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Opening extract from

Sea of Tears

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To Keith, whose dream is to live in Barbados

JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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Chapter One

Jasmine's eyes opened and scanned the bare walls of her room. Traces of Blu-tac stained the white wallpaper where her posters had been. The empty room felt like a prison cell. Only her bed and a small side-table remained – everything else had gone, even the carpet. It was horrible.

This was the room she had grown up in, her safe haven, the place where she felt happy and secure, the place she ran to when everything was going wrong. Now the shrill beeping of her alarm clock bounced harshly off the bare walls. And the clattering of her mother moving around downstairs was amplified by the emptiness of the house.

Jasmine pulled the duvet over her head and tried to force herself back to sleep but, perfectly on cue, came her mother's yell from the bottom of the stairs.

'Jazzie! It's six o'clock... time to get up. The taxi's here in an hour!'

Jasmine stayed silent. Why did her mother

always have to shout so loud?

'Jasmine!'

This time it was her real name. Her mum always did that… First the pretence at being nice with the Jazzie thing, then, when she started to get annoyed, it became Jasmine.

The floorboards felt cold and splintery as she padded across to the door, opening it just wide enough to shout back. 'I'm up... stop yelling.'

'Well, have a wash, get dressed and come down for breakfast. And don't be rude, young lady, and don't take liberties just because your dad's not here.... Show some respect.... Oh, and bring your bedclothes down with you.'

Jasmine went over to the window and pulled aside the old sheet that her mother had put up in place of her lovely, blue, flowery curtains, which were now, along with all her other possessions, on their way to Barbados.

It had been difficult deciding what to take and what to leave. Many arguments had taken place as to what was necessary and what wasn't. Jasmine had lost most of them of course. She had watched in despair as her precious old toys and winter clothes were given away to charity shops.

They were buying new furniture in Barbados, so their old furniture had been sold, given away or taken to the recycling centre. Everything else had been packed into large, blue plastic drums and wooden packing-cases to be transported in a container across the Atlantic by ship.

Jasmine's dad, who had flown out six months ago to prepare for their arrival, would have to get the container through the strict Customs in Barbados and get everything delivered to the house.

Jasmine had not seen the house, but already she hated the thought of it. Nothing could ever replace the affection she felt for her cosy, south London semi.

As the hazy morning sunlight burst in, she rubbed her eyes. They were still puffy and sore from all the crying she had done the night before. She felt a lump rise in her throat again as she remembered the tearful goodbyes with her three best friends.

It was the start of the school summer holidays, a time that would normally be for going out, a time for fun and laughter. But Rachel, Michaela and Sam had come over yesterday, and they had sat in the empty front room and basically just cried.

'It's gonna be so great... innit,' enthused Sam, trying to lift everyone's spirits in her usual, upbeat

way. 'Barbados sounds so, like, cool. Will you be livin' on the beach under a palm tree?'

'Yea, wiv Reggae music playin' all the time,' added Michaela, curling one of her ringlets round her finger.

'Don't be stupid, that's Jamaica!' Rachel said crushingly.

Of course none of them had ever been out of south London, and the only images they had seen of the Caribbean were on adverts for fruity drinks on the TV.

They had all promised to come out to Barbados and see her, but Jasmine knew deep in her heart there was little chance of that. She realised that, in reality, this was probably the last time she would see her friends, and it hurt so badly she wanted to scream with frustration and anger at what her parents were doing to her.

She stared out at the familiar street, where she had walked so many times. The rubbish truck was making its noisy way up the road, the bin men banging and crashing the wheelie bins, oblivious to people asleep in the houses. The truck snorted its way up to the gate below, and one of the men rolled the overflowing bin up to its gaping chasm. The truck's two metal

claws grabbed it, and the contents lurched into the crushers.

In went the last remaining bits and pieces of Jasmine's life at Number 73, Cromer Road, SE26. The old, broken lamp that had lit so many bedtime stories while her dad sat in its warm glow; the bag of old magazines that had accumulated under her bed; the faded, cardboard cut-out of Beyonce that had hung on the back of her bedroom door for the last five years. The crusher made short work of them all, and the man carelessly rattled the bin back on to the pavement and swiftly moved on.

Jasmine let go of the sheet, turned away from the window and headed for the bathroom with a sick, empty feeling in her stomach.

The mirror was still on the wall above the sink. Part of the 'fixtures and fittings', Dad had said. She wished she could smash it and stop it showing her puffy, tear-stained face staring back at her.

To make matters worse, a new spot had erupted during the night and it stood out yellow and tight on her forehead, as if to say, 'Ha ha, hello there, I'm here just to make you even more miserable.' Jasmine viciously squeezed it, and its contents splattered on the mirror, leaving a globule of watery blood

on her brown skin.

The hot-water heater had been switched off, and the cold splash felt strangely comforting as Jasmine half-heartedly washed and brushed her teeth. She dragged on her jeans and the 'Friends for Eternity' T-shirt Michaela had given her as a going-away present.

She took one final look round her empty bedroom, then silently closed the door behind her and reluctantly made her way down the stairs, at the bottom of which were the suitcases packed with clothes and essentials for the flight. She felt like kicking them but resisted the urge.

In the kitchen Jasmine's mother was frantically wiping surfaces with a handful of kitchen roll. On the worktop next to the hob, a paper plate with a slice of toast on it sat forlornly next to a plastic cup full of orange juice.

'Quickly – eat your breakfast,' said her mum. 'I want to wipe that top off before we go.'

