

ALYSSA  
and the  
SPELL  
GARDEN

**ALEXANDRA  
SHEPPARD**

ILLUSTRATED BY BEX GLENDING

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## CHAPTER ONE

The morning Alyssa Charles-Reid's life imploded was a perfectly pleasant one. The sky above her house was a piercing shade of blue, the smell of cut grass hung in the air and the sun's rays toasted the pavement.

'See you in a few weeks, darling!' said Mum as she waved cheerily from the front door.

A bit too cheerily, Alyssa thought. Three weeks was the longest she'd been away from home. It was the longest she'd been away ever. Would Mum miss her?

Alyssa put on a smile and waved goodbye to Mum as she climbed into Dad's car.

It was the start of the summer holidays and Alyssa was preparing for a number of firsts:

Her first solo trip to London.

Her first time meeting Great-Auntie Jasmine.

Her first holiday without her parents, who were dumping her in London with the aforementioned great-aunt for three whole weeks.

‘You’re going to have the best time, sweetheart,’ Dad said as they sped down the motorway. It was as if he couldn’t wait to get rid of her either.

Alyssa fiddled with her braids. She was still getting used to her new hairstyle: Mum had had her thick curly hair braided into a gazillion tiny plaits that grazed her shoulder. It was so Alyssa could manage her hair over the summer. So she could get by without Mum.

‘I’d love to spend a few days with you in Dublin, Dad,’ Alyssa hinted for the millionth time. One more try couldn’t hurt.

She was being extra careful to be on her best behaviour around Mum and Dad, and that had meant not badgering them with demands to stay with them over the summer. She didn’t want to be a burden. Unfortunately, the hints didn’t seem to have worked.

Dad sighed. ‘We’ve been through this, sweetheart. You don’t want to join my work conference. I won’t have time to leave the hotel.’

Alyssa tried to hide her disappointment. She'd rather be in a dull hotel with Dad than spend the summer with a relative she had never met. Especially now that she only ever saw Dad on weekends since he'd moved out a few months ago. He and Mum both said it was temporary, but Dad showed no sign of coming home.

They drove on in silence, Alyssa's mind bubbling with unanswered questions. Earlier that week, when she'd asked Mum about Great-Auntie Jasmine and why she'd never met her, Mum had pretended she hadn't heard.

'How come I've never met Great-Auntie Jasmine before? Or any of Mum's family?' Alyssa asked now.

Dad smiled. 'Your mum can be a closed book, sweetheart.'

'She never wants to talk about them!' Alyssa said.

It was so weird. She knew all about Dad's family in Leeds, even if they only saw each other at Christmas and Easter. But Mum was so secretive, and Alyssa couldn't help wondering why.

'All I know,' said Dad, 'is that she fell out with her sister – that's your Auntie Dahlia – a long time ago. Before we met. And I've never met your grandparents because they live in Jamaica. They couldn't make it to our wedding. We're really grateful that Jasmine is

able to look after you at such short notice. She has a tea shop, you know?’

Alyssa smiled weakly. It was hard to get excited about three weeks being surrounded by dusty tea leaves and an ancient great-aunt. Would she even have Wi-Fi?

Usually Alyssa and her parents went on holiday somewhere sunny over the summer break. But not this year. Alyssa remembered the crushing disappointment she’d felt when she discovered they wouldn’t be going away together as a family.

It had totally ruined Alyssa’s plan. She’d wanted to make sure that Mum and Dad had an incredibly fun time. So much fun, in fact, that Dad would realise what he was missing and move back home straight away.

Now, the plan had failed before it had even begun.

Mum and Dad said they were too busy with work trips for a summer holiday, but neither of them had told the other until last week. Typical. They never seemed to talk much these days.

It had been a last-minute scramble to find someone to look after Alyssa, and Great-Auntie Jasmine was the only available choice. Alyssa had found it hard to ignore the hushed telephone calls Mum made to neighbours and friends, asking them

if they could look after Alyssa for a few weeks. Every time they told Mum they had other plans, like a real holiday booked with their families, Mum had sounded so disappointed.

