
L.B. Tillit
WARNING:
MATURE CONTENT
Edge
of
Ready

CHAPTER 1

Dani

I should have never been born. That's what my daddy said before he shut the door. I never saw him again.

True, I was only three, but I can still see his long black hair fall into his face. He pushed it back with one hand as he opened the door with the other. He spit words out in Spanish. I don't know what he said, but Mom cried and yelled, "You better not come back." So he didn't.

Mom took me in her arms. Her skin looked black against my chubby brown legs. She said we could do this, just the two of us. I believed her.

We moved a week later. Mom said we didn't need three bedrooms. She said smaller was better. I believed her.

By the time I was seventeen I knew she had lied. We moved because she didn't want Daddy to find us. She also needed a cheap place.

But I didn't care. West Street was my home and I was just happy to have my own room while Mom shared her

room with Benny. Benny is my baby brother. When I was sixteen Mom thought she had a thing going with her white boss at Ted's Rest Hotel across town. It was going to move us out of here. The minute he found out Benny was on the way it was over. Mom wept for weeks. She cried, "We're stuck!"

I just held her and said, "Mom, why do you want to get out?" When she didn't speak I said, "You always said this was better than where we were before."

"You're right, Dani." She took my hand and wiped her tears. "It is better. I just want more for you, baby."

"More?" I looked at my mom. Her dark skin was smooth and beautiful. She didn't have a muffin top like I did. I kept waiting for my baby fat to go away. I was in for a long wait. I would never look like Mom. I could see why men liked her. Why they wanted her. But for the first time I saw some gray beginning to color her hair.

"You have to finish school!" Mom looked at me as I rolled my eyes. She always went back to the school thing. "Dani Garcia, don't you roll your eyes at me!" She pointed her finger in my face. "You want to be stupid and let others decide for you?"

"No, Mom," I said, just like always. She looked at me and smiled.

"Whatever happens, school comes first!" Mom said it like she meant it. I believed her.

Then along came Benny. His blue eyes shocked both of us. So I called him my white brother. I guess he's not much whiter than me since my dad was Hispanic.

I hated it when people tried to talk Spanish with me since I didn't know any. Just because I looked like a Garcia didn't mean I could *say* anything. Kids teased me when I was younger, calling me stupid. They backed off when I learned to cuss them out in Spanish. They didn't ask me to speak Spanish again.

At seventeen I was facing my last year of school. I was facing graduation. Easy, right? Wrong!

CHAPTER 2

Ruth

Ruth was my best friend. She had been since we moved to West Street. It was easy to be her friend. She lived in the same building, and we went to school together. She never teased me about my dad being Hispanic. Maybe that's why I liked her.

As we grew together, we stayed friends. But when we were twelve, I could tell she was more into boys than I was. She would say, "Come on, Dani! Chris likes you. Come on, kiss him! It feels real good." I hated Chris, a neighbor who was twice as fat as me. I guess Ruth thought we made a pair. She thought wrong. I could see him staring at me, and I would just want to puke.

"I want to kiss someone I love!" I would say to Ruth. She would look at me and laugh.

"You're stupid! Boys don't love you. They just want you!" She'd punch me and I'd tell her to shut up.

Still, we were friends. She never teased me about finishing school. I think she told people she stayed in school to watch my back. But really she stayed because she liked boys. She liked boys wanting her. She didn't mind letting them have her.

Still, we were friends.

CHAPTER 3

Evron and Keon

Most of my world seemed to have a phone, so I asked Mom if I could have one too. Since Benny was born, Mom wanted to reach me when she needed to. So she bought me a cell phone with prepaid minutes. Mom chewed me out because I used up my whole $20 card in one day talking to Ruth. Mom told me we didn't have money to burn and she asked why I was talking to Ruth on the phone when I could just go over to her house. So that's what I did.

Ruth had two brothers. At eighteen, Evron was beautiful, if you can call a boy beautiful. His skinny teen years were over. I liked it when he showed off his six pack. His dark skin was so smooth that I longed to reach out and see if his beauty would rub off on me. But he never looked at me. When I was with Ruth, he'd come and go without saying a word.

