

## Prologue

I'll keep this short, because it's not fashionable to have prologues these days, so I'm told.

My name is Jimmy Logan. And the following story is true.

Well, at least to the best of my ability it's true. You see, this book takes place when I was 12 and 13 years old at the end of the 1980s. Decades have passed since then.

Most of the memories I'll be sharing with you here are absolutely as they happened, in perfect detail. These parts are seared into my brain and created who I am today. Other parts of this story are at least a decent approximation of the truth. In such moments where I don't have a flawless recollection, I'm relying on a combination of memory, conjecture, and even connecting with old friends to help me fill in the gaps. These story elements are probably close enough to the truth to qualify as memoir, but not close enough to hold up in court.

I've changed all names to protect the proverbial innocent, so if you think you recognize yourself in this book and disagree with my depiction of your personality or of any events you witnessed, well, you're being ridiculous because it's just a story. Any similarities to any persons living or dead, blah blah blah, totally coincidental.

This is a work of fiction.

And here's how it happened.

## One

“Dale Dunkle?”

I perked up in my seat and looked around. I had known a Dale Dunkle from my neighborhood, but he was a year younger than me. He would be in sixth grade now, not seventh.

“Present,” replied a weak voice from the far right of the classroom. A few students giggled. The first five or so kids called for attendance had said “here,” not “present.” No one said “present.” But it was exactly the kind of thing Dale Dunkle would say. I strained to get a better look, but being in the back row I had a bad angle unless he turned around.

Mr. Gilbert said nothing for a few moments. He just sat there, slouched in his old brown chair behind a grey metal desk, half-moon granny spectacles balanced on the tip of his nose. I thought perhaps he was trying to figure out how to pronounce the next name on the roll sheet. Instead, a grin crept across his face and the attendance pad fell into his lap.

“Dale Dunkle. Would you stand up for us, please?”

Dale stood up.

It *was* him. My God, he still had the same bowl cut from when he was five. Poor bastard. Only now he also had glasses. With *green frames*. All he needed was a “kick me” sign on his back. He looked like a geekier version of Ben Seaver from the first season of *Growing Pains*, though I suppose I’m dating myself with that reference.

“Class,” said Mr. Gilbert, “I’d like to introduce you to Dale Dunkle. He’s a transfer student from Roeper

City and Country School in Bloomfield Hills. Has anyone ever heard of this school?"

The class hadn't.

"Roeper City and Country School is a *private school*. A private school for *gifted children*." Mr. Gilbert looked right at Dale. "I guarantee that this kid is the smartest student in this class. How old are you, son?"

Dale looked down at his no-name brand shoes. "11, sir."

There were a few murmurs at this. The rest of us were 12 at least. Hell, Marco was nearly 14.

"11," Mr. Gilbert repeated. "Are you turning 12 soon?"

"No, sir, I turned 11 last month."

More giggles now. Was this kid in the wrong class?

Mr. Gilbert leaned forward and pivoted his attention to the rest of us. He seemed pleased with himself, like a lawyer who had extracted a confession in open court.

"Dale is 11," Mr. Gilbert explained, "because he had to skip a grade when he left Roeper to come back to New Haven so he wouldn't be too bored in his classes. We're dealing with a real *Einstein* here, you understand. Which is why I want to make sure that none of you treat him any differently. Just because Dale is smarter than you, and younger than you, doesn't mean it's okay to pick on him. Maybe he can even teach some of you a thing or two. But there will be no bullying of Dale *in my classroom*, got it?"

A few kids nodded their heads. We got it, alright.

"Dale, you let me know if this class is too easy for you," Mr. Gilbert said in a syrupy tone. "You may sit back down now."

Dale did.

Mr. Gilbert slumped back into his chair and continued homeroom roll. When he got to my name, Jimmy Logan, I was horrified to catch Dale smiling at me from across the room. I was probably the only one in the whole school that he knew. *Great*.

