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'For Christ's sake, Jinx! Will you please not refer to your grandmother as "that rancid old slag"?''

Caroline Slater, normally a paragon of maternal virtue, stood up and threw the *Sunday Times* travel section she'd been reading wistfully at the groaning pile of newsprint covering the black marble-topped breakfast bar. She then stalked out of the kitchen in the direction of her beloved greenhouses, pausing only to slam the back door behind her.

Jinx sighed. She hadn't meant to upset her mum but, like most of the Slaters, she was suffering from a severe case of cabin fever following an excessively boozy Christmas. What's more, she had to think about packing and getting herself ready to go back to Stagmount – the exclusive girls' boarding school perched atop Brighton's cliff face where she was in the lower sixth – for the start of the spring term. But worst of all, as far as she was concerned anyway, for the first time since she was fourteen years old and allowed out to party with her friends, she had a grand total of zero options for New Year's Eve.

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Jinx wouldn't even allow herself to think about Liberty, her best friend and partner in crime since they'd met on their very first day at Stagmount. She had no idea where Lib was or how she was doing after the nightmare ending to last term, but she knew for sure that the last thing she fancied was lunch with her mad old gran.

'What have you done now?' asked George.

Jinx's older brother, whose name was usually prefixed with 'gorgeous' by the various girls who tied up the Slater family phone lines day and night wondering if he was 'up to' anything, had just sauntered into the room. He threw a dark-chocolate-coated brazil nut into the air and caught it between his even white teeth.

'Mum's chucking things around the stables in a right old mood and you look like you've been ridden hard and put away wet.'

'I only said I couldn't see why I was being forced to go for lunch when you and Gaymian are allowed to stay here, no bloody questions asked,' Jinx sniffed, stubbing her cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray in front of her. She proceeded to top up her thick black coffee with brandy from the silver hip flask she'd removed from her dad's drawer of 'special things' earlier that morning. 'It's not fucking fair, that's all.'

A sudden hint of a smile threatened to ruin her determinedly grumpy face. 'And *what* was that expression you just used? Jesus, George, you get worse and worse. Where do you even *hear* that kind of shit?'

There was a long pause. 'Frasier, if you must know,' he

said eventually, before grinning widely at his sister. 'I *was* going to pass it off as one of my own but I guess it's too good.'

Jinx, who was back in the groove of her black sulk, shrugged, grunted what was clearly a 'couldn't care less' response and tipped the rest of her supercharged coffee down her throat.

'Come on, little sis.' George shoved Jinx along the bench, sat down next to her and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. 'You've got a face longer than Pansy this morning. What's up?'

It was impossible to stay mad when George was at his most understanding like this. Jinx lit another cigarette and resigned herself to the brotherly pep talk that was surely coming.

'Since you're obviously very taken with the horse theme today,' she said, kind of sarcastically, turning to face him for the first time since he'd come into the room, 'why don't we go for a ride? I haven't actually left the house for five days and I bet the ponies are gagging to get out too.'

George nodded, pleased he was going to get Jinx to himself for a couple of hours. He hated seeing his usually effervescent sister so down in the dumps. A gallop in the fresh air would do her the world of good, and then he planned to have a serious talk with her.

'I saw Pansy practically doing cartwheels around the field when Mum let them out first thing,' he said, standing up and hoisting Jinx to her feet at the same time, 'and Gaymian didn't get home until five o'clock this

morning so he won't be up for hours yet. It's you and me, kid. Let's go.'

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Pelting down a very muddy track in one of the forest enclosures not far from home, Jinx stood up in her stirrups, folded herself forwards towards Pansy's pricked ears and loosened her reins. The game old hunter belonged to her other brother, Damian (affectionately nicknamed Gaymian by his siblings on account of his sexual preferences). They were soon galloping so fast that Jinx's eyes were streaming and the trees and bushes blurred into one big streak of green.

Feeling the horse beginning to slow underneath her, Jinx sat back in the saddle and peered over her shoulder to look for George. She laughed out loud as she spotted him way behind. His stirrups were so short his knees practically touched his ears and he was bouncing up and down like a huge, demented jockey. She pulled Pansy back into a gentle canter before they slowed to a jerky, high-stepping trot and then an ambling walk.

Jinx drew in great lungfuls of the fresh forest air and stretched her arms high above her head. Flexing her neck from side to side, she realised she hadn't felt this physically or mentally sharp since the day she'd arrived home from Stagmount at the end of term. She'd managed to hold it together until the last day, but winced as she acknowledged the fact that she'd spent most of the Christmas holidays in a haze of tears. She had stubbornly refused to return any of her friends' phone calls

and had generally stomped about the place like a bear with a sore head, complaining bitterly about every family activity she'd not been able to get out of.

