

Shine by Chandra Sparks Splond



SHINE

CHANDRA  
SPARKS SPLOND

CHAPTER 1

THE PINGING OF MY PHONE nearly jolted me from my chair as I sat hunched over the computer pretending to watch YouTube videos of this new skating move I wanted to learn. I was hoping it would take my mind off everything that had happened the last few days.

I glanced at the phone and released a breath, glad it wasn't another text from Fallon Hargrove or one of her funky friends.

"Hey, girl," I said to my best friend Patrina Mitchum, hitting pause on the computer as I propped up my phone for our video chat.

"Hey," she said. "What are you doing?" Before I could even respond, she leaned into the screen, peered at me closely then frowned. "Have you been crying?"

"I was watching YouTube," I said defensively.

"Um-huh," she said. "Seriously, Nia, what's going on with you? You've been acting weird for almost a week."

As much as I wanted to tell Trina what was going on, I couldn't. Even though I didn't think she would judge me, what I'd done was just too embarrassing.

"I've got a lot on my mind," I said, pushing up my glasses.

"Like what?"

I glanced at my skateboard as my mind raced, trying to think of a reason. "I'm just worried about this job."

I had been hired to teach skateboarding at Railroad Park—the first black girl to ever land one of the coveted positions.

"You're still excited about it, right?" she asked. She peered at me again, like she was still trying to figure out what was going.

"Yeah, but—"

"But nothing," she said. "How many other people do you know who are getting paid to skate?"

I hadn't thought of it like that, but she was right. I had vowed to become the best female skater Birmingham had ever seen. When I was done, everyone was going to know my name. I laughed at the irony of the thought that everyone might already know my name. I took a deep breath, trying to tell myself things weren't as bad as I thought as a text notification flashed across my phone, making me jump again.

"You want to take a break?" Trina asked, squinting at me again. "I'm about to head to the mall, and I was calling to see if you wanted to go."

I frowned, really not in the mood. It would be my luck to run into Fallon or some of her funky-acting friends from school or maybe worse, my boyfriend Brandon Jackson who still hadn't responded to any of my messages. I was better off just keeping it at the house.

"I promise we won't be gone long," Trina begged, looking at me with perfectly made-up puppy dog eyes.

I sighed, knowing she wasn't going to stop talking until I agreed to go. "Which mall are you going to?" I asked, not that it really mattered.

"Brookwood," she said.

I twisted my lips. "You know I can't afford to be up in there. Even their sale stuff is expensive."

"Nia Yvonne Mitchell," she said, calling my whole government name like she was somebody's momma. "What's wrong with you? You can't hang with your girl for a few hours while I apply for jobs?"

Trina and I were like peanut butter and grape jelly, although she wouldn't like the fact that I was using food analogies to describe us. My skin color made me the peanut butter, and Trina's dark color made her the grape jelly. I was a total tomboy, and she was a girly girl, but we balanced each other. Where you saw one, you saw the other. On the outside, we looked totally different, but our hearts were the same. We were definitely sisters from different misters. I'd heard someone say that once, and for us, it was true.

She had been sick the day of the interviews for Kids and Jobs—a summer work program for youth in the city of Birmingham, Alabama—so she hadn't been able to land one of the positions. Lucky for her, she could apply for regular jobs since she was seventeen like me. We had both agreed working was better than being home. Not only would we get paychecks, but working had the added benefit of getting us out of the house. If I were home, Momma would have a list of chores ready to greet me every morning when I woke up. I glanced over at the one she had stuck to the mirror before she went to study for finals, making a mental note to make sure everything was done before she got in that evening. Even though technically Momma and I lived with my grandparents since we stayed in an apartment above their garage in West End, Momma insisted we not impose on them, which meant we typically did our own cleaning and sometimes cooking.

"So are you coming?" Trina asked, breaking into my thoughts.

"Yeah," I said, "but you knew that before you called." Trina always supported me, and I wanted to be there for her too. "I need to get Momma a gift anyway."

Momma was graduating from Cumberland School of Law the following week. I still had no clue what to get her, but I was hoping inspiration would strike.

"Cool," Trina said. "I'll treat you to lunch, and we can go to Great American Cookies for dessert. If we have time, bring your skateboard, and we can even go to the park."

"I'm in," I said, shutting down the computer at the mention of the word park. Maybe Brandon would be there and we could finally talk. "Why didn't you say that when you first called?"

"Because I like messing with you," she teased. "I know how much you hate going to the mall."

"You also know how much I love skating—and food," I said. "Give me ten minutes."

