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Opening extract from

Ginger Snaps

Written by

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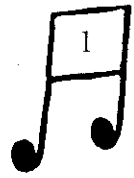
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Ginger Brown . . . it sounds like a colour on a paint chart, not a name. It sounds like a joke, or a new shade of hair dye, or one of those treacly sort of cakes that nobody really likes. What kind of parents would call their kid something like that? Well, mine, obviously.

They didn't mean to ruin my life. They thought they were being quirky and cool and original, but actually they were working their way through the spice rack, taking inspiration from those little jars with funny names and even funnier ingredients. Seriously, if Dad hadn't been a curry fanatic, it might never have happened.

They named my big sister Cassia, after a sort of aromatic tree bark you put in chicken korma, and me . . . well, they named me Ginger. If I didn't have hair the colour of grated carrots, I'd maybe be able to forgive them . . . but then again, maybe not.

With a name like Ginger, I didn't stand a chance.

*

I worked that out way back, on the very first day of primary school, when I told the teacher my name and saw her mouth twitch into a smirk. It was worse with the kids – they didn't just smirk, they laughed. The boys pulled my plaits and asked why my parents named me after my hair colour, and the girls asked if I thought I was one of the Spice Girls. Fun, huh?

I went home after the first day and told Mum and Dad I wanted a different name, like Kerri or Emma or Sophie, and they just laughed and told me not to be silly. It was good to be different, they said, and Ginger was a beautiful name – unique, striking, unforgettable.

Well, it was that, all right.

I never really knew what to say to the jokes and the teasing. 'Don't let it get to you,' Cass used to tell me. 'Just laugh it off, or ignore it, OK?'

It was easy for her to say. She was in high school by then, cool and confident and always surrounded by friends. She had auburn hair too, but nobody ever seemed to call her names.

I worked out that the easiest way to avoid being teased was to keep my mouth shut, keep my head down and pretend I didn't care.

'She's very quiet,' Miss Kaseem told my parents at the start of Year Six. 'A lovely girl, but she doesn't join in with the others much. Not at all like Cassia was.'

I suppose I should be grateful Miss Kaseem didn't tell them the rest of it. How I never got picked for playground games, never had a partner for PE or project work, never got invited to sleepovers or parties or trips to the cinema with the other girls. I was an outsider, a loser. I tried to be invisible, sitting on my own in the lunch hall, eating an extra helping of apple pie and custard because it was something to do, a way to fill the time, a way to fill the hole inside me, the place where the loneliness was.

'Have you seen her?' I heard Chelsie Martin say to her friends one day. 'She's soooo fat! I saw her eat two packets of crisps at break, *and* she had an extra helping of chips at lunch. Gross!'

I just sat and smiled and pretended I hadn't heard, and when Chelsie had gone I ate a Twix I'd been saving for later, without even tasting it.

I thought it would go on like that forever.

Mum and Dad were anxious by then, always asking if I wanted to invite a friend over for tea, or go to dance classes like Cass, or swimming club. 'It'd be fun,' Mum would wheedle. 'You'd make lots of new friends, and get fit too . . .'

That's how I knew *they* thought I was fat too, as well as a loser. I wasn't the right kind of daughter. I wasn't the kind of girl who could make a name like Ginger seem cute and quirky.

When my eleventh birthday rolled around, Mum and Dad asked if I wanted a party. I said no, I was too old for that kind of thing.

'You're never too old for fun,' Dad had said, and I could see a flicker of something behind his gaze. Worry? Disappointment? 'You never have your friends round. What about a trip to the cinema, or the ice rink? Would that be grown-up enough for you?'

Sometimes, you go along with something, even though you know it's a bad, bad idea. 'What if nobody comes?' I'd said feebly to Cass, but she'd just laughed.

'Of course they'll come,' she'd said.

