A photograph of a dilapidated classroom. The room has peeling walls and a dark green chalkboard. Several wooden desks and metal chairs are scattered across the floor, which is covered with numerous open and closed books. The lighting is dim, creating a somber and neglected atmosphere.

The Path to Dysfunctional

Johann Heynecke

Foreword:

This book is a work of fiction... All characters, schools, communities and incidents described within its pages are entirely imaginary or used in a fictitious manner... Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to real institutions or places is coincidental and unintended...

Although the story draws on themes that may feel familiar to readers who have watched South Africa's education system change over time, it is not an exposé or a documentary... It is a novel - a way of exploring, through imagined characters and events, what might happen when policies, communities and values collide...

At its heart this is a cautionary tale about loss and resilience: a portrait of a proud, functional school sliding into dysfunction under the weight of mismanagement and of the small, stubborn acts of defiance that survive even amid collapse...

So, as you turn the page, a question hangs over the story like a shadow:

“Could this be the future of the functional schools still left in South Africa - or will we choose a different path?”

Once a model of excellence, Bergveld Hoërskool stood as a beacon of discipline, culture and community... But when new laws and unseen forces begin reshaping its classrooms, corridors and playing fields... The proud institution finds itself sliding into chaos... Teachers lose their authority, parents lose their voice and children are caught in the middle of a battle they didn't start...

Through the eyes of principal Karel van Rensburg, veteran teacher Marli Strydom and a network of parents who refuse to look away, *The Path to Dysfunctional* traces the slow unravelling of a school and the small, stubborn acts of defiance that survive amid collapse...

This is not a true story, but a cautionary one: a vivid imagining of how a functional school can be hollowed out by bureaucracy and mismanagement and of the courage it takes to build something new from the ruins... Could this be the future of South Africa's remaining functional schools - or will communities choose a different path?...

Author's Note...

I wrote *The Path to Dysfunctional* not as an exposé of any one school or community, but as a story - a mirror held up to possibilities... Over many years of watching South Africa's education system change, I have heard parents, teachers and learners speak with pride, frustration and fear about the future of their schools... This novel grew out of those conversations...

The characters, policies and incidents in these pages are inventions... They are not thinly disguised versions of real people or institutions... They are composites, imagined events created to explore what might happen when good intentions, bureaucracy and a lack of accountability collide...

My aim is not to vilify, but to provoke thought... What happens to a functional school when its autonomy is stripped away?... What happens to children when adults no longer have the tools or courage to protect them?... Also what small acts of resilience are still possible when an institution begins to fail?... If, while reading, you feel anger, grief or hope, then the story has done its job... These are not comfortable questions, but they are urgent ones... I invite you to enter this fictional world with an open mind and to leave it thinking about the real choices still ahead of us...

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Date: September 2025...

Please everyone that receive and read this... Doesn't matter if you agree or not with what I've written here, please don't keep it for yourself... Spread it far and wide, let more people see and read it...

Chapter One – Morning Assembly...

The bell rang at 7:25, a sound so constant that even the pigeons on the roof shifted on cue... Children in pressed navy uniforms streamed through the wrought-iron gates of Bergveld Hoërskool, their chatter low and steady, a kind of soft hum against the early spring air... The jacarandas lining the driveway were still purple, scattering petals like confetti on the paving stones...

Inside the main hall, sunlight pooled on polished floors... The teachers stood at the edges of the assembly, greeting pupils as they entered... No registers were ticked, no roll calls shouted; everyone was known here...

On the stage, a tall, lean man in a blazer adjusted the microphone... Principal Karel van Rensburg didn't bang on the podium or demand silence... He simply raised his hand and the noise faded... Behind him stood this week's "scripture reader" - Marli Strydom, the Grade 8 Natural Sciences teacher, her Bible already open to the Psalms...

She read slowly in Afrikaans, her voice clear enough to reach the last row... The words were not a ritual; they were a rhythm, binding the room together... When she finished, Karel bowed his head and began the Lord's Prayer... One thousand two hundred voices followed, steady and unselfconscious, echoing off the high rafters like a promise...

This was not performance; this was the school's heartbeat...

Afterwards, the assembly shifted to announcements... Rugby trials, the debate team's win at district level, a reminder about winter uniforms... Learners listened without fidgeting... The hall smelled faintly of polish and chalk dust - a scent as familiar to them as the sound of their own surname...

When the bell released them to class, the corridors filled but did not crowd... Teachers stood at their doors, greeting each child by name... In Grade 9, Me. Jansen moved between desks, checking homework with a glance and a nod... "Goeiemôre, Pieter, jou diagram is mooi geteken en Anika, onthou asb. jou liniaal volgende keer." Her voice was soft but sure... The children responded, eyes bright, books open...

Mathematics at Bergveld was taught with precision... Numbers were not just exercises to finish; they were logic to be understood... The same was true for Natural Sciences, where lessons were framed with local examples - a borehole pump instead of an imported diagram, soil from the school garden instead of a textbook photograph... History was a study of lineage and place, not a battlefield of slogans...

The classrooms reflected the ethos: neat rows of desks, clean floors, a library corner stacked with Afrikaans novels and Christian texts... Charts of the periodic table hung alongside maps of the nine provinces... Windows opened easily; light fell on actual books rather than flickering screens... Technology was present but purposeful - a single data projector used to enlarge diagrams, not to entertain...

Assessment here was diagnostic, not punitive and teachers marked with care... Comments were handwritten, specific, sometimes even illustrated with small arrows or underlines... Learners improved not from fear of failure but from a sense of belonging... No motivational posters were needed, the culture itself was the motivation...

Outside, the sports fields were clipped and lined, with rugby posts straight, netball courts freshly painted... Practices were led by teachers who also coached, their involvement extending beyond the classroom... Games start and ended with prayer as often as with cheers... The school choir practised under the guidance of Mrs Botha, singing Afrikaans hymns alongside original compositions by the learners... Parents attended rehearsals, helped with costumes and stayed late after concerts to stack chairs and sweep floors...

Karel moved through it all like a steward rather than a manager... He stopped to greet a group of Grade 10 boys, joking about the weekend's rugby scores... In his office, the door was rarely shut... He knew each teacher's strength, each family's story, each child's potential... Authority here was not delegated; it was embodied...

By mid-morning break, the courtyard buzzed with quiet energy... Children shared sandwiches under the jacarandas with laughter... Teachers gathered in the staffroom not to complain but to plan... Coffee mugs and curriculum guides littered the table alongside handwritten notes about learners who needed extra help... There were no consultants, neither external audits - just colleagues holding one another accountable...

Discipline was firm but not harsh, with rules that were clear, consequences consistent... When a learner erred, the response was corrective rather than punitive... Detention was rare not because misbehaviour was ignored but because it was pre-empted... Forgiveness was practised and not preached...

Parents were present, not as customers but as partners... They served on committees, supported fundraisers and collaborated with teachers when a child struggled... No marketing campaign advertised Bergveld Hoërskool, its reputation was earned, not purchased...

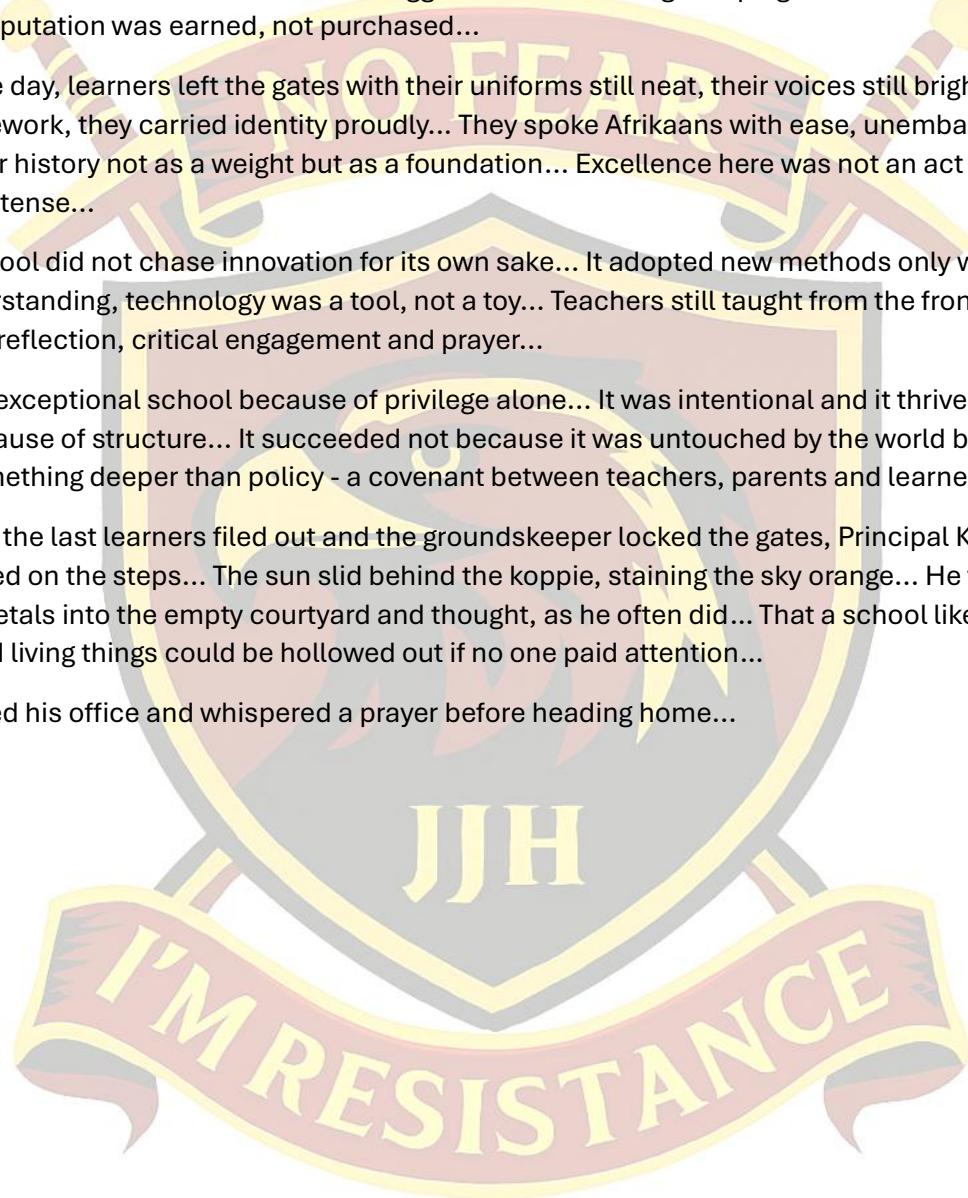
By the end of the day, learners left the gates with their uniforms still neat, their voices still bright... They carried more than homework, they carried identity proudly... They spoke Afrikaans with ease, unembarrassed... Understood their history not as a weight but as a foundation... Excellence here was not an act of nostalgia; it was the present tense...

