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Opening extract from **Unique**

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PROLOGUE

I am high up in the mountains, sitting on their shoulders, breathing the rock-cold smell of sheep and earth and granite. Way down below me, where the dark slopes plunge towards each other, a pale mass is floating in the valley. A whipped-cream of mist. The sun is bleeding over the ridge opposite, but it hasn't got down into the valley yet. Somewhere down in that valley there are dead bodies. Dead because of me.

A crow squawks, sudden and close. It is time to begin the journey home.

I

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.

2

I tried very hard not to let the outside world know just how far gone Pops was, because I knew it would kill him if the authorities got involved and tried to put him into a Retirement Unit. Truth is, he's woofing mad, but between the two of us that never matters.

On that afternoon, as usual, I rang the bell and waited. You can't hear the doorbell from outside, so you never know if it's worked or not until the door suddenly opens and there he is.

There he was, that afternoon, with a face like a burst football. Which meant that the false teeth had gone missing again. Eventually, I found them in the fruit bowl. He took the teeth and turned away from me like an impressionist donning a new disguise.

'Dear boy!' He swung round to greet me. 'Just a short back and sides will do. Where do you want me?'

So, that day I was to be a barber.

I plonked a chair in front of the dining-room mirror, got the comb from his dressing-table and the scissors from the kitchen.

He smiled at me in the mirror.

'Got to make the effort, haven't you? Even at my age. Keep yourself nice.'

'You always look nice.'

'Good, good. Make sure my daughter pays you. She looks after all that sort of thing. Takes care of me.'

You must be joking, I thought. Mum doesn't take care of anyone. But, of course, he wasn't joking. I drew the

comb through his fragile silver hairs and wondered whether she would be sober when she got back from wherever it was she'd gone. I thought about her note and smiled to myself. 'The cat has been sick on your bed, so be careful.' Careful of what?

I caught Pops's glance in the mirror.

'Sweet girl, my daughter,' he said. 'Sings like an angel, did you know? Shouldn't boast of it, but, you know, a chap has a right to be proud of his little girl! Singing at the Opera House next week!'

'That's brilliant!'

I carried on combing. I knew this story about Mum the rising opera star and her leading role at the Opera. For Pops, the story ended there, with a standing ovation and roses thrown onto the stage. He had forgotten the bit where her career stopped dead because suddenly she couldn't sing any more. Nobody had ever told me why. They hadn't wanted to talk about it.

'Did I tell you, my daughter sings like an angel?' He smiled.

'You did mention it once,' I said casually. 'What sort of stuff does she sing?'

'Very, very talented.' He nodded.

I stroked my hand over the tea-coloured blotches on his nearly bald head. Most of the things that had gone in there over eighty-two years were lost somewhere in the grey folds and ripples of the brain. Some memories found their way back every now and again. Like the day he told me, in precise detail, how to take off and land a light aircraft.

Suddenly he leapt up, hair half-chopped, with a long wisp of grey sticking straight up on top of his head.

'Better start packing!' he cried. 'Should have thought of it sooner!'

And he was off down the hallway at full speed.

'Where are you going?' I called after him.

'Awful lot to do before we go! Come along, Dominic!'

I followed him up the dusty stairs to the landing, where he stopped suddenly and wagged a finger up at the ceiling. I looked at the trapdoor. I'd only ever half-noticed it before.

'You want to get into the attic?' I said.

'Got to get the cases down!' he cried.

'Is there a ladder?'

'There's a stick,' he said. 'You do it with a stick.'

Soon, behind one of the bedroom doors, I found the stick. It had a hook on the end and I hooked it round a ring on the trapdoor and pulled. Down came a folding ladder.

'Ah-HA!' cried Pops.

You know you're in for trouble when he says 'Ah-HA!'

I held the ladder steady while he climbed up. He found a light switch and by the time I got up there he was standing in a pool of light like an actor on a dusty stage.

He grinned at me. Then frowned, and said, 'What the hell are we doing up here?'

'Packing?' I suggested.

'Yes. Yes, you're quite right,' he said.

And then he was off again, hopping across the attic like an old mountain goat.

'Look at this! Remember this?'

He dragged a moth-eaten cover from a table. On the table was a racetrack with old toy cars scattered around it. He picked up one of the cars and fixed it on the track.

