

"SATISFYING IN A MOST DISQUIETING SORT OF WAY."
St. Petersburg Times

DEBORAH CROMBIE

AUTHOR OF NOW MAY YOU WEEP



ALL SHALL BE WELL

All Shall Be Well
By
Deborah Crombie

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For Katie

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It is sooth that sin is cause of all this pain, But all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.

—Julian of Norwich, 15th century

Chapter One



Jasmine Dent let her head fall back against the pillows and closed her eyes. Morphine coats the mind like fuzz on a peach, she thought sleepily, and smiled a little at her metaphor. For a while she floated between sleeping and waking, aware of faint sounds drifting in through the open window, aware of the sunlight flowing across the foot of her bed, but unable to rouse herself.

Her earliest memories were of heat and dust, and the unseasonable warmth of the April afternoon conjured up smells and sounds that danced in her mind like long-forgotten wraiths. Jasmine wondered if the long, slow hours of her childhood lay buried somewhere in the cells of her brain, waiting to explode upon her consciousness with that particular lucidity attributed to the memories of the dying.

She was born in India, in Mayapore, a child of the dissolution of the Raj. Her father, a minor civil servant, had sat out the war in an obscure office. In 1947, he had chosen to stay on in India, scraping a living from his ICS pension.

Of her mother she had little recollection. Five years after Jasmine's birth, she had borne Theo and passed away, making as little fuss in

dying as she had in living. She left behind only a faint scent of English roses that mingled in Jasmine's mind with the click of closing shutters and the sound of insects singing.

A soft thump on the bed jerked Jasmine's mind back to consciousness. She lifted her hand and buried her fingers in Sidhi's plush coat, opening her eyes to gaze at her fingers, the knobby joints held together by fragile bridges of skin and muscle. The cat's body, a black splash against the red-orange of the coverlet, vibrated against her hip.

After a few moments Jasmine gave the cat's sleek head one last stroke and maneuvered herself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, her fingers automatically checking the catheter in her chest. Installing a hospital bed in the sitting room had eliminated the claustrophobia she'd felt as she became confined for longer periods to the small bedroom. Surrounded by her things, with the large windows open to the garden and the afternoon sun, the shrinking of her world seemed more bearable.

Tea first, then whatever she could manage of the dinner Meg left, and afterwards she could settle down for the evening with the telly. Plan in small increments, giving equal weight to each event—that was the technique she had adopted for getting through the day.

She levered herself up from the bed and shuffled toward the kitchen, wrapping about her the brilliant colors of an Indian silk caftan. No drab British flannels for her—only now the folds of the caftan hung on her like washing hung out on a line. Some accident of genetics had endowed her with an appearance more exotic than her English parentage warranted—the dark hair and eyes and delicate frame had made her an object of derision with the English schoolgirls remaining in Calcutta—but now, with the dark hair cropped short and the eyes enormous in her thin face, she looked elfin, and in spite of her illness, younger than her years.

She put the kettle on to boil and leaned against the kitchen windowsill, pushing the casement out and peering into the garden below.

She was not disappointed. The Major, clippers in hand, patrolled the postage-stamp garden in his uniform of baggy, gray cardigan and flannels, ready to pluck out any insubordinate sprig. He looked up and raised his clippers in salute. Jasmine mimed "Cup of tea?" When he

nodded acceptance she returned to the hob and moved carefully through the ritual of making tea.

Jasmine carried the mugs out to the steps that led from her flat down to the garden. The Major had the basement flat and he considered the garden his territory. She and Duncan, in the flat above hers, were only privileged spectators. The planks of the top step grated against her bones as she eased into a sitting position.

The Major climbed the steps and sat beside her, accepting his cup with a grunt. "Lovely day," he said by way of thanks. "Like to think it would last." He sipped his tea, making a small swishing sound through his mustache. "You been keeping all right today?" He glanced at her for a second only, his attention drawn back to the rioting daffodils and tulips.

"Yes," Jasmine answered, smiling, for the Major was a man of few words under the best of circumstances. Those brief comments were his equivalent of a monologue, and his usual query was the only reference he ever made to her illness. They drank in silence, the tea warming them as much as the late afternoon sun soaking into their skins, until Jasmine spoke. "I don't think I've ever seen the garden look as lovely as it has this spring, Major. Is it just that I appreciate things more these days, or is it really more beautiful this year?"

"Humfff," he muttered into his cup, then cleared his throat for the difficult business of replying. "Could be. Weather's been bonny enough." He frowned and ran his fingers over the tips of his clippers, checking for rust. "Tulips're almost gone, though." The tulips wouldn't be allowed to linger past their prime. At the first fallen petal the Major would sever heads from stalks with a quick, merciful slash.

Jasmine's mouth twitched at the thought—too bad there was no one to perform such a service for her. She herself had failed in the final determination, whether from cowardice or courage, she couldn't say. And Meg... it had been too much to ask of Meg, she'd had no right to ask it of Meg. Jasmine wondered now how she had ever considered it.

Meg had arrived today looking even more untended than usual, her wide brow rumpled with distress. It took all Jasmine's strength to convince Meg that she'd changed her mind, and all the while the irony of it taunted her. It was she who was dying, after all, yet it was Meg who needed reassurance measured out in palliative doses.

She couldn't explain to Meg the reckoning she had reached somewhere between last night's sleeping and this morning's waking. She knew only that she had crossed some meridian in her swift progress toward death. The pain held no more terror for her. With acceptance came the ability to hold and savor each moment, as well as a strange new contentment.

