The Secret Garden Rewilded

Also by Anthea Simmons

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Anthea Simmons



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Chapter 1

Mia was called out of a geography lesson on a grey Tuesday morning in early February. She wondered what she was in trouble for this time. Usually, it had to do with being rude to a teacher or refusing to follow a stupid instruction, but as soon as she saw the Head's expression, Mia knew it was something quite different. She felt a wave of nausea wash over her.

The class was immediately abuzz with excited whispering, which seemed to follow Mia as she reluctantly crossed the room to join Mrs Massey, the head teacher, who beckoned to her from the doorway.

Mia watched Mrs Massey mouthing a message to the teacher . . . and made out the words 'talk later'.

A feeling of real dread had landed like a dead weight in her stomach.

'Someone's died, I bet! Look at Massey's face!' hissed Phoebe Everett, with some relish. Mia shot her a look of fury. She hated Phoebe Everett.

Mrs Massey's eyes were red and her pink face puffy. She bent to put her arm round Mia's shoulders as she ushered her out

of the door and closed it behind her. Mia shrugged her off. Mrs Massey was a big woman and her arm felt hot and heavy.

'What's happened?' Mia asked flatly.

Mrs Massey gave a sniff.

'You poor, poor lamb,' was all she said, as she retrieved a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes.

They passed the Head's secretary seated at her desk in the outer office. She, too, looked upset.

What was going on? Mia thought, crossly. And what did it have to do with her?

As she was led into the Head's office, two police officers stood up. They were grim-faced and tense.

'I haven't stolen anything!' Mia said defensively.

'Of course you haven't, sweetie,' Mrs Massey said. 'PC Patel and PC Evans have some news for you. Terrible, sad news. Sit down, Mia, there's a good girl. This is going to come as a shock, I am afraid.'

Mia sank reluctantly into a chair. She watched the police officers shift uneasily from one foot to the other, their hands tightly clasped in front of them. Phoebe must have guessed right.

'Is it Ellis? Or Louisa? Are they dead?'

Mrs Massey shook her head. She crouched down beside Mia, one hand on Mia's knee.

'No, lovely. It's your mummy and daddy. I am afraid that there's been a tragic accident . . .'

One of the policewomen stepped forward and began to explain.

Mia heard only one word. She had a kind of dull thrumming filling her ears, squeezing out everything else.

That word was 'dead'.

It seemed to swell like a black cloud in her head, leaning on the backs of her eyes so that they began to leak, the tears rolling down her cheeks. She brushed them away, angrily.

She felt Mrs Massey's arm come snaking round her again, pulling Mia's cheek against her. Mia wriggled free.

'You poor, poor lamb!' the Head repeated.

Mia closed her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from crying properly.

'Can I go now?' she asked, standing up and refusing to look at the Head, who was still crouching by the chair. 'I just want to go home.'

Mrs Massey sighed and her voice sounded soppy to Mia, as if she were speaking to a baby. 'Oh, Mia. You can't go home alone, darling. We need to make some arrangements for you to ensure you are properly cared for.'

Mia stared straight at her.

'Why not? I'm used to being on my own. And there's Ellis and Louisa . . .'

'The chauffeur and the housekeeper . . .' Mrs Massey interrupted, for the benefit of the police officers.

'When can Ellis take me home?' Mia persisted.

'We need to wait for your uncle James, darling. He's coming up from Devon.'

Mia looked at her blankly.

'He's coming to fetch you, Mia,' the Head continued. 'You'll be looked after. Try not to worry.'

Mia's eyes flashed with fury.

'I don't know him, and I don't need looking after. There's Louisa and Ellis. I keep telling you. They look after me anyway and they can keep looking after me.'

Everything was buzzing and fuzzy yet shot through with a dreadful pain that made her want to scream.

She couldn't stand it any more.

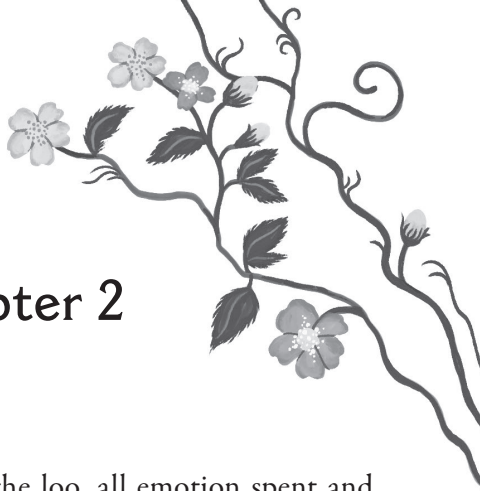
She tore out of the room, knocking over the chair and running straight into the secretary, who tried and failed to stop her.

She ran along the corridor towards the loos and somewhere to hide, pushing roughly through a gaggle of girls coming in the opposite direction.

