

SHAYLA

Chapter 3 | THE GOOD GIRL

Fifty years in the past.

The sun swept field gave way to the radiance of the season, spring, the favorite time of year for young Shayla, then a spry 10 years of age. Her fanciful ways spirited along the fields as she picked the brightest flowers and filled her wicker basket. She couldn't wait to rush home to show her mother her floral finds of the day.

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This was the happiest time for Shayla—her youth—pure, innocent, and unscathed. Looking back at this poetic period in Shayla's life is practically surreal, like a dream, taking her back to her small village in Portugal. It was the kind of community where everyone knew each other. This was where Shayla's parents had raised her together with her sister in the late '60s in a small farmhouse that offered resplendent views of the ocean from within the idyllic, manicured farmland. Beyond pristine, this was home for young Shayla, where everything was familiar, and she felt comfortable and safe.

During those times in that part of the world, it wasn't unusual for a plain, simple house to consist of a relatively spacious kitchen with two bedrooms, and lack of electricity or indoor plumbing. Shayla shared a bedroom with her sister. It had two small beds with handmade mattresses that were filled with straw, and adorned with handmade quilts. Similarly simple, but sturdy, the furniture somewhat filled the rest of their room and the house.

Her mother took extraordinary pride in her children’s appearance, so Shayla’s look mirrored that of the family home—modest, yet tasteful. She had a favorite dress, for instance, that was made of a soft blue and white fabric, laced with a pale blue ribbon around the neckline, sleeves and the bottom of the dress. Shayla also had a way she liked to keep her long dark waves in a bun that was lined with the same lace from her dress.



Young Shayla wearing her favorite dress. Only 6 years old, still a happy little girl (then) living with her parents and sister... Shayla was totally unaware of the looming violent rapes she would suffer only three short years later, by age 9, at the hands of her village priest (a hero in her parents’ eyes who were oblivious to subjecting their daughter to a pedophile, the priest, when they insisted she take music lessons with him)... And then Young Shayla’s nightmare began.

Everything was wonderful with her family during these happier times. Shayla and her sister shared a close bond; two nice girls from a lovely family.

As a child, Shayla’s parents and her sister were her world.

She had an anxious side; something grounded in her deep curiosity, paired with her enthusiastic and sometimes rebellious streak.

Those traits rose to the surface in various ways. With an insatiable curiosity, Shayla wanted to know everything, so query she did, constantly asking questions. This part of her demeanor left her parents perplexed, if not frustrated, as they grew concerned over her exhibiting a pronounced independent streak.

Shayla was quite aware of her parent's frustration with her overriding personality. This led to her ignoring the house rules, cooking her own meals, growing her own flowers and making her own clothes—all of which she tried to do quickly and discreetly, so her parents wouldn't have to reprimand her.

Not only did Shayla know how to cook, she could also gut and clean chickens and fish before dinner. A somewhat puzzling dichotomy, as she loved animals and had a rather promiscuous cat. She would even spend hours outside pretending to be a veterinarian. And during times of loss, she would ensure the smallest of God's creatures received their proper burial.

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Being outside as much as she was added to Shayla's rich complexion, making her naturally dark skin even darker. The locals would sometimes refer to her as "cockroach." Hardly a flattering moniker, this dubious endearment later affected her self-esteem.

To make her feel better, her mother, ever the nurturer, told her the people meant to call her "ladybug," since she was so cute. Perhaps Shayla picked up her active nature from her mother, who was also a hard worker.

In the summertime, she would take burlap sacks and weaved baskets full of cabbages or other vegetables to bigger nearby villages, using the town bus, to go selling them door-to-door. She would also use extra-large weaved baskets and fill them with all the fruit she picked the night before. She did this first thing in the morning, five days a week.

Together, Shayla and her mother loved to make bread. On the hot summer days, Shayla's mom would suffer a great deal from the heat, making her weak, as she would ask Shayla to get her some water.

