

ONE

The sound of high heeled shoes echoed around the vast, white atrium. A young blonde was striding purposefully towards the reception desk.

“Hi,” the girl said brightly. “My name’s Abigail Turner. I’m here to interview.”

That much is obvious, thought the receptionist, noting the innocent, brown eyes and the forced smile. Despite the aura of self-confidence she was trying to exude, there was something that gave her away. She was clearly petrified.

“Which department?”

“Corporate Finance.”

“For the position of... secretary, yes?”

“No - *analyst,*” the girl replied, her expression suddenly hardening.

Ooh. So she was one of them. The receptionist nodded calmly. She’d come across girls like this before - hoity-toity twenty-somethings who thought they could hack it in the world of investment banking. She glanced disdainfully at the scowling blonde, who looked *exactly* like a secretary: skinny, attractive and well-dressed in a cheap sort of way,

with exceptionally long legs. No, she thought. This girl wouldn't last five minutes as an analyst - not at Cray McKinley.

* * *

Abby snatched the temporary pass from the woman and turned abruptly on her heel. *Secretary, for God's sake.* She'd show them. She wasn't spending four years at Cambridge learning thermodynamics and quantum mechanics to do dictations and answer the phone.

She pretended to fiddle with the pin on her pass as she studied the turnstiles up ahead. A young man barged through, slamming his pass down on the side as he rammed into the barrier. Abby took a deep breath and did the same, then instantly became disorientated. A pure, brilliant whiteness surrounded her, and she lost all sense of direction. It was impossible to tell where the walls ended and the ceiling began. She looked around, searching for some sort of reference point.

A set of lifts appeared from nowhere, along with a group of suited young men. As Abby approached, something struck her about the men: *they all looked exactly the same.* They were all in their mid-twenties with spiky hair and shiny, tanned skin, wearing immaculately ironed shirts. And they were all incredibly good-looking.

Abby stationed herself on the edge of the group, maintaining an air of indifference. Inside, she was

panicking. She felt sure her nylon suit stood out as cheap, and her friend's pointy shoes were making her too tall.

The ride up to the twentieth floor was excruciating. The bankers didn't speak. They just stood, shoulder to shoulder, like a huddle of penguins with newspapers tucked under their wings. Occasionally one would clear his throat or surreptitiously check his hair in the mirrored wall, but as soon as Abby managed to catch his eye, he'd get back to staring at his feet. Had she not felt so nervous, Abby would have taken offence. None of the men had given her a second glance since she'd stepped into the lift. She exhaled shakily and wiped her sweaty palms on the sides of her trousers. There was a churning sensation in the pit of her stomach.

As the doors slid shut on the nineteenth floor, Abby looked across at the one remaining passenger – a tall, suave guy with dark hair. He was good-looking in an unconventional way: dusky skin and a shallow dent in the middle of his nose.

He looked up, suddenly. Abby held his gaze for a fraction of a second, then turned away, blushing. His eyes were incredible. Bottle-green, like the colour of the sea on an airbrushed postcard. The temporary swipe-card clipped to his jacket told Abby that his name was Mike. He was another applicant.

“Can I take your names, please?” said a high-pitched female voice.

Abby stepped out of the lift and stepped into what looked like an airport lounge – vast and airy, and dotted

with brown leather armchairs, matching coffee tables and pots of identical ferns. But the most distracting feature was the wall straight ahead. It was made of tinted glass, and extended from floor to ceiling all the way across, revealing a vast, sepia image of the City of London. The Millennium Dome, Canary Wharf, Tower Bridge, St Paul's Cathedral, the OXO tower, the London Eye-

"Your name?"

The voice was coming from behind a clipboard, and sounded rather agitated this time.

"Abigail Turner," she replied hastily. The voice, it turned out, belonged to a tall, striking brunette - probably no older than Abby - with unfeasibly large breasts and a suspiciously healthy tan for the time of year.

"Great," the young woman said brusquely, drawing a tick on her clipboard in a very self-important manner and fixing a smile on her rubbery lips. "I'm Claudia. Just take a seat and make yourself at home." She motioned to the clusters of nervous-looking candidates who were perching on the uncomfortably low armchairs. "My colleague, Stephanie, will be along shortly. She'll call you for your interviews and numerical assessments."

Abby nodded politely. There was a frenzy of pouting, hair-flicking and eyelash-batting as Claudia moved on to the good-looking guy behind her. Abby headed for the pots of coffee.

"Uh-huh! Another female!" said a timid-looking girl who was concentrating very hard on pouring the milk into her cup. "Not many of us here today, are there?"

Abby's feeling of insecurity began to seep away. This gawky creature with her fuzzy hair and ill-fitting lilac suit was Abby's competition for the day.

"No," Abby smiled at the nervous wreck. "But I guess that's banking for you."

The girl tittered awkwardly.

"I'm Abby, by the way."

"Um, oh - Jackie Crump." The girl giggled again, not quite brave enough to reach out and shake Abby's hand.

Abby was feeling more and more confident by the second. There were only three girls in the room, as far as she could see, and it was likely that the firm would accept at least one. If the other girl was anything like this Jackie Crump, Abby was laughing all the way to her desk.

"You came all the way from *York*, did you?" a small, weasly fellow in a brown tweed suit was asking, staring in horror at the applicant in the armchair opposite. "Good God - that's practically *Scotland*! I'm glad I didn't have that far to come - I only came from *Oxford*."

Abby pulled up a small leather foot-rest and sat down. They were obviously trying to out-university each other.

"I'm Abby," she announced, thrusting her hand at the tweed-clad rodent.

"Pleasure," he said patronisingly. "I'm Humphrey. Humphrey Dartington, like the crystal - ahahahahaha!"

Abby gave an obliging grunt and moved her hand round to the *York* undergraduate, who nervously introduced himself as Mark.

“Nice to meet you,” he muttered, looking everywhere but into her eyes. He had the limpest grasp Abby had ever experienced; it was like shaking hands with a fish.

The dumpy young man to her right didn't notice her hand as it was waved in front of his nose, and after a few seconds, she gave up and put it away. He seemed to be engrossed in the book on his lap, which he was propping open with his elbows, his fingers stuffed in his ears.

The Revolution in Corporate Finance, Abby read in the top left corner of the page. Jesus Christ. The guy was revising for his interview.

Humphrey Dartington turned to Abby. “Did *you* have far to come today?”

“Oh – not really!” she replied breezily.

He looked annoyed. “I was just saying, luckily I only had to travel from *Oxford*. What about you?”

Abby shrugged. “Same distance, I guess – about an hour by train.” She wasn't going to rise to the bait.

The young man nodded sullenly. “So... what do we all think of the proposed changes to the Listing Rules, eh?”

