

the
NEW GIRL

Harriet Walker

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For Moomy and Pops, who got me here
because they got themselves so far

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NEW GIRL

It looked like she had fallen from the sky.

She was lying on the floor in front of them all, a small puddle of black ink blooming next to her head.

The drum and thud of footfalls died as shoes slowed and stopped, then began to arrange themselves around her. The busy swish of people passing quieted to a few mere shuffles and gasps. Even those subsided within seconds, like coughs at a recital. The chatter of a hundred mouths stopped, as if they had been gagged.

Beyond her—beyond the scene and heedless of the shocked pause it demanded of the onlookers—the world continued. Raindrops broke on the windows; a bird sang in imitation of a mobile phone. In the distance, a door slammed somewhere—the wind must have closed it, because all human activity was, for now, on hiatus for this frozen moment. For her.

Above the body stood two young women, a tableau in symmetry of dumbstruck horror: hands clamped to mouths, eyes roving wildly around the hall—looking everywhere, inquiring urgently of everyone—except in one direction.

The women would not look at each other.

They would never ask each other that question.

The farther the black ink traveled along the pistachio linoleum, the paler and less viscous it became, and the more it began to look like what it really was: blood.

part one

1

MARGOT JONES

I first felt the baby move the day Winnie's son was born. Born, and died an hour later.

I had just stepped from the shower and wrapped a towel around my torso when, deep within, there came a faint throb of activity. A not-quite-roll but a barreling sensation nonetheless, like cresting a dip in the road. A single kick of a swimming stroke, a fillip, a half-pipe completed in utero: the quickening.

It made me gasp, and feel faintly nauseous at the idea of something living inside me. Blame science fiction. Once, this moment spoke of the miracle of life, of the Divine Countenance smiling on the humble and the highborn alike, but these days, every pregnant woman's reference point is an alien escaping a man's chest cavity in a spray of gore.

I smiled then, as the goosebumps on my arms subsided. Later, I would remember my brief shiver of disgust and feel ashamed.

In those same minutes, Winnie's boy was hurtling through hospital corridors in a tiny plastic cot, traces of his mother's blood still clinging to his purplish limbs. By the time I saw the blur of messages and medical terms on my phone from my oldest friend—his heart

had slowed, then rallied—and replied to them in a tumble of horror and relief, it had happened.

The next said, simply, *He's dead*.

I called, but there was no answer. It didn't cross my mind then that I might never speak to my best friend again, but the hollowing sensation that replaced the earlier sprightliness in my gut seemed to presage it—that this awful, awful thing might be the first in twenty years we wouldn't be able to face together. Once the well-wishers disperse and the casserole dishes have been returned, once time goes on and the seasons continue to change, mourning a child is a lonely business.

I left a voicemail and, after I hung up, couldn't remember a word of what I had said. I sent a text: "I'm so sorry, I love you, I'm here when you need me."

I have to get to work. I was due back in the office today after almost a month away at the shows. When I'd started out as an assistant and general dogsbody, I only went to fashion week in London, and even then on the sort of ticket that promised, at best, a standing spot at the back of a drafty hall or warehouse. From there, I'd had to crane my neck for a glimpse of the otherworldly creations below the models' chins.

In those days, I remembered designers' collections for the soundtrack and the hairstyles rather than the clothes—those I looked at online afterward. As I climbed the career rungs, I realized why so many fashion editors were obsessed with shoes: You could only see them once you'd secured your spot on the front row.

This season, I had been to New York, Paris, and Milan too, as I'd done twice a year for the past decade. Except this time, I carried my little swimmer with me, sat cocooning it on hard benches and plush brocade chairs, ushered him or her (we wouldn't find out which, Nick didn't want to) beyond the velvet ropes and black-clad doormen at designer parties and luxury store openings, clinking champagne coupes without drinking from them.

I laughed at my extra passenger when I thought about how impossible it was to smuggle in a plus-one at these events—especially

one who was quite so intent on locating and polishing off whatever elegantly minuscule amuse-bouche happened to be offered on silver platters by waiters who looked like they'd been hewn from marble.

But I was back in London now and had to get to the office. They were choosing my maternity cover today. The person who would take over the job I'd spent ten hard years working for. The prospect of handing it over had seemed appalling, until now. All I could think of now was the little life that had failed to launch just a few miles away.

