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## *Linked*

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One was black and the other was white and they had switched!

After witnessing a violent quarrel between his parents, Greg feels confused, resentful and angry. His father accused his mother of having an affair fifteen years ago, and if the details of the affair are true, then the man that Greg had always called father is not his real father. Even worse is the fact that after striking his mother, Greg's "father" walks out. Meanwhile, Greg has only his mother's word that his father is really his father.

Into this mix comes the **link**.

Steve hates his stepfather. He has struggled for years to find out why his mother would choose to remain with a man who physically abuses her. Steve's secret fear is that his stepfather is actually his real father. Frustrated and angry, Steve goes for his stepfather's gun.

And then there is the **link**.

Neither boy is able to deal with his family's problems; each needs help. And suddenly, help is available! They switched! Greg is now faced with Steve's family's problems and Steve has Greg's. But that's not all. Suddenly, family matters are no longer the biggest problem. Because Greg is black and Steve is white, each boy now faces the question of race from a different perspective. Fearful that no one will believe the switch-- and even more fearful of becoming experimental subjects-- they struggle on their own to survive. They are forced to share information, communicate and--even worse in their eyes--get along with each other.

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## *Chapter One*

*His heart was pounding as he watched the weapon. It glittered in the glare of the fluorescent light. It wasn't a knife, but the threat was real. Calm down. Calm down. He tried reassuring himself. It's only a letter opener. No way! Daniel would never kill us.*

*But the man wielding the letter opener was livid! "I won't have it! Do you hear me? I won't have it!"*

*The fury in those words made him cringe, especially since it was emphasized with a stabbing motion that drove the letter opener into the desk.*

*Then, with a quick motion, the man released the weapon and moved toward them. They retreated in panic.*

*"Daniel, please," his mother was begging, again.*

*But she knew pleading with her husband was useless. He too knew it was useless. A spurt of anger overcame his fear*

*"Mom!" He was frantic as he tried to get her out of harm's way—to shield her. But he was too slow, way too slow. A backhanded blow caught her across the face. She stumbled into him and he awkwardly supported her weight.*

*"Leave her alone! Leave her alone!" he screamed as he tried to drag his mother behind him. But she was resisting. Trying to protect him!*

*"Steve!" she cried out.*

*But it made no difference. The man was on her in a flash, striking at her again.*

\* \* \* \*

*Wha...! Greg's eyes flew open. He sat up with a jerky gasp and looked around wildly. The streetlight dimly illuminated the room and as he picked out familiar objects he slowly relaxed.*

*With a deep sigh of relief he collapsed back on the pillow. Oh Crap! There was no man... no attack. He was home; his mother was safe. Greg rested his hands over his heart—in reassurance and to calm its erratic beat. It was just a dream. No, a nightmare! And it seemed unbelievably real. He took some deep breaths then rolled over. Automatically, he glanced at Garvin's bed,*

then paused. The lump on the bed did not look real. Why would Garvin be bundled under so many covers in mid May? Greg got up and slowly padded over to the next bed, his nightmare forgotten. He clenched his fist as he stared in fury at the empty bed. How could Garvin? He had given his word...!

Greg paced back and forth a few times, trying to concentrate. The result was scattered fragments of nothing, plus disturbing remnants of the nightmare. With a groan of disgust he gave up.

The room wasn't made for pacing anyway—what with two beds, two dressers, and too much junk. Garvin collected everything, and he kept his stuff in piles of assorted boxes beside, under and around his bed. Greg didn't know how he kept track of the different piles. There were boxes of stones, pens, stamps and coins. You name it, Garvin collected it.

Greg was the total opposite. Anything that couldn't fit into his dresser or under his bed was thrown out. There was a straight imaginary line dividing the room that even Garvin respected. Any junk that crossed the line was dumped.

After a bit he took a peek out the third-floor apartment's window that overlooked the street. Not much activity, which was normal; this was Paigetown, not the city. He glanced at his bedside clock radio. Twelve o'clock. It didn't even make sense to try to find Garvin. Greg had no idea what time Garvin had left. He frowned. Something was wrong.