Abby raised her eyebrows questioningly. “I'm sorry?”

“You know – the FSA? The Listing Rules? The proposal to take account of treasury shares?”

Mark from York looked anxiously from Humphrey to Abby, then back again.

“Oh, I shouldn't think it'll happen,” Abby said boldly. She had no idea what Humphrey was on about, but she had a feeling that neither did he.

“Wha-” Mark had turned quite pale.

“Do we know what time these interviews are due to start?” asked Abby, glancing around the table.

The guy on her right started flapping his elbows from side to side in an attempt to turn a page of *The Revolution in Corporate Finance* without unplugging his ears.

“They’ll start at ten, I should imagine,” Humphrey declared. “Always the way with these American banks – herd all the applicants into one room, then let them sit and stew for an hour before grilling them over a case study.”

Mark looked horrified. “Case stud-”

“How d’you know?” asked Abby. She wasn’t fazed. She’d met his type before. “Have you interviewed with other banks?”

“Oh no!” Humphrey laughed as if the very notion was absurd. “Contacts.” He winked and tapped the side of his nose. “*Contacts.*”

She smiled falsely. “Right.”

“This is my first interview,” ventured a sweet looking guy with lots of freckles whose badge proclaimed him to be Alan. “I haven’t heard back from the others yet.”

Mark from York smiled with relief. “Me neith-”

“Ah, you will,” Humphrey assured them. “Give it a couple of weeks – they usually get back to the dead-certs first, then wait to see who accepts before trawling through all the borderline CVs. That’s how they do it these days,” he explained.

“Oh, is that *so*?” Abby asked loudly. The busty HR girl lowered her clipboard and glowered at her from across the room.

“Certainly is,” Humphrey muttered, reaching down to the coffee table and idly flicking through the Financial Times.

Abby exchanged a sly grin with the freckly Alan. Her tolerance level for pompous, tweed-wearing know-alls was fairly high after four years at Cambridge, but this Humphrey Dartington twat was really starting to bug her.

“ABBY TURNER?” called a female voice. Abby looked up to see another brunette – this one taller and slimmer than the first, with more realistically-sized breasts – standing by the lifts. “COULD YOU FOLLOW ME TO YOUR FIRST INTERVIEW?”

TWO

Room 20.02 was like a miniature version of the waiting room: thick pile carpets, silky cream wallpaper, unrealistically green pot plants and leather armchairs in chocolate brown. By the window was a large, polished mahogany table, behind which were two silhouettes.

Mike pressed the door shut behind him and marched purposefully towards the empty chair. He impulsively ran a hand through his short, dark hair and realised – with satisfaction – that one of his interviewers was a woman.

She was clearly of the no-nonsense variety, wearing immaculate makeup and a neat little suit. Her chestnut hair was cut in a severe-looking bob. As Mike approached, she slipped off her chair – which made virtually no difference to her height, he noticed – and thrust out a hand weighed down with a rock-like jewel.

“You must be Michael,” she said authoritatively. “I’m Jennifer Armstrong. And this is Paul Fletcher.”

Paul Fletcher was tall and muscular, possibly more stacked than Mike, with a strong jaw line and cropped blonde hair. He smiled warmly as they exchanged a bone-crushing handshake.

“Right,” said Jennifer, hopping back onto her seat and tapping her pen impatiently on the table. “It says here you’re applying to work in the Paris branch of Cray McKinley; is this correct?”

Mike smiled. He’d successfully predicted the first question. “Yes that’s right – I’ve been studying French at Edinburgh for four years, and I’m keen to put my skills into practice. I figured Cray McKinley Paris would be a good place to do that.”

Paul nodded encouragingly, then stopped, and pointed his finger at Mike. “Y’know things happen a little differently in the Paris office,” he said, with a thick New York accent. “It’s kinda small-scale over there; less glitzy – more low-key. Y’know that, dontcha?”

Mike hadn’t known that. His mind drifted back to that impressive white atrium twenty floors below, and the slick young bankers he’d seen strutting through the doors. He wondered if he was making a terrible mistake. *Less glitzy. More low-key.* What was that supposed to mean? Was the office tucked away in a dingy basement of some graffiti-scrawled tower block in the outskirts of Paris? Would there be no glamorous receptionist? No in-house Starbucks? Mike pulled himself together. Now was not the time to be having doubts.

“Yeah – I heard that. But I figured that as a first-year analyst, I’d get a greater share of the responsibility if the deals and teams were smaller.” Mike had always been good at bullshitting.

“Right,” Paul nodded. “Yeah – I guess you’re probably right.”

The woman scowled at her colleague, then looked at Mike.

“Why did you apply to Cray McKinley?”

Mike paused for a suitable length of time. These questions were a piece of cake. “Well, I’m an ambitious person, and I always aim for the best–”

“Have you applied to other investment banks?” she interrupted.

“Well–”

“Be honest – don’t lie.”

“No,” Mike lied.

“Slightly *over*-confident, wouldn’t you say, applying to just one bank?”

“Well I did apply to a *couple* of others–”

“I see.” She looked unimpressed. “Now tell me, Michael, is it the salary that appeals to you in this job?”

“Oh no – it’s–”

“So you’re not driven by money?”

“No.”

“You want to be a banker,” she said slowly, “but you’re not driven by money. OK...”

“Oh, well I like *working* with financial–”

“Good. Now it says here you’re the captain of the university rugby team. Tell me, how do you see your team mates? Do you see them as equals? Or as subordinates?”

“Well, obviously I’m in *charge* of them–”

“So you’re a leader, are you?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“You like giving orders?”

“Well, yes.”

“So you’re not very good at *taking* orders, presumably?”

“Oh, I don’t mind taking orders—”

“Hmm. Are you a sociable person, Michael?”

“Yes - very.”

“You go out a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Do you ever let your friends down?”

“Oh no - I never let people down. I do my utmost to—”

“So if you were put on an important transaction that meant working through the weekend, you’d still meet up with your friends on the Saturday night?”

“Oh, well if *that* was the case, I’d cancel my—”

“You’d let your friends down?”

“No. Yes—”

“You are aware of the long hours required of our analysts here, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes.” He nodded sagely. Everybody knew about the long hours.

“Good. And your rugby - do you intend to keep playing in London?”

“Well, I hope to play a little, obviously not as much as—”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Er, n-no—”

“Good.” Jennifer Armstrong clasped her little hands together, and looked meaningfully at her colleague. Mike

took the opportunity to rearrange his features: shoulders back, head casually to one side, face calm and expressionless. He felt tense after the barrage of questions – some of them really quite obscure, he thought – and was becoming increasingly aware of his body language letting him down.

“So Michael...” Paul began, as if he didn’t really know what to ask. “Tell me about a deal, y’know, a deal that caught your eye in the press recently.”

