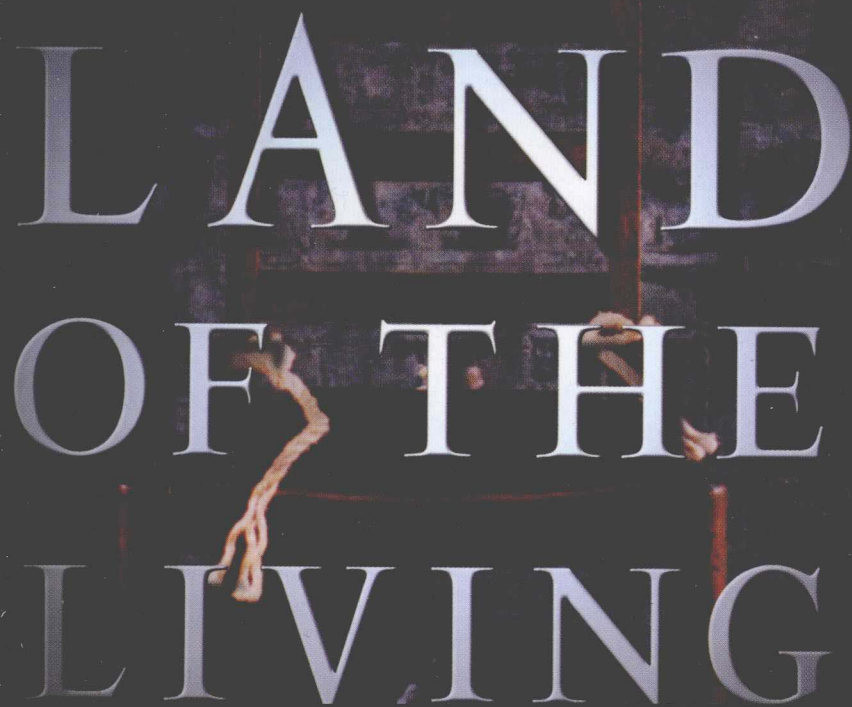


From the bestselling author of *The Red Room*

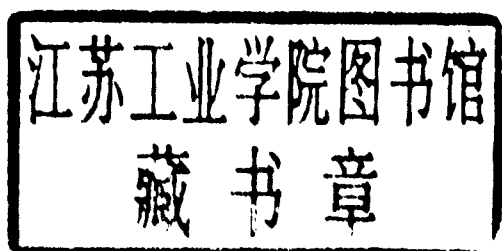
NICCI FRENCH

LAND OF THE LIVING



Land of the Living

NICCI FRENCH



BCA 

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LAND OF THE LIVING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicci French’s bestselling novels are *The Memory Game*, *The Safe House*, *Killing Me Softly*, *Beneath the Skin* and *The Red Room*. She lives in Suffolk.

To Timmy and Eve

Part One

Darkness. Darkness for a long time. Open my eyes and close, open and close. The same. Darkness inside, darkness outside.

I'd been dreaming. Tossed around in a black dark sea. Staked out on a mountain in the night. An animal I couldn't see sniffed and snuffled around me. I felt a wet nose on my skin. When you know you're dreaming you wake up. Sometimes you wake into another dream. But when you wake and nothing changes, that must be reality.

Darkness and things out there in the darkness. Pain. It was far away from her and then closer to her and then part of her. Part of *me*. I was filled to the brim with hot, liquid pain. Although the darkness remained, I could see the pain. Flashes of yellow and red and blue, fireworks exploding silently behind my eyes.