'Used to play this with my grandson!' he cried.

'Did you?' News to me. I'd never seen the thing in my life before.

'Yes, yes! But you have to plug it in!' He found the plug and dangled it at me hopefully.

The hunt for a socket to stick the plug in involved Pops standing in the centre of the attic, directing me from one spidery corner to another.

'Must be one somewhere!' he cried.

'Ouch!' I cracked my head on a beam.

'Careful as you go! Nothing there? Goodness, my old brain needs a bit of a shake!'

He shook his head. It didn't seem to help.

At last I saw a socket behind a bulging tea chest. I tugged at the chest and it shifted on the gritty floor. It was full of heavy old books. I gave one more heave and the thing split open, books slapping out of it in clouds of dust.

I fell backwards.

'You all right, old chap?' said Pops.

'Yeah,' I spluttered as I plugged the thing in. It would probably blow us up, I thought, but what the hell.

I switched it on and a few seconds later there was the high-pitched whine of little electric cars whizzing round the track. Pops was standing over the table, squeezing the control buttons, eyes and mouth wide. I began to stack the books back into what was left of the tea chest. And then I noticed that not all of them were books. There were a couple of musty albums with old-fashioned photos.

'BAH!' cried Pops. I dropped the album I had in my hand.

'What is it?'

He didn't answer, too absorbed with picking up a fallen car and fitting it back onto the track. The whining noise started again.

I opened the album. The story began with Pops and Gran and a baby. This must be Mum. Even as a bald, pink-faced bundle in Gran's arms she had a faint trace of the dimples that she and I both have. Silently, I flicked through the pages and watched her grow. Sandcastles and sports days, rain-soaked camping holidays, dogs, cats, and birthdays. Pops and Mum hugged together, Mum holding some sort of trophy. I imagined myself into the pictures, trying to feel

what a happy family would have been like. I bet the birthday cake had been made by Gran herself, she looking on proudly as my five-year-old mother blew out her candles. I wanted more of this perfect childhood. I picked up the next album.

But here was Mum grown up, and now she had a baby. Me!

The first picture was just us—Mum looking ages younger than she did now, her long dark hair framing my bald head as she snuggled me against her cheek. Then there was Dad holding me. It was obviously Dad because it was his face, but the face was wearing an expression that I couldn't remember seeing lately, if ever. He was smiling. In fact he looked happy. So there must have been a time when I'd done something to please him.

I flicked him over and saw myself as a chubby baby sitting in the bath, chewing a plastic duck. Opposite, I was smiling straight to camera, looking tottery, with Mum holding my arms while I walked. Next, me and Mum and Gran, and then a nursery school line-up. I searched along the rows and found myself wearing (yuck!) a stupid cheesy grin, dimples the same as Mum's. Come to think of it, I still had that stupid cheesy grin!

I searched on hungrily, annoyed that they'd never shown me these bits of the past that belonged to me. All I'd ever seen were the cringe-making DVDs that we didn't bother to look at any more.

There was me playing with Pops in a tree house. I stared at the photo. How old was I? About five? I couldn't remember Pops coming out to visit us in the States, but perhaps Mum and Dad had brought me over here.

'Pops?' I said. 'Do you remember going to visit us in the States and playing with me in a tree house—when I was little?'

'Tree house? What d'you want to live in a tree for?'

'Never mind.'

I flicked on through and watched myself getting older. Me on a tiny bicycle and then . . . something that puzzled me. Me in a school uniform, when I was about eight. But what was I doing wearing a uniform? They didn't have uniforms in the States. I stared into the picture. I was with Dad, holding his hand. We were on the steps of what looked like an English stately home. They often tried to make things look English in the States. It could have been a school or some wealthy person's house. Either way, I didn't remember the place.

I carried on turning pages. I began to panic. There were scenes with other kids that looked as if we were the best of friends, but I didn't remember them. Holidays I'd never had, places I'd never been. Yet there I was, right in the middle of it all, living a life I didn't remember. And the really weird thing was that Mum and Dad looked somehow different from the way they did in my memory of the DVDs that I used to play. But *how* they were different I couldn't quite tell. There was a light-heartedness about them. And something else.