The sun dipped behind the square Victorian house across the garden, and its stone faded from gold to gray in an instant. The air felt chill against Jasmine's skin and she heard the faint bustle of traffic from Rosslyn Hill, evidence that life still eddied about her.

The Major stood, his knees creaking. "I'd best finish up. The light'll be gone soon." He reached down and hoisted Jasmine to her feet as easily as if she'd been a sack of potting soil. "In with you, now. Mustn't catch a chill."

Jasmine almost laughed at the absurdity of her catching a chill, as if an exterior circumstance could compare with the havoc her body had wreaked from within, but she let him help her inside and rinse the cups.

She locked the garden door after him and closed the casements, but hesitated a few minutes before drawing the blinds. The light was fading above the rooftops, and the leaves on the birch tree in the garden shivered in the evening breeze. From Duncan's terrace she might have watched the sun set over West London. For that privilege he paid dearly, and he had been kind enough to share it a few times before the stairs defeated her.

Duncan—now that was another thing she couldn't explain very well to Meg—at least not without hurting her feelings. She hadn't wanted Meg to meet him, had wanted to keep him separate from the rest of her existence, separate from her illness. Meg looked after her so zealously, tracking the progress of every symptom, monitoring her care and medication as if Jasmine's disease had become her personal responsibility. Duncan brought in the outside world, sharp and acid, and if he dealt with death it was at least far removed from hers.

As she sighed and lowered the blind, Sidhi rubbed against her ankles. The distinction between Duncan and Meg was all nonsense anyway—if Meg had immersed herself in her illness, her illness also made her a safe prospect for Duncan's friendship. No older woman-younger man scenario possible: dying made one acceptably non-

threatening.

She found him a contradictory man, at once reserved and engaging, and she never quite knew what to expect. "Ice cream tonight?" she could hear him asking in one of his playful moods, a remnant of his Cheshire drawl surviving years in London. He'd jog up Rosslyn Hill to the Häagen-Dazs shop and return panting and grinning like a six-year-old. Those nights he'd cajole her with games and conversation, rousing in her an energy she thought she no longer possessed.

Other evenings he seemed to draw into himself, content to sit quietly beside her in the flickering light of the telly, and she didn't dare breach his reserve. Nor did she dare depend too much on his companionship, or so she told herself often enough. It surprised her that he spent as much time with her as he did, but before her mind could wander down the path of analyzing his motivation she silenced it, fearing pity. She straightened as briskly as she was able and turned to the fridge.

The food Margaret left turned out to be a vegetable curry— Meg's idea of something nourishing. Jasmine managed a few bites, finding it easier to sniff and roll about on her tongue than to swallow, the smell and taste recalling her childhood as vividly as her afternoon dream. An accumulation of coincidence, she told herself, odd but meaningless.

She dozed in front of the television, half listening for Duncan's knock on the door. Sidhi narrowed his eyes against the blue-white glare and kneaded his paws against her thigh. What would happen to Sidhi? She'd made no provision for him, hadn't been able to face disposing of him like a piece of furniture. Her own brother Theo despised cats, the Major complained when Sidhi dug in his flower beds, Duncan treated him with polite indifference, Felicity pronounced him unsanitary, and Meg lived in a bed-sit in Kilburn with a landlady she described as ferocious—no good prospects there. Perhaps Sidhi would manage his next life without her intervention. He had certainly been fortunate enough in this one—she'd rescued him, a scrawny six-week-old kitten, from a rubbish bin.

She drifted off again, waking with a start to find the program she'd been watching finished. She wondered if, as her morphine dosage increased, her awareness would fade in and out like the reception on a poor telly. She wondered if she would mind.

Jasmine wondered, as the night drew in, if she had made the right

decision after all, yet she knew somehow that once she had crossed that invisible line, there could be no going back.

Duncan Kincaid emerged from the bowels of Hampstead tube station and blinked in the brilliant light. He turned the corner into the High, and the colors jostled before him with an almost physical force. All Hampstead seemed to have turned out in its shirt sleeves to greet the spring morning. Shoppers bumped and smiled instead of snarling, restaurants set up impromptu sidewalk cafes, and the smell of fresh coffee mingled with exhaust fumes.

Kincaid plunged down the hill, untempted by the effervescent atmosphere. Coffee didn't appeal to him—his mouth tasted like dirty washing-up water from drinking endless, stale cups, his eyes stung from other people's cigarette smoke, and having solved the case offered little solace for a long and dismal night's work. The body of a child found in a nearby field, the crime traced to a neighbor who, when confronted, sobbingly confessed he couldn't help himself, hadn't meant to hurt her.

Kincaid wanted merely to wash his face and collapse head first into bed.

By the time he reached Rosslyn Hill a little of the seasonal mood had infected him, and the sight of the flower seller at the corner of Pilgrim's Lane brought him up with a start. Jasmine. He'd meant to stop in and see her last night—he usually did if he could—but the relationship wasn't intimate enough for calling with excuses, and she would never mention that he hadn't come.

He bought freesias, because he remembered that Jasmine loved their heady perfume.

The silence in Carlingford Road seemed intense after the main thoroughfares, and the air in the shadow of his building still held the night's chill. Kincaid passed the Major coming up the steps from his basement entrance, and received the expected "Harummf. Mornin'," and a sharp nod of the head in response to his greeting. After several months of nodding acquaintance, Kincaid, intrigued by the brass nameplate on the Major's door, ventured a query regarding the "H." before "Keith." The Major had looked sideways, looked over Kincaid's head, groomed his mustache, and finally grumbled "Harley." The matter was never referred to again.

He heard the knocking as soon as he entered the stairwell. First a