



Nicci
FRENCH



SECRET
SMILE

'CREEPY, GENUINELY GRIPPING' HEAT

Secret Smile
by
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I

I've had a dream recently, the same dream, over and over again, and each time I think it's real. I'm back at the ice rink on the afternoon I first met Brendan. The cold stings my face, I can hear the scrape of the blades on the ice and then I see him. He's glancing over at me with that funny look of his, as if he's noticed me and he's got something else on his mind. I see all over again that he's good-looking in a way that not everybody would notice. His hair is glossy black like a raven's wing. His face is oval and his cheekbones and chin are prominent. He has an amused expression on his face as if he has seen the joke before anybody else, and I like that about him. He looks at me and then gives me a second look and he's coming over to say hello. And in my dream I think: *Good. I've been given another chance. It doesn't have to happen. This time I can stop it now, here, before it's even begun.*

But I don't. I smile at what he says to me, and I say things back to him. I can't hear the words and I don't know what they are, but they must be funny because Brendan laughs and says something, and then I laugh. And so it goes, back and forwards. We're like actors in a long-running show. We can say our

lines without thinking, and I know what's going to happen to this boy and this girl. They have never met before, but he is a friend of a friend of hers and so they are surprised that this is the first time they have come across each other. I'm trying to stop myself, in this dream which I both know and don't know is a dream. An ice rink is a good place for a boy and a girl to meet, especially when neither of them can skate. Because they have to lean against each other for support and it's almost compulsory for the boy to put his steadying arm around the girl and they help each other up and laugh at their joint predicament. Her laces are frozen together and he helps her to untie them, her foot in his lap for convenience. When the group starts to break up, it's only natural that the boy asks the girl for her phone number.

The girl is surprised by a moment of reluctance. It's been fun, but does she need something like this at the moment? She looks at the boy. His eyes are shining from the cold. He is smiling at her expectantly. It seems easier just to give him the number and so she does, even though I am shouting for her not to. But the shouting is silent and in any case she is me and she doesn't know what is going to happen – but I do.

I'm wondering how it is that I know what is going to happen. I know they are going to meet twice – a drink, a movie – and then, on her sofa, she'll think, well, why not? And so I'm thinking, if I know what's going to happen, it must mean that I can't change it.

Not a single detail. I know they'll sleep together twice more, or is it three times? Always in the girl's flat. After the second time she sees a strange toothbrush in the mug next to hers. A moment of confusion. She will have to think about that. She will barely have time. Because the next afternoon, her mind will be made up for her. It's at about that moment – the girl coming home from work, opening the door of her flat – that I wake up.

After weeks of greyness and drizzle, it was a beautiful autumn afternoon. A blue sky just beginning to lose its electric glare, a sharp wind that was shaking bright leaves from the trees. It had been a long day, and I'd spent most of it up a ladder painting a ceiling, so my neck and right arm ached and my whole body felt grimy and sore, and there were splashes of white emulsion over my knuckles and in my hair. I was thinking about an evening alone: a hot bath, supper in front of the TV in my dressing gown. Cheese on toast, I thought. Cold beer.

So I opened the door to my flat and walked in, letting my bag drop to the floor. And then I saw him. Brendan was sitting on the sofa or, rather, lying back with his feet up. There was a cup of tea on the floor beside him, and he was reading something that he closed as I came in.

'Miranda.' He swung his legs off the cushion and stood up. 'I thought you'd be back later than this.' And he took me by the shoulders and kissed me on

the lips. 'Shall I pour you some tea? There's some in the pot. You look all in.'

I could hardly think which question to ask first. He barely knew what job I did. What was he doing, thinking about when I finished work? But most of all, what was he doing in my flat? He looked as if he had moved in.

'What do you think you're doing?'

'I let myself in,' he said. 'I used the keys under the flowerpot. That's all right, isn't it? You've got paint in your hair, you know.'

I bent down and picked up the book from the sofa. A worn, hard-backed exercise book, a faded red, the spine split. I stared at it. It was one of my old diaries.

'That's private,' I said. 'Private!'

'I couldn't resist,' he said with his roguish smile. He saw my expression and held up his hands. 'Point taken, I'm sorry, it was wrong. But I want to know all about you. I just wanted to see what you were like before I met you.' He reached a hand out and gently touched my hair where the paint was, as if to scratch it away. I pulled away.

'You shouldn't have.'

Another smile.

'I won't do it again then,' he said in a playfully apologetic tone. 'All right?'

I took a deep breath. No. I didn't think it was all right.

'It's from when you were seventeen,' he said. 'I like to think of you at seventeen.'

