

PROLOGUE

James, a fifteen year old boy, lay under the covers at midnight playing 'Professor Layton and the Curious Village.' He heard a thump outside and he knew that his dad was going to sleep. James decided it was time to hit the hay.

James woke up at 7:30am and went downstairs to get his school shirt. When he arrived in the kitchen his father took one look at him and held up his Nintendo DS and said

"I'm confiscating this dang contraption. You're playing it way too much and you've got your Junior Cert. to think about!" James watched as he locked away his Nintendo DS in the

cupboard. When his dad left the room he quickly picked the lock, took out his DS and stuffed it into his schoolbag. He then took down the box of Weetos and began to eat.

After the school bell rang James headed for his maths class with his least favourite teacher Mr. Salem.

When James first saw Mr Salem he knew he was bad. He knew you shouldn't judge a book by its cover but when it comes to Mr Salem you'll know you should.

James walked in and sat down.

“To start the day all of you will find the square root of 160,000,000,000,000,000,000,000” yelled Mr Salem.

“Without a calculator... and in your head!” he added. Everyone groaned and started thinking but James started to play his DS under the table. Mr Salem left the room so everyone started to chat and shout across the room.

James had just figured out how to do a hard puzzle when the DS's power went out. He closed the DS and looked up. Everybody had left and gone to their next class. James got up and was about to leave when the security alarm went off. He went out to the corridor and realised it was coming from the computer room. James was about to investigate when the principal, Mr. Norbert stopped him.

“Why aren’t you in class?” he asked. James thought up a good lie.

“Well I was, but when the alarm went off I came out to investigate” he said.

“Oh... well... ok.” Mr Norbert said. “But get back to class, we have everything under control.” Just then the computer room burst into flames.

“See? Under control!” he said

Out in recess James talked to his friends Joey and Jimmy about the computer room incident.

“Hmm ...Oh...crud.” said Joey. “I can’t do this puzzle”

“Which one?” James asked.

“Number 51” replied Joey.

“Only number 51!” I’m on number 148 and we bought the game on the same day!”

“Wow, number 148,” said Jimmy. He was impressed. “Maybe you could solve the case of the computer lab.”

James laughed.

“No way could I solve that case. I’m not that good.”

“Ah you’re just being modest, you should really consider trying.”

James said he'd think about it and left to go to his next class pre-algebra.

The next day James arrived early to school as he did every Friday. He approached his friend and said

“I'm gonna do it.”

Chapter 1

Investigation

James was up in his room ruling out who could be the suspect. There was a knock on the door so James crammed the list under his mattress. His Dad walked in and told him that they'd just ordered pizza from Dominoes. James came downstairs and ate. While he ate he thought about telling his Dad but he decided to keep his mouth shut because he knew his dad wouldn't approve. So he finished eating and went back upstairs to work on his list.

James lay awake all night thinking about the mission. He figured he would ask the janitor if he saw anyone suspicious. He wondered what Mr Salem would say, or rather, yell when he found out he didn't find out the square root of whatever the heck that number was on page 2. He laughed at the ridiculous number then fell asleep.

When he woke up he got ready for school and came downstairs and his Dad said, "What are you up to these days?"

James said, "Nothing", and then left with some toast.

While cycling to school, he ate his toast and wondered what exactly he would ask the janitor. He pondered about this all the way to school. When the bell rang he approached the janitor and asked if he saw any one suspicious at the time of the incident. He told James to mind his own business and he left. James looked at the burnt computer lab door and tried to think of what could have caused the fire. He glanced around then ran into the lab.

The lab was dark and gloomy. About a dozen of the computers were charred, and the science kits had melted. James decided to look around and see what started the fire. He searched high and low and what he found

couldn't have been more obvious. It was a petrol can and a Bunsen burner. He soon realised the burning of the computer happened in rows up to the door, which was when he and the principal saw the fire. He found a box of calculators all smashed up. He decided that that he had no evidence as to who did it and left.

James tried to sneak into his class, but Mr. Salem saw him

“Where've you been?” he barked.

“In the bathroom” James lied quickly.

“For 45 minutes?” James' stomach gave a funny jolt. He did not realise he had been in the lab so long.

“Err...” James began.

"Detention!" After school...! For five hours!" Mr.Salem yelled with an ugly smile on his face.

James was sitting in the dark detention room. He heard a story about this room. It went like this:

A boy named Brandon was sitting in the detention room. This boy was a bit of a mental case. The teacher told him to do maths and when he was done he was to check them on the calculator. Brandon kept getting one wrong so he brought it up to the teacher. The teacher told him he forgot to carry the one. That did it. Brandon also had anger issues. He smashed the teacher over the head with the calculator, smashed the window with a calculator and then dived out of it. The boy ran away with a

broken arm (I'm not surprised, thought James, he dived three stories).

When James left detention he started to head home, but when he looked for his bike it was gone. The only bike there was a pink tricycle. There was a note attached saying: 'Solve this one loser'. The writing was all scribbled, so James thought it was the school bully, Conor. Reluctantly he used the tricycle as a scooter.

Chapter 2

Connections

James was up in his room when his phone rang and sped downstairs. The reason for this was because when he was eight and he and his dad bought the phone, it was top of the range, but now it was old and it only rang three times before it went to voicemail. James answered the phone and he heard an old man speak:

“James... Is that you?” he said in a raspy voice. James was about to say “get lost old man” but stopped when he realised who it was.

“Grandad!” he exclaimed. “How are you?”

James hadn't seen his Grandad since he was six and neither had his dad.

"Fine... just fine... look I need to speak to your dad."

"Oh...sure." James remembered why he hadn't seen his Grandad for such a long time. He and his dad had an argument and his granddad had left.

