

EVERYONE HAS A BREAKING POINT

HOUSE

OF

GLASS

A NOVEL

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THE GOLDEN COUPLE AND THE WIFE BETWEEN US

"GRIPPING . . .
Packed with surprises
and compelling
characters."
—FREIDA McFADDEN

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For Jamie Desjardins, with gratitude

Children's games are hardly games. Children are never more serious than when they play.

—Montaigne

CHAPTER ONE

Tuesdays at 4:30 p.m. That's her routine.

I stand on a grimy square of sidewalk near the busy intersection of 16th and K Streets, scanning the approaching pedestrians.

My new client will arrive in seven minutes.

I don't even need to meet her today. All I have to do is visually assess her to see if I'll be able to work with her. The thought makes my shoulders curl forward, as if I'm instinctively forming a version of the fetal position.

I could refuse to take on this client. I could claim it's impossible for me to be neutral because the media frenzy surrounding the suspicious death of her family's nanny has already shaped my perceptions.

But that would mean lying to Charles, who is the closest thing I have to a father.

"You know I hate asking for favors, Stella," Charles said last week from across the booth in his favorite Italian restaurant. He unfolded his heavy white napkin with a flick of his wrist, the crisp snap punctuating his words.

Perhaps a reminder that in all the years I've known him, he has never asked me for a single one?

"I'm not sure if I can help her," I'd told Charles.

"You're the only one who can. She needs you to be her voice, Stella."

Saying no to the man who gave me my career, walked me down the aisle, and has provided a shoulder during the dissolution of my marriage isn't an option. So here I wait.

My new client won't take any notice of me, a thirty-eight-year-old brunette in a black dress and knee-high boots, seemingly distracted by her phone, just like half the people in this power corridor of DC.

Two minutes until she's due to arrive.

As the weak October sun ducks behind a cloud, stealing the warmth from the air, a nasal-sounding horn blares behind me. I nearly jump out of my skin.

I whip around to glare at the driver, and when I refocus my attention, my client is rounding the corner a dozen yards away, her blue sweater buttoned up to her neck and her curly red hair spilling over her shoulders. Her expression is wooden.

She's tiny, even smaller than I expected. She appears to be closer to seven years old than nine.

Her mother—tall, brittle-looking, and carrying a purse that costs more than some cars—holds my client's hand as they approach their destination: a gray stone building with its address discreetly displayed on a brass plaque. Inside is the office of DC's top child psychiatrist.

In another few moments, they'll disappear through the doors and be swallowed up by the building.

She's just a kid, I remind myself. One who has been through more in the past month than some people endure in a lifetime.

I'm good at my job. Maybe the systems and strategies I've developed will carry me through. I can put a favor in Charles's bank for a change.

A few steps away from the entrance of her therapist's building, little Rose Barclay stops. She pulls her hand out of her mother's and points down to her shoe. Mrs. Barclay nods, busying herself by removing her oversized sunglasses and placing them in a case while Rose bends down.

I squint and crane my head forward.

People stream past Rose like water around a rock, but no one seems to notice what she's doing.

Rose isn't adjusting the buckle on her shiny black Mary Janes, as I'd assumed.

Her left hand is stretching out to the side. Seeking something.

I'm drawn forward. Closer to her.

It happens so quickly it's almost over before I realize what she has done. If my angle had been off—if I'd been watching from across the street or inside the building—I never would have noticed.

Rose straightens up, her left hand slipping into the pocket of her sweater as her right hand reaches up for her mother's.

The evidence is gone now, tucked away.

But I saw it. I know what this shy-looking girl collected off the sidewalk and concealed to keep.

A shard of broken glass, shaped like a dagger, its end tapering to an evil-looking point.

CHAPTER TWO

My first rule for meeting a new client: It's always on their turf.

Sometimes that means at a skateboard park, or in side-by-side chairs at a nail salon, or in their backyard while they throw a tennis ball for their golden retriever. Food is typically involved. My clients rarely want to confide in me early in the process, and eating pizza or nachos provides space for silence.