Great. They were back on track. Mike put a hand up to his chin, and pretended he was thinking about the question for the first time in his life. “Hmm. Ooh – I was reading the other day about the Sentron IPO...” And he was off. Mike had done his homework. He knew just about every detail of the Sentron IPO that was in the public domain.

“Well,” said Paul, leaning back in his chair at the end of Mike’s enthusiastic overview. “Y’know what? I *worked* on that IPO, and I didn’t know half that stuff!” He shook his head, chuckling to himself, until he caught the look in his colleague’s eye. “Er, anyway. Right. So, have you ever worked in finance before?”

Mike recalled his pre-made response. This part was going to be tricky. “Oh yes.” He nodded with conviction. “In fact, not only *worked*, but *traded*, as it happens. I’ve been dabbling in the markets for some time–” not strictly true, but he’d once inherited some shares – “and I like to keep an eye on what’s–”

“You do understand the difference between Investment Banking and Equity Trading, don’t you Michael?” Jennifer Armstrong cut in.

“Yes, absol-”

“You won’t be ‘dabbling in the markets’ if you join Corporate Finance, you know.”

“Oh I didn’t mean-”

“In fact, perhaps you could define the role of Corporate Finance within the bank?”

“Well...” Mike scoured his memory for the definition he’d seen on the company website. “Corporate Finance is the area of finance involving decision-making by the management of corporations, for example take-over bids, public offerings and certain types of restructuring.”

That was one of the benefits of being an arts student: the ability to rote-learn chunks of text. The woman raised her pencilled-on eyebrows and nodded reluctantly at Mike.

“So...” muttered Paul. He seemed to be finding the interview as stressful as Mike was. “Say... What’s your greatest achievement in life?”

Straight from the Interviewer’s Handbook, thought Mike. He had a number of pre-prepared answers up his sleeve. There was the time he’d saved his sister’s life in the pool when he was eight... but that was a long time ago, and sounded rather pathetic now, coming from a twenty-two year old. There was the modelling he’d done for Marks and Spencer... but it wasn’t really an *achievement*. And then there was the village fete he’d helped to organise last year... He looked at Paul.

“Running the New York Marathon.”

Paul’s eyes lit up. “Which year?” he cried excitably. “I ran it in 2003!”

“Oh really?! I did it the year after!” This was good; they were bonding.

Jennifer Armstrong looked cross. “How’s your maths, Michael?”

“Well,” Mike shrugged. “Obviously, I’ve been studying languages for the last-”

“What’s thirteen percent of two hundred and fifty?”

Mike thought carefully. This was easy, he told himself. He’d always been good at maths.

“Thirty-two and a half.”

She nodded curtly, and scribbled something on her notepad. Mike thought he saw Paul smile faintly. Yes – they were definitely bonding.

“OK,” Jennifer Armstrong snapped, ripping off the sheet from her pad like a doctor issuing a prescription. “That’ll be all. Paul, do you have any more questions?”

He let out a long ‘phhhhhh’ noise and slowly shook his head.

“Good. Michael, do you have any for us?”

Mike had a selection of ‘sensible questions’ up his sleeve for moments exactly like this. “Well, I-”

Ms Armstrong suddenly jerked her head backwards, tapping her watch irritably.

“-think that just about covers everything,” he concluded.

The tiny figure jumped down from her chair and held out her hand. Paul did the same, with considerably more ease.

“What position d’you play on the field, then?” he asked.

Mike looked up and smiled. “Number eight. You play?”

“I have done – more of a football man myself. *American* football to you I guess,”

“Oh! I once–”

“Excellent. Well, thank you for coming, Michael,” the woman cut in. “I believe you’re to make your way back to the reception area now.”

Striding down the corridor, Mike let out an exhausted sigh. It was mid-afternoon, and he’d been under observation since nine o’clock that morning. He’d been put through two interviews, a numerical assessment, a psychometric test and a tiresome teambuilding exercise involving a shoebox, some string and a hard-boiled egg. He wondered what he’d have to do next. A corporate pantomime? A spelling test? A wheelbarrow race around the twentieth floor?

The tension in the lounge appeared to have slackened off a little since lunch. Mike meandered over to the tea-trolley, where two candidates were chatting, and a third one, a girl, was loitering awkwardly beside them, trying to join in.

“No, no! The answer is *definitely* six hundred and twenty million,” declared the shorter young man – an Etonian, Mike presumed, judging by the brown tweed jacket and the accent.

“I’m not saying you’re *wrong*,” argued the taller one, a Geordie. “I’m just saying I don’t think there *is* a right

answer. The point is, they don't care *what* figure y' say; they just want to hear how y' get to it, don't they? To make sure you're good at reasoning, like."

"Oh dear - I think I messed that one up *completely!*" muttered the girl, pulling her mouth into a straight line.

The Etonian pressed his face up to Mike's. "Did *you* get asked the ice cream question?"

"Er, what?"

"How many ice creams d'you think are sold in the UK each year?"

Mike frowned.

"I mean, I *know* the answer's six hundred and twenty million - I've had that question before! I looked it up on the Internet!"

"Dear me," whispered the girl, "I was a long way off!"

The Geordie lad pulled an exasperated face.

"OK!" screeched a loud female voice.

Mike looked round to see the HR girl standing by the window, clapping her hands above her head, making her enormous tits bounce up and down.

"OK! Listen up! Those of you in Group A, you're done - you may leave. You'll be notified either way within the next three days. Everyone in Group A, you're free to go!"

Mike picked up his jacket and made for the lifts. It was the first good thing she'd said all day.

THREE

There was a honking noise as Abby squeezed on the brakes and continued to hurtle across the gravel, heading straight for the brick wall. Flinging her legs out wide and trailing her feet along the ground, she brought the bike to a wobbly halt. She slung a chain round its back wheel, dumped it in a hedge and ran onto the sidelines.

“What’s the score?” she asked one of the spectators, a lanky fellow she didn’t recognise – presumably a sub for the opposition.

“One all,” he grunted, keeping his eyes on the game. “Two minutes left.”

Abby squinted into the low winter sun, and saw the little white ball skim to the far side of the pitch. A Cambridge player with sandy blonde hair launched himself across the astroturf and hooked the ball with his stick. Abby smiled as Ben took command of the game, dribbling the ball up the wing, dodging stealthily past the defence.

“Oh no,” muttered the spectator.

She glanced up at the gangly man. He was definitely a sub for the opposition, she thought, noticing the crest on his shirt saying St Ives 1^{sts}. Abby craned her neck to see who else was on the sidelines. The Blues coach was at the far end, fists clenched in anticipation. A couple of blondes

wearing their boyfriends' turquoise scarves stood clapping their gloved hands together, and then there was a line of strangers, whom Abby took to be with St Ives.

