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High Tinx

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High Tinx

Jinx Slater lay in bed listening to Chastity Maxwell shagging the handyman. She wasn't so much listening, mind, as accidentally overhearing, for the paper-thin walls of the sixth-form boarding house had been built with no regard for aural abstinence.

But nor, for that matter, had the supposedly squeeze-through-proof ground-floor windows been built with any regard for a girl with escape on her mind and a miniature screwdriver kit in her tuck box.

And escape, as it so often was, was on Jinx's mind. She lit a Lucky Strike Light and leaned out of the window handily placed at the head of her single bed. As she breathed in Brighton's sharp sea air alongside a lungful of smoke she glanced at the twinkling lights of the gin palaces moored at the Marina to her right. She looked past these towards the fluorescent flickering of the fun-fair beyond and held her breath as long as she could.

She turned her face to the left as she exhaled, relishing the cool breeze. She stared at the navy expanse of calmly rippling sea set against the darkening sky, and

thought of what lay beyond. She thought of freedom, of dancing, of drinking and of laughing until you thought you would breathe no more. She also thought that even a spot of ear-bashing Drum and Bass – which she *hated* – would be infinitely preferable to the noises emanating from next door.

Chastity's moans grew louder as her empty head beat a rhythmic drum against the wall. The handyman was obviously handy in more ways than one, but the only reason Chastity liked him so much, or so she said anyway, was because he'd had a bit part in some stupid cop show as a teenager.

Jinx relinquished her duvet, got out of bed, leaned across her desk and knocked three times on the poster-laden opposite wall, Liberty's wall. Liberty and she had shared a single bed for the last three years, but tonight Liberty was – half-heartedly no doubt, with much huffing and puffing and shaking of her half-Persian head – working on her A-level art coursework.

The entire thing was due in tomorrow, quite a big project considering the amount of weed Liberty smoked, and Jinx had already done most of it for her. Bless Liberty. She wasn't the cleverest girl in the school, but she was certainly the crudest. She was fantastic company and Jinx's best friend at Stagmount, the imposing girls' boarding school sat atop Brighton's cliff face.

In summer, visitors professed astonishment at the Gothic building's warm beauty, in winter they invariably likened Stagmount to a prison. The stone seemed

to absorb the sun; golden and welcoming from May to September it quickly turned grey and foreboding in winter. The weather made such a difference that the bursar – always with one beady eye on the holes in the roof – decreed last year that prospective parents were to be shown round only during the summer term. He'd been right. Sales went through the roof and the waiting list was longer than ever.

It was small bother for Jinx to dash off a couple of expert-looking sketches, but they took Liberty weeks. These weeks, in a parody of masochism, for Liberty was not *really* the sort of girl to punish herself for any regret or misdemeanour, were mostly spent pulling her long dark hair and chewing on her bottom lip until it bled.

Jinx sighed and resigned herself to a morning spent finishing Liberty's 'The Sea' project. Thankfully, Jinx had insisted on Liberty taking the same project as her; three years' experience had taught her that if she wanted Liberty as a partner in crime she would have to do her work as well. Frankly, it was a small price to pay for high jinks and hilarity all term long, and Liberty was the perfect buddy.

At the tap on her door, Jinx carefully placed the half-smoked cigarette on the windowsill, burning end facing out, and removed the cautionary hard-backed chair she'd wedged beneath the handle.

A wild-haired Liberty threw herself from the door-frame on to the bed. Wearing a lime-green Juicy Couture tracksuit, an ostentatious gold cross – somewhat bizarrely for one who professed herself an orthodox

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Muslim, although she mainly did this to avoid the daily chapel service – and huge grey rugby socks that had Jinx's brother George's name sewn on the heel, she curled herself underneath Jinx's duvet, plumped both pillows behind her back, leaned her head against the wall and made a face intended to convey abject misery. In fact she looked stunning, as per.

'Jin, I've been drawing that fucking crab for three hours now, and it's starting to freak me out. I keep looking into its dead staring eyes and thinking it's trying to talk to me.' Liberty made a grab for the half-smoked fag, took a long drag, looked at Jinx properly and brightened considerably. 'Are we going out then?'

'Liberty Latiffe! Are you stoned?' Jinx laughed. Did Dolly Parton sleep on her back? Probably, yes.

Chastity's handyman resumed his pounding, and Liberty's head began to beat against the wall in time.

'Fuck it. Is there any male within a twenty-five-mile radius she *hasn't* shagged? And I'm fucked if I'm going to be made to join in by proxy. Come on, Jin, it's ship-out time.'

Jinx grinned. She pulled off her regulation navy-blue tracksuit bottoms with the red ('go faster', Chastity called it) stripe down the side, unbuttoned her not-so-crisp white shirt, lay down on the floor and reached behind the messy desk for her favourite pair of skinny black jeans.