James gave the phone to his dad and ran out of the room.

After James' dad put the phone down he called James down.

"What did granddad want?" asked James.

"Come into the sitting room and sit down." He said quietly. James confused walked into the sitting room and sat down.

“Now,” he said quieter still, “your granddad rang to apologise for what happened nine years ago and I forgive him.”

Great so does that mean...”

James stopped and looked at his father. There were tears running down his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” James asked.

“My mother’s... dead.”

“Oh” was the only thing James could say.

“Go to bed and don’t bother getting up. I don’t want you going to school.”

James ran upstairs undressed and got under the covers. He tried not to think about the fact that his dad was upset.

The next day James woke up after having a nightmare about Mr.Salem melting his calculator with a lighter after he caught James using it under the table. He went downstairs and turned on the TV. He watched nickelodeon while eating coco pops. James wasn't in the mood to watch Spongebob and Patrick do something stupid so he switched off the TV and read one of his many comics that was lying on the table. He read it at least forty times before he put it down. James suddenly had a thought. He remembered the dream of Mr. Salem... Mr. Salem demanding they find the square root of some ridiculous number without a calculator...the box of smashed calculators... and the story about Brandon.

**He knew there was a connection.
James decided to investigate
more. He slipped upstairs,
dressed then left the house.**

Chapter 3

James arrived at school but didn't go through the front door. Instead he walked around the building and stopped when he reached the smashed window of the lab. He climbed through. The crunch of glass beneath his feet created an echo that filled the air. He got to work. He took out some plastic zip-lock bags. He put as much of each calculator as he could in a separate bag.

“Now for the hard part,” he said to himself. He left the lab and approached Mr. Salem's door. He listened and waited until he heard ‘class dismissed’ then dived into the bathroom next door. As the class filed out, James waited. When they had all gone to their lockers, James entered the room. Mr. Salem's

dark eyes swept over him. James walked to the desk. He put one of the Ziploc bags on the table. Mr. Salem eyed it.

“What’s this?” he spat.

“You tell me,” James said. Mr. Salem said nothing and James waited. Eventually Mr. Salem coughed and left. James thought it was strange. If that was the Mr. Salem he knew he would have screamed until he exploded. James returned home.

When he got home, his dad was there to greet him. His dad saw his uniform and frowned.

“I thought I told you not to go to school.” he said with his hands on his hips.

“Oh I... uh... must have forgotten.” James said sheepishly. His dad had never gotten angry with him before.

“James Brooks, sometimes I just wonder about you. Come inside.”

James lay on his bed thinking. He knew yet couldn't be sure that Mr. Salem blew up the lab. He also wondered why no other research teams were sent in. James thought this was strange. The explosion in the lab was big enough to be on the news. James started to suspect something was up. Surely the police would be in the school every minute of every day?

James skipped breakfast the next morning and headed for school. As usual the principal, who come to think of it he hadn't seen in ages, was standing at the

**door greeting the students.
James walked up to him.**

“Hello James, feeling alright today?” the principal asked.

“Fine, listen can I speak with you in your office?” replied James.

“Sure! You go on up there and I’ll be with you in a moment!”

James walked down the corridor and went up the stairs. He found the door with the word ‘PRINCIPAL’ written on it in gold letters. He went in and looked around. There was a desk made of oak. It had pictures of a boy and a girl on it. James assumed that these were the principal’s kids or grand-kids because no one knew how old the principal was. There was also a reading lamp and some

paperweights. On the wall there were paintings and a stars-and-stripes flag tacked to the wall. James sat on a chair in front of the desk and picked up a paperweight. He saw a filing cabinet with a drawer marked 'Teacher Evaluations'. James went over and opened the drawer. He flicked through the files until he found Mr. Salem's. He opened the file and began to read:

Mr. Salem isn't the nicest man alive but he is a great teacher. His students always get their work in his class finished and I can bet you that his past students can do maths lightning fast...

It went on and on like that. James was about to close the

file when he glimpsed something on the first page that caught his eye. It said 'Full Name: (?) Salem'. Another strange thing he thought. Just milliseconds after James replaced the file and closed the drawer, the principal walked in.

"Now! How do you like my office?" he said.

"It's nice." James said.

"So, you wanted to talk to me?" the principal said.

"Yeah." They both took a seat and the principal offered James a biscuit. He took a custard cream and started talking.

"It's about the laboratory. You know... the explosion and

everything.” The principal sighed.

“I’m not allowed to discuss this with students.”

“Please sir, I think it was Mr. Salem”. The principal didn’t look phased.

“That’s a very serious accusation, yet I can see why you would blame him. Although he is a brilliant teacher, he can be... well...”

“A complete jerk.” James finished for him.

“He is your teacher, show him some respect”

“But he is a jerk!”

“Stop saying that!”

“Never!”

“Get out! And go to the principal’s office!”

“This *is* the principal’s office!”

“Well then just get out!”

James left and slammed the door. As he left, the principal’s cell phone rang. When he answered it he heard a voice he knew all too well.

“I just saw that little brat leaving your office. What exactly did you tell him?”

“Nothing at all, I swear. Please believe me and don’t break my nose...again.”

“I won’t, but if you speak I will set ‘*it*’ off and your nose will be the least of your worries.”
The principal heard laughter that sounded like a pig in pain.

“Shut it you! This phone call is supposed to be important and you’re ruining it!” the line went dead and the principal broke out in a cold sweat.

Chapter 4

James spent many hours fuming that the principal was defending Mr. Salem. He was almost 100% sure that he blew up the lab. No one would believe him. He had no evidence that it was Mr. Salem. All he had was a box of smashed calculators.