

THE FAME FACTOR

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AVON

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PROLOGUE

Hutchinson cocked his head to one side and made a clicking noise with his tongue.

‘All right,’ he said eventually. ‘Show us the DVD. But no promises.’

The large American rose from his seat as quickly as was possible for someone of his size and stature. ‘You’ll like this, I’m tellin’ ya,’ he said in his irritating, mid-Atlantic drawl.

The head of the label didn’t reply. Nobody told Edgar Hutchinson, President of Vicinity, one of Universal’s most successful commercial labels, what he would or wouldn’t like.

After much button-pressing, the blinds slithered down and a fuzzy image was projected onto the far wall. The American man sank back in his chair like a proud parent waiting for his child to appear in the school play. Slowly, the resolution improved and after a few seconds it became obvious what they were all looking at.

Hutchinson raised an eyebrow, taking in the long, denim-clad legs of the lead singer. Her dark hair was cut to chin-length and she had that doe-eyed, Keira Knightley thing going on.

‘So ...’ He looked around at the other men, waiting for something to happen on the screen. ‘Do we have sound and light on this thing, or is it just a fancy photo frame?’

The American rolled his eyes. ‘Give it a mo.’

Hutchinson looked back at the image, letting his gaze roam over the rhythm guitarist, a gypsy type with dark, wavy hair and cat-like eyes. Then he saw the blonde on bass and laughed. ‘Who’s that – Britney Spears’s little sister?’

‘Hey,’ said the large man, twisting round in his seat and waggling a sausage-like finger. ‘Wait ‘til you hear ‘em.’

Several seconds passed. Hutchinson looked at his watch.

‘Look, Louis, I really don’t have time for a Girls Aloud re-make or whatever this is. You know I don’t do girl-bands. They’re expensive, high maintenance and they don’t sell any records outside the UK.’

The American was shaking his head, poking buttons on the remote control like a baby with a new toy. ‘Huh. Looks like I had it on pause.’ He held the device aloft as he tried again. ‘No, believe me, this is *not* a girl-band.’

Suddenly, the room was filled with a very loud humming noise and the screen was filled with a wonky shot of the girls on stage. Hutchinson grimaced.

‘It’s a live recording,’ the big man explained.

‘God help us,’ muttered Hutchinson.

He was picking at the strip of skin by the side of his thumbnail when something made him look up.

Despite the background hum on the recording, it was just about possible to make out the vibe of the song. It wasn’t pop, exactly. Nor was it rock, or indie. Post-punk, maybe. Whatever it was, it wasn’t the sound he had expected to come from these cutesy chicks. For a start, the singer could *sing*. Hutchinson didn’t like to think of himself as sexist, but the fact was, girls didn’t usually make good musicians. This, though ... It sounded like the Killers or The Thrills or something. There was, as the American had irritatingly pointed out, nothing girl-band about this group at all.

The guitarist’s quick-fingered solo was good. And he liked the way the buxom, blue-eyed drummer kept peeping out from behind her raven-black hair as she kept the beat. Even the mini-Britney was doable, too, if you were into the young girls thing. But Hutchinson’s attention kept flitting to the lead

singer. She had the looks alright – porcelain face, bee-stung lips, long, Bambi legs and a decent rack on her, too – but better than that, she had presence. You could feel it, even by watching the shoddy, amateur recording.

‘Okay!’ he cried, looking away from the screen. The perpetual zooming in and out was making him feel seasick. ‘That’s enough.’

The DVD was switched off and the room became silent.

‘So ...?’ said the American, after some time. ‘You wanna think about signing them?’

Edgar Hutchinson exhaled noisily and started tapping his fingertips on the desk. He did this for some time.

Eventually, he looked up.

‘No.’

‘What?’

‘No. I’m not going to sign them. I’ve got a better idea.’

1.

'This is an insult to my ears.' Shannon angrily stuffed her earplugs into her ears and downed the remains of her beer.

Zoë persevered with tuning her guitar as the distorted noise continued to grind through the walls. She was concerned by the number of empty bottles at Shannon's feet, but knew better than to aggravate the feisty Irish drummer when she was like this.

'I'm sure we'll be able to turn down these awards nights when your amazing campaign starts to pay off,' Kate remarked quietly.

