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## GINGER (1983–1985)

I TOOK A DEEP breath. Slowly breathing in, concentrating on calming my wired nerves, and trying hard to ignore the churning in my stomach, I let go, breathing out and glancing up. Against a deep blue sky, the sun had finally broken through the clouds, matching the heat and intensity on the court. The smell of fresh-cut grass, grunts, and explosive clapping filled the air. Freckle-faced ball boys and girls, their lean limbs nearly as white as the players' tennis clothes, ran determinedly after each ball. Precise arm movements judged every fault, affirmed every winner. Passion and pageantry, and I simply couldn't believe I was here, courtside Wimbledon, a long, long way from home in Richmond, Virginia.

For years I'd dreamed of running away from home, leaving the azalea bushes, church bells, and slammed doors behind, but at twenty-one years old, I'd never thought I'd get so far so fast. When I was a child, the idea of escaping the ordinary seemed pure fantasy, and I believed more in the magic of miracles to transform my life than in my own tender nascent power. If there was an Oz, and like Dorothy I wished hard enough, I too could escape a predictable existence for a yellow brick road to adventure.

With a deep attachment to the land in Virginia, my family provided love and security, but few role models in running away. For generations they'd lived in farmhouses rooted deeply in the history of the South, with the church being the center of their small community. Outside its white wood-framed structure with the bell hanging high in the steeple, my ancestors put flowers on headstones in family plots where the names varied

little. Inside the same church, my great-grandmother, great-aunts, grandmother, mother, and cousins had all married, most pledging their love to one of the boys who plowed the fields next door. Growing up, I had tried to peer behind my older sister Marsha's big brown eyes. I could see she was dreaming of another life, but as puberty struck, she kept her dreams to herself. So I moved forward alone, blindly putting my faith and future in the power of wishful thinking.

At twelve years old, by chance, I found an ally who shared my longing to break away: Sara James. Though we were from the same suburban side of the tracks, Sara and I knew each other only in passing. In the hall at school, Sara on her way to honors English, me on my way to gymnastics practice. Passing in cars, Sara waving on her way to the Governor's School for the Gifted, me on my way to cheerleading camp. Sara was taken seriously and I was seen to be about as serious as the last pep rally. Although she hung out with other straight-A students, Sara didn't share their air of arrogance. Every school clique wanted her as a member, and she moved easily from one to another, a part and apart. This openness made Sara approachable. When I spoke to her, I felt like she was really listening, not worried about a boyfriend waiting down the hall or a gaggle of friends from the Honor Society, sneering, wondering why she should be talking to me.

But at that time in our lives, conversations between Sara and me were few. Despite the friendly waves, we remained acquaintances, separated by perceptions: Sara smart, me pretty, and never the two shall meet. But one night we did, pretty Sara with her auburn hair and intense green eyes and me smartly daring to expose more of myself than the blond-haired, blue-eyed façade. At a friend's sleepover party, we shared secrets, whispered in the dark, confidences from the past that had shaped who we were. Other secrets were dreams that would inspire us and form the women we would become. Lying on the floor watching the stars fade, we found words for a desire to run away in search of a life full of adventure, intrigue, and wonder. We just needed a way out.

And now, nine years later, I'd found mine. On the grass courts of Wimbledon, my boyfriend Kevin Curren was on the verge of the tournament's

biggest upset. Smelling blood, the fans filled the grandstands until they overflowed. Players lined the balcony overlooking court 2—the “graveyard court”—sensing a changing of the guard. The press area bulged with reporters and photographers waiting to document the rise or fall of a champion. Punching volleys, diving for impossible shots, tumbling on the grass, glaring across the net, whispers as sides were changed—all of it was part of an incredible physical and mental contest.

After more than two hours on court, the scores were level in the fourth set. Six games all. Tie break. As Kevin prepared to serve, I ran my hands through my hair for the hundredth time, pushing a strand into the claws of my earring. I’d only had these earrings, a college graduation present from my parents, for a month. I remembered opening the pretty paper and finding a Canon camera box underneath. My smile faded. A camera? Why? I’d never wanted to be the one taking pictures. Then I’d spotted the tiny black velvet box nestled inside and opened it to find a pair of diamond earrings in a beautiful antique setting. They were perfect, plus there were plenty of professional photographers courtside at Wimbledon, with multiple cameras slung around their necks. Instinctively I rubbed the sparkling stones for good luck. Kevin tossed the ball, low, and struck it hard. I looked down, unable to watch, twisting the sapphire ring on my finger, and listened. I heard the ball hit the strings, again and again and again. I heard the players grunt, felt the intake of air from the spectators around me, and then I heard the crowd roar. I looked up in time to see Kevin punching the air with his fist. “Game, set, match, Mr. Curren.” He’d done it; he’d beaten Jimmy Connors, the defending champion.

