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Opening extract from

House of Secrets

Written by

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Brendan Walker knew the house was going to be terrible.

The first tip-off was the super-cheerful tone the estate agent, Diane Dobson, used with his mother.

"It's *truly* the most *amazing* house, Mrs Walker," Diane chirped on speakerphone. "The perfect place for a sophisticated family like yours. And it's just gone through a major price reduction."

"Where is this house?" Brendan asked. Aged twelve, he sat next to his older sister, Cordelia, playing *Uncharted* on his much-loved PSP. He sported his favourite grass-stained blue lacrosse jersey, torn jeans, and weathered high-tops.

"I'm sorry, who is that?" Diane asked from the dashboard of the car, where an iPhone sat in a holster.

"Our son, Brendan," Dr Walker answered. "You're on speakerphone."

"I'm talking with the whole Walker family! What a treat. Well, *Brendan*" – Diane sounded as if she expected to be commended for remembering his name – "the house is located at one twenty-eight Sea Cliff Avenue, among a stately collection of homes owned by prominent San Franciscans."

"Like Forty-niners and Giants?" asked Brendan.

"Like CEOs and bankers," corrected Diane.

"Shoot me."

"Bren!" Mrs Walker scolded.

"You won't feel that way once you've seen the place," said Diane. "It's a charming, rustic, woodsy jewel—"

"Whoa, hold on!" Cordelia interrupted. "Say that again?"

"With whom am I speaking now?" Diane asked.

With whom? Seriously? Cordelia thought – but the truth was she also used "whom" in her more intellectual moments.

"That's our daughter Cordelia," said Mrs Walker. "Our eldest."

"What a pretty name!"

Don't 'pretty name' me, Cordelia wanted to say, but as the eldest she was better than Brendan at being tactful. She

was a tall, wispy girl with delicate features that she hid behind a dirty-blonde fringe. "Diane, my family has been looking for a new house for the last month, and in that time I've learned that estate agents speak in what I call 'coded language'."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Excuse me, but what does that mean, 'I'm sure I don't know'?" piped up Eleanor, aged eight. She had sharp eyes, a small, precise nose, and long, curly hair, the same colour as her sister's, that sometimes had gum and leaves in it, if she'd been adventurous that day. She tended to be quiet except in moments when she wasn't supposed to be quiet, which was what Brendan and Cordelia loved most about her. "How can you be sure if you don't know?"

Cordelia gave her sister an appreciative nod and continued: "I mean that when estate agents say 'charming', Diane, they mean 'small'. When they say 'rustic', they mean 'located in a habitat for bears'. 'Woodsy' means 'termite-infested'… 'Jewel', I don't even know… I assume 'squat'."

"Deal, stop being an idiot," grumbled Brendan, glued to his screen, irritated that he hadn't thought up that line of reasoning himself.

Cordelia rolled her eyes and went on.

"Diane, are you about to show my family a small, termite-infested squat located in a bear habitat?"

Diane sighed over the speakerphone. "How old is she?"

"Fifteen," Dr and Mrs Walker said together.

"She sounds thirty-five."

"Why?" Cordelia asked. "Because I'm asking pertinent questions?"

Brendan reached over from the back seat and ended the call.

"Brendan!" Mrs Walker yelled.

"I'm just trying to save our family some embarrassment."

"But Ms Dobson was about to tell us about the house!"

"We already know what the house is gonna be like. Like every other house we can afford: bad."

"I have to agree," Cordelia said. "And you know how much it hurts me to agree with Bren."

"You love agreeing with me," Brendan mumbled, "because that's when you know you're right."

Cordelia laughed, which made Brendan smile despite himself. "Good one, Bren," said Eleanor, giving her brother's uncombed hair a quick rub.

"Kids, let's try to be positive about the house," said Dr Walker. "Sea Cliff is Sea Cliff. We're talking unobstructed views of the Golden Gate. I want to see it, and I want to know about that 'reduced' price. What was the address?"

"One twenty-eight," Brendan said without looking up. He had an eerie ability to remember things; it came from memorising sports plays and game cheats. His parents joked that he would end up a lawyer because of it (and because he was so good at arguing), but Brendan didn't want to end up a lawyer. He wanted to end up a Forty-niner or a Giant.