Winnie and I had been together just that weekend, chatting and giggling. Planning the months we would spend, loosed from our desks and free to roam in daylight hours, with each other and our tiny companions. A new coffee place with regulation bare brickwork and lightbulbs hanging on industrial cable had opened a few minutes' walk down the road from my and Nick's house, and Winnie's bus stopped right outside it.

Winnie knew she was having a boy, had asked the sonographer to let her know as soon as he could tell. She wanted to be able to plan for him and to name him, she said, when I teased her about being a control freak. He had been Jack since twenty weeks.

I had gone to the loo in Winnie's home—I seemed to spend most of my time sitting on one now, squeezing out a few drops every half an hour even though my bladder felt constantly full—and marveled at the rows of tiny white bodysuits hanging up to dry in my friend's bathroom. Then again at the slatted wooden cot made up with bright white sheets, the changing table stocked with diapers, cotton wool, various lotions that even I had never heard of despite having to write about obscure and esoteric-sounding beauty products every so often at work.

Winnie had always been more maternal than me, calmer, more patient, and more instinctive. Kinder, too. She would be such a natural mother that I was grateful for the five months between her due date and mine—five months of expert nurturing that I'd be able to crib from Winnie just as I had my best friend's science notes at school.

I sat on the bus to the office, chest tight at the thought of all that prep, all the folding, stacking, straightening, the lining up of things just so for when Jack finally arrived; eyes stinging at the prospect of Winnie and her husband, Charles, going home to a house so loaded with anticipation it had practically hummed last weekend. I had a vision of their redbrick terrace itself sagging with grief when two, rather than three, reentered it that evening.

They had seemed so ready to be parents—vibrating with potential, sparkling with nervous excitement. As Winnie had nested so thoroughly, Charles had been tying up loose ends at work. His plan was to be at home with them both for the first six weeks of Jack’s life.

“We’ll probably end up killing each other,” Winnie had laughed last Sunday. “Being under each other’s feet for so long.”

I doubted either of them would even raise their voice to the other in that time. They never did.

There was not a note of disharmony between them, as Charles went back and forth from the kitchen, bringing us mugs of tea, fetching the various baby props that Winnie called out for in her show-and-tell for me of what they had amassed ahead of the birth. He’d been as enthusiastic as she was, as pregnant with the father that he would become as she was full of baby.

More than just another protective husband, Charles reminded me of those dogs that refuse to budge from their pregnant owner’s side. He couldn’t do enough for Winnie; he was devoted to her. He had learned foot massage from YouTube. When the time came for them to say goodbye to me, he stood next to her on the front step with his arm protectively around her as they waved me off.

The next scene should have been his opening the door to me to introduce his brand-new son. Not this.

I usually read the news on my phone on my journey into work, but today my eyes absorbed no sense of the words in front of them. As the double-decker made its way through the smog-hazy streets of southeast London, I tried to reconcile the Jack we had all been waiting for, and all the potential he represented, with this dead baby,

cried and keened over instead of cuddled and cooed at, still now where he had squirmed under the tight skin of Winnie's belly only days ago.

It was as though I had woken in a parallel universe, showered and dressed in one and boarded the number 40 to this bizarre new destination. Back in the real world, Jack was surely freshly delivered this morning, warm and snuffly in his mother's arms—arms that, as my most adored friend and loyal champion, Winnie had pressed around me so many times, too.

But my own baby had now moved in this alternate reality. It had asserted its presence, its existence, its claim on me and on the world. And it was the most real—the most alive—thing I had ever felt.

THE CANDIDATES were lined up along one wall by the time I arrived at the office, their glossy heads bent over the screens in their hands as they sat beneath a supersized plastic rendering of the magazine's logo: HAUTE. It was one of Moff's favorite tricks, the placing of the hopeful under this rather literal beacon.

I knew my boss well enough to realize she art-directed almost every aspect of her life. A newshound first and foremost, Moff saw stories everywhere: Shoots, page layouts, and headlines were her daily bread. Two women vying with each other for the rare chance to work at one of the country's most successful fashion magazines—if only for the time that I was on maternity leave—was precisely the sort of real-life scoop that its editor in chief, Emily Moffatt, thrived on. I wouldn't have put it past her to commission the one not chosen to write about the experience for the next issue.