I started to search for something without really knowing what it was. I didn't know where it was. I didn't know what it was. Nightingale. Farthingale. It took an effort, like hauling a package out of the water of a deep dark lake. That was it. Abigail. I recognized that. My name was Abigail. Abbie. Tabbie. Abbie the Tabbie. The other name was harder. There were bits missing from my head and it seemed to have got lost among the missing bits. I remembered a class register. Auster, Bishop, Brown, Byrne, Cassini, Cole, Daley, Devereaux, Eve, Finch, Fry. No, stop. Go back. Finch. No. Devereaux. Yes, that was it. A rhyme came to me. A rhyme from long, long ago. Not Deverox like box. Nor Deveroo like shoe. But Devereaux like show. Abbie Devereaux. I clung to the name as if it was a life-ring that had been thrown to me in a stormy sea. The stormy sea was in my head mostly. Wave after wave of pain rolling in and dashing itself against the inside of my skull.

I closed my eyes again. I let my name go.

★

Everything was part of everything else. Everything existed at the same time as everything else. How long was it like that? Minutes. Hours. And then, like figures emerging from a fog, things resolved and separated. There was a taste of metal in my mouth and a smell of metal stinging my nostrils but the smell became a mustiness that made me think of garden sheds, tunnels, basements, cellars, damp dirty forgotten places.

I listened. Just the sound of my own breathing, unnaturally loud. I held my breath. No sound. Just the beating of my heart. Was that a noise or just the blood pumping inside my body, pushing against my ears?

I was uncomfortable. There was an ache down my back, my pelvis, my legs. I turned over. No. I didn't turn over. I didn't move. I couldn't move. I pulled up my arms as if to fend something off. No. The arms didn't move. I couldn't turn. Was I paralysed? I couldn't feel my legs. My toes. I concentrated everything on my toes. Left big toe rubbing against the toe beside. Right big toe rubbing against the toe beside. No problem. I could do it. Inside a sock. No shoe. I wasn't wearing shoes.

My fingers. I drummed them. The tips touched something rough. Cement or brick. Was this a hospital? Injured. An accident. Lying somewhere, waiting to be found. A railway accident. The wreckage of a train. Machinery on top of me. Wreckage. In a tunnel. Help coming. Heat-seeking equipment. I tried to remember the train. Couldn't remember. Or a plane. Or a car. Car more likely. Driving late at night, headlights on the windscreen, falling asleep. I knew the feeling, pinching myself to stay awake, slapping my cheeks, shouting, opening the window so the cold air hit my eyeballs. Maybe this time I failed. Veered off the road, down an embankment, rolled over, the car lost in undergrowth. When would I be reported missing? How do you look for a lost car?

I mustn't wait to be rescued. I might die of dehydration or blood loss just yards from people driving to work. I would have to move. If only I could see the way. No moon. No stars. It might only be twenty yards to safety. Up an embankment. If I could feel my toes, then I could move. Turn over first. Ignore the pain. I turned but

this time I felt something hold me back. I flexed my legs and arms, tightened and loosened the muscles. There were restraints. Over my forearms and just above my elbows. My ankles and thighs. My chest. I could lift my head, as if in the feeble beginning of an attempt at a sit-up. Something else. Not just dark. It was dark but not just that. My head was covered.

Think clearly. There must be a reason for this. Think. People in prison were restrained. Not relevant. What else? Patients in hospitals can have restraints placed on them in order to prevent them harming themselves. Lying on a trolley. Restrained on a trolley prior to being wheeled in for an operation. I've been in an accident. Say, a car accident, which is most likely. Statistically. Severe but not life-threatening. Any sudden movement could cause, and the phrase came to me out of nowhere, severe internal bleeding. The patient could fall off the trolley. It's just a matter of waiting for the nurse or the anaesthetist. Perhaps I had been given the anaesthetic already. Or a pre-anaesthetic. Hence the vacancies in my brain. Strange quiet, but you do hear of people in hospitals lying around on trolleys for hours waiting for a free operating theatre.

Problems with the theory. I didn't seem to be lying on a trolley. The smell was of darkness, mildew, things that were old and decaying. All I could feel with my fingers was concrete, or stone. My body was lying on something hard. I tried to think of other possibilities. After famous disasters bodies were stored in improvised morgues. School gymnasiums. Church halls. I could have been in a disaster. The injured could have been placed wherever there was room. Restrained to prevent them injuring themselves. Would they be hooded as well? Surgeons were hooded. But not their eyes. Perhaps to prevent infection.