Mum was a property lawyer, which was a job Alyssa didn't exactly understand. All she knew was that it kept Mum busy and glued to her laptop. Alyssa kept hearing Mum mutter phrases like 'big client' and 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity'. Basically, it sounded like Mum would be in trouble at work if she didn't get this deal right. Alyssa guessed it sort of explained why Mum had pretty much taken to sleeping with her laptop.

So, Alyssa was being packed off to Great-Auntie Jasmine's for three weeks.

She couldn't help but feel a little rejected.

The car's GPS informed them that they were getting closer to Great-Auntie Jasmine's tea shop. Soon, Dad pulled the car to a stop. They had arrived.

Dad opened his arms wide. 'Come and give your old dad a hug, then!'

Alyssa hugged him awkwardly, being careful not to accidentally hit the steering wheel. His ginger beard tickled her face, and she breathed in his familiar scent, mingled with something new.

She pulled back. ‘Did you change your fabric softener?’

Dad chuckled. ‘Master sleuth, Alyssa! Why, yes, I did. It’s called Spring Meadow or something. Is that all right with you?’

Alyssa nodded, even though it wasn’t. Not at all. It was just one more way Dad had changed without her knowing. How much more would he change by the time the summer was over? If Alyssa wasn’t there to help get her parents back together, would they stay apart forever?

‘Alyssa, I . . .’ Dad began.

She braced herself. Was Dad finally going to tell her he was moving back home?

Dad plastered on a fake grin. ‘I want you to have the best time ever.’

No.

Alyssa looked out of the car window. ‘The shop’s all the way down there.’

‘It’s impossible to find a parking space, sweetheart,’ Dad muttered. ‘Let’s see if I can find somewhere away from the high street,’ he added, but then he glanced uneasily at the time. He looked stressed. Alyssa could tell what he was thinking. If he didn’t hurry, he might not make his flight.

‘It’s all right, Dad,’ she said. ‘I can hop out here.’

‘Are you sure? It’ll only take a few minutes.’

Alyssa put on a brave face. ‘It’s fine. I’ll be starting Year Seven in September. I can handle this.’

Dad looked relieved. ‘That’s my girl,’ he said.

Alyssa looked out at the chaos of the high street, her heart racing. It seemed way busier than the shopping centre at home. But if she was going to secondary school next term, she’d better get used to navigating new places. Just the thought of secondary school made her tummy flip with anxiety and she pushed it out of her mind.

Alyssa gave Dad another hug and got out of the car. She wheeled her purple suitcase along, dodging shoppers and manky pigeons. Her palms were clammy against her suitcase handle. She ignored the urge to run back to Dad’s car, and walked down the high street.

She scanned the rows of shops, looking for Jasmine’s Teas – her great-aunt’s tea shop. The high street looked like a right mishmash. Greengrocers and a couple of chain stores stood beside greasy-spoon cafes, laundrettes and corner shops that looked like they’d been around for decades. Across the road was a small park teeming with activity. It was full of kids playing football and people walking their dogs. The road was busy with traffic, but



Alyssa was surprised that the air smelled clean and fresh. She looked up and noticed brightly coloured flowers hanging from every lamp post lining the road. They seemed to perfume the air with their magical scent.

This was not what she had expected London to look like. Where were the towering statues, historic buildings and glamorous shops she'd seen on school trips? Of course, she didn't think her great-aunt lived opposite Big Ben or Buckingham Palace, but she didn't expect it to look so ... normal. As she carried on walking, her nerves eased a little. She had the vague feeling that she was returning to somewhere she'd been before. It made her feel warm and welcomed. But, as far as she knew, she'd never set foot in this part of London.

Finally, she found it. A faded hand-painted sign read *Jasmine's Teas* in swirly gold lettering. The midnight-blue shopfront framed a glass window that had a display of assorted crockery. It looked more like a charity shop than anything else.

