

NICCI  
FRENCH

THE  
LAST DAYS  
OF KIRA  
MULLAN



SIMON &  
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Amsterdam/Antwerp · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2025

Copyright © Nicci French, 2025

The right of Nicci French to be identified as author  
of this work has been asserted in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd  
1st Floor  
222 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney  
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

[www.simonandschuster.co.uk](http://www.simonandschuster.co.uk)  
[www.simonandschuster.com.au](http://www.simonandschuster.com.au)  
[www.simonandschuster.co.in](http://www.simonandschuster.co.in)

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-3985-2413-2  
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-3985-2414-9  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-3985-2415-6  
Audio ISBN: 978-1-3985-2416-3

This book is a work of fiction.  
Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's  
imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people  
living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Katie Forrest / S&S Art Dept  
Author photograph © Johnny Ring  
Cover images © Johnny Ring and Shutterstock

Typeset in Sabon by M Rules  
Printed and Bound in Australia by Griffin Press



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds chain of custody certification SCS-COC-001185. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

*To Jasper, Arlie and Elias*

# PART ONE

## ONE

The journey into darkness began with the move, although for Nancy North moving felt more like an ending. The wreckage of the past lay behind her and she couldn't see into the future or imagine what it would be.

'We'll come back,' she said determinedly, wrapping glasses in newspaper to keep them safe, placing them into the large box at her feet.

Felix smiled across at her.

'Of course,' he said.

'And soon.'

'Soon,' he echoed, but Nancy knew he was just humouring her.

He taped his box shut and labelled it with a marker pen. Nancy watched him. Her packing was impatient and slapdash; his was calm and methodical.

They were moving from a flat that she loved into a smaller and cheaper one she hadn't seen, and from a patch of East London where she knew every shop, every alley, to an area she had never set foot in. She'd had to look at a map to find out where it was. West London: it was travelling to a different continent.

'Harlesden,' she said. 'What's it like then?'

Felix straightened up and pushed his fingers through his blonde hair. He looked tired, and Nancy felt a familiar stab of

guilt. She had done that to him. All of this was her fault, and he hadn't complained once.

'Interesting,' he answered. 'Diverse. I think you'll like it.'

It sounded like he was reading from a guidebook. There was an anxious, almost pleading note in his voice. Nancy crossed the room and put her arms around him.

'It'll be an adventure. While we plan what comes next,' she said, and kissed him.

An adventure. If she allowed herself to think about it, which she tried not to, it felt more like a failure and a humiliating retreat. Eleven months ago, she had opened a tiny restaurant in Stoke Newington, the fulfilment of a dream she had had since she was a teenager. It had taken most of her twenties to save up the money for the deposit, working long hours in shitty jobs while friends became lawyers and teachers and management consultants, whatever they were, or travelled for months at a time, posting photos of themselves from beaches and jungles. At last, she managed to get a bank loan with scary repayments, and then had to find the premises, to equip it, to get the right person to be waiter and bar tender. A year and a half ago, just before she turned thirty-two, she had opened the restaurant. She had never worked so hard or with such intensity: in the kitchen before most people's day began, home very late, and even then, she would lie in bed and think about the tasks that hadn't been completed and the things that she could do better. It was like being an accountant and an artist at the same time. She even dreamed about menus. She barely saw Felix in those feverish months, or friends, unless they came to eat in the restaurant. She never took days off or went on holiday. But she was happy, if happiness means joyful immersion in a task. She was also, she realised now when it was too late, scared that it was too good to be true and couldn't last.

It couldn't.

Four months ago, on a Sunday in the hot middle of July when she was making raspberry sorbet, a voice had whispered to her, 'It's coming.'

Nancy had looked around. The kitchen was empty.

She pushed an escaped lock of hair back inside her cap and returned to her task.

'It's coming,' said the voice again, nasty, menacing, making her heart beat faster.

There was still no one there. Perhaps she had been talking to herself. She often talked to herself, giving herself instructions, admonitions. 'Get out of the bath, Nancy North,' she would say, or she would tell herself where she was putting her keys so that she wouldn't forget them. She talked in her sleep as well. Felix would gently shake her awake and tell her she had been shouting out, asking for help.

That sinister voice was the last thing she remembered. Everything that happened after was a blur: yells and screams, leering faces and pinching fingers, a hurtling sense of terror and she knew she had to get away but there was no place to hide, no safety anywhere. She did have a few clear and shaming memories. One was of urgently taking her friend Bridie by the arm and making her run, shouting at her all the while to go faster, trying to take her away from danger. When they had at last come to a gasping stop, Bridie had stared at her in such horror that Nancy had crouched on the ground and covered her face with her hands. The other was of Felix crying, his mouth wide open and fat tears streaming down his cheeks, into his stubble. She had never seen him cry before, nor since. She promised herself she would never make him cry like that again.

She had been sectioned, drugged, talked to as if she was a small child, made to put food in her mouth. In the psychiatric

ward she had lost all sense of time. She had learned to talk about what had happened to her as a psychotic breakdown, the result of working so hard and with such a feverish passion. Her voices had been externalisations: the self warning the self of its danger. She had come to understand that she had often heard the voices before, though they had never seemed violently threatening.

