

EVERYONE HAS A BREAKING POINT

HOUSE

OF

GLASS

A NOVEL

SARAH

PEKKANEN

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

#1 BESTSELLING COAUTHOR OF  
*THE GOLDEN COUPLE* AND *THE WIFE BETWEEN US*



# HOUSE OF GLASS

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SARAH PEKKANEN



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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.