'God, Mia, you're such a cow!' shouted one, picking up the books scattered across the floor.

Mia barely heard her above the roar in her head and the scream she could feel building up in her throat.

She reached the loos and dived into the first cubicle, banging the door shut with all the strength she could muster and ramming the bolt home. She sat on the loo and began to howl. The noise was deafening. It took over everything, filled everything and now that she was finally screaming, Mia found that she just could not stop.



Chapter 2

When Mia emerged from the loo, all emotion spent and her voice reduced to a croak, her class teacher and the Head were waiting for her.

She was too exhausted to resist when they led her back to Mrs Massey's study, sat her down and gave her a glass of juice and a chocolate biscuit. She couldn't face either.

'Your driver is here and Mrs Edwards is going to go home with you, Mia,' Mrs Massey said, stroking her hair. 'And your uncle is on his way.'

Ellis was waiting outside in the car, but he leaped out when he saw Mia and held out his arms. Mia ran into them, sobbing.

'I thought it was you who was dead,' she cried.

Ellis held her tight.

'I'm indestructible, Miss Mia. Didn't you know? Let's get you home now.'

'I don't want *her* to come,' mumbled Mia, wiping snot from her nose with her sleeve and pointing to Mrs Edwards. 'I don't want any of them.'

Ellis looked embarrassed.

'She'll be safe with us,' he told the teacher. 'Louisa and I will look after her until her uncle arrives. We all go back a long way, don't we, Mia? Me, you and Louisa.'

Mia nodded and climbed into the car, slamming the door shut. She sat picking the tiny balls of pilled wool from her jumper, waiting for Ellis to get back into the car. She had seen Mrs Massey's lips moving, but she couldn't hear what she said, and the tinted glass made her look like a distant shadow.

'I want to go. Now!' she said, tapping him on the shoulder as he fastened his seat belt.

Ellis turned to look at her. His brown eyes were kind and his expression concerned.

'You OK?' he asked, in the steady, matter-of-fact tone which Mia always found so reassuring.

She nodded. Being with Ellis made her feel calmer, made it feel like the upside-down world had righted itself. It could almost be a normal day with the normal routine.

'Have you had lunch?' he asked, catching her eye in his mirror.

Mia shook her head. 'But I want a gelato,' she said, after some hesitation.

'Right you are.' They drove to the busy street where her favourite ice-cream shop stood, with its cheerful canopy of red, green and white stripes.

As Mia waited for Ellis to return with a cone of double chocolate chip – her favourite – she realised that she did not

really want an ice cream at all. She'd only said it to prove nothing had changed. That everything was normal.

But everything *had* changed, and *nothing* was normal and never would be again. She knew almost nothing about her uncle or about Devon. Why should she go with someone who was a stranger? Why did he want her at all when she'd barely heard of him? Why did he have the power to completely change her life? Why did her parents have the power to completely wreck it even now, when they were dead?

She kicked the back of the car seat, her fists balled against her sides, knuckles white, nails digging into her palms. She could see Ellis in the little shop, talking to Luca, the owner and gelato chef, as he piled ice cream into a waffle cone. He was probably telling him what had happened.

She took out her phone and looked at her mother's Instagram account and her post from the day before.

There she was: her mum. Her dead mum. Julia Townsend, her blonde hair hidden by a huge fur hat, smiling, her teeth blindingly white against the tan of her skin. She rested on her ski poles, tall and lean in her super-expensive black and silver Chanel ski suit. The caption read:

Up in the chopper first thing for a blast of powder.
Can't wait! #fearjunkie #BellaCoola #Heliskiing

78k likes. 223 comments. Hundreds of emojis.

The rushing noises in her head got louder and louder.

Mia clicked the comment balloon and typed.

#Fearjunkie #DeadNow

Within seconds a great torrent of messages flooded in, confused and anxious, asking if this was a joke.

Mia shut down the app and put the phone away. She saw Ellis approach with an enormous cone of ice cream, and hit the window button.

'Don't want it. Bin it. Just want to go home,' she ordered, her voice still croaky.

The tinted glass rose up to block out the daylight and the sight of Ellis, shrugging before dumping the cone in the bin outside Luca's shop.

'Luca will think you don't like his gelato any more,' Ellis said, sliding into the driver's seat and starting the engine.

'So?' retorted Mia. 'I paid for it. I can do what I like with it. He got his money.'

'My money, actually,' Ellis said ruefully.

'Well, just get it off my dad!' Mia snapped, before falling silent.

No Dad.

No Mum.

'I'm here for you, Mia,' Ellis said calmly, switching off the engine again and twisting round to face her. 'When you need me. Same goes for Louisa. I think you know that.'

Mia turned away and stared blankly out of the window.