Bergveld Hoërskool did not chase innovation for its own sake... It adopted new methods only when they deepened understanding, technology was a tool, not a toy... Teachers still taught from the front of the class, but they did so with reflection, critical engagement and prayer...

This was not an exceptional school because of privilege alone... It was intentional and it thrived not because of slogans but because of structure... It succeeded not because it was untouched by the world but because it was anchored in something deeper than policy - a covenant between teachers, parents and learners...

That evening, as the last learners filed out and the groundskeeper locked the gates, Principal Karel van Rensburg lingered on the steps... The sun slid behind the koppie, staining the sky orange... He felt the wind lift a few jacaranda petals into the empty courtyard and thought, as he often did... That a school like this was fragile - a living thing and living things could be hollowed out if no one paid attention...

He turned, locked his office and whispered a prayer before heading home...



Chapter Two – The Field Was Never Level...

Saturday dawned clear and cool over Bergveld Hoërskool... The Grade 9 rugby team was already on the main field by seven-thirty, loosening shoulders, snapping passes back and forth... Their maroon jerseys gleamed under the early sun, there is excitement in the air... Parents hauled folding chairs and thermoses of moerkoffie to the edge of the grass, chatting in Afrikaans, voices carrying across the empty stands...

Five schools were gathering for the district interschool sports day... Buses rumbled in one after another, disgorging teenagers in mismatched kit... Flags went up, whistles shrilled, the smell of boerewors and fried vetkoek drifted from the food stalls and it felt festive, but also like a test...

Bergveld's staff moved easily through the logistics... Coach Johan Botha had his players lined up for weigh-ins, his clipboard already filled... Marli Strydom, also the Life Sciences teacher for Grades 10 and 11, was stationed at the hockey field with a bag of spare sticks... Principal Karel van Rensburg walked the perimeter, shaking hands with visiting principals, making sure the schedule stayed on track... Everything ran on time because everyone knew their role...

The other established suburban schools were almost as organised... Their teams wore coordinated uniforms, their parents pitched small gazebos, their teachers hovered at the sidelines, notes in hand... It wasn't perfect, but it was recognisable: the same rhythm of preparation and participation...

Then the township school arrived. Their bus came late, the learners spilling out in borrowed kit. Some wore rugby shorts and soccer socks; others clutched hockey sticks they had never held before. Their teachers looked around for a programme but found none. Announcements blared from the PA, but not everyone caught them. The learners gathered in loose groups at the edge of the field, eager but unsure.

Bergveld's Grade 9 rugby side moved like a single organism... They ran set pieces as warm-ups, calling out numbers, practising defensive lines... The visiting team from the township school was strong and quick but uncoordinated... When the match began, Bergveld's tackles landed cleanly, their passes crisp, their scrums tight... Within ten minutes the score was 14–0... Coach Johan Botha shouted instructions not as orders but as confirmations; his boys already knew what to do...

On the hockey field, the Grade 10 girls played with the same quiet discipline - stick control, positional awareness, tactical passing drilled into muscle memory during weeks of practice... Their opponents had heart but lacked formation... Their spacing collapsed under pressure, their goalkeeper was left exposed... The scoreline widened, applause from the stands generous but tinged with sympathy...

Netball was no different, Bergveld's shooters rarely missed; their passes snapped from hand to hand like clockwork... The visiting team reacted rather than anticipated, rotating positions haphazardly, breathless before the first quarter ended... Their coach clapped after each attempt, offering praise but no adjustments...

At the archery range beyond the pavilion, the disparity was almost painful... Bergveld's learners lined up calmly, adjusting sights, breathing before release... Arrows thudded into the centre of targets... The township learners tried hard, but their hands shook with unfamiliarity... Many shots flew wide. Teachers from other schools offered quiet guidance, but the gap wasn't in effort - it was in exposure...

Parents from Bergveld moved between fields with quiet purpose, handing out water, checking on injuries, ferrying equipment... Their presence was operational, not ornamental, they knew the players' names, the rules, the rhythm... For many of the visiting school's learners, there were no parents at the sidelines... Work shifts, distance and transport costs made attendance impossible... Teachers tried to fill the gap, but they were outnumbered and overstretched...

As the day wore on, the contrasts deepened... Bergveld's learners regrouped between matches under the shade of a tent, listening to quick tactical briefings, eating sandwiches their mothers had packed... The visiting school's learners sat together in the sun, waiting for someone to tell them where to go next... Announcements

were missed and warm-ups were skipped... They wanted to compete but were always a step behind the timetable...

When the semifinals began, Bergveld advanced in every category... Their teams didn't just win; they adapted mid-game, executing moves drilled during weekday practices... Coaches gave feedback between plays; the learners listened and adjusted... Other suburban schools competed, but Bergveld led... The township school teams had been eliminated hours earlier, their players wandering to the stands, jerseys damp with sweat, faces bright with effort but clouded with defeat...

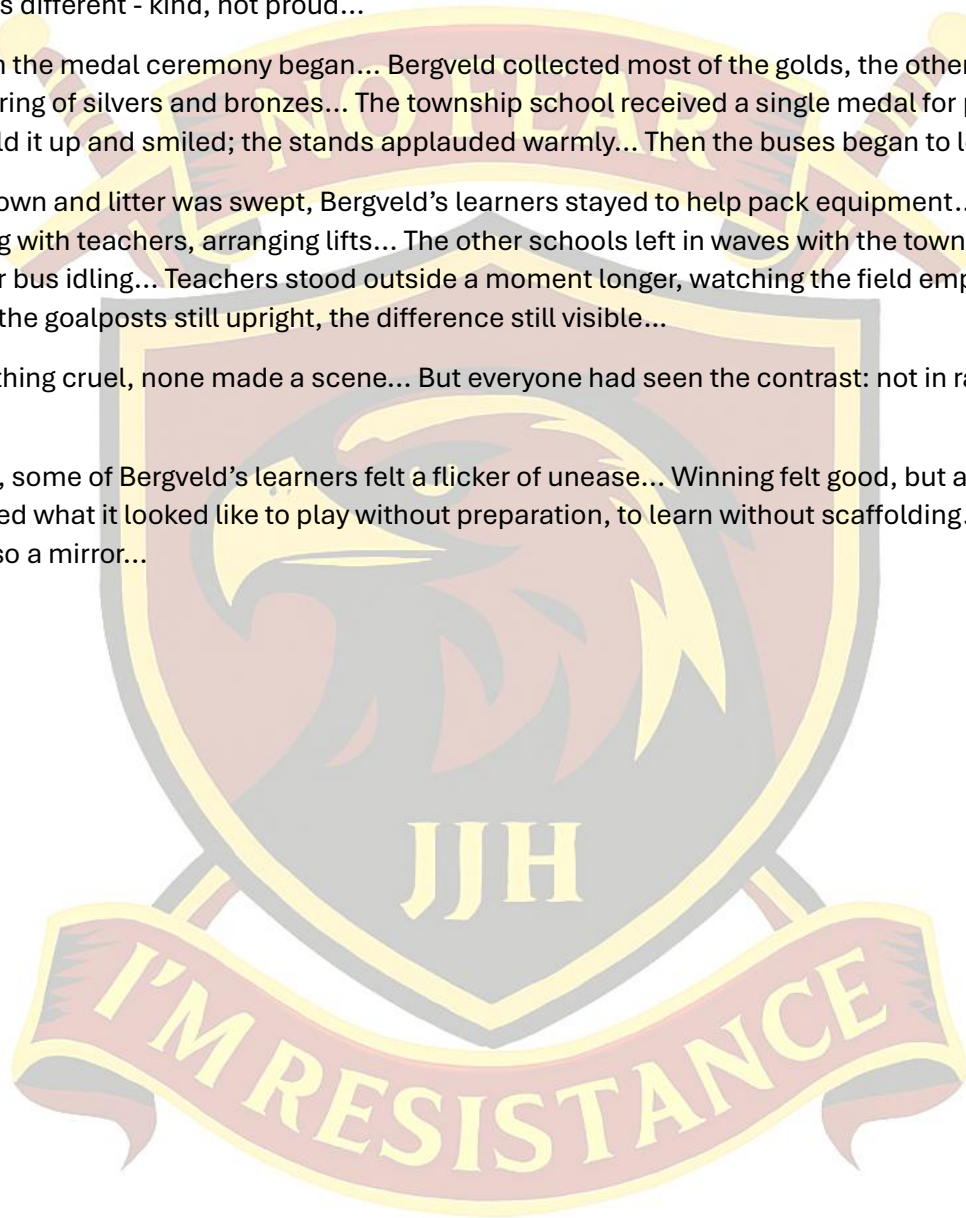
No one mocked them, spectators clapped after each of their attempts... Teachers hugged them at the end but the applause was different - kind, not proud...

By late afternoon the medal ceremony began... Bergveld collected most of the golds, the other suburban schools a scattering of silvers and bronzes... The township school received a single medal for participation... a Grade 11 boy held it up and smiled; the stands applauded warmly... Then the buses began to load...

As tents came down and litter was swept, Bergveld's learners stayed to help pack equipment... Parents lingered, chatting with teachers, arranging lifts... The other schools left in waves with the township school leaving last, their bus idling... Teachers stood outside a moment longer, watching the field empty... The chalk lines still bright, the goalposts still upright, the difference still visible...

No one said anything cruel, none made a scene... But everyone had seen the contrast: not in race, not in effort - in structure...

For the first time, some of Bergveld's learners felt a flicker of unease... Winning felt good, but also strange... They had glimpsed what it looked like to play without preparation, to learn without scaffolding... It wasn't just a match; it was also a mirror...