"Plug it into my phone, will you?" Dr Walker waved the phone in front of Brendan while he drove.

"I'm in the middle of a game, Dad."

"So?"

"So I can't just *pause*."

"Isn't there a pause *button*?" Cordelia asked.

"Nobody's talking to you, Deal," said Brendan. "Could you guys just leave me alone, please?"

"You're already practically alone," said Cordelia. "You always have your head buried in your stupid games, and

then you get out of going to dinner with us because of lacrosse practice, and you refuse to go on trips… it's like you don't even want to be part of this family."

"You *are* a genius," said Brendan. "You guessed my secret."

Eleanor swooped in, grabbed the phone and plugged in the address – but she did it backwards, putting the street in first and then the number. Cordelia started to give Brendan a nasty retort but reminded herself he was at that "awkward" stage for boys, the stage where you were supposed to say horribly sarcastic things because you looked so gawky.

It was the house that was the real problem. Even Eleanor was suspicious of it now. It was going to be old enough for people to have died in. It was going to be falling apart and have crooked shutters and a layer of dirt an inch thick and an overgrown tree out the front and a bunch of snoopy neighbours who were going to look at the Walkers and whisper, "Here are the suckers who are finally gonna buy this thing."

But what could they do? At eight, twelve and fifteen, Eleanor, Brendan and Cordelia were each absolutely sure

that they were at the worst possible age, the most powerless and unfair.

So Brendan gamed and Cordelia read and Eleanor fiddled with the GPS until they pulled up to 128 Sea Cliff Avenue. Then they looked out of the window and their jaws dropped. They had never seen anything like it.



Sea Cliff was a neighbourhood of mansions on hills, most built right up against the sunny street with its row of young trees trimmed into perfect leafy spheres. But the house the Walkers were looking at was set back, perched at the edge of the cliff from which the neighbourhood took its name, so far back that Brendan wondered if it was half supported by stilts. An expanse of emerald lawn buffered it from the street, with three wide pine trees that kept the grass in shadow. The house itself had gold and tan trim accenting the royal blue that wrapped around its slatted sides. An impeccably groomed pebbled path slalomed through the trees to the front door.

"I've biked by here tons of times, but I've never seen this place," said Cordelia.

"That's because you never look up from your stupid

books," said Brendan.

"And how do you figure I'm reading when I'm on a bike, genius?"

"*Audiobooks?*"

"Guys, no fighting in front of the estate agent," Mrs Walker said under her breath. She had already called Diane Dobson back to apologise for how Brendan had hung up on her, and now they saw a woman who looked like Hillary Clinton standing at the front of the path. "That must be her. Let's go."

The Walker family stepped out of their Toyota, bumping into one another. Diane greeted them, wearing a finely tailored, coral-coloured suit, her hair lacquered into a blonde helmet. She made the house look even more impressive.

"Dr Jake Walker," Dr Walker said, reaching out to shake hands. "And this is my wife, Bellamy." Mrs Walker nodded demurely. Dr Walker didn't bother to introduce his offspring. He hadn't shaved that morning, even though he used to make a point of telling his children how men who didn't shave every day lacked discipline. But he wasn't the man he had been back then. Diane eyed the family's second-hand car.

"Can we keep our horse here?" Eleanor asked, tugging Dr Walker's leg.

"We don't have a horse, Nell," he laughed. "She's going through a horse phase," he explained to Diane.

"But it's perfect, Daddy! You said I could get a horse on my next birthday—"

"That was if we got a country house, which we're not getting, and you can't keep horses in the city."

"Why not? There's lots of places to ride them! Golden Gate Park, Crissy Field… You think I don't remember things you promise—"

Mrs Walker knelt and took Eleanor's shoulders in her hands. "Honey, we'll talk about this later."

"But Daddy always—"

"Calm down. It's not Daddy's fault. Things have changed. Why don't we play a game? Here, close your eyes and tell me what kind of horse you want in your wildest dreams. Come on, I'll do it with you."

Mrs Walker shut her eyes. Eleanor followed. Brendan rolled his eyes instead of shutting them, but he was tempted, deep down, to join in. Cordelia shut hers – in solidarity with her sister and to annoy Brendan.