*BEEP-BEEP!*

Alyssa turned to see Dad, who had pulled up on the other side of the road.

*Look brave, Alyssa,* she told herself.

She gave him one final wave. Then she pushed

open the creaky front door and walked in. The doorbell tinkled.

‘H-hi,’ Alyssa stammered. ‘I’m—’

‘Early!’ shrieked the woman behind the till. ‘My dear, I thought you were coming tomorrow!’

Great. Not even Mum’s secret relative wanted her there. This trip wasn’t exactly off to a great start.

Alyssa figured this must be Great-Auntie Jasmine. She wore a crimson-red kaftan thingy that flowed to her ankles, with red-framed spectacles on her nose. Her silver-streaked locs were wrapped in a matching headscarf, adding quite a few centimetres to her petite frame (with the headscarf, she and Alyssa were the same height) and accentuating her beautiful brown skin. A silver leaf-shaped brooch glinted on her chest.

‘Oh, sorry,’ Alyssa managed awkwardly. ‘Mum and Dad had to leave for their work trips today. Dad’s on his way to the airport right now. But I can call him if you want?’ She reached for her phone.

Her great-aunt waved her hand. ‘No need. It’s a lovely surprise. Come closer, sweetness. Let me take a look at you.’

Alyssa stepped forward, and she was bundled into a rose-and-cinnamon-scented hug.

‘Now, technically I am your mother’s aunt, but you

can call me Auntie Jasmine. I look far too youthful to be anyone's great-aunt.'

Alyssa nodded. That was easy enough to remember. Auntie Jasmine seemed chatty and warm, and it made Alyssa feel a tiny bit less nervous.

They were disturbed by someone opening the door. It was the postman.

'Morning, Miss Jasmine!' he said brightly. He handed Alyssa a stack of white envelopes, which she passed to her great-aunt.

Auntie Jasmine took one glance at the return addresses and her face fell. She dropped them onto the counter, and looked up at Alyssa again, her face brightening.

'I'll worry about those later. For now, I'd like to welcome you to north London's premier tea emporium,' she announced. At that moment, a Jenga-like stack of boxes toppled to the ground.

Alyssa looked around. The shop seemed like it had seen better days, especially compared to the bright and shiny shops on her local high street in Milton Keynes. For a start, it seemed more like the living room of someone with a serious hoarding problem than a shop. It was impossible to tell what was for sale and what was just . . . *there*.

Dozens of chests of drawers, some small and squat

and others reaching to the ceiling, lined the room. Each drawer was hand-labelled and dedicated to a particular type of tea leaf. Two small, cosy-looking armchairs and a polished mahogany coffee table took up a corner of the room in front of the till. The walls were bare, apart from an embroidered quote in a frame hanging by the till. Alyssa squinted to read it: *We are each other's harvest.*

*Auntie Jasmine must be into gardening,* she thought.

Although it felt chokingly warm, the smell of dried tea was fragrant and intense. A bit like flowers mixed with Christmas spices. The aroma mingled with the stuffy heat, making Alyssa's head spin. She wanted badly to get some fresh air.

'We have the largest tea selection this side of the Thames,' Auntie Jasmine said proudly. 'If we don't have it, it isn't worth brewing.'

Alyssa tugged at the neck of her white T-shirt. She was beginning to feel hot and bothered. Her skin prickled, like she had pins and needles over the surface of her entire body.

*This place is going to give me heat stroke,* Alyssa thought, even though Auntie Jasmine looked as cool as a cucumber in her flowing kaftan. Perhaps she would get used to it. She just had to get through the next three weeks, then she'd be home again.

They stepped through to the back (which took all of ten paces) and entered a room that seemed a world apart from the shop. This room was light, airy and made of glass. Plants of all varieties dangled from the ceiling and sprouted from giant terracotta pots. It smelled faintly like earth after a rainstorm. And it was very humid.