Chapter Three – The New Coordinator...

Monday morning at Bergveld Hoërskool felt different, though nothing visible had changed... The jacarandas still arched over the gates, the bricks still gleamed and the learners still streamed in wearing pressed maroon blazers and polished shoes... Only the grass-stained kit bags slung over their shoulders hinted at the weekend's matches... The hall filled for assembly; the Lord's Prayer rose clear and confident...

In the Grade 10 classroom the conversation was subdued... "Their goalkeeper didn't even have gloves," a girl said quietly... "And she never stopped trying." Another added, "They looked exhausted before the match started..." Nobody bragged about the wins... The contrast they'd seen had dampened any sense of triumph...

Meanwhile in the staffroom, coffee mugs steamed while teachers compared notes... Marli Strydom, still pink from a day on the hockey field, leafed through the schedule... "It hit me," she said, "we're not just playing different teams, we're playing a different reality."

Coach Johan Botha nodded: "Their rugby boys were strong... They just didn't know what to do - no training, no structure." He tapped his clipboard; "It's not talent that's missing... It's scaffolding."

Principal Karel van Rensburg walked in, closing his phone with a snap... He wasn't fighting for tents or buses; Bergveld had its own, his frustration lay elsewhere... "The Department sent through a new circular," he said, laying a thick printout on the table... "Transitional guidelines for the BELA Act: "They can't fix dysfunctional township schools, now they're coming for us to rectify the problem."

The teachers fell silent as he outlined the key clauses: the provincial head of department would take final authority over admissions, language policy and curriculum emphasis... Parent decisions would be advisory, not binding... Department-appointed staff would be embedded in every school...

Karel tapped a line halfway down the page. "This one worries me most, 'Schools must accommodate centrally appointed Learner Support Coordinators to ensure compliance with child-rights and inclusion policies.'" He looked up, "We're getting one. No opt-out."

"When?" Marli asked. "Who?" No one knew, the email didn't say...

Two weeks later, the someone arrived, a man in his late thirties with a crisp shirt and a Department lanyard... "Mr Mokoena," he said at assembly, "your new Child Rights and Inclusion Coordinator... I'm here to make sure every learner benefits from the BELA reforms." His smile was wide, his handshake firm and he spoke in phrases lifted straight from policy documents - "equitable access," "safe learning environments," "progressive inclusivity."

To the learners, he seemed friendly enough, always smiling... He visited classrooms, sat at the back taking notes, asked detailed questions about "barriers to learning" and "family circumstances." He handed out glossy surveys... Teachers were told to cooperate fully; he carried a letter from the Department granting him "unrestricted access to learner information and activities."

At first the staff tried to welcome him but small things felt off... He insisted on private interviews with selected learners "to assess well-being." He asked for duplicate keys to certain storerooms and took an unusual interest in after-school activities... When Marli asked about his training credentials, he smiled. "I've worked with many schools, the Department trusts me."

Parents weren't informed, Governing Body members sent polite queries to the provincial office and received only form replies: "Your concerns have been noted."

Meanwhile, the school's rhythm began to shift in subtle ways... Departmental emails demanded new reporting templates, new attendance registers, new Life Orientation guidelines... Teachers spent more time on compliance than on planning... The choir's winter concert had to be rescheduled to make room for a "wellness audit." Nothing catastrophic - yet - but the changes were noticeable...

In the courtyard, older learners whispered about “the new guy.” Some liked his easy laugh, others avoided his gaze... He seemed to know everyone’s name within days...

One late afternoon, long after the learners had gone, Principal Karel stood in his office with the window open... The jacaranda petals were browning now, the air turning sharp... He looked at the Department’s stack of memos and the list of new obligations pinned above his desk... Bergveld Hoërskool had always been a living entity... But something was entering its bloodstream now - slow, bureaucratic, deliberate...

He thought of Saturday’s games - of boys without boots and girls without gloves, of a system built on disparity and neglect... He had always believed Bergveld could hold its own, insulated by community and discipline... But the BELA Act wasn’t just a law; it was a lever and someone was already pulling it...

He turned off the light, locked the door and walked out into the darkening yard... Behind him, in an empty classroom, the new coordinator’s office light still glowed...

Now Karel isn’t “managing” but wrestling with the **policy intrusion** that threatens a well-resourced school...



Chapter Four – Hairline Cracks...

By the time the second term settled in, Bergveld Hoërskool still looked like itself... The lawns were cut, the halls polished, the choir rehearsed... On paper nothing had changed but inside staff meetings and corridors, a quiet unease was growing... Mr. Mokoena had moved his desk into an unused storeroom near the staffroom... His door was always open, but his work was rarely visible... a Rainbow of Departmental forms stacked on his table - “learner risk profiles,” “well-being assessments,” “inclusive education audits.”

He asked teachers for class lists, disciplinary records and copies of their lesson plans... “It’s just to make sure the school is aligned with national policy,” he would say, smiling... He never raised his voice, but he never stopped requesting information... At first it felt harmless, then small incidents began to pile up...

One Monday, the Life Orientation teacher arrived to find her planned lesson replaced by a “mandatory BELA module” that Mr Mokoena had delivered in a sealed envelope... She was to read the script exactly, with no discussion or deviation... When she asked to preview the material before class, he said, “Departmental policy doesn’t require parental or staff review.” Another week he removed three learners from class for “individual well-being interviews” without notifying their teachers or parents... When the Grade 10 Head of Department asked to sit in, he politely refused... “The Department needs honest answers,” he said... “No adults present except me.”

Parents began noticing subtle shifts, a mother phoned the school after her daughter came home describing “new lessons” about gender and consent... “Where did that come from?” she asked... Marli tried to explain the Department’s new requirements but had no documentation to share; the modules arrived without covering letters...

At the next Governing Body meeting, the agenda bulged with policy updates... Admissions decisions now had to be submitted to the provincial head for “final confirmation.” Language policy changes were on the horizon... a Clause in the BELA Act allowed “provincially appointed support personnel” to access “all learner-related spaces.” Mr Mokoena’s presence was not a courtesy; it was a legal foothold...

The parents on the Governing Body were no strangers to rules... They were lawyers, accountants, small-business owners, they read the Act and saw the fine print... “We’re losing authority over our own school,” one father said... “We built this, we fund this and now we’re being told to stand back.”

Karel listened... He had always prided himself on openness, but for the first time he found himself without answers... “We will comply with the law,” he said slowly, “but we will also protect our learners... That’s non-negotiable.”

In the staffroom the mood shifted, teachers who had once debated pedagogy now debated compliance... “If we ignore the scripts, will we be reported?” “Can we refuse him access to our classrooms?” “Are we liable if parents complain?” Each new form and module were another thread in a tightening net...

Yet outwardly Bergveld still excelled, the rugby teams kept winning... The choir performed a flawless Easter concert and the matric pass rate remained high... Visitors walked the corridors and admired the displays of science projects and art portfolios... Nothing looked broken but the people inside could feel the subtle tilt - like a ship that has taken on water but still rides high...

One Friday after school, Karel walked the empty corridors... The sunlight slanted through the windows, casting long shadows across the tiles... Outside, learners kicked a ball while waiting for their lifts, laughing... It looked like a picture of success... Yet on his desk sat a thick file of directives from the Department and on the chair opposite lay a letter from a parent demanding to know why her son had been “interviewed” without consent...

He paused at the door of Mr Mokoena’s office... The coordinator was inside, speaking quietly on his cellphone, the glow of his laptop screen lighting his face... Karel didn’t enter, simply watched for a moment, then walked on... Bergveld still functioned but now it was functioning under someone else’s script...

Chapter Five – Shifting Foundations...

The new term opened with banners still hanging from Bergveld’s walls: “Congratulations Class of 2025 – 98% Matric Pass Rate.” In the courtyard the jacaranda petals had been swept, the sports fields chalked... Parents snapped photos of their children in blazers and on the surface, nothing had changed...

But in Karel van Rensburg’s office, a letter lay on the desk with a bold provincial crest at the top... “Revised Admissions Allocation – Effective Immediately.” Below it, a table listed names of learners who had never applied to Bergveld Hoërskool... The provincial head of department had placed them there, without consultation, no interviews, no consideration of language of instruction...

The letter ended: “This allocation is binding in terms of Sections 4 and 5 of the BELA Act... Non-compliance constitutes an offence.”

Karel read it twice and again... He had known it was coming, but the bluntness still shocked him... “They’ve started,” he said to Marli, handing her the paper... “They’re telling us who to take, and how many.”

Within a month new faces appeared at the gate: learners from township schools and informal settlements, some travelling two hours by taxi... They arrived eager but lost, clutching Department-issued placement letters... Most spoke little to none Afrikaans and some had been out of school for months... Others had never sat in a lab or used a library... Their uniforms were pieced together from donations - different shades of maroon blazers, different badges sewn over... Some uniforms were different shades of blue, not navy... They wanted to learn, but the gap was wide...

Bergveld had always welcomed diversity in measured, supported ways... Exchange students, bursary pupils, transfers from nearby towns... But this was different: dozens of learners at once, without additional teachers, funding or bridging programmes... Classes swelled from thirty to over forty-two... Teachers had to repeat instructions in two languages, then rush through lessons to stay on schedule...

Marli tried to keep her Life Sciences lessons coherent... “Remember, we’re learning about cell structure,” she would say in Afrikaans, then again in English, slower, hoping the new learners would follow... Older Bergveld pupils began muttering under their breath... “We’re falling behind,” one whispered... “We’ve done this already.”

Sports practices became chaotic, Johan Botha found himself coaching three different ability groups at once... Some of the new boys had raw talent but no training... They arrived late because taxis ran on erratic schedules... Fixtures had to be rescheduled, “We’re not against them,” Johan told Karel one evening... “But the Department hasn’t given us a plan, they’ve just dumped kids and left.”

Parents began to voice concerns at Governing Body meetings... “We don’t object to inclusion,” said a mother, a lawyer... “We object to mismanagement... You can’t throw children into a high-functioning environment without support... It’s not fair to them and it’s not fair to ours.” Another parent added, “We fund this school, we maintain these facilities and now our children are repeating lessons and waiting for translators.”