I turned the last page and felt myself go hot all over. I was staring at the face of a young man. He was leaning against the parapet of an old stone bridge, his fair hair bright in the sunshine. There was a river, old buildings. It was my face looking at me. A few years older, but my face. But it couldn't be!

'Pops!' I stumbled towards him on wobbly legs and slid the album onto the table. 'Pops, who is this?'

He glanced down and I caught his eyes as slowly, slowly, he looked up again. Please come back and tell me, Pops, I willed him. Stop being mad, just for a second, and remember properly. Remember this.

And then I turned cold all over, because I could see he did remember something, and for a moment I saw the eyes

of my grandfather as they used to be. Clear, intelligent.
And frightened.

'Who is it, Pops?'

He began to shake.

'It's Dominic.'

I looked at the photo again.

'No, Pops, it can't be! *I'm* Dominic. This isn't me!'

3

He turned away from me.

'Pops? Did you hear me? It can't be Dominic!'

I moved round, grabbed his arm, tried to make him look at me. His eyes had glassed-over with tears.

'It can't be me. I don't remember any of this!' I tried not to shout. *'Please tell me who it really is!'*

'Ummm, well now . . . ' He shook his right hand by his side, as he always does when he's upset. 'Should offer you a drink before you go. My wife will ummm . . . my wife . . . '

I couldn't have felt worse if I'd punched him in the gut. It had been years since he'd mentioned Gran as though she were still alive. He began to sob.

I closed the album.

'Tell you what,' I said, trying to sound bright even though my own voice was shaking, 'let's go back down and see what's on the radio. I think there's that programme you like, about gardening.'

He brushed his sleeve across his eyes. 'Do I like gardening?'

'Yeah, it's your favourite thing.'

'Then I'd better not miss out, had I?' he said.

I went ahead of him down the ladder, guiding the threadbare slippers from rung to rung. He made a fuss about putting the ladder away and shutting the trapdoor but eventually I settled him in his chair with one of the audio tapes I had recorded to soothe him when he got upset—the gardening programmes were favourite.

'Woolly aphid is one of nature's most tiresome pests,' said the presenter.

'Quite right,' nodded Pops. 'How right you are!'

In the kitchen, my thoughts churned as I brewed the tea. How could I have had two lives—one I remembered and one I didn't—going on at the same time? It just wasn't possible.

I heard the front door and the 'Woooo-hoooo!' of Pops's neighbour, Margi, arriving.

'Fwoof!' she cried, grinning from the kitchen doorway. 'Hot or what? How is your grandfather today? Look, there's a cake here. I've been baking all day because Tom's brother's coming down and he doesn't half get through cake. Doesn't touch the sides. And here's some steak and kidney pie and washing powder. I'll do some vegetables . . .'

She clattered around the kitchen, easily finding the pans and plates she needed. I stared at the neatly-iced cake that she'd left on the table.

'Margi,' I blurted, 'who did you say the cake was for?'

'That one's for your grandfather, love. But he won't mind you having a chunk.'

'No, I mean . . .' Brother. She'd said 'Tom's brother'. 'Margi,' I said, 'did you know Mum and my father before I was born?'

'No, my love, first time I met them was when you all came back from the States—five, six years ago it must be now.' She came over and stroked my cheek with her palm. 'Why? What's up, love?'

The kindness stung like acid. I swallowed hard.

'Nothing. Pops has got his gardening programme and the tea's just brewing. See you later, Margi. Thanks.'

It was a brother. No other explanation. It couldn't be me in those photos, so it had to be a brother. I wandered home, searching for clues in my life, anything that could point to his existence. There was nothing. I couldn't

remember him for myself, and certainly no one else had ever mentioned him. Why not? And where was he now?

I let myself in the back door, made straight for the fridge and gulped down a pint of juice. The house still felt deserted. The smell of rotting vegetation from the dishwasher was simmering in the afternoon heat and suddenly I felt as if I was in someone else's house. The brother had changed who my parents were. He'd changed who I was.

'Hello, darling!'

I spun round and was immediately wrapped in Mum's hug. Something banged against my back and as she pulled away I saw it was a half-empty wine bottle. In her other hand was an empty glass.

She plonked the bottle down, swiped a hand through her dyed auburn hair and beamed at me. I hoped it was only the first bottle of the evening. Things were going to be difficult enough as it was.