

A letter from King's College arrived in early November,

informing me of my interviews and test the next month. Ella summoned me for a meeting at her house on Storey's Way.

Ella's mother opened the door, yanking the large Doberman away from my heels. I entered the white living room overlooking an orchard at the far end. Chloe and Sam were already there.

Ella tapped her watch. 'You're late, Milly. Warm-up time. I'm starting with real interview questions. Ready?'

Chloe put her face in her hands and mumbled, 'Do you know the worst part? It was him, Hugh was behind it.'

Sam said, 'What do you mean?'

'My party,' murmured Chloe.

As her head shot up, I noticed her eyes were dry.

'*He* sent the strippers.'

It was over with Hugh, so what did it matter?

'Not now, Chloe. We need to start with the questions,' said Ella, glancing at her watch again.

'But Alcott's already done a week of mock interviews,' protested Chloe. 'How much more practice do we need?'

Ella persisted. 'How many molecules in a cup of tea? Take it away, Chloe.'

Chloe cried, '*What?*' Sam burst into a mean cackle.

'Not so fast, Sam, it's your turn,' said Ella. 'A monkey is on

one end of a pulley, a bowl of fruit on the other. The monkey starts to move, but will it get to the fruit?

Sam was speechless, but Ella was relentless. ‘Should historians judge? Sam, tell me about the structure of a Latin sentence, especially when the verb changes from active to passive. Milly, what’s the volume of the vapour from a cup of boiling tea?’

Sam fidgeted with her bag, Chloe shrugged and I was struck dumb.

Ella softened. ‘I wasn’t kidding when I said I’ve got real interview questions for Oxbridge, but take it easy. We’re not getting random questions unrelated to our subjects. So, Chloe, don’t worry – you don’t have to know the number of molecules in a cup of a tea.’

‘I don’t see the point of this cheap trick,’ said Sam.

Ella said, ‘I know what I’m doing. Sam, no one’s going to ask if you can scan hexameter verse. They’ll ask about number theory, of course. We’d better be prepared. Last year Oxford had questions like, “Why do lions have manes?” and “Would it matter if tigers became extinct?” and “Ladybirds are red. So are strawberries. Why?” We have to know our personal statement backwards, duh, but it’s those interviews we need to ace and that’s why we’re having an extra session today with Dave.’

‘Your *dad*?’ asked Chloe.

‘He’s a management consultant, remember? He trains people for real tough situations. Yep, he’s here to help,’ said Ella. ‘Classic Dave. He wants to be the one to give us the very last tips.’

Ella’s mum silently circled the room in her grey cashmere slippers and glided out as Ella’s dad walked in wearing a

black pinstriped suit.

‘Good to see ya!’ he boomed, his bald head gleaming as he playfully punched my shoulder. ‘Too bad about your mom being ill and all. But hang in there, kid!’

Ella led us into the conservatory. It had been transformed and was now bare except for a coffee table with white leather chairs.

‘Simulation room,’ announced Ella. ‘We wanted to make it feel like the real thing.’

Mr Roberts began his pre-lunch briefing. ‘Now, I know you’ve all had a mock interview with external experts and I’m no Cambridge academic – I’m a management consultant – but I guess I do know a thing or two about interview strategies and techniques. From this moment on, you’ve got to think like winners. Let’s start with the dress code. Some of those public school boys wear suits to the interviews, but you don’t need to dress up. Just get the look right.’ Pointing to Sam, he said, ‘Too fussy. You’re not lunching with royalty. We don’t want distracting jewellery.’ He stared at me for a moment and said, ‘Jeans and hoodie? Too sloppy.’ He turned to Chloe. ‘The low neckline is an unnecessary distraction. And the interviewers don’t care if you’ve got gorgeous legs. Keep them covered or wear tights. No short skirts.’ He ticked off his fingers. ‘When it comes to dress, you’ve got to be, one – smart, and two – practical.’

*Toto, I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas any more. Why didn’t Ella prepare us for ‘Dave’?*

‘Let’s start with the interviewers,’ he said, clapping his hands together. ‘There are two. They’ll introduce themselves. They may not shake your hand but if they do, remember, firm grip.’