It was true. Ellis was always there, taking her to and from school every day, ferrying her to swimming and tennis, sometimes even helping with homework when Louisa was too busy and standing in for her parents at concerts and sports days and school plays. But he was paid to do that, wasn't he? She wondered what would happen now.

'Sorry,' she muttered.

'No need to say sorry, Mia. Shout and rant and cry all you like. I won't be offended.'

He restarted the engine and the car pulled away from the curb and into the lunchtime traffic.

Mia's phone was pinging with alerts. She scrolled through TikTok and saw that Phoebe had actually filmed her from below her desk and then got footage of the police car leaving the school grounds, adding the caption:

Exclusive! MineMine Mia in police raid mystery.
What did this bad girl do?

It had been shared many times and then Phoebe's best friend, Clara, had posted a picture from one of the newspapers.

It showed a photo of Mia's parents taken at a party underneath the headline:

London Society Couple Killed in Heli Crash in Canada

So, there it was. Everyone knew. No joke.



Chapter 3

Back at the house, Mia trailed round after Louisa, who was busy getting a room ready for Uncle James.

'How can this be happening?' Mia asked, watching as Louisa bent over the bed to fluff up the pillows.

'I don't know, pet,' Louisa replied, keeping her head down and focused on her task. 'I just don't know.'

'I don't even know what Uncle James looks like. Ellis said he came here when I was a baby, but how am I supposed to remember that? And he's going to take me away, isn't he? How can he do that? I live *here*.'

Louisa shook her head but said nothing. She moved the bedside lamp an inch to the left and then back again. Her hands were shaking.

Watching Louisa, who was usually the calmest, least emotional person Mia knew, made her feel increasingly desperate. Life was spinning out of control.

'Why can't I stay with you and Ellis? Why can't we just go on as usual?' Mia pleaded.

Louisa sat down heavily on the bed and hid her head in

her hands for a few seconds. Then she looked up and took a deep breath before saying, 'Mia, love. There's not a lot we can do, I am afraid. It's not our place.'

'If I tell you to stop him, you must stop him! You work for me, too. You do as I say! Daddy always says I'm in charge when he and Mummy are away.'

She stamped her foot, but Louisa just shook her head, sadly.

'Like I said, lovey, it's not our place. You belong with your relative.'

She looked at her watch.

'And he'll be here, soon. Why don't you go and take that uniform off and have a bit of a wash before he arrives?'

'I don't want to see him! I hate him,' Mia shouted. 'And you're just going to let him take me away. I don't belong with him at all! That's rubbish! I *hate you*!'

She ran to her room, slammed the door and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling until she felt her heart slow down.

Her eyes moved from the wallpaper, busy with mermaids and dolphins, to the curtains covered in shells and starfish, and the end of her bed, piled high with teddies and a huge unicorn soft toy. She thought about how much her mother had wanted to redecorate.

'Really, darling,' she had said the day before she had left for Canada, 'I do wish you'd let us change this. It's embarrassing! You're a big girl now. Too old for these baby things. Do you want to spend your life in a nursery?'

Mia had been irritated. She didn't want to be told what to do with her room by anyone. And, now she thought about it, perhaps she hadn't wanted to say goodbye to all the magical creatures who had been with her for so long. They were always there when she got home from school or ballet or swimming or tennis or any of the other sessions her mother insisted she attend and which took up almost all of every weekend.

Her parents had never come to watch anything, she thought, gazing at the swimming and dance certificates propped up on her mantelpiece. Only Ellis and, every now and then, Louisa.

'Did you win? Were you the best?' her mother had asked, barely giving the certificates a second's attention. 'We'll come and see you when you're in the Olympics,' she had promised. 'We'll come and see you dance *Swan Lake*,' said her father. 'Or play at Wimbledon. When you're winning.'

Really, Ellis and Louisa were the only ones who ever took any notice.

Because they're paid to, Mia thought bitterly. Paid to be nice.

She slid off the bed and seized the certificates and tore them up. Then she swept all the soft toys to the floor and kicked them across the room, before flinging herself down on the bed on her stomach and burying her face in her pillow.

She thought she heard Louisa knock at the door, but she ignored her and, exhausted, finally fell asleep.

The next thing she knew, someone was standing over her and gently rocking her shoulder.

It was dark in the room, and, for one wild moment, she thought it was her mother beside her. Her heart missed a beat.

Her bedside light came on and then she saw that it was only Louisa.

'Mia, pet. I am sorry to wake you, but your uncle's here and your teachers, and they want to have a talk. Do you want to change out of your uniform and come down?'

'Do I have to?' Mia muttered.

''Fraid so.' Louisa brushed her hair back from her face and gave her chin a gentle pinch. 'Do you want me to help?'

Mia got off the bed and went to her wardrobe.

''S all right,' she murmured. 'You can go.'