There was a loud thud, followed by the sound of a whistle and a tremendous, collective roar. Abby whirled back to face the pitch. The Cambridge boys were running about like lunatics - yelling, whooping and shaking their sticks. They were converging on Ben, leaping at him, hugging him and jumping on his back as though he were on fire and they were trying to put out the flames. It occurred to Abby that she'd just missed the most important part of the match: the part where her boyfriend scored the winning goal.

"Hey!" cried Ben, flinging his stick down as he saw Abby on the sideline. He was grinning like a little kid. This was Ben at his most adorable. "You came!" He wiped his glistening forehead and ran a hand through his hair, leaning forward to give her a kiss.

Usually a quick peck on the cheek would have done, but today she grabbed him by the collar and kissed him properly on the lips. Ignoring the wolf-whistles from the other lads, she locked her arms around Ben's hot neck and pulled his body close to hers.

"Woah - what was that in aid of?" he asked, beaming, as he finally pulled away.

Abby shrugged. "Just to say well done."

“Hmm, I should score goals more often,” he remarked, chucking his astro-glove into the kit bag and kicking his boots off on the concrete.

“And to celebrate.”

“Celebrate?” he frowned. “We were only playing St Ives, Abby - not the bloody Netherlands!”

“Well, we’ve got something else to celebrate, too.”

“Eh?”

She extracted the crumpled, off-white paper from her pocket and passed it over.

Ben’s pale blue eyes narrowed.

“Go on-” she motioned for him to look at the screwed up letter. “Read it.”

With a quick glance at his team mates, who were all stomping towards the clubhouse, slapping each other on the back and laughing, Ben turned to study the piece of paper.

Abby watched his expression change. “Cray McKinley?” he said quietly. “What... the investment bank?”

Abby smiled.

“So...” Ben suddenly looked perplexed. “You applied to Cray McKinley?”

“Yeah.” Abby’s smile faded. She knew what Ben was thinking. *Why hadn’t she told him about the interview?*

“Why didn’t you tell me about the interview?”

“In case I didn’t get the job,” she said quickly. “Come on - let’s go inside. You’re standing around covered in cold sweat. We’ll get a drink from the bar.”

She bent down, picked up his kit bag and marched towards the clubhouse before he had a chance to object. This

was the reaction she'd been dreading. Poor Ben. He'd spent the last two weeks filling out application forms for management consultancy jobs, and he hadn't received a single response. Now here she was waving her offer letter at him – an offer of a job at Cray McKinley. He was bound to feel a bit outdone.

Abby was sitting on a bar stool playing with the ice cubes in her drink and wondering how to make it up to him when Ben emerged, hot and damp from the changing rooms. He grabbed her round her waist and pressed his lips against hers.

“Cheers–” he said, grinning, holding up his Coke.

She smiled and raised her glass.

“So! Investment banking, eh?” he said.

Abby looked at him sheepishly.

“After you told me that I shouldn't apply for management consultancy because the city was ‘fucking boring’.”

“I didn't say it was ‘fucking boring’,” she replied carefully. “I said the people who *worked* in the city were fucking boring.”

“And now you suddenly find them interesting?”

“No – I still find them boring, but I think *I* could work there and be different.”

Ben smiled and shook his head.

“What?” Abby didn't like people taking the piss.

“No – nothing!” he laughed. “You’re probably right!” Ben waved at the barman and held out his glass for a top-up. “What’s the starting salary?”

“Forty k,” she mumbled into her Coke.

Ben slammed the glass on the bar and held onto it. The barman leapt backwards and busied himself with some bottles.

“Forty k?!” Ben repeated, staring at Abby. “That’s shitloads!”

She smiled awkwardly. “I know.”

Ben’s hand slithered off the glass, and the barman swooped forward to whisk it away.

“What do they make you *do*, for that kind of money?”

“Well, the work’s supposed to be hard, and the hours are quite long, but I reckon I’m quicker and more efficient than most, so I won’t turn into one of those zombies who spend their whole lives in the office.”

“You’d better not,” Ben warned.

Abby smiled and swivelled on her stool so that her knees were nestled between his.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me, Abby – when was the interview?”

“Last Wednesday. When I said I had a basketball match in Surrey.”

Ben nodded, looking quite hurt.

“Don’t worry,” she said, putting a hand on his thigh. “I haven’t got any other secrets – I just didn’t want everyone getting their hopes up. Didn’t want to look like a failure.”

“Abby, I’m the one that’s applied to seven consultancies and heard nothing back from any of them!”

Oh dear. Bad choice of words. “Well... that’s management consultancy for you. It’s a nightmare to get into. Banking’s much easier,” she lied, although Ben didn’t look convinced. “And it’s only November. Most people haven’t even thought about applying for jobs – you’re well ahead of the game.”

He nodded reluctantly, and took his drink from the barman.

“What about your MoD offer?” he asked suddenly.

Ben had a point. Abby had worked for the Ministry of Defence every summer throughout university, and they’d paid her thousands of pounds in sponsorship. If she turned down their graduate job offer, she’d have to pay a lot of that money back. But Abby had thought this through.

“Stuff the MoD,” she said dismissively. “I never wanted to work for them. I can pay them back with the sign-on bonus from Cray McKinley.”

“Sign-on bonus?”

“Yeah – I get one of those ‘golden handshake’ thingies. Eight grand. I could write off my student debt *and* pay back the MoD with that.”

Ben ran a hand through his wet blonde hair. “Eight grand...?”

“The MoD was dull,” she said. “Slow-moving. Boring projects. Stupid people. Crap money. And I *hated* being a small cog in a big machine.”

“Cray McKinley’s a big machine too,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but at least small cogs get the chance to become big cogs there, if they’re good enough.”

“I guess,” he agreed sceptically. “But careful, Abby – it’s a man’s world, investment banking. There’re stories every day in the press about sexual harassment and stuff, and–”

“Ben,” she cut in. “*Physics* is a man’s world.”

She knew she was right; being a female in a man’s world had never held Abby back. In fact, being an *attractive* female in a man’s world gave her a distinct advantage. It would be just the same at Cray McKinley, she felt sure.

“Speaking of which,” she said, checking her watch. “I should go – I’ve got a lecture.”

They both drained their glasses and stood up.

“Well played today,” she said, looking up into his eyes.

“Well *done* today,” he replied, nodding at the letter she was still clutching.

Abby pushed up onto her tiptoes and kissed him, then with an affectionate smile, dashed off.

FOUR

Mike sifted through the stack of mail in his letterbox. Having removed the letters addressed to Matt Cunningham, the geek in the year below, and the correspondence from Avenues, the country's largest introduction agency - the rugby lads' idea of a joke - there were four envelopes in his hand. Two looked like college junk mail, one was a bank statement, and the other was a heavy, A4 package - thick, cream woven paper with a London postmark. This was the one he'd been waiting for.