Suddenly it hit him. He was no longer mentally linked with his dad! For a minute, a feeling of panic threatened to overwhelm him. Something was wrong. Did that mean...? He hated to imagine the worst. But what if his dad was dead? Greg sank down on the side of the bed. Much as he hated his dad, he did not want him dead! Bending forward, he covered his face in his hands. *Oh, no!* It was a strange feeling—not having the link. He couldn't read minds or anything, but throughout his life he had been aware of a mental link—a sort of emotional awareness—between him and his father. But now he felt nothing. His thoughts were blank. No.... Not blank; simmering in the background, just waiting to come out, was the nightmare. *No!* He didn't want to think about that now. Greg blinked back tears. His link was gone. He had expected it to go, just as his dad was gone. But still... as long as he had the link there had been a deep-seated hope that things would work out. After all, his reasoning went, how could he be linked mentally with someone who was not a part of his life? But now even that hope was gone. As he dashed a hand across his face, he realized how pointless it was to think about it. There was nothing he could do.

*Damn Garvin!* He did not doubt that Garvin had gone to visit his father. He tried unsuccessfully to repress his immediate and intense feeling of betrayal. *How could he? Again! And what if Mom found out? How could Garvin do this to her?* Greg turned and pummeled his pillow for a few mindless seconds. *Damn! Damn! Damn!* He finally collapsed on the bed, mentally if not physically exhausted. He would never again cry over that man. Never! After a few calming breaths, he sniffed. *What should he do now?* No sensible plan came to mind. Greg stretched out on his bed again. He would try to stay up....

About an hour later, Garvin slipped quietly into the room.

Greg watched in silence as his brother quickly removed his shoes and shirt and continued his preparations for bed. "That was some promise you made, huh? And fool that I was, I believed you."

Garvin jerked around, startled. "Mind your own business," he muttered.

"This is my business." Of necessity Greg's voice was low, but his intense feeling of frustration was clear. "How could you? Hell! After what he did? And we agreed we would never see him, no matter what. You promised!"

"YOU promised," Garvin retorted.

"You agreed with me." Greg could not believe what he was hearing.

"Shut the hell up!" Garvin's voice had risen. He now sat on the bed and made a visible effort at control. He lowered his voice and continued. "Look, Greg. You're only looking at one side. You could never see his side. Will you just listen...?"

"Listen! You retard! Did you forget that we were listening while he beat our Mom?"

"Damn it, Greg. He had a reason...."

"Yes! He's a vicious bastard! Hell, Garvin! How can you defend him after what he did? I don't believe I'm hearing this. How could you?"

"He's my father!" Garvin said violently.

There was total silence.

It was a low blow. A cruel, low blow and Greg had no comeback; it was the truth. Nine months ago—after a violent quarrel between his mother and the man he had called Dad all his life—he had learned the truth. Dad was not his father. Worse, he did not even know who his father was. His mother refused to talk. And Dad had walked out after striking his mother. No explanations. Nothing. The entire evening was still engraved in Greg's mind.

\* \* \* \*

It happened in mid-August. One evening their father was late picking them up from camp. Greg had been feeling uneasy all evening. Something was not right—but what? Because of the mind link he knew that his father was physically okay. But Greg knew something was wrong.

"What's up Dad?" Greg asked, as soon as he got into the car.

His father refused to make eye contact. "Nothing."

*This was bad*, Greg thought uneasily. *Real bad*. Greg wished he could read minds. But this link was not like that. Although Greg could always accurately sense feelings, he was never sure about events. When he was about five or six, and first became aware of the link, he used to believe his father was linked to him too. Now he was sure that it was a one-way link; his father had never indicated that he was aware of it.

Greg shot his brother a disturbed look.

Garvin just shrugged.

That meant nothing. He and Garvin were not always on the best of terms and Garvin would sometimes act casual just to annoy him, especially when Garvin knew he was upset.