I hurried past them without looking too closely, grateful that my pregnant stomach wasn't obvious just yet, that I still appeared much like the two sleek, well-dressed women who had come to jostle for my position. Though not among the hungriest-looking portion of the fashion industry, I am tall and fairly slim, and I knew with healthy

cynicism that this would be a valuable asset for the power play to come during this morning's interviews. *Not waddling and irrelevant just yet, thanks very much.*

As much as Moff was looking for a stand-in as quick and efficient a writer as her current fashion editor, I was all too aware that my boss would also have a beady eye on how each candidate might look on camera and on the cover, how each might carry off the eye-wateringly expensive designer clothes that hung as higgledy-piggledy and as tightly packed as charity shop donations in the fashion cupboard down the hall.

When I'd arrived as an intern all those years ago, I had been ushered into that cupboard by Moff's PA and instructed to "give it a bit of a tidy."

There was a lot about working at *Haute* that didn't quite live up to the *Devil Wears Prada* paradigm I had arrived with fresh in my mind, aged twenty-two, a month after I'd seen it in the cinema. The freezing-cold office loos that the male bike couriers dropping off logoed garment bags would sneak into to read their tabloids between jobs; the greasy smell of bacon rolls wafting in from Spiros's café on the landing; the blokes from upstairs who worked on *Goal!* and scratched themselves in the lifts; and the mice that regularly appeared beneath the wheels of my office chair to eat the box of cereal I left on my desk.

But it was the state of its fashion cupboard that was the greatest point of divergence from that industry fairy tale. I remembered a time when my eyes, like everyone else's, had lit up at the prospect of seeing inside it. I had expected—as everyone had after that bloody movie—something like a pristine designer boutique, with bottom-lit shelves and discreet house music, shoes and bags in neat rows along each wall as if ready to purchase.

My disappointment at the sight that had greeted me instead was so strong it bordered on disgust. The size of a bathroom—a small one at that—with shelves lining each wall from floor to ceiling and four clothes rails standing in rows in the middle, its floor was waist-deep, from the door to the window on the far wall, with stiff, luxuri-

ous carrier bags from the sort of boutiques that I had, at that point, only ever read about.

Out of them spilled satin stilettos in rich jewel colors, crocodile handbags studded with rose-gold rivets and spikes, printed silk blouses, frothy tulle skirts, leather, denim, shiny lamé, and sparkling sequins. All sent in for the editors and stylists to pick from, to photograph on the hottest models for their pages, to try on and write about, to hype, to hero-worship, to shout about, and to shill—and for the assistants, supposedly, to send back once they were finished with them.

I had never seen such beautiful things close up, had certainly never touched anything like them, never before tried such things on (until the door had been closed on me), but neither had I witnessed such nonchalance toward things that cost triple my monthly salary or more. I had been careful of my belongings from a young age, neat and rigorous, and respectful of an object's worth—not to mention its price. I realized then the gulf between me and the women beyond the door. For them beauty and money were equally disposable, because they had an infinite supply of each.

I liked to think that Moff had hired me for my sparkling prose, my witty repartee, and a writing style that sang from the page—all of which the boss had indeed come to appreciate in her fashion editor—but I knew in my heart that I'd got the job for transforming that cupboard from a yard sale into a lending library.

I had taken a deep breath to steady myself, then cleared the floor of its glamorous debris, lining up the smaller items on shelves initialed according to which editor had requested them and when they'd arrived, and the clothing on hangers ordered by their designer names and the season's trends. Every so often a single shoe or earring would rise like flotsam and jetsam to the top of the pile, and I'd set it aside in the hope of making it once again part of a pair.

I uncovered things that the team had long since assumed were lost and had been charged the full price for by the labels' furious PRs—a fur coat that went straight to Moff's corner office, which she had worn on a semiregular basis every winter since; a diamond

hairslide that Trina, the beauty editor, had clipped in on her wedding day; a bias-cut silk sheath dress that Laura, the then-fashion editor, packed for the shows every season, with a theatrical wink directed at me but done for the rest of the office's benefit.

"Many thanks, Miss Jones! Fashion's most fabulous cleaning lady!" she'd trill.

That had stung a bit. My beginnings admittedly were more ordinary than those of the rest of the women in the office, many of whom came less from family homes than from dynastic seats, but I'd hardly grown up on the breadline. Still, my country accent and the fact I'd caught Moff's eye for clearing up after them was too delightful a Cinderella narrative not to stick.