I never press hard during the first meeting. It's all about establishing trust.

By the time I see them, any trust my clients once held in adults has been shattered.

When divorce court judges are presented with the most brutal, complicated custody cases—ones in which no resolution seems possible—they appoint someone like me: a best interest attorney, or guardian ad litem. We represent the children.

My particular area of expertise is teenagers. I never take on clients younger than twelve. But Charles—or Judge Huxley, as he's more widely known—wants me to break that rule. One of his colleagues is the presiding judge on the Barclay case, and she is having trouble finding the right attorney for Rose.

I take a last glance up at the gray building Rose disappeared into only moments ago. She's in a safe space, being tended to by a highly trained professional. Her mother is present.

So who does the girl think she needs to protect herself from with a shard of glass that could double as a knife?

My Uber pulls up to the curb. “Stella?” the driver asks as I slide into the backseat, and I nod.

He turns up the radio, and an NPR reporter's modulated voice pours out of the speakers. I'm relieved the driver doesn't want to make conversation. I need to gather myself before reaching my next destination, another office building close to the National Cathedral. This appointment is a personal one.

I stare out the window as the driver winds his way north through clogged streets, muttering under his breath when he gets stuck behind an illegally parked Tesla.

My mind feels overly full, a dozen discordant thoughts buzzing through it. I reach for my phone to send a text to Marco, my soon-to-be ex-husband, then discard the idea. He knows I'm coming, and he won't be late. Like all the partners in his prestigious law firm, he parcels out his days in six-minute billing increments, which makes him acutely aware of time.

I step out of the Uber at the stroke of five o'clock, heading for a nondescript brick building that holds more than its share of heartbreak.

I bypass the elevator and climb the stairs to the fourth floor, then walk into the small reception area of suite 402. Marco is waiting, leaning back in a chair as he smiles at something on his phone.

The sight of him still takes my breath away. His Italian roots show in his glossy dark hair, tan

skin, and eyes that turn to amber when the sun hits them. Our coloring is so similar we've been asked more than once if we're related.

"Just one of those old married couples who start to look alike," Marco used to joke.

He rises now, placing a hand on my shoulder as he leans in to brush a kiss across my cheek. I start to wrap my arms around him, but he pulls back before I can embrace him in a real hug.

We both speak at the same time, our words entwining instead of our bodies.

I aim for a joke: "Fancy meeting you here."

Marco pulls out a DC cliché: "How was traffic?"

He gestures to the coffee table where two sets of documents topped by identical blue pens await. "Lakshmi already brought out the paperwork."

I blink hard. This is happening fast. "So all we have to do is sign?"

He nods and hands me one of the slim stacks of paper.

Unlike the divorces I encounter through work, the one Marco and I are going through is as amicable as it gets. Our biggest disagreement came when Marco insisted on giving me the little row house we'd bought together near the DC line. We both know why: He makes twenty times as much as I do now. I accepted the house. But I insisted he take our fancy espresso maker. It was a bigger sacrifice than it sounds; I love a good cup of coffee.

I hesitate, then scrawl my name across the bottom of the final page of our divorce agreement. When I look up, Marco is recapping his pen.

Lakshmi steps into the waiting room. "Hey, Stella. You guys all set?"

I nod, my eyes skittering away from her sympathetic ones. This is the final step in the dissolution of our marriage. After Lakshmi files the papers, I'll get a letter in the mail notifying me our uncontested divorce has been granted.

My gaze roams across the box of tissues on the coffee table. Next to it is a sculpture of an eagle in flight, its wings outstretched. I recognize the symbolism: tissues for grief at an ending, the bird an image of hope for the future.

Marco and I wed on a crystalline winter day nearly ten years ago, just as the first snow of the season began to fall. Even before I said the vows I meant with my whole heart, I knew we'd end up here.

It was only a question of when.

CHAPTER THREE

Marco and I claim two stools at the bar of a casual Mexican place in Tenleytown. Always the gentleman, he pulls mine out before seating himself.

