

An Exclusive Extract from Complicit, by Nikki French - the Great Read in the December issue of The Australian Women's Weekly:

After

I turned around and checked the door of the flat. It was closed. That wasn't enough. What if somebody arrived suddenly? What if they had a key? I pulled my sleeve over my hand so that I wouldn't touch it directly and, awkwardly through the cloth, grasped the bolt and slid it across as quietly as I could. The lights were all on, but the curtains still half open. I sidled round the wall until I reached the window, looking out to make sure nobody was standing in the dark street beneath before I closed them.

Starting at the door, I gazed around the room, dispassionately, like a camera, moving my attention from object to object. There was a framed photograph on the wall. I had never seen it properly before. Now I realized that it was a swarm of blurry orange butterflies. On the small table were a phone (what if it rang?) and a bowl with a small bunch of keys in it. Whose were they? His, probably. I needed to think about that. There was a comfy brown suede chair with the guitar case leaned against it. The guitar lay on the floor beside it, smashed through its centre, strings dangling in the splintered wood. I glanced away to the TV that I'd never seen switched on and to the big striped sofa where we had - No, don't. Don't remember. My scarf was draped across one arm where I had left it a couple of days earlier.

I picked it up and wrapped it around my neck, where the violet bruise throbbed like a nasty memory. There was a bookshelf. The books, some of which had been scattered onto the floor, were all Liza's, about art, design, a bit of travel. Liza was far from here, a thousand miles away. On some of the shelves were objects and curios, little sculptures and pieces of pottery. A miniature brass Buddha, a green bottle with a silver stopper. Liza used to bring them back from abroad. There was a low cupboard along the far wall and, on top of it, a mini-stereo with a wire rack barely half full of CDs. They were Liza's too - all except one. I walked across and, with care, using my fingers like tweezers, picked up the Hank Williams CD I had brought the previous week. I opened the case. It was empty. Covering my hand with my sleeve again, I pressed the button on the CD player and the tray opened. There it was. I pushed my little finger into the hole, removed it and returned it to the case. I put it on top of the stereo. I'd need to look for a plastic bag. A pine table that Liza used for working stood against the right-hand wall. The mail that had arrived in the weeks she'd been away was no longer in a pile but spread out messily on the surface, and a few envelopes were on the carpet. On the table, there was also a silver laptop, its lid closed, the power cable coiled neatly on top, a funny

little green plastic tortoise for keeping pens and a tin box full of paperclips and rubber bands. The chair that was usually beside it had fallen over. A vase lay next to it, its red tulips and water spilled out on the carpet, darkening it from the colour of pale barley to that of piss. Next to that the body lay face down on the rug, arms splayed. It was the arms that showed he was dead, even more than the dark stain that had spread from under his head - really dark, more black than red. I thought of his open eyes staring down into the roughness of the rug, his wide mouth misshapen against the wool. I looked at the hands, stretched out, as if reaching for something.

Before

Those hands. When I first felt them on my face, stroking the skin at the back of my neck, running through my hair, they were softer than I'd expected. Kinder. I felt almost as if he was a blind man learning about my body by touch. He ran his fingers down my naked spine and I felt that I was being played; unfamiliar bass sounds were released from me as he pressed the keys of my vertebrae, strung me out in a pleasure that was close to pain.

After

I couldn't help it. I knelt down beside him for a minute and put one finger into his slightly curled hand, still warm and soft to the touch, and let it rest there for a moment. In spite of everything, he had been mine for a while. He had looked at me as if I was the most beautiful woman in the world, the most precious to him, and I had comforted him. That's not so far from love.

I stood up again and moved around the room, checking things without being sure what I was checking for. I opened the table drawer, crouched and peered under the sofa, lifted the cushion on the armchair. My leather satchel, the scuffed brown one I had carried as a schoolgirl and used again now that I was back at school as a teacher: it should be here. I knew I had left it on the arm of the chair, its strap unbuckled.

I went into the kitchen, placing my feet carefully on the tiles, heel to toe, so that I wouldn't make any noise. There was the usual mess: unwashed mugs and plates, crumbs on the table, a slop of coffee on the hob, an opened packet of biscuits. I stood quite still. Something was wrong; something did not make sense. I opened each cupboard and looked inside. I pulled out each drawer, wincing as it scraped and squeaked, as the cutlery rattled. Where was my apron, the one I'd brought over when I'd cooked us a meal just a few days ago because for once I was wearing a dress that I would mind staining? Where was my favourite - my only - recipe book, with my name written inside the front cover? 'To Bonnie, with love from Mum.' For a moment I stood

quite still, baffled, and with an ominous ache in my chest. The tap was dripping very slightly. Outside, I could hear small gusts of wind in the tree at the back and, in the distance, the cars rumbling along the main road, the shake of a lorry that I could feel in my feet.

I tiptoed into the bedroom. The curtains were closed and the bed was unmade. I could almost make out the shape of his body, our bodies, still there. Clothes were piled for washing in a heap to one side of the door. I couldn't see my shirt, the one he had ripped off and tossed aside, although I knew where it had been lying. I remembered the way he had looked at me then, a gaze that made me want to cover my nakedness. I couldn't see my old T-shirt and flannel shorts, the ones I wear at night if it's cool. I pulled open each of the chest's drawers. A few of Liza's clothes were there, the ones she hadn't wanted to take with her, and some of his, but none of mine, and no satchel either. I sat on the bed and closed my eyes for a few seconds, and in the darkness I thought I could feel him there beside me. Would I always live with this or would it fade and dwindle?