I blushed and shrugged: Among my finds was a crumpled gabardine trench coat of the sort I liked to imagine Jackie O throwing on over a black sweater and cigarette pants, something for which I would have had to save for several years to buy from the label, and that would have caused me severe angst had I ever had to part with quite so much money for it in a shop.

It was mine, they told me, for the amazing job I'd done for them—little expecting that, ten years on, I'd still be in the office. Still wearing that trench occasionally, in fact, only now more senior than all of them.

I STILL HADN'T HEARD from Winnie by the time the first interview was scheduled to start. I found I couldn't put the tragedy from my mind without another vision of the little cotton hats I'd bought for Jack, the ridiculously small socks we'd both been laughing at on Sunday, the plastic bath propped up beside the sink, floating into my head.

I could hardly believe I hadn't cried yet—thanks to the pregnant hormonal fug I existed in, I'd found myself welling up regularly at TV ads for donkey sanctuaries and life insurance in recent weeks. Instead I felt my friend's grief as a dull physical ache, in my throat,

my heart, my shaking hands, and my stomach, where all fluttering had given way to a sadness as still and as heavy as a boulder. *Perhaps there is an unhappiness beyond tears that is just pain.*

I couldn't tell Moff: I wouldn't know how to say it and she wouldn't know how to hear it. It'd sound like something out of a schmaltzy TV program. *That's the only place you hear about children dying. Children die every day and we just pretend it doesn't happen.* I didn't want to risk bursting into tears in front of my boss: Moff wasn't good with emotions. She'd be shocked and standoffish, and then she would almost certainly send me home. The last thing I wanted was to be alone today.

So I hung my coat up behind my desk and smoothed the oversized shirt I had on underneath with a pair of indigo jeans. *Not in maternity-wear yet!* I rummaged in my stiff leather handbag (pregnancy notes, prenatal vitamins, water bottle, makeup bag) for the black leather pochette that contained my phone, security pass, and notebook, and headed into the glass-walled meeting room next door to Moff's office.

The two women who had applied to cover my job knew me already. They recognized me from my byline photo, an unflatteringly cropped headshot that I loathed and that accompanied most of my articles, right next to my name along the top. They knew me from my seat at the shows, where elaborately calligraphed cards are placed on cushions or at intentionally narrow-hipped intervals on white benches to signify whose bottom goes where. While attendees scan for their own names along the length of the catwalk, they take in the rest as they go, either to drop ambitiously into conversation later on or so they can take merciless aim at that person's perceived failings in the privacy of their own clique.

I had told Moff I had a vague idea of who the two newcomers were, too. In truth, I knew exactly. I had put the same effort into researching my potential replacements as I would into finding my baby's carer once I was ready to come back. This job might not have been performing backflips in my stomach, but it was just as much a part of me. Full-on, often stressful, sometimes infuriating,

but fun and fast-paced: I loved it. Only the most capable pair of hands would do.

A woman capable of following Moff's orders, and equally capable of fucking off again in a year's time.

The first, whom I knew from the society pages, was married to a tinned-food company heir worth millions. I saw Moff's interest pique at the sheer wealth this woman exuded, at her perfect hair caught back in a ponytail that hung down over one shoulder, her glowing skin and buffed nude nails, the pterodactyl-wing elbows that come from consuming just enough calories to function. Her doll-like frame was clad in perfectly fitting black trousers, a simple turtle-neck, and a pair of loafers that almost every editor was on the waiting list for.

My blood ran cold at the prospect of this woman's occupying my desk; I had always been uncomfortable around people this rich and this polished. I knew I was being touchy and insecure (Winnie always upbraided me for it, wagging a finger and tutting: "Not attractive!") but this woman was everything I wasn't, and if she ended up doing my job, Moff might realize how much its original incumbent was lacking in. The confidence that comes with a certain type of education, the presence that gloss and beauty can bestow, the easy chitchat born of an innate knowledge that other people will want to listen. *Absolutely not.*

While Moff tittered at the woman's anecdotes and inquired about other horsey people they had in common, I worked out my strategy. I suspected that someone who didn't strictly need the money the role came with was likely to flinch at the devotion that Moff required of all her staffers. I threw her a few examples of late nights in the office to finish the pages ahead of print deadlines, of writing breaking news on my phone in the street in the rain, of filing a story within minutes to make sure *Haute's* was the very first online.

The woman's deep-set dark eyes widened on either side of her aristocratic nose. *Too easy!* She'd politely retract her interest by email on her way home in a cab.

