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On the day it all began, I'd spent a hot hour in the reception area outside my father's office. I reckoned he was keeping me waiting on purpose, leaving me to cook slowly in the midday sun that was burning through the glass. We were on the top floor of the tower, the penthouse suite, which was for his use only, and I'd been instructed to come here straight from school with my end of term report. It was the big one, the one that would indicate, he said, how well I should do in my exams next year.

I fidgeted on the leather sofa, turning the envelope over and over in my hands and wondering if it was possible to feel this sick without actually being sick. The receptionist looked up and smiled. She was a new one. They never stayed long. Lucky them. I wished I could change jobs, be someone else's son.

A buzzer went off and the sick feeling churned at my stomach.

'Mr Gordon will see you now, Dominic,' said the receptionist cheerfully, as if this was good news.

I pushed at the steel door. The huge chair behind his desk was empty. He was over by the window, looking down on his empire.

'Good afternoon, Dominic!'

'Hello, Dad,' I said.

He spun round to stare at me thoughtfully, savouring the cleverness which he always used as a weapon. People said he didn't look his age. He had his hair carefully dyed

so as to have just the right amount of grey in the black. Contact lenses brightened the blue of his eyes and expensive dressing did the rest. He was a handsome man, people said. He would be sixty this year and any normal person who'd made as much money as he had would have retired long before then.

'Do you know, Dominic,' he said, with a puzzled frown, 'I've always had a strong belief that there is no problem that cannot be fixed. However, I am, as they say, damned if I can see how to fix this one.'

An alarm bell went off in my head. He must have already seen my report. He gestured to the creased, slightly damp envelope in my hand.

'Open it,' he said. 'Let us see if, by some miracle, your copy holds more hope for your future than does the one I've had emailed through.'

He strode over to his desk and jabbed at the keyboard of his communications centre. The screen snapped into life.

'I said open it.'

I ripped at the envelope. Surely, surely it couldn't be that bad. I'd worked really hard. I pulled out the little red book with its gilded school crest and flicked through with trembling fingers to look at the grades.

'Have you anything to say?' he asked.

'I'm sorry,' I said, crushed with misery. One C—that was for biology—the rest of the sciences were Ds. I didn't get as far as Art and English because my father took the book away.

'It makes interesting reading,' he said. 'Your chemistry master, for example, suggests that "Dominic needs to apply his brain"'. Upon further investigation, we find that this is a common theme. Dominic, when you take up a senior position in this company it must be seen that you do so on merit and not simply because you are my son. I do not want

the embarrassment of a son for whom I have to apologize the whole time! Such laxity is totally unacceptable!

. . . Blah, blah, blah . . .

Now, as I lean back against my mountain, my stomach wrings with anger. He had said it. I was totally unacceptable and I always had been. But he'd never told me why. If I'd fought him back then, would it have made a difference?

Anyway, I didn't fight. On that baking summer afternoon I stared out of the window of the European headquarters of Gordon's Pharmaceuticals, and watched the monorails shuttling around the city. Tubes full of people. I knew that I didn't want to spend my life sitting in this tower. But I was too terrified to say what I did want—I don't think I even knew back then. Back then, only a couple of months ago.

'Clearly, these grades do not augur well for your university prospects,' he said. 'In view of the cost of your education . . . Dominic, are you listening to me?'

'Sorry.'

I'd been looking at the blocks of colour in the cityscape below. A tessellation of murky reds and greys. Was tessellation the right word, though? Did a tessellation have to be made up of all the same shapes? There were so many shapes down there . . .

'You do propose to try for Oxford or Cambridge, I take it?' my father said. 'Cambridge, preferably.'

'I hadn't . . . I don't know,' I mumbled, avoiding his eyes. Despite the swimming-pool blue, they were like a hawk's eyes. And I was the mouse. Pinned down while he ripped at me.

'Or do you intend to spend the rest of your life grubbing around your grandfather's house and painting pictures?'

My heart thudded. How did he know I did my painting at Pops's place? I gasped in the breath to make a protest but

stopped myself. Best to keep my mouth shut where Pops was concerned. I didn't want my father laying down laws that I would have to break. And I certainly didn't want him turning up at Pops's place.

'I'll try and do better, I promise,' I said.

Pops needed me and I needed Pops. There was a thing he used to say to me when I was little: 'I'd kill a dragon for you.' And I'd kill a dragon for him, too.

'Oh, you *will* do better, Dominic, rest assured you will. At this point, however, an explanation would be most acceptable.'

'I'm really sorry, Dad. I *did* try, honest. I just can't . . . '

I stopped, remembering that 'can't' wasn't in his vocabulary.

My father had finished an orbit of the office and was coming in to dock at the desk.

'I'll be flying out shortly and will be away on business for a few days,' he said. 'By the time I return, you will have a tutor to get you up to speed on your sciences over the summer holiday. As I say, there's no problem that can't be fixed. You may go. The chauffeur will take you home.'

He turned back to his communications centre and switched off the screen.

So that was the summer blown.

And just my luck, the chauffeur waiting for me wasn't the nice guy who could be persuaded to release you at an unauthorized destination. It was Granite-face. No chance of getting him to drop me off at Pops's house. I'd have to go home first.

The car purred up to the iron security gates of our mansion and Granite-face scanned his pass. The gates swung slowly open. The mansion was a new one, an Exclusive Executive Home, sitting smug and sun-drenched within its high walls. I often wondered what, exactly, 'exclusive' meant. Exclusive of life, I reckoned. No birds or

insects. No worms burrowing in the lawns, no bees flitting from flower to flower. Nothing that would muck up the gleaming tidiness.

I chucked a few yells around the house and across the shaved lawns to see if Mum was around. She wasn't, but I found a note by the phone: 'The cat has been sick on your bed, so be careful. Back later. Love you, love you, love you. Mum.'

I closed the door on the silent house and set off on the walk to Pops.