

## CHAPTER 011

---

### DARK SECRET OF SHALE SNYDER

I hid in a closet underneath the stairs—my safe house. Nobody would find me here. The ceiling was too low. I don't think anyone knew about the small room but me.

After the accident, the closet became my friend. I wanted to avoid Judd, who came over to visit Chumana. She was not my sister but we lived together.

The door creaked as I turned the handle. I held my breath and peered through the tiny slit. Moving shadows darkened the room. Judd, Rachel, and Chumana stared into a small brown shoebox.

Chumana burst out crying. "I hate Shale."

I cringed. She already hated me anyway, ever since my mother and me moved in with them a few months earlier.

Rachel stood and recited a Jewish prayer. "*Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed.* Blessed is the name of his glorious kingdom forever and ever." With her unkempt hair, puffy red eyes, and flushed face, I barely recognized my best friend.

"Why are you praying?" Judd snapped. "We aren't here to pray."

"Accidents happen," Rachel said.

"She should be cursed," Judd exploded.

"Don't say that," Rachel said.

"How do you know it was an accident?" Chumana asked.

I looked away. I couldn't listen. My whole body shook—what kind of curse?

Judd's voice cracked. "I demand she tell us what happened."

The three twelve-year-olds sat silently for a moment before Rachel responded. "She fell down the stairs with Fifi, and she's afraid."

I swallowed hard.

Judd pulled his uncle's Atlanta Braves cap over his eyes and clinched his hand into a fist. "I hope Shale never has any friends—for the rest of her life." He covered his face and sobbed.

I bit my fingernail holding back tears. I'd never heard a boy cry. Could his curse come true?

Chumana's red hair matched her fiery temper. "That's not enough of a curse. She already doesn't have any friends."

"I'm her friend," Rachel said. "Accidents happen."

Rachel lived two buildings down from us in the Hope Garden Apartments. Would she still be my friend if I told her the truth? I didn't just fall—it was what I was doing when I fell. I was too afraid. I rubbed my swollen ankle, a reminder of my foolishness. The doctor hoped it would heal, but Fifi lay in the box.

Probably God hated me, too. If I told the truth, everyone would hate me. I couldn't even tell my mother. My father—he left me long ago.

## TWO YEARS LATER

I felt a hand reach underneath my blue skirt. I spun around on my toes. Students in the crowded hallway blended into a blur of anonymity. Hurried bodies shoved past. Am I going crazy? Did I imagine it? I scanned faces and froze each one, like a snapshot with a camera.

Rachel was waiting at the hall lockers. “Shale, why are you standing there? Come on or you’ll be late to class.”

I walked towards her as the bell rang.

She furrowed her brow. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I smiled, pretending nothing had happened. I’d think about it later. “Did you finish your analysis of *As You Like It*?”

Rachel’s brown eyes bulged. “Is it due today?”

“Here’s mine. You can take a quick look.”

“Oh, thanks, Shale. I hate Shakespeare anyway. No copying, promise. Just a peek.”

“It’s no different from reading Spark Notes on the web,” I quipped.

When we walked into English class at Garden High School, I sat in the seat closest to the door and stared out into the darkened hallway. Who did it? What would I do if I caught him? Mrs. Wilkes’s voice brought me back to reality as she recited from a Shakespearean play.

“All the world’s a stage.  
And all the men and women merely players  
They have their exits and their entrances  
And one man in his time plays many parts  
His acts being seven ages.”

What was my part? At fourteen, did I have one yet?

\*~\*~\*~\*

Later in the afternoon, I tripped while stepping off the school bus, scattering my books over the ground. My bum ankle from the accident two years earlier would catch at the worst possible moment—what I considered my eternal punishment.

Scrambling to pick them up, I wiped the red Georgia clay off my math book. The bus waited long enough to make sure it wouldn’t run me over before pulling away.

“Hey, wait up, ya’ll.” I walked faster to catch up as Rachel stopped, but Chumana and Judd kept going. We still lived in the same apartment complex on the south side of Atlanta.

“If you used a backpack, you wouldn’t have dropped your books,” Rachel chided me.

“Mine broke.” I scanned Rachel’s back. “Where’s yours?”

“I did my homework at school.” Rachel waved a thick book with strange-looking letters in the air. “This is all I needed.”

“Can you read that stuff?”

“Sure,” Rachel laughed, “but I don’t know what it means. You could too if I taught you.” Rachel flipped to the first page. “You start on this side.” Her finger pointed to a line of Hebrew, and she ran her finger across the page from right to left.

“Really?”

“Yes.” Rachel giggled. “So who reads backwards, the English or the Jews?”

“I’d say the Jews. I can say that since I’m not Jewish, right?”

“Why not?”

“Writing would sure be easier if English was right to left. I wouldn’t smear my words.”

Rachel nodded. “I forget you’re left-handed. It’s crazy, isn’t it—like the Brits drive on the left side and we drive on the right.”

We walked for a while not saying anything. I glanced at my friend with her striking olive skin, almond brown eyes, and brown hair. “Do you like being Jewish?”

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t know any different.”

“I wish I was Jewish.”

“Why?” Rachel asked.

“It would be neat to be able to say I was something.”

