



RAPID READS



# BEST GIRL

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MAULTASH WARSH

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RAVEN BOOKS  
*an imprint of*  
ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Warsh, Sylvia Maultash  
Best girl [electronic resource] / Sylvia Maultash Warsh.  
(Rapid reads)

Electronic monograph.

Issued also in print format.

ISBN 978-1-55469-898-1 (PDF).--ISBN 978-1-55469-899-8 (EPUB)

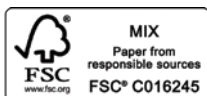
I. Title. II. Series: Rapid reads (Online)

PS8595.A7855B47 2012      C813'.6      C2011-907540-7

First published in the United States, 2012

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011942469

**Summary:** A young aspiring musician's life is turned upside down when she begins to learn the truth about her long-dead parents. (RL 2.6)



*Orca Book Publishers is dedicated to preserving the environment and has printed this book on paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council®.*

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Design by Teresa Bubela

Cover photography by Getty Images

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
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Victoria, BC Canada  
V8R 6S4

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
PO Box 468  
Custer, WA USA  
98240-0468

[www.orcabook.com](http://www.orcabook.com)

Printed and bound in Canada.

15 14 13 12 • 4 3 2 1

*For Jerry, as always.*  
*And for my muses, Nathaniel and Jessica.*

## CHAPTER ONE

**M**y life changed on October 23, 2010. Suddenly I didn't know who I was. Before the phone call, here's what I knew: I was adopted. My real parents died in a car crash when I was four. Shelley was the only mother I've ever known. As soon as I could understand, she told me I was adopted. Shelley's husband—I never thought of him as my father—wasn't home much. When he lost his job, he went out west to work in the oil fields.

I didn't have a lot of friends. It was mostly Shelley and me. I always cared too

much and didn't want to get hurt. Because people let you down. People are liars.

All the time I was growing up, Shelley and I argued. She never saw things my way. Then she could stay mad for days and not speak to me. In the end she'd be all lovey-dovey, as if nothing had happened. When I was a kid, I was always relieved when she started talking again. It was hard living with someone who ignored you. Once I was a teenager, though, I didn't mind being left alone. When she saw it didn't bug me, she gave up the silent treatment.

The best thing she ever did for me was make me take piano lessons. She said her own family was too poor to pay for lessons when she was a kid. Her mother laughed when she asked for them and said she was too stupid to play piano.

Shelley loved listening to music (mostly bad music). She couldn't hold a tune. To her, musicians walked on water.

Where she got the money for the piano I never knew. It's been there since I can remember. When I was young, I hated practicing. I was always a little rebel. Anything Shelley wanted, I didn't. So she made me feel guilty. Her usual line—if she could scrounge together the money for lessons, the least I could do was practice. She found a music student a few blocks away who charged less than the going rate, but it was still a lot of money for a hairdresser. She said she had to cut and style two heads of hair to pay for one hour of lessons. Sometimes we ate Kraft Dinner to make up for it.

So I pouted while practicing my scales, up and down, up and down the keys. Until I realized I was good at it. Then I just *pretended* to hate it. Shelley didn't understand why the piano teacher started me on Mozart and Bach. "Doesn't the teacher know any Billy Joel or Phil Collins?" she'd ask. I'd roll my eyes and say, "She's teaching me music that

doesn't suck." I stopped piano lessons when I was fifteen because I got interested in the guitar. My voice wasn't bad either. But I only sang when Shelley wasn't home.

The radio in her hair salon was stuck on the "easy listening" channel, so those old songs were background music while I was growing up. They made me want to hurl. Even going into *Shelley's*, the salon she owned on the Danforth, made me want to hurl. It was old and dingy and badly needed a facelift. Her customers were old too. When I was younger, some of them would comment on how I didn't look anything like Shelley. I took that as an insult because Shelley was hot. Tall and thin with a long neck. Her ears were perfect little shells with earlobes. I was always jealous of her ears because mine were ugly. They were big and flat with thin round edges like clamshells. And no earlobes! She laughed when I complained, and said no one would notice my ears if I wore my hair long.



I thought Shelley would be happy when I told her I wanted to sing with a band. But she wasn't. It seemed to make her nervous. And I didn't even tell her I would be playing guitar, not piano, for accompaniment. She said I needed to make a living, so she taught me to cut hair. I fought at first, but then I started to like it. I had complete control over someone for an hour. They sat in my chair and they couldn't move. Not if they wanted a really cool haircut. Shelley showed me how to dye hair, and after that I was the only one she trusted to do hers. She liked to change her hair color with the season. I dyed it a streaky blond for the summer.

Then I pulled the rug out from under her feet. Without telling her, I registered for an apprentice job at a salon in Yorkville where the customers had style. I had to take classes in a hair school for a couple of hours a week too. The boss liked me and printed out some business cards with my name.

Shelley was mad, but impressed with the cards and the snazzy address.

