

Deborah
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NECESSARY
as BLOOD

Can someone really
disappear without a trace?



Necessary as Blood

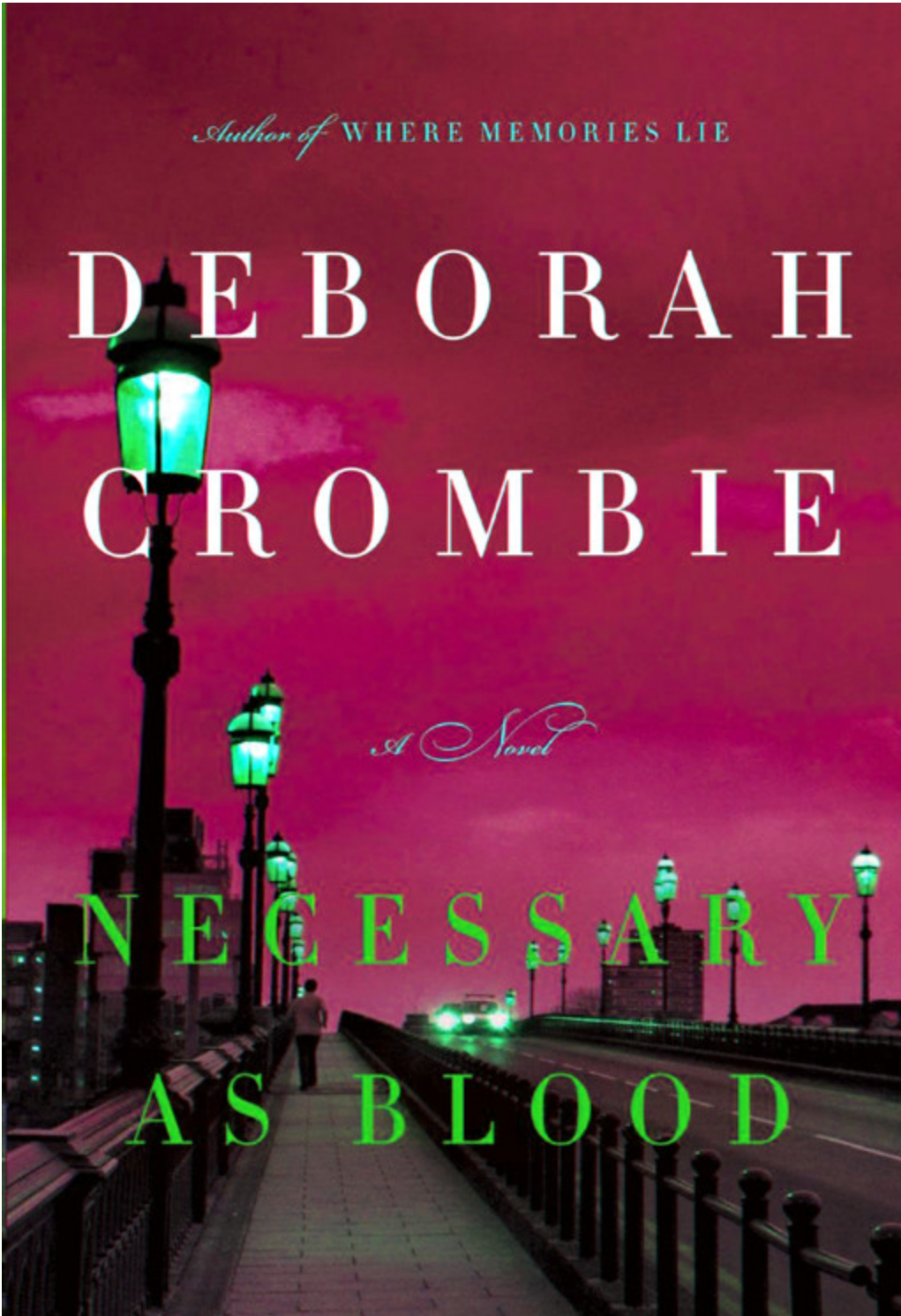
Deborah Crombie

Author of WHERE MEMORIES LIE

DEBORAH
CROMBIE

A Novel

NECESSARY
AS BLOOD



 HarperCollins e-books

FOR GIGI

PROLOGUE

Umbra Sumus—“We are shadows.”

—Inscription on the sundial of the Huguenot church, now the Jamme Masjid mosque, on Brick Lane

That Sunday began like any ordinary Sunday, except that Naz, Sandra’s husband, had gone in to work for a few hours at his law office, an unusual breach of family protocol for him.

Having pushed aside her initial irritation, Sandra had decided to use the time for one of her own projects, and after breakfast and chores she and Charlotte had gone up to her studio on the top floor of the house.