An hour later, after a shower, rubdown, and an intense press conference, Kevin walked into the players’ lounge. Slaps on the back and echoes of “Well done, mate,” “Great win” greeted him. He shook his head and smiled. When he reached my table, he bent down, brushing his lips across my cheek and whispering, “You must be good luck.”

Overnight, after the win over Connors, things changed. Cameras flashed in our faces, a sleazy reporter shadowed me around the courts, and my friend Stacy Margolin, who played on the women’s circuit, warned me, “Careful, Ginger, they read lips.” Stacy would have known. She’d recently

been offered 50,000 British pounds sterling by the tabloid newspaper the *Sun* to “tell all” about her relationship with John McEnroe. She turned them, and the others, down flat.

In the quarterfinals, Kevin beat “Gentleman Tim” Mayotte in a match that was widely heralded as the best in the tournament. There were more reporters, more photographers. As we were leaving the club, a press photographer followed us to the car. The next day, when I opened the newspaper, there was a picture of Kevin and me splashed across the pages of the *Times*. Then Kevin lost in the semifinals to Chris Lewis, an unseeded player from New Zealand, and it was as if we’d disappeared. There was another winner with a different girlfriend to follow, teaching me a quick lesson in the fleeting nature of fame.

But it was a lesson I found easy to forget, because while my trip to Wimbledon—a college graduation present from Kevin—had been my first trip out of the United States, I soon learned it wouldn’t be my last. Kevin’s success in the UK had thrust us into the limelight and led to a journey around the world. First stop, his native South Africa. An offer to play an exhibition match at the Sun City resort came complete with two first-class airline tickets. We took an overnight flight from London, and just as we cleared customs in Johannesburg, a public relations representative from Southern Sun Hotels which was sponsoring the tournament pulled me aside. “Have you seen today’s papers?”

“No.”

She hesitated, looked around, and, lowering her voice, told me, “There was an interview with Kevin’s father, and well . . . he said you’re the reason Kevin lost at Wimbledon. He doesn’t think Kevin needs a woman traipsing around the circuit with him.”

I shook my head, trying to clear the words and the jet lag away. “You’re kidding. There must be some mistake.”

“No. Now maybe the reporter got it wrong, but there are many more reporters waiting outside customs for you. I thought you should know.”

I was too tired to think his comment through, too determined that it not ruin my first moments in Africa, that I simply tried to laugh it off. “Thanks, I guess.”

The sliding doors opened and we stepped into the main lobby of the airport. In the hollow of this huge space, lights flashed brighter, motor drives whirred more loudly, and the shouted questions ran together in a strange combination of English and Afrikaans. Kevin wrapped his arm protectively around my shoulder and we kept walking. After a shower and a press conference by the pool, we quickly settled in, and the headlines over the next few days were different. We laughed at leads like “Anyone for Tennis with Ginger?” “Ginger: The Power Behind Kevin,” and then guffawed at the one that read “The Fragile Beauty of Kevin’s Ginger.”

How could love be bad for anyone? Plus, since Kevin had never reached the finals of Wimbledon before, why shouldn’t his parents believe that I was actually good for their son? I could only hope that they too were laughing off the recent run of stories in the press. I’d soon find out, as we planned to meet his family during the exhibition tennis matches at the Sun City resort.

In the middle of rural Africa where the nearest buildings were goat kraals made of sticks and cow dung, Sun City rose like a phoenix, a sprawling, impressive Third World pretender to Las Vegas, full of glitz, glamour, and gambling. For three days I tried to fit into the family and the place, but it didn’t work. I was desperate to escape the cutting looks, the monosyllabic answers to my questions, and the incessant sound of slot machines. Kevin pulled me aside. Draping his long arms over my shoulders, he whispered, “Try not to worry. We’ll be in the bush soon. I hope you love it as much as I do.”

The next day, feeling like I’d only just survived round one in this foreign country, we boarded a small aircraft. As it lifted off, the pressures of the past few days drifted away. I peered below as buildings disappeared; the roads changed from tar to gravel and finally single dirt tracks. I hoped for a glimpse of an elephant or a lion, imagining that the creatures hidden in the bush couldn’t be more menacing than those I’d left behind at Sun City. The plane touched down, first one wheel, then the other, kicking up dust and bouncing down the runway before skidding to a stop.