'Why are you cleaning everything, Mum? We don't live here any more.'

'Listen, I don't want the Framptons thinking we are dirty people. Now, less of the backchat and eat up.'

The Framptons were the young couple who had bought the house and would be moving in later that day. Mum and Dad had been in the house for over twenty years and it was the only home Jasmine had ever known. It was a typical, terraced, south-London house dating back to Victorian times. Dad had done most of the decorating, and kept embarrassingly announcing to everyone that he had bought it for thirty thousand pounds and got over ten times more than he had paid for it when they sold it.

The house had ornate, plaster cornices on the ceilings and in the front room there was the original fireplace, something everyone seemed to get very excited about. Jasmine couldn't see the point of a fireplace herself – no one had ever lit a fire in it.

But at Christmas-time her mother decorated it with holly and pine branches, and on Christmas Eve she would put a sip of sherry and a carrot above the fireplace and hang out a big red stocking for Santa to put her presents in. Jasmine had figured out that Santa didn't really come down the chimney, or even exist, when she was about six. But she never said anything as she didn't want to upset her mother, who seemed to get so much pleasure out of doing it.

She wondered if the new house would have

a fireplace... or if they even celebrated Christmas in Barbados. Father Christmas and his sleigh pulled by reindeer seemed a bit out of place on a palm-fringed beach.

'Stop day-dreaming and finish your breakfast!' Her mother's voice burst into her thoughts, snapping her back to reality. 'The taxi will be here soon so get your stuff together...now!'

Jasmine just about managed to force down the soggy toast. Then she finished her juice, put the cup into a bag with the rest of the final rubbish and sullenly took the bag outside. She dropped it with a thud into the empty wheelie bin which the dustbin men had, as usual, left blocking the pavement.

She looked up and down the street. It gave her a strange, melancholy feeling. This had always been 'her street', the street where she had played 'Don't step on the paving-stone lines' on the way back from school or rushing home to see her favourite television programme. A familiar place where she had learnt to ride her bike, where she had fallen over a dozen times as she tried to master skateboarding and rollerblading. Now it was just another street amongst the thousands criss-crossing London's suburban sprawl.

As Jasmine stood there, a blue people-carrier

came slowly up the road, its driver craning his neck to see the house numbers. It stopped opposite, in Mr Cranbourne's disabled parking space – which was the only possible place to stop without causing a traffic jam. It didn't really matter because Mr Cranbourne, who had one leg, didn't have a car, and every other inch of the streets in every direction was lined with so many cars it was impossible to park. The driver tooted at Jasmine and pointed at his watch.

'Taxi's here!' Jasmine shouted through the open front door.

'Well, come and get the cases, for Goodness' sake, instead of standing there with your two long hands... what's wrong with you this morning, girl? You're in another world."

Jasmine stood by the two cases in the hallway, her heart beating faster, her hands clenched tightly. She swallowed hard but the lump in her throat seemed to grow larger as her eyes filled with tears. Suddenly her knees weakened and she felt herself crumpling to the floor as if she were about to pray.

At that moment her mother came bustling out of the kitchen, fumbling in her handbag. 'Oh dear... where did I put the keys? I have to leave them next door with Mrs Lehman....'

Jasmine was on her knees, sobbing silently. Her mother looked down, shocked and surprised.

'Oh, Jazzie darlin'...what is it?' she said, dropping down beside Jasmine, cradling her in her arms as she used to when Jasmine was a child and had fallen over and hurt herself. 'Tell me what's the matter, Jazzie. What is it?'

Jasmine's tears had now become deep and uncontrollable, her body shaking violently with each sob.

'I don't want... to leave... the house....' she gasped.

'Oh, Jazzie,' sighed her mother. 'I've been so busy with the move, I didn't realise....'

'You and Dad just don't understand… it's so unfair! I love everything about this house. I'm happy here.'

Her mother took a tissue out of her bag and carefully wiped away Jasmine's tears. 'I feel the same way too, Jazzie. This is where your dad and I came when we got married, it's where you were born. Yes, it has so many happy memories for me too.' Suddenly her mother's eyes took on a distant look and a tear rolled down her cheek. 'And sad ones as well.... Remember when we lost little Jason that

night in his sleep?'

Jasmine's heart missed a beat at the mention of the little brother she had lost, and the terrible grief she had felt. She had been so happy to have a baby brother to look after. But he had died one November night, aged only five months, a victim of cot death. Yes, the house held sad memories too, she thought. But some of the pain had eased over the last seven years.

'You were so brave then, and having you to love made it easier for your dad and me. But now it's time to move on,' said her mother softly.

'Why?' sniffed Jasmine.

'Jazzie, we've been through all this....'

Outside, the taxi driver was impatiently tooting his horn.

'Come on, Jazzie darlin', get up and let's say goodbye to the house together,' said her mum, forcing herself to smile.

Jasmine knew it was hopeless. She could never win, there was no way she could change the situation. So she sniffed away the last of her tears and stood up, pulling herself together before she dragged the suitcases over to the taxi. Meanwhile her mother locked up and shoved the keys through the next-door

neighbour's letter-box. Then they stood silently by their front gate, arms round each other's shoulders, gazing sadly up at the curtainless windows, both knowing this was the last time they would see the house.

'Bye, house,' whispered Jasmine.

'Thanks for everything,' added her mother.

From the taxi, Jasmine took one last look along the street. Then she turned and stared through the windscreen as the driver accelerated away towards the airport and her new life, thousands of miles from the drab streets of south London, far from the grey skies of Britain.