Jinx eyed them and prepared to breathe in. Disco punk was all well and good, but really jeans like this would probably render her infertile. Which actually, she

mused, wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing.

Jinx lay on the floor and quickly turned bright red as she struggled to pull the jeans over her knees. Jinx was not fat. 'Christ,' she gasped, as she finally got them over her arse, 'I am *dying* down here.'

Liberty bounced up and down on the bed, laughing. 'Jin, you look so, like, stupid doing that.'

'Thanks for nothing. Now shut up and get ready – and don't smoke any more of that skunk!'

Liberty giggled as she tripped out of the room and Jinx began surveying the wreckage atop her chest of drawers. Squinting into the dirty mirror, Jinx applied Benefit peach blusher, YSL navy mascara and a smearing of sticky, vanilla-flavoured gold Lancôme lip-gloss before running industrial quantities of Frizz-Ease through her curly blonde hair. She slipped on a hot-pink All Saints T-shirt with a black skull and crossbones motif etched on the front and smiled at her dusty reflection as she wound ropes of black beads around her neck.

She squirted about half her bottle of Chanel No. 19 in front of her before stepping into the voluminous cloud, simultaneously spinning around as she sought out the partner to the gold Nike trainer – metallic sportswear, very hot right now – that was swinging by its laces in her left hand.

At the same time as she spied the missing shoe, one of the myriad Blu-tacked photos adorning the inside of the open cupboard door caught her eye. A black and white Polaroid, taken by Jinx's mum, Caroline, who

obsessively documented every single thing that ever happened to any member of the Slater family – including snapping dead pets in their shallow graves whilst the rest of the family sobbed at a respectful distance – it showed her and Liberty on the first day they'd met. It was three years ago, but seemed like twenty. Jinx loved that picture.



Mrs Patricia Gunn sat on the navy-blue sofa in her small staff flat, one of her fat hands clutching a tumbler that contained slightly less than an inch of whisky.

The other hand, its mottled and liver-spotted flesh spreading with the furious strain, pressed down on the globe that lived on the occasional table next to the sofa.

She looked cross as she spoke the word of God and tried to feel as drunk as possible. It didn't work. 'Those little bitches, those little bitches,' she murmured over and over again, her stranglehold on the entire continent of North America tightening.

Mrs Gunn stood six feet five inches tall in her flat, stockinged feet, and was almost as wide as she was high. She was wearing what she called – horrifically as far as those in the know were concerned – her 'lady suit'. This was a now threadbare, once luxurious ruby-red velvet dressing gown over a massive pair of stripy blue men's pyjama bottoms, held up with the sort of red and white string butchers use to tie joints of meat together, with scuffed, beige, faux-leather slippers. She looked, frankly, hideous.

Most of the girls were terrified of this sour-faced harriidan, with her booming voice and military approach to discipline. The naughtiest girls in the school, however, took a sheer, some would say perverse, pleasure in provoking the loss of her legendary temper.

Mrs Gunn reached for the bottle of aged Talisker by her feet. She usually drank the famously naff Famous Grouse, but one of her charge's fathers had bought her this expensive drop hoping to sweeten relations. Despite the fact that she was universally hated by the girls, most of the other staff, and the parents, Mrs Gunn always got the best end of term presents. It was amazing, actually, that the parents would not only cough up the extortionate and ever-increasing fees that helped pay Gunn's wages without ever daring question her skewed authority, yet also try to butter up the old witch with costly gifts from Harrods and Fortnum's.

That very afternoon, only the second bloody day of term, she thought bitterly, Mrs Gunn had suffered a nasty surprise. When traversing the brick-paved path that ran from house to house behind the main building – with so many offshoots it was like an extremely complex rabbit warren – hoping to catch one of the many illicit smokers having a crafty fag before tea, she'd heard shrieking and laughing and a clattering mechanical sound coming from near the sanatorium.

Shuffling as fast as her huge bulk and flat feet would allow, thoughts of dishing out a hefty punishment warming her insides, Mrs Gunn rounded the corner. She stopped, dumbstruck, at the sight that greeted her.

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She could see a curly blonde head, a straight dark one on top of it, whizzing past her at the speed of light in some kind of silver chair. It passed so quickly that she didn't at first realise that the silver chair was, in fact, the wheelchair belonging to her own dear mother.

