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Opening extract from

House of Windows

Written by

Alexia Casale

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HOUSE OF WINDOWS

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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

For my mother, who has believed in this story since
its first (very different) incarnation,

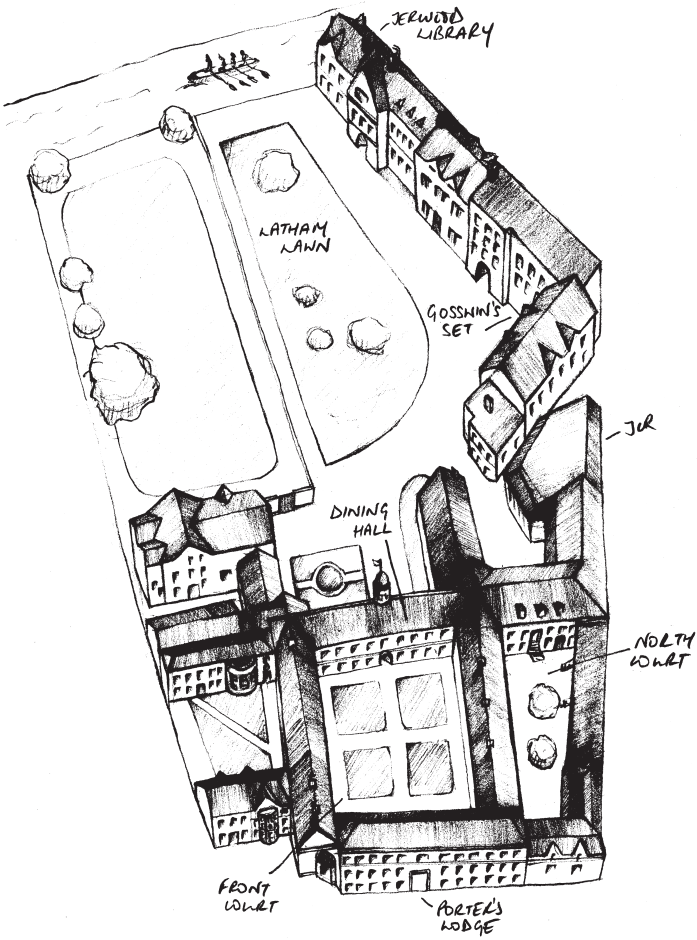
for my Fiercely Wonderful Aunty Pat,
always my First Reader, and

for Kate and Luna, who gave me Dragon Treasures
just when I needed something to hold on to.

Cambridge


HM PRISON UL
TRINITY HALL BOATHOUSE
JESUS
MIDSUMMER COMMON
BRIDGE OF SIGHS
ST JOHN'S
CHRIST'S
THE GRAFTON CENTRE
POLICE STATION
TRINITY LANE
CAIUS
TRINITY STREET
EMMANUEL
TRINITY
SENATE HOUSE PSG
THE BACKS
GREAT ST MARY'S
LITTLE ST MARY'S LANE
SENATE HOUSE
KINGS PARADE
PARKER'S PIECE
MILL LANE
CLARE BRIDGE
TRINITY HALL
KINGS
REGENT STREET
KING'S BRIDGE
CORPUS CHRISTI
PEMBROKE
TRAIN STATION
CLARE
CATZ
TRUMPINGTON STREET
MATHEMATICAL BRIDGE
SILVER STREET
MILL LANE
PETERHOUSE
BOTANIC GARDENS
ADDENBROOKE'S HOSPITAL

Trinity Hall



The body is a house of many windows: there we all sit, showing ourselves and crying on the passers-by to come and love us.

Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Truth of Intercourse', *Essays: English & American*

What a child doesn't receive, he can seldom later give.

P. D. James, *Time to Be In Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*

Chapter[I]

(28 × August)

Happy fifteenth birthday, genius! Just think: this time next year you'll have a first-year Cambridge First and a bunch of mates who might just keep up with you.

Love, Gerry

Nick let his fingers linger on the overprinted surface of the card, cold and slick as water.

A glance up at the clock: time to go.

He slipped the card between the pages of his book. 'Dad!' he called as he tucked the book into his rucksack. He hitched the strap over his shoulder as his father emerged from his study, shoulders hunched, a fretful look on his face.