After two hours’ work, Sandra stepped back, frowning, from the swatches of fabric she had pinned to the muslin stretched over the work frame in her studio. The carefully shaped pieces of material overlapped, forming a kaleidoscope of images, so that at first the whole appeared abstract, but on closer inspection, shapes appeared: streets, buildings, people, birds, other animals, flowers—all representing in some way the history and culture of Sandra’s particular part of London, the East End, in and around Brick Lane.

Sandra’s love affair with fabrics had begun as child, with the acquisition of a tattered quilt from a market stall on Brick Lane. She and her gran had pored over it, marveling at the intricacy of the pattern, wondering which bits had come from an Auntie Mary’s best pinny, which from a little girl’s Sunday dress, which from an Uncle George’s cast-off pajamas.

That passion had survived art college, and the pressure to join the vogue for shock art. She had learned to draw and to paint, and gradually she’d translated those skills into what she still thought of as painting with fabric.

But unlike paint, fabric was tactile and three-dimensional, and the work fascinated her as much now as it had done when she had haltingly composed her very first piece.

Today, however, something wasn't quite right. The piece wasn't generating the emotional impact she wanted, and she couldn't quite work out what was wrong. She moved a color here, a shape there, stepped back for a different perspective and frowned again. The dark brick of Georgian town houses formed a frame for a cascade of color—it might have been Fournier Street, or Fashion Street, with the women parading in their gowns, intricately worked iron cages held high in their hands. The wire cages held, however, not birds, but women and children's faces, dark to light, a few framed by the hijab.

Late-morning sun poured through the great windows in the loft—a blessing for the warmth in midwinter if not in mid-May—but it was the clarity of the light that had drawn her to the place, and still, even when the work wasn't going well, had the power to hold her transfixed.

She and Naz had bought the Fournier Street house more than a decade ago, when they were first married, disregarding rising damp, crumbling plaster, and minimal plumbing, because Sandra had seen the potential of the studio space. And it had been affordable on Naz's solicitor's earnings while Sandra was still in art school. They had worked hard, making many of the repairs themselves, to create their vision of a home, not realizing that in a few years' time they would be sitting on a property gold mine.

For the town houses on Fournier Street were Georgian, built by the French Huguenot silk weavers who had come to London's Spitalfields to escape persecution in Catholic France. The weavers had done well for themselves for a time, their looms clicking in their spacious lofts, the women congregating on the front stoops in their lustrous taffeta gowns, while their canaries sang in the cages they carried as marks of status.

But cheap calico imports from India had threatened the weavers' livelihood, and the invention of the mechanized loom had sounded its death knell. New waves of immigrants had followed the Huguenots—the Jews, the Irish, the

Bangladeshis, the Somalis—but none had prospered as the Huguenots had done, and the houses had sunk into a long, slow decay.

Until now. Despite the recession, the City was moving relentlessly eastwards, encroaching on Spitalfields, bringing a new wave of immigrants. But these were yuppies with fat pocketbooks who were snapping up the houses and warehouses of the old East End, pushing the lower-income residents out as they came in. For the present bled into the past, and the past into the present, always, and to Sandra it seemed particularly so in the East End, where the years accumulated in layers like the fabrics on her board.

Sandra sighed and rubbed her fingers over the scrap of peacock-blue taffeta she held in her hand, contemplating its position in the overall design of her collage. It was inevitable, she supposed, change, and she had friends now on both sides of the economic divide—and if anything, she owed her ability to make her living as an artist to those on the upper end of the scale.

She glanced at the pile of fabric scraps under the loft casement. Charlotte lay nestled among the silks and voiles, drawn like a cat to the pool of sunlight. She had settled there when she tired of a long and one-sided conversation with her favorite stuffed elephant—Charlotte, like her mother before her, would have nothing to do with dolls.

Graceful as a cat, too, her little daughter, even asleep with her thumb in her mouth, thought Sandra. At almost three, Charlotte had held on to her thumb sucking a bit too long, but Sandra found herself reluctant to deprive her precocious child of a last vestige of infant comfort.

Her frustration with the collage-in-progress momentarily forgotten, Sandra grabbed a sketchbook and pencil from her worktable. Quickly, she blocked out the spill of fabric, the small French panes of the casement, the curve of Charlotte's small body in dungarees and T-shirt, the delicate and slightly snub-nosed face framed by the mass of toffee-colored curls.

The sketch cried out for color and Sandra exchanged her number 2 for a handful of colored pencils pulled from a chipped Silver Jubilee mug—a flea-market treasure kept for its accidental misspelling of the Duke of Edinburgh's name.

Red for the dungarees, pink for the T-shirt, bright blues and greens for the puddled silks, warm brown for the polished floorboards.

Absently, she went back to the silks, her hand attempting to reproduce the half-formed memory of an intricate silk pattern she had seen. It had been sari silk, like those spilled on her floor, but an unusual pattern, tiny birds handwoven into the apple green fabric. She'd asked the girl who wore it where it had come from, and the child had answered in soft, halting English, saying her mother had given it to her. But when Sandra asked if her mother had bought it here, in London, the girl had gone mute and looked frightened, as if she'd spoken out of bounds. And the next time Sandra visited, she had been gone.

