



UNCHAINED

L.B. Tillit

CHAPTER 1

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

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

Kaden

It 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 nodded

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.

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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.*

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