Dale and I had grown up on the same street, Chennault, in an affordable New Haven subdivision called

“The Heights.” This was New Haven, Michigan, you understand, not Connecticut—I always feel the need to make that clear, even when talking to other people in our state. No one has heard of New Haven outside of Macomb County, and on the rare occasion people claim to know where I’m talking about, they inevitably begin describing *Grand Haven* instead. I’m sad to correct the error, since Grand Haven’s a gorgeous lighthouse-filled vacation spot on Lake Michigan, with a state park that boasts the most beautiful freshwater beach in the Midwest. Not the worst place to be from, in other words. *New Haven* was an anonymous mile-square village centered around Gratiot and 27 Mile Road, about halfway between Detroit and Port Huron, with no claim to fame at all. New housing developments have tripled the size of the town in recent years, but back in 1988, when I started seventh grade, the village had barely 1,800 residents. Unless you lived there, or your nearby small-town school competed against us in track or football, you’d never have known we existed. We didn’t even merit our own exit ramp off the interstate.

Anyway, The Heights was a neighborhood consisting of about fifty bi-level homes mostly built in the late 1960s. There were two long parallel streets, Chennault and Stevens, and two small connecting streets, Shirley Ann and Clawson. An uninspiring wooded area with a creek separated the subdivision from Gratiot Avenue, the only busy road in town. Mom and I had moved into our Chennault house when I was a toddler to be closer to my grandma, who would eventually move in with us. Dale and his parents had moved into the neighborhood a few months afterward, eight houses down and across the street. As a single mother anxious to arrange a playdate, Mom made a point of walking up and down Chennault with me until she could run into this new family and make a proper introduction.

“Nicole Logan,” she had said by way of greeting. “I live with my son on the other end of the block. Your boy seems to be about the same age!”

“Alice Dunkle,” Dale’s mom had replied. “Dale, come and meet your new friend!”

And that was that. At least that's how it was explained to me.

From the time I was three years old until I was seven, Dale and I played together several times a week, and often every day. My mom and his parents would take turns babysitting, so I got to know his house as well as mine. Although Dale was a year younger, his language skills had developed early, and I remember getting jealous at the way he could communicate with my own mother better than I could. Once, in what may be my first negative memory of my mom, she said "I hope Dale's brains rub off on you." I stormed off and barricaded myself in my room, which she didn't know I had figured out how to do, and I refused to come out until she apologized, though she never did. I went to kindergarten a year before him, of course, and he was super jealous, but I told him we'd be in the same school soon enough. And we were the next year, but first graders don't see kindergarteners during the day. We still played together almost every day after school and on weekends, though, so when Dale and his family moved away the summer before *his* first-grade year, I was devastated.

I hadn't thought about the kid in years, and wasn't ready to be his friend again at the expense of my own shot at popularity.

"Jimmy!"

Damn. I had tried to slink out of the classroom before he could see me, but he caught me in the hallway.

"Oh, hey," I said, noncommittal.

"Do you remember me?"

"Yeah, sure," I shrugged. "You used to live on my street when we were babies."

Dale smiled. "I do again, my friend. Same house."

My eyes went wide. "Really?"

"Yep! My dad never sold the place. He just rented it out when we moved to Pontiac for his teaching job. But now we're back, so our families are neighbors again. Isn't that neat?"

"Radical," I deadpanned. I still wasn't sure what to make of this enthusiastic former friend, and I became

quite aware that other students were staring at us. At least that's how it felt.

I had been a somewhat popular kid in school the last few years, all things considered, but this was my first day at the high school. No, seventh grade wasn't "high school" in the technical sense, but since New Haven High School held grades 7-12, it sure *felt* like high school. I mean, I had seen two teenagers making out by their lockers before the first bell, and no one even asked them to stop. This was a level of grown-up culture I had never experienced before. One wrong move and I could be stuck at the nerd table for the next six years.

"Your hair's changed," Dale observed.

"Uh, yeah," I said, reaching up to feel my new undercut. I had straight brown hair like my mom, which could get boring, so I'd insisted on a modern style for the schoolyear. "Yours...hasn't," I noted.

"This is so different than my last school," Dale babbled cheerily, ignoring my slight. "At Roeper, we didn't have bells. Or desks. It was an excellent learning environment. But my dad said this is what everyone else does, so I have to get used to it. It'll be a challenge. A different kind of challenge, anyway. But I'm so glad I know someone! This is going to be great."