The journey home was completed in silence. Greg turned to stare out the window. He was only vaguely aware as the car turned onto their street. He hugged his body as a horrible feeling of dread engulfed him. The silence remained unbroken as their father parked the car in the underground parking and they took the elevator up to their apartment.

Mom was home.

"Hi, darlings." She came toward them with a warm smile.

Without greeting her or saying a word, their father stalked toward the master bedroom.

She gave Garvin and Greg a puzzled glance, looking a little hurt.

Greg instinctively moved closer to her to comfort her. He loved his dad; he was mentally linked with his dad, but he still felt extraordinarily close to his mother. He sometimes wondered if he hadn't deliberately cultivated the closeness because of the strange link he had with his dad. "We don't know what's wrong."

She gave him a distracted look before absently brushing away his arms and following her husband into the bedroom.

The door closed.

Greg and Garvin stood outside the door and tried to listen. Their parents had a normal marriage, and they had their share of quarrels. But they always made up afterwards. Both boys expected the same results today. They were intensely curious, however.

But the quarrel taking place in the bedroom started as a low, indistinct rumble. At first their mother sounded pacifying—her tone a sharp contrast to the violent fury in her husband's voice. Gradually, however, her anger increased. The voices became louder, more strident.

"The truth! The truth! What the hell do you know about the truth?"

"Guy, please...."

"You just admitted you knew him. Damn you!"

"He was a friend. Just a friend. I've never...."

"Shut up!"

"Guy...."

A distinct sound followed—flesh striking flesh. Greg drew back in alarm and then started for the door as he heard his mother scream. A loud crash followed.

By this time Greg's hand was on the doorknob. He did not get a chance to turn the knob. The door flew open. The furious man standing there was barely recognizable as his father.

"Get the hell out of my way!"

Greg moved automatically, too shocked to do anything else.

His father dragged two suitcases out of the room. As he approached the door, he turned to point a furious finger at Greg. "You'd better tell her not to try getting child support for you. I have one son, and that's Garvin. You heard me, boy? I have one son." He slammed the door as he barreled out of the apartment.

Greg could only stare after him in shock. Then he heard his mother's quiet sobs. He took a quivering breath and rushed into the bedroom. His mother was on the floor, weeping and holding

her face. His father had hit her. It was obvious. Her face was already puffy from the blow. She had fallen, taking a standing lamp with her. As Greg hurried to her side, he tried to blank out what he had just heard, but the horror of his father's words was already beginning to overwhelm him.

"Mom! Mom! Are you alright?"

"Yes. Yes." She stared tearfully up at him. "Oh Greg. Oh Greg."

"He left," Greg stated unnecessarily, as he struggled to understand. Only by clamping down on his emotions could he refrain from breaking down completely. That would not help his mother now. He had to stay calm. His father worked as a computer specialist on a cruise ship and was at sea for about half the year. In general, he was away up to eight weeks at a time, which meant that they were often on their own. As the eldest, Garvin should have been the one to shoulder major responsibilities, but somehow it had always been Greg who took charge.

Now his mother allowed him to help her to her feet. He slowly guided her to the bed. She was still crying and holding her face. What should he do? Greg looked up. Garvin was still standing at the door. His face mirrored the shock Greg was feeling.

Greg sat on the bed with her. Garvin slowly entered the room and sat at her other side. He awkwardly patted her on her back as Greg hugged her close. Neither boy said anything. After what seemed like hours but was in reality only a few minutes, her sobs diminished, then finally stopped. She took a few shuddering breaths.

"Did he really leave?"

"Yes," Greg muttered. It was a shock seeing his mother in this condition.

She got slowly to her feet. They sat helplessly, watching as she walked to the window and stared out.

"He's your father," she finally said after a long silence. "Don't worry, Greg. He's your father. A paternity test will prove it."

Galvanized into action by her words, Greg jumped to his feet. "I don't want him as my father," he said furiously. "And I'm not going to give any blood to prove he is. Not after what he did to you."

"He was just angry," Garvin began.

"He had no right hitting her," Greg interrupted. "How can you defend him?"

Garvin gave a nervous laugh. "Come on, Greg. He's our father."