When she was released from hospital, back into a world where the light seemed too bright and the sky like a bruise, she had lost almost everything she cared about: her beloved little restaurant, several of her friends who were embarrassed and appalled by what she had been like in those wild weeks, her self-respect, her self-belief, her joy. The shame was intense: there were days when it took all her courage to meet someone's gaze. She wanted to hide, to cover her eyes, be swallowed up in darkness and forgetfulness.

Felix had saved her. He had been calm and steadfast and tender, and Nancy, who hated being looked after by anyone, let herself be looked after by him. It was Felix who had dealt with all the bureaucracy of the fall-out, faced up to the fact that they could no longer afford the flat they were living in, found the new place which a friend of his was moving out of and which he'd often visited, organised the removal men, and done the lion's share of packing.

'Felix,' said Nancy.

'Yes?'

'This teapot has a crack. Keep or chuck?'

He lifted it in his broad, competent hands and examined it.

'Keep until we buy a new one.'

'And Felix.'

He looked round at her.

'Have I ever told you how fab you are?'

He grinned.

‘Rather a lot recently.’

In her late teens and twenties, she would have overlooked Felix, or dismissed him as boring. He wasn’t reckless, charismatic, unreliable, unpredictable or downright self-harming; not thin and stubbly and carelessly dressed. No sharp cheekbones or tattoos or piercings. He didn’t take drugs, except the occasional spliff; he paid bills on time. He was solid, blonde, sensible and good-looking in a way that was easy to ignore. He was only two years older than Nancy, but sometimes, she thought, they seemed to belong to different generations.

‘Remember our first meeting?’

He had come, with a mutual friend, to the restaurant where she worked before she opened her own. She hadn’t fallen for him at once, but she had rather liked the way he looked, the way he listened, his modesty, his composure, his lack of irony, the way he ate his food slowly and thoughtfully, giving it his full attention. He wasn’t neurotic or troubled. He was, well, nice. And he adored her. It was almost absurd how much he adored her.

‘Do you remember what you ate?’

He lifted knives from their magnetic strip and folded them in tea towels before saying, ‘No, but I remember you came out of the kitchen in white trousers and a funny little cap on your head with some of your hair escaping from it and there were freckles on the bridge of your nose. I thought you very fetching.’

‘Fetching?’

‘Yes.’

‘You had tagliatelle with wild mushrooms and parmesan and lots of black pepper.’

‘That sounds pretty good.’

‘We should have that as our anniversary meal.’

‘It’s a plan.’

He was pulling pots and pans out of the cupboards.

‘I’m going to start cooking again soon.’

‘Only when you’re ready.’

‘I miss it.’

‘Don’t forget what your doctor said. One step at a time.’

Nancy felt a pulse of irritation. She wanted to say that of course she wouldn’t forget, and that Felix didn’t need to incessantly remind her: he wasn’t her doctor or her carer, but her partner. But she held her tongue.

‘It’s about three steps to the bedroom,’ she said instead. ‘A goodbye fuck.’

‘Nancy, we have to get everything packed and we’ve barely started.’

But he was smiling and moving towards her, frying pan still in one hand. She put her arms around him, and he pushed her long, pale brown hair away from her face before kissing her.

Everything will be all right, Nancy told herself, putting her fingers in his soft hair, feeling the graze of his cheek. She would take her drugs, see her therapist, take things step by step and day by day. But there was a sinister tingling in her brain, like pins and needles. The objects in the room came in and out of focus and she closed her eyes to stop the world from wavering. I will make it all right.

On the other side of London, in a small flat in Harlesden, twenty-three-year-old Kira Mullan was saying goodbye to the man she had spent the afternoon in bed with. He was called Ollie and she liked him. She really liked him. It had been a long time since she had fallen like this for someone: maybe, she thought giddily, not since her first real boyfriend when she was sixteen and a half and thought that love would last for ever,

but then he had left her for one of the mean girls in her class. She could still remember the heartbreak, how she had cried for days until her eyes were red and her whole face puffy with luxurious weeping.

But then what about Davey, who she'd gone out with when she was nineteen? Or Serge, who had overlapped with Davey, which wasn't something she usually did, or Angus with the lovely voice and the drug habit that got out of control. Since she'd arrived in London, there had just been a handful of unsatisfactory hook-ups that she had tried to pretend to herself were more pleasurable than they actually were. A few of them had been scary and some were a tipsy blur. Sometimes she wondered if she had made a mistake coming here. London was exciting, but also monstrously huge and sprawling, and she didn't understand how to belong to it, how to meet people who wanted to be friends with her. She did her best to sparkle and be fun and show her best face, but there were days when loneliness swamped her normal buoyant optimism. Not today, though. Today she was brimful of hope.

Ollie pulled his jacket on. Kira was wrapped in a flimsy robe and her hair was a tangle; her lips were chapped. Happiness and sex had made her young face glow.

'I don't want to go,' he said.

'I've got to get to work. I'll be late as it is.'

He ran a thumb against her lower lip, pressed his lips to her jaw.

'I've been wanting you for weeks,' he said. 'Ever since I saw you in the bar.'

'Really?'

'You're beautiful,' he said, his mouth in her hair, hands on the small of her back. 'Gorgeous.'

She leaned into him, feeling his warmth.

‘You’re not so bad yourself.’

‘I’ll call you when I get back.’

‘When will that be?’

‘Six days.’

‘I’ll be waiting.’

It was the last time he would see her.