

# A Matter of Choice

## Chapter 1

The five intellectuals calling themselves Justice Inc entered the George R. Brown Convention Center shortly before ten a.m. They were at the convention center in downtown Houston for a rally in support of public schools and in opposition to a school choice program being touted by the Texas governor. During the previous legislative session, a bill that would have established an education voucher program advanced further than previous attempts. Teachers' unions in the state were up in arms, and they expected the issue to be brought up in the legislative session that was starting in three days. Indeed, multiple bills to establish a school choice program had already been introduced. The unions were on the offensive and hoped to convince both the public and lawmakers that school choice should be rejected once again.

As they entered the room reserved for the rally, the five partners were greeted by a middle-aged woman. She had short hair that was mostly gray and wore oversized glasses. She looked to be about 5'3" and nearly as wide. "Welcome," she said as she handed each of the partners a brochure. "I'm Janice Jenkins, the president of the Houston Teachers Union. Are you teachers?"

"No," Pratik Shah replied. "We're intellectual bodyguards." Pratik was the size of a small garden shed. He stood 6'8" tall and weighed two-hundred and seventy pounds, none of which was fat. The former football player was dark complected with short black hair. Though he had been born in India, Pratik had grown up in Texas and considered himself an American. He had a double major in philosophy and business.

Jenkins made a face that conveyed confusion. "And what is that? I have never heard of such a thing."

"A traditional bodyguard protects his client from physical threats," Meghan Charlton answered. Meghan was 5'8" tall. She had played soccer in high school and continued her training regimen through college. Her light brown hair fell past her shoulders. Her friends had long tried to convince her to try modeling, but Meghan wanted to make a career with her brain, not her beauty. "An intellectual bodyguard protects his client from intellectual threats—bad ideas." She had a master's degree in journalism with a minor in philosophy.

"Oh, so you must be opposed to school choice," Jenkins said happily, "because that is a very bad idea."

"Actually, we haven't taken a position on the issue yet," Justin Walker said. Justin stood just over six foot tall and was a solid one-hundred-eighty pounds. He had curly red hair that reached his collar and Arctic blue eyes. He often joked that he was a real-life flag—red, white, and blue. Justin had a double major in philosophy and psychology. "We're here to learn more about school choice. But speaking for myself, I'm inclined to support school choice. When it's a matter of choice, I always support freedom of choice."

"This isn't about freedom of choice," Jenkins snapped. "It's about ensuring that every Texas student receives the quality education guaranteed by the state constitution. Our public schools are already grossly underfunded, and school choice would just divert money from those schools to the private schools where the wealthy are already sending their children. The poor, and particularly children of color, will be harmed. They won't have any options. What about their freedom of choice?"

“As Justin said,” Sally Baker, Justin’s cousin, replied, “we’re here to learn more about this issue. But it seems to me that the poor would benefit most from school choice. Sure, the wealthy can afford to send their children to better schools, but the poor don’t have that luxury. School choice would provide a huge financial boost for them.” Sally was a foot shorter than Pratik, her partner, and was less than half his weight.

Jenkins waved her hand dismissively. “Do you know how much tuition is at private schools? The voucher program that was proposed in the last legislative session wouldn’t come close to paying the tuition at Kincaid or St. John’s. How will that help the poor?”

“I don’t know much about either school,” Sally admitted, “other than they are the premier private schools in Houston. But I don’t see how that matters in regard---”

“You don’t see how that matters?” Jenkins said incredulously. “Young lady, if tuition is \$30,000 and a parent has a voucher for only \$10,000, that voucher is useless. It’s an issue of basic economics.”

Sally smiled but said nothing. Instead, Jenna Walker, Justin’s sister, spoke. “Ms. Jenkins, Sally has a PhD in economics with a minor in philosophy, so I think that it’s fair to say that she understands that side of the issue better than any of us.” Jenna was slightly shorter than Sally, but the two cousins shared the same sandy blond hair that each wore shoulder length. Most people believed that the two young women were sisters and were shocked to learn that Jenna and Justin were siblings. Like her brother, she was an avid runner.

“Whatever,” Jenkins replied. “This isn’t just an economic issue. It’s also a moral issue. We have a moral duty to provide a quality education for all children. It’s in the state constitution.”

“If this is a moral issue,” Sally said, “then Justin and Pratik are the ones to speak to. They both have degrees in philosophy.”

Jenkins stood with her mouth agape as she studied the five intellectuals. Looking at Meghan Charlton. “What about you, young lady? I suppose that you are an astrophysicist or something.”

Meghan shook her head. “No, I’m just a lowly journalist,” she replied. “I do have a master’s in journalism with a minor in philosophy.”

Turning to Jenna, Jenkins said, “And you?”

“I’m an historian,” Jenna replied. “Like Meghan, I have a master’s degree in my field along with a minor in philosophy.”

Jenkins shook her head. “Who are you people?”

“We’re intellectual bodyguards,” Pratik repeated. “We protect people from bad ideas.”

“Yes, I know,” Jenkins said testily. “You’ve already told me that. Why are you here? None of you seem to be supportive of public schools or the poor. How much are they paying you?”

“Who are they?” Pratik asked. “The antecedent is unclear.”

The educator was visibly taken aback. “Young man, mind your manners. I taught English for twenty years, and I don’t need grammar lessons from you.”

“That explains a few things,” Pratik quipped. Jenkins’ face twisted in confusion.

Smiling, Justin handed Jenkins a business card for Justice Inc. “You can keep this,” he said, “in case you need our services in the future.”

Jenkins snatched the card and looked at it quickly before dropping it on the floor. “Get out of here. All of you. You are wasting my time.”

As they walked away, Pratik said to his colleagues, “Well, that was interesting. She demonstrated absolutely no interest in educating us why we should oppose school choice. She expected us to agree with her, and when we didn’t, she became condescending and belligerent.”

“Yes,” Sally said, “she thinks that she is our intellectual superior. That was great, Jenna, when you told her that I have a PhD in economics. And I loved your comment about the antecedent, Pratik. She wasn’t at all happy about that.”

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The rally ended two hours later. Janice Jenkins walked up to Maggie Guidry, the president of the Texas Teachers Union. “What do you think, Janice?” Guidry asked.

“The rally was great,” Jenkins replied. “I think we really fired up the troops. But I had a troubling experience before the rally started.”

“What happened?” Guidry inquired.

“I was by the door when five young people entered. I asked them if they were teachers. No, one of them said. God, he was huge. Anyhow, he said that they are intellectual bodyguards.”

“What is that?”

“I was confused too. They said that they protect people from bad ideas. When I told them that school choice is a bad idea, they became very rude and belligerent. At one point, I thought the big guy was going to attack me.”

“Did you call security?”

“No, he didn’t do anything overt. He just had this look about him. It’s hard to explain. But that’s not what was troubling. If they decide to stick their nose into this, they might cause problems for us. They had this cocky air about them that smells like trouble.” Jenkins reached into her pocket. “One of them gave me their business card,” she said as she handed it to Guidry.

“Justice Inc, huh,” Guidry said as she looked at the card. “I’ll see what I can find out about them. Thanks, Janice, for the heads up. I’ll see you in Austin on Monday.”

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