Nick glanced back at the apartment as they crossed to the door. He'd been expecting the phone to go all morning, stomach tying itself into progressively more intricate knots

as the clock ticked on. Now, standing with his hand on the front-door latch, disappointment was almost swallowed by relief at the ring. Almost.

It wasn't even the phone call. It was his father's soft sigh of relief: the way all the tension in his shoulders suddenly vanished.

Don't bother! The words shouted themselves so loud across the inside of his mind that it was precious seconds before he realised he hadn't even whispered them aloud; if he spoke them now, it would sound rehearsed, like a character playing a part. Like his father, pantomiming dismay as he drew his mobile out of his pocket.

What's the point anyway? he muttered. *Shouting isn't going to change anything. It's not going to make you want to go with me.*

'What?' his dad asked, covering the phone with his hand. 'Did you say something?'

Nick shook his head. Words stuck in his throat like water breathed down the wrong way.

'What? Now?' his father asked the phone. 'I'm meant to be in the car with my son. I've told you a dozen times it's his birthday today and we're celebrating by moving into the new Cambridge house. We've got furniture arriving in a few hours.'

Nick flinched as the study door snicked shut.

He slouched, reading, against the kitchen counter, until Michael reappeared. The words on the page broke apart, refused to coalesce as he tried to ignore his father's worn-out placations: 'Terribly urgent . . . so sorry, Nick . . . get the train down as soon as I can . . . I wish . . .'

No, you don't, he told the book, trapping the words against the pages. The pain in his chest tightened to a white-hot pulse of grief and anger and frustration. *I wish. I'm the one who's sorry.*

A sigh from Michael. 'Nick, please stop mumbling into that book.'

'Is the Replacement insured for the car?'

'I wish you'd stop calling my assistants "Replacements" just because you don't like them as much as Gerry. Gerry may have been head and shoulders above everyone who's come since, but it's still rude.'

Nick met his eyes. 'And calling them the wrong name like you do isn't?'

'The car insurance's set up so it covers all additional drivers now, so tell . . .' The current Replacement's name was clearly just on the tip of his father's tongue. 'If you keep above eighty on the motorway, you should be there in time for the delivery men. I'll pay the fine if you get one.'

When Michael turned back to his phone, Nick retreated to his bedroom. It looked strange without his things, like the guest room it had been before he'd moved in four years ago. The single crumpled ball of paper in the bin looked forlorn and abandoned. He shivered, as if there were a window open, though he was the one who'd gone round checking that everything was shut before their abortive attempt to leave.

He took his book out to the living room, curling himself up into someone else's troubles.

Twenty minutes later the sound of the doorbell jolted him

back from a life where every question had an answer, every problem a solution.

'Bye, Dad!' he called as he buzzed the Replacement into the building. He bookmarked his page with Gerry's card again, wondering if the current Replacement would even bother to comment on the day.

Michael appeared for a moment at his study door, phone to his ear, and pulled an expression like a Greek tragedy mask.

'Ready to go?' Nick asked the Replacement when the lift doors pinged open in the hall.

The Replacement's look went from friendly to surly. 'Shouldn't I check in with Michael first?' He slipped into the apartment for a spot of hasty ingratiation.

'Never gets out from under it, does he, your old man?' asked the Replacement as he flicked the apartment door shut behind him a few minutes later.

In the glaring light of the basement, the car looked murderous, polished to a vicious shine. The Replacement sank into the driver's seat with a moan of delight that made Nick shudder. He tapped the SatNav into life, checking the traffic reports to forestall further conversation, though the Replacement seemed temporarily content, stroking the steering wheel, wriggling unpleasantly in his seat, playing with the controls on the dashboard.

'So, excited about the move then?' the Replacement asked. 'Know if there are any other pint-sized geniuses heading to Cambridge?'

'Not this year. And I'm not actually a genius.'

A snort from the Replacement: the type that said 'pull the other one' and 'your false modesty sucks' and 'looking for compliments?' all in one neat little package of spite.

'I started school a year early, when I was four, because I was already reading. Then I went up two years when I was eleven. That was when I moved in with my dad, so I was changing schools anyway. He persuaded the new school to let me join the year ahead 'cos I'd been finding the work at the old place too easy.'

'So it's not just me that your dad pushes, then? You must have loved all that extra pressure at school on top of moving and having to make new friends.'