So we planned an afternoon at the ice rink, all expenses paid, followed by burger and chips in the cafe that looked over it. Mum had made a three-layer chocolate cake for afterwards, with eleven little candles. I was excited, in spite of myself. Cass let me use some of her sparkly eyeshadow, and I wore my new pink minidress with the pop-art flowers, and a new pair of jeans. I thought I looked good.

We'd arranged to meet outside the ice rink at two. Emily Croft and Meg Walters arrived dead on time. They were best friends, geeky, serious girls who sometimes let me hang out with them at break. 'Who else is coming?' they asked.

'Oh, everybody,' I told them, even though there was already a little seed of doubt eating away at my heart. 'Chelsie and Jenna and Carly and Faye . . . everyone.'

I'd asked every girl in my class, because Cass said there was room for everyone at the ice rink, and even if they weren't all special mates, it would be a good chance to get to know them a bit more. I wanted to be the kind of girl who could invite a whole bunch of kids to her party. I didn't want to let her down. I asked everyone, and most people had said they'd be there.

So where were they? At half past two, Dad looked at his watch for the hundredth time and said maybe the others had got mixed up about the time. 'Cass, you take Ginger and the girls in,' he decided. 'Your mum and I can stay here for a bit, wait for the others. Perhaps they thought it was three?'

Emily Croft took a folded invitation from her pocket and looked at it. 'It says two,' she said, and I hated her for that, for not pretending that there was a mistake or a misprint or a traffic jam in town . . . anything, anything at all to take away the sick ache inside me.

Cass took Emily, Meg and me through to the rink. I felt like I was holding myself together, as if the slightest knock might make me crumble. There

was a stinging sensation behind my eyes. We handed in our shoes and pulled on ugly white boots with sharp silver blades, lacing them up tightly. Then we clomped across to the rink, wobbling slightly, and edged our way on to the ice. It was cold, and my feet felt like they could slip from under me at any moment.

At first all I could do was cling on to the edge, but Cass wasn't going to allow that, of course. She took my hand and prised me away from the rail, and slowly, haltingly, I took my first few steps on the ice. It *was* fun. Pretty soon the four of us were slithering about, grabbing on to each other and yelping with terror whenever anyone swooped past.

After a while, Cass spotted Mum and Dad, watching from the sides, and skated over to talk to them, leaving Emily, Meg and me together. That's when I saw them – Chelsie, Jenna, Carly and Faye – just ahead of us on the ice.

My face lit up. They were here after all – Chelsie and the others, the four most popular girls in the class. It must have been a mix-up about the time, like Dad said. I skated towards them with a grin a mile wide.

Chelsie spoke first. 'Hi, *Ginger*,' she said. Her voice sounded mean and smirky, the way it always did when she spoke to me. Then again, that wasn't

exactly often. 'Thought we might see you here. Sorry we couldn't make your party . . . we had something better to do.'

Chelsie and the others dissolved into giggles, while I struggled to make sense of what she'd said. Couldn't make the party? Something better to do? But they were here, weren't they? And then it dawned on me.

They hadn't arrived late, Dad hadn't paid them in. They'd been here all along, watching, waiting. They were here to laugh at me. My cheeks flamed.

'Look!' Faye sniggered. 'Her face matches her hair!'

I wished a hole would appear in the ice, a hole I could fall into and disappear forever. It didn't, of course. I was vaguely aware of Emily and Meg just behind me, and I knew that Mum, Dad and Cass were here somewhere too. I tried to turn, to get away from Chelsie's cold eyes and Faye's twisted smile, but the blades slipped beneath me and I fell down, hard, with the sound of laughter in my ears.

Emily crouched beside me on the ice. 'Ignore them,' she said kindly. 'Come on, Ginger. Don't let them win.'

By the time I crawled on to my hands and knees, Chelsie and the others were skating away, looking

back at me over their shoulders. 'Honestly!' I heard Chelsie say. 'She looks just like a pig . . . a fat, ugly, ginger *pig*.'

