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Opening extract from

Model Misfit

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1

My name is Harriet Manners, and I am a model.

I know I'm a model because:

1. It's Monday morning, and I'm wearing a gold tutu, a gold jacket, gold ballet pumps and gold earrings. My face is painted gold, and a long piece of gold wire has been wrapped around my head. This is not how I normally dress on Mondays.

2. I have a bodyguard. The earrings cost so much I'm not allowed to go to the toilet without a large man checking my earlobes afterwards to make sure I haven't accidentally flushed them.

3. I haven't been allowed to smile for two hours.

4. Every time I take a bite of doughnut to keep my strength up everybody breathes in sharply



as if I've just bent down and given the floor a quick lick.

5. There's a large camera pointing at my face, and the man behind it keeps saying, "Oi, model," and clicking his fingers at me.

There are other clues – I'm pouting slightly, and making tiny movements every couple of seconds like a robot – but they're not necessarily conclusive. That's exactly how my father dances when a car advert comes on TV.

Anyway, the final reason I know I'm a model is:

6. I have become a creature of grace, elegance and style.

In fact, you could say I've really grown up since you last saw me.

Developed. *Blossomed.*

Not literally. I'm exactly the same size and shape as I was six months ago, and six months before that. As far as womanly curves go, much like the netball captain at school, puberty is making no bones about picking me last.

No, I'm talking metaphorically. I simply woke up

one day, and *BAM*: fashion and I were at one with each other. Working together, helping each other. Just like the crocodile and the little Egyptian plover bird that climbs into its mouth to pick bits of meat out of its teeth. Except obviously in a much more glamorous and less unhygienic way.

And I'm going to be totally honest with you: it's changed me. The geek is gone, and in her place is somebody glamorous. Popular. Cool.

A brand-new Harriet Manners.

2

Anyway. The really great thing about being totally *synergised* with the fashion world is that it makes shoots very smooth and focused.

"Right," Aiden the photographer says, "what are we thinking, model?"

(You see what I mean? What are *we* thinking: fashion and I are basically sharing a brain.)

"We're thinking mysterious," I tell him. "We're thinking enigmatic. We're thinking unfathomable."

"And why are we thinking that?"

"Because it says so on the side of the perfume box."

"Exactly. I'm thinking Garbo and Grable, Hepburn and Hayworth, Bacall and Bardot, but it might be best if you think reality TV show contestant and do the opposite."

"Got it," I say, shifting slightly in my position on the floor and moving my foot so that the sole is pointing towards me. Then I lean towards it gracefully. *Mysterious*. I grab the corner of my jacket and lift it slightly, like a



butterfly wing, angling my face downwards. *Enigmatic*. Finally, I arch my back and poke out an arm so I'm staring at the crease of my inner elbow. *Unfathomable*.

"Got it." Aiden looks up from the camera. "Model, Yuka Ito was right. These are some very strange shapes you're pulling, but it works. Very edgy. Very high fashion."

What did I tell you? Me and fashion: I walk in and out of its mouth and it doesn't even *try* to eat me any more.

"Now point your elbow in the other direction for me." The photographer crouches down, adjusts the camera shutter and then looks back up again. "Towards the camera."

Sugar cookies.

"You know," I say without moving, "enigmatic, mysterious, unfathomable. They're tautological. Yuka could save a lot of room on the box by just picking one."

"Just move your arm."

"Umm, has she considered 'baffling'? It's from an old word used to describe a wind that buffeted sailors from all directions. It's sort of appropriate for a perfume, don't you think?"

Aiden pinches the bridge of his nose with his

fingers. "Right. How about you show me the bottom of the shoe? We should try to get the contrasting sole in the shot."

I clear my throat, mind starting to race. "Erm… but what about Saudi Arabia, China and Thailand? It's considered culturally impolite to show the bottom of your feet there…" I look around the room in a blind panic. "We don't want to risk alienating them, do we?" I sweep my arm out in a wide, persuasive gesture.

And something on my sleeve catches Aiden's eye.

Oh no. No no no.

"What's that?" he says, standing up and walking over to where I'm now scrabbling to get off the floor but my feet are caught in the enormous tutu. The photographer grabs my arm and peels a tiny gold sticker from the inside of my jacket elbow. "What's *this*?"

"Hmm?" I say, swallowing and straining to make my eyes as round as I physically can.

Aiden peers at the sticker. "F = M x A?" he reads slowly. Then he pulls three more from inside the lining of the jacket. "V = I x R? Ek = ½ x M x V2? W = M x G?"

Before I can move he grabs the shoe from my foot, turns it over and pulls a sticker from the heel. Then he pulls one from my inside elbow and four from the inside folds of the tutu netting.

He blinks at the stickers a couple of times while I stare at the floor and try to look as small as humanly possible. "Harriet," he says in a slow and incredulous voice. "Harriet Manners, are you studying maths in the middle of my fashion shoot?"

I shake my head and look at the air behind the photographer's left ear. You know the crocodile and the bird? I think one of us is about to get eaten.

"No," I answer in my littlest voice. Because a) It's physics, and b) I've been doing it all the way through.

3

OK, so I *may* have stretched the truth a tiny bit.

Or – you know: a lot.