'Actually, that was the best bit. It gave me something to do, seeing as how no one was all that keen on making friends with the new kid – especially when they found out I wasn't just short but two years younger. But I was still bored because even then the work wasn't that hard, so after a month I got Dad to talk them into moving me up another year so I could start the GCSE syllabus. That meant I did my A levels three years early. That's the only reason I'm going to uni so young: it's not like I proved the Riemann Hypothesis or anything.'

'I thought you were one of those maths prodigies?'

'My dad's good at making it sound that way, but I'm not that special.' He bit his lip over the automatic rush of defensiveness. 'I did well enough in my Cambridge interview and STEP maths admission tests to get a place fair and square with my predicted A levels. Then I said the right things about

why I wanted to study there straight after sixth form rather than take a gap year . . . let alone three.'

That wrung a bark of laughter out of the Replacement.

'Anyway, they don't like Maths students having a pause before uni so . . .' He shrugged.

'You're not so bad, kid. For a genius and all.'

'You know my dad'll expect you to get all the flat-pack furniture made up before he arrives, right?'

The Replacement's look of horror sustained Nick for a further forty-five minutes.

'You nervous about it yet?' the Replacement asked as they finally merged on to the M11.

Nick shrugged. 'Not really. I've still got a month to go before Induction, since Cambridge Term doesn't start until October. Besides, it's got to be better than school. If nothing else, the work will be interesting.'

'I like the confidence, kid.'

No, you don't. You don't like it or me at all, Nick whispered to the side mirror.

'Don't like this station?' the Replacement said, fiddling with the radio. 'You maths geniuses like classical, right?'

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'I thought you said I had to set up the flat-pack stuff?' the Replacement grumbled, following Nick puppy-like into the kitchen to set about unpacking the 'emergency caffeine rations' box.

A crash sounded in the hall.

The Replacement hurried away, already yelling at the delivery crew. 'You might want to take some care on this one, boys! My boss makes a living out of suing people.'

And people think I am socially awkward, Nick told the coffee tin. He left the kettle to boil only to find the Replacement in the hall, squaring up to one of the delivery men with his hands on hips, chest puffed out, his accent getting posher by the second.

'Why don't we bring in the rest of the stuff from the car?' Nick suggested.

The Replacement made a noise like a poodle trying to growl and stalked out of the front door. Nick grimaced at the delivery man as he lifted his shoulders in a 'what can you do?' shrug.

With the unloading done, Nick left them arguing about where to drill the holes for the TV wall-bracket – 'I'm calling my boss,' whined the Replacement – and slipped away upstairs: one flight, turn, another. When they'd bought the house, Michael had sent in the builders to gut it and replace the plumbing and electrics, then put in an attic conversion for Nick, complete with en suite.

He could barely get in the door of his new room for all the boxes. The delivery men had left the packaging on the mattress but at least it was already sitting on the bedframe, tucked neatly under the window overlooking the back garden. Past sagging fences, tangled gardens stretched away to left and right: a rusting mini-trampoline; a slide spattered

with startlingly purple bird-muck; a rotting wooden patio with a crumpled bamboo summer shelter; a path of warm brown stones, sunk into the grass; a cat flopped on its side in a patch of sunlight. He rotated the window catch and shoved the bottom pane up under the top one, closing his eyes as the hot summer wind moved across his face.

Sprawling across the bed, he reached for the closest box and ripped the tape off, dragging out the books inside and piling them on the bed, then shuffling to the end and leaning over to slot them into the bookcase against the side wall. The photo frame was waiting for him at the bottom of the third box. He'd forgotten it was there, but when he lifted out the last of his Harry Potter books, there she was, looking up at him with that funny expression he could never pin down. A frown? The start of a smile? Her eyes looked grey and uncertain, though they'd been blue: a strange colour, like bonfire smoke curling up into a night sky. Just like his. Sometimes he caught the same expression on his own face in the mirror, but even then he wasn't sure what emotion lay behind it.

Biting his lip, he tried to nod at the picture, but couldn't, found himself camouflaging the movement as an attempt to see where on the shelf to set the frame, though there was no one to pretend for: no one to trick but himself. Snapping the stand closed, he slid the picture between two oversized books, pushing it to the back of the shelf so it was all but hidden. He watched his hand hover mid-air as if unable to leave the photo there.

