



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.

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™

 **SADDLEBACK**
EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING
www.sdlback.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-61651-792-2
ISBN-10: 1-61651-792-1



9 781616 517922

90000



SCREAMING
QUIETLY

evan jacobs

CHAPTER 1

Practice

Ian didn't think it was possible to sweat more that afternoon. Football practice had worn him out. He was just happy it was Friday. The end of hell week. Then school started the following Thursday.

This would be Ian's first year playing as a wide receiver for Davis High School. He had been at the school since last fall but arrived too late to play.

At his old school when he was a freshman, Ian had a reputation as one of the best frosh-soph football players. Of course Coach Banks and Coach Geary, the varsity and junior varsity coaches, didn't let Ian

know they knew this. They just threw him in with the JV team. Ian could see they were impressed. Especially when he met all of their challenges. Whether it was testing his speed, endurance, or ability to pick the right moves to make, Ian never seemed phased. He never seemed rattled.

For Ian Taylor the grueling activity of the football field was a welcome change from the chaos of his life.

Practice was winding down.

As much as Ian had sweat, as much as he had run, as much energy as he'd used up, he still felt pretty good. All the other players had their mouths open. They looked exhausted. Something about this always inspired Ian. It made him try harder. He was still sweating a lot, but none of that seemed to matter. He was in a zone. Everybody was waiting for practice to be over. Ian was waiting for the next play. He didn't care that this was

just his team playing against itself in a scrimmage.

“You play how you practice,” Ian told himself.

Everybody wearily took their spots in the formation. Ian was already at his. He stood at the ready, his muscles tensing, ready to take off across the field.

“Hike,” the quarterback called. The ball was in play.

Ian moved across the field as if practice had just started. He could almost feel Coach Geary, the JV cheerleaders, and some of the people in the bleachers watching him. He moved to the area of the field where the least amount of players were. Ian quickly whipped around. The pass traveled through the air. It was as if the quarterback had been waiting for Ian to catch it.

Ian had always been a good judge of where the ball was going to land. He

saw the other players on the team moving toward him. Ian began moving again. The ball glided into his hands. It was so effortlessly done that Ian didn't really even feel it land. Before he knew it, he had run under the goal post, leaving the other players who sought to tackle him behind by many yards.

It may as well have been miles.

“Good scrimmage, Taylor. Great field instincts. Great hustle,” Coach Geary said as Ian walked with some of his teammates toward the showers. Everyone seemed to be hobbling along. Ian had a lot of spring in his step.

When he got to his locker, he checked his cell phone.

His mom had called. He'd call her later.

Jessica Barnes had texted him. “What r u doing tonight?” she asked.

He'd have to think about that and text her back. As was usually the case with Ian Taylor, he had to think before making his next move.

Even the small ones.

CHAPTER 2

Evasion Tactics

Come on, Ian ...” Shawn went on. “You never hang out.”

“I do to,” Ian said. Ian, Shawn, and Ryan were walking across the school’s practice field. “I just can’t today.”

“We barely saw you at all this summer,” Ryan offered.

Ian was used to hearing this. He never hung out. He never went to parties. He rarely did anything with his friends.

Then Ian remembered that he still needed to call his mom and return Jessica’s text.

“I’m doing something with Jessica,”

he said. The guys couldn't give him any grief about that. Jessica was a girl. What high school boy wouldn't ditch his friends to hang out with a girl? Especially Jessica Barnes. She had flowing blonde hair and a perfect complexion. Jessica had eyes that seemed to scoop you up, willingly or otherwise, whenever you looked into them.

"Oh, that's right," Shawn said, his tone softening. "You guys have been hanging out."

"Yeah," Ian said. They hadn't been hanging out that much, but he wasn't going to tell Shawn or Ryan that. "Maybe we can go to the movies tomorrow?"

Shawn shrugged.

"With Jessica?" Ryan asked. He was unable to hide his excitement.

"No," Ian said. "Just us."

"Ahhh ... I was hoping she could bring some friends."

Ian walked with them for a little while longer, then cut out.

The master of evasion had struck again.

Ian was going to text Jessica. But first he had to call his mom. She probably wanted to make sure he was going to be home to take care of his brother, Davey. The brother that nobody knew he had. At this school anyway.

It hadn't been that bad when Davey was younger. All of Ian's friends seemed to accept that his brother was "different." And they mostly ignored him. But as Davey got older, he became harder for everybody to ignore. That's when Ian started keeping secrets.

Davey's autism was all that Ian's mom talked about back then. Ian had heard his mom talk about it so many times that he couldn't even pinpoint when he knew his brother had autism.

By the time Davey was in kindergarten, he was known for being a tough kid. He wasn't tough in a talk back, disrespectful kind of way. He just got frustrated by the simplest things. When this happened, it didn't matter where he was, it didn't matter who was around him. Davey would go off.

He'd bite others or himself, kick, scream, cry, pull hair, and scratch. A lot of the time Ian, his mom, and his dad (before his parents got divorced) would have no idea what the problem was or how to calm him down.

This was stuff Ian had heard about or witnessed. He could only imagine the stuff Davey had done that his parents hadn't told him about. When his dad lived at home, his parents would argue about Davey and what he had done on a particular day. It seemed like they were constantly arguing.

Back then Ian always knew when Davey had a problem in school because one of his parents' cars would be in the driveway when he got home. A lot of times, if he was having a tantrum about something, Ian would hear Davey screaming as he approached the house. A few times Ian had friends with him. As soon as he'd hear those all-too-familiar shrieks, Ian knew he had to act quickly. He'd tell a potential guest he had chores to do. He'd forgotten about them. He couldn't hang out any longer. Or he'd say they had to go somewhere else because he just remembered his parents didn't want anybody over that day.

Anything.

Anything he could think of to get out of that situation and keep Davey a secret. The neighbors knew about him. A lot of people knew at the first house they lived in. But after the divorce, Ian, his mom, and

Davey moved. The only people who knew about him now—about his brother with autism—were family and the neighbors. After the move, Ian stopped having friends come over.

Davey needed to be in a special class: an autism-specific class with people like him. Ian's schools had never had a class like that. Ian was safe. Safe in his world. As long as he didn't let anybody in, how would anybody find out that there was a kid like Davey in the Taylor house?

Ian called his mom. She worked as a sales rep at a medical supply company. He usually got her voicemail when he called. When her familiar message came on, Ian hung up the phone. If she wanted him for anything, it was probably for Davey. And Ian was on his way home anyway.