Ever since we met in law school at George Washington University, we've been cultivating a list of our favorite restaurants around town. This one didn't make the cut, but the margaritas are good and it was convenient. Besides, Marco has let me know he can't linger for dinner.

We order a pair of spicy margaritas on the rocks, no salt. A bartender delivers a basket of crispy chips and a dish of warm salsa along with our drinks.

I watch as a barback cuts limes with a small knife, the blade easily slicing through the fruit's green skin. The knife is only a little bigger than the piece of glass Rose Barclay put in her pocket.

"It's always the husband," Marco says, continuing the conversation we began while we walked here. "Ian Barclay knocked up the nanny. She was two months pregnant, right?"

"Closer to six weeks."

"So he tried to eliminate the problem."

"The wife had plenty of motive, too," I counter. "Jealousy. Rage. Plus, Beth Barclay is the one with all the money. What if the nanny came after her for blackmail or child support?"

"So why didn't Beth kill her husband *and* the nanny?" Marco asks. "They both betrayed her."

I shrug and swirl a chip into the salsa. "Crimes of passion defy logic. If she did it, she probably didn't plan it out. There are subtler ways to murder someone than by pushing them through a third-story window."

I pause, regretting the flippancy of my words as I recall Rose's vacant expression. Rose was in the backyard helping her grandmother pick tomatoes from the vegetable garden when it happened. Rose might have seen her nanny tumble through the air. She would have heard the fatal crack of skull against the stone patio.

"Both parents were in the house, right? So whose alibi is stronger?" Marco wants to know.

In the month since the nanny's death, media coverage has tapered off, but there is no shortage of old news clips on what police termed a "suspicious death." I've spent the past few days digging into research, so I tell Marco what I know: Beth Barclay claimed to be in her second-floor office, writing an email to her fellow members of the board of the Kennedy Center. She had classical music playing through her computer speakers, as she typically did when she worked, and she insisted it masked the sound of the window glass breaking a floor above. Police verified Beth transmitted an email around the time the nanny fell.

Beth's husband, Ian, was on the phone with an employee of his landscaping company; his home office is down the hall from Beth's. He uses noise-canceling AirPods for his calls, and claims he didn't hear a thing until he ended his call and heard his mother screaming. That phone

call was also verified.

Both Barclays lawyered up the moment it became clear the police considered them suspects and refused to take lie detector tests, multiple press outlets reported. Police recently closed the active investigation, so it's now considered a cold case.

And both Barclays are fighting for sole physical and legal custody of Rose.

"Let's say you pushed the nanny. How fast could you make it from that third-floor window back down to one of those second-floor offices?" Marco wonders. Then he smiles. "Who am I asking? I know you're going to find out."

I smile, too, the sorrow I felt in our mediator's office beginning to fade. I've always bounced my cases off Marco. His even temperament and contemplative nature are two of his many wonderful qualities. We no longer share a home or life together, but we still have this: A deep friendship. An enduring connection. A different kind of love.

"Another?" the bartender asks.

I look down and see I've drained my margarita. "Sure."

Marco's glass is almost full.

That's unlike him. Marco loves a good cocktail.

I frown and take in more details. I do what I've learned to do in my cases, when just about everyone I encounter lies to me to further their own agendas—or delusions. I look for the unspoken messages. His tell.

His fingertips are drumming on the wooden bar. He hasn't loosened his tie, like he typically does at the end of a workday. Instead of leaning back against the curved, welcoming backrest of his stool, he's sitting up straight.

Marco's body language reveals what his words don't: Something is weighing on his mind.

I probe for the source of his unease. "Everything good at work?"

He shrugs. "Fine. You know, the usual."

Marco doesn't derive his sense of self-worth from the eight-figure deals he navigates. He takes more pride in volunteering pro bono hours to battered women and donating a chunk of his salary to charities that serve underprivileged children. His heart is with people—with family.