'Hello?' someone called up the stairs. 'Not sure where the last stuff goes,' the delivery man said, as Nick slouched reluctantly down, 'and I'm done asking Upper Class Twit of the Year. How'd you get stuck with him anyway?'

'It's more "How did he get stuck with me?" It's not really his job to . . .' He gestured around at the packing crates.

'Must be weird, doing the move and all that without your dad.'

Nick shrugged. 'He'll be here later. To be honest, if he were here now he'd just be wandering around down the bottom of the garden, yelling into his phone, driving the neighbours up the wall.'

The delivery man laughed. 'Got to look on the bright side. Though I'm not sure there's a bright side to that lump downstairs. You have to deal with him a lot?'

'He's new. Last time I had to move somewhere by myself it was . . .' He swallowed down the rest of the words about how the first move had been different because of Gerry: Michael's original articled clerk. The one all the Replacements failed to measure up to.

To be fair, Gerry had set a high bar. When Nick had opened Roger's front door for the last time, hoping against hope his dad was on the other side and finding Gerry instead, Gerry's first words had been, 'So your stepfather's a bit of a dick, then. I'm afraid your dad's caught up at work – we're meeting him at the flat later – but he's given me the expenses credit card and *carte blanche* to buy anything that will make the move easier to bear.' There had been more sympathy than

pity in Gerry's face. Best of all, he'd said nothing about Nick's mum, why Roger had responded by throwing him out, or what his father thought about Nick moving in without even a day's notice.

Unlike the current Replacement, Gerry had made himself useful without fuss, staying to help Nick unpack his old life and rearrange it into something new.

At least he was sure that the current 'something new' was also 'something better'.

It was easy enough to persuade the Replacement to leave almost as soon as the delivery men had finished: people tended to listen when you told them what they wanted to hear. Gerry was the only one who'd risked treading on Michael's toes to do the decent thing, whether that was making sure Nick didn't have to come home from school to an empty flat every night while Michael was away on a business trip, or just keeping him company when he had to go to the dentist. Gerry's birthday card brightened the new mantelpiece next to the ones from 'Your fond Godfather Bill' and Secretary Sandy.

Michael's phone was endlessly engaged or off when Nick tried it at five past each hour. At nine, he gave up and settled down with a packet of biscuits by way of dinner, stacking them into a tower and forcing a birthday candle into the top one until it split. He propped the candle between the pieces and lit it, sighing as it promptly listed to the side, dripping wax down the edge of the stack.

I wish that this time next year I'll have a First in my Part

IA exams and some friends. The puff of breath sent the candle tumbling across the table, painting a streak of wax after it. *Birthday candles are not meant to be bad omens*, he told it, tossing it into the bin. The attempt at humour felt pathetic, worse than the silence.

Sighing, he curled into one of the new kitchen chairs and opened his notebook to the page where he'd been working out a series of formulae for integrating trigonometric functions involving powers. He'd been playing around with the formulae since he'd printed out the first term's example sheets from the Maths Faculty website, hoping to find some shortcuts for his Differential Equations course. So far he'd been guessing at the formulae, working from simple examples to see if he could spot a pattern.

Tapping his pen against his cheek, he glared at the page. There had to be a reason that $\sin^n a \cos^m a$ seemed to follow different rules when n and m were both odd or even, versus when one was odd and the other even. That couldn't be right, unless there was some principle at work like two negatives make a positive, while a positive and a negative make a negative. Or maybe the whole thing was wrong: some random quirk of only using examples with n and m less than ten.

'If I were a maths genius, I'd understand how it all worked,' Nick told his Caffeine Addict mug. 'Though I'd probably still be talking to myself.'

With a sigh, he crossed his arms on the table and lowered his head on to them. While some of his university materials

looked horrifying, he had to believe the lectures would explain everything. After all, the Faculty was too big to be comprised entirely of geniuses. Most of the others had to be like him: clever enough to use logic to plod their way to the correct answer, rather than having it appear, miraculous and fully formed, in their heads.

Chin propped on the heel of his hand, he let his eyes blur on the chart of formulae. He jumped when his phone beeped.

> Dad:
>
> Heading out soon. Catch you before bed? Sorry later than expected. Is router set up?