‘This is the greenhouse!’ Auntie Jasmine said, as though it was perfectly normal for a tea shop to have a greenhouse. She picked up a spray bottle and spritzed the leaves of a nearby fern. ‘I believe it’s time for someone’s breakfast.’

‘I’m okay, thanks,’ Alyssa said. ‘I had toast at home.’

Auntie Jasmine looked at Alyssa like she was silly. ‘Not you, child,’ she said with a smile. ‘Pass me the plant food on the shelf.’

‘So which ones are for sale?’ Alyssa asked, handing her great-aunt the sticky brown bottle of plant food.

Auntie Jasmine looked horrified and cupped the petals of a nearby lily. ‘We don’t talk about such things in front of the plants,’ she whispered. ‘They’re terribly sensitive.’

‘Oh. My bad,’ Alyssa muttered.

This woman was clearly a bit odd. Maybe there was a good reason Mum didn’t talk about her family.

Mum was calm and collected most of the time. Auntie Jasmine seemed the opposite.

They pushed through the back door to reveal a huge garden. ‘And this is the allotment,’ Auntie Jasmine said. ‘Anyone in the neighbourhood can grow vegetables here. We have cabbage, green beans, broccoli ...’

As Auntie Jasmine listed the least tasty foods known to humankind, Alyssa looked around. A morning breeze stirred through the garden; the cool air was welcomed by Alyssa’s warm skin. But that didn’t stop the weird prickling feeling. In fact, it was worse now they were outside.

It was shaping up to be a scorching hot summer’s day. If Alyssa was at home, she’d be lounging in the garden with a stack of fantasy novels from the library by her side.

At that moment, Alyssa felt like she was being watched. She turned to see two Black girls – one who looked older than her and the other younger – staring at her with intense curiosity. They had just stepped through a door in the side wall, leading from the street straight to the allotment.

‘Rosalie! Rue! Are you going to say hello to your cousin?’ Auntie Jasmine said.

*Cousins?*

Yet another secret Mum had kept from her.  
'Hi,' Rosalie and Rue said at the same time.  
'I'm Alyssa,' she replied, giving a weak wave.  
'I'm Rosalie, and this is Rue,' said the older one  
with an air of authority.

Alyssa reckoned Rosalie was thirteen, maybe fourteen. She was taller than Auntie Jasmine (which wasn't difficult) and her black hair was slicked back into a neat ballerina bun.

The younger one, Rue, was maybe nine years old. She clutched the handles of her yellow backpack and wore a shiny badge with '**She/They**' in bold letters.

The siblings looked at Alyssa as if she'd sprung up from a hole in the ground. She squirmed under their gaze.

'Hi, I'm Rue. Are you coming with us to—'

'No!' Auntie Jasmine interrupted. 'Alyssa will not be joining you at summer school. I'm afraid we're fully booked. You kids head on to morning registration now.'

Rosalie and Rue obeyed. They walked towards the back of the allotment and were soon hidden from sight by the greenery.

'My nieces stay with me every summer, even though they live down the road. They're arriving properly tomorrow night, so get ready to spend lots

of time together,' Auntie Jasmine said cheerily. 'I do hope your mother comes to visit soon too.'

'She's pretty busy with work,' Alyssa mumbled.

Understatement of the year. She'd been surgically attached to her laptop for the last few months.

A flash of something shiny caught Alyssa's eye. A thick, unruly hedge lined the back of the garden. But through the bean poles and greenery of the allotment, she spotted a gap. It was a wooden door, the planks worn with age. Was that where Rosalie and Rue had gone?

A giant silver leaf was painted on the door, so faint that Alyssa almost thought she'd imagined it. It looked exactly like Auntie Jasmine's brooch. The leaf caught the sunlight and glimmered for just a second, then faded away completely.

Alyssa blinked several times, but it didn't reappear. A trick of the light.

She pointed to the wooden door. 'Auntie Jasmine, what's through there?'

'Oh, nowhere you need to worry about, my dear,' Auntie Jasmine said with a smile.