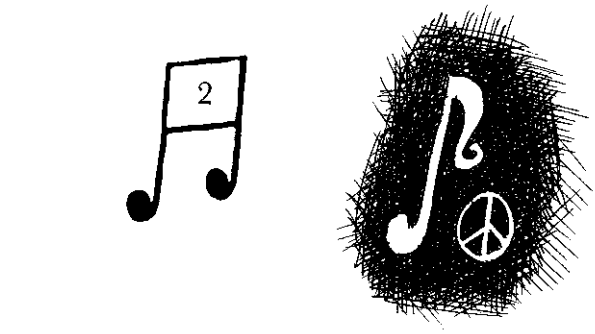
When I think back, that's the bit I remember. The shame, the hurt, the ice freezing my grazed palms and numbing my heart. I'll never forget it.

Emily and Meg helped me to the edge of the rink, and I told Mum, Dad and Cass I'd hurt myself falling. We all clomped off the ice, handed in our boots and went up to the cafe for burger and chips, only I couldn't eat a single bite of mine. Mum brought out the chocolate-layer cake and lit the candles, and everyone sang 'Happy Birthday'.

My eyes slid away from the cake and down towards the rink below, where I could see Chelsie and Jenna and Carly and Faye skating round and round, laughing, tossing their hair, flirting with boys. I hated them, sure, but a part of me wanted to be like them too.

I blew out the candles and made a wish.





They say you should be careful what you wish for, but hey, I got what I wanted – I'm in Year Eight now, and things are very different.

You *can* make a wish come true, if you're determined. You can put the past behind you, be somebody new, and that's what I did. I moved on. These days, I try not to think about the sad, scared little girl I used to be . . . she's in the past, and that's a place I'm not going back to, not ever.

I met Shannon on my first ever day at Kinnerton High. I held my head high, my shoulders back, the way Cass had taught me. I'd tried so hard to look the part – Cass had taken me shopping for uniform, rejecting the regulation knee-length pleated skirts and lace-up shoes for a mini from New Look and black Rocket Dog pumps. I looked good, but still, I was shaking inside.

'First impressions,' Cass had said. 'They count,

Ginger. Look confident. Act like you belong. You can do it.'

I wasn't so sure. My heart was thumping so hard it felt like all the world would see it, and my stomach seemed to have turned to water. I flopped down in a corner of the classroom and started painting my fingernails with ten different shades of felt pen to camouflage the fear, and I wondered why, after all the hard work, all the effort, I was still alone.

'Things will change for you, at high school,' Cass had said. 'I promise, Ginger.'

But what if they didn't?

Then Shannon walked into the classroom, late as usual. She had long, shiny hair, like a waterfall of sunshine, and her skin was golden brown, as if she'd spent the whole of her life up till then in the sun. Well, she probably had.

She scanned the classroom, looking at each of us in turn, then grinned and pulled out the chair next to mine.

'Love the hair,' she'd said, one eyebrow raised. 'Strawberry blonde. Cool.'

It had taken me an hour that morning to smooth it into place with styling serum and Cass's straighteners. I knew I'd do the same every day from now on, if it meant that Shannon liked my hair.

'We should stick together,' she'd said, slicking

on some lipgloss while the teacher's back was turned. 'Friends, yeah?'

'Friends,' I'd agreed.

Everything changed for me then. I had a friend, a cool, careless friend, the kind I'd always wanted. I never looked back.

All that was a year ago now. It's the first day of a brand-new school year, the first day of Year Eight, and it's kind of chaotic. Kids are milling everywhere, little kids in too-big blazers and shiny shoes, clutching their bags and clogging up the pavements.

'Ugh,' Shannon sighs. 'Year Sevens. They're just so . . . squeaky clean! Were we ever like that?'

'No way,' I bluff. 'Not a chance.'

Shannon laughs. A year ago, she walked into Kinnerton High like she owned the place. She picked me out of the crowd in the mistaken belief that I was cool too, and I kept up the pretence until, somewhere along the line, I started to believe it myself.