"And so now we have . . ." Moff looked at the next résumé, once

the first interviewee had swished from the meeting room and the second taken a seat on the other side of the red Perspex table. “Margot?”

“Oh no,” a warm voice corrected her as its owner slid her arms from the sleeves of a well-cut dark blazer. “It says that on my résumé, but I’ve never been a Margot—too formal and fusty for me.” The woman beamed, all telephone-box red lips and tumbling dark curls.

“I’m Maggie.”

2

MAGGIE BEECHER

She almost *died* when she realized what she'd said. Formal! Fusty! Only about the woman's actual name—the name her eyes had danced over for years every time she read an issue of *Haute*, and the name on the masthead inside that hers might well have replaced. She guessed it wouldn't now. *Christ, Maggie, what an idiot move.*

She was always being told, usually by men on building sites or in pubs, that she had a big mouth—with bright red lipstick on, it was one of her best features—but it had never felt big enough to get both feet in it at the same time. Until now. What could she say? She was terrible when she was nervous.

And she was *really* nervous about this interview. These jobs don't come up very often—why would they? It's a pretty plush deal, being fashion editor of a glossy magazine.

You sit there writing about nice things, while the people who make the nice things send them to you, so you can see exactly how nice they are. You travel a lot—to fashion week, sure, but also to interview beautiful, glamorous people in beautiful, exotic locations, and sometimes simply because a brand who wants to get on your good side has enough money to take you there.

Let's just say it was a job she could definitely see herself doing, at least for a year or so until Margot Jones wanted it back. Maggie would be more than happy to keep Margot's seat warm for her.

To the fashion editor's credit, she was nice about it. As Maggie was trying to disguise the full-body cringe her mistake had triggered, Margot smiled and threw her a lifeline.

"Maggie, hi! I never knew you were a Margot, there's always more of us than I realize. How are you?"

What Maggie was tempted to say, by way of an apology, was that the woman opposite her was a total Margot, every inch an M-a-r-g-o-t, in the way she was so, so not. She had never lived up to her elegant name: she was short and busty, a bit crass, and prone to excruciating social gaffes.

The other Margot was tall and willowy—tidy—with long, straight blond hair and very clear, pale skin. She looked immaculate, as always, even though she was probably feeling ropy as fuck underneath it all. How pregnant was she anyway? She couldn't be that far along. Maggie was more bloated than she was, especially when she'd got her arms stuck in the sleeves of the blazer she'd borrowed from her flatmate, Cath.

But Maggie didn't say any of that. She said: "Yeah, I'm good, thanks."

Maggie saw the lights go out behind Emily Moffatt's eyes at that point—before, they'd been twinkling merrily at her mistake and Margot's potential irritation—and cursed her usual curse for not being sparkier or more interesting. But Margot seemed to have faith in her.

They'd first met years ago, on the sort of press trip that brands didn't tend to do that often anymore: expensive, excessive, and thoroughly unnecessary. Some niche vodka company whisked a bunch of journos off to Iceland for three days, put them up in a razzzy hotel, chauffeured them to the hot springs in a fleet of black Mercedes, laid on a helicopter tour of the geysers, and wined and dined them all in edgy Reykjavík restaurants. Maggie had wangled a spot by promising to write about it for the food and drink column in the local paper; Margot was there because she was fashion editor at *Haute*, and that's

the sort of person who needs to know about your niche vodka if you want it to become less niche, in certain circles at least.

It was an odd group. Maggie's heart had sunk slightly when they'd all met up at the gate before the flight and the majority were middle-aged men who covered the consumer beat for the big newspapers. Middle-aged men and this incredibly glamorous blond woman in a black leather biker jacket, gray jeans, and ankle boots who looked as dismayed with her fellow travelers as Maggie was. They might have been thrown together by circumstance, but they bonded after that. The men used the trip to behave like bachelors and drink as though they were childless; the two women entertained themselves by watching them at it.

"Makes me almost glad to be terminally single," Maggie said to Margot on the first night as they sat with their backs to the subway-tiled wall in a cocktail bar that styled itself as a sort of hipster laboratory and served drinks in conical flasks and test tubes. Endearingly European not to realize that there was nothing remotely cool about that concept.

"I'd rather be on my own forever than married to him," she continued as one of the group chased a pixieish Icelandic woman across a dance floor pulsating with people half his age.