Karel listened, feeling a knot in his stomach... He believed in opportunity, had built bursary programmes himself... But this was not opportunity; it was bureaucratic allocation and behind it all, Mr Mokoena watched quietly, taking notes... When parents demanded meetings with the Department, he told them to send emails to an address that returned only automated replies...

Meanwhile, the curriculum scripts for Life Orientation became more rigid... Modules on gender identity and consent were no longer suggestions; they were mandatory... Teachers had to sign affidavits confirming delivery... Parents who asked to see the content were told to file formal requests under the Promotion of Access to Information Act... Few had the time or knowledge to navigate the paperwork...

By midterm, cracks were visible... Discipline referrals doubled, test scores dipped... Older learners who had once helped younger ones now withdrew, frustrated... Teachers who had prided themselves on handwritten

feedback began giving ticks instead of comments, simply to keep up with the marking load...

At a Friday assembly, Karel looked out over the hall... The maroon blazers were still there, but interspersed now with mismatched uniforms, borrowed ties, unfamiliar faces... He didn't see a bad picture; he saw a **fractured** one... Diversity without preparation, policy without support... He took a breath and began speaking about unity, about shared purpose... But even as he spoke, he could feel the room shifting - not hostile, not rebellious, but unsettled...

Afterwards, Marli caught up with him in the corridor... "We're losing our rhythm," she said... "Not because of them, because of how this is being done."

Karel nodded slowly and remembered the weekend's sports day, the gap between schools... He had thought Bergveld could hold its own, insulated by its structure and community... But the BELA Act was no longer just a lever; it was a wedge and someone was hammering it in...

That evening, the courtyard lay empty... The jacaranda petals had started to rot where no one had swept... Karel stood on the steps, watching the last learners walk to the taxi rank... a Boy in a donated blazer waved shyly... Karel raised a hand in return, feeling both pride and dread... Bergveld was still alive, but its foundations were shifting under his feet...



Chapter Six – The Slow Unravelling...

By winter, Bergveld Hoërskool still carried the look of order, but it no longer moved with its old rhythm... The bell still rang at 7:25, the uniforms mismatch but still looked neat, the choir still rehearsed – yet a low-grade restlessness had taken hold, like static beneath a clear broadcast...

In Marli Strydom's Life Sciences classroom the change was stark... Fourty - one learners crammed into a space built for thirty... She repeated each instruction twice, switching from Afrikaans to English and back again, then walked the aisles correcting work... Her handwriting on the board grew hurried... Where she once wrote paragraphs of feedback in exercise books she now left ticks and a few words: "Goed / Good," "Check diagram." She went home each day late in the afternoon with an ache between her eyes...

Sports practices began to fray, Johan Botha tried to coach three rugby squads on the same field at once... Some of the new boys were gifted athletes but had never learned basic drills... Taxis delivered them late, collected them early and fixtures were cancelled... Uniform orders fell behind... For the first time in years, Bergveld forfeited a match... Johan stood on the sideline staring at the empty opposition try-line, feeling a shame he could not name...

The school's culture weeks – once highlights of the calendar – started shrinking... Parents who used to bake, sew and volunteer now sent polite regrets... "Too many changes." "We'll see next term." The choir's winter concert was postponed again; the learners had been pulled into Mr Mokoena's "well-being workshops" during rehearsal hours...

Mr Mokoena's office had become a hub, learners came and went for "support sessions." He held clipboard meetings with small groups, closed his door for one-on-ones... He began circulating new "mandatory" Life Orientation modules with bright covers and unfamiliar terminology... Teachers were instructed to sign that they had delivered them... When Marli asked for training on the content, he smiled. "The scripts are self-explanatory."

Parents' emails began to stack in Karel's inbox: *Why was my daughter removed from class? Why was my son asked about private matters without my consent?*... Each time he forwarded the concern to the provincial address provided in the BELA circular... Each time the reply came back: "Your concern has been noted... The matter has been escalated." No names, no timelines...

Admissions for the next year arrived from the Department in a spreadsheet... Dozens of new placements, again without support or explanation... Some parents threatened legal action, others quietly transferred their children to private schools... For the first time since Karel became principal, the waiting list for Bergveld shrank...

At staff meetings the mood had shifted and teachers who once debated pedagogy now whispered about liability... "What happens if a parent sues?" "Are we allowed to refuse these modules?" "Can we sit in on Mokoena's interviews?" No one had clear answers, even the Governing Body's lawyer parent looked tired. "The Act is written to override us," she said... "We can object, but we can't stop it."

In the hallways, the learners felt it too. The older ones began retreating into cliques. Whispers about "favourites" and "spies" floated through the lockers. Arguments broke out over language – "Why can't we just do English?" – then over small things: queue-jumping at the tuck shop, late buses, missing equipment... Detentions doubled, teachers stopped greeting by name as often; there were too many new names to learn...

Karel kept walking the corridors, still greeting, still encouraging, but at night he found himself awake at two in the morning, scrolling through Departmental directives, searching for loopholes... He had built his career on steadiness and patience... Now the ground under his feet shifted faster than he could map it...

One afternoon he paused outside Mr Mokoena's office... Through the half-closed door he heard laughter – not children's laughter, but Mokoena's, low and pleased, on a private phone call... On the wall behind him hung a

laminated chart headed “Learner Support Matrix – Confidential.” Names filled every box and next to some names were symbols Karel didn’t recognise...

He stood there a moment, then walked on, his shoes echoing down the corridor... The school still looked immaculate but in his gut, he felt the truth: a living thing was being hollowed out from within... The BELA Act had not come with bulldozers or sirens... It had come with spreadsheets, scripts and a smiling coordinator...

Outside, the jacarandas had lost their blossoms... Brown pods rattled in the wind... Learners boarded taxis, shoulders hunched against the cold... Karel watched them go and wondered how long Bergveld could hold together before the cracks widened into fractures...



Chapter Eight – The Staffroom Shuffle...

The week after the assembly and the fight felt like the longest of Karel van Rensburg's career... Every morning he opened his email to more complaints, media queries and official memos... Every evening he left the office long after sunset, the corridors echoing with a new kind of silence - not the comfortable hush of learning, but the tense quiet after an argument...

The Department's response to the viral videos was not an apology but an escalation... a Formal letter arrived with the provincial crest at the top. "To ensure compliance with the BELA Act and the Employment Equity Act," it began, "the Department will immediately commence with the redeployment and appointment of additional educators to Bergveld Hoërskool to ensure staff demographics reflect provincial norms."

Karel read it twice... "They're not only assigning learners," he said to Marli, handing her the paper... "They're assigning teachers."

Within three weeks new staff began arriving: a Mathematics teacher from a rural district, a Life Orientation facilitator from another province, an administrative clerk seconded from a nearby township school... Some were qualified and earnest, eager to contribute... Others arrived with little preparation, handed scripts rather than lesson plans.... The Department bypassed the school's Governing Body entirely... Existing vacancies were frozen until "equity goals" were met...

The effect on the staffroom was immediate... Teachers who had worked side by side for years now found themselves rearranging timetables, sharing classrooms, negotiating responsibilities with strangers... The camaraderie that had once defined Bergveld's professional culture began to fray...

It wasn't about colour or language alone - it was about fit, about trust, about being parachuted into a complex environment without context... Marli tried to welcome the new Life Orientation facilitator, but the woman arrived clutching a Department-issued binder labelled "Inclusive Pedagogy – Mandatory Modules." When Marli suggested adapting the lessons to Bergveld's learners, the facilitator shook her head... "We deliver exactly what is in the script, that's what my contract says."

Parents noticed quickly, the quarterly newsletter listed unfamiliar names under staff changes... "Who are these people?" one father asked at the Governing Body meeting... "Were they interviewed?" Karel had to explain that under the BELA Act and equity regulations, the Department had taken over appointments... The parents looked at one another in disbelief... "We fund this school," a mother said. "We should at least have a say in who teaches our children."

Sports teams suffered too, Johan Botha was told he would now "mentor" a newly appointed sports coordinator from the Department... The man had a background in community outreach, not competitive coaching... "We're supposed to run drills together," Johan muttered to Karel, "but he doesn't know the rules of line-out calls."

Assemblies changed... Where once Karel opened with a prayer and announcements, now Mr Mokoena often took the microphone to "share updates on transformation." He began introducing the new staff by name, emphasising "our shared journey towards equity." Learners applauded politely, but whispers rose at the back of the hall... "Do they even teach here?" "Where's our coach?" "Who's marking our tests?"

Academically the cracks widened, with classes grew noisier... Assessments returned later, the new teachers struggled with Bergveld's internal systems... The carefully cultivated feedback culture dissolved... Parents began comparing test scripts from this year to last year, pointing out the difference in handwriting, in rigour, in tone...

In the staffroom, old hands sat with folded arms... New arrivals clung to their binders... Conversations about pedagogy had become conversations about compliance, duty rosters and whether one could refuse to sign a script without being reported...

One afternoon Karel held a closed-door meeting with his senior staff... “We are not against diversity,” he said quietly... “We are against disorder, but the Department is not listening... We have to decide how we’re going to protect what matters - for all our learners.”

Marli looked tired... “We can keep teaching,” she said, “but we can’t keep pretending this is the same school... It isn’t.”

That evening, as the sun dipped behind the koppie, Karel walked through the staff car park... New cars stood alongside old ones, number plates from distant provinces... In the quad, learners waited for taxis, chatting in a patchwork of languages... He heard laughter, but also sharp words he didn’t understand...

The school still looked like Bergveld... The crest still shone on the gate... But inside, the staffroom - once the heart of its ethos - had become a transit lounge... Teachers came and went under Departmental orders... Authority had shifted from local hands to a spreadsheet in a provincial office... For the first time, Karel wondered not if Bergveld would survive, but if it could even remember what it had been...



Chapter Nine – The Day the Lid Blew Off...

The September wind rattled loose sheets of paper along Bergveld Hoërskool’s corridors... On the staff noticeboard a fresh Departmental memo flapped under a drawing pin: “Mandatory Participation in Comprehensive Sexuality Education – Grades 8–11.” Below it, highlighted in yellow: *Parental consent not required...*

Karel stood staring at it when Marli arrived, a pile of unmarked tests in her arms... “They’ve made it official,” she said quietly... “No opt-outs.”

By break time the news had already reached the learners... Screenshots of the memo zipped through WhatsApp groups, captioned with angry emojis... At the tuck shop, groups huddled and whispered... “My parents don’t even know about this...” “They’re making us sign things.” “We don’t have to, do we?”