Zoë closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable retort. They'd been cooped up in the grotty backstage cell for nearly an hour and nerves were evidently beginning to fray. The promoter had lied about the timings. It was the usual stunt: Goading the fans to arrive early and then forcing them to hear acts they didn't want to hear whilst spending money in the over-priced bar. All gigs were a sham - even these so-called awards nights.

'What did you say?' snapped Shannon, removing an earplug and staring at Kate's bowed head.

The bassist shrugged anxiously. 'I just meant, I hope it was money well spent.'

Shannon sighed loudly and shook her head, looking at Zoë. 'Did you hear that?'

Zoë held out her hand in a gesture of peace. 'Let's not—'

'She has the cheek to criticise *us* for our efforts!' cried Shannon.

'Look ...' Zoë watched uneasily as the drummer began taking ever larger mouthfuls of beer.

'Miss *Sit-back-and-see!*' Another swig. 'Like *your* efforts are going to propel Dirty Money into the global spotlight!'

Kate flashed a look of aggression that didn't quite mask the pain in her eyes. Shannon's remark was unfair. Kate did a huge amount to help promote the band; she just didn't make a lot of noise doing it. However, for the promotion in question, it was fair to say that the bassist had played no part.

It was hardly surprising that Kate disapproved of their latest ploy for attracting the attention of major labels. She had never been one for taking risks – especially when money was involved. Ever prudent, the bassist liked to stay well within her safety zone. Shannon, however, had never been inside a safety zone.

The plan, executed by Zoë, as usual, was to send copies of their demo CD to the heads of the key record labels, along with photocopies of the review that had appeared – in microscopic proportions – in *Mojo* the previous month. The controversial part of the operation was the inclusion of a used ten-pound note (a fiver for indie labels) in each mailshot, representing 'dirty money'.

Shannon's thinking was that no self-respecting label manager would dare pocket money from an unsigned band and that nobody would bother to post the cash back to them. Which meant that the recipients would feel obliged to at least play their CD – and that was the critical hurdle; most promo packs went straight into the recycling bin.

The promotion, which had set them back nearly three hundred pounds in tenners and fivers, had gone out eight days ago. Zoë kept telling herself that no news was probably good news. Kate clearly wasn't so sure.

It was the fourth member of the group who eventually curtailed the row.

‘There’s not a lot we can do about it, anyway,’ Ellie muttered quietly from behind her wavy locks as she strummed her un-amplified guitar. ‘Let’s just see what happens.’

Shannon looked over, drew a breath to respond, and then shut her mouth.

Zoë smiled. It was typical of Ellie to suggest that they do nothing, that they put their faith in fate. That was her mantra for life. *See what happens*. It wasn’t apathy; it was more of an unwavering belief that good things would come to them in the end. Ellie wasn’t one for setting herself ambitious targets.

Glancing across at Kate, Zoë felt her smile fading. The bassist Kate was staring at the floor, unblinking, expressionless. She was clearly upset, but Zoë suspected that it wasn’t down to the argument. Kate was well-versed in dealing with Shannon; she could hold her own in a row. Apart from anything else, Kate had the advantage of being right, most of the time. No, the pursed lips and watery blue eyes could mean only one thing: She had been dumped. Again. Zoë laid down her guitar and crossed the room, catching her eye. Then the door burst open.

‘Evening all!’ cried the short, wiry man with spiky ginger hair. It was Jake, their over-zealous and under-achieving manager. ‘How’s me girls?’

Zoë switched on a mechanical smile and allowed their eyes to meet. ‘Fine, thanks.’

‘Ready to rock the joint?’

She grunted. Jake Gordon-Spencer was one of those people who lived in blissful ignorance of the irritating effect he had on others. His accent, which had been cultivated through years of expensive schooling and then years of half-hearted rebellion at daddy’s expense, was presumably supposed to appeal to the geezers of the industry. In fact, it

had the opposite effect; Jake was known as The Mockney Dickhead across the London scene. However, he had one saving grace: His cousin, Dan, who came as part of the package and who was one of the city's best booking agents. Without Dan, Dirty Money would never have made it this far. He was diligent, well-connected and commercially savvy. He was also unfathomably loyal to his cousin.

'Record number of fans 'ere to see you,' Jake reported as they trooped along the damp corridor towards the stage. 'All my hard work paying off ...' He tilted his head to one side, like a market stall holder clinching a deal.