Stuffing the other three into his kit bag, Mike tore open the anonymous envelope and pulled out the sheaf of paper. Yes, this was it. Cray McKinley headed paper. Multiple pages, he noted. A good sign.

'Dear Michael,' it began. Mike didn't bother with the blurb. He just wanted a yes or a no. Scanning the first paragraph, his eyes stopped on the word 'delighted'.

'...to offer you a position at Cray McKinley,' he read.

Mike felt a surge of something rush through his body. This was it. This was confirmation of the glittering career that lay ahead for him in London. He had a job offer from Cray McKinley, the best-paying firm in the city. This was the moment he'd been daydreaming about for the last two

months. He was going to be an investment banker. Mike looked around to check that nobody was watching, then punched the air. *Yes*. Life didn't get much better than this.

He ran towards the clubhouse with newfound energy. It was as though he'd just taken an ecstasy pill; he felt capable of anything. The urge to do cartwheels along the edge of the pitch was so strong that he nearly hurled himself onto the touchline, but remembered just in time that he couldn't actually do cartwheels, and made do with sprinting to the clubhouse door.

"Afternoon!" he boomed, trying to control the excitement in his voice.

"Mickey! Not like you to be late!" It was the other Mike speaking - Minnie. When Mike Atkins had joined the squad a year ago, things had got a bit confusing on the pitch. So right at the start of this season, they'd been allocated nicknames: Mickey (Mike Cunningham-Reid) and Minnie (Mike Atkins). Minnie had never really taken to his name on the team, but being scrum-half and several inches shorter than the captain, he didn't have much say in the matter.

"Minnie, what are you *wearing*?" Mike asked, staring at the little player, who was sporting a pair of red knee-length shorts in a floral design and a yellow T-shirt saying *Dude*. The thin white socks only made it half way up his stumpy shins.

"Oh, er, yeah. Sorry - my kit's dirty."

"But you knew we had practice today!"

Jenkins, the bulky full-back leaned across. "His mummy's taken it home for a good wash," he whispered loudly.

Mike shook his head and dropped his kit bag on the floor. He felt like laughing. Everything seemed funny this morning - even the state of his scrum-half.

"Looking smug, Mickey," commented James, or Hooker as he was known, for more reasons than one. "Get laid last night, did you?"

Mike raised an eyebrow cryptically and said nothing. The boys could think what they liked. Another day, the answer might have been a yes, but today he was smirking for a different reason. Mike wasn't sure whether to tell his team mates about the job offer or not. Some of them were applying for positions in the city, and having trouble even getting to the interview stage. As captain, he had to tread carefully. He wanted admiration and respect from the lads, but he didn't want resentment.

"Where's Jim and Dan?" he asked.

Jim and Dan were the latest recruits to the squad, both of them second-years. They were nimble and accurate, and the fastest wings Mike had ever played with, but it was their attitude off the pitch that was worrying the captain. They just didn't act like part of the team.

"Anyone?" he pleaded. "Has anyone seen Jim or Dan?"

Blank looks from all the boys.

"OK. I'll call them. Greg's already out there, so get kitted up and start doing laps."

Greg was the new coach. He had withdrawn from professional rugby with a hamstring injury after only six months in the game, and now devoted most of his time to the university team.

“MY GOD! LOOK AT THAT!” roared BFG – the Big Fat Goon. The flanker was holding up a double-page spread – ‘spread’ being the operative word – from a magazine he’d found stuffed between the slats of the bench. The players converged on the naked woman like kids around an ice cream van.

“C’mon guys, get out on the pitch!” Mike ordered, booting the lads out the door. He wasn’t really cross. Nothing could make him cross today.

Finally, the squad was complete. “Just one more lap!” yelled Greg from the touchline.

“Alright for you,” gasped BFG, dropping to the back of the pack. Mike pushed forward, to be running alongside Chris, his best mate from school. It was strange playing with Chris again after so many years. Mike had persuaded him to trial a few months ago, after a spate of injuries had left a hole in the team, and he’d played as centre ever since. They jogged around the edge of the pitch listening to the sound of their own breath and the squelch of the mud under their feet.

“How’s things?” Mike panted.

Chris looked up. “Good. You?”

“Good, yeah...” He just had to share it with someone. “Did I tell you I applied to Cray McKinley a few weeks ago?”

“The merchant bank?”

“Investment bank – yeah. I just heard back this morning–” Mike filled his lungs. “Got the job!”

“Really?” Chris gasped. “That’s fantastic, mate! Awesome.”

They were nearly back at the clubhouse. A writhing mass of bodies had formed around the coach, stretching, bending, crouching, twisting.

“Right lads,” yelled the coach. “We’ve got a full squad today, so we’re gonna start with fitness, do some ball-skills then move into a game. It’ll be hard work, OK?”

Mike divided the wandering players into groups. They were like sheep, he thought as he pushed them into place. They’d do anything he told them to. But he didn’t begrudge that. He loved his position on the team.

Greg had not been exaggerating when he’d said ‘hard work’. After twenty minutes of drills, the students were staggering about at the side of the pitch, spluttering, panting and gasping for air. Mike lay flat on his back in the mud, staring up into the white-grey sky, hearing nothing but the thumping pulse in his ears. His lungs were aching from all the sharp intakes of cold air, and his muscles felt stretched and worn. There was no denying it, though. Greg was a fucking good coach.

It was at Wellington College that Mike had earned the nickname Sticky Mickey, for his ability to cling to the ball. And by some quirk of fate, here he was again on a Wednesday afternoon, passing and catching with his school

friend Chris. The drill was easy, and neither one of them needed to concentrate. Pass, switch, catch, pass, switch, catch... They could have done it with their eyes shut.

“So what’ll you be doing in this job of yours then, Mickey?” shouted Chris as he hurled the ball backwards.

Mike glanced cautiously from side to side; he hadn’t had a chance to explain that he wanted to keep this quiet.

“Corporate finance!” Mike shouted, as softly as he could.

“Chalk and diamonds?!”

“*Corporate finance!*” Mike articulated, increasing the volume slightly. “You know – transactions and stuff!”

“Oh!” Chris lurched forwards to receive Mike’s pass, which had been uncharacteristically weak.

“Come on you two!” yelled Greg. “*Think* about what you’re doing!”

“What’s the pay like?” Chris called. It was the question Mike had been dreading.

“Dunno – haven’t checked.”

It was true – he hadn’t actually checked. But he knew roughly how much Cray McKinley paid first-year analysts, and he wasn’t about to shout that across the playing field. According to his mate in the London office, it was somewhere between forty and fifty grand a year. And that was before bonuses.