Momma had started joking that it was a good thing I loved skating because as much as I liked to eat, I should be as big as a house. Instead, all the food seemed to go to my feet. At five-ten, I towered over Trina and most of the girls at Grover, wore a size ten shoe, and was thinner than a dollar bill as my granddaddy Big G liked to say.

By the time Trina and I made it to the mall, it felt like the temperature had gone up another thirty degrees. The weather in Birmingham had been crazy for the last few months, so since the highs were only in the forties the day before, I had thrown on my favorite red zip-up hoodie over a white t-shirt with Skater in graffiti letters across the front, a pair of ripped-up jeans and my black Converse.

Bad decision.

Sweat had already soaked through my t-shirt on the walk from the underground parking deck to Sky Cosmetics, a new store that had just opened.

While Trina filled out job applications, I roamed the mall for about thirty minutes before I realized I had to pee. On the way to the bathroom, I spotted another new store called Salzburg's that had little trinkets on display and decided to stop in, thinking maybe I could get one as a graduation gift for Momma.

"Hi," I said as I walked into the store.

The saleswoman glanced up, but she didn't say a word, so I thought she hadn't heard me. I shrugged and headed over to a clearance table.

"May I help you?" the woman asked as I picked up a snow globe, glanced at the price underneath and frowned at the fifty-dollar price tag.

"Just looking," I said, glancing up at her as I replaced the globe.

She turned up her nose and gazed at me from the tips of my worn sneakers to my glasses and chipped tooth, which had happened a few weeks ago at the skate park. I turned my back to her and rolled my eyes. Another thing I hated about Brookwood was the way some of the people looked at you like they were better than you or something. I picked up a statue and quickly put it down when I realized it was seventy-five dollars.

I knew being in the store was a waste of my time, so I turned toward the exit, only to find the woman still glaring at me as she stood a few feet away.

“May I use your restroom?” I asked, thinking maybe I could get something out of my visit.

“It’s for paying customers only,” she said, crossing her arms and turning up her nose.

I held up the statue. “I’m going to buy this as soon as I come out,” I said, knowing that wasn’t going to happen. The way she was watching me though had me real curious to see how she was going to respond.

She gave this chirpy laugh that matched her bird-looking appearance and sniffed. “We both know you can’t afford anything in here,” she said. “Please leave.”

I just stood there, not sure I had heard her correctly.

“Don’t make me call the cops,” she threatened.

“But I haven’t done anything,” I said.

“You haven’t done anything—yet. You people get on my nerves. I don’t know why you’re allowed in here.”

I stood there in shock for a second, telling myself she really wasn’t serious, but when she headed for the phone, I knew she was, and I hightailed it to the exit. I was not trying to be placed in handcuffs or go viral on the internet.

The thought made me pause for a second when I realized thanks to Brandon and Fallon, I might already be all over social media.

I went to the bathroom near the food court then headed to Books-A-Million, hoping Trina would eventually come in there looking for me since I had left my phone at home and couldn’t text her.

I flipped through the latest *People* magazine, stopping when I caught a brief glimpse of the finest guy I had ever seen. I just stared, realizing it had to be his eyes that drew me in.

“Hello, Matthew Cook,” I said when I saw the headline that revealed who he was. I guess I had spoken out loud based on the way the woman standing next to me was giving me the side eye.

I skimmed the article, seeing what other information there was about Matthew Cook. There wasn’t much, other than he was eighteen and from a small southern town. I made a mental note to Google him later and to set my DVR for his show *King Penn*, a modern version of that old show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. I couldn’t help but gaze at Matthew Cook’s Hershey brown skin, espresso eyes and sexy smile. I couldn’t be sure, but it looked like he might have a dimple.

I tucked the magazine under my arm and flipped through a few more until Trina showed up about twenty minutes later with a Sky Cosmetics bag in her hand.

“Now how did I know you’d be here?” she asked. “I tried texting you.”

I shrugged. “I left my phone at home.” I pulled the magazine from under my arm. “Look at this,” I said, flipping back to the article and pointing at the picture of Matthew Cook.

She glanced at him and nodded, which wasn’t the reaction I was expecting.

“You don’t think he’s fine?” I asked, frowning.

“He’s alright,” she said, shrugging.

I cut my eyes at her. “Are we looking at the same person?” I asked, tapping on the picture.

She shrugged and turned her attention to Allure magazine, so I changed the subject. “How did things go? I thought you were job hunting,” I said, nodding at her bag.

She grinned. “There’s always time to shop. I decided to treat myself since I got a job at Great American Cookies—Sky Cosmetics wasn’t hiring. The cookie company manager said he liked how professional I was. When he saw on my résumé that I went to Grover, he told me he graduated from there a few years ago and interviewed me on the spot.”