I looked at Brendan and already he seemed to be receding into the distance. He was on the platform and I was on the train which was pulling away and leaving him behind for ever. I was thinking how to say it, as cleanly and finally as possible. You can say, 'I don't think this is working any more,' as if the relationship was a machine that has stopped functioning, some vital bit having gone missing. Or, 'I don't think we should continue,' as if you were both on a road together and you've looked ahead and seen that the road forks, or peters out in rocks and brambles. You can say, 'I don't want to keep on seeing you.' Only of course you don't mean *see*, but touch, hold, feel, want. And if they ask why – 'Why is it over?' 'What have I done wrong?' – then you don't tell them: 'You get on my nerves,' 'Your laugh suddenly irritates me,' 'I fancy someone else.' No, of course you say, 'You haven't done anything. It's not you, it's me.' These are the things we all learn.

Almost before I knew what I was about to do, I said the words. 'I don't think we should go on with this.'

For a moment, his expression didn't alter. Then he stepped forwards and laid his hand on my shoulder. 'Miranda,' he said.

'I'm sorry, Brendan.' I thought of saying something else, but I stopped myself.

His hand was still on my shoulder.

'You're probably exhausted,' he said. 'Why don't you have a bath and put on some clean clothes.'

I stepped away from his hand.

‘I mean it.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘What?’

‘Are you about to get your period?’

‘Brendan . . .’

‘You’re due about now, aren’t you?’

‘I’m not playing games.’

‘Miranda.’ He had a coaxing tone to his voice, as if I were a frightened horse and he was approaching me with sugar on his outstretched palm. ‘We’ve been too happy for you to just end it like this. All those wonderful days and nights.’

‘Eight,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Times we met. Is it even that many?’

‘Each time special.’

I didn’t say, not for me, although it was the truth. You can’t say that it really didn’t mean much after all. It was just one of those things that happened. I shrugged. I didn’t want to make a point. I didn’t want to discuss things. I wanted him to leave.

‘I’ve arranged for us to meet some mates of mine for a drink this evening. I told them you were coming.’

‘What?’

‘In half an hour.’

I stared at him.

‘Just a quick drink.’

‘You really want us to go out and pretend we’re still together?’

‘We need to give this time,’ he said.

It sounded so ridiculous, so like a marriage guidance counsellor giving glib advice to a couple who had been together for years and years and had children and a mortgage that I couldn’t help myself. I started to laugh, then stopped myself and felt cruel. He managed a smile that wasn’t really a smile at all, but rather lips stretched tight over teeth, a grimace or a snarl.

‘You can laugh,’ he said at last. ‘You can do this and still laugh.’

‘Sorry,’ I said. My voice was still shaky. ‘It’s a nervous kind of laugh.’

‘Is that how you behaved with your sister?’

‘My sister?’ The air seemed to cool around me.

‘Yes. Kerry.’ He said the name softly, musing over it. ‘I read about it in your diary. I know. Mmm?’

I walked over to the door and yanked it open. The sky was still blue and the breeze cooled my burning face.

‘Get out,’ I said.

‘Miranda.’

‘Just go.’

So he left. I pushed the door shut gently, so he wouldn’t think I was slamming it behind him, and then I suddenly felt nauseous. I didn’t have the meal in front of the TV I’d been looking forward to so much. I just had a glass of water and went to bed and didn’t sleep.

My relationship with Brendan had been so brief

that my closest friend, Laura, had been on holiday while it was going on and missed it completely. And it was so entirely over and in the past that when she got back and rang to tell me about what a great time she and Tony had had – well, after all that, I didn't bother to tell her about Brendan. I just listened as she talked about the holiday and the weather and the food. Then she asked me if I were seeing someone and I said no. She said that was funny because she'd heard something and I said, well, nothing much and anyway it was over. And she giggled and said she wanted to hear all about it and I said there was nothing to tell. Nothing at all.

2

It was two weeks after Brendan had walked out of my door. It was half past two in the afternoon, and I was up a ladder and just reaching up with the brush to get into the corner when my mobile went and I realized it was in my jacket pocket and that I didn't have my jacket on. We were working on a newly constructed house in Blackheath, all straight lines and plate glass and pine. I was painting the wood in a special, almost transparent oil-based white paint that had been imported at great expense from Sweden. I scrambled down and put the brush on the lid of the tin.

'Hello?'

'Miranda, it's Kerry.'

That was unusual enough. We met fairly regularly, every month or so, usually at my parents'. Maybe once a week we would talk on the phone; I was always the one who rang her. She asked if I were free that evening. I'd half arranged something, but she said it was really important. She wouldn't ask if it weren't. So of course I had to say yes. I started to discuss where we should meet, but Kerry had it all worked out. A very straightforward French restaurant

had just opened in Camden, fairly near where I lived, and Kerry would book a table for eight. If I didn't hear back from her, I should assume it was set.

I was completely baffled. She'd never arranged anything like that before. As I slapped the paint over the huge pine wall, I tried to think of what she could possibly have to tell me and I couldn't even come up with a plausible answer to the basic question: was it likely to be something good or something bad?

Within families, you're stuck with the character they think you are, whatever you do. You become a war hero and all that your parents ever talk about is something supposedly funny you used to do when you were in nursery school. You can end up moving to Australia just to get away from the person your family thinks you are – or you think they think you are. It's like a room made out of mirrors, with reflections and reflections of reflections going on into infinity. They make your head ache.