“Haven’t checked?! Why the hell not? I bet it’s thirty grand or something!”

Chris was planning to stay on for a teachers’ training qualification. City salaries were a mystery to him.

"I'll check the letter after training," Mike muttered as they trotted back towards an angry Greg.

"That was *sloppy!* You can do better than that. From now on I wanna see *accuracy.* You hear me? *Accuracy.* Good passing, good catching, good tackling, good kicking... You get the picture. Now get into threes."

Four drills and one sprained ankle later, the coach seemed somewhat pacified.

"OK, that's enough lads!" he called. Then, almost inaudibly, he added: "You've worked hard today."

That, in Greg's terms, was a compliment. There were a few raised eyebrows among the boys before they trampled off the pitch, supporting the hobbling BFG.

Despite the pain of the last ninety minutes' exertion, Mike still felt fresh and bursting with a special type of energy that overrode his physical tiredness. He and Chris hung back from the rest of the team as they headed towards the showers.

"So!" Chris looked expectantly at Mike. Mike could sense what was coming. "This job..."

"Yeah - the thing is Chris, I know some of the boys inside were -"

"What will you be doing? Where are the offices - London?"

"Well, actually I applied to the Paris branch, so that I could -"

"Paris?! What, France?!"

“Well, that’s where Paris was located last time I checked. But listen-”

“I just meant... Why there? Surely Drake McKinsey has offices in *this* country?”

“Cray McKinley,” Mike corrected. “Yeah, they have offices in London – that’s where I had my interview – but y’know, I’ve just spent four years working for a degree in French, so I figured I might as well use it. But hey, Chris, there’s guys in the –”

“That’s really brave, Mick,” Chris said admiringly. “Starting a new job with new people, in a new country... I don’t think I’d wanna do that.”

Mike laughed. “Oh, I dunno. It’s not *that* brave,” he said modestly. “Most of the meetings are conducted in English.” They were entering the changing rooms, and he was desperate to change the subject. “How’s the new bird – Sophie, is it?”

“Awesome.” Chris grinned, and stripped down to a pair of old, yellowy Y-fronts. He started rummaging around in his kit bag. Mike grimaced and looked away, hoping Sophie never got to see him like that.

As he stood under the lukewarm trickle of water, the glorious feeling returned. Mike thought about the life that lay ahead, and wondered what he’d be doing in one year’s time. Would he be chairing a meeting between Cray McKinley and one of its global clients? Catching a plane to some financial hotspot on the other side of the world? Shaking hands with the Chief Executive of a multi-million pound superpower? He remembered the words of the

woman he'd met at the graduate recruitment dinner: 'A job at Cray McKinley is whatever you make of it. For the real high flyers, there's potential for you to go as high as you like.' Mike smiled. He was a high flyer. And he was going all the way to the top.

He stepped back into the changing room, towel round waist, dripping and shivering slightly. A raucous discussion was breaking out.

"No, he hasn't even *looked!* I know!"

"It'll be fucking big bucks, I tell you."

"Oh, here he is! What's all this then? Cray McKinley?" BFG was barely masking his contempt.

"Oh, um, yeah. Just heard this afternoon. I don't know any details yet though - it's early days." Mike pulled on his boxers and dived into the kit-bag for his jeans.

"Details?!" roared Adam, the Edinburgh fly-half who'd apparently applied to every city firm in EC1. "Mate, you don't need *details* - it's *Cray McKinley*. Nobody thinks twice about an offer from them!"

"Yeah, maybe," said Mike quietly. This was beginning to get a bit awkward.

"So, Corporate Finance, eh?" It was Minnie, coming from the other end of the changing room, tugging his over-sized kit bag behind him, floral board-shorts hanging out. Word was obviously spreading.

"Well, like I said, I haven't made up my mind yet."

"When did you interview, mate?" Minnie asked, with excessive emphasis on the last word.

“Only a couple of days ago. They’re pretty efficient.”

“Was it hard, the interview and everything?” Adam pressed.

“Well, yeah. It was tricky. Lots of questions, a numerical test, team-building – you know the sort of thing.”

“Did you have to fill out an on-line application form?” asked BFG.

“How many jobs did–”

“When did you apply?”

Shit, thought Mike. They were really bitter.

“How many applic–”

“Look, sorry guys,” he cut in, swinging his bag over his shoulder. “I’ve gotta run.”

no obvious effect on the temperature. Abby hadn't yet mastered the air conditioning unit, so it was all she had. Her body felt greasy and hot. She shifted sideways onto a cooler patch of sheet, and contemplated switching on the TV. American chat shows, Abby had discovered, were the best way of getting her out of bed in the mornings. As she summoned the energy to reach the remote control, there was a knock on the door.

"Hi Abby," called a soft male voice. "You up?"

With great effort, Abby managed to put a face to the voice. Mousy, freckles, friendly smile. It was Alan. Fellow trainee. Suite next door.

"Mmm. Yeah," she croaked, pulling a sheet up over her naked body.

"You told me to check you were up this morning. You feeling OK?" He was smiling; she could tell by the sound of his voice. What had she got up to last night? She had vague memories of a cocktail bar in Lower East Side, then some bar near Union Square, then... another bar? A club? The drink had blotted out large portions of the night. She'd have to ask the boys.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Abby lied. The effort of speaking was making her head throb. "See you in the lobby at quarter to?"

"Yup - see you there. That's... Seven minutes!"

Seven minutes? Abby frantically kicked off the sheet and propped herself up on the pillow. Shit. She must have been drunk when she set her alarm. Water. That's what she needed. Her head felt as though it might explode.

With a shaky hand, Abby filled her third glass, and poured it down her throat. She staggered, naked, through to the bathroom and turned on the power-shower – the anti-hangover machine. She longed to stand there for another hour, feeling the force of the boiling water between her shoulder blades, massaging the shampoo into her scalp and washing away the grime from the night before, but this morning there wasn't time. She was due at a lecture in twenty minutes, and it wasn't just any old lecture. It was the introductory lecture by Stanley Conway, President of Cray McKinley International. This was the one time she couldn't be late.

Abby stared into the gigantic walk-in wardrobe, where her clothes skulked inadequately at one end. She was experiencing that slow, indecisive, fuzzy-brain sensation that always came after a big night out. What should she wear...?

Seven forty-four. Abby had one minute to get down twenty-eight floors, preferably with some clothes on. She grabbed some jeans and a top and pulled them onto her damp body. It was only as the door slammed behind her that Abby realised she'd forgotten the most important thing.

"Hey Sean!" she called to the guy coming out two doors down. "Hold the lift for me, will you? I'm just coming!"

Sean smiled and rolled his eyes, keeping one foot in the jaws of the elevator while Abby ran back for her kit. Saturday afternoons were the best part of the week – she wasn't going to miss basketball.