Louisa closed the door quietly behind her.

Mia stared at the long row of dresses in every colour of the rainbow. No good to her now. She slid the door shut with a bang and went to her mother's dressing room.

Almost every one of the hundred or more dresses was black. She took off her school kilt and sweater and pulled down a dress at random, putting it on over her polo shirt and woolly tights. It dragged on the floor and hung off her shoulders, but Mia didn't care. She bundled it up in her arms and carried it, like the train on a wedding dress, as she went downstairs to the drawing room.

She was quite pleased by the little gasp of horror that

came from Mrs Massey's mouth as she made her entrance, but the tall man with greying hair just stared at her, blankly, as if he were barely seeing her at all.

'Well?' she said, defiantly. 'Black's the only colour to wear when people are dead, isn't it?'

The man – Uncle James – stood like a statue. The only thing moving were his hands, which he knotted and unknotted, the knuckles showing white. Suddenly, he seemed to see her.

'Mia. Goodness. You're so like Julia. Your mum. When she was your age.'

He continued to stare at her.

Mia stared back. 'You don't look much like her. You look *old*. My mummy's young. And beautiful.'

He nodded. 'Yes. Yes. She is. Was . . .'

'Why don't you come and sit down?' Mrs Massey asked, patting the space on the sofa between her and Mrs Edwards.

Mia ignored her and crossed the room awkwardly. The dress now seemed like a stupid idea. She bunched it up as best she could and sat in a chair near the fire.

Uncle James sat down heavily in a chair opposite.

'Are you going to take me away?' Mia asked.

He nodded. 'You're coming to live with me, yes,' he said quietly.

'You're off to glorious Devon, Mia, you lucky girl!' Mrs Massey said brightly.

Mia scowled at her.

'Honestly, Mia. I am really envious!' Mrs Massey continued. 'I can think of nothing more fantastic!'

'If it's so fantastic, why don't *you* live there?' Mia snapped.

'I am afraid, Mia, that you are going to have to get used to the idea,' Mrs Edwards said. 'We are all very, very sorry that everything is changing for you. It must be very scary. Very upsetting indeed.'

'Devastating,' Mrs Massey added. 'But things will get better. I promise.'

'You can't promise anything,' Mia spat. 'And *he* doesn't want me. Look at him!'

'Mr Russell is your blood relative, Mia,' Mrs Edwards said, firmly but kindly. 'Your *only* blood relative, and he wants to help. He's very upset, too, you know. He's lost his sister – your mother. He understands exactly how you feel, I am sure.'

Mia buried her face in the dress and started making a wild noise, something between growling and screaming.

'But I don't want to go to Devon. I don't belong there. I don't want to go and I won't. You can't just ruin my life!'

'It will be such an adventure for you, Mia!' said Mrs Massey, squatting down next to her and attempting to stroke Mia's hair. 'Fabulous fresh air! Countryside! A Dartmoor pony of your very own, perhaps? Imagine!'

'Yes. Of course. Whatever she wants,' Mia heard her uncle say. He didn't sound enthusiastic, and Mrs Massey seemed to have gone nuts with her ridiculous enthusiasm for life in Devon.

'And there's your cousin!' Mrs Massey added. 'Won't that be lovely! He's almost the same age, isn't that right, Mr Russell?'

Her uncle hesitated for a moment.

'Yes. Christopher . . . your cousin . . . is nine now,' he said softly.

'Why haven't I ever seen him? Why haven't I ever seen *you*?' Mia demanded.

He looked her straight in the eye for the first time. His eyes were the same greeny-gold as hers and her mother's, except they somehow seemed glassy, empty.

He shrugged.

'We fell out. Time passed. We lost touch. I'm sorry.'

'You can make up for lost time now!' Mrs Massey said, determined to be positive.

'If only that was true,' Uncle James said mournfully.

Then he seemed to pull himself together.

'Mia. I wish things were different. Believe me, I do. But we've just got to get on with life and I'll do my best to make yours as good as it can be.'

Mia felt sick.

'What about all my things?' she wailed. 'What will happen to everything?'

Louisa had come into the room and put her hands on Mia's shoulders.

'You'll have time to sort out what you want to take

straight away, and I will pack the rest up and send it down,' she explained.

Mia looked down at her mother's dress, which was pooled round her feet like a slick of oil.

'And all Mummy's stuff . . . Daddy's stuff?'

'You don't have to worry about any of that, Mia. Ellis and I will deal with everything. Now let's get that frock off, pet, and get you in your jim-jams.'

'I'll see you in the morning, Mia. Try to get some sleep,' her uncle said. For a second he looked as if he might reach down to kiss her cheek, but the moment passed and Mia left them all with the thrumming in her ears as loud as it had ever been.

It felt like the end of the world. The end of her world.