"Yeah, well, speaking of bells..."

"Oh, that's right! We only have four minutes to get to class. So sorry to keep you waiting. What are you going to next?"

I was flustered. I couldn't remember. I just hoped it was a different class than Dale. I fished the crumpled half-sheet of paper out of my front pocket and replied "uh, English."

"Ah, okay," said Dale, disappointed. "I have Science. See you around!"

And with that, he practically skipped down the hallway.

*He's going to get his ass kicked,* I thought.

At lunch I sat at a crowded table with my three closest friends: Marco, Zach, and Benny. I don't think Dale saw where I was sitting, and if he did, he would have noticed there wasn't room for him. My friends and I talked about the last days of vacation, made fun of our new teachers, and gossiped about a girl named Sarah, who we decided had "blossomed" over the summer, because we were adolescent idiots.

Marco asked about Dale. "He's the kid who used to live next to Mrs. Regan, right? Like, three down from the Black House?"

"Yeah," I agreed.

"I remember him," Marco said. "Didn't he move away forever ago?"

I shrugged. "He's back. And apparently in our grade."

"Man, I can't imagine being a year younger than everyone else."

"He's two years younger than you," I reminded him. "At least."

Marco stuck out his tongue. "You know that whole held-back thing was total bullshit. I could read fine in first grade. That old racist hag just didn't want to let me through."

"If she hated you so much, why would she want you back in her class another year?"

"Hell, I don't know. I just know it was a race thing. My momma said so."

I had been in Marco's first grade class (my first time, his second) and thought Mrs. Ladrado was quite nice. Besides, a third of the kids in the New Haven school system were Black, and Marco was the only one I knew to have been held back a grade. Lucky for him, Marco was small for his age, so he fit in okay.

I resisted the urge to tease him further.

Zach, on the other hand, couldn't let it go. "It can't be a race thing. T-Too never got held back and he's darker than you."

"Shh," I said, looking around the room. "He's probably in here and you don't want to get punched in the back of the head."

"I ain't afraid of T-Too," said Zach, unconvincingly. "Just sayin' he didn't get held back. Besides, if Ladrido hated Black kids so much, she should have at least sent Benny to summer school."

"Go to Hell!" laughed Benny, who then did his own nervous sweep around the room to make sure no adult overheard him.

Benny's dad was Black, but his mom was an Irish redhead so fair-skinned she was almost a ghost. New Haven in the 1970s and 1980s was racially diverse, with a high number of interracial families, so Benny wasn't unique among our friends in that regard.

Zach smiled. "She probably thought you were Mexican, Benny."

"Maybe you're right," Benny said. "Sorry, Marco! Mrs. Ladrido loved me!"

Marco still looked grumpy over being teased and mumbled something about setting the school on fire. Zach made a peace offering of his remaining tater tots.

When I went to clear my tray, I noticed Dale sitting with a few kids I didn't know. Perhaps he had met them in his last class, or he'd just sat down alone and was joined by strangers. Either way, I was relieved. My fear that he would cling to me as his only "friend" had been premature.

Another class we ended up having together, not counting homeroom, was Social Studies with Mr. Wright. Dale had tried to sit next to me, but Mr. Wright assigned seats, which landed Dale a seat in the front row and myself in the back. Of course, this is where each of us would prefer to sit anyway.

"Sucks to be in the back, doesn't it?" whispered a girl a desk over. She had dark brown hair and wide eyes. I wasn't sure she was talking to me, but when I cocked my head she smiled.

"Uh, yeah, I guess," I said.

"I'm Emilia Jankowski. I'm new here."

"I'm Jimmy Logan. I'm not."

She giggled. It was an adorable sound. I glanced up to see if Mr. Wright had noticed. He hadn't. He was droning on about the Soviet Union.



“Nice to meet you, Jimmy,” she said. Then she must have heard something important from Mr. Wright, turned back to her desk, and started taking notes.

I had to force myself to look away.