“If he graduated from Grover, why is he working at Great American Cookies?” I asked. It was pretty common knowledge that for the most part only the top students got accepted at Grover, and most went on to graduate from really great colleges.

“He’s in grad school at UAB,” she explained.

I nodded and put the magazine back after casting one last glance at Matthew Cook. “Congrats,” I said, turning to give her a hug. “After I get my first check, we’ll have to celebrate. My treat.”

“Sounds good to me,” Trina said, “but I’ve got you until then.”

As we waited in line at Chick-fil-A, I told Trina about my experience at Salzburg’s. She just shook her head. As we placed our orders and she pulled out her wallet. Part of me felt bad for letting her pay, even though I knew she didn’t mind. It was another way we were different. Trina got an allowance, and I didn’t ask Momma for money unless I really needed it. With Momma attending law school and only working part time, things were kind of tight. Momma was an only child and got pregnant with me when she was fifteen. Since my grandparents helped her so much with me while she finished high school and college, Momma tried not to ask them for anything. Now that she was finishing law school, I was hoping things were going to get better for us financially soon—and that I could get my tooth fixed. Momma still had to pass the bar exam after graduation and was planning on taking it in July.

“So did you find anything for your mom?” Trina asked, already knowing the answer since I didn’t have any bags.

I shook my head. I had gotten so caught up in what had happened at Salzburg’s and reading about Matthew Cook that I had forgotten about Momma’s gift. “You want to go to Walmart?” I asked, figuring I could at least get a card.

“Okay,” Trina said. “As soon as you tell me what’s really going on.” She stared at me, and I sighed, knowing she wasn’t going to budge until I told her.

“Brandon texted to wish me a happy birthday last week...”

At the mention of Brandon’s name, Trina frowned. It was no secret that she couldn’t stand him. She didn’t understand why I liked him. For the most part, she kept her thoughts to herself though.

I paused, not sure how to tell her.

“He asked me to send him a picture...”

Her frown deepened. “What kind of picture?”

I hesitated, not believing what I was about to admit. “Of me, with no clothes on.”

“And you did it?” She said the words so loud the women at the table next to us looked over at us curiously. “Sorry.”

My peanut butter-colored cheeks turned as red as my sweatshirt, which I had taken off and tied around my waist.

I took a sip of my lemonade in response.

“Nia,” she said. “You didn’t.”

My eyes filled with tears again as the memory of the last few days came flooding back. “He sent the picture out, and apparently Fallon got it. I’ve been getting all of these crazy texts...”

I shuddered, thinking of some of the things that had been said to me.

“Fallon and her friends cornered me in the bathroom the other day... Let’s just say it wasn’t a nice conversation.”

Trina narrowed her eyes. “Are you okay?” She scanned me as I nodded, and when she was satisfied I hadn’t been harmed physically, she went in. “She gets on my nerves. What is her deal?” she asked, not really wanting an answer.

Fallon, Trina and I had been friends—best friends actually—since sixth grade. We would have sleepovers, and we pretty much did everything together. That all changed freshman year at Grover. Fallon just stopped hanging with us. No explanation or anything. Suddenly whenever Trina and I walked by Fallon and her new friends, I was called the tomboy and Trina was the freak. Last week was the first time Fallon had said anything to me in years, all because of a picture I didn’t even send to her. It just didn’t make any sense.

“So why didn’t you tell me?” Trina asked as we dumped our trash.

"I was embarrassed," I admitted. "I know you don't like Brandon—"

"He's a jerk," she said. "He doesn't deserve you."

"He just has a hard time expressing his feelings," I explained.

"Why are you defending him?" she asked, frowning.

"I'm not," I said, but my words sounded weak, even to my own ears.

"Have you talked to him since you sent him the picture?"

"No," I admitted.

Trina just stared at me.

"What?" I finally snapped.

"I'm sorry you're going through this," she said.

I don't know what I expected her to say, but that wasn't it. Tears filled my eyes, and she led me over to a private corridor where I finally let the tears flow.

"I don't know what to do," I said. "I feel so stupid. He's been asking me to send the picture for months, and I finally just got tired of him asking. I figured if I sent it, he would be happy and stop bugging me. Now I haven't heard from him, and Fallon and her friends and who knows who else knows about it. Do you know how embarrassing this is?"

"I'm sorry," she said again. "What can I do to help?"

"Just have my back," I said. "I don't want to, but if things get any worse, I may have to fight."

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AFTER HEADING TO THE BATHROOM and fixing myself up as best I could, Trina and I bought a couple of sugar cookies from Great American Cookies to snack on later, then walked back to the underground parking lot to Trina's brand-new-to-her 2000 Toyota Camry. Why did it feel like it was ten times hotter in the underground lot than it was outside? I was instantly drenched in sweat again.