It's one of the things I love most about him. It wasn't only Marco I gained when we wed. From the start, his big, Italian-American family folded me into their gatherings: everyone talking over one another, the table laden with food, someone always topping off your wineglass, friendly arguments and laughter swelling like waves.

If Marco isn't troubled by something at work, maybe it has to do with his family. His older sister is pregnant with her fourth child—a high-risk pregnancy due to her diabetes. But last I heard, all was going well. His mother experienced chest pains recently. The doctors ran tests and told her it was just gas. But doctors aren't infallible.

"Mom's seventieth is coming up fast," I venture. "Is the plan still the Inn at Little Washington?"

Marco's fingers speed up their rhythm. Bingo.

"Ah, yeah ... Actually, I was hoping we could talk about that."

My heart accelerates, echoing the staccato rhythm of Marco's fingertips.

Marco's mother has long talked about celebrating her milestone birthday at the coveted kitchen table in the only three-star Michelin restaurant in the DC area. A reservation was secured

nearly a year ago. Though Marco's father passed away shortly after we wed, Marco's four siblings, along with their spouses, will all be there.

I was invited, too. They still consider me family.

I brace for Marco's next words.

"I've met someone," he says. I flash to the memory of him smiling down at something on his phone when I walked into the mediator's lobby and the way he deflected my invitation to dinner tonight.

Marco wouldn't be telling me this if his new relationship weren't serious—serious enough that the woman he wants to bring to that long-awaited family dinner isn't me, an ex-wife who still calls her former in-law "Mom."

It isn't hard to do the math. No matter how many chairs the table holds, there won't be enough room for both of us.

Marco has already found the hope the eagle statue in the mediator's office promised.

I can't blame him. We've been separated for more than a year.

I do what needs to be done. I smile and maintain eye contact. I don't allow myself to give away a single tic or clue. My work has taught me to lie convincingly.

"I'm happy for you." I lift my glass in a toast. "She's a lucky woman. Bring her to the dinner. I'll drop off my gift for your mom some other time."

Marco smiles, his posture finally relaxing. "Thank you for understanding."

On our wedding day, I was so in love I thought we could overcome anything. But there was one thing neither of us could compromise on. A dividing line that only grew deeper and wider with time.

Marco wanted kids.

I didn't. More than that, I couldn't. Not physically but emotionally.

People who endure childhoods like mine tend to go one of two ways, a therapist once told me. Either they try to give their kids the kind of parenting they wish they'd had, or they avoid children altogether.

Marco hoped I'd change my mind about motherhood. I hoped our love would be enough.

I turn my gaze away from his, watching the knife cleave through another lime.

CHAPTER FOUR

The tall iron gates swing open, and I gently press down on my gas pedal, easing along the curving private road toward the Barclay estate in Potomac, Maryland. This historic Colonial and its twenty acres of land were purchased for \$12 million, according to public records. And that was before the Barclays renovated the mansion and added a reclaimed-wood barn and two-story shed.

The property is in both Ian and Beth Barclay's names, but Beth's inherited fortune made the buy possible.

I take another swig of hazelnut coffee from my travel mug. I feel a bit off my game—I didn't sleep well last night after Marco's news—and I need to be sharp.

As of today, I'm officially the best interest attorney for Rose Barclay.

It's time to meet my newest client.

I crane my neck as I approach the house, trying to glimpse the area where the nanny was pushed—or fell. But my view is blocked by a big excavator parked by the side of the house, its giant metal claw waiting to smash and grab.

I shift my gaze to the house. It's like something from a place time forgot, with its gray-green serpentine-stone construction and wide front porch. The house is ringed by sprawling oak and cedar trees, but not a single fallen branch or brown patch mars the emerald expanse of lawn. Lush blue hydrangea bushes, with flower clusters as big as bowling balls, line the beds surrounding the front porch.

I park my Jeep in front of the garage and double-check that I have everything I need. My phone is fully charged and has a good camera, since I never know when I'll need to document something. In my shoulder bag I've tucked my laptop and a new yellow legal pad. My cherished Montblanc pen—a gift from Marco—is in an interior pocket.