He continued, 'Oxbridge isn't about cheap tricks. They're not trying to make you feel like you don't know a thing. You're an individual, not a statistic. They want to see you at your best. They already know you are all as nervous as hell. So, Milly, in the general Cambridge interview, what are they going to do? They'll start with something innocuous, but remember, those killer questions are just around the corner ready to sneak up on you and *wham*.' He beat his fist into a palm with a resounding smack that made me tremble. 'Suddenly you're in deep trouble. Why do worms glow? Why do muscles hurt after running?' He swung his large frame towards us. 'You're not going to know the answer. So what should you do while you think of what to say?'

Ella smugly said, 'B for breathe.'

'Good girl!' he said.

She preened as he continued, 'Chloe, there's a question on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and you know you're rambling, you're trying to second-guess the facts, what do you do?'

'B for breathe,' said Chloe.

'Wrong,' he replied, arms folded. 'How long are you going to get by with the breathing thing? You're not a dragon. Do some dynamic thinking. They're not interested in what you know – they're interested in how you think. If you start parroting a rehearsed speech they'll pick it up right away. Be ready to talk about what you *don't* know.'

Sam giggled at Chloe's discomfiture. He towered over Sam and said, 'Smart girl.'

She said, 'Thank you.'

He barked, 'But I'm looking for the big A. What's the big A?' He rapped a ruler on the table. 'Anyone?'

'The Big Apple?' asked Chloe.

'Take it away, Ella,' he said, rolling his eyes.

Ella chanted, 'A for ability.'

He said, 'Sam, the interviewers might look like they're asleep. Or even keep you standing for the whole interview. If they don't offer you a seat, are you going to get spooked?'

'No,' she said unconvincingly.

He persisted. 'They keep asking you questions you can't answer. What do you do?'

'I guide them into something I can talk about?' she asked.

'You got it,' he said, pointing two fingers like a gun above her head. 'Sam here just got the big A. You've just got to think on your feet. It's also about the big C. What's the big C, Milly?'

I hesitated. 'Cambridge?'

'No!' he yelled, making me jump. 'C for control. *You* have to be in control, not them. They may not even look at you, they may just write notes the whole time you speak. You can't afford to lose your nerve. If you lose the big C, you lose it all.'

Ella's mother knocked on the door. She said with a poker face, 'The food's on the table.'

He glanced at his watch in disappointment. 'Darn! We only just got started. That reminds me, you should prepare an original question of your own to ask the interviewers but remember, no long questions just before lunch.'

Ella's mum waved us into the large, airy kitchen. An oak table was piled high with breads, cheeses, pizza, spinach and ricotta quiche, salads, tiramisu and chocolate cake.

His mouth stuffed with pepperoni pizza, Ella's dad asked, 'Sam, you're applying for math, right? So here's the thing: I have a pizza. What's the maximum number of pieces that can be made with four cuts?' He didn't wait for her reply. 'Gotcha. How about this one, then? Rolling a pair of dice twice, what's the chance of the highest value being a six? Or a five?' He guffawed and grabbed a slice of quiche.

'More cake, Milly?' asked Ella's mother. She bent to confide, 'I could give Carter a two-storey condo for Christmas, what do you think? The hutch has a solid floor. It's winter-proof and water-repellent. That way we can put him out in the garden.'

Ella's rabbits came from an animal shelter. I knew that Carter was the meanest of all.

I said, 'Has Carter done anything to deserve a condo?'

Ella's mother gave me an assessing look. 'You're so right. Time to take a tough decision.'

After lunch I drew Sam aside. 'How's it going with Jonathan?'

Sam gushed, 'He's so sweet. I'm in heaven.'

'That's great. I was just thinking, though, how well do you really know him? Are you sure you can trust him?'

Sam looked surprised. Then she sneered, 'I thought you'd be happy for me but I was wrong. You're just jealous I was the one who got Chloe's sunglasses.'

