hand for students who didn't have their own.

The school was coming along nicely. He and his fellow administrators were

still working out the kinks, but overall he considered it a success. There had been a period of chaos after the new educational system had been set into motion, and the process of sorting it all out was ongoing. Some approaches to remote private education had failed. But the possibilities of the new system were exciting, and Mark had enthusiastically jumped on board. He had enrolled in one of the training classes offered to educate potential facilitators and administrators about the system, and together with several other investors, he had established his own JRA-affiliated school with a focus on math and science. The Brookstone Academy was open to students aged 14-18 with a particular interest and skills in those subjects. Mark and another facilitator oversaw a small class of twenty students at a time. The academy held two sessions five days a week, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, each with a different set of students.

His job was not too complicated, but it was rewarding. He helped students with the software when necessary, answered questions, and kept order in the classroom. The software was self-grading, and it was easy to track any particular student's progress. The facilitators reviewed their progress mostly by computer. If a student was not progressing, this was reported to the parents. Mark and Felicia, his fellow facilitator, encouraged the students in their studies, but if the student was not causing a problem for other students, little could be done to force him or her to learn. In reality, they had little trouble with students staying engaged with the courses. They were as entertaining as movies and video games, and very effective as learning tools. Because the students in his classes shared common interests and were often studying the same subjects, they often engaged in lively discussion during breaks and tutored each other. Students typically came away from a day of courses feeling enlightened and hungry for more, rather than relieved to be free of the boredom or struggle of

their classes, as Mark had witnessed for years in the public schools.

Of course, there were various levels of dedication and ability among students. That was the advantage of having many smaller schools. Some catered to the most capable and focused students, while others were equipped for students moving at a slower pace or who had learning disabilities. Levels of study were not fixed, but many levels were possible as demand required. Students who mastered courses quickly took more courses or spent more time in recreation.

Discipline was simple. Students who repeatedly caused problems were simply expelled from the school. They then had to find another school that would take them, or enroll in one of the alternative public schools.

As an administrator of the school, Mark had helped choose the courses that made up the curriculum. Parents were free to share their input at quarterly meetings with the school's administrators. Brookstone was a secular school teaching traditional subjects such as geometry, algebra, calculus, biology, physics, chemistry, history, language, and writing. They contracted with a nearby arts school to provide art and music instruction, while a local rec center provided opportunities for team sports and fitness. Other schools included religious studies in their curriculum, focused on the arts, or taught only girls or boys. As supply met the demand, there would soon be a school for every kind of student.

After pouring himself a cup of coffee, Mark stepped to the windows and looked out. A few students were beginning to arrive. Tyrell was chatting with Aiko as she locked up her bike. Several others who carpoled to class each day piled out of a van in the parking lot.

Mark breathed deeply, enjoying the comforting aroma of the coffee and his last few moments of solitude. What a change this was from his previous posts as principal



and assistant principal. He no longer dreaded each day. He didn't lie awake nights wondering how to fix what seemed hopelessly broken. He didn't see a stream of bored, misbehaving students in his office daily, or meet with disgruntled or even frightened teachers demanding better pay and working conditions. The people who worked at the Brookstone Academy were happy with their jobs. Their students were being equipped for the future, for roles in a challenging and ever-changing society. They seemed more aware of and interested in the world around them, better able to make decisions, and more willing to take responsibility for their choices. The differences between these students and those in the public schools were undeniable. And none of these students were any more intelligent or well-off than those he had known in the public schools; they were simply making better use of their own skills, fulfilling the potential that was already there.

He thought of some of the students who had passed through his office at Westside Middle School and eventually dropped out. As usual, Manny Rumescuela came to mind. He liked the boy and had sensed such potential in him. And his name, Rumescuela, was so unusual, and yet had popped up in the name of that revolutionary schooling system, the Juan Rumescuela Academe. He wondered if they were connected somehow. He wondered, too, how Manny would have done in a JRA-affiliated school. He felt sad thinking of all the students who had been lost to them because the schools simply couldn't provide what was necessary to keep them engaged and safe.

He heard the doors opening down the hall. A moment later, Tyrell and Aiko came strolling in.