After about five minutes George pulled up alongside his sister and motioned for her to stop as he fumbled in the top pocket of his jacket for his cigarettes and lighter. He was breathing almost as heavily as Martin's beautiful chestnut thoroughbred, Dillon, who evidently hadn't had much exercise over the last couple of months.

'Jesus,' said Jinx, 'I knew Dad had been busy tying up all his work stuff before Christmas, but I didn't realise it had been *that* bad.' She laughed as she accepted a Marlboro Light from her still-too-breathless-to-speak brother. 'I bet you wish you hadn't insisted on having him today now.' She leaned over to pat Dillon's neck. 'I can't remember the last time I beat you in a race.'

She wiped her grimy, sweaty hand on her clean jeans and smiled with something approaching genuine happiness for the first time since Liberty had been flown away from Stagmount in the Harrods helicopter by her furious father.

'I was going easy on you,' said George with a sideways smirk, delighted to see his sister looking and acting more like her usual self. 'I thought letting you win would cheer you up. I wouldn't have bloody done it if I'd known you'd be this smug, though.'

'Shut up, G,' Jinx said, laughing so hard she had to clutch the front of her saddle for support. 'I won that fair and square and you *know* it. But if you're still not sure' – she gathered up her reins, narrowed her eyes and

made as if to belt off across the huge green they were approaching – ‘why don’t we go again?’

George grabbed her left arm and shook his head. ‘I was just kidding,’ he said hastily. ‘You are the champion. El Champione! All hail, Jinx Slater, fastest woman in Hampshire!’

‘Thank you,’ she replied, making a mock bow to the left, the right and then in front of her. ‘I’m honoured to accept this award. I’d like to thank Pansy, this gorgeous horse right here between my legs, my brother Gaymian – without whose sterling work this horse would be as unfit as my dad’s – and last and *definitely* least my brother George, for being so crap at riding he can’t even coax a gallop out of a seventeen-hand Irish thoroughbred.’

‘So,’ said George casually after they’d meandered along in companionable silence the entire way across the open green and were now approaching the home straight, ‘still no word from Lib then?’

Jinx scowled. She’d refused to discuss the possible whereabouts of her best friend since she’d told Caroline the whole story in the car on the way home from school, and the Slaters – knowing how upset she was – hadn’t pushed her. They preferred to let her talk about Liberty when she felt up to it, but Jinx had been so grumpy, miserable and downright rude a lot of the time over Christmas that George had decided to take matters into his own hands.

‘Come on, Jinx,’ he continued, refusing to take accept this uncharacteristic moody silence for an answer. ‘I know you haven’t wanted to talk about it, but I hate

seeing you like this. To be honest, you’re being an absolute pain in the ass. It’s not *our* fault Liberty’s gone and we all miss her too. Christmas just wasn’t the same without you two goons shrieking, shoving and laughing all over the place. Mum and Dad are really worried about you. It’s not fair.’

Jinx’s eyes filled with tears. She stared determinedly in front of her, torn between shouting at George to mind his own business before storming off in the most almighty huff and admitting that he was right. The first option was certainly easier, given her current mood, but she loved her family and she was aware that her behaviour was getting worse. Sod it, she thought, resigning herself to a spot of bridge building. It’s easier to phone your mother than not phone, yes?

‘You’re right, G,’ she sniffed. ‘I’m absolutely gutted about Lib. And I know I’ve been awful to you guys.’

George said nothing, but he nodded encouragingly at her.

‘It’s like’ – Jinx squirmed in her seat, for she had a real aversion to deep and meaningfuls – ‘when you *know* you’re being a bitch even as you’re doing it. You don’t want to be behaving that way and you wish you could snap out of it, but your bad mood has been going on for so long it’s become almost a default setting. Do you know what I mean?’

‘I’m a guy, Jinx, remember?’ George said this with a small self-satisfied shrug of his shoulders. If he could have patted himself on the back at the same time he would have done so. ‘We don’t do that kind of shit.’

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'Shut up, G,' Jinx shouted, spinning round in her seat and giving him the finger. 'That's the biggest bunch of bollocks I've ever heard. What about your total hissy fit last time we went skiing? You locked yourself in the bathroom for *hours* because Mum said you looked stupid in those awful skinny jeans you bought. I would say like a little girl, only I don't want to fuel your misogynistic fire. I've seen you strop out of various rooms more times than I can even remember. And what about Gaymian? Are you seriously trying to tell me that my moods are worse than his?'

'Well,' George said thoughtfully, 'I suppose you're right. Gaym *is* the exception that proves the rule.'