She moved away before I could protest. Ella's dad frowned at his watch but Sam swiftly pushed a plate of her brownies under his nose to delay proceedings. Rocket Dog, aka Caesar, broke free from confinement, raced into the kitchen, squatted and departed, leaving streaky turds on the gleaming white

floor tiles.

‘Get ... that ... dawg outta here!’ bawled Ella’s dad, losing his cool, but Ella’s mum calmly took a long sip of her wine, flipped the pages of a magazine and stayed where she was. Chloe wrinkled her nose and bolted from the kitchen.

By the post-lunch session, Ella’s dad had clawed back his composure, although his tie was askew from cleaning up after Caesar.

He pinned his sunglasses to his shirt and said, ‘Like I was saying, the interviews are all about control.’

There was another knock on the door. Ella’s dad looked pained. He said, ‘If it’s about that pooping dawg again ...’

‘The vet,’ said Ella’s mum, ‘isn’t answering.’

‘It’s a *Sunday*, hon. But remember what he said? Dobermans have a tendency to bloat, so no food until they’ve exercised. You broke the rule, hon, you stuffed him like a darn turkey and didn’t take him for a walk. Now take it easy, we’ll deal with it later. I don’t wanna know even if the President drops by.’

Her face was expressionless as she shut the door.

Hitching the waistband of his trousers high, he pushed his face close into mine. ‘So the interviewers don’t smile or nod even once. Are you going to freak out?’

‘Yes,’ I said, fascinated by the spinach stuck between his front teeth. My eyes wanted to be a toothpick.

He said, ‘Sam, after every answer you give them, they ask, “Anything else you’d like to say?” as if you’ve told them nothing at all. Are you going to get spooked?’

‘Yes,’ she confessed, hastily looking away from his mouth.

Ella raised her hand. ‘Dave, there’s something in your ...’

‘Not now, Ella,’ he warned. ‘Learn to wait your turn. Okay, one more question, Sam. You’re going to talk to people you’ve never met in your life. Are you going to be nervous?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered, making choking noises.

He thumped hard on the table. ‘No!’ His eyes and voice were passionate. ‘The four of you are going to do *Oxbridge* interviews. It’s not a frickin’ driving test.’

‘Dave,’ interrupted Ella, ‘seriously, you’ve got ...’

He thundered, ‘I know what I’ve got, Ellie, G-U-T-S. That’s why I am where I am today. My dad was a garage mechanic but he lived the dream for his family and I made it through college and got a great job. You guys have guts too. Heck, you decided to go for Oxbridge and that takes guts. It means you believe in yourselves, it means you are all winners, every last one of you. You’re going for *Oxbridge*. Do you know what that means? A lot of guys out there didn’t get that letter calling for an interview. *You* did. It’s a privilege, not a right. So you’re darn well going to enjoy it while it lasts.

‘You’ve got this one chance to talk about yourself and about the subject you love, to describe your passion with the people who share your passion and they’re the best fricking people in the country at what they do. Are you going to blow it with cookie-cutter answers because you’re N-E-R-V-O-U-S? No way! Think outside of the box. Tell yourselves you’re going to get in no matter what and you’re going to be one of those winners. If they say only one in five or six gets into Oxbridge, guess what? All four of you will. Go blow them away!’



Ella's mum was peering at the Beatrix Potter bunny teapots glistening in the glass display cabinet. Mr Roberts waved goodbye with a green sliver still stuck in his teeth. I decided I would stay off spinach for a while.

He bellowed, 'Remember, eight hours of sleep from now on. Eat your cereal and arrive early to acquaint yourselves with the location of the interview rooms. Remember that it's a conversation about the way you think, not what you know. Think on your feet. Afterwards, you might come out dazed or you might come out smiling. You might remember it all or you might not recall a thing. You might cry or you might laugh. That's because you'll have done *the Oxbridge interview*.

'Don't do a post-mortem among yourselves. It is what it is. Now, here's one for the road, Sam – how many zeros on the end of one hundred?'

Before I went to bed that night, I described my day. Neel found it really funny. I told Neel he had to come back in time to help. I wanted the very last tips to be from him.