



The Girl Before

By Rena Olsen

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In this powerful psychological suspense debut, when a woman's life is shattered, she is faced with a devastating question: What if everything she thought was normal and good and true . . . wasn't?

Clara Lawson is torn from her life in an instant. Without warning, her home is invaded by armed men, and she finds herself separated from her beloved husband and daughters. The last thing her husband yells to her is to *say nothing*.

In chapters that alternate between past and present, the novel slowly unpeels the layers of Clara's fractured life. We see her growing up, raised with her sisters by the stern Mama and Papa G, becoming a poised and educated young woman, falling desperately in love with the forbidden son of her adoptive parents. We see her now, sequestered in an institution, questioned by men and women who call her a different name—Diana—and who accuse her husband of unspeakable crimes. As recollections of her past collide with new revelations, Clara must question everything she thought she knew, to come to terms with the truth of her history and to summon the strength to navigate her future.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Girl Before*

“Gripping...A powerful, moving debut by therapist Olsen in which cruelty is counterbalanced by compassion and love.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Easily the most disturbing and unsettling book I have read this year. . . . As in the best suspense novels, there are mysteries within mysteries, and all is not what it seems—not to Clara, and definitely not to the reader.”—BookPage, A Best Mystery of 2016

“[A] thoughtful look at victims and perpetrators and the difficulties that arise for someone who is both at once. . . . [*The Girl Before*] moves at the pace of a mystery, but the novel is strongest when it allows Clara to unpack her past and consider who she will be going forward. A moving story of recovery and responsibility.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“I couldn't put it down. The novel is compelling, perplexing, and ultimately uplifting! The unusual structure is a perfect match for the magnetic voice of the central character. I predict this daring debut will make Rena Olsen “the girl ahead” among psychological suspense authors.”—Karen Harper, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Upon a Winter's Night*

“A disturbing story, haunting and important.”—Alexandra Burt, author of *Remember Mia*

“Daring, harrowing and absolutely riveting.”—Sandra Block, author of *Little Black Lies*

About the Author

Rena Olsen grew up moving around every few years, following her minister father from church to church, and her exposure to so many different people and environments sparked an interest in human nature. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in marriage and family therapy. A licensed therapist, she works in Des Moines, Iowa.

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Now

I am brushing Daisy's hair at the kitchen table when the front door crashes open. The sound of gunfire and

men shouting and children screaming comes in a tidal wave through the open door. Dropping the brush, I grab Daisy's hand and pull her into the nearest closet, fumbling for the lever that will open the false back. We huddle in the small space together, and Daisy trembles in my arms.

Daisy cries as the door to the closet opens. I put a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound. Our hiding spot is clever, but not clever enough. Someone taps on the wall. "This is hollow!" he shouts, and his hands make shuffling sounds as they grope for a way in. It only takes a few minutes before the latch is discovered and we are revealed. Daisy screams and buries her face in my chest. I shield my eyes from the sudden brightness, swinging out with my other arm and coming into contact with hard flesh.

"Whoa, there," a gentle voice says. I peek at the source, and see a man with kind eyes. I know it is a trick. How could he be kind when he has broken into our home? I lash out again, and he catches my arm. "A little help here!" he calls over his shoulder. His grip is firm, and I cannot retrieve my arm from his grasp. I wrap my other arm tightly around a sobbing Daisy and glare up at him.

The man is dressed in black from head to toe, a large gun strapped across his back. A woman pops up behind the man, her hair pulled back in a tight bun. She does not look as kind as he does, but she speaks in a quiet voice, holding her hands out in front of her.

"We're not going to hurt you, sweetheart," she coos, and I roll my eyes. I am nobody's sweetheart. "Just come out here so we can talk."

I want to protest, but I don't have many options. The man with the kind eyes tugs on my arm, and reluctantly I stand, pulling Daisy to her feet with me. She clings to my skirt, trying to disappear into the folds. Daisy has only been with us a few months, but we have already bonded. Daisy isn't her real name. I don't know what her real name is. When Glen brought her to me, he handed me a bouquet of fresh cut daisies. It seemed fitting. She is like my own daughter.