"No." Greg backed away. "He's YOUR father. Not mine. He's NOT my father."

"Greg!" his mother pleaded.

But he didn't want to hear. Suddenly it was just too much. He backed out of the room and then ran out of the apartment. Too furious and hurt to wait for the elevator, he took the stairs two at a time. And he was still running when he left the apartment building. He had no idea where he was going, or what he hoped to prove. The only plan was to get away, as fast and as far as he could.

A painful cramp in his side finally forced him to stop. Greg collapsed on the ground, panting and crying. It was now dark. Slowly, painfully, he got up. What should he do now? The last thing he wanted to do was go home—not right yet. After some deep breaths, he began walking—aimlessly. Since he was still linked to the man he used to call Dad, he was battling both his anger and his father's. Ruthlessly, he suppressed the link—deliberately focusing on his own emotions. It was like trying to blank out a tune that was stuck in memory but enough was enough. Right now he wanted nothing to do with that man.

Shortly after ten—he had been wandering for more than two hours—a police cruiser pulled up beside him. Until it stopped, Greg didn't even notice it, he was so deep in unwanted thoughts. Startled, he turned to run.

"Hold it! Stop right there!" a voice called out.

How many times had he been warned: never run from the police? Yet, instinctively, he did. And he would have gotten away, too, if he hadn't run up a dead end. Well, he should have known better. Many of these residential streets were dead ends. Greg turned, but before he could assess his situation he was brought down by a flying tackle. Once he was down, the questions began. When he remained silent the officer soon became annoyed, threatening to take him in because he was underage. Finally, after ordering him to stay still, the officer backed away and radioed in.

Greg was numb. He had stopped struggling as soon as he realized he could not escape. Now he just waited. He felt nothing, not even fear.

Later, at the police station, he continued his silence refusing to answer any questions. Although they could not charge him with any crime, as a juvenile he could be released only to an adult. They could only guess at his age, but Greg knew that he looked even younger than his fifteen years. They finally gave up, and would have locked him up for the night if his mother hadn't appeared. Fortunately for him, she had reported him missing and was therefore called in to identify a youth fitting his description.

She was furious. Greg didn't blame her, but he really didn't care. He silently listened to her lecture. Since he was incapable of dealing with it, he simply blanked it out. *Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow something will change.*

\* \* \* \*

Nothing changed the next day or the next month. In the intervening nine months things had gotten worse, not better. His mother had twice tried to get him to a clinic for blood testing. Since Greg knew that the whole point of the exercise was to do a paternity test, he had refused each time. He had threatened to run away if she forced the issue. So far she had not pushed it and Greg wasn't sure what he would do if she insisted. He did not want to have anything to do with *That Man*.

That was not the worst of his worries. A month after the breakup, through a lawyer, his father had demanded that he be allowed to have visitation rights—with Garvin only. It was

agreed that Garvin would visit him every other weekend. However, Greg and Garvin both decided never to see their father. With him away on the ship, keeping the promise had been easy so far. Then, two months ago, their father returned and Greg discovered that Garvin was seeing him secretly. After a major blow up—fortunately not witnessed by their mother—Greg had extracted Garvin's promise not to do so again. But now—now he had just discovered that Garvin's promises were worthless.

Greg didn't even try to break the silence. On one level he even understood Garvin's frustration and the need to see their father. *It's worse for me.* Technically, he had no father! There were times over the past few months when he'd been rational enough to realize that he was drowning himself in self-pity. Unfortunately, those times were few and far between; most of the time he just felt mad. He felt he had to do something, anything—just to get even. Never mind that he was mostly hurting himself! He hated *That Man*. And the conflicting fury and anger he was still occasionally picking up in the link, whenever he lowered his guard, definitely did not help.

Greg turned over and pretended to sleep. He was beginning to hate Garvin, too, because Garvin was starting to blame their mother for the breakup of the family—also, because Garvin was secretly seeing his father.

Both Greg and Garvin had trouble getting up the next morning. He sleepily turned off his alarm when the noise blared and didn't blink again until his mother's shouts woke him up.