Nick pushed himself to his feet and scowled his way into the sitting room. 'So much for the birthday pizza,' he told the mess of boxes, or maybe he only thought the words: he was so used to no one being there to hear that sometimes he wasn't sure what he said aloud and what stayed in his head.

The road outside grew dark, then orange with the glow of the streetlights. The overgrown shrubs in the tiny front garden became alien: leathery and shiny, highlighted with poisonous stripes of reflected colour. Even though it felt like conceding defeat to admit that it was dark – that his birthday was almost over, no chance of rescuing it now – he put on the kitchen light, then both of the living-room lights, then the hall light, and the light over the front door, and still the house felt huge and strange and empty; even with the stereo

blasting out cheery cheesy pop music, it was full of echoes and shadows.

He trudged upstairs for a jumper, took out the brand-new blue cashmere. Then he remembered Michael's look of puzzled surprise as he'd watched Nick unwrap it that morning, forgetting for a moment to pretend that he was the one who'd picked it out, rather than Secretary Sandy.

His favourite jumper was at the bottom of his box of A-level textbooks. Worn and disreputable, with holes under the arms, it no longer smelled of his grandmother, but there was something in the texture of the weave that *felt* happy: the echo of a memory so far down in his soul it was all emotion, a burst of colour and warmth, adrift from time and place. The smell of fresh lemon cake and jam pastries. Flour on his nose, batter smeared into his clothes. Laughter, and games, and walks in the woods. Great Adventures to the nearest town to buy books. Soft warm *enormous* towels after a bath. Story after story before sleep.

Her photo smiled from his bedside table. He turned the frame so that the glass reflected the light, hiding the picture.

By the time he'd taken the brand-new duvets, pillows and bed linen out of their packaging and made his bed, then Michael's, the house was starting to feel more familiar: there was something homey about the way he hadn't stretched the fitted bottom sheets enough, so the mattresses showed where the fabric wouldn't pull down to the bedframe. He already remembered which part of the floor in his new room squeaked, and which step made the most noise on each

staircase. His books were on the bookcase. His clothes in the chest of drawers.

And it's not like I had any real friends back in London to miss, he was telling his desk lamp when there was a scratching at the front door.

His father blinked in surprise when he pulled it open. 'I didn't think you'd still be awake.' Michael pasted on a smile a moment too late to render the words glad.

'Coffee?' Nick called over his shoulder as he led the way to the kitchen. *Birthday cake, if you've remembered one?* he mumbled into the cupboard. 'Are you off early tomorrow?'

'No, I'm good to go down to College with you, like we said. Anyway, how's everything here? You should use the household card if we need any pots and pans, stuff like that.'

Nick sighed. 'I guess I should learn how to cook spaghetti at least.'

'Well, we've made boiled eggs before,' his father said. 'I seem to remember your mother saying that roasting a chicken and potatoes was just putting everything in the oven until it was brown but not black. Think we could manage that.' The words puffed out in jolly staccato bursts: a 'ho ho ho' of overwrought cheer.

'I don't remember her cooking. Not with Roger,' Nick said softly.

Michael's face fell. 'She had a fad of it the year before we separated. Bought a whole shelf of recipe books and half a ton of ingredients. Lasted a few months. She was just getting the hang of baking when . . .' He stopped to rub at the bridge

of his nose. 'Anyway, she lost interest. You know how it was.' He picked up his phone again. 'Better just reply to this email.'

Twenty minutes later, Michael was still sighing over his phone.

'Think I'll get to bed then.'

His father glanced up with a smile. 'Night, Nick. Thanks for holding the fort.'

Michael was fully focused on his mobile when Nick paused to dither in the doorway before turning himself around again. His steps sounded heavy on the stairs, but his father didn't call after him.

'It'll be tough for a while, but we'll get there, right?' Michael had said the night Nick first installed himself in the guest bedroom of his London flat.

If we're not there after four years, I'm not sure it's happening, Nick told the face looking out at him from the window behind his bed. He shuddered at the expression that met these words, slammed off the light. His reflection vanished, leaving the window clear. Below, in the garden, a cat leapt on to a fence post. It stalked towards the house then settled, looking up at the sky, its eyes silver in a shadowed face.

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The dream, when it came, wasn't a surprise. He was back in his STEP admissions test, only he didn't seem to understand any of the questions because they had apparently been written in the Cyrillic alphabet. He was telling himself not to panic,