We emerge into the kitchen, and I sit at the same table as before. I place Daisy in front of me, retrieve the hairbrush from the floor, and resume brushing. Daisy sucks her thumb, but I do not scold her, even though we broke that habit two months ago.

"What is your name?" the woman asks, sitting across from me.

Brush, brush, brush. Long strokes through Daisy's cornsilk hair. It is almost halfway down her back now. Sometimes we go out and make dandelion crowns and she looks just like a princess. She wears those crowns until they are completely wilted.

The woman is still staring at me. "My name is Meredith," she says. "And this is Connor." She gestures toward the man. "Can you tell me your name?"

Can I? Certainly. I bite my lip, wishing for guidance. As if by divine intervention, there is a commotion from the back door, and Glen bursts through. His arms are pinned behind his back, and he is surrounded by men dressed in black. He sees me and his eyes widen.

"Say *nothing*, baby, okay? Don't tell them anything." He continues to shout as the men wrestle him towards the front of the cabin. "I love you, baby! Remember that!"

I blush at his declaration in front of these strangers. The man and woman interrogating me look at me with odd expressions.

“Is that your husband?” the man asks.

Brush, brush, brush.

“How long have you been here?” the woman wants to know.

The strands sift through my fingers.

The man’s eyes narrow. He looks as if he is concentrating very hard on putting a puzzle together. I see the moment he comes to his solution.

“Is your name Diana?”

Yank. The brush catches on a tangle and crashes to the floor. Daisy yelps.

“Who is Diana?” My first words. My only words.

Then

“Clara! That damn baby is crying again!”

I am woken by Glen’s yell. Our newest addition, whom I have christened Jewel, whimpers quietly from the floor. She has been having nightmares, so I brought her into our room to be closer. Glen grumbled about it at first, but his chest soon rose and fell with his deep heavy sleep breathing. He tends to overreact sometimes.

Now, I slip out of the bed and stretch out on the floor next to the fitful child. She is not yet four, with dark ringlets and bright green eyes. She is quiet, but in unguarded moments, her smile could light an entire city.

As soon as I reach Jewel, she relaxes, and curls into me. I stroke her soft curls, murmuring nonsense words of comfort. She should sleep through the night now. She never has more than one nightmare. I tell this to Glen, who has come to stand over us. He nods, then gathers Jewel into his arms. He can be so gentle when he chooses to be. He leaves to bring Jewel back to her room.

I am already in bed when Glen returns. He climbs under the covers and reaches for me. His stubble scrapes along my skin and his breath has already turned sour in the night, but it is comforting and familiar. It is Glen.

Now

It has been three days since I have been taken. I lie on my narrow cot and try not to fidget with the scratchy gown they have given me to wear. I want to ask what will become of all my beautiful things, but that would involve talking, and I must not talk. Glen told me to *say nothing*. I slipped up once when the man asked about Diana, and I forgot for a moment that I wasn’t to speak. The man began an explanation, but I tuned him out. I didn’t want to hear. I only wanted to see Glen again, but he was gone.

They brought us out to the front driveway and ushered us into the backseats of the many cars

cluttering the space. The children tried to run to me, but were held back. They let me keep a hold of Daisy, but wanted my hairbrush. "Evidence," they said. I don't know what a hairbrush is supposed to tell them, but I gave it to them anyway.

They pulled up in front of a brick building and took Daisy. She cried and reached for me, and I whispered, "Be strong, be brave," in her ear. I don't think Glen would have minded that. It didn't really count anyway, since none of the uniformed men and women heard it. I was brought to another building, stripped and bathed, and left in this room. Three times a day they bring food, which I have not touched. It smells like antiseptic, and the wail of ambulances keeps me up at night. Once a day they bring me into a room with a table and three chairs, and sit across from me, trying to get me to talk.

I won't talk.

There is a toilet in the corner of the room, but I only use it when I am sure it is nighttime. I only know it is nighttime because they turn the lights from dim to dimmer. There are no windows here. They say it is not jail. It is a hospital. They are only holding me here "for now." They want to help me.

I will rot in this room before I tell them anything.