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As new experiences go, seventh grade seemed fine. It was fun to see certain friends again, like Zach who didn't live in my neighborhood, and the lockers were bigger. None of my classes were interesting yet, but both band and gym started the next day, and I suspected those would be my two favorite periods. True, I had never been in band before, but I liked loud music, and as a drummer I would get to hit things.

On the bus I sat with Marco who lived two doors down from me. Dale was late coming onto the bus and we caught each other's eye, but seeing everyone partnered up, he sat by himself behind the driver. The bus made two stops on our street, one near Dale's end of the block and one near mine and Marco's. Dale got off first, turned around, saw me looking at him from my window seat, and waved. I didn't wave back.

I heard Mom doing dishes as I walked in the house. It smelled like she had been cleaning. I called “hi, Grandma” up the stairs, heard “hi, Jimmy” back, then joined Mom in the kitchen.

“Mike coming over tonight?” I asked. Mike Healy was a pretty cool guy she had been dating the better part of a year. He had red hair, like Benny's mom, only he was big and burly, whereas Benny's mom was a waif like Benny himself. Mike worked at the New Haven Foundry, though I didn't know what a foundry was exactly, and the one time I asked him he had claimed he was in charge of “foundring.”

“Hello to you too,” Mom said, smiling. “And yes he is, so tidy up your room for me, please.”

“Aw come on mom,” I moaned. “He's not going to come up to my room.”

“You never know,” she said. “Besides, your room is

next to the bathroom and your door might be open.”

“Can’t he use the downstairs bathroom?”

My mom shuddered. “No one is allowed to use the downstairs bathroom.”

“I use the downstairs bathroom.”

“No *company* is allowed to use the downstairs bathroom.”

I laughed. “Guys don’t care if places are gross.”

“I care,” she said. “Now clean your room.”

“Don’t you want to know how school was?”

“I do, but you’re stalling.”

I went up and cleaned my room.

We ate dinner late on nights Mike came to visit, because his shift ended at 5:30 and he always had to shower and change before feeling presentable. At 6:30 sharp, just like dozens of times that summer, he was at our door.

“Ah, Nicole,” he said to my mom. “So good to see you after a long, hard day.”

“You as well,” she cooed. “And looking so handsome.”

“Gross,” I called from the other room.

“You don’t think I look handsome, sport?”

“I have no opinion on that, Mike!”

He laughed a big, full laugh that reminded me of Santa Claus.

Over meatloaf and mashed potatoes, I finally got to describe my first day of seventh grade. I told them all about my classes, teachers, lockers, and friends. I didn’t bring up the cute Polish girl, obviously, but I did mention Dale.

“You mean the Dunkle boy you used to play with years ago?” Mom seemed genuinely interested.

“Yeah, I guess they moved back to town. Same house, even.”

Mom turned to Mike. “Dale was the only white kid besides Jimmy on the block,” she explained. “Probably Jimmy’s only white friend since we’ve lived here.”

“Zach’s white,” I said, annoyed that she seemed to be color-grading my friends.

“Well yeah, but he’s just a school friend. He’s not

in the neighborhood.”

Zach wasn't just a “school friend.” We were bonded for life since I had saved him from being run over by a giant riding lawn mower back in grade school.

Mom frowned. “Wait, wouldn't Dale be a grade below you?”

I sighed, annoyed. “Yeah. I guess he skipped a year.”

Mom thought about this for a moment as she scooped mashed potatoes onto a plate for Grandma. “You know,” she said, “I bet you could skip a grade too if you tried harder.”

Mike shot her a look. “Now Nicki, I'm sure Jimmy's doing just fine. And you wouldn't want him to skip a grade anyway. Can you imagine being the youngest kid in your class by a whole year? That Dale kid might not be able to drive to his own Junior Prom.”

I couldn't imagine Dale Dunkle dressed up and on a date. Then again, I couldn't imagine me on a date either. I wondered what Emilia would look like in a few years.

“All I'm saying,” Mom protested, “is that anything Dale can do, Jimmy can do.” She turned to me. “Don't you forget that. Especially if you start playing with him again. I wouldn't want you thinking you're not as good as he is.”

“Don't worry,” I said. “I won't.”