They bounded through the lobby together, just in time to see the contrasting silhouettes of Alan and little Joe disappearing into the morning sun.

“Oi, wait!” Abby yelled through the revolving door, not caring about the disapproving looks from the fat women behind the Concierge desk. She clattered down the shallow steps and walloped the boys on the back.

“Hey!” cried Joe, his expression changing from one of shock to one of amusement. “Didn’t think you’d make it this morning.”

“I *always* make it, don’t I?” Abby replied indignantly, glaring down at him.

It was true. Abby always made it to lectures. Late, maybe. But she always made it. They’d been in New York for nearly a month, and she hadn’t missed a single one. It was a habit she’d picked up at Cambridge. Physicists went to lectures at nine o’clock every day, six days a week, and Abby had been no exception.

“Shall we take the yellow line?” asked Alan with a raised eyebrow. It was a private joke among the trainees. There were two subway lines – red and blue – that ran down to Wall Street where the Cray McKinley headquarters were located. The third alternative, which avoided the heat, the stench and the risk of being accosted by homeless madmen, was to take a yellow cab. This was ‘the yellow line’.

“Definitely.” Abby nodded, sticking her hand out into the street. “I’ll vomit if I go underground.”

The driver, a small Hispanic man with wild black eyes and nicotine-stained teeth, seemed to have a peculiar

infatuation with beads. There were small, wooden beads everywhere Abby looked: hanging round the man's neck, dangling from the rear-view mirror, draped around the door frames, lying along the dashboard and alarmingly, strung from the top of the windscreen in front of his face.

"Wall Street?"

"Ye-es!" the Hispanic man replied keenly, as though Sean had been offering him a spliff.

"We're going to Wall Street?" Sean confirmed, looking slightly anxious.

The man turned to him with a yellow grin, and slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

Abby was thrown back in her seat, and remained there, slumped in the corner, her head rolling uncomfortably on a string of beads. The air in the taxi was musty, and smelt of stale tobacco.

Alan looked sideways at Abby's half-closed eyes, and laid a hand on her arm. "Don't worry," he told her. "I'll get him to open a window. Er, abierto ventana? Ventana abierto?" he said hopefully.

The driver threw his head back, let out a peal of coarse laughter then swerved into the middle lane of traffic.

"Ventana abierto?" Alan pleaded, with a frantic winding-the-window-down gesture followed by a mime of somebody throwing up.

The man nodded, chuckled some more, and lit a cigarette. Abby concentrated on looking out of the window as the cab filled with sickly brown smoke.

Finally, the trainees hurried into the cool, vast atrium of the Cray McKinley headquarters. There were two familiar faces waiting for the elevators: one white, one black, both square-jawed and handsome with impeccable sets of teeth. Tao and Rod, both from Princeton, were fellow graduates heading for the New York office.

“Hey, Abs, how you doing?” Rod smiled, looking her up and down in a way that made her feel slightly uncomfortable.

“How’re you *feelin’*, more like?” asked Tao.

Abby began to wonder what she might have done last night. She didn’t even remember seeing Tao or Rod. “Er, fine. A bit dodgy, but I’ll live.”

“*Dor-dgy! Dor-dgy!*” cried Tao. “She feels *dor-dgy!* That is *so funny!*”

Abby smiled. She’d forgotten how hilarious Americans found that word.

Scanning the lecture hall for somewhere to sit, she spotted Brad and the other Aussies in the corner of the room.

“How’s it going?” asked Brad, grinning. “Feeling a bit ropey this morning?”

Abby looked at him sheepishly.

“No bruises in strange places...?”

“Huh,” Abby snorted, and decided it would be wise to ask what on earth had happened last night. “Brad, could-”

A hush fell on the auditorium, as a man entered through the left-hand stage door.

“*Here’s the big man himself!*” hissed Brad.

The man was indeed big. He was enormous. Probably forty years old, and almost completely bald, this was their President. Abby stared. He looked as though he spent his entire salary on food. All around the room, people were glancing at their neighbours, trying to catch a raised eyebrow or a sneaky smile. The guy was *huge*.

"Hi. And welcome," Stanley Conway drawled, in a slow, nasal Mid-Atlantic accent. "I am proud, <pause> and excited, <pause> to be here today."

Abby groaned under her breath. She couldn't believe she'd got out of bed to sit through an hour of this.

"I'm standing here, <pause> looking at three hundred pairs of eyes, <pause> and I'm thinking: <pause> these are the eyes of our future! <pause> The future of Cray McKinley! <pause> And that makes me happy. <pause> Because you are not just any old people. <low-pitched chuckle> No! You are the smartest, sharpest, most talented young people this city has ever seen! And I can tell you something. <long pause> You've come to the right place to start your careers!"

Abby got out her notebook and drew a horizontal dashed line on the back page. "*Hangman!*" she whispered.

Brad smiled and took the pen.

"When I joined the firm, and that was a long time ago, <pause for obligatory laughter> there were two things I wanted to learn about the firm -"

"*Where the canteen was?*" muttered Abby, adding an arm to her stick-man.

“-Firstly, what I’d be *doing* in Corporate Finance. <pause> And secondly, how much I would earn!”

More false laughter rippled around the auditorium. Abby watched as Brad filled in the remaining letter of Q B E S I Y.

The speech droned on. The back page of Abby’s notebook became a dense mass of scribbles, and after twenty minutes, she and Brad ran out of games to play. Bored and tired, she flopped onto the desk and let her eyes roam around the room.

The front row was filled with Malaysians, as usual, all of them fast asleep. They slept through all the lectures, and they came top in every test. She wondered how long it would be before Tze-Han, who was sitting at the end of the row and leaning at a precarious angle, toppled into the aisle.

The middle block was populated with keen Americans – the source of most of the irritating questions. On the far left were the Scandinavians, their blonde hair shining like halos on top of their conscientious heads.

Abby’s sleepy gaze was drawn towards the back row: The Lads’ pad. Marcus occupied the middle seat and was reclined with his feet up on the one in front. Sean, Alan, Danny and Joe, his disciples, were arranged either side of him, playing their favourite game: firing scrunched-up lecture notes at Americans. Right at the end of the row, nonchalantly handing ammunition to the boys, was the dark-haired guy with incredible eyes. Mike with the double-barrelled surname. His looks were really his redeeming feature, thought Abby, thinking back to last week’s

basketball match when he'd practically trampled her into the tarmac. He was a complete tosser.

She let her eyelids drop shut. Stanley Conway's voice was smooth and monotonous, and quite relaxing as a background noise. Abby's limbs began to feel heavy, and then numb. There was a nice cool breeze circulating around her face.

