

# UNCHAINED



**L.B. Tillit**

## CHAPTER 1

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# Bad

I wasn't born mean. I hated the word "mean." But being bad was great. It got Mom and Dad to at least look at me. And that's all I wanted.

I started being bad when I was little. Real little, like five. I couldn't figure out why Mom and Dad didn't play with me or touch me anymore. I remember that there had been times before when they did. I thought I had done something to make them stop. So I cried. When that didn't work, I would go up to them and hit. I was reaching for anything.

Mom and Dad didn't do much when I hit them. I wanted them to do something. Even hit me back. They just sat on the couch in a fog of smoke. The smoke made my head spin. I didn't get it then. I get it now. They were so high that they didn't know I was there.

It wasn't always bad with both of them. One time I

remember opening the fridge. I wanted something to eat. Anything. There were three things in the fridge. Milk, old cheese that looked green, and one can of soda. I couldn't open the soda, so I started to drink the milk. I put my lips on the jug and tried to drink it. Lumps filled my mouth. I choked a little. Then I spit out a sour mess all over my shirt and the floor. I screamed.

Dad walked in the kitchen. Standing in his boxers he looked at me and cursed. He looked at me. Actually looked at me. "TJ, you clean up that mess!" He threw me a towel, and I cried while I wiped the mess off of me and the floor.

Then I took the towel and threw it at his legs. The white lumps smeared his black legs like paint. I yelled, "I'm hungry!" I stood up and faced the man. "I hate you!" My little hands balled up in fists. I had pulled my shirt off, and I could see my stomach. Spots of white milk stuck to my own dark skin. I didn't care. I was mad. I was hungry.

Dad stared at for me a minute. Then he started to laugh. "Thomas Jahmal Young! You think you can take me?" He ran after me as I took off into the living room, if you could call it that. It had barely enough room for a small couch and TV. He tackled me in front of Mom. She was on the couch and woke up out of a deep sleep. She watched him pin me down. He was laughing. He took his nasty legs and wiped the curds all over my belly. I almost looked white. Then we both started laughing.

“What’s going on?” Mom wasn’t sure if she should get mad or not.

Dad held me for a moment longer. His grip loosened. I could feel something I hadn’t felt in a long time. He rubbed my head and looked at Mom. “Baby, it looks like we need some food.” He rubbed my skin. “Our milk has turned into paint.”

I giggled. I hadn’t giggled much lately.

Mom didn’t smile. She turned over on the couch and said, “You go get some. Just leave me alone.” Without looking at me she went back to sleep.

## CHAPTER 2

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# The Beginning

School was great. At first. My teachers in kindergarten and first grade thought I was cute. When I'd be rude, they'd laugh. One teacher even said she wished she could take me home. Now I look back and wish she had.

At first I think Mom and Dad were good at getting me to school. They couldn't get me out the door fast enough. Even if I felt sick they made sure I would catch the school bus that stopped at the corner. I only had to walk a few minutes to get there. It wasn't hard since other kids from my building were walking too. Billy was one of them. He was Black too and was a little taller than me. He lived on the first floor, and we would play together on the playground. I would watch Billy hold his mother's hand as they waited for the big, yellow bus to pull up. I wanted to reach out and hold her hand too. I didn't understand why

Mom couldn't walk me to the stop, and she told me that holding hands was for babies.

That's when I first started to be mean. At age seven I'd get on the bus and call Billy a baby. "Baby Billy holds Mommy's hand." I would yell until the bus driver made me stop. But it was always too late. Billy would already be crying. He didn't play with me on the playground after that.

## CHAPTER 3

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# Kaden

**I**t didn't take long before Mom bought me an alarm. By third grade she was getting calls from school about how I was starting to miss school. She hated talking to anyone at school. She didn't trust teachers. She always said that they were judging her. They thought they were better than her. I didn't see it. I didn't believe her. I knew that getting up was not something Mom wanted to do. Dad had odd jobs when he wasn't high, so I couldn't count on him. I spent all of third and fourth grade getting myself to school.

I went to school because there was nothing better to do. I wanted to do well. I also loved math. I guess I was good at it. It felt good to see the looks on other kids' faces when they'd see that A on my test. They didn't think a kid like me could get good grades. But my grades really didn't matter to Mom or Dad. So the teacher's threats about getting my

homework done didn't bother me. I did well enough on tests. I soon figured they wouldn't fail me even if I never did homework. I made it all the way through eighth grade. I did just what I needed to do and no more.