I raised my head again. With my chin I felt a shirt. I was wearing clothes. Yes. I could feel them on my skin. A shirt, trousers, socks. No shoes.

There were other things at the edge, clamouring to be admitted to my brain. Bad things. Restrained. In the dark. Hooded. Ridiculous. Could it be a joke? I remembered stories of students. They get you paralytically drunk, put you on a train at Aberdeen. You

wake up in London dressed only in your underwear with a fifty-pence piece in your hand. Everyone will jump out in a minute, pull off the blindfold and shout, 'April fool.' We'll all laugh. But was it April? I remembered cold. Had summer been? Was summer still to come? But of course a summer had always been and there was always another summer to come.

All the alleys were blind. I had gone up them all and found nothing. Something had happened. I knew that. One possibility was that it was something funny. It didn't feel funny. Another possibility, possibility number two, was that something had happened and it was in the process of being officially dealt with. The hood – or bandage, yes, very possibly a bandage. That was a thought. I might have received a head wound, eye or ear damage and my entire head was bandaged and hooded for my own protection. They would be removed. There would be some stinging. The cheery face of a nurse. A doctor frowning at me. Don't worry, nothing to worry about. That's what they'd say. Call me 'dear'.

There were other possibilities. Bad ones. I thought of the stone under my fingers. The damp air, like a cave. Until now, there had been only the pain and also the mess of my thoughts, but now there was something else. Fear in my chest like sludge. I made a sound. A low groan. I was able to speak. I didn't know who to call or what to say. I shouted more loudly. I thought the echoing or harshness of the sound might tell me something about where I was but it was muffled by my hood. I shouted again so that my throat hurt.

Now there was a movement nearby. Smells. Sweat and scent. A sound of breathing, somebody scrambling. Now my mouth was full of cloth. I couldn't breathe. Only through my nose. Something tied hard around my face. Breath on me, hot on my cheek, and then, out of the darkness, a voice, little more than a whisper, hoarse, strained, thick so I could barely make it out.

'No,' it said. 'Make another sound and I'll block your nose as well.'

★

I was gagging on the cloth. It filled my mouth, bulged in my cheeks, rubbed against my gums. The taste of grease and rancid cabbage filled my throat. A spasm jerked my body, nausea rising through me like damp. I mustn't be sick. I tried to take a breath, tried to gasp through the cloth but I couldn't. I couldn't. I was all stopped up. I tugged with my arms and my ankles against the restraints and tried to take a breath and it was as if my whole body was twitching and shuddering on the rough stone floor and no air inside me, just violent space and red behind my bulging eyes and a heart that was jolting up through my throat and a strange dry sound coming from me, like a cough that wouldn't form. I was a dying fish. A fish thrashing on the hard floor. I was hooked and tied down, but inside me I was coming loose, all my innards tearing apart. Is this what it's like? To die? To be buried alive.

I had to breathe. How do you breathe? Through your nose. He'd said so. The voice had said he'd block my nose next. Breathe through my nose. Breathe now. I couldn't take enough air in that way. I couldn't stop myself trying to gasp, trying to fill myself up with air. My tongue was too big to fit in the tiny space left in my mouth. It kept pushing against the cloth. I felt my body buck again. Breathe slowly. Calmly. In and out, in and out. Breathe like that until there's nothing except the sense of it. This is how to keep alive. Breathe. Thick, musty air in my nostrils, oily rotteness running down my throat. I tried not to swallow but then I had to and again biliousness flowed through me, filled my mouth. I couldn't bear it. I could bear it, I could, I could, I could.

Breathe in and out, Abbie. Abbie. I am Abbie. Abigail Devereaux. In and out. Don't think. Breathe. You are alive.