"Garvin! Greg! It's past six. You know you have to get out by quarter-past-seven. Come on! I shouldn't have to wake you up. What did I give you alarms for?"

"I'm awake. I'm awake," Garvin grumbled, as he slid out of bed. "Greg is the one still sleeping."

Greg gave Garvin a hard glare before leaping out of bed. He made a dash for the door, but Garvin tackled him just as he reached it. Thump! They crashed to the floor. Although Greg was taller, Garvin was heavier; Greg knew from past encounters, that keeping Garvin down would be hopeless. Nevertheless, he tried.

"Let go. You weren't even thinking about the bathroom until I got up."

"Garvin! Greg! Stop it!" Their mother had opened the door. "I don't believe this. It's getting late, and you two are fighting. Over what?"

"Greg knew I was going straight into the bathroom and he tried to beat me to it," Garvin began.

"I don't want to hear this," their mother interrupted. "Garvin! You go first since Greg went first yesterday." She didn't add that since Greg generally woke as soon as his alarm rang, he almost always went first.

Garvin gave Greg a triumphant stare as he made his way to the bathroom. Greg scowled but said nothing—he knew he would now be late for school. Whether deliberately or not, Garvin always spent a good forty-five minutes in the bathroom.

"You should get up earlier." His mother was not sympathetic, although she, too, was well aware of Garvin's habit. No degree of cajoling, threats or punishments had ever got Garvin out of the bathroom quicker.

Greg turned away—annoyed. He hated getting to school late!

"What were you and Garvin arguing about late last night?"

Her question got Greg's prompt attention. "You heard?"

His mother shrugged. "Something woke me up." She ran a harried hand through her short black hair. She had only just taken the rollers out, so her action merely increased the confused tumble of curls. "I heard the murmurings."

Greg glanced in the direction of the bathroom. The door was closed. "Uh, nothing."

His mother stared in silence. Greg lowered his head and scuffed at the carpet with a bare toe.

Finally, she sighed. "Okay, Greg. I hope you would let me know if it was important."

"Sure, Mom," Greg said, with an uncomfortable shift, not quite able to meet her eyes.

Not surprisingly, she didn't appear to believe him. She sighed again. "I don't know why the two of you can't get along...."

Greg didn't bother answering that one. *Parents!* As far as he was concerned, he and Garvin got along fabulously, considering.... Besides, Greg knew that she knew exactly why he and Garvin were hardly talking. Before the big quarrel, Garvin had resented him. He mentally checked off the reasons. He got good grades effortlessly, while Garvin generally ended up failing. Garvin got held back, so now they were both in the same grade, although he was a year-and-a-half younger. And Garvin felt that their mother loved Greg best. A big lie, as far as Greg was concerned. He felt his mother often bent over backwards to be fair to Garvin. Since the quarrel, the resentment on Garvin's side was worse, since Garvin blamed him and his mother for the breakup. On his side.... Greg turned away. It really wasn't worth going there....

His life was spiraling hopelessly out of control. He couldn't seem to work up the effort to make the necessary changes. In fact, his behavior was deliberately complicating his life.

Greg spent some—if not all—of the first period in absentminded distraction. He was bored. Not that he missed much of the lecture. He had a phenomenal short-term memory and could play back virtually an entire lecture session in his head. He quickly packed up his workbook to head for the next class. Mr. Stevens, his biology teacher, called to him.

"Greg!"

Greg hesitated but did not turn around. "I'll be late for my next class." The last thing he wanted was a discussion of his class grades. He knew Mr. Stevens was disappointed in his work this school year.

"Two minutes. I'll follow you to the next class."

Greg reluctantly turned. Mr. Stevens matched his pace as they walked along the corridor.

"You know, Greg. I've never come across someone like you before. After our last talk, when was it—four, five months ago?--you've really surprised me."

Greg stared at the ground.

"I guess you have finally perfected your technique."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Greg muttered.