I haven't changed. In fact, I'm even more of a geek than I used to be because:

a) the grey matter in my brain is still developing extra connections on a daily basis
b) I know even more facts than I did before
c) I'm just coming to the end of exams, which means my short-term cognitive abilities are on overdrive.

I'm also not graceful, elegant or stylish, but I guess you've already worked that out for yourself.

"Unbelievable," Aiden mutters, clicking through the images as I slip behind a curtain at the back of the room to get changed into my school uniform.

"I'm so sorry, Mr Thomas," I call out. "I honestly didn't mean to disrespect you and the crocodi— erm,



fashion industry. Did you get OK photos?"

"That's not the point. Do you know how many other models wanted this job?"

Yes. Last time I was at Infinity Models, two of them locked me in a cupboard so I missed a really big casting. I had to wait until the cleaner came round to let me out again.

"I'm sorry, it's just it's my final GCSE today," I try to explain as I tug off the massive tutu and smack an elbow painfully against the wall. "At 2pm, the British education system is going to decide whether I have any chance of ever becoming an award-winning physicist. My entire future is going to be shaped by today."

I pull on my school jumper, which promptly gets caught in the gold wire still wrapped around my head. There's silence while I hop in and out of the 'changing room' with my jumper over my face and my arms waving in the air like manic bunny ears.

"Hmm," Aiden agrees still clicking through images. "You're clearly a genius destined for a Nobel Prize."

"GCSE physics is not about *literal* spatial awareness," I puff, clutching blindly at my head and simultaneously smashing my knee against the wall. "It's *conceptual* spatial awareness. Two very different things."

Which is lucky, because the wire on my head now

appears to be caught on everything in a two-metre radius. I have a detailed Get To School On Time Plan in my satchel, and nowhere at all does it say: Detach Myself From A Curtain Ring.

"It's OK, Harriet," I say, spinning helplessly in little circles. "You still have an hour and eleven minutes to get to school by train. Or an hour and sixteen minutes by taxi. You've got ages."

"Erm… you know the clock on the back wall is slow. Right?"

I abruptly stop circling.

Oh my God. OH MY GOD. I *knew* there was a reason they made us study karma in religious education.

"*No*," I squeak, ripping myself free from the wire at the cost of quite a few hairs, a scratch on my cheek, a curtain ring and half a school uniform. "*How* slow?"

"An hour," Aiden says.

And – just like that – both my Get To School On Time Plan and entire life trajectory fly straight out the window.

4

This is so incredibly *typical*.

The *one* time my dad isn't at the back of a photo shoot, trying to 'liven things up a bit' by stealing bits of mannequin and pretending he has three arms and four legs, is the one time I really need him here.

But Dad's at a job interview and I now have less than fifty minutes to get to a destination over an hour away.

As the taxi driver points out cheerfully after I clamber into the back and beg him to hurry: "I can only go as fast as the traffic, Goldilocks. I'm part of it, ain't I?"

Which I would probably look at as a kind of poignant universal truth if I wasn't preoccupied by trying to make myself as light as possible, in the hope that the decreased weight would allow the car to accelerate faster.

And also with correcting his grammar.

There's nothing else I can do. Thanks to the laws of physics – and irony – the factors dictating how fast I get to my exam apparently do not include a) crying,



b) hyperventilating or c) repeating 'sugar cookies' until the taxi driver shuts the internal window and flicks the switch that stops him being able to hear me.

So I may as well use the remaining time constructively to update you on what's been happening in the past six months.

Here's a brief synopsis:

1. I've become even less popular. Geek + Model = a whole new set of graffiti on your belongings.

2. I'm trying to cry less about it. We each expel an average of 121 litres of tears in a lifetime, and I can't afford to dry up before I even hit sixth form.

3. My dad is still out of work, and Annabel is still working as a lawyer. This is worth noting, because my stepmother is now seven months pregnant, and Dad is definitely not.

4. Apparently the average person eats a ton of food a year: the weight of a fully grown elephant. Annabel is doing her best to single-handedly challenge this statistic. She is *huge*.

5. My best friend, Nat, has turned sixteen, and I have not. This means that Nat can now legally play pinball in Georgia, USA after 11pm and fly a plane solo in the UK, and I cannot.

6. I have modelled twice for Baylee, gone on a few go-sees (when not spending time productively locked in a cleaning cupboard) and that's it.

7. I've finally reached the painful conclusion that my hair is not strawberry blonde.

8. It's ginger.

And that's it. Everything else has stayed exactly the same.

My stalker, Toby, still orbits me like some kind of slightly snotty moon and my nemesis, Alexa, still inexplicably hates me.

My agent, Wilbur, still makes up words whenever he feels like it, and the fashion designer, Yuka Ito, is still totally terrifying.

My dog, Hugo, is still fond of sampling anything sticky he spots on the pavement and I still keep my

textbooks lined up in alphabetical, chromatic and subject order.

Because that's how real life is: people and situations and dogs don't change that often, even when you have written *very* careful plans and tried to force them to.

And if I could leave my list there, I would. Because it's a nice list, isn't it? A lovely, positive list that looks forward to an entire summer with Nat, a brand-new graffiti-less satchel next term, and – quite soon – the legal ability to fly planes on my own whenever I feel like it.

But I can't leave it there, because one more thing happened. And – for a little while, anyway – it made all the other points seem less important:

9. Lion Boy dumped me.