The pain inside my skull rolled back. I lifted my head a bit and the pain surged towards my eyes. I blinked my eyes and it was the same deep darkness when they were open and when they were closed. My eyelashes scraped against the hood. I was cold. I could feel that now. My feet were chilly inside the socks. Were they my socks? They felt too big and rough; unfamiliar. My left calf ached. I tried to flex my leg muscles to get rid of the crampy feeling. There

was an itch on my cheek, under the hood. I lay there for a few seconds, concentrating only on the itch, then I turned my head and tried to rub the itch against a hunched shoulder. No good. So I squirmed until I could scrape my face along the floor.

And I was damp. Between my legs and under my thighs, stinging my skin beneath my trousers. Were they my trousers? I was lying in my own piss, in the dark, in a hood, tied down, gagged. Breathe in and out, I told myself. Breathe in and out all the time. Try to let thoughts out slowly, bit by bit, so you don't drown in them. I felt the pressure of the fears dammed up inside me, and my body was a fragile, cracking shell full of pounding waters. I made myself think only of breathing, in and out of my nostrils. In and out.

Someone – a man, the man who had pushed this cloth into my mouth – had put me in this place. He had taken me, strapped me down. I was his prisoner. Why? I couldn't think about that yet. I listened for a sound, any sound except the sound of my breath and the sound of my heart and, when I moved, the rasp of my hands or feet against the rough floor. Perhaps he was here with me, in the room, crouching somewhere. But there was no other sound. For the moment I was alone. I lay there. I listened to my heart. Silence pressed down on me.

An image flitted through my head. A yellow butterfly on a leaf, wings quivering. It was like a sudden ray of light. Was it something I was remembering, a moment rescued out of the past and stored away till now? Or was it just my brain throwing up a picture, some kind of reflex, a short circuit?

A man had tied me in a dark place. He must have snatched me and taken me here. But I had no memory of that happening. I scrambled in my brain, but it was blank – an empty room, an abandoned house, no echoes. Nothing. I could remember nothing. A sob rose in my throat. I mustn't cry. I must think, but carefully now, hold back the fear. I must not go deep down. I must stay on the surface. Just think of what I know. Facts. Slowly I will make up a picture and then I'll be able to look at it.

My name is Abigail; Abbie. I am twenty-five years old, and I live with my boyfriend, Terry, Terence Wilmott, in a poky flat on Westcott Road. That's it: Terry. Terry will be worried. He will phone the police. He'll tell them I have gone missing. They'll drive here with flashing lights and wailing sirens and hammer down the door and light and air will come flooding in. No, just facts. I work at Jay and Joiner's, designing office interiors. I have a desk, with a white and blue lap-top computer, a small grey phone, a pile of paper, an oval ashtray full of paperclips and elastic bands.

When was I last there? It seemed impossibly far off, like a dream that disappears when you try to hold on to it; like someone else's life. I couldn't remember. How long had I lain here? An hour, or a day, or a week? It was January, I knew that – at least, I thought I knew that. Outside, it was cold and the days were short. Maybe it had snowed. No, I mustn't think of things like snow, sunlight on white. Stick only to what I knew: January, but I couldn't tell if it was day or night. Or perhaps it was February now. I tried to think of the last day I clearly remembered, but it was like looking into a thick fog, with indistinct shapes looming.

Start with New Year's Eve, dancing with friends and everyone kissing each other on the stroke of midnight. Kissing people on the lips, people I knew well and people I'd met a few times and strangers who came up to me with arms open and an expectant smile because kissing is what you do on New Year's Eve. Don't think of all that, though. After New Year's Eve, then, yes, there were days that stirred in my mind. The office, phones ringing, expense forms in my in-tray. Cups of cooling bitter coffee. But maybe that was before, not after. Or before and after, day after day. Everything was blurred and without meaning.