I step out and inhale the clean air. It's hard to believe this place is less than thirty minutes from the hustle and grime of DC. Instead of the rush of traffic and bleating of horns, all I hear is birdsong.

I climb the porch steps and press my finger to the bell. Beth Barclay opens the door a moment later, like she was hovering nearby.

Police never officially deemed her a suspect in the murder. But I can't help assessing her ballerina-lean, five-foot-nine frame. Strong enough to push her petite young nanny through the fragile single-pane glass of a hundred-year-old window?

Absolutely.

"Ms. Hudson?" she asks, even though I gave my name at the gate intercom.

"Call me Stella." I extend my hand.

She takes it. Her grip is firm.

“Welcome. I’m Beth.”

She has the same pale skin, delicate features, and red hair as her daughter. But the years have sloughed away some of the vibrancy of Beth’s coloring.

I step across the entryway and feel my eyes involuntarily widen.

It’s as if I’ve landed in another time.

From the narrow-planked, dark wood floors to the steel-gray steam radiators and pocket doors with skeleton keyholes, it’s as if this house has been perfectly preserved for a century, waiting for the Barclays to move in.

Most major renovations of old homes involve tearing down walls to create an open floor plan and using architectural tricks to bring in light and flow.

The Barclays didn’t do any of that. They went backward in time, not forward.

The floor is slightly sloped, and the ceilings are low. The hallway is papered in a flowery ivory pattern, and the console table looks like an antique, with its rickety legs and brass fixtures. Above it hangs a watercolor in an ornate gold frame that could have come off the wall of a museum.

“Would you care for some coffee, or perhaps sparkling water?” Beth offers.

Despite all she has been through—a double betrayal, a death in her home, a public scandal, and a looming divorce—her manners are impeccable, her voice soft and cultured. She wears slim-fitting, camel-colored pants and a cream sweater with a scarf that looks like vintage Hermès knotted around her neck. But I can read the deep strain in her eyes, and in the faint lines around her mouth.

Beth looks like a woman on the brink—of an eruption or a collapse. Maybe both.

I shake my head. “No thanks.”

“So.” Beth’s hands twist together. “I’m not quite sure how this works.”

I smile in a way that I hope reassures her. “All I need to do today is meet Rose. You can remain with us the whole time.”

Beth doesn’t look happy. Then again, most people aren’t when faced with a lawyer who may decide the best thing for their child is to have minimal contact with them.

“I’m going to be around a lot during the next few weeks, so it’s important Rose feels comfortable with me,” I continue. My job requires me to assess everything in Rose’s world and get multiple perspectives from people she knows before I give the court my custody recommendation.

“I understand.” Beth nods toward the staircase, with its intricately carved, thick wooden banister. “She’s in her room.”

“Just one question first. How much does Rose know about the divorce?”

“She’s aware her father and I are divorcing, and that we both want her to live with us.”

I can’t help thinking that’s a huge emotional burden to place on the shoulders of a small child.

As I follow Beth to the stairs, I pause and peer into a formal living room to my left. Furniture is grouped around a simple brick fireplace—it looks like another original feature of the house—and a large black piano awaits, sheet music resting on the ledge above its keys. Rose plays, I remember. She’s supposed to be remarkably good for her age. There’s a silver tea set on the coffee table, and the rug is woven in dark blue and maroon shades. The room feels sterile, as if it has been staged but not truly lived in.

Something else feels off about this house, but I can't put my finger on it. There's a heaviness to the air, as if gravity is somehow stronger within the confines of these walls. Maybe the rage and turmoil and pain swirling around are affecting me.

We climb the stairs, the hundred-year-old wood creaking under our weight. Rising in symmetry with each step is a series of photographs of Rose, from infancy through the present. I'm struck by the fact that Rose is smiling in only two of the pictures. There's something eerily adult in her eyes, even as a toddler.

I want to pause and study the photographs—there's another off detail tickling my brain—but Beth is moving quickly. It's a struggle to catch up to her; my limbs feel leaden.