That afternoon Mr Mokoena held another “wellness assembly” in the hall... Teachers were told to attend as observers... Rows of teenagers sat stiff-backed, eyes flicking to their phones... Mokoena projected new slides: gender spectrums, definitions of orientation, scenarios for “affirmative consent.” His voice was calm, almost hypnotic...

Then a hand shot up at the back – a tall Grade 11 boy, rugby captain, blazer still damp from practice... “Sir, have our parents seen this?” he asked...

“This is national policy,” Mokoena replied... “It is your right to this information.”

“But do our parents know?”

“They will be informed in due course.”

Another learner stood: “Why do we have to sign pledges about things we don’t even understand?”

“It’s not a pledge,” Mokoena said smoothly... “It’s a commitment to equality.”

The murmuring became a low growl... Someone at the back shouted in Afrikaans, another replied in English... a Chair scraped, then another... The sound swelled, a mix of protest and confusion... Phones came out; cameras blinked red...

Karel stepped forward to calm the hall... “Please, sit down... Let’s handle this—”

But the words drowned in the noise, a group of learners walked out... Others followed, within minutes half the hall was empty... Those remaining shouted questions at Mokoena, who stood with his hands clasped, smiling tightly...

The next morning the videos were everywhere... Shaky footage of Bergveld learners streaming out of the hall, captions accusing the school of “indoctrination,” “betrayal of parents,” “chaos at model school.” Talk radio picked it up by lunchtime... By evening national news outlets ran the story... Headlines shouted: “*Model Afrikaans School in Turmoil*” and “*BELA Implementation Sparks Walkout.*”

Parents arrived at the gates the following day, some carrying placards... Others demanding to see their children’s files... The Governing Body called an emergency meeting in the auditorium... The atmosphere was electric... Lawyers, pastors, business owners – all on their feet, shouting questions...

“How could this happen without our knowledge?”

“Why was our authority removed?”

“Who is this man running our school?”

Karel tried to speak but was drowned out by overlapping voices... Marli sat in the front row, watching the hall she’d loved turn into an angry amphitheatre...

Midway through the meeting a mother stood up and held aloft a paper – one of Mokoena’s “confidential support surveys” her daughter had brought home crumpled in a blazer pocket... It asked about sexual history, family

discipline and “preferred identity.” Gasps rippled through the room... Someone shouted, “This is grooming!” Another, “This is illegal!” Cameras flashed...

Mokoena was not in the hall, he had been summoned to a “briefing” at the provincial office that morning... When journalists called his phone, it went straight to voicemail... The Department issued a single-line statement on Twitter: “We are aware of misinformation being spread about Comprehensive Sexuality Education... We stand by our staff and our policies.”

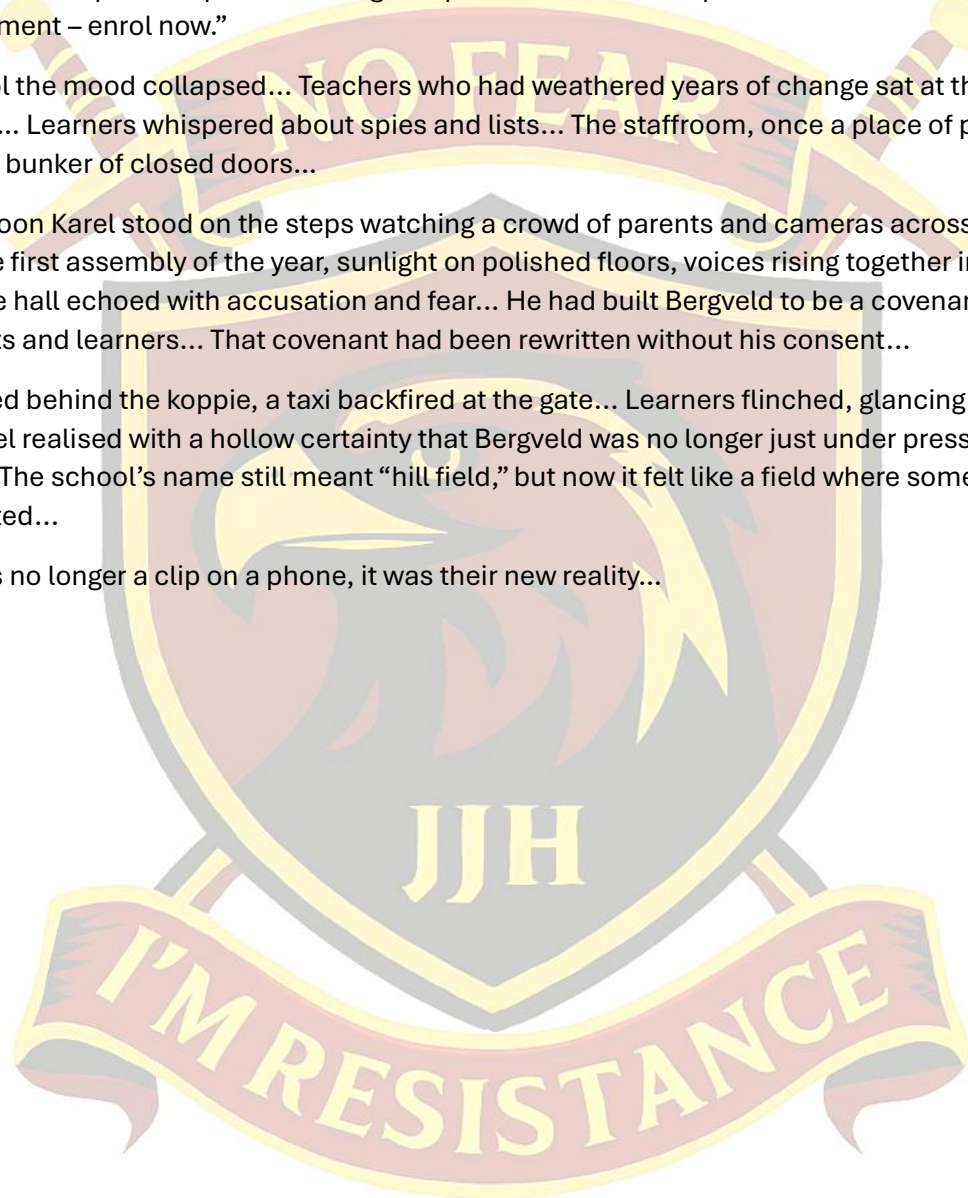
By the end of the week Bergveld was trending on social media... News vans parked outside the gate... Anonymous leaflets appeared in the staffroom, accusing the school of “selling out” its values... Parents withdrew learners and sponsors pulled funding for sports tours... a Rival private school ran an ad: “Stable learning environment – enrol now.”

Inside the school the mood collapsed... Teachers who had weathered years of change sat at their desks staring at piles of forms... Learners whispered about spies and lists... The staffroom, once a place of planning and jokes, became a bunker of closed doors...

On Friday afternoon Karel stood on the steps watching a crowd of parents and cameras across the street... He remembered the first assembly of the year, sunlight on polished floors, voices rising together in the Lord’s Prayer... Now the hall echoed with accusation and fear... He had built Bergveld to be a covenant between teachers, parents and learners... That covenant had been rewritten without his consent...

As the sun dipped behind the koppie, a taxi backfired at the gate... Learners flinched, glancing over their shoulders... Karel realised with a hollow certainty that Bergveld was no longer just under pressure... It had crossed a line... The school’s name still meant “hill field,” but now it felt like a field where something precious had been uprooted...

The scandal was no longer a clip on a phone, it was their new reality...



Chapter Ten – The Unravelling...

The week after the walk-out felt like a slow collapse... Every morning Karel unlocked his office to a new stack of mail: withdrawal notices from parents, letters of complaint, terse replies from the Department... Every evening the corridors emptied earlier, the chatter of learners replaced by the metallic thud of taxi doors...

The first real blow came on Monday... Johan Botha left a one-sentence email on Karel's screen before sunrise: *I can no longer coach under these conditions...* By afternoon his office was stripped, his whistle lying on the desk like a relic... Without him the rugby boys drifted at practice, trying to run their own drills... Fixtures were postponed... For the first time in a decade, Bergveld forfeited a match...

Marli stayed, but she was fading... Her Life Sciences classroom had turned into a translation exercise, half the class restless, half bewildered... She spent evenings hunched over piles of books, marking in two languages... At staff meetings she sat back, eyes ringed with fatigue, hands clasped tightly to stop them trembling...

Parents began moving in the shadows... A handful created a secure mailing list called *Friends of Bergveld* and started collecting evidence... Photos of lesson scripts, screenshots of messages, affidavits from their children... Some wanted to go to court... Others whispered about "exposing everything properly," not just clips on social media...

Inside the school, suspicion thickened... Learners avoided certain rooms, whispered about "being called in" by Mr Mokoena... Teachers noticed changes in behaviour - children who had been confident now keeping their heads down, others acting out... Nobody felt sure what happened in the closed-door sessions; nobody could get a straight answer...

Staffing, too, shifted again, but this time without any announcements... a Timetable appeared one morning with new names slotted in and old ones crossed out... Teachers found themselves sharing classrooms with strangers, covering subjects they hadn't taught in years... The staffroom grew quieter, people spoke in pairs instead of as a group... Laughter had stopped!...

The academic slide became measurable... Tests returned late and homework went uncollected... For the first time in years a Bergveld matric failed an internal exam... Karel printed the result twice, convinced it was an error...

In the middle of this, Mokoena remained unflustered... He spoke at assemblies about "navigating change" and warned staff about "outside forces spreading misinformation." His smile was unchanged, but his office door was now always locked...

One rainy afternoon Karel found a brown envelope pushed under his door... No note, no sender... Inside: print-outs of private messages between Mokoena and a small group of learners - meeting times, personal questions, remarks that felt too familiar... Nothing overtly criminal, but enough to make Karel's stomach drop... He closed the blinds and read them again...

He thought of the girl who had cried during the assembly... He thought of the mother waving that crumpled survey in the Governing Body meeting... He thought of the rugby captain who had asked, "Do our parents know?"

That evening he phoned Marli. "We may have a whistle-blower," he said quietly... "If what's in this envelope is true, it's bigger than curriculum scripts."