Zoë glanced at him, wondering whether the manager really was deluded enough to believe that he had been responsible for the audience numbers tonight. *She* had gone round with a clipboard, collecting email addresses at their last umpteen gigs. *She* was the reason they had twelve thousand friends on MySpace, the reason they'd been nominated for the Indie Awards tonight.

The girls assembled themselves in the wings while the compère rallied the crowds. Zoë leaned forwards, catching a glimpse of the curly blond locks of their most loyal fan, Crazy Jeff, just in front of the stage. Whooping and cat-calling, his skinny arms were flailing like wind turbines in a gale. Jake had been right. Tonight was a record for the band. There were probably four or five hundred bodies rammed into the sweaty pit, a good proportion of them rooting for Dirty Money. With a bit of luck, thought Zoë, they'd have this award in the bag.

'It was only seventy-five pounds each,' Shannon whispered loudly.

'They're loud, they're dirty, they're sexy ...'

'Seventy-five pounds we could've spent elsewhere,' Kate hissed back.

Zoë glared at each of them in turn. Now was not the time to be bickering. They needed to focus. They needed to win an award tonight.

‘... our final act of the night, please welcome ... Dirty Money!’

2.

Zoë kicked off her office shoes and dumped her bag on the doormat. The mouth-watering smell of roast chicken was wafting through the flat.

‘Hey,’ James called out, holding out a glass of red wine, like a carrot for a donkey.

Zoë smiled, kissing him and then sipping the wine as she tugged playfully at her boyfriend’s untucked shirt.

‘Good day?’ he asked.

She rolled her eyes, taking a sip of wine and not bothering to reply. Good days at Chase Waterman were few and far between. ‘How was the trip?’

James shrugged and stooped down in front of the oven, peering through the layer of grime to see what was going on inside. ‘So-so.’

He never complained. Zoë couldn’t remember a single time in the three years since they’d graduated that he’d really had to let off steam. James worked in the marketing department of one of the UK’s leading home insurers. His work was mundane, often involving last-minute assignments, late nights and tedious trips to the Norfolk headquarters, but he never seemed to have cause for the explosive rants to which Zoë was prone.

‘Another ten minutes, I reckon.’ He nodded in the direction of the lounge, grabbing both drinks as he went.

It was impressive, how easily James seemed to have made the transition from student to young professional. Six years ago, he’d been the tall, lanky stranger with the piercing blue eyes and dirty blond, messy hair, loitering at the back of the sticky-floored hangout where Dirty Money had first

performed, drinking pints with all the other Goldsmiths undergrads. It was his scruffy, rebellious streak that had drawn her to him. He was as devoted now as he had been then – work permitting. But now, with his military crop and slick Moss Bros suit, he looked like a different man.

‘So.’ He topped up her glass as she drew her laptop towards her and logged onto MySpace. ‘Did you win, the other night?’

Zoë took a large sip and groaned quietly. She had been trying to block the Indie Awards from her mind.

James raised an eyebrow.

‘Shannon got drunk before we went on and Kate wouldn’t let up about the dirty money campaign ... then it all kicked off on stage. Shannon messed up one of the songs, Kate tried to correct her, then next thing you know, Shannon’s chucking her bass pedal at Kate. It knocked out the power for the whole venue.’

James drew back his head, eyes wide. He was clearly impressed by the new level of absurdity achieved.

‘So, no, we didn’t win.’

Zoë sank into her wine, trying to dispel the image of the angry woman with the headset, sweeping them off the stage. ‘Shannon stayed ‘til the end and said some bunch of drunk, teenage boys took the award. We came third. She reckoned we were penalised because we were girls.’

‘Not because she smashed up the stage and tried to decapitate her bass player?’

Zoë managed a meek smile. ‘Oh, and then Jake walked out on us.’

James expelled a jet of air from his mouth. ‘*He* walked out on *you*?’

Zoë nodded. She needed to have a proper word with the girls. Shannon had called, as she always did, muttering a

vague apology and then quickly moving onto her next hare-brained scheme. She remained happily ignorant of the trouble she'd landed them in, even after Zoë relayed her conversation with the promoter about the damage to the stage equipment. Kate had called, too, admitting that she had been partly to blame. The storm had blown over, as it always did, but the consequences remained very real; Dirty Money no longer had a manager.

James watched over her shoulder as she edited the details of their upcoming gigs. Then he sat up and looked around the room. He had a very low boredom threshold.