When the doors opened, porters grabbed our bags and a lone white

figure stepped forward. “Welcome to Londolozzi, Ginger. Don’t worry, no one will bother you here.” Sporting a French foreign legion cap, a machete, and a mischievous grin, Kevin’s friend John Varty wore the role of rebel, filmmaker, and keen conservationist lightly. Ever since we’d landed on African soil, I’d heard about John. Kevin respected his conservation ethics and envied him his freedom, living life in the wild. John, a professed bush recluse, seemed slightly jealous of Kevin’s newfound success. Theirs was a man’s friendship, all unspoken, backslapping, crackling with energy and competition.

But it was a genuine friendship, with a past, a present, and a future, something far removed from life on the tennis circuit. In the world of professional tennis, week after week, year after year, players face each other across the net. Points are scored any way you can get them, using any weakness—your opponent’s feeble backhand, his insipid second serve, or his foundering relationship—to win. Tennis is a physical game, sure, but at the top professional level with big prize money and even more lucrative endorsements on the line, it’s far more mental. So little is shared, and no one talks. No one gives up the game.

Week after week, women like me who traveled the circuit—the wives, the girlfriends, the groupies—checked each other out from across hotel lobbies and players’ lounges. We also kept score. Who had the biggest diamond, the biggest hair, and whose partner landed the biggest paycheck at the end of the week. Those were the constants. In that world of fast serves and even faster lifestyles, women came and went. The players knew who had the hottest girlfriend or, in the case of some guys, who had the most women. One week it was Allison, next week Julia, after that who knew, who cared. Your real friends—like the real world—were very far away.

“Ginger, hey, Ginger, want a cuppa tea?” John, our host, asked, bringing me back to the bush. We walked onto a large wooden deck fitted into the trees with the riverbed far below. “Oh yeah, great.” I accepted a cup of rooibos, or bush tea, and a chunk of what looked like stale bread. I bit into the bread; the power of the crunch turned heads and nearly broke a tooth. Kevin didn’t say a word. He dipped his *rusk* into his tea and it melted in his mouth. I stepped away from the small group of game rangers and looked

below at the pools that dotted the sand and the birds that fluttered between the reeds. The air was crisp, and the sound of silence infused with laughter echoed across the riverbed.

This was the bush. Peace, quiet, mystery, and an almost tangible magic. I'd seen pictures in *National Geographic* of elephants walking across vast open plains and watched a documentary film on lion behavior in South-West Africa, but those images, though moving, were one- or two-dimensional. Now I could feel the roughness of the earth, smell the richness of the rivers, almost taste life and death. It was fertile and raw, wild and ancient, and I couldn't have been further away from Richmond.

We finished our tea and began a tour around camp. It was clear that John was justly proud of his home. Londolozi was once a family farm, but John, along with his brother Dave and his wife, Shan, transformed it into a five-star experience in ecotourism long before anyone called it that. The Varty family were widely respected and emulated in the conservation world for their practice of reclaiming land, stopping illegal hunting, and providing jobs to members of the impoverished local communities. We stopped outside a chalet where thick duvets and natural fabrics mixed with African art and unabashed luxury. John grinned at me and said, "You can have this room or you can sleep outside the camp, away from everyone, if you want."

Kevin looked amused and I wondered, *Is this a test?*

I laughed, unsure of the right answer, but the thought of no electricity, no toilet, and plenty of animals with big sharp teeth sent a chill down my spine. Power lurking behind the trees wasn't restricted to the pages of a book now; it was palpable.

"I think we'll sleep inside."

It didn't matter. I hardly slept at all. Lion roars, hippo snorts, and owls screeching provided the audio backdrop to a physical yearning to get outside. My eyes picked up the slightest movement; my ears heard every twig snap, every alarm call. I was entranced by the bush, and when I saw a leopard for the first time, I was gone. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds—there was nothing more stunning in the world than her deep green eyes. In them I found the beauty, the tension, and the power of the bush. She was at once

enticing and threatening, gorgeous and dangerous. As she disappeared back into the thicket, I felt these natural extremes touch a deep, primal place in my soul. I felt as if I belonged here, and oddly, though it was Kevin who'd introduced me to the bush that he loved, this feeling of belonging wasn't tied to him. It felt unique, mine alone, a feeling that remained with me long after we left Africa.