As we approach the second-floor landing, my gaze is pulled to the rear of the house. A window overlooks the grounds. The nanny would have tumbled past that pane of glass, her face filled with terror, her arms outstretched.

I suppress a shudder. If I were the Barclays, I'd move out as quickly as possible. It seems strange that given the ugliness of their pending divorce, they're still living under the same roof.

But Charles explained why: The Barclays have agreed to sell the house, and Ian Barclay is honoring the prenup he signed by not angling for alimony or a piece of Beth's inheritance, so their standoff has nothing to do with money. Each will leave the marriage with the same assets they brought into it.

But neither Beth nor Ian wants to give up their chance at winning full custody of Rose—and they see moving out as a losing chess move.

My chest tightens. The fate of a helpless young child rests in my hands, and I have no idea if I'm equipped to fix what seems like an unwinnable future for her.

More than a half-dozen doors with round brass knobs line the second floor, and all are closed. I wonder what lies behind them. There are no other visible windows in the hallway, and the space is dim.

Beth passes two doors, then pauses at the third and taps her knuckles against it. I inhale a deep breath into my pinched lungs. This is my first chance to look beyond the surface, to see what all the tabloid articles and TV clips couldn't.

Beth opens the door to reveal a tidy bedroom with walls painted soft pink. A wooden rocking chair occupies one corner, and on the canopy bed is a large cloth doll that appears to be formed in Rose's image—down to her wide blue eyes and freckles.

"Rose? I have someone I'd like you to meet."

I don't love Beth's choice of words. There's an implication of ownership to them, like I'm here as Beth's guest. In order for me to do my job, Rose can't think I'm in the corner of either of her parents. I'm here to serve her, not the adults in her life.

Rose twists around from her white wooden desk, where she's reading a book. I glimpse the title on the jacket: *Anne of Green Gables*.

"Hi, Rose." I keep my tone light. "My name is Stella Hudson."

Rose's eyes are downcast. She doesn't give any indication she has heard me.

"I'm a lawyer, Rose. And guess what? I'm here to work for you."

She doesn't react.

Sometimes my clients are glad I've arrived. They're desperate for someone to finally listen to them. Others are resistant. This year alone I've had a fifteen-year-old girl slam a door in my face,

narrowly missing catching my hand in it, and a seventeen-year-old boy curse me out, a vein bulging in his forehead and his voice rising into a deep-timbred shout—just before he fell to his knees and burst into tears.

I have no idea how Rose feels about my presence.

“I know there’s a lot going on for you right now, and it’s probably pretty confusing,” I continue. “I’ll be spending some time with you and your parents over the next few weeks to help figure out what will make you happiest.”

Rose is wearing a green velvet dress today, with her loose red curls pulled back in a matching headband. Up close, I see a sprinkling of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Again, I’m struck by how young and innocent she appears—and by how formally she is dressed.

I wonder where she put the shard of glass.

“I like your room.” I glance around, spotting a blue ribbon from a horse show, a tall bookshelf in white wood, and a painting of a garden scene in another large, ornate gold frame.

“This painting is so pretty and peaceful. It must be nice to look at.”

I keep my tone gentle and pleasant as I admire the pink flowers and the little dog peeking out from behind a tree. “I didn’t see the dog at first ... It’s almost like he’s playing hide-and-seek.”

I don’t ask a single question because I know Rose won’t answer.

She can’t speak.

CHAPTER FIVE

It's as if Rose split into two people when she watched her nanny die: The little girl of before—a gifted student with the vocabulary of a much older child.

And the expressionless child who sits before me now, suffering from traumatic mutism.

Rose has seen the top doctors in the region. None can say when she will talk again. It could be in a day, or in six months.

Beth sits on the edge of her daughter's bed, twisting her hands together again. I catalog it as a nervous tic.

Beth probably thinks I don't understand what her daughter is going through.

But I'm one of the few people who does.

There are different kinds of mutism that afflict children. Some kids can't speak in certain environments, such as at school. That's called selective mutism.