Young Shayla enjoyed a close bond with her father as well. He knew all about hard work; he was a farmer and would work out in the fields all day. A simple man, he was stout and fairly strong with wavy hair and an arched right eyebrow that gave him a rather quizzical look. He lacked a formal education and could barely read at basic level. He wore a straw hat and the native albarcas shoes, as worn by most villagers.



Albarcas

Shayla's father absorbed what he learned at his trade, and became quite good at it, then loved sharing it with his daughters. That worked for Shayla, feeding into her hyper curiosity. She was also quite intuitive when around adults, always listening, as she was able to keep up with everything that was being said around her.

“Father, look here. It has peanuts under there! Wow, that's how peanuts grow?”
“Yes, Shayla. Those are the peanut plant babies,” he said. “They grow in the ground.”

Shayla could go from an even-paced conversation with her father, where she was learning something, to another with her mother, leaving her baffled and distraught, as Shayla would not do as being told.

“Dear God,” said the mother. “I can't take my eyes off that child. Yesterday I asked her to get me just a couple of scallions, and she went and picked two. And when I asked her to go again and pick a couple more, she picked the whole row, and then asked me, “Is this enough now?”

“Did you punish her?” asked the father.

“No, I didn't punish her. But she did make me laugh when she turned around to go back outside.”

“We need to guide her to be more focused and pay attention to the important things,” the father suggested. “This will help her to not get distracted and do things wrong. Otherwise, we may as well let the chickens out of the coop because Shayla will destroy our crops in no time, just like the chickens would.”

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Shayla overheard her parents' conversation and felt terrible, but quickly forgot about it. Something she would learn to do, and become good at, was burying things that brought her pain. After hearing her parents, she promised herself that she would pay better attention to her actions and make her parents proud of her efforts. This was her new determined mindset.

Shayla's father knew of her love for nature and how she looked forward to his newest surprises for her. Like the time when he gave her an earthworm wrapped in a leaf, or another occasion when he brought a perfectly crafted bird's nest that had fallen from a tree, or even better, the first ripened fruit of the season.

Her parents came to see Shayla in a different light, realizing she was different from her sister, who was calmer and more settled. Still, the sisters had many interesting conversations while walking to school thirty minutes every day. It was a single-room school, near the local church.

Shayla's family was very traditional in their Catholic beliefs, including being followers, almost to the point of being cultish, of the local priest at the church. They attended church on Sundays with their two daughters as they also tried to thwart her endless restlessness—ultimately taking their efforts, alas for young Shayla, to a point of no return.

Their Sunday routine became a challenge, as her parents would tell Shayla to either sit in the front or the back of the church. However, whenever mass started, Shayla became a walking commotion, as she would move up and down the middle aisle of the church and switch between sitting beside her mother or father. Sitting still in a quiet demeanor like her sister was not who she was.

The routine commotion at the church was only a prelude to the series of tragic events that would soon follow, to the detriment of Shayla where her welfare would suddenly be at stake. She didn't realize, then, that she was about to fall into a trap, and the priest's heinous grasp. Her spirited ways were on the brink of being upended and her life changed forever. A spiral that would all start with her father.

After mass ended, he approached the priest, though Shayla was hesitant to join her father and moved in the opposite direction. Having his daughter's best interests at heart, he simply asked the priest for suggestions, a solution, to help calm her mercurial ways.

The priest was quick to respond with an answer, and an offer, for her to sing in the choir. Though Shayla wasn't thrilled about the idea, her father tells the priest that she'll be over the next day.

As the Sunday morning crowd dispersed, there was a bustle outside the church. One of the neighbors was all packed up to leave and started saying her goodbyes. Shayla and her father approached the neighbor to offer their farewell, as the departing woman—a younger Juliette—seemed distraught and tried to warn Shayla of... *Something*.

As Juliette hugged Shayla goodbye, she attempted to whisper discreetly in her ear, “*Don't ever be alone with the priest, Shayla...*” Jolted by Juliette's untimely warning, and before Shayla could process her words, their parting hug was suddenly cut short when her father reminded it was time to go.

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