She was standing on an escalator. It seemed to have no beginning or end – it just went on for ever. There were other people on the steps above her and below, all of them very serious-looking and dressed in suits. They were brandishing briefcases, newspapers and umbrellas like weapons over the side of the escalator, taking a swipe at anything that came within reach. Abby peered over the side. It turned out that the things being walloped were not in fact things, but *people*.

The escalator was transporting them through an infinitely large factory, where workers dressed in overalls were going about their business – welding, cutting, fixing and soldering – and suffering regular blows to the back of the head from the men in suits.

As Abby looked on, she felt a stab in her back, and turned round to find an angry man in a pinstriped suit poking her with his umbrella. He seemed to be indicating that she too should be lashing out at the workers. Abby didn't want to. She tried to ask the man why they were doing this and who all these people were, but she'd been stripped of her vocal chords.

Abby turned her back on the pinstriped man, and gazed out at the industrious scene. There was another jab in the small of her back, and then another in the side of her ribs. The man was poking her again and again.

“Abby! Abby!”

The man was using the butt of his newspaper now to prod Abby in the ribs. It was beginning to hurt.

“Abby!”

She opened her eyes. Brad was holding a wad of rolled-up lecture notes and smiling.

Regaining her bearings, Abby looked at the stage. Stanley Conway had been replaced by a table. She squinted. Behind the table were four very unremarkable faces, which were beaming up at the roomful of trainees like children’s TV presenters who’d forgotten to go to Makeup before coming on set.

“*What’s going on?*” whispered Abby.

Brad nodded towards the front. “Peer group panel. They’re Cray McKinley analysts.”

“Oh.” She scrutinised them again. Analysts, he’d said. That meant they weren’t much older than Abby. But most of them could’ve passed for thirty-five. “What’re they doing here?”

“Answering our questions.” Brad shrugged. “According to that HR woman, they’ve turned off all the video cameras and stuff, so we can say what we want.”

Abby snorted. She wasn’t so sure. All through the Cray McKinley training course, they’d been scrutinised like kids serving time in a juvenile delinquent centre. There were

CCTV cameras all over the building, and when someone misbehaved in a lecture – usually one of the back row Brits – the footage was flashed up as a warning at the end of the day. Apparently, reports were being compiled on each analyst, detailing his or her conduct throughout the course. It was scary stuff. She doubted they'd miss out on an information-gathering opportunity like this.

“Hi there,” said the first analyst, whose face was so fat it was difficult to make out his eyes. “I guess we’ll start by introducing ourselves. I’m Jimmy. Graduated from Harvard two summers ago.” His jowls wobbled as he sat down.

Rising to his feet was a tall, blonde guy with an exceedingly large chin. A long time ago, thought Abby, he’d probably been in good shape, but the man looked stodgy and weak. “Hank Nailer,” he announced. “Second-year analyst in Investment Banking, New York. Studied Finance at Princeton.”

“*Hank?!*” Brad muttered under his breath. “*Hank the Yank. I bet he likes a good-*”

“Rosalind Whittaker.” The girl stood up. She was fair, with an unmemorable face and long, fuzzy hair the colour of weak tea. Standing under the harsh stage lights, her makeup did nothing to conceal the bags under her eyes. She glanced nervously around the lecture hall. “Hi. Second-year analyst in Leveraged Finance, New York. I have a Masters in Economics from Stanford.”

Abby and Brad exchanged unimpressed looks. The last member of the panel – a tall, lanky man with ginger hair

and freckles – was someone she recognised. He'd been shipped over from the London office to help with the training programme, and last week had spent a whole homework session explaining Discounted Cash Flow to Abby and Justine, the other girl heading for Corporate Finance UK.

“Hi,” he said in his calm, Scottish accent. “Patrick Gilligan.” He waved at the rows of trainees and then sat down. Abby smiled. She liked the guy. He didn't bother trying to impress.

There was a series of predictable, pointless questions that Abby had come to expect from the American trainees.

“How d'you ensure you keep to deadlines?”

“Does it help to do an MBA?”

“What's the best part of your job?”

“What does it take to be promoted at Cray McKinley?”

And then something unusual happened. One of the Brits asked a question. The Brits *never* asked questions. She looked up at the back row. It was Joe.

“I know you all work long hours,” he began quietly, “but how long is 'long'? I mean, what can we really expect?”

A silence fell on the auditorium. All eyes turned to the stage. This was the question they'd all wanted to ask.

Jimmy the piggy-eyed analyst looked up first and broke into a grin. “Well. I'd say that an average day's work would start at 9a.m. and finish anywhere between 9p.m. and, well... sometimes I just work right through, two days running. It depends.”

Murmurs travelled around the room as the trainees digested his response.

“If I’ve pulled an all-nighter, I usually try to get away by eight the next night, to catch up on sleep,” the analyst explained.

Hank Nailer jumped in. “That’s on weeknights. Weekends are usually different; Friday nights I like to leave before bars shut and a few of us go grab a beer after work. I usually work just a five-hour day on Saturday – they’re kinda sacred – then a normal working day on Sunday.”

“Yeah – Sundays are the best day,” added Jimmy enthusiastically. “At least, for me they are. On Sundays I get to drive my X5 into work and I get a spot in the Cray McKinley parking lot!”

Abby stared at the repugnant, grinning analyst. He *had* to be joking.

Rosalind Whittaker looked up. “Our hours vary, week on week. On average, I guess we work a fifteen-hour day. It looks kinda bad if you’re seen to be leaving the office before midnight.”

There was more murmuring as trainees quietly refuted what had been said. And then, as quickly as it had swelled, the noise level dropped.

“...a little different outside New York,” Patrick Gilligan said, his voice barely coming through. “Those of you going to London will certainly find that it’s more about *work achieved* in the office than *time spent* there.” He smiled pointedly at the three Americans. “Face-time doesn’t

happen so much in Europe. If you're done for the night at 7p.m., you *leave*. You don't hang around to impress."

A quiet snigger rippled through the room. Abby was liking the guy more and more every second.

Someone raised a hand.

"How much spare time d'you guys actually get then?"

Jimmy smiled zealously. "Well, put it this way: if you have a girlfriend, dump her now!"

If that was a joke, thought Abby, it wasn't very funny. Nobody else was laughing either.

"Yeah," agreed Hank. "You don't get much spare time, it's true. I haven't had a weekend off in four months."

Rosalind nodded.

Everyone looked at Patrick, waiting for his retort. Surely things weren't like that in the London office? *Come on – tell us it's not that bad*, urged Abby. Eventually, he spoke.

"Well, it has to be said, a whole weekend off is a rare thing at Cray McKinley."

Suddenly there was an almighty clunking sound from the front of the room. Abby looked down to see Tze-Han clambering back onto his seat.

"OK guys!" cried Jimmy. "That's it from us!"