There was a long pause... Then Marli's voice, low but steady: "We can't keep this to ourselves any longer."

Outside, the jacaranda pods knocked against the windows in the wind... The crest still gleamed on the gate, but inside the school something essential had come loose... Karel felt it as clearly as the papers in his hands: Bergveld was no longer simply changing... It was being dismantled...

Chapter Eleven – Breaking the Silence...

The following week began under a lid of cloud that never seemed to lift... Bergveld still looked outwardly neat - trimmed hedges, polished corridors... Trophies shining behind glass - but the atmosphere inside had shifted from tension to something heavier, a collective holding of breath... The scandal had drained energy from the school like a slow leak, leaving only anxiety and resignation... Learners walked between classes in loose clusters, heads bent over phones, scrolling for the latest rumours... Teachers arrived early, not to prepare lessons but to sift through e-mails from angry parents and new directives from the Department, their coffee cups cooling untouched on their desks...

Karel van Rensburg carried the brown envelope in his briefcase like contraband... It had become a physical weight; he could feel it pressing against his leg as he moved... For days he had not spoken of it beyond his brief call to Marli... He had read and reread the print-outs, trying to convince himself there was an innocent explanation for the tone of the messages, for the insistence on unsupervised meetings.... Each night he would open his laptop, search for policy documents, then close it again when his eyes blurred... There were procedures, of course: internal reviews, appeals to the Department, official complaints... But he had seen what happened to such complaints... They vanished into the same polite void that swallowed every parent's query...

On Wednesday evening he called an off-record meeting at his house... Marli came, pale and thin but still fierce... Johan Botha returned for the first time since his resignation; two Governing Body parents arrived quietly... Parking their cars down the street to avoid cameras... Karel spread the papers out on the dining room table beneath the warm light of a single lamp... He did not dramatize; he simply let the messages speak for themselves... The room was silent except for the rustle of pages...

Marli broke the silence first... "This isn't just overreach... This is predatory behaviour cloaked in policy... We can't let this continue." Her voice was low but steady... Johan, normally blunt and practical, sat with his head in his hands... One of the parents - an attorney - began reading the texts aloud, translating the Afrikaans where needed, highlighting patterns... Another parent pulled out a notebook and began drafting a timeline of incidents... The surveys, the closed-door interviews, the assembly pledges, now the messages...

By the time they finished, the room felt charged... Outside, the night was still, but inside something had shifted... The two parents exchanged a look... "We can compile an affidavit," one said: "Not a petition, a sworn statement... We can go to the Children's Commissioner and the press simultaneously... They can't ignore both at once..." The other parent nodded... "But we need more voices... If this is going to hold up, it can't be just four or five of us... We need staff, learners, anyone who's seen or experienced it."

Karel sat back, fingers steepled... "If we go public, the Department will retaliate... They'll call it misinformation, threaten with lawsuits."

"They already have," Marli said quietly... "And look where we are."

Johan lifted his head... "If you're going to do this, do it properly... Document everything Dates, times, names. And keep duplicates off-site. Don't rely on school servers, they're not safe."

For the first time in months Karel felt a current of something other than despair... Fear, yes - but also clarity... He realised that the real collapse at Bergveld had not been the test scores or the cancelled matches... It had been the loss of trust, the gradual silencing of voices. And here, at his dining table, the silence was breaking...

Over the next few days the group moved quietly... Marli began collecting written statements from colleagues she trusted... Johan reached out to sports parents whose children had been questioned privately... The attorney drafted a formal complaint to the Children's Commissioner, attaching anonymised copies of the messages from the envelope... They created encrypted folders, printed duplicates, stored them in different places... Each act felt small and secretive, yet also like the rebuilding of a spine...

Meanwhile the school continued its public life... Assemblies proceeded under Mokoena's polished speeches... New staff drifted in and out with their scripted lessons... Learners whispered about "something coming,"

without knowing what... Parents queued at the gate to sign withdrawal forms or to deliver complaints that would go unanswered... The Department's official statements grew sharper, accusing "reactionary elements" of undermining transformation... In the local paper a columnist wrote, "*Bergveld is a case study in the pain of progress.*"

Inside his office, Karel drafted his first open letter to parents in weeks... He did not mention the envelope or the complaint, only spoke of "our ongoing commitment to transparency" and "concerns being addressed through the proper channels." Yet when he pressed send he felt a tremor of defiance... He knew the Department would read it too...

On Friday afternoon, after the learners had gone, he walked the empty corridors... The sunset cast long bars of light across the tiled floor... He could hear faint music from the choir room where a few stubborn voices still practised, determined to hold on to tradition... He paused outside Mokoena's office; the door was closed, the blinds drawn... He thought of the brown envelope, of the sworn statements in progress, of the small network of people who had decided enough was enough...

For the first time in months he allowed himself to imagine Bergveld not just as a place sliding into dysfunction but as a battleground where truth might still win... The school was wounded, yes and its reputation battered, but its people - some of them - were no longer paralysed... They were moving, slowly, deliberately, against the current...

He stepped outside into the cooling evening... The jacaranda pods rattled in the breeze... Beyond the gate a few parents lingered, talking in low voices, glancing back at the building as if waiting for a sign... Karel drew a long breath, the fight to save Bergveld had finally begun...



Chapter Twelve – Countermeasures...

By mid-October the quiet resistance inside Bergveld had grown roots... What began as a handful of parents whispering around a dining room table was now a cautious network... Statements circulated in sealed envelopes, photocopies were passed hand to hand and a digital folder... Hidden under an innocuous title - stored the most sensitive evidence off the school servers... Every addition to the file felt like another brick in a wall of truth... Yet with each step forward came a sharper sense of danger, as if they were moving across thin ice while the water beneath them stirred...

Mr Mokoena seemed to sense it... His manner did not change - still the broad smile... The polished shoes, the clipped references to “policy compliance” - but his presence grew heavier... He was in more places at once: observing classes, standing at the gate in the mornings, dropping in on practices after school... Learners noticed his shadow before they saw his face... “He’s everywhere,” one girl whispered to Marli. “Even when you don’t hear him, he’s listening.”

One Monday the staff found a new directive pinned to the noticeboard: all educators were required to submit weekly “lesson alignment reports” directly to Mokoena’s office... Each report was to include not only lesson plans but also “observed learner responses.” The implication was clear - he wanted names, attitudes, fragments of private conversation... A few teachers signed the forms grudgingly, others protested quietly, but all complied... Nobody knew what would happen to those reports once they left their hands...

Then came the announcement of “random classroom observations.” Mokoena entered rooms unannounced, clipboard in hand... Watching not only the teaching but the learners’ faces... Sometimes he asked a question unrelated to the lesson, then jotted down who answered and how... The air in classrooms shifted; children stopped volunteering, teachers stuck to the script... Creativity drained out of the day like colour from an old photograph...

Parents noticed the shift... Learners went home quiet, reporting less and less about what happened in class... Homework grew generic, questions about personal surveys multiplied... The *Friends of Bergveld* group began meeting more openly, though still off campus... Their mailing list buzzed with frustration: *We can’t let them normalise this... We need the media involved... Who’s willing to go public with their name?...*

But courage and fear travelled side by side... One parent’s business suddenly faced a surprise audit from the revenue service... Another received a letter from the Department accusing her of “spreading harmful misinformation.” Nobody could prove a link, but the timing was too sharp to ignore... “They’re watching us,” one father muttered, folding the letter into his pocket... “They want to scare us back into silence.”

Inside the school, staff morale frayed further... The new hires, parachuted in by the Department, kept largely to themselves... Old Bergveld teachers felt cornered, unable to speak freely in the staffroom... Even routine conversations were whispered, eyes flicking to the door... Marli found herself writing lesson notes on loose paper rather than the official forms, afraid that anything in her handwriting might be copied out of context...

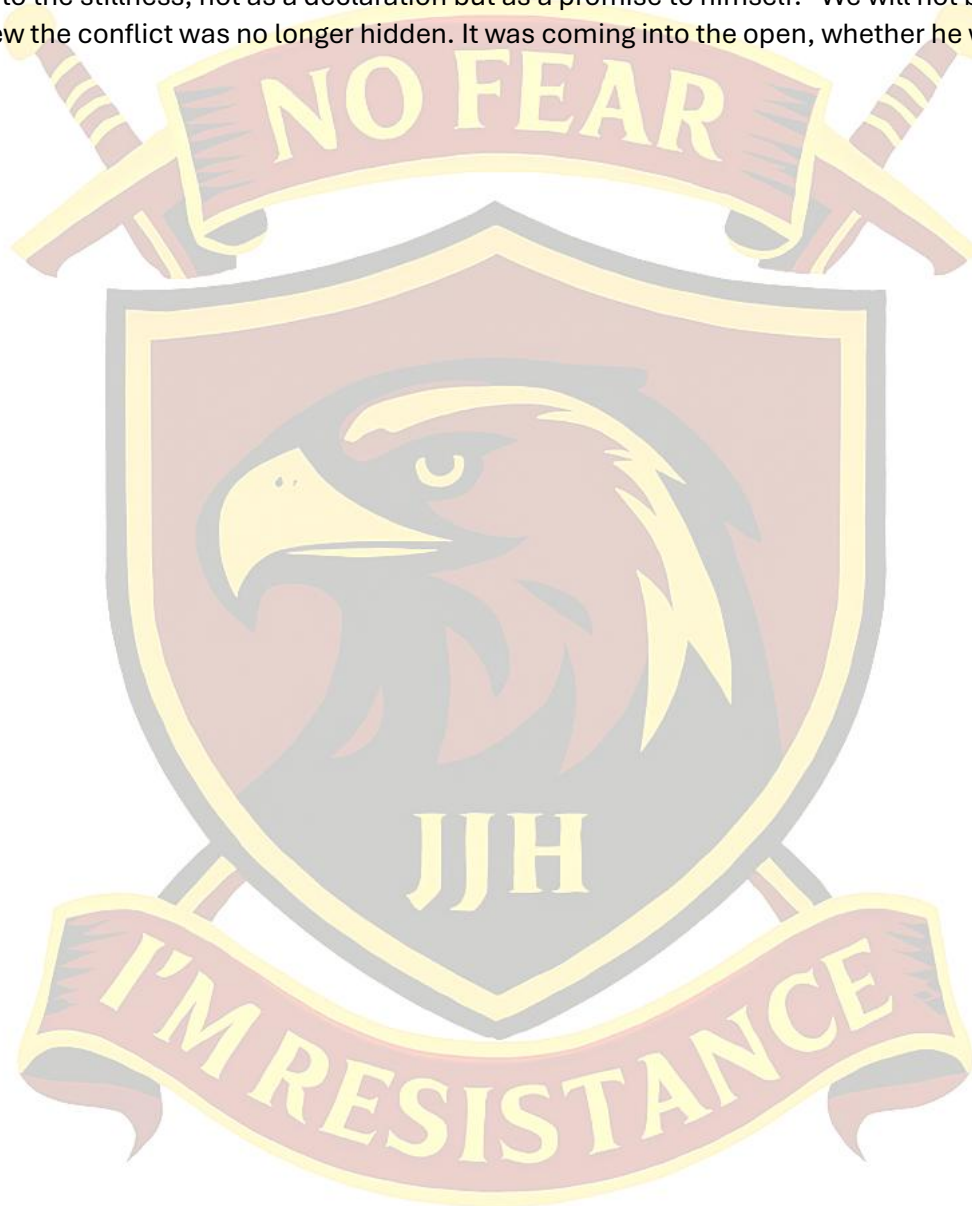
One evening Karel discovered his office computer had been accessed remotely... A document he had left open - a draft letter to the Governing Body raising concerns about “questionable practices” - had vanished... When he called the IT technician, the young man shrugged... “Could be a sync error... Could be oversight.” But Karel knew, someone had been inside his files... He shut his laptop with a snap and began keeping handwritten notes in a locked drawer instead...