Then

"No peeking!" Glen is acting like an excited schoolboy. He has driven me hours out of the city, blindfolded the whole way. He has a surprise for me, and doesn't want to ruin it. I can smell the fresh air, and know we must be far away from the pollution-filled city. Glen helps me down from the front seat of his truck, and my feet crunch on gravel as they land. "Just a little further," Glen says, sounding absolutely giddy.

He comes to stand behind me and whips off the blindfold. "Ta-da!"

I am standing in front of the largest log cabin I have ever seen. We are surrounded by a forest of evergreens, and I hear water rushing in the distance.

"Glen," I breathe. "It's beautiful!"

His face breaks out in a wide grin. "Come see the rest of it!" He pulls me forward toward the large porch that wraps around both sides of the house. Double doors lead into a giant foyer. There are separate staircases leading to opposite wings of the house, but what catches my eye is the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows on the other end of the house. The Rocky Mountains look beautiful, like a postcard, and I am in love.

"What is it for?" I ask, my voice hesitant. Sometimes Glen likes to play jokes. I cross my fingers behind my back that this is not one of his silly pranks.

"For us, baby," Glen says, coming forward to wrap his arms around me. He kisses my nose. "For us and the children."

I look around. "All of us?"

Glen laughs and leads me to the window. Down the sloping lawn I see a cluster of smaller cabins. "The guys will live there. The children will live here. The house already has plenty of spaces for safe rooms. It won't need too much work." It doesn't surprise me that Glen has already thought of this. He has become

obsessed with ways to keep us safe over the past few months. From whom, I'm not sure, but we practice what to do in case of a threat each time a new girl joins our family. "And over that way," Glen continues, gesturing beyond the tree line, "there is more land we can use to expand."

He has a point. Right now our apartment feels like it will burst. A small bit of hope blooms in my chest. Here, with so much room to spread out, there will be plenty of room for our daughters. Maybe here, in the fresh air, nestled among the trees, things will be different.

Glen watches me, eyes shining as he waits for my response. I haven't seen him this excited since Papa G passed last year. The stress of taking over for his father has weighed on Glen, and with this house, that weight seems to have lifted.

"I love it," I gush, spinning in a circle to take it all in. Glen catches me by the waist and lifts me high.

"Really? Do you really like it?"

"I think it's the best house I've ever seen," I sigh as he sets me down, keeping me within the safe circle of his arms. "But can we afford it?"

Something flashes in Glen's eyes. I recognize that look. I have crossed the line. His arms tighten and I flinch. Glen closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and when he opens them they are clear once again.

"You don't need to worry about that, do you, baby?"

I shake my head, clamping my mouth shut. I got caught up in the moment and the idea that he wanted my opinion on the house. I only need to know what Glen tells me.

Now

The metal chair is hard beneath me. I wish they would give me pants to wear with my medical gown when they make me leave my room. Or a coat. It is always freezing. The paper slippers I have been granted do little to warm my toes. I sip the lukewarm water in front of me. Water is the only concession I make. I have not eaten in four days.

Meredith sits across from me, her ever-calm façade in place. Connor paces behind her, suit jacket off, tie loosened. They look different than they did when they came to the cabin. More formal, but less scary.

"Diana, it is very important that you cooperate with us."

They keep calling me Diana. But I am not Diana. They are confused. This entire thing is one ridiculous mistake. They think I am Diana, and they think Glen is a criminal. I usually stop listening when they talk about his crimes. I will not listen to lies.

I know that the table has five hundred ninety-two scratches in it. Five hundred ninety-seven now, since I have made some new ones. When Connor paces, he walks eight steps in one direction, pivots, and walks eight steps in the other direction. The clock ticks steadily until seven minutes before the hour, then it starts clicking and moving backwards. At two minutes to the hour, it buzzes and returns to its normal rhythm. Meredith always tenses up when it begins clicking, and I get secret enjoyment out of watching her squirm.

"Glen has been talking about you, Diana." This statement catches my attention as I am trying to figure the

best way to count the ceiling tiles. “He calls you Clara. Do you want to know what he says about you?”