Perhaps that was a bit strong, but Maggie was feeling bitter at the time. Her last serious relationship had been nearly six years ago, and she was a couple of months off her thirtieth birthday. She'd gone on some dates since then, had a couple of few-month things, but still nothing long-term. The difference now was that she was finally okay with being by herself. She quite enjoyed it most of the time.

"Safer to have a baby hatched in one of these," Margot had replied, waving the half-empty test tube that she was drinking from. The green liquid sloshed inside.

They laughed then and traded stories about their worst dates: the nose-picker, the drunk, the slightly threatening one (Margot), the one with the full-length leather coat (Maggie).

Maggie got the impression—and she often got it from women her

age in a couple—that Margot was trying to convince Maggie that she would always be single at heart. Lots of them believed that deep down they were this happy-go-lucky girl who lived in a crap flat full of shoes and had just accidentally met the one guy who wasn't a shit. Otherwise they'd have been in Maggie's shoes. In her crap flat. It was an attempt at solidarity, she supposed, which, when it comes from somebody more successful than you, is just another version of pity, isn't it?

They had fun together on the trip. They'd meet for breakfast at the hotel and sit together on all the outings. It was like the friendships you develop at Brownie camp or during Freshers Week: functional but intense, warm but temporary. When she got back, Maggie bought herself approximations of all the outfits she'd seen Margot in, only from significantly cheaper shops where the clothes came in plastic bags rather than paper ones. It sounded a bit creepy when she put it like that, but it was Margot's job to persuade everyone else to dress like her, after all. Maggie supposed she might have been a bit embarrassed if the other woman had found out.

She'd seen Margot a few times since then, at launch parties and the occasional dinner thrown by a new label or a fancy stationery brand—or at a distance from her back-row perch at the shows—and they always chatted. When Margot had texted to say she was pregnant and asked whether Maggie would be up for covering her job, she couldn't believe her luck. It wasn't a dead cert that she'd get it, she knew that much, but having Margot's seal of approval had to count in her favor.

As a freelancer, she was never quite stone broke, but it was either feast or famine when it came to commissions, and there was all too often a bit of a lull between them. A salaried job appealed to Maggie: She could relax a bit, maybe make a start on the savings account she'd been lying to her parents about, or the pension she assured them she had opened. And at a magazine like *Haute*—she would have said it was the icing on the cake, but from what she'd seen that morning, Maggie was fairly sure nobody in that office touched the stuff, iced or otherwise.

She had to say, once they'd got over that initial hitch, the interview seemed to go quite well. Maggie was no fashion editor, but she was a journalist through and through: She knew a good story when she saw one, she knew where to look for them, and she was a master in the art of turning a mere thing into a Thing.

Maggie had always been fascinated by what turned a matter of taste into a trend. She'd discovered, early on, that most people just wanted to know about the stuff that somebody else thinks is worth being interested in.

Her enthusiasm seemed to get Emily Moffatt back on her side reasonably quickly, too—once the editor in chief realized she wasn't just a nervous amateur. Emily Moffatt. Maggie had to keep using her full name because she was *Emily Moffatt*. In magazines, there was nobody more impressive or more high-powered. She got a lot of criticism beyond the fashion world—she was a bitch, a tyrant, a bit of a caricature—but everyone Maggie knew who'd worked with her agreed she was a pro. Even the ones who'd shared an office with her for years still spoke of Emily Moffatt in hushed tones.

And there she was, just like her photo from the papers, sitting opposite Maggie, interviewing Maggie. That artfully blow-dried, raven-black do—the sort that looks like it might lift off like Lego hair; a gray Prince of Wales—check trouser suit so sharply tailored you could dice carrots with it; and a face so subtly, so impeccably worked on you'd have had to cut her open and count the rings to find out her age. Interviewing Maggie!

She had felt, rather than seen, the editor looking at her when she entered the room. Emily Moffatt had appraised Maggie from head to toe in one expressionless rake of the eyes, starting with her hair (she'd had it blow-dried professionally that morning, knowing precisely that her frizzy curls wouldn't play ball on such an important occasion) and finishing with the embroidered velvet slippers she'd panic-bought the night before (she remembered Margot's wearing something similar when they'd last bumped into each other).

