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opening extract from

The Chain

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Link 1: Cal's Test

Chapter 1

Mr Webster, the English teacher, was sitting back in his chair and reading the book. He didn't look up. He mumbled, "Shh. Quiet, please," even though no-one in the class had said a word. He pushed up his glasses and went on reading.

The class was hushed. The only sounds were the scribbling of pens and the rustle of paper. Everyone had their heads bent over their work. Everyone seemed to know just what to do. Everyone except Cal Brady.

He stared at the questions Mr Webster had written on the board and didn't know where to start. He watched everyone else working hard. Then he looked down at the blank piece of paper in front of him again. He began to worry.

His friend, Luke, was sitting next to him. Cal gave him a nudge.

But Luke took no notice.

Cal read the questions on the board again. But again they didn't make any sense at all. Cal was beginning to get that cold, fluttery feeling of panic in his belly.

The class was working on some horror stories by a writer called Edgar Allan Poe. Yesterday Mr Webster had told them to read one of the stories for homework. But Cal hadn't had time, and now all of the questions on the board were about that story. Cal enjoyed English and got good marks most of the time. He also liked horror stories.

Reading one of the stories for homework shouldn't have been a problem. Cal even liked Mr Webster. He was one of the younger, more interesting teachers. It made Cal feel even worse that he was letting Mr Webster down.

Should he tell Mr Webster he was stuck? But Cal didn't dare admit he hadn't done his homework.

He nudged Luke harder.

Luke frowned. He looked up. "What?" he whispered.

Cal checked to make sure Mr Webster wasn't watching. "Can I copy?"

Luke looked surprised at first. He made sure Mr Webster wasn't looking, then he pushed the paper with his answers towards the middle of the desk.

Cal quickly started to copy out Luke's answers.

"Make it a bit different to mine," Luke whispered.

Cal had never copied anyone's work before. He'd never had to. Normally it was the other way round. People asked if they could copy from *him*. This felt strange. But Cal wanted to change, didn't he? Wasn't this how he wanted to be? He'd better hurry up and get used to feeling like this.

At the end of the lesson everyone got up and went out. They left their work on Mr Webster's desk for him to mark. Cal wanted to get out of the classroom as quickly as he could but Mr Webster put down the book he'd been reading and looked up at him as he went past.

"What did you think?" Mr Webster asked with a smile. "Did you enjoy that story?"

Cal didn't know what to say. He felt bad and blushed. He could feel the hotness in his cheeks.

"Mmm. Yeah. It was OK," he mumbled.

Mr Webster pushed his glasses up again. He ran a hand through his thinning hair. Then he looked back at Cal as if he expected him to say something else. "I thought it would have been your kind of thing," he said. "Right up your street."

Cal was a rubbish liar. He just wanted to go, get out of there, get away. "It was good," he said. "I did like it."

Mr Webster stood up and put on the tatty blue jacket he always wore. "It was a little bit like the story you wrote for me last term, remember?"

Cal could remember the story he'd written, but there was no way he could know if it was anything like the one he should have read for homework last night. "A bit, maybe," he said softly.

Mr Webster stacked the class's work into a pile. He put Cal's work on top and tapped it with his finger. "Well, I'm looking forward to seeing what you thought of it anyway," he said. "I'm sure you'll have had some good ideas, you always do."

Cal shrugged, nodded, then went out quickly. He was glad to get away.