I do. Desperately. But I only stare at Meredith. “*Say nothing.*” Glen’s words echo in my head. Why is he allowed to talk and I am not? Then, Glen is allowed to do many things I am not. I fidget as I imagine his reaction to my thoughts. A few days away and I am getting myself into trouble again. I remind myself that Glen cannot hear my thoughts, though at times it seems he can. Glen knows me better than anyone else.

“He says you are innocent, Diana.” Meredith pauses. “Would you rather I call you Clara for now?” She asks this as if it is only just occurring to her, but I am familiar with this trick. Glen uses it often. She is pretending to be nice, expecting me to break if she shows me kindness. Trying to get me to drop my guard. I narrow my eyes at her. I am on to her. She will not get me to talk.

“Clara.” Connor has come to the table. He sits next to Meredith. “Glen doesn’t want you to be in trouble. He wants us to let you go. But before we can do that, you have to talk to us. Can you do that, Clara?”

Does Glen really want me to talk to them? Or are they just trying to make it seem that way? Glen doesn’t change his mind. Ever. He said not to talk. I will have to hear it from him before I do. I lean back and begin counting the ceiling tiles. Connor sighs and signals for the guard to take me back to my room.

Then

The apartment is in chaos, and a client is coming. Joel brought in a new girl last night, and she is tearing the living room apart. Glen won’t let me near her for now. I am tasked with keeping the other girls calm. Jill will be leaving us today if the client is pleased with her progress. I try to distract the girls from the commotion in the other room by having them help prepare Jill.

“Look at her beautiful dress,” I say, smoothing Jill’s skirt. She stands, still and quiet, as I put the finishing touches on. Jill is barely fourteen, but could pass for older. She has been with us for three years. One of our long-term girls, and one of the ones passed from Papa G when he gave Glen a portion of his business. This will be his first big deal without any involvement from Papa G as well, and he wants badly to impress his father.

Jill’s straight brown hair falls all the way down her back. We have placed a large bow on top of her head, as requested by the client. Her few belongings are packed in a small bag, waiting by the door. Her bed has already been stripped in preparation for the new inhabitant, the one currently destroying half the apartment.

All goes quiet at once as the doorbell rings. I signal for the other girls to take their places on their beds, and they do so obediently. I stand with Jill and wait to be summoned, my hand resting on her shoulder. I feel a slight tremble and give her a squeeze.

“Jill darling, you are perfect. You will be very happy with Mr. Jamison.”

“Clara! Bring Jill!” Glen calls out. He is using his professional voice. He only uses it around clients, and it is much more pleasant than how he usually talks. I enjoy meeting clients with Glen just to see that side of him.

I lead Jill into the living area, which is miraculously spotless. I had expected it to look like a tornado ran through. I spare a quick thought to wonder what they have done with the new girl, but my focus is pulled

to the interaction between Jill and Mr. Jamison.

Mr. Jamison circles Jill, asking her questions, to which she responds appropriately. I beam with pride, and I can see relief on Glen's face. Mr. Jamison walks over to Glen and hands him a thick envelope, waiting while Glen counts the contents. I give Jill one more look-over and smooth her hair. I always feel a little sad when I am saying goodbye to one of my daughters. But I am confident she will do well. She has not even moved to hug me goodbye, though tears glisten in her eyes. She is ever the lady, just as I taught her.

Mr. Jamison leads Jill out, and after the door latches behind them, Glen lets out a whoop and spins me around. "We did it, Clara! Father will have to be impressed."

I smile at him. "He will be." Jill was the first girl that Glen and I handled completely on our own after taking over her training. It couldn't have gone better, and Papa has to be able to see that.

A crash echoes from the other room. Glen swears. "Can you do something about that tiger? Now that Jill is gone, I expect you should be able to deal with her."

I nod and hurry to the other room. There is an observation room outside the small bedroom where new girls are put when they first arrive. We need time to observe them and pinpoint areas for improvement. The men have managed to get the girl into the room, but cannot shut the door, as she has wedged herself into the space between the door and the latch. The adorable bedroom I decorated has been ransacked, and there is a decapitated doll strewn across the bed. The girl has wild eyes, and she screeches as I walk into the observation room. Her dark blonde hair is a nest of tangles that will take me hours to smooth out. I shake my head.