Somewhere in between, Emily Moffatt took in Maggie's borrowed blazer (a far better cut and fabric than anything she could af-

ford); her “perfect white tee,” as fashion editors called it (as far as she could tell, the perfection stemmed from its costing almost a hundred quid); her black trousers (reliable, smart); and her vital statistics. It felt like that, anyway. Maggie almost wondered whether her prospective boss would tell her she was in the wrong-size bra, like those fitters in posh shops who know whether you’re a 34C or D from sight alone.

She’d never reveal how long it had taken her to choose this outfit, but she’d missed the deadline on another article because of it. What do you wear to an interview with somebody who decided six months ago what you should be wearing right now?

From the moment she’d started mixing with them—albeit from a distance—Maggie had always been surprised by how fashion editors dressed in real life. They might have been telling you on those shiny pages that the seventies would be big next season, or that it was all about polka-dot everything, but they were more likely to be in jeans and a sweater, or a white cotton shirt, when you spotted them in the wild. Granted, they’d be the It-jeans du jour and the sweater would always be one million percent cashmere, but a few larger-than-life types aside, these women were rarely the peacocks you’d expect them to be.

For them, power dressing wasn’t a “look at me” thing. Status came from going unnoticed, from signaling that they were above the fray—it’s much harder to stand out subtly than it is in a yellow frou-frou frock and matching heels. They left that sort of look to the social media crowd.

At her most cynical, Maggie firmly believed that fashion editors dressed like this as part of an unspoken competition to show off how beautiful they all were, too. It takes youth, exercise, grooming, and a lot of bone structure (or a bit of help) to look good in very little makeup, a navy sweater, and baggy denim. Obviously, Margot had it nailed. Maggie, on the other hand, looked like the sort of teenage boy who communicates only in grunts if she wasn’t wearing a full face of slap and something that pulled her in at the waist. It had taken all her strength not to turn up to the interview in heels.

Her flatmate, Cath, couldn't believe it. "You're never going in your slippers, Maggie?" she'd called in her broad Irish accent that morning as Maggie tore about, trying to get ready.

If Maggie had had more time before her train, she would have pointed out to her flatmate that, if she were being *truly* fashionable, she'd have been wearing them with a pair of silk pajama bottoms, too. No, really.

If Emily Moffatt had done a full survey of Maggie as she sat down, then Margot, Maggie observed, was the opposite. The younger woman seemed off in her own world, icy blue eyes unfocused, a sliver of tooth visible as she chewed her bottom lip, one hand worrying the pen she was holding. She had barely even seemed to register Maggie until she had started talking (oh *God*, that stupid opening gambit again).

In fact, Margot was so zoned out that Maggie wondered whether they were going to pretend they didn't know each other. She'd heard of some maternity covers where the pregnant woman and applicant had to do that, because the person in charge wouldn't give anyone suggested by their employee a fair hearing—they didn't like the idea of the new person's having been sanctioned by the old, in case they were left with a duffer or a bore, somebody the mum-to-be deemed a safe choice.

Of course she'd wondered whether Margot had sought her out precisely because she didn't think Maggie was a threat. She'd have been an idiot not to. The answer seemed plain enough: She was shorter, fatter, less glamorous, and less successful than her. Little ordinary-looking Maggie to Scandi-chic Margot. She was exactly who Margot would want doing her maternity cover. But Maggie liked to think the fashion editor also believed she was up to the job, and that she'd be a loyal presence at her desk rather than a snake in the grass.

Margot had been friendly enough once they'd started and warmed up as things went on. The rest of the interview was more like a chat than an interrogation; Maggie even managed a few jokes along the way. As they finished up and Emily Moffatt told the candi-

date she'd hear from her PA within a few days, Margot even flashed her a warm smile. Maggie felt like the pregnant woman was telling her it had gone well, and she was so relieved she almost forgot to ask her question.

She'd always been told that asking your own question during an interview makes you look positive and engaged—as long as you ask the right one, of course. She had come with one all prepared.

“What are the chances of remaining a contributor at *Haute* once Margot is back from her maternity leave?” Maggie said, directing it toward the magazine's head honcho.

It was then that something odd happened to Margot. One minute, she'd been checking her phone—that quick email refresh and catch-up that has become acceptable even when someone is talking to you. The next, she was pale and trembling, her lips white against gray, clammy skin in which her eyes stood out, urgent and piercing. Staring at Maggie but also through her, the sinews in her neck taut.

“We'll have to get back to you on that, Maggie,” she said curtly. “If there isn't anything else . . . ?”