I tried to shift. My toes felt stiff with cold and my neck ached and my head banged. The taste in my mouth was foul. Why was I here and what was going to happen to me? I was laid out on my back like a sacrifice, arms and legs pinned down. Dread ran through me. He could starve me. He could rape me. He could torture me. He could kill me. Maybe he had already raped me. I pressed myself against the floor and whimpered deep down in my throat. Two

tears escaped from my eyes and I felt them tickle and sting as they ran down towards my ears.

Don't cry, Abbie. You mustn't cry.

Think of the butterfly, which means nothing but which is beautiful. I pictured the yellow butterfly on its green leaf. I let it fill my mind, so light on the leaf it could be blown away like a feather. I heard footsteps. They were soft, as if the man was barefooted. They padded closer and stopped. There was a sound of someone breathing heavily, almost panting, as if he was climbing or scrambling towards me. I lay rigid in the silence. He was standing over me. There was a click, and even from beneath the hood I could tell he had switched on a torch. I could hardly see anything, but I could at least see through the grain of the fabric that it was no longer entirely dark. He must be standing over me and shining a torch down on my body.

'You're wet,' he murmured, or maybe it sounded like a murmur through my hood. 'Silly girl.'

I sensed him leaning towards me. I heard him breathing and I heard my own breathing getting louder and faster. He pulled the hood up slightly and, quite gently, pulled out the cloth. I felt a fingertip on my lower lip. For a few seconds, all I could do was pant with the relief of it, pulling the air into my lungs. I heard myself say, 'Thank you.' My voice sounded light and feeble. 'Water.'

He undid the restraints on my arms and my chest, so that only my legs were tied at the ankle. He slid an arm under my neck and lifted me into a sitting position. A new kind of pain pulsed inside my skull. I didn't dare make any movements by myself. I sat passively, and let him put my arms behind my back and tie my wrists together, roughly so that the rope cut into my flesh. Was it rope? It felt harder than that, like washing line or wire.

'Open your mouth,' he said in his muffled whisper. I did so. He slid a straw up the hood and between my lips. 'Drink.'

The water was tepid and left a stale taste in my mouth.

He put a hand on the back of my neck, and started to rub at it. I

sat rigid. I mustn't cry out. I mustn't make a sound. I mustn't be sick. His fingers pressed into my skin.

'Where do you hurt?' he said.

'Nowhere.' My voice was a whisper.

'Nowhere? You wouldn't lie to me?'

Anger filled my head like a glorious roaring wind and it was stronger even than the fear. 'You piece of shit,' I shouted, in a mad, high-pitched voice. 'Let me go, let me go, and then I'm going to kill you, you'll see -'

The cloth was rammed back into my mouth.

'You're going to kill me. Good. I like that.'

For a long time I concentrated on nothing but breathing. I had heard of people feeling claustrophobic in their own bodies, trapped as if in prison. They became tormented by the idea that they would never be able to escape. My life was reduced to the tiny passages of air in my nostrils. If they became blocked, I would die. That happened. People were tied up, gagged, with no intention to kill them. Just a small error in the binding - the gag tied too close to the nose - and they would choke and die.

I made myself breathe in one-two-three, out one-two-three. In, out. I'd seen a film once, some kind of war film, in which a super-tough soldier hid from the enemy in a river breathing just through a single straw. I was like that and the thought made my chest hurt and made me breathe in spasms. I had to calm myself. Instead of thinking of the soldier and his straw and what would have happened if the straw had become blocked, I tried to think of the water in the river, cool and calm and slow-moving and beautiful, the sun glistening on it in the morning.

In my mind, the water grew slower and slower until it was quite still. I imagined it starting to freeze, solid like glass so that you could see the fish swimming silently underneath. I couldn't stop myself. I saw myself falling through the ice, trapped underneath. I had read or heard or been told that if you fall through ice and can't find the hole, there is a thin layer of air between the ice and the water and you can lie under the ice and breathe the air. And what