'I was wondering,' he said, staring up at the ceiling. 'D'you reckon Axl Rose spent his evenings fine-tuning the details of his promotional packs, in the early days?'

Zoë smiled. 'Oh, I'm sure he did. You know, Slash and the other guys were like, "Come on Ax, let's get fucked and smash up some hotel lobbies," and he'd say, "I'll catch you up, I've just got to change the font on this title track."'

James laughed and reached for the TV remote control.

They'd had similar conversations before. James knew how much things had changed since the eighties. If a group from thirty years ago had been re-born and expected to 'make it' all over again, they'd probably sink before they'd even cut their first track. Back in the day, all you needed was a bit of talent, an attitude and a lucky break. If you happened to be playing in the right place at the right time, you'd get picked up by a manager, who, over a couple of lines of coke and a hooker, would sweet-talk some A&R rep into taking you on. Then, assuming you had enough decent songs inside you to fill a couple of albums, you were made.

Not any more. These days, there were more acts to go around. The internet was awash with talent. There were literally millions of artists pumping out tracks – something

for everyone. Even the fan bases of the mainstream acts were carved up into smaller pieces. The days of bands like The Beatles, whose appeal reached from brickies to housewives, were long gone. As a lowly unsigned act, Dirty Money had to shout as loud as it could to stand a chance.

Settling for *Cook Me Famous*, a programme about deluded nobodies trying to batter and fry their way into the history books, James kicked off his shoes and drew his own laptop towards him. Zoë knew he was trying to make a point, sitting beside her and mirroring her exact posture, but the MySpace page was a priority, and nobody else was going to update it.

Thanks for asking, she typed. We actually have a gig in N London in 2 weeks' time - check out our schedule! DM x

Hi M, yes we do play private gigs - for a fee! Let us know what you're thinking and we'll get back to you. DM x

It was a laborious way of reaching out to fans, but it was the only way. Zoë removed the usual smattering of lewd postings about bizarre sexual fantasies involving the members of Dirty Money and their instruments, scanning the page for other requests. As she did so, an email alert appeared in the corner of her monitor.

Dear lead singer,

I just wanted to tell you how much I admire the way you work that stage. I would be truly honoured if you could spare some time to spend with me at some point in the next few weeks to celebrate my appreciation of your work.

Your adoring fan x

Zoë smiled.

Dear Adoring Fan, she typed.

Thank you for your kind words. It's always nice to hear from admirers. In terms of spending time together, what were you thinking?

Zoë

She flicked back to the website and checked through the outstanding messages. There were always a slew of requests for dates – most directed at Shannon or Kate, some both at once. Ellie attracted a different type of guy altogether: The black leather, pierced flesh, greasy hair variety – mostly guitarists themselves. Zoë looked again at the bottom of her screen where the alert had reappeared.

Dear Zoë,

Thank you for the quick response. I was thinking along the lines of dinner. Might you have an evening spare for me to take you out? Around Valentine's Day, perhaps?

Adoring Fan x

Zoë leaned forward and tapped out her response, feeling a shiver of excitement at the prospect of a proper date.

Saturday 11th then?

A moment later, James turned to her, eyes twinkling. 'Sure you can spare me the time?'

Zoë smiled. 'For my Valentine, of course.'

3.

'It's hardly a *ban*,' scoffed the ruddy-faced man to her right. 'All the coppers round our way are too busy galloping after hounds to make any arrests!'

He hooted at the apparent irony, prompting a ripple of false laughter along the table. The woman who had brought up the subject of fox hunting looked at her lap, blushing.

Zoë was regretting her late arrival. Had she arrived at the Inns of Court at six-thirty, as stipulated by the glossy, gold-edged invitation, she would at least have been able to sit with her parents. Not that she'd usually relish the prospect of their company, but this evening it would have been preferable to that of the slack-jawed buffoon.

Zoë leaned sideways as an array of colourful vegetables and finely cut veal appeared in front of her, trying to blot out the drone on her right. The hall looked like the inside of one of King Henry VIII's castles: Dark oak panelling, carved buttresses and glinting chandeliers on chains that stretched all the way from the raftered ceiling down to the long, wooden tables along which they sat.

Up on High Table, as it was apparently known, her sister sat, chatting away, her curly hair splaying out over the fur-lined gown that seemed to be compulsory attire for all of the part-qualified barristers. Even some of the guests were wearing gowns, she noted, including the pompous cretin she was sitting next to. It was another world. A world she could have inhabited herself, had things turned out differently, and now, more than ever, she felt glad that they hadn't.