Amid all this, the learners themselves began to react... A group of seniors circulated a handwritten petition demanding “freedom of choice” in curriculum content... They passed it discreetly between classes, collecting signatures in pencil to avoid detection... When Karel found a copy on his desk, unsigned, he felt torn between pride and fear... He wanted to encourage their courage - but he also knew that if the Department discovered the petition, those learners would be branded as agitators...

On the surface Bergveld still functioned: lessons were taught, exams scheduled, assemblies held... But beneath, two forces now moved in opposite directions - the Department tightening its grip... a Fragile network of parents, staff and learners gathering courage to push back... Both sides knew the other existed... Neither had yet declared open war... It was a stalemate, but one that could not last...

Late one night, after the last car had left the parking lot... Karel sat alone in his office with the envelope of messages, the affidavits, the growing stack of notes... He thought of the risk to his job, his career, even his family... He thought of Bergveld's crest gleaming still above the gate, a symbol now battered but not yet broken... Then he pictured the learners' faces - tired, confused, but still looking to their teachers for direction...

He whispered into the stillness, not as a declaration but as a promise to himself: "We will not be silent." In that moment, he knew the conflict was no longer hidden. It was coming into the open, whether he was ready or not...



Chapter Thirteen – Rumours of a Replacement...

By November the air above Bergveld had turned heavy and electric... a Storm were waiting just beyond the horizon... On paper, the school was still a model institution: timetables posted, exams written, uniforms tidy... But under the surface an invisible war was being fought... One side pushing for silence, the other quietly collecting proof...

The Department's measures tightened week by week... New forms arrived not just for lesson plans but for "attitude tracking": teachers were told to record "indicators of resistance" among learners... Unannounced inspections increased. Officials with clipboards appeared in the corridors during tests, taking notes... On everything from seating arrangements to the content of exam papers... Karel's office was now required to submit weekly "leadership compliance reports" directly to the provincial head... It was control disguised as oversight...

Then the rumours began...

They started as a whisper in the staffroom - an overheard phone call, a half-sentence in a meeting... "They're talking about bringing in someone from outside," a teacher murmured to Marli. "A comrade." By the end of the week the story had shape: the Department was considering "redeploying" Karel van Rensburg and appointing an "principal aligned with transformation objectives." The name of a senior party loyalist from the district office circulated in low voices... Nobody could confirm it, but the effect was immediate...

Teachers stopped leaving confidential notes on Karel's desk, afraid they'd be discovered by a successor... Parents hesitated to put their names on affidavits... Even Johan, usually direct, spoke to Karel only over encrypted messages... "They'll try to neutralise you first," he warned... "That's how it works... You're the anchor."

Karel carried himself as he always had - jacket pressed, hair neat, voice calm... Although inside he felt the rumour like a physical blow... His career at Bergveld had been built over decades, not just as a job but as a covenant with the community... Now he imagined being marched out of his office, the keys handed to a stranger with a party badge and a department-issued smile... Not just his position lost, but the school's last line of local defence...

The countermeasures became subtler too... One morning his official e-mail account was suspended for "security updates," cutting him off from staff and parents for twenty-four hours... Another day his scheduled meeting with the district director was "postponed indefinitely." A routine order for science equipment was suddenly blocked... None of these actions alone was catastrophic, but together they formed a net tightening around him...

Meanwhile the small resistance continued its work, now under greater caution... The *Friends of Bergveld* group moved its meetings to rotating locations... Statements were anonymised and stored offline... Marli began using coded references in her notes... The attorney parent drafted a second complaint, this time addressed to the national Ombud, with a dossier attached - copies of surveys... Screenshots of messages, also testimony from learners. They called it "the Lighthouse File." If released, it would illuminate everything...

Learners sensed the tension without knowing its details... In the corridors they whispered about "a new principal coming," about "lists of troublemakers," about "our teachers being watched." Some reacted with defiance - smuggling leaflets into lockers, writing anonymous posts online... Others withdrew, heads down, doing the minimum... The atmosphere was no longer one of a school under pressure but of a community under occupation...

On a rainy Thursday, Karel returned from class observations to find a sealed envelope on his desk stamped with the Department's crest... His hands trembled as he opened it... Inside was not a dismissal but a "performance review notice" - a pretext, perhaps, for removal... The language was polite but unmistakable: questions about

“alignment with transformation objectives,” “failure to fully implement mandated programmes,” “concerns regarding community communication.”

He set it down and stared out the window at the courtyard, where a handful of learners were huddled under the eaves, waiting for taxis... He thought of the brown envelope of messages locked in his drawer... The affidavits hidden off site, the Lighthouse File slowly growing... He realised the conflict was about to enter a new stage: the Department moving to decapitate the school’s leadership even as the truth about its methods neared exposure...

That night he phoned Marli. “The whisper’s real,” he said... “They’re preparing the ground.”

“We’ll hold the line,” she replied. “We have to.”

“But if they remove me—”

“Then we publish,” she said simply... “All of it.”

Outside, the jacarandas had gone bare... Their branches clawed at a sky full of unspent thunder... Karel stood at his office window, the sealed notice still on his desk... For the first time he allowed himself to imagine not just a fight to save Bergveld but a fight to save his own name, his career, his integrity... The rumour was no longer a rumour, it become a countdown...



Chapter Fourteen – The Fall...

The clouds finally broke over Bergveld in a storm of thunder and headlines... For weeks Karel and the *Friends of Bergveld* had been building their Lighthouse File... Affidavits, screenshots, surveys, dates, times, names... On a grey Monday morning they took the step they had promised: copies to the Children’s Commissioner, copies to the Ombud, copies to three national newspapers... Within hours the story appeared online under the headline *“Inside Bergveld: How a Model School Was Taken Over.”* The article described closed-door interviews, forced curriculum scripts, surveys of minors and intimidation of staff... Names were redacted, but the picture was unmistakable, the comments section exploded... Talk radio ran phone-ins for three days... Parents called for inquiries and opposition politicians demanded answers...

For a brief, flickering moment it felt like victory... Teachers hugged in corridors... Learners whispered, “We’re safe now.” Even Johan returned to help the rugby boys pack up their kit... Karel walked the grounds with his head high for the first time in months, telling himself that daylight would disinfect everything... The Department could no longer pretend...

But daylight alone did not change the power structure... By Wednesday afternoon an official convoy rolled up to the gate... Men and women in dark suits filed into the principal’s office carrying a sealed directive... a Photographer from the provincial communications office stood discreetly by the door... When Karel opened the letter his stomach went cold: *“Redeployment of Principal K. van Rensburg – effective immediately... Appointment of Principal Ms. N. Dlamini.”*

There was no discussion, no transition plan... Just the statement that his services were “required at district level” and that “continuity of leadership” would be ensured by his replacement... Karel looked up at the officials, his mouth dry... “This school is under investigation,” he said quietly... “You cannot just—” “The Department is acting within its mandate,” one of them interrupted... “Please hand over your keys.”

Word spread through the building before he reached the door... Learners lined the corridor in stunned silence... Some teachers stood with arms crossed, others looked away... Marli tried to speak but her throat closed... In the courtyard Johan watched the convoy with his fists clenched... Karel walked past them all, carrying only a briefcase... No speeches, no farewell, just the click of the gate as it closed behind him...

That afternoon Ms. Dlamini addressed the staff in the hall... She spoke of “renewal” and “real transformation” and promised to “bring Bergveld fully into the new era.” Her smile was wide, her tone firm... Departmental banners appeared at the entrance... Mokoena took a seat at her side, nodding along... The message was clear: the old guard was gone... a New order had begun...

Within weeks the downward spiral that had seemed gradual became a plunge... Parents who had waited to see what would happen now pulled their children out... Sponsors withdrew, the school’s proud rugby programme was cancelled mid-season... The choir lost its conductor and half its members... Class sizes ballooned as teachers were shuffled or left... New staff arrived with no connection to the community, following scripts and checklists... Assemblies became rote recitations of Departmental slogans... Discipline faltered and fights broke out in the corridors... For the first time in living memory police were called to the school to break up a brawl...

Marli stayed, but her eyes were hollow... She taught from photocopied worksheets under flickering lights, telling herself she was doing it for the children who had nowhere else to go... Johan came back once to visit and left shaking his head. “It’s gone,” he said: “This isn’t Bergveld anymore.”

Outside the gates the name “Bergveld Hoërskool” still gleamed on the stone arch, but inside the building was becoming unrecognisable... a Patchwork of disconnected classes, demoralised teachers, disoriented learners... The Lighthouse File had not saved it... The investigation dragged on in procedural loops, press statements and denials... Karel sent letters from his new post at district level, but they were never answered... He had been removed from the battlefield before the real fight began...