Shannon will never know how scared I was that day. Why should she? I've come a long way. Chelsie Martin is a distant memory now. After primary, she went off to a private boarding school in Sussex, but even if she were here, she wouldn't recognize me, I swear. Jenna, Carly and Faye go to Kinnerton

High, though they're not in any of my classes. I catch them looking at me sometimes, in the lunch hall or at break, and I think I see a kind of respect in their eyes these days.

Whatever. I look right through them as if they don't exist.

'Last year was good, but Year Eight is going to be fan*tastic*,' Shannon says now. The buzzer sounds, and about a million Year Sevens swarm towards the main entrance. Shannon pulls a face and hooks my arm, leading me along the side of the music block, where there's another way in. 'We're going to be teenagers . . . I can't wait!' she says. 'We'll be all sophisticated and worldly and wise, and boys will fall at our feet . . .'

That's not such a big change for Shannon. Boys fall at her feet all the time, or look at her with big, moony eyes and try to chat her up. Shannon plays it cool. She just tosses her hair and smiles to herself and walks right past. She's waiting for someone special, she says. Someone a bit cooler, a bit different, a bit more mature.

She may have a long wait, at Kinnerton High.

Or . . . not.

As we pass the bicycle racks and head for the steps that lead up into the side entrance, we can see that our path is blocked. A long-legged boy in a black trilby hat is sprawled out across the steps,

writing something on to his skinny black jeans with what looks like a white Tippex pen.

Shannon squeezes my arm. 'Hey,' she whispers, and that one tiny word is loaded with all kinds of possibilities. 'He looks . . . interesting!'

I scan the hat, the jeans, the lazy way he's sitting across the steps, Converse trainers trailing their bootlaces. This boy is no Year Seven, that's for sure.

Shannon drops my arm and walks right up to the boy. He may not have fallen at her feet, exactly, but he's sitting at them. He looks up from under the hat brim, revealing dark brown eyes, a crooked grin and a tangle of curly hair.

'Haven't seen you around here before,' she says softly. 'I don't think I'd have forgotten.'

The boy studies Shannon carefully, silently, the way you might study a page of algebra. Then his eyes slide past her and focus on me. A smile flickers across his lips, and suddenly the ghost of a blush seeps up across my cheeks. I drag my eyes away, hide behind a curtain of hair.

'So,' Shannon is saying. 'Are you new? What's your name?'

His eyes flick back to Shannon. 'Just joined Year Eight,' he says. 'My name's Sam Taylor.'

'I'm Shannon Kershaw,' my best friend tells him, twirling a length of golden hair round one finger

and fluttering her lashes. 'You'd better get into school, Sam – the buzzer's already gone. I can show you around, if you like. I'm Year Eight too.'

But Sam is looking at me again, brown eyes laughing. 'How about you?' he asks. 'What's your name?'

Shannon frowns. 'This is my friend, Ginger,' she says carelessly.

Sam grins. 'Nice one,' he says. 'It kind of fits!'

'So,' Shannon cuts in. 'Shall I show you around? You don't want to be in trouble on your first day, do you?'

Sam looks like he doesn't much care, either about Shannon or about being in trouble. 'No thanks. I'll be OK,' he says.

I see Shannon blink, as if she can't quite believe her own ears. Well, maybe she can't. Boys don't generally turn her down – for anything.

'What are you doing to your jeans, anyway?' she asks, glancing down at the scrawl of spidery white Tippex writing on his jeans. 'Miss Bennett won't be too pleased.'

Sam shrugs. 'They're not school uniform,' he says. 'So I thought I'd customize them, make them look more the part.'

The scribble of Tippex reads: *School days are the best days of your life.*

Shannon rolls her eyes. 'Yeah, right,' she says. 'Whatever. You're in my way, OK?'

Sam Taylor gets to his feet, stepping to one side, still grinning at me from underneath the hat brim. Shannon huffs, hooks an arm through mine, and marches me up the steps.

'See ya,' Sam Taylor calls after us, raising his trilby hat. 'Gingersnaps.'