Mutism can also occur after brain trauma or surgery.

Rose suffers from a condition that's far rarer and not well understood: traumatic mutism. The onset is swift and overwhelming, and as the name suggests, it occurs after a severe trauma. One documented case involved a girl who was mauled by a dog and didn't speak for six weeks. Another case—not documented—occurred when a girl discovered the body of her mother.

That girl was me.

I was a little younger than Rose when I experienced the sensation of my throat closing up around my words, sealing them away. I couldn't speak for months after I saw my mother's lifeless form on our living room floor.

Charles knows this; it's why he asked me to work with Rose. He believes I'm in a unique position to understand her.

Back when I was a child, traumatic mutism wasn't understood at all. Some people believed I was being defiant, that I was perfectly capable of speech. Perhaps being punished would remind me how to talk.

I push away the memory fast.

I spend the next few minutes talking about a horse I once met named Pacino who loved peppermints, then admire the row of perfect little origami cranes decorating the top of her bookshelf.

"Rose made those," Beth tells me.

When I thank Rose for letting me see her room, she doesn't give any indication she has heard me.

"I'll be back tomorrow to talk with your dad, so I'll probably see you again then," I tell Rose.

Beth takes my cue and stands up. I watch as she walks over and drops a kiss on Rose's forehead, telling her daughter she'll be back in a moment.

Rose picks up her book again. But the jacket gapes away from the book cover, and I glimpse the title printed on the spine.

The first word isn't *Anne*.

It's *The*.

It's an old trick to hide books beneath different books' jackets to camouflage what you're reading. I had a friend in junior high school who did it with Judy Blume books to fool her strict mother.

If the book Rose is so engrossed in isn't *Anne of Green Gables*, what is it?

I can't linger any longer. Beth is in the doorway, looking at me expectantly.

I follow her as she retraces our path downstairs. When we reach the entryway, she begins to head for the front door. I quickly ask, "Actually, can I take you up on that glass of water now?"

I'm not thirsty. I want to get a look at more of the Barclays' home. Plus, it will give me a chance to talk more to Beth.

The kitchen is in the rear of the house. We walk down the narrow hallway, passing a small library with an exposed stone wall and floor-to-ceiling shelves, as well as several other rooms with closed doors. I see activity going on in the backyard through the clear panes of the sliding kitchen doors that lead to the patio.

Parked to one side of the yard is a work truck with the name of the company in big letters—*TRINITY WINDOWS*—and beneath it, a line of script that reads *Plexiglass: The Safe, Clear Choice for Today's Homes*.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Beth open a dark wood cupboard and pull out a blue tumbler, filling it with filtered water from a small tap on the side of the deep sink.

I clock the cement countertops, the copper cabinet handles, the stone floor. Modern luxury renovations tend to incorporate products like solar panels or glazed tiles on the walls, but all the materials I've seen in this house were available a century ago.

I turn my focus onto two men unloading a pane of what looks like glass—but must be plexiglass—from the back of their truck, carrying it down the ramp toward the house.

"Stella?"

I look over to see Beth holding out the glass of water.

When I take it, it feels strange in my hand. Much lighter than I expected.

I examine it more closely and realize it isn't glass, even though it looks identical. It's the sort of acrylic that is shatter-proof. I know because Marco's sister, the one who is pregnant with her fourth child, switched to those when her kids knocked one too many drinks off the kitchen table.

It's a discordant modern detail in a home that seems frozen in time.

My eyes flit to the truck again. It's filled with large, rectangular shapes. Dozens of sheets of plexiglass.

Enough for every window in this enormous house.

"Well, it's a busy morning. And Rose needs to get back to her schoolwork."

"Her schoolwork?" I echo. It's a Saturday, and I can't imagine a third-grader has much homework.

"My mother-in-law has been homeschooling Rose. We thought it would be best to take her out of school temporarily, given everything..." Beth's voice trails off. "Thank you for coming."

She is dismissing me. She smiles, but the expression doesn't reach her eyes.