"Hey, Mr. K," Tyrell greeted him as he found his workstation and set down his messenger bag.

“Good morning, Tyrell,” Mark said. “Hello, Aiko.”

Aiko, a pretty girl with long black hair, waved shyly and sat down. Both students pulled out their computers and began hooking them up to the workstations. Finishing his coffee, Mark moved to his desk and prepared for another promising day.



It was near sunset when Donna, Wendell, Aaron, and Nora strolled along the National Mall to admire the monuments and the cherry trees in full bloom. For much of the year, Donna and Wendell now lived in Washington, D.C., while Donna fulfilled her duties as a legislator. Aaron and Nora had decided to take a rare vacation and had flown in from Massachusetts for a visit.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Wendell said as they gazed up at the Lincoln Memorial. The setting sun made its surface glow against the dusky sky.

“It’s so much larger than I expected,” Aaron remarked.

He and Nora ascended its steps arm-in-arm and posed while Wendell took their picture. The seated Lincoln dwarfed them.

Donna and Wendell made this stroll frequently during their time in Washington, often with Wendell’s camera in tow. Donna never tired of coming here. The Smithsonian museums and memorials to the presidents prompted thoughts of the great minds that had founded this country and of the many distinguished thinkers who had followed them since, helping to shape America into an innovative, powerful, and accomplished nation. Right now, in homes and schools all over the country, future scientists, doctors, clergy, legislators, soldiers, entrepreneurs, stay-at-home moms, writers, and voting citizens of every stripe were learning about the world – and, she hoped, learning how to think and how to learn.

As the four friends continued their walk, Wendell joked, “Donna, why don’t

you two stop by the White House and drop off a gift basket for the president? I wonder if he prefers fruit or chocolates . . .”

To their great relief, the President had recently issued a pardon to Aaron and Donna for their felonies for civil disobedience.

Nora laughed. “Just because you’re no longer a felon doesn’t mean they’ll let you waltz in the front door with a big basket.”

Donna eyed Aaron. “You certainly are a suspicious-looking fellow,” she said. “How Nora can let you leave the house with your hair looking like that, I’ll never understand.” It was well known that Nora kept her house immaculately clean and her family dressed to a T, but that Aaron was a lost cause.

Aaron touched his chronically unkempt curls and feigned confusion. “This? You should have seen it before I spent an hour combing it.”

Groaning, Nora slapped his arm away and rolled her eyes.

“Well, since you spent so much time getting ready this morning,” Donna said, “I think we should head someplace special for a little celebration. What do you think, Wendell? Charlie’s?”

“Celebration?” Nora asked. “What for?”

“H.R. 73, the bill that repealed the restrictions on remote education.”

“That passed during the last session,” Wendell said with a suspicious smile.

Donna shrugged. “Aaron and Nora weren’t here then, and we didn’t have a chance to celebrate. Not even any Champagne . . .”

Wendell smiled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Besides, Aaron’s become a national hero since then. I’d say that’s worth celebrating, wouldn’t you?”

“Champagne it is,” Aaron announced spiritedly, puffing out his chest. “I say we celebrate!”

They all laughed. Aaron was in a rare mood.

“But in all seriousness,” Aaron said, “none of this would have happened without you, Donna. I’ve mostly just been playing at my favorite hobby, and I’m grateful that something so important came out of it. But you saw the big picture.”

“You both took big risks to make change happen,” Wendell corrected him. “It’s both your accomplishments we should be celebrating.”

“Hear, hear,” Nora said before either of them could protest.

“Hear, hear,” Donna echoed with a smile.

“Now all we need is Champagne for the toast,” Aaron said.

“Charlie’s it is,” Wendell declared. “I’ll hail a cab.”

Surrounded by loved ones, Donna was filled with joy and contentment during the ride to the restaurant. She thought back over their journey together. It had been a long and difficult one, marked by disappointments and defeats, but also by many celebrations like this one. Thankfully, things were now moving in the right direction. Since the passage of the bill, with the advent of unrestricted private schooling, Aaron’s success with SchoolTools had exploded. Authors had begun producing an unprecedented variety of courses for the medium. Small schools had sprung up all over the nation to serve the nation’s youth. At first there were very few regulations, and schools had been established in every kind of building imaginable. Meanwhile, the Juan Rumesuela Academe, now operated by a large staff, distributed mostly free courseware to all who had a desire for it. A few courses were fee-based, with fees going to the authors. Parents and teachers assisted in choosing curriculum for each child. Students attended any school that would accept them, including one-room

schools.