'Don't make me laugh,' Jinx snapped straight back. 'Anyway, I thought we were supposed to be talking about me here. Do you want me to continue baring my soul or not?'

'Of course I do. I'm just pleased,' George said, looking at his watch and then winking slyly at his sister, 'that it's only taken you – ooo – about three minutes of chat with your second-biggest brother to revert to the self-obsessed narcissist we all know and love.'

He ducked as Jinx swung her riding crop at his head. The sudden movement surprised Dillon, who'd been moseying along in a very relaxed fashion with his nose practically touching the ground, and the horse jumped about a metre in the air without any warning whatsoever. Jinx winced and shut her eyes. When she opened them a second later a very disgruntled-looking George was sitting in a puddle, completely soaked through, with

muddy streaks all over his face and neck. Dillon, meanwhile, had obviously decided he needed to get home as fast as equinely possible. Since he was quickly becoming a chestnut blur in the distance, he'd also evidently discovered a turn of speed that he'd been hiding earlier.

'Shit, George!' Trying desperately trying to hold back what she was sure would be an uncontrollable case of the giggles if she let them out, Jinx jumped off Pansy's back and held out a hand to help George up. 'I am so sorry. I seriously didn't mean for that to happen.'

George shook his head and grabbed hold of Jinx's hand as if he was going to let himself be helped out of his puddle.

'Argh, you bastard!' Jinx screamed when he yanked her towards him and she lost her footing. She toppled forward, then skidded on her knees in the deep mud until she was lying on her front, adjacent to her brother. 'I can't bloody believe,' she said, lifting her head and mumbling through a mouthful of dirt, 'I fell for that!'

'Yeah, literally!' George sprang to his feet and grabbed hold of Pansy, who was standing like a mule, staring half-heartedly after Dillon. 'Well, sis, it looks like one of us will be walking back. And since it was you who started this little incident' – George swung himself athletically on to Pansy's back, gathered the reins together and flicked his sister the V – 'it's sure as hell not going to be me. Bye!'

Jinx sat in her puddle and glared angrily after her brother, whose maniacal bursts of laughter were carried back to her on the wind as he galloped home. Torn

between crying and laughing, she chewed her lip and used her sleeve to try to wipe the worst of the mud off her face as she decided which emotion was going to win.

With a sigh, she stood up and ran her hands through her hair, wincing as her fingers became stuck in a particularly filthy clump. She peeled off her sodden jumper, tied it round her waist and began the long trudge back, the occasional giggle escaping her mouth every time she thought of George's extreme surprise at his impromptu fall to earth.

By the time she passed the pond at the end of their road and turned left towards Slater Towers, Jinx felt surprisingly chipper.

Walking down the long drive towards the stables and the back of the house, she decided that when Liberty found a way to contact her she would, and that in the meantime she had to stop agonising about it. She also decided that if she did find herself agonising about it, which was pretty much inevitable given the circumstances, she wouldn't take it out on her family but would instead remove herself to her bedroom until the violent urges passed.



Jinx was washing the mud off the bottom of her filthy jeans and ancient trainers using the hosepipe just outside the tackroom and feeling pretty pleased with her new mature outlook on life when Caroline Slater flew round the corner in her tan Ugg slippers.

'Jinx,' she yelled breathlessly, skidding to a halt in front of her surprised daughter. Caroline *never* wore her Uggs outside and regularly threatened pain of death to anyone – namely Jinx – who might borrow them and think of doing the same. 'I thought I heard the gate slam. Thank God you're back!'

'What's wrong, Mum?' Jinx asked, quickly turning off the tap and shaking the water from her jeans. 'Is everything OK? You've got your Uggs on!'

Caroline looked down at her feet in dazed surprise. She'd left the kitchen at such a stretch she hadn't noticed what she was wearing. 'Never mind that,' she said, grabbing Jinx's hand excitedly. 'I've been pacing about for the last hour, just dying for you to get back. When George eventually appeared and told me you were walking home I nearly combusted!'

'Why, Mum?' Jinx was none the wiser and her feet were beginning to freeze. 'What is it?'

'Liberty phoned,' Caroline cried, gripping both of Jinx's hands. 'She's in Washington, DC!'

'What?' An expression of sheer, unadulterated delight was slowly spreading across Jinx's shocked face. 'When? How *is* she? And what the hell is she doing there? Did she leave a number? Oh, God!' Jinx hugged her mum and started jumping up and down, taking the protesting Caroline with her. 'I'm so *pleased*!'

Caroline drew back and put her hands on her daughter's shoulders. Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke: 'Oh, Jinx, I can't tell you how pleased I am. We've all been so worried about you – and her! For the first time