

Parallel Lines

“A 97. Not bad... but there is always room for improvement,” Leo whispered, staring at the number on top of his exam.

“98.5! Suck it, Leo!”

Alex’s voice crossed the classroom. A few students laughed. Leo felt his face burn, but he stayed silent. This was normal. They had been competing for years. First and second. Always compared. Always watching each other. They spent every afternoon in the same corner of the library, sitting at the same long table. Books between them like walls. They were close, but never connected, like parallel lines. Leo believed effort was everything. His parents had sacrificed too much for him to relax. A scholarship was not a dream, it was a necessity. Every grade felt like a step toward safety, or disaster. Alex seemed different. He understood things quickly and rarely looked worried. Teachers admired his talent. But being “the smart one” was not as easy as it looked. If he wasn’t the best, he felt invisible. Praise was the only way he knew he was enough. Then Mr. Tucker announced the most important project of the entire course.

“It will count for forty percent of your grade. And you will work in pairs.”

When he said, “Leo and Alex,” the class reacted immediately. Of course. The two best students together. Their first meetings were tense. They argued about structure, ideas, even small details.

“You’re too controlling,” Alex said one afternoon.

“And you don’t take anything seriously,” Leo replied.

They cared more about proving who was smarter than about the project itself. In their weekly collaboration journals, they wrote formal but sharp comments about each other’s mistakes. But one rainy afternoon in the library, something changed. Alex had been staring at the same page for minutes.

“If this isn’t perfect, my dad will be disappointed,” he said suddenly. “He tells everyone I’m a genius. I don’t know who I am if I’m not.”

Leo hesitated, then answered quietly, "If I don't get a scholarship, my parents can't pay for university. I can't fail. I just can't." For the first time, they were honest. Not rivals. Just two teenagers afraid of not being enough. After that, they started working differently. Leo organized their ideas. Alex made them more creative. The tension slowly disappeared. The library stopped feeling like a competition and began to feel like a shared space. The night before the deadline, they were finishing the project in a small café. They were tired but proud of it. Then suddenly Alex's coffee spilled all over Leo's laptop. The screen went black. Half of their work was gone. They stared at it in shock. Weeks of effort had disappeared. Leo felt panic rising, but when he looked at Alex, he saw something worse than anger, he saw fear.

"I'm sorry," Alex whispered. "I always ruin everything."

Leo took a deep breath. He thought about the grade, about the percentage, about all the pressure waiting at home. And then he said something he never expected to say:

"It's just a project."

They rewrote what they could. Not perfectly, not completely, but together. When the grades were posted, they received high marks, though not identical. They were confused, but too tired to argue. For once, the number didn't feel like the most important thing. As they walked out of school, Leo realized something strange: the moment he would always remember was not seeing his grade. It was the second when the laptop went black and the world didn't end. All those years, they had acted as if one bad result could destroy their lives. As if a number could measure their value. But the truth was simpler and harder. The pressure had never come from the exams. It came from the fear of disappointing others. And that fear had made them forget something essential: they were more than their performance. Tests can measure knowledge. Teachers can measure projects. But no exam can measure your worth.

And sometimes, you only understand that when everything you worked for disappears, and you realize you are still standing.