It was now possible for any child to study fascinating courses of interest to him or her. Over the years, the system and the courses would continue to be refined, but they had finally done it.



Juan sat by the window in his dormitory and gazed out at the plaza below, enjoying the warm breeze. He had been in Mexico City for just two weeks. It felt good to be back here – back home.

Following graduation from secondary school, he had been admitted to the University of Texas. By that time, the advances in distance learning had been so great that he had decided to live off-campus at home and study from the powerful educational courseware available. Most colleges also offered online courses. Not only did they feature text, sound, and color graphics at high speed, but also courses involving virtual science laboratories. Collaboration applications provided interaction with other students and instructors in real time. Given that he was only seventeen years old, his mother had also felt that he should continue living under her supervision.

His social life outside the home flourished. He had begun dating Rosa and was not really interested in moving away from her or his friends. By the time he was nineteen, he had the equivalency of a four-year college education majoring in pre-med. He had also taken some courses at the university and was ready to enter medical school. He was thrilled when he received his acceptance letter from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Classes started tomorrow.

Edward and Maria had accompanied him to Mexico City and had stayed for a week, sightseeing and helping him get settled. He would go back to visit them

occasionally and hoped to marry Rosa when she finished school. As Donna had reminded him in a recent email, he had received the best education available anywhere in the world and had gotten it mostly in a one-room school. He was prepared for the challenges that lay ahead.

Juan had gone to Illinois to meet his aunt and uncle, and they had told him how sorry they were that they had been unable to take in both him and Manny. They explained that they just couldn't afford two boys at the time, and thought it would be for the best. He assured them that he understood and that he'd had a wonderful childhood with loving parents.

He and Manny now kept in regular contact. Manny had gone through a rough time for a while. His odd jobs hadn't been enough to pay for an apartment for him and his girlfriend, Chariti. After their baby daughter, Angelica, was born, she and Chariti had moved in with Manny and his parents. After just six months, when he had lost one job too many, Chariti had taken Angelica and moved back in with her parents. Devastated, Manny had written to Juan, wondering what to do. He had no prospects of a career and had developed no skills. The economy was still limping along.

Juan had suggested he take advantage of the new tuition credits that had just become available and enroll in some classes. For a start, he could aim at getting his GED, and then consider college-level courses or vocational training. After years of boredom and inattention in school, however, Manny had a severe lack of confidence in his ability to learn. He wasn't sure he was willing to try. Juan reminded him that this could be the only way to get his family back. Work hard, get an education, and find a career that would allow him to support Chariti and Angelica. Besides, the remote courses available were fascinating, nothing like public school classes, and would adjust to his knowledge level and progress. No one else would be around to

tease him if he got the wrong answer – or the right one.

Juan and Maria had helped Manny select several courses to begin, and he had quickly caught on. Within a year, by learning at home, he had gotten his GED and begun training as an electrician. Finally, with the economy starting to recover, Manny had gotten his first job in the field. He and Chariti were talking about getting married. Manny had even mentioned visiting Juan in Mexico City and making a trip together to their home village. Juan felt an ache in his heart when he thought of it. The loss of his family still hurt deeply. But now that he and Manny were becoming close again, that part of him had begun to heal.

Turning his gaze from the scenic plaza below his window, Juan brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes and looked at his watch. He had one more day to himself before classes and other school obligations took over his life. He planned to get a pastry from the bakery around the block and spend the afternoon in the Museo de Arte Moderno, admiring the original works of famous Mexican artists whose posters he had seen every day growing up at home.

Leaving his room, he took the stairs to the first floor and stepped out into the bright sunshine. The sights and the smells that surrounded him felt new, yet familiar. A thrill went through him as he contemplated his future and the possibilities that lay ahead. Strolling across the cobblestone plaza, he offered a prayer of thanks and smiled.