Whenever possible, Kevin and I returned to the African bush, but our life together revolved around the very unnatural world of the tennis circuit. During the infrequent weeks when I wasn't traveling on the tour with him, I went home to visit my family, but there was rarely an opportunity to see Sara or my other old friends. No sooner had I landed in Richmond than I was back on the phone, using Kevin's calling card to make plans to pick up my prepaid ticket at the airport to join him again. Indoors, outdoors, hard courts or grass, the tournaments melted into one another. Off the courts, life was full of moments I could never have imagined when Sara and I had shared our childhood dreams.

In Tokyo a charming representative from Cartier, complete with gold cuff links and a thick French accent, laid out three watches in front of me on the table. "Please, Ginger, would you select one?" In Montreal, between matches, I wandered the streets of the old quarter alone, returning to the courts in time to watch Kevin play. In Melbourne, alone on the sidelines, I cheered as Kevin reached the finals of another Grand Slam tournament, the Australian Open. Back in South Africa, I was asked to model—all five feet four inches of me, blue eye makeup and pink cheeks, hair teased and the spring wardrobe prepared and presented as a gift. And there was the prospect of another, even better present.

"Gin, what if I gave you a fabulous ring—say, three carats—but then something happened between us. What would you do?" Kevin spoke quietly, not looking at me but gazing out into the distance, across one of the largest, deepest ravines in South Africa.

Below, between the cliffs, a black eagle soared on thermals. His words hung in the air. I shifted closer, resting my head on his shoulder; the breeze blew my hair around his neck. "Don't worry. I'd give you back one and a half carats." A near-perfect ending to another African holiday.

So many times I'd wanted to call home, to giggle with Sara about seeing myself on page one of newspapers, to laugh about nearly plowing down Faye Dunaway on the steps at Wimbledon, or to share the giddy feeling of riding through the streets of London in a Rolls-Royce while trying to act blasé. I also wanted to know what was happening in her life. Was she happy? Was the search for a good story as rewarding as the search for true love? Had she found her ticket out of Richmond? Were we still friends, or would the outside perceptions of our lives once again keep us apart? I wanted to reconnect, but the time was never right. Morning in England meant the middle of the night in the U.S. In most places I was too jet-lagged to even begin to figure out the time difference. Then too much time passed. Months rolled into years and I wondered if my old friends remembered me as part of their present, or just their past. I never called and then I wondered if anyone would answer if I did.

Despite my mother's warnings that I needed to have my own life, my own career, my own friends, I kept traveling, living Kevin's life. Since childhood I'd never needed many people around me, preferring small groups of close friends, but now through choice and time that group had narrowed to one. Kevin. He was all I needed. From Cincinnati to Sydney, London to Los Angeles, I sewed sponsor patches onto his tennis shirts, rang for room service, even polished his trophies. This was his time. Everyone knows the career of a professional athlete is short. We would have the rest of our lives together and my time would come.

But the holidays in Mauritius, the Mercedes sports car, nights out at London clubs, and mornings spent lying close to each other listening to the African bush awaken were all possible because of Kevin's success. He shared them with me on his terms, and then his terms began to change.

"So Wimbledon is coming up?"

"Yeah, I know." That was not the response I was hoping for.

A few days later I asked, "So where will we be staying?"

"What? Where?"

"You know, in England."

"Don't push it, Ginger." I didn't. I washed his clothes, drew the blinds when he was tired, and kept quiet. A few days later he told me sternly,

“Listen, you can come to Wimbledon, but not early. Not for Queens, none of the preliminary tournaments. I’ll meet you there later.” He didn’t explain and I was too afraid to ask.

JULY 7, 1985. It had been two weeks since I’d landed in England and the sun was shining. My Maud Frizon heels clicked rhythmically and a light breeze blew my white linen skirt as I walked down the hill toward the All England Lawn Tennis Club. It had been three years since I first passed through these gates, smelled the fresh-cut grass, felt the energy and the tension. My third Wimbledon, the day of the finals, and I was still there. I remembered nothing of the previous two weeks, couldn’t recall whom Kevin had beaten or where the other seeded players had fallen. I only knew that today Kevin was to play for the championship against Boris Becker, an unknown kid from Germany with a big serve and nothing, absolutely nothing, to lose.

I flicked my hair over my shoulder and smiled. And yet, as I climbed the steps to the players’ box, I felt tense and it had nothing to do with the atmosphere on court. Only twenty-four years old, I knew that this time I had everything to lose.