"No?" Mr. Stevens feigned a look of surprise. "Your grades were astounding last school year but surprise, surprise this year you have had a disastrous start. If you remember, last time we met with your mother about your grades. You were failing, or your grades were fluctuating wildly."

"They are much better now," Greg protested.

"I know." The teacher sounded almost amused. "I've checked with all your teachers. Straight C's. Even on class tests. That must take some effort. What do you do? Calculate how many questions you should answer before each test?"

*He was close.* Greg cleared his throat. In fact, that was one of the few challenges he still allowed himself.

"Just enough to get by," Mr. Stevens mused. "Just enough not to cause any more alarm, like us contacting your mother again."

"Listen," Greg interrupted, "I really have to go." He didn't want to hear the spiel again—how he was wasting his life. His life was now. And surviving meant getting from day to day without going crazy. Coping with a heavy workload now was out of the question. He was too frustrated and too angry. Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone? That was why he had deliberately improved his grades. After his first precipitous drop in grades, his mother had told the teachers about the separation and pending divorce but not the reason behind it. He was forced to get counseling and he had hated it. No way did he want anyone prying in his private life. As far as he was concerned, the counseling had turned out to be a waste of time. He had refused to cooperate.

"I want to see you after school," Mr. Stevens insisted.

Greg's jaws clenched.

"It's that or I call your mother again."

Greg acknowledged Mr. Steven's ultimatum with a nod. *Just another problem I don't need.*

Greg sighed and turned away. That was when he spotted Ray. Ray was a mixed kid—his mother was Swiss and his father Jamaican. Greg did not know what Ray's problem was, but this past year Ray had definitely been acting weird—worse than him, even. He and Ray had never been friends. Ray had always been a loner. They had first met a year ago in honors history class. Like him, Ray seemed to have had a precipitous drop in grades. They had both been dropped from their honors and AP classes and now both boys had a number of classes together and were slowly inching toward friendship. Inching was the word to use because half the time Greg wasn't sure he wanted to have anything to do with Ray. Last year, Greg had tended to stay away from him because, well... because! It was hard to buck the trend, and in this school race was a big issue—you stuck to your racial groups—or else. Greg used to feel he had enough problems—what with dealing with Garvin and all—he didn't feel like fighting the unspoken codes of school too. But this year he didn't care whether the other kids accepted him or not. Ray, however, was definitely trouble. He disrupted classes and was always thinking up some wild plan. Greg was

listening, and the temptation to follow through on some of the wilder plans was getting too hard to resist.

"What's up, Greg?" Ray had spotted him at the same time.

"Nothin', man. You?" Greg asked as he approached.

"How about a trip to Manhattan?"

"Manhattan?"

"Yeah. After school. I know a place we can see movies for three dollars."

"Well...." It didn't sound like a bad idea to Greg. But he wasn't sure his mother would allow it.

"C'mon, man. My dad isn't home until late tonight and the last thing I want to do is spend the entire evening by myself. I figure we could go and get back by ten, eleven."

Greg felt a stirring of excitement. This might be just what he needed. He wouldn't tell his mom. She would just say no. Greg thought quickly. He could tell her he was spending some time at a friend's house. *Yeah! That was it.* Going straight home was depressing anyway. He would do it!

"Okay. Sounds good. I have to see the bio teacher after school but I'll meet you by the lockers when I can."

As he had expected, Mr. Steven gave him a long spiel about career paths and how messing up your life now can mess up your future. Greg listened in silence. He was aware that Mr. Stevens was putting out an effort for him and he wished he could appreciate the help, but right now he wanted to be left alone. There were better ways of solving his problems, true, but he didn't feel up to trying Mr. Steven's way.

Finally, Greg gave his watch a pointed glance. Mr. Stevens noted his action but would have ignored him if someone hadn't rapped at the door.

"Come in," the teacher called.

It was another teacher. Greg grinned in relief.

"Do you have a minute?" the teacher asked.

"Sure. This is an ongoing problem. I can always get back to it later." Mr. Stevens gave Greg another warning look. "You can go now, Greg, but just remember what I said. I'll be watching you."

Greg couldn't get out fast enough.

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