"And… open!" Mrs Walker said. "What kind of horse is he?"

"*She.* Calico. Light brown with white spots. Her name's Misty."

"Perfect." Mrs Walker hugged her daughter tight, stood up and went back to looking at the house with Diane Dobson, who had waited patiently for the family to work out their very obvious issues.

"Delightful, isn't it?" the estate agent said. "A completely unique construction."

"There are some things about it that concern me," Mrs Walker said. Brendan saw that she was entering negotiation mode, where she used her charm and poise to make people do things. Standing in front of the home, she looked strong and beautiful, more confident than she had been in months. Brendan wondered if it might be fate that had brought them to this house.

"What concerns you?" asked Diane.

"First of all," said Mrs Walker, "the house is on the edge of a cliff. It seems very precarious. And what would happen in an earthquake? We'd slide right into the ocean!"

"The house emerged from the quake of 1989 without

a scratch," Diane said. "The engineering is superb. Come inside; let's take a look."

Intrigued, the Walkers followed her up the path towards the house, past the big pine trees. Brendan noticed something odd about the lawn. It took him a minute to realise… there was no For Sale sign. *What kind of house goes on sale without a sign?*

"This is a three-storey, Victorian-style property," Diane declared, "known locally as Kristoff House. It was built in 1907, after the Great Quake, by a gentleman who survived it."

Dr Walker nodded. His family, too, had survived the Great San Francisco Earthquake generations before. They had moved away, but work had brought Dr Walker back. Work he no longer had.

"Two eighteen!" Eleanor said, pointing at the address hanging over the front door.

"One twenty-eight," Cordelia corrected gently.

Eleanor huffed and looked down at her feet. Diane continued her monologue on the front steps, but Cordelia hung back and knelt beside her sister. This might be a "teachable moment", as Cordelia's English teacher

Ms Kavanaugh liked to say. Since one of the effects of Eleanor's dyslexia was that she read things backwards, Cordelia figured there must be a simple psychological trick that could get her to read perfectly. They just hadn't found it yet. Brendan lingered, eager to see Cordelia fail.

"Can you try reading it backwards?" she encouraged.

"It's not that simple, Deal. You think you know everything!"

"Well, I *have* read books about this, and I'm trying to help—"

"Then where were you at school last week?"

"What? What're you talking—"

"This stupid substitute teacher in my stupid English class called on me to read from *Little House on the Prairie*. And I couldn't do it."

As she said the words, Eleanor remembered that day at school. Ms Fitzsimmons had been off sick, and Eleanor had been too scared to tell the sub teacher that she had problems reading, so she went in front of the class and held the book and waited for magic to happen. She thought maybe somehow, just once, magic would happen and she'd be able to read a sentence the right way. But the words

looked as mixed-up as they always did – *not backwards, Cordelia,* she thought, *mixed-up* – and when she tried to read the title, the first four words came out right, but the last one came out like a swear word. The whole class laughed and Eleanor dropped the book and ran out of the room and the sub teacher sent her to the principal and everybody was still calling her that swear word.

Cordelia spoke in a quiet voice: "Oh, Eleanor… I'm so sorry. But I can't be with you in class."

"No, you can't! So don't pretend you can *fix me*!"

Cordelia winced. Brendan, amused by her failure, prepared to deliver a cutting remark, but before he could—

"What's *that*?" Eleanor exclaimed.

Brendan and Cordelia glanced over in time to see a figure streaking from one of the pine trees to the side of the house. A flash of shadow. Too fast to be a person. A car honked on Sea Cliff Avenue behind them.

"That was probably just the car's shadow, Nell," said Brendan. "Jumping from the tree to the house."

"No, it wasn't. It was a person. And it was bald," insisted Eleanor.

"You saw a bald guy?"

"*Girl.* An old woman. Staring at us. And now she's behind the house."

Brendan and Cordelia glanced at each other, each expecting the other to be making a '*silly Eleanor*' face. But they were both as deadly serious as their sister.

They looked at the side of Kristoff House. The silhouette of a dark figure stood there. Watching them.