Zoë let the man talk, nodding when the moment seemed right. People like this, she thought, were evolutionary

anomalies. They were so focussed on themselves and their own activities that they should, by rights, have become extinct years ago – eaten by a bear whilst regaling others with their tales of bravery. But somehow, they lived on to tell their dreary tales.

Zoë watched as her sister surreptitiously slid her profiteroles onto a neighbour's plate, glancing about as if worried that somebody might be watching. Their eyes met briefly and Tamsin cast her a guilty smile. Zoë winked back, thinking about all the times she had flouted laws and bent rules in the last few weeks.

A month ago, she and Shannon had had the brilliant idea of performing a gig wearing hard hats, on a stage decorated like a road works site: Traffic signs, cones, flashing orange lamps ... Of course, they had planned to return everything after use. It was only when Shannon appeared on the night with the *pièce de résistance* – a large set of temporary traffic lights – that the promoter had put his foot down and threatened to report the girls to the police. It seemed obvious, thinking about moments like this, that Zoë wasn't destined to follow in her sister's footsteps.

They were similar, in many ways. They had the same drive, the same sense of determination and resilience. They were both bright, hard-working and ambitious, but they were motivated by different things.

For Tamsin, it had always been about following the path but walking it quicker and better than everyone else on it. She had excelled at school, acing her exams and easily overcoming hurdle after hurdle. That was how she had ended up here, a trainee barrister at one of London's most prestigious chambers.

Zoë had never cared about following the path. For her, the further she got from the path, the better. She knew, having

lived in Tamsin's shadow for twenty-four years, that she was the outlier. She understood that her parents couldn't understand her way of thinking. That was why she compromised. She had gained a degree – albeit not the one her parents would have liked – and she had found herself a respectable job. But inside, she knew she could never be satisfied by her traditional middle-class existence.

'And what about you?' asked the man, poking his pitted nose in Zoë's face. 'What do you do?'

Zoë straightened up and looked at the man. 'I'm at Chase Waterman.'

'Ah!' he cried. 'You're a bean counter!'

'Well,' Zoë averted her eyes. She wanted to defend her role at the UK's largest independent auditing firm, but she couldn't think of anything positive to say about it.

'Didn't you fancy your chances in law?' He tugged proudly at the navy gown that engulfed his ample frame.

'Something like that,' Zoë replied, deciding that now was not the time to admit that she'd failed to make the grades for her first choice of degree. Looking down the table, she watched as her father became embroiled in a debate with a man in a green tweed jacket.

'You'd be surprised,' her father was saying. 'Misconduct has existed in top-level sport since long before it all went commercial.'

The man, who appeared to have far too much hair for his age, squinted at Zoë's dad. 'Is that so?'

'It is.'

Zoë smiled wryly. They were trying to out-sport one another. Her father would put up a good fight, she suspected; he had once played rugby for Hertfordshire. He was also one of the most highly-respected defence lawyers in London.

‘What sort of misconduct?’

‘The England rugby squad in the nineteen-eighties,’ Zoë’s father replied. ‘There was plenty of match-fixing, even then.’

The man drew his head back, frowning. ‘How could you possibly know that?’

‘I trained with them. I was offered a place on the squad.’

Zoë nearly yelped. *Her father had nearly played rugby for England?* How did she not know this? And why had he turned it down? She looked at her phone. It was eight fifty-two. The questions would have to wait.

Still reeling, Zoë leaned back as the waitress poured coffee into her bone china cup. She would slip out now, pretending to visit the ladies, and then by the time everybody adjourned to the room with carpet on the walls for drinks, they’d all be too sloshed to notice her absence. She felt bad about leaving her sister, but there wasn’t really an alternative. She could hardly skip up to ‘High Table’ and explain that she was abandoning one of the most important dinners of the legal calendar to go and rehearse with her band.

Out of the darkness came an unmistakable Irish shriek.

‘Over here, you eejit!’

Zoë followed the sound to where Shannon was parked illegally in the middle of High Holborn, honking and yelling through the open window.

As a drummer, owning a large car was a prerequisite, but there was something about the battered old Volvo estate that particularly suited Shannon. The car was like the vehicular equivalent to its owner: Noisy, colourful and unreliable. It had transported Shannon and all her belongings, including the drum kit, from Limerick to East London six years

previously – miraculously, only breaking down once along the way.