Sandra frowned at the recollection and Charlotte stirred, as if unconsciously responding. Afraid she would lose her opportunity to capture the tableau, Sandra reached for her camera and snapped. She checked the image, nodding as she saw Charlotte's sleeping face framed by silk, timeless now.

Timeless, like the faces in the cages in her collage...A sudden inspiration made her glance at the collage. What if...What if she used photo transfer for the faces of the women and girls, rather than fabric and paint? She could use the faces of women and children she knew, if they would agree.

Charlotte stretched and opened her eyes, smiling sleepily. A good-natured child, Charlotte was seldom cross unless tired or hungry, a blessing Sandra was sure she had not bestowed on her own mum. Setting down her camera, she knelt and lifted her daughter. "Nice nap, sweetie?" she asked as Charlotte twined her arms round her neck for a hug. Charlotte's hair was damp from sun and sleep and her pale caramel skin still held a faint scent of baby muskiness, but she didn't give her mother much chance to nuzzle.

Squirming from Sandra's arms, she went to the worktable. "Duck pencils, Mummy," she said, eyeing the empty mug. "I want to draw, too."

Sandra considered, glancing at the clock, at the sun-brightened windows, and once again at the half-finished collage on the worktable. She knew from experience that she'd reached the point where staring at the board wouldn't

provide a solution, and besides, she wanted to try out her photo idea. A break was in order.

It was not quite noon; Charlotte had been up early and Sandra had let her fall asleep before her usual nap time. They'd agreed to meet Naz for lunch at two, that is, if he could drag himself away from the office. She gave a sharp shake of her head at the thought. He and Lou had both been working much too hard on an upcoming case, and Naz was showing uncharacteristic signs of strain. Family Sundays had always been a priority for them, especially since Charlotte's birth, as they both were determined to give her the secure childhood neither of them had had.

Naz had been orphaned, his Christian parents murdered in Pakistan by the swell of fundamentalist Muslim violence in the seventies. Sent to London in the care of an aunt and uncle who felt themselves burdened by the charge, he had grown up adjusting to the loss of both family and culture.

And Sandra, well, her family didn't bear thinking about.

But as for her husband, no Bangladeshi restaurant owner's troubles with the law were worth damaging what they had so carefully built. She would have to have a word with Naz. In the meantime, it was a perfect May day, and there was still time to go to Columbia Road.

"I have a better idea," she told Charlotte, putting the pencils firmly back in the cup. "Let's go see Uncle Roy."

Sandra held Charlotte's hand as they made their way up Brick Lane through the bustle of the Sunday market. Fall-off-the-lorry day, Naz always called the Sunday market, with a hint of disapproval. He was right, of course. Half the things hawked by the traders had either fallen off a lorry or been smuggled across the Channel in the back of one. But Sandra loved it—loved the tatty chaos of it, the vendors with their makeshift trestle tables selling everything from French wine to cases of oranges (no doubt rotten at the bottom) to old car batteries.

When they passed the Old Truman Brewery, Charlotte tugged at her hand. “Roots, Mummy,” she said, pointing into Ely Yard. In the car park behind the brewery, an old Routemaster bus had been turned into a vegan restaurant called Rootmaster. Charlotte didn’t understand the pun but loved to eat in its top deck. The bus rocked with the wind and with the waitress’s tread on the curving stairs, and Charlotte would shriek with joy at every sway.

“Not now, sweetie.” Sandra clasped her hand more firmly. “We’ll meet Daddy there in a bit. And when we get to Columbia Road, I’ll buy you a cupcake for after.”

She waved at her friends in the vintage-clothing shop where she often bought things to use in her collages, but resisted the temptation to go in. The window gave back a distorted reflection of her mop of blond hair, and of Charlotte’s, a few shades darker but just as curly.

It was only as they neared the railway line that Sandra slowed, then stopped. When Charlotte tugged at her hand again, she scooped her up and propped her on her hip. In one of the recessed brick arches under the old railway bridge, an anonymous artist had pasted a black-and-white photo image of a young woman. She was nude, shown from the pelvis up, her torso almost as slender as a boy’s. The shape of the surrounding brick arch suggested an icon, and the subject gazed out at the viewer with such a serene grace that Sandra had mentally dubbed her “the Madonna of Brick Lane.”

But she was fading, the Madonna, the paper wrinkling, the edges beginning to peel and curl. Soon she would disappear, in the way of street art, to be replaced by another artist’s vision. Sandra pulled out her camera and snapped a shot. Now, at least, the Madonna would be preserved.

The inspiration she’d had in the studio suddenly crystallized. She would use photo transfers, yes, but fade them...They would vanish as had the women and girls held captive in so many ways over the years. Vanish like the girl with the sari—