“You could go to church,” Rachel suggested.

“Mom and Remi would never go. Every time they talk about God or anything religious, they end up fighting.”

Rachel flinched. “That’s too bad. By the way, thanks for your help with English.”

“You’re welcome.” I switched my books to the left. I hated the long walk home, especially since we now lived farther away. The new unit we moved into when Remi and mother married was at the very back by the woods.

Rachel frowned, noticing my musings. “What’s it like having a father now?”

I bit my lip. “At least I have my own bedroom and don’t have to share with Chumana.”

“That’s good,” Rachel agreed. “How did you ever end up living with her anyway?”

“Mother didn’t have any money when we moved to Atlanta. She found an ad that Chumana’s mother placed in the *Atlanta Constitution* looking for a roommate. It was a cheap place to live.”

I eyed Judd and Chumana ahead of us. “What are they talking about? They have been spending a lot of time together.”

Rachel lowered her voice. “I know.”

“Maybe they deserve each other.”

Rachel edged up closer to me and spoke in a whisper. “You never knew your father, right?”

“No.” I double clutched my books that now seemed heavier. “Mother couldn’t wait to marry Remi after being divorced for so many years. Then she cried all night when they returned from their honeymoon. I wondered why, but I was too afraid to ask.”

“Maybe it was a bad honeymoon,” Rachel chortled.

“Silly you. How can you have a bad honeymoon?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel replied. “I’m sure it’s happened.”

“I hardly knew Remi the day they married.”

“It’s hard to imagine what it would be like to be at your own parent’s wedding. I mean, it might be funny if it could happen.”

“Like *Back to the Future*?” My thoughts darkened. “How would you like having a stepfather you didn’t know?”

Rachel shook her head. “I wouldn’t.”

I’d never confided in anyone about my past, but now I couldn’t stop. “Presents arrive twice a year from North York. I don’t remember anything about my father. One day he left and never returned.”

“I can’t imagine what that would be like,” Rachel said.

“Sometimes I get angry.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. “About what?”

“Mother didn’t ask how I felt about her remarrying.”

We walked in silence as my words hung in the air. I kicked a rock on the sidewalk, and it skipped into the gutter. Rachel’s warm nature was comforting. She came from such a perfect family, or it seemed. I’d tell her things I wouldn’t tell anyone else.

Voices from the past mocked me. “Do I walk like a chicken?”

Rachel laughed. “No, you don’t walk like a chicken.”

“Do I have big lips?”

“Big lips?” Rachel stopped and stared at me surprised. “No.”

“You don’t think so? Every time I wet them with my tongue, I worry I’m making them fat—so I was told.”

Rachel examined my fair face. I pretended not to notice. “You’re beautiful. Who would say such mean things?”

I didn’t want to tell her. What was the point in making him look bad?

Rachel reached out and grabbed a couple of strands of my hair, flipping them over my shoulder. “I love your green eyes and long brown hair. I wish mine wasn’t wavy with all the humidity. I use an iron to straighten it, but it doesn’t stay that way for long.”

Rachel giggled. “Guys love long, straight hair.”

“Remi wants me to call him dad, but that seems weird.”

A few feet in front of us, Chumana knelt on the sidewalk.

Rachel squinted. “What are they looking at?”

When we got closer, I could see an earthworm wiggling on the sidewalk. A few weeks after Christmas, it was the wrong time of year for creepy crawlers.

“It’s probably cold,” I said.

Judd lifted his foot to squash it.

“Wait,” I demanded.

Judd glared at me.

“Why kill it?” I asked.

He leaned down and picked it up, dangling the worm a few inches above the sidewalk. “Have you ever dissected one of these?”

I shook my head.

He stiffened. “I should make you squish it between your delicate fingers.”

I stared at the worm. Judd dropped it on the sidewalk. As he started to smash it again, I leaned over and shoved him. “Just leave it alone.”

Judd’s face turned beet red. “Don’t ever push me again. You hear me?”

I nodded. My knees spasmed like a jack-in-the-box.

His icy eyes ripped at my soul. “You don’t like squishing worms, but you killed my puppy.”

Rachel said, “Get over it. You sound so hateful.”

Chumana glared through her thick, black-rimmed glasses. “Judd is right, though, Rachel. Don’t you remember?”

“I remember,” Rachel whispered.

My heart raced as I picked up the worm—its slimy body was cold to the touch—and stuck it in my pocket.

Judd shook his head and stomped off.

I urged Rachel and Chumana. “You two go on. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Rachel nodded. They continued walking, leaving me alone.

After wrapping the worm in some brown leaves, I placed it on a warmer corner of the concrete. When I lifted my eyes, I saw her for the first time. She was mostly white with a few brown spots, medium size, and thick fur covered her soft body for the cold Atlanta winters. She sat on the sidewalk wagging her fluffy tail.

As I started to approach her, she stood and limped backwards. Despite her natural beauty, the scruffy creature was dirty. Her floppy short ears had mangy spots, and her almond brown eyes appeared crusty. If she belonged to someone or was lost, the owner wasn’t taking very good care of her. A warm fuzziness filled my heart. Before I could get too close, however, the dog turned and ran away.