‘I’ve had an idea,’ said Shannon, winding up her window and swerving into the fast lane. ‘Fuck off!’ she yelled as the driver behind them made a gesture with his hand in the glow of the next car’s headlights. ‘We should get some celebrity endorsement.’

Zoë gripped the fabric of the seat, glancing at the silhouette of the angry man in the wing mirror. ‘What d’you mean?’ she managed to ask. Rides with Shannon were not for the faint-hearted. Kate refused to get in the car unless there was no alternative.

‘Well, we’ve got fans all over the world, all over the internet, but none of them are *famous*. If we could get a big name to say, “hey guys, I think you’re great”, we’ll be made.’ She yanked the steering wheel round and pulled a sharp left, provoking more sounding of horns.

‘Mmm, maybe.’ Zoë nodded, grabbing the door handle to keep herself upright. It was hard to focus on promotional strategies and staying alive at once.

‘That’s what Ladyhawke did,’ Shannon went on, flicking on the internal light and checking her hair in the rear-view mirror. Zoë watched as a fearless motorcyclist approached them on the outside. ‘Apparently Courtney Love left a glowing review on her MySpace page.’

‘Right ...’ Zoë tried to control her breathing as the motorcyclist slipped into Shannon’s blind-spot. ‘And don’t you think maybe that might have been a PR stunt by Ladyhawke’s management? Watch the bike, by the way.’

‘I don’t know. Don’t matter, does it? If it’s a stunt, then we need to be doing one too. Jesus! Where did he come from?’

Zoë breathed a sigh of relief as the motorcyclist emerged, seemingly unscathed, in front of them. ‘Um ... yeah,

although it might not be that easy. I bet if you look closely, you'll find that Ladyhawke's on the same label as Courtney Love, or her management knows Courtney Love's management or something like that. It's not so easy when you're unsigned.'

Finally, Zoë began to relax her grip as they made the last turn onto Shannon's road. It was always tricky explaining realities to Shannon. In many ways, it was great that she was so up for anything. It made a welcome change from the attitude of most of the people Zoë dealt with on a day-to-day basis. Shannon never saw problems, only ideas. Masses and masses of ideas. The hard part, for Zoë and the rest of the band, was bringing her back down to earth.

Their rehearsal studio, which was actually the front room of the West London flat that Shannon shared with three or four other girls (it fluctuated), was just large enough for the drum kit, three small amps and four people standing, as long as Zoë half-perched on the armchair and Kate stooped inside the upturned sofa. Sometimes, when the girls scraped together enough funds or they had an important gig coming up, they'd book a slot in the Shoreditch studio but most of the time, they made do with the drummer's lounge.

Flattening herself against the wall to let Ellie pass, Zoë thought about how she was going to broach the subject of their Indie Awards fiasco.

'Great, we're all here!' cried Shannon, 'Let me tell you my news!' She thumped the bass drum with the newly-purchased pedal.

'Hold on.' Zoë held up her hand. 'I just want to say ...' She bit her lower lip, not wanting to come across like a bossy headmistress. The truth was, though, she *was* the boss. If she didn't say it, nobody would. 'We really messed up, the other night. And now, because of that, we don't have a—'

‘Who cares? We don’t need—’

‘One sec,’ Zoë pleaded. ‘We don’t have a manager, we don’t have a booking agent, we didn’t win the award and I think it’s safe to say we won’t be asked back to the Camden House for a while. I think we need to start—’

‘For Christ’s sake!’ yelled Shannon. ‘We don’t *need* Jake or Dan any more!’

‘What?’ Zoë asked cautiously.

‘Well ...’ Shannon bowed her head and performed a drum roll that seemed to go on forever. Zoë watched, willing it to stop. ‘We have a new manager!’

The three girls looked at Shannon, who beamed back at them triumphantly and whacked the cymbal for effect.

‘Who?’ asked Kate.

‘Aha.’ Shannon carefully balanced her drum sticks on the rim of the snare, her movements deliberate and slow. She rubbed her hands together, like a magician warming up for a trick. Zoë sighed impatiently. Finally, the drummer looked up. ‘The guy I met in the bar, after the awards night. He’s called Louis Castle. Ring any bells?’