Gunn kept it in one of the numerous bike sheds for when her ancient mother visited. It must be said that her mother was not *technically* disabled, but one of the earliest victims of Britain's obesity epidemic. The wheelchair was very much a case of too many pies (and crisps, boxes of very expensive white chocolate champagne truffles, very cheap chicken Ginsters slices and Scotch eggs – mmm, skeggs: the fat man's fruit – from that nice deli in Hove in Mrs Gunn senior's case) spoils the legs. And why bother to walk, the old lady thought, when she had that big sturdy daughter always ready and willing to push her about the place like a queen?

The penny dropped – it always did with Mrs Gunn, eventually – and a hot flush of anger spread from her vast chest up her turkey neck, before growing livid vermillion across her furious face.

It had to be those two she-devils Slater and Latiffe. The girls had lived in Mrs Gunn's main schoolhouse as recently as the last day of last term, and although she had tried to rule and rile them with her rod of heavy wrought iron from day one, they had continually managed to give her the slip. She turned puce again just thinking about them.

If truth be known, Mrs Gunn had actually felt the first stirrings of something akin to relief when she'd

sarled her goodbyes and handed over those terrible final house reports, safe in the knowledge that next term they were to be in the charge of that useless popsy Brian Morris.

The Slaters had laughed heartily over Mrs Gunn's descriptions of Jinx as a 'cold fish' with a 'positively criminal mindset', and Amir Latiffe sadly never had the opportunity to consider his daughter as 'Boswell to Slater's Johnson' or 'thick thick thick – *not* likely to get into *any* university', as Liberty had carefully unsealed the envelope, removed the offending page and calmly burnt it in the back of the chauffeur-driven Mercedes that always took her to and from Heathrow airport at the beginning and end of term.

Mrs Gunn sat on her hard-backed sofa, tightened her stranglehold on America, guzzled her expensive whisky and thought furious thoughts.

How *dare* they! Not only had they stolen – *stolen!* – her property and made light of her mother's disability by joyously carousing in it down the slippery stone pathway – thereby, if one looked closely enough, scratching one of the wheel trims – they'd got away with it.

There was nothing she could do this time. And Mrs Gunn hated not being able to mete out terrible punishments and dire threats of expulsion, particularly where those two were concerned. No, that useless . . . *Man* . . . Brian bloody Morris, had intervened. Not only scuppering her chance of revenge – and oh, how sweet it would have been to have the cretinous reprobates copy-

ing out, word for word until it was finished, *twice*, the entire Maastricht Treaty in her study every Saturday and Sunday for the rest of term – but calling into question her authority.

Mrs Gunn then thought about how she hated those girls – more, much more than she hated the others. She didn't like any of them particularly, but the black hatred she felt for Jinx and Liberty had become almost as great a depth of feeling as her forty-year passion for Icelandic literature and ancient Norse mythology.

Her scowl grew heavier and her forehead almost disappeared as she thought about how she'd half-shuffled, half-run (such as she could) to the staffroom, panting all the while, to call for help. The few staff lounging about on the sofas inside, drinking lukewarm teas and voraciously reading the *Sun* hidden inside copies of *The Times*, barely looked up as she breathlessly explained her torture.

Eventually Brian Morris, realising his colleagues were not about to act swiftly, if at all, put down the English teacher's well-thumbed copy of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* that he was rather disbelievingly reading the back of, took pity on the hideous Gunn and offered to assist her. He'd felt he should, really, especially when he realised two of his girls were involved – the two fun pretty ones. Yes, he liked them!

Gunn shuddered as she recalled what had happened next, and poured herself a restorative refill.

She'd insisted she and Morris visit the lock-up bike shed where she stored the chair to confirm it had been

broken into and the contraption stolen. She hadn't liked it *at all* when Morris suggested she calm down, and told her that under no circumstances whatsoever was she to telephone for the police. A very stern look passed across his usually smiley face, and Mrs Gunn had suddenly felt the tiniest bit stupid. How dare the man tell her to 'calm down', as if she were being ridiculous? It wasn't him who'd had his authority called into question, or him whose disabled mother's wheelchair had been made an object of hilarity. She hadn't liked it when he'd enquired too closely about her mother's disability either – if she hadn't known better she'd have sworn he was mocking her.

When she'd finally managed to turn the hefty key in the rusty padlock and wrench the shed door open, she'd been appalled to see the wheelchair sitting in front of them, glinting almost aggressively at her in the shaft of sunlight illuminating it. Morris, of course, had smirked and told her she must have been mistaken. And she was sure if she hadn't stomped off in the most massive strop he might have gone so far as to give her a piece of his mind. Bah! Either way, she had been made a laughing stock.

Gunn sat on her sofa, staring unseeingly at the tube of her portable black and white television and thought that this really was the straw to break the camel's back. This time she would get revenge. Slater and Latiffe had better watch their slim, young backs she resolved, for she, Mrs Patricia Gunn, was not going to take this final breach of her erstwhile unblemished authority lying