I hadn't told her ahead of time because I knew it would be a hassle. She'd yell and call me ungrateful. Maybe I was. But I wanted more than *Shelley's* salon. She was really mad when I moved out—but hey, I was twenty-three! Now that I was making my own money, I could afford a studio apartment near the subway. I was *so* out of there. Couldn't live with her anymore—she was a control freak. Okay, so we both had control issues. Even so, last month I came to her shop on a Sunday to dye her hair mauve-red for the fall (her choice). She was almost fifty but looked good for her age.

\* \* \*

But back to the phone call. A woman named Diane called, asking for Amanda Jane Moss. That was me.

“You don’t know me,” she said. “I was a friend of your mother’s. She was a good person.”

“How do you know Shelley?”

“I mean your real mother.”

“What?”

“She asked me to give you something. Can I come by this afternoon?”

“There’s some mistake. My mother died twenty years ago.”

“Is your birthday December third, nineteen eighty-six?”

“How d’you know?”

“Your mother told me. Her name was Carol Allan. You were born Amanda Allan. You were adopted by Shelley and Stephen Moss. Carol...your mother and I worked together. We were friends.”

I was speechless. This was the first time I’d heard my birth mother’s name. Shelley always said the agency wouldn’t tell her

who my parents were, only that they had died in a crash.

Then she said, “I’m sorry to have to tell you—Carol died last week. It was cancer. I’m so sorry.” There was a pause. “Please tell Shelley.”

In a daze, I gave her my address. Why did my mother give me away? She was alive all this time! It was like a knife in my chest. I could’ve met her.

It was Monday, so I had the day off. I stewed for half an hour, getting madder and madder. Then I called Shelley.

“You liar!”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You lied to me! About my mother.”

I felt the shock over the phone. I knew her too well. After my father left for the last time, there were just the two of us.

“Who told you that?”

“Nobody you know.”

“You talked to someone...”

“She was alive all these years and you didn’t want me to meet her.”

“No, no, that’s not true. You don’t understand...I...I was trying to protect you.”

“Why did you lie to me?”

“There are some things...better not to know.”

That was just like her. “I’ll never meet her now.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“She’s dead.”

A long pause. “It’s better that way.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“Believe me...”

“I’ll never forgive you.”

I heard a sharp intake of breath. Good.

“I didn’t tell you because—she was evil.”

I slammed down the phone.

\* \* \*

Diane showed up at my door, a worn-out woman around forty who must have

been pretty once. She wore a rain jacket over her jeans and carried a black canvas tote bag in one hand, her purse in the other. Nice hair—kind of a pageboy dyed chestnut. She stared at me as if she'd seen a ghost.

“Wow, you look just like your mother. When she was young, I mean.”

I asked her in, nervous and excited both. When she took off her jacket, she was wearing a green scrub tunic. We sat down on my old IKEA sofa, her purse and tote bag between us.

“Are you a nurse?” I asked.

Diane smiled and nodded. She said no more about herself, and I didn't ask.

I went on to what I really wanted to know. “What was she like?”

Diane looked away, remembering. “She was strong. Inside, you know? She knew who she was. No bullshit. Pretty though.”

She turned to me. “Dark hair and white skin. Blue eyes. Like you.”

I got a shiver down my back.

“Here’s some pictures.” Diane took a manila envelope out of the tote bag and handed it to me.

I peered inside the envelope. My heart jumped. I pulled out a photo.

A cute young couple with lots of hair smiled at the camera in front of Niagara Falls. She wore a short white dress. He was in a suit. They looked happy.

“That’s Carol and Freddy on their wedding day,” she said. “They were both twenty-one.”

*Freddy.* My father’s name was Freddy!

I turned the photo over. Someone had written in: *September 20, 1985.* I was born one year later.

I took out more photos, staring at the mother I would never meet. It was

like looking into my own face. The same wary eyes, the high forehead. Then I *was* looking into my own face. Me as a baby. Then as a toddler. My mother, a bit older, sitting on a stoop holding me on her knee, both of us smiling like crazy. There was something weirdly familiar about that stoop. Could I really remember it from when I was that young?

“That’s your dad,” said Diane.

I picked up a picture of Freddy. His longish hair was pulled back into a ponytail, his head turned a bit so I could see his ear. And there it was! The clamshell ear I hated on me. No earlobe. Only it looked good on him.

Tears filled my eyes. Embarrassed, I stuck my hand into the envelope again and pulled out something else. A faded flyer: three young guys playing music onstage. The Tranzac Club. The date at the bottom was August 2, 1984.

“That was Freddy’s band,” said Diane.



“My father was a musician?” Young and skinny, Freddy played the guitar, looking spaced out on bliss.

“Vandal Boss. They did okay.”

“The one with Stu Van Dam?” I asked.

Vandal Boss was local, and I was interested in bands so I’d heard of them, though they never made the big time. Their claim to fame was Stu Van Dam. I peered more closely at the shot. The lead dude in the middle practically chewed on the microphone. That was Stu. He’d become a star on his own in the nineties with a hit song—they still played it on the radio. Blond. Full of himself. Behind them sat a guy on drums. I was trying to remember what happened to them. They’d dropped off the radar.

My father had played with a band! I was excited. That’s where I got it from!

“Where’s Freddy now?” I wanted to meet him!