I had better things to do. I spent little time at home. Mom and Dad didn't care anyway. For a few years I hung around my building. I would start at the playground. It wasn't long before most kids didn't want to play with me. They said I always wanted things my way.

At age thirteen I was bored. That's when I met Kaden Cruz. He was a couple of years older. He was leaning against the fence at the far end of the playground.

"Hey." He smiled at me as I walked toward him. I had never met him, and I had nothing better to do. I thought his cut-off shirt looked cool. His light brown skin boasted a small tattoo. It looked like a band wrapped around his wrist. I couldn't quite see what it was. I didn't want to look too hard. I was afraid he'd get mad. Like it was none of my business.

"Hey." I nodded at him.

"TJ, right?" he asked.

I tried not to look surprised. "Yeah. How'd you know?" I shifted to lean on the fence as well.

"Been watching you." The boy nodded toward the playground. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad, so I just



noded back. There was some silence before he said, “I’m Kaden Cruz.” He reached out his hand and I took it. He squeezed it and pulled my shoulder into his shoulder and then backed off again. We looked like two kids trying to be tough. I didn’t realize then how tough we really were.

## CHAPTER 4

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# North Side

**D**o you want to take off?" Kaden looked at me. I paused. I frowned a little, not sure where he wanted to go. As bad as I thought I was, I never really left my street. Kaden nodded at the playground. "Or is there something holding you back?"

I took a look at the kids who were still hanging around the swings. I heard Billy laugh and quickly turned to look at Kaden. I knew those kids didn't want me around. So I shrugged my shoulders trying to look real relaxed. I'd been walking the streets in my neighborhood on the north side of the city a long time. How would this be any different? Still, my heart raced when I answered, "Sure, why not?" I didn't look him in the eye. I didn't want him to see my fear.

We walked down Hillside Avenue for a few blocks. I had passed Thirty-Second Street on my own all the time. But it was different when I wasn't leading. We hit Railroad

Avenue and turned left. I took a quick look back down my street and could barely see my apartment building. It was lined up with ten other buildings. They looked like huge giants ready to march.

“What?” Kaden’s voice broke into my thoughts. “Are you coming?”

I turned to face Railroad Avenue. I knew it wasn’t much different than Hillside. On my left, buildings and old houses stood close together. But on my right, the old railroad bed was still showing. Some rusted tracks poked through the dirt and others had been moved. I ran with Kaden across the road to walk along the old railroad bed. We were behind a very large building.

“Hey, it’s Walmart!” I said and suddenly felt like a little kid. Kaden just nodded. I added, “I’ve been in there from the Market Street side.” I paused. “Lots of times ... with Dad.”

“So?” Kaden didn’t stop walking.

“Nothing really. Just have never thought about coming at it from this side.” I decided to shut up.

“You’ll do lots of things you never thought of ...” Kaden finally smiled. “If you stick with me.”

I didn’t answer but followed him up the street. We passed behind the bowling alley, and I decided not to point it out. We walked until the railroad bed ended and

hit School Road. I started to turn left down the road and guessed we were headed toward North Side Middle School and High School. They were only a couple of blocks down the road. I knew School Road well, so I kept walking.

“Where are you going?” Kaden’s voice was behind me. I turned and saw he wasn’t leaving Railroad Avenue. He had only wanted to cross the road again. He had stopped in front of an old house. It sat between two other houses that looked just the same. Except for the paint color. It looked like Kaden lived in the yellow one.

I didn’t say anything. By the time I caught up with him, he was opening the door. I didn’t stop. Not for one second. I walked right on in. The room had a few couches and some posters of beautiful women on the wall.

“Hey, Kaden. Who’s this?” A man about twenty with biceps the size of melons was sitting on a couch. He looked Black, but his long dark hair pulled back told me he was part Hispanic.

“Hey, BB.” Kaden slapped my back. “This is TJ.”

BB kept staring at me. He lifted his arms behind his head and flexed his muscles. I didn’t want to look, but I couldn’t help it. I noticed he had the same tattoo around his wrist. It looked like a small chain. I suddenly remembered my father telling me about the Hillside Vipers. The gang members wore tattooed chains around their wrists. I realized

I may have gotten in over my head. I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded.