My entrance is enough to distract the girl so the men can push her inside and close the door. The girl continues to destroy the room, but it is silent now. The room is soundproofed.

"Sorry about your room, Clare," Joel says, shaking his head. "This one's a fighter for sure."

I just nod and wave them off. Joel and his companion leave gratefully. My eyes are glued to the girl on the other side of the window. She appears to be at least twelve or thirteen, a bit older than the girls we usually take in. The girl cannot see me, but has tasked herself with trying to break what she sees as a giant mirror by repeatedly ramming herself into it.

A fighter, indeed. I think I will call her Passion.

Now

They are trying something new today. They have brought me outside to a courtyard of some sort. A picnic table, shaded by a large tree, is centered in the area, surrounded by sparse blades of brown grass. It has been a dry spring. I drag my feet as I walk toward the table. All my energy is gone. I cannot remember my last meal. Connor and Meredith sit on one side of the picnic table, plates of chicken in front of them. Another plate sits waiting across the table, and I collapse in front of it. It is a struggle, but I push the plate away from me and turn to stare at the tree. It is a sad tree. Alone. It looks dead, but small buds give evidence of dormant life.

“You are wasting away, Di—Clara,” Connor says. He sounds concerned. More of his tricks. I am worried his tricks are starting to work on me, because his kind voice makes tears prick my eyes. I will not cry though. I will show no weakness. Not by talking. Not by eating. Not by crying.

“They have located the parents of all the girls from your house,” Meredith says. “The reunions will be on the news.”

Parents? Those are my girls. Glen and I are their parents. I turn to say so but catch myself just in time. There is a spark in Meredith’s eyes that says she knows she almost broke me. I must be stronger. Meredith and Connor take large bites of chicken and talk about some sporting event that happened last night. They pretend I do not exist. Maybe I don’t. Not anymore.

Meredith pauses and looks at me. “Oh yeah,” she says, as if she has just remembered something. She does this a lot. She slides a scrap of paper across the rough surface of the table, and returns to her conversation and her chicken.

I consider ignoring the note, but I am weak. I pull it closer, eyes widening. One word stares back at me from the paper.

EAT.

It is Glen’s handwriting.

I eat.

Then

Glen’s parents’ house is large, located in a gated community in a wealthy area of the city. Though I have been here many times, my hands tremble with nerves as we pull up in the circular driveway. Glen is tense but excited as he hops out of the truck and motions me to follow. A maid lets us in and leads us to a cozy sitting room. I clasp my hands in front of me, unsure what to do with them.

Mama Mae stands as we enter the room. She embraces Glen stiffly, and gives me a kiss on each cheek. Papa G stays seated, his breathing machine tethering him to his chair. Glen walks over to shake his hand, and takes the chair next to him.

“Come, child.” Mama Mae takes my arm and leads me out of the room. “Let’s have a chat.”

We settle into a small parlor down the hall, and I am telling Mama about the children’s progress when there is a loud bang from the other room. Glen stalks into the room and grabs my hand.

“We’re leaving.” His grip on my fingers hurts, but I dare not complain. As we reach the sitting room, I see that a table has been tipped. Papa G sits calmly in his chair, and does not look up as we pass. Glen drags me out the front door, leaving it open in his wake. Anger rolls off him in waves, and he throws me at the passenger door. I quickly climb in and buckle up. I don’t get involved with disagreements between Glen and Papa, and know better than to ask what has happened. I know enough to suspect that Papa was not as excited about Glen’s decision to expand the business as Glen had hoped.

Glen drives like the devil himself is chasing us, and I cling to the door handle to keep from sliding all over the seat. He drives to a state park and stops the truck in the shadows of the towering evergreens. He is

breathing hard, and grips the wheel like he is strangling it.

“Glen...” I begin, unsure how to help him.

Glen lunges for me, crushing his mouth against mine. I cling to him, trying to absorb the demons he is fighting, if just for a short time. The layers of clothing between us disappear. As he rises above me, his hands find my neck. His eyes blaze and stare into mine, and his fingers tighten. I cannot breathe. I cannot speak to tell him I cannot breathe. He moves faster and squeezes tighter and my vision begins to blur, black spots dancing over his face.