On a rainy afternoon Marli walked alone across the courtyard where jacaranda pods lay rotting... She could still hear echoes of the school it had been: choir rehearsals spilling into the corridors, rugby boys shouting on the field, parents chatting at the tuck shop... Now only the wind moved, she looked up at the crest above the hall doors... The same crest that had once stood for discipline and community - and felt the emptiness behind it like a black hole pulling everything down...

Bergveld had not simply declined, it had been hollowed out and repainted... Once the core was gone, no banner or slogan could bring it back...



Chapter Fifteen – The Last Holdouts...

By the time the new year began, Bergveld was unrecognisable to those who had known it only a few seasons before... The crest still hung over the main gate, but paint was peeling from the pillars... Once-green sports fields lay patchy and brown, the chalk lines of rugby pitches blurred into weeds... Lockers had graffiti etched into their doors, slogans in several languages layered on top of one another... The bell still rang, but few learners moved with the brisk order of the past; they drifted, laughing too loudly, headphones in, phones out... The rhythm that had once been Bergveld's heartbeat had dissolved into a low thrum of noise...

A handful of veteran teachers remained... They had taught through decades of change, through mergers and policy swings, through integration drives and budget cuts... They were used to differences... What they were not used to was, the absence of rules... Discipline hearings went nowhere, detentions were ignored and every complaint was met with a bland memo from the Department: *"We are monitoring the situation."* In staff meetings their voices trailed off because nobody above them listened...

One Thursday, Ms. du Toit - a senior English teacher who had taught three generations of families - faced a class of thirty-five restless teenagers... A group of boys at the back whispered and snickered through her lesson, filming her on their phones... When she confiscated one device, another camera appeared... They mocked her accent, mimicked her gestures... Other learners, uncomfortable, kept their heads down... The deputy principal did not come when she sent a note... After the bell, the boys uploaded a clip to social media with a caption calling her "out of date." By afternoon it had been shared hundreds of times... No one from management intervened...

In the staffroom that day Marli found Ms. du Toit sitting rigid, her hands trembling around a mug of tea. "I've taught here since before some of their parents were born," she whispered... "I've never felt like this... Not because of who they are, but because nobody backs me anymore." She looked at Marli with tired eyes... "It isn't the children's fault entirely... It's what we've allowed this place to become."

More families left, cars with old Bergveld bumper stickers no longer queued at the gate... The parking lot stood half-empty before assemblies... Even long-time black families who had once fought for a place at the school began transferring their children to independent academies, unwilling to risk their education on chaos... The learner body that remained was a patchwork of those who had nowhere else to go... Supervised by a shrinking cadre of exhausted teachers and a rotating cast of Departmental appointees...

On the sports fields the decay was visible... The rugby posts leaned and the cricket nets sagged... Matches were cancelled not for lack of talent but for lack of uniforms, buses and discipline... Where once rival schools had feared coming to Bergveld, now they scheduled it as an easy fixture... Parents stopped bringing picnic baskets; stands stood empty under rusting poles... The choir disbanded entirely after its conductor resigned, citing "irreconcilable differences with management."

Afternoons, after the learners had gone, Marli walked the corridors... Remembering the smell of floor polish and fresh paint, the echo of rehearsals and cheers... Now the air was stale... Posters about "Equity and Inclusion" peeled at the corners... The new principal's office was brightly lit, but doors to classrooms were left ajar, chairs tipped over... She felt like a ghost wandering the ruins of a place still technically alive...

Karel watched from a distance, redeployed to the district office... He read reports of declining test scores, rising incidents and escalating maintenance costs... He wrote letters no one answered... In quiet moments he thought of the last day he had walked out through the gate, briefcase in hand, wondering if he had done enough...

Bergveld was no longer in a spiral; it had crossed the event horizon... The proud institution that had stood for order, culture and community was being swallowed by a kind of bureaucratic black hole... Not one dramatic collapse, but a steady erosion of authority, support and trust... Those who remained could feel it pulling at them, day after day, until only exhaustion was left...

And yet, in a few classrooms, lights still burned late... a Handful of teachers, old and new alike, stayed behind after hours to coach a debate team, help a learner with maths, or sweep up litter in the quad... Their efforts were small and unseen, but they were all that stood between Bergveld and complete dissolution... Whether it would be enough, no one could yet say...



Chapter Sixteen – The Last Bell...

By the start of the new academic year Bergveld had ceased to resemble the school its founders had built... The stone arch at the gate still read *Bergveld Hoërskool* but the letters were pitted and stained... The crest above the hall doors had lost one of its anchors; the paint beneath had been scraped off in a square patch ready for a new emblem... Grass on the sports fields grew knee-high between patches of bare clay... The tuck shop was shuttered... The sound of whistles, choirs and assemblies had been replaced by a dull, directionless hum...

From the outside, the town could see it happening... Parents driving past on their way to work slowed down at the gate, remembering school concerts and rugby finals... Retired teachers walked their dogs along the fence line and shook their heads... Local papers stopped calling Bergveld “the model high school” and began referring to it as “the district’s troubled campus.” Each headline was another small funeral for the school’s reputation...

Inside, chaos had hardened into routine... Lessons began late and ended early... Teachers rotated in and out under short-term contracts, some leaving after a single term... Learners drifted from class to class without timetables... Discipline hearings went unrecorded and textbooks vanished... The computer lab stood locked because no one could keep the equipment from being stolen... Exam scripts were marked by whoever happened to be on site... Report cards carried rubber-stamped comments rather than notes in a teacher’s hand...

When the Department finally announced the “Rebranding of Bergveld” in a press release, no one was surprised... The statement called it “a bold step in transformation” and said the school would “align its identity with a new national vision.” The Afrikaans name would be phased out in favour of *Unity High School*... The medium of instruction would be “English only, with additional language support where feasible.” The old crest would be retired; a design competition would be held for a new one...

The community’s reaction was a mixture of anger and exhaustion... Some parents staged a small protest outside the gates, holding faded banners from earlier fights... Others simply turned away, driving their children to other schools or giving up on formal education entirely... Letters to newspapers went unanswered... The Lighthouse File, once a rallying cry, had become a bundle of affidavits gathering dust in a legal office... “It’s like watching a house burn when you’ve already called the fire brigade and no one comes,” one parent told a journalist. “You stop shouting after a while.”

Marli stayed on, one of the last of the old staff, moving between overcrowded classes with photocopied worksheets in English... Her voice is hoarse from repeating instructions... She had once been a teacher of Life Sciences, now she was mostly a crowd manager... Sometimes she would glance at the bare patch on the hall wall where the crest had been and feel a wave of nausea... “This isn’t change,” she thought. “It’s erasure.”

From his district office Karel read the official notice about the name change and felt an emptiness settle in his chest... He had fought for a school, not for a name, but the name carried a history... Of parents building classrooms with their own hands, of teachers holding standards through hard times, of children who had thrived... Now it was gone, replaced by a slogan... He closed the notice and did not open the follow-up e-mail requesting a “comment from former leadership.”

On the day the new sign was unveiled, a thin crowd gathered at the gate... Department officials smiled for the cameras, Ms. Dlamini cut the ribbon and Mokoena handed out branded pens... Behind them, the sports fields lay empty and the classrooms echoed with disorder... A few of the learners watched from the windows, faces pressed to the glass... They had never known Bergveld as anything but a place of confusion; for them, *Unity High School* was just another name...

Across the street an elderly man who had taught at Bergveld for thirty years watched the ceremony from the shade of a jacaranda... The pods had fallen; only brittle branches reached into the air... He turned away before

the speeches ended and walked slowly down the pavement, his dog tugging at the lead... “It’s finished,” he murmured, not to anyone in particular. “The hill field is gone.”

Inside the grounds, the last bell of the day rang out... It sounded like every other bell, but for those who remembered, it was the end of something that could not be rebuilt...



Epilogue – The Hill Beyond the Hill...

Spring returned to the town a year after the sign at the old gate was changed... The jacarandas starts blooming again, purple petals falling over cracked paving stones... Inside the renamed “Unity High” the noise of another chaotic school day drifted across the street, but Karel van Rensburg no longer looked toward it with anger... He had stopped walking past the gates months ago.... Instead he parked his car at a modest prefab building on the edge of town where a different sound met him - the quiet hum of learning, punctuated by bursts of laughter...

The building had once been a warehouse... Now its walls were painted with bright murals and its windows filled with plants in tin cans... a Sign above the door read simply *Die Heuwel* - “The Hill.” It was not a formal school yet, but a community learning centre built by the very network that had fought to save Bergveld: Marli, Johan, the attorney parents, retired teachers, local tradespeople... They had pooled savings, begged donations and scavenged furniture... They started with a weekend tutoring programme for learners who had left or been pushed out of Bergveld... Within months it had grown into a structured set of classes and workshops...

Marli stood at the whiteboard, explaining cell structure to a mixed group of teenagers... She no longer had to translate every instruction; the learners leaned in, eager to understand... Johan coached a small rugby squad on a patch of scrubland behind the building, teaching them drills with two borrowed balls and a handful of cones... Parents took turns cooking lunches in a converted storeroom... There were no glossy brochures, no Departmental banners, no crest - just a handful of adults reclaiming the craft of teaching, one hour at a time...

The centre was small, fragile and underfunded... But something lived there that had died at Bergveld long before the name change: trust... Learners looked teachers in the eye, parents volunteered... Rules were few but enforced... Successes were small - a boy passing maths for the first time, a girl applying for a scholarship... But each one felt like a flag planted on a new hill...

One crisp morning Karel arrived early to unlock the door... a Wind moved through the jacarandas, scattering petals across the pavement like a path, there are promise of rain in the air.... He paused, feeling the cool air on his face... The old school on the other side of town might never recover, but here... In this repurposed warehouse, a different future was taking shape... Not a replica of the past, but a seedbed for something new...

He thought of the phrase that had once been printed under Bergveld’s crest: “*Op die heuwel staan ons*” — “On the hill we stand.” Perhaps the hill had shifted, perhaps standing now meant starting over in unlikely places, with small acts of defiance and care... He smiled, turned the key in the lock and opened the door to the sound of children arriving, their voices rising like a chorus under the wind of change...