But Keon, who was two years older, always talked to me. He was tall and not bad to look at either. His hair was

so short he looked like he was in the Army. He said he packed meat at the Market Place and had to keep a clean cut. I think he made it up, but it made him feel big.

Keon was the only one in the family that had graduated. He made sure everyone knew it, and he always told Ruth she better not drop out. Not like Evron. Ruth said they'd never make it without Keon's paycheck since their father left.

Their mother and Keon worked all the time while Evron just liked to hang out all day. He spent a lot of time on his phone. He liked to show off how fast he could text. I wanted to believe he was just hanging out and texting with friends, but deep down I knew better. There was no way he could look so hot in his clothes. There was no way he could pay for his phone without some extra money coming in. I just pushed the thought away.

It was Saturday. We had just finished our first week back at school. I was hanging out at Ruth's. Like always, Saturday was spent on her couch watching TV. When the boys were younger, they'd watch TV too. But mostly they were gone. That morning was different. That morning the boys were home.

"So it's your senior year?" Keon asked me as he took a sip of soda.

I sat down on the couch with him and smiled. "Yeah. I can't believe it." I turned to see if Evron had already left.

When I looked back, I saw Keon frown. He pushed the look away and took another sip. “So are you going to make it?”

I stopped smiling. “What’s that mean?”

Just then Evron walked through the bedroom door. He stopped before he got to the front door and looked at me. *He* looked at *me*. He looked at me. My heart stopped. He winked and then left. I looked at the closed door and smiled.

“That’s what I mean!” Keon jumped up and walked into the bedroom. He slammed the door. I sat there dazed. What had just happened?

“Don’t worry about Keon!” Ruth said as she plopped down next to me. “He’s like the dad around here.” She smiled and said, “I think Evron is checking you out.” She tried to reach to pinch my cheek, but I slapped her hand.

Soon we both started to giggle like little girls. I couldn’t help but whisper into Ruth’s ear. “Your brother’s so fine!” She knew which one I was talking about.

CHAPTER 4

September

The first month of school was okay. My English class was hard, but I knew I was almost done with school. I could push through any hard classes. Mrs. Grady pulled me aside after class one day. Her little white self got up really close. I could smell the smoke on her. The wrinkles just spread wide into a smile. "Now Dani, hon, you're doing really well."

"Thanks, Mrs. Grady." I smiled and stepped back. Her breath just about knocked me out.

The old lady stepped in again. "Tell me, dear. How is your mother?"

I stepped away again. I could tell she dyed her hair red, really red. "Fine." I was short and sweet. Why did she want to know anyway?

The smile faded for a moment. It was like she was thinking. She was trying to come up with something else to say. I finally started to turn and go. I felt her hand on

my arm, “Dani?” She was smiling again, but it was not the same. “I heard she had a baby.”

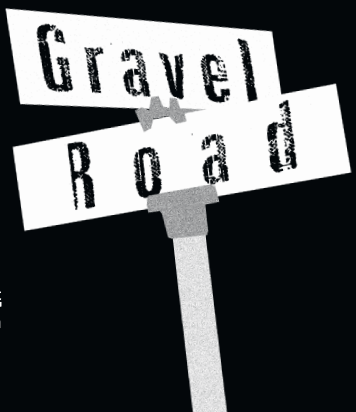
I looked at her funny. “So?” I didn’t mean to be rude, but there it was.

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Grady shook her head. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I just want you to keep doing your best.”

Something hurt deep down. Wasn’t I always doing my best? Why did people keep making me feel like I might not make it? I looked at her and tried to be nice, but my edge was still there. “Ma’am, I think I have shown I can do it. Thank you, but it really is none of your concern.” As I turned to leave I saw Mrs. Grady look at me. I couldn’t help feeling that she knew something I didn’t know.

Edge of Ready

Whatever happens, school comes first. Her mother said it like she meant it. These words played over and over again in Dani Garcia's head. But life got in the way. There were mouths to feed and rent to pay. Plus someone had to watch baby Benny. Dani knew adversity, but she was the kind of strong that comes from within: strong in mind, body, and soul. Then a horrible event and its powerful aftermath threatens to bring Dani's life crashing down—forever.



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