I felt a breath on my shoulder. A deep voice whispered, "So you brought us fresh meat?" I thought I would piss in my pants. A tall, white-looking boy with no hair started to squeeze my neck with his hand. I saw the same chain tattooed on his wrist.

"Shut up, Brian!" Kaden shoved him away from me. Brian fell on the couch next to BB, where they started to laugh. I thought Brian looked about seventeen. I took a deep breath and tried to smile. I wanted to show I could handle a joke.

"Brian and BB like to mess with everyone." Kaden pulled me into the kitchen and opened the fridge. "You want something to drink?"

"Sure." I was glad to move away from the laughter.

"Just take what you want." Kaden held the fridge door open. It was packed. There was Coke and Pepsi and beer and vodka. I stood there for a few minutes before Kaden got mad. "Take something or not!"

I took a Coke, and we walked back into the other room. I watched Kaden take a handful of chips from the bag on the table. So I took some too.

"That's my food!" BB looked serious.

"Thanks!" I said, not knowing what else to say.

Brian started to laugh. But BB shot him a glance and

he stopped. He looked at me again, “So I heard you’re a tough guy.”

I looked at Kaden and suddenly knew this was all planned. He stared back at me and gave me a “what’s your problem” look. I looked back at BB “It depends what you mean by tough.” I gulped the Coke down as if I’d never had one before. BB nodded for Brian to get up. He did. He was back in a second and threw a second can of Coke my way. I caught it. Then I smiled, “If it means sitting at home watching TV and drinking what I want all day, I’ll be tough!”

They all laughed.

“Yeah! That’s it!” BB looked right at me. I knew that was not what he meant. BB knew that too.

## CHAPTER 5

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# Why Now?

Where you been?" Dad stood at the door as I came into the kitchen. It had been a month since I met Kaden, and all we had done was hang at his house after school. Sometimes BB, Brian, and other guys and even girls were there. The most I counted was twenty. Some had names like Bulldog, Snake, or Candy. But most kept their own names. Sometimes they got high or drunk. Sometimes not. Sometimes a few of the guys would disappear upstairs with the girls. Sometimes not.

I was turning fourteen in a couple of days, and the boys told me they had something for me. Summer was coming, and all I could think about was spending more time with them.

"What?" I looked at Dad like he was a stranger. He was sober and his face was serious.

"Where you been?" He stood in the doorway, so I

couldn't move into my small room on the other side of the kitchen.

I looked him straight in the eye, "Why do you care?" I tried to shove past him.

He grabbed my arm. "You're my son!" He never took his eyes away from mine.

"Since when?" My words cut. I wanted them to cut. "What? You going to hit me now? You don't have it in you. Why don't you go smoke something!" I pulled my arm away from his grip. Before I turned, I took one last jab, "That's the only way I know you! High and gone!"

Dad followed me to my room. It didn't have a door. It was broken and gone long before we ever moved in. I plopped down on the mattress on the floor. I tried to close my eyes so the man with tears in his eyes would go away. But he didn't.

"You're right." His voice was weak. "You're right." I opened my eyes and frowned. I stared. He continued. "I've seen you with that Cruz boy. You take off with him and do God knows what."

"Nothing, Dad. We do nothing." I sat up and shook my head.

Dad's eyes became hard. "Nothing *yet*."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" I sneered.

"You'll see." He was calm. "You're with the Hillside Vipers, right? They're feeding you, right?" I just stared, so



he continued. “You get what you want, food, movies, and some friends.”

“So?” I spat.

“It’s not free, son!” He came and sat next to me. “You’ll have to pay them back one day.”

I frowned. I shook my head, but deep down I knew he was right. I knew it all along.

“Why now?” I asked Dad.

“What?” He looked at me.

“Why do you suddenly care now?” I felt anger well up inside.

Dad just stared at me. He couldn’t answer me. He had no excuse. He had no reason. He was who he was. I had to take that moment for what it was. It was mine.

# UNCHAINED

After two years in a loving home, TJ's mother got him back. She was clean. No pot. No meth. His chest felt like it was burning. His heart was racing. Trapped. He felt trapped. He didn't have a say. Everything he had come to care about was gone. And the brutal life he'd escaped quickly reclaimed him. Kaden Cruz didn't run after him. Instead his voice boomed, "You owe us." TJ didn't look back. But he knew this wasn't the end of Kaden Cruz. He could still hear his father's voice.

*It's not free. You'll have to pay them back one day.*

Gravel  
Road

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