I hadn't fled to Australia. I lived less than a mile from the house I grew up in and I worked for my uncle Bill. Sometimes it's hard to think of him as my uncle because he is so unlike my father. He has long hair that he sometimes wears in a ponytail, and he hardly ever shaves. What's more, rich and trendy people queue up to employ him. My father still calls him a painter and decorator, and when I was a child I remember him working with a ragtag collection of no-hopers, usually driving a dodgy van he'd borrowed from someone. But nowadays Uncle Bill – which I

never call him – has a big office, a company, a lucrative agreement with a team of architects and a waiting list that you can hardly even get on to.

I arrived at La Table at about one minute past eight and Kerry was already there. She was sitting at the table with a glass of white wine and the bottle in a bucket by the side, and I knew immediately that this was good news of some kind. She looked illuminated from the inside and it showed through her eyes. She'd changed her appearance since the previous time I'd seen her. I have my hair cut quite short. I liked the look anyway, and it made particular sense when I was working so that my hair wouldn't get dipped into resin or caught around a drill. Kerry wasn't someone who had ever had much of a particular look, just medium-length hair, practical clothes. Now she had had her hair cut short as well and it suited her. Almost everything about her was different. She was wearing more make-up than usual, which emphasized her large eyes. She had new clothes as well – dark, flared trousers, a white linen shirt and a waistcoat, of all things. She had an elfin, eager look about her. She waved me over to the table and poured me a glass of wine.

'Cheers,' she said. 'You've got paint in your hair, by the way.'

I wanted to say what I always want to say to this, which is that naturally I have paint in my hair because I spend half my life painting. But I never do and I

especially wasn't going to this evening when Kerry looked so happy and expectant. Expectant. It couldn't be, could it?

'Occupational hazard,' I said.

It was round the back where I couldn't see. She scratched at my hair, so that we must have looked like two grooming chimpanzees in the middle of the restaurant, and I even let her do it. She said it wouldn't come off, which was comforting. I took a sip of the wine.

'This place seems nice,' I said.

'I was here last week,' she said. 'It's great.'

'So how's things?'

'You're probably wondering why I called you,' she said.

'There doesn't have to be a special reason,' I said, lying.

'I've got some news for you,' she said. 'Some pretty startling news.'

She *was* pregnant. That was it. That was all it could be. I looked at her more closely. A bit surprising to see her drinking, though.

'I've got a new boyfriend,' she said.

'That's wonderful, Kerry. That's great news.'

I felt more puzzled than before. I felt happy for her, I really did, because I knew that she hadn't had a boyfriend for some time. It was something that worried her. My parents were always a bit concerned about it, which didn't help. But for her to announce it in this formal way was bizarre.

‘It’s a bit awkward,’ she said. ‘That’s why I wanted to tell you before anybody else.’

‘How could it be awkward?’

‘That’s right,’ she said eagerly. ‘That’s right. That’s what I’ve been saying. It really shouldn’t be a problem at all, if we don’t let it become one.’

I took a sip of wine and forced myself to be patient. That was another characteristic of Kerry. She veered between being so incommunicative that she wouldn’t say a word to a sort of babbling incoherence.

‘What problem?’

‘He’s someone you know.’

‘Really?’

‘Actually, it’s more than that. It’s someone you went out with. It’s an ex-boyfriend of yours.’

I didn’t respond to this because I started thinking frantically. Who could this be? Lucas and I had had a massive bust-up and he was with Cleo anyway. I’d been with Paul for a year and he’d certainly met Kerry once or twice. But wasn’t he still in Edinburgh? Then it was back to ancient history. There were a few odds and sods from college, but that was at a time when I was hardly in touch with Kerry at all. I tried to imagine the massive coincidence that could have brought Kerry together with some figure like Rob from my distant past. But they hadn’t even met, had they? Or perhaps it was way back even beyond that into my primeval past at school, with someone like Tom. That must be it. Maybe there was a school reunion . . .

‘It’s Brendan,’ she said. ‘Brendan Block.’

‘What? What do you mean?’

‘Isn’t it amazing? He’s just about to arrive. He said he thought it would be good if we all got together.’

‘That’s not possible,’ I said.

‘I know it might seem a bit odd . . .’

‘Where did you meet?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ she said. ‘I’ll tell you everything. But I wanted to tell you something quickly before Bren arrives.’

‘Bren?’

‘I just wanted to say straight away, my lovely Miranda, that Bren has told me all about it, and I want you to know that I hope it won’t be embarrassing.’

‘What?’

Kerry leaned across the table and put both her hands on mine. She looked at me with big, sympathetic eyes.

‘Miranda, I know that it was painful for you when you parted.’ She took a deep breath and gave my hand a squeeze. ‘I know that Bren broke up with you. He’s told me how upset you were, how angry and bitter. But he has told me that he hopes you’re over it. He says he’s fine about it.’

‘He says he’s fine about it?’

And at that moment Brendan Block came into the restaurant.