When I am sure I am dying, his fingers loosen and he falls on top of me, his face buried in my shoulder. I feel the wetness of his tears on my blouse as he shudders and stills. After a few moments, he moves his lips to my neck, kissing the tender skin gently.

The next day, Glen presents me with a silk scarf and a single red rose.

The bruises on my neck linger for a week.

Now

I am back in the familiar questioning room, but feeling stronger. Glen's note has made all the difference. He wants me to fight. I cannot fight if I am weak, so now I will eat. This morning I got up and did jumping jacks and pushups in my room. I tried to jog in circles, but the space is too small. They will not give me a jump rope. At least they have given me loose pants and cotton shirts to wear. I feel almost human.

The door opens and Meredith strolls in. Instead of taking her normal seat across from me, she drags the chair around the table to place it next to me. The sound of the metal legs on the floor causes me to cringe, and I see a small smile cross Meredith's face. She enjoys watching me squirm as well. Connor is not far behind, wheeling a television on a cart into the space. He pops a tape in the VCR and perches on the edge of the table with the remote control in his hand.

The screen comes to life and I lean forward as I recognize Daisy. She is running into the arms of two people who scoop her up and embrace her as if they will never release her. All three are crying. Jenna has run to another couple, who are inspecting her in disbelief, as if they cannot quite understand that she is real. Simone stands slightly apart from her people. She is a miniature of the woman who is trying to speak to her, but she stares past them. Somber Simone. That is how she got her name.

One by one, I watch as my daughters are embraced and taken away by these strangers. Finally, I see Passion. My wild child. Never quite tamed, at least not for anyone but me. No one has come for her. She watches with disinterest until the uniformed men close in on her again. Then she comes to life, kicking and screaming. The camera pans away, but I can hear her continued shouts. “Clara! Clara!”

The screen goes blank and Connor turns to look at me. Beside me, Meredith shifts and hands me a tissue to wipe the tears I did not realize were pouring from my eyes.

Then

The sun stretches across the smooth floor of the library, and I scoot myself away from its searching

fingers, pulling my pile of books along with me. The window is open, but there is barely a breeze today, and sweat soaks the hair covering my neck. I want to put it up, but Mama insists I wear it down.

Giggling voices float through the open window, and I glare at it. The other girls have been allowed to spend time outside today to escape the oppressive heat inside the house, but Mama assigned me a “special task.” She says it’s an honor and she only gives these tasks to the best girls, but it feels like a punishment. I sigh and lift my hair off my neck for just a moment, leaning back against the bookshelf and closing my eyes.

“So lazy,” a voice taunts from the direction of the doorway, but instead of feeling guilty, I smile.

“Buzz off, Macy, I’m special.” I open my eyes and grin at my friend.

Macy wanders across the room to the nest I’ve made for myself within the pile of books. “What are you doing, anyway? It’s too hot to be inside.”

Rolling my eyes as she plops next to me on the floor, I shove a stack of books in her direction. “I’m supposed to pick another language to learn, and one to teach.”

“You’re such a pet,” Macy says, but not in a mean way. “How do you even learn those stupid languages?”

I shrug. “I dunno. It’s easy. But now Mama thinks that since I can learn them, I should teach them.”

“She knows you’re eleven, right?”

“I think she thinks I’m one hundred or something. Not nearly as old as she is though.”

We look at each other for a moment before breaking out in giggles. I sneak a glance at the open library door, certain that Mama is going to jump out and punish me for saying something like that about her, but the hallway remains quiet.

“Ugh, it is so hot in here,” Macy says when we have calmed down again. “Can’t you just pick some and come outside?”

Shaking my head, I reach for the next book. “I want to pick the right ones. Mama got all these books and workbooks and if I have to use them, I want to at least have fun with them.”

“Only you would talk about lessons as fun.”

I shove her shoulder, toppling one of my neatly stacked piles in the process.

“They can be,” I say, restacking.

Macy reaches over and picks up a thick volume from a pile I haven’t looked through yet. “How about Mandarin?” she asks. “This shouldn’t take you more than a week or two.” Her cheeky smile shines at me, bringing a smile to my face despite the teasing.