Three faces looked back at her blankly.

‘Okay,’ Shannon shrugged. ‘Maybe he’s not that big over here. But he’s from LA and he’s managed bands like The Anglers and Domino Scene and ... and Tepid Foot Hold!’

Zoë glanced at Kate’s face, then at Ellie’s. There were no signs of recognition on either. ‘Tepid Foot Hold?’ She frowned. ‘Sounds like the name of an IKEA flat-pack.’

Shannon growled. ‘They’re big in America. Massive.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Anyway, this guy has his own management company and he wants to manage *us*! He’ll sort us out with a booking agent and everything. I mean, seriously. He was talking about stadium gigs!’

Zoë exchanged a quick, apprehensive look with their bassist. Kate's expression said it all.

'Well, don't all thank me at once!' Shannon cried loudly. 'I've only gone and put us one step closer to world domination!'

Zoë tried her best to look enthusiastic. The problem was, they'd been here before. Shannon was always making Useful Acquaintances. She seemed to have a natural magnetism for lonely, lecherous males who – either by calculation or misunderstanding – ended up in her address book when it was perfectly clear to everyone else that they simply wanted to get in her pants.

'Oh, and I forgot the best bit!' Shannon's eyes were wild. 'His company, Blast Management, has some sort of connection with Universal. Universal!'

Zoë's ears pricked up. She glanced at Kate.

As a general rule, Kate's expression served as a good sanity check. She was naturally cautious – to the extent that she chopped up her old credit cards and scattered the pieces in different dustbins around the country – and as such, tended to stand in the way of Shannon's more ludicrous schemes. Kate was still looking sceptical.

'Not ... BMI?' asked Ellie, smiling dreamily. 'Maybe he's going out with an air steward.'

Shannon tossed her long, black ponytail over her shoulder.

'Look, I'm telling you, this guy is a hot-shot manager from LA. He's seen us perform a few times and he *loved* our set at the awards.'

'Did he love the bit when you threw the bass pedal at Kate?' asked Zoë. 'Or when all the lights went out?'

'Shut up!' cried Shannon, her accent full strength. 'If you don't want a manager, then fine. But if you ask me, this is our

big chance. And to be honest, we haven't got a lot to lose right now.'

'Okay,' said Zoë, thinking for a moment. 'You're right. How did you leave it with this guy?'

Shannon cleared her throat melodramatically. 'He wants to see our demo DVD.'

'Our what?' chimed Zoë and Kate in unison.

'I know. He said it needs to be visual.'

Zoë pulled a face, wondering what 'visual' meant, and whether Shannon might have got the wrong end of the stick.

'Not like *that*,' the drummer clarified. 'And don't worry, I know a guy who'll do it.'

Zoë looked at the others and laughed. Shannon always knew a guy. Whatever the challenge, there was always a man from Shannon's past who would fit the bill.

'Can your guy come and film our next gig?'

Shannon smiled coyly. 'I'm sure he could be persuaded.'

Zoë rolled her eyes and switched on Ellie's amp, nodding for her to play. After a quick tweak of strings, they were ready.

'Shall we?' said Shannon, holding her sticks in mid-air, ready to launch into their first song.

Over the years, the band had built up a repertoire of about thirty decent songs. Two albums' worth and five extra songs, to be precise. Not that any had been officially released. The tracks, having been recorded in a studio belonging to a sleazy millionaire acquaintance of Shannon's, had been uploaded to various places on the internet, but never released. It was a deliberate move. The girls had considered the idea of self-releasing - burning the tracks to CD and flogging them to friends and fans - but had rejected it on the grounds that no proper label would want to release a re-hash of an album that

had photocopied sleeves and hand-written inserts. Dirty Money were waiting for the real thing.

Most of the tracks on their first unreleased album were either cheeky reflections on events or incidents in their lives, like 'Run Boy Run', a song about Shannon's man-eating attributes, or flippant takes on the world around them, such as 'Man Made', a song about an increasingly materialistic society.

Over the years, their lives had changed and so had their music. Recent tracks included 'Sensible Lies', a frank exposé on the double life Zoë found herself leading, and 'Clap Now Turn Around', a song that hit back at the endless stream of identikit girl-bands who stripped their way into the charts, only to be pushed back to obscurity when the next set of grinning dolls came along.

They bashed through a few of their old favourites, experimenting. They never needed to tell one another what worked or