It reminded me of the time my grandparents had been babysitting me when I was around eight or nine, and they had taken me to their neighbor's church, which didn't have air conditioning. The preacher had stepped into the pulpit sweating so hard there were huge stains on his light gray suit. He had jumped around, yelling that if we didn't start living right, we needed to get used to things being much hotter than that in hell. The memory of it still scared me.

I rolled down my window, trying to release some of the heat as Trina cranked up the air conditioner and we were headed up Lakeshore Parkway to Walmart.

Within ten minutes of entering the store, I had found the perfect gift for Momma. It was a plaque with her favorite scripture, Ecclesiastes 9:11, "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong..." I knew she'd love it. I did too because it was only two bucks, so I wouldn't have to spend all of the ten dollars I had.

"I'm going to get a card," I told Trina, and she shrugged and followed me to the greeting card section.

I stood there debating whether to get a funny or serious graduation card for Momma before finally settling on a generic congratulations one for ninety-seven cents. I figured I could decorate it and add a sappy note, which Momma would love.

I went to stand in one of the lines, which was almost to the women's clothing section, and I found myself peering around to see if Fallon or any of her friends were there. I didn't see anyone, including Trina, who had gone to use the bathroom, so I picked up the issue of *People* I had been flipping through in *Books-A-Million*. Looking at Matthew Cook was a wonderful way to pass the time.

"Excuse me," a voice said, and I froze. I knew the voice didn't belong to Fallon, but it could be one of her friends. I decided to just ignore whoever it was.

"Excuse me," the voice said again. This time the person tapped me on the shoulder, which caused me to look up.

“Yes?” I said, glancing at the woman curiously. I had never seen her, and Momma had ingrained in my head to never talk to adults I didn’t know, which I knew was kind of silly since I was almost an adult.

“My name is Mariah Nelson. I’m an agent with Faces in New York City. Has anyone ever told you you should be a model?”

I looked at the woman like she was crazy. First of all, why would a New York City agent be in Birmingham? Second, why would she be trying to recruit me in Walmart?

I looked around, thinking I was the target for a new reality show, but nothing looked strange, so I gave the woman the side eye before burying my head in my magazine again. “No thanks, Ms. Nelson,” I said. I wanted her to at least know I was paying attention when she said her name.

She touched my arm again, and I jerked away, freaked that she would put her hands on me twice. The whole thing just felt weird. A few months back, a guy had tried to kidnap a teenaged girl from the Trussville Target, and I wasn’t about to let that happen to me. I took a deep breath, prepared to scream, making a mental note about what Mariah Nelson looked like in case I had to describe her to the cops later.

Mariah Nelson looked to be in her fifties or sixties and reminded me of a much older version of former Apprentice reality star Omarosa who was probably better known as one of the handful of blacks who worked for President Donald Trump. Word was Omarosa had been kicked out of the White House for acting a fool. I guess Mariah was kind of pretty, but I really couldn’t tell because she wore a huge wide-brimmed hat like my grandma Gigi wore when she worked in her garden.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” she said. “Please call me Mariah. I really am an agent in New York. I’m originally from Birmingham, and I still have family here. I’m in town for a visit. I think you have star potential, and I’d like to meet with you and your parents while I’m here.”

She pulled out a business card, and it looked legitimate enough—it had gold raised letters, and the paper felt nice, not like those business cards kids at school order off Vistaprint.

“Have your mother or father call me,” she said.

I shrugged, took the card and stuffed it in my back pocket just as Trina walked up. “Hi,” she said politely.

Mariah smiled warmly at her. “Hello,” she said. She turned back to me. “I really think I can turn you into a supermodel,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, more to shut her up than anything.

She laughed like she knew what I was doing. “You know what, give me your number, and I’ll call your parents myself.”

I tried to make up a number off the top of my head, but I couldn’t think of something fast enough. Trina scrolled through her cell phone and recited Momma’s number, which Momma had given her for emergencies. I looked at Trina like she was crazy, but she ignored me.

“Her mother’s name is Olivia Mitchell, and in case she didn’t tell you, her name is Nia Mitchell,” Trina said, sounding like she was my wingman.

“Thank you. I’ll be in touch later today,” Mariah said.

I smiled, realizing a moment too late my chipped tooth was on display. Mariah looked at it without saying a word, nodded and walked off.

“Why’d you do that?” I asked Trina as soon as I checked to make sure Mariah wasn’t in hearing distance.

“The woman might be serious,” Trina said, looking at the business card Mariah had given her. “Just think, this time next year, after I get into NYU, we could both be living in New York.”

“Whatever,” I said as I paid for my stuff. “There’s no way I will put my picture on display ever again.”