“Maybe someday,” I say, grabbing the book from her and placing it in the “No” stack. “But I don’t want to outshine you too much.”

The smile falls off Macy’s face, and I worry for a second that I hurt her feelings. Even though I roll my eyes at Mama’s “special” assignments, she makes no secret of the fact that I am her favorite. Macy, on

the other hand, is always getting in trouble. Mama says she has too much spirit, and needs to learn to be a lady. Macy is really smart though, and her art skills are better than any of the other girls. I have overheard Mama and Papa talking about clients for her already. She will find a great place to be.

“Hey,” I say, nudging Macy’s knee with my foot. “Do you want to learn a language?”

She shrugs. “Mama hasn’t mentioned it,” she says. “I don’t think she’d let me.”

“Why not?” I ask, pushing a stack of French workbooks toward her. “Pick one. I’ll teach you whether Mama approves or not.”

Macy’s eyes glint with mischief, as they always do if I mention breaking the rules. “Like a secret tutor?”

“Exactly.”

“Sounds right up my alley,” Macy says, flipping open the book at the top of the stack.

“Sure you don’t want to go back outside for a while?” I ask after a few minutes. I start moving my book nest away from the growing patches of sunlight again.

Macy doesn’t look up from the book she is looking through. “Nope,” she says. “If you’re in here, I’m in here. You’re stuck with me.”

I hide my smile behind the Italian language book I pick up next. I can’t imagine anyone else I’d rather be stuck with.

Now

When they come for me the next day, I am still lying in my bed. I refuse to move. I refuse to eat. I have soiled my bed, but I do not care. I see Passion’s face over and over in my mind. I see all my children running to strangers as if they had no other mother. As if I weren’t enough. I will never see them again.

They bring someone in to clean me and change my bed. I do not help. I do not move. They dress me like a doll. I am limp in their arms. I hear Connor’s voice.

“Clara. Sit up. Eat something. Glen wants you to eat.”

It won’t work this time. Glen did not see my daughters being given away. Glen has never understood my attachment to them. I can say goodbye when the time is right, when I have prepared. But not this. Not all of them at once.

The mattress sinks as Connor sits on the edge. He puts a tentative hand on my arm. I do not react. I do not have the energy to shrug him off. I do not have the energy to care.

“I’m sorry, Clara,” Connor says, and there is regret in his voice. More tricks. “I thought it would make you happy to see that your daughters are being taken care of.”

I turn my head so I can see him. This is the first time he has referred to them as my daughters. How did he know? I have not spoken. Has he talked to Glen?

Encouraged by my reaction, Connor continues. “The people who were parents for the girls before they came to you...they agreed to take care of the girls again. They didn’t want bad things to happen to them. You don’t want bad things to happen to them, do you, Clara?”

Very slightly, I shake my head. Connor’s brows rise, but he goes on without comment about my communication. “To keep them out of group homes, we had to find families willing to take them. Since they already knew these families, it made sense.”

Connor’s words are logical. The best place for them is with me, of course, but as long as they are keeping me here, they need to be someplace familiar. I give a short nod, then turn back to the wall. Connor’s hand tightens on my arm before he releases me and stands.

“We’ll forego our questioning for today, Clara. Meredith and I will see you tomorrow. I trust you’ll eat something before then.” Without waiting for a response, Connor walks out of the room. I am alone again. I close my eyes and imagine myself as one of the parents in the video, all my daughters rushing toward me, tumbling into my arms. And I smile.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jennifer Stewart:

People live in this new day of lifestyle always make an effort to and must have the time or they will get large amount of stress from both way of life and work. So , if we ask do people have time, we will say absolutely indeed. People is human not only a robot. Then we consult again, what kind of activity are you experiencing when the spare time coming to you of course your answer will certainly unlimited right. Then do you ever try this one, reading ebooks. It can be your alternative in spending your spare time, often the book you have read is actually The Girl Before.

Octavio Martin:

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account is *The Girl Before* this publication consist a lot of the information on the condition of this world now. This kind of book was represented how do the world has grown up. The language styles that writer value to explain it is easy to understand. The actual writer made some analysis when he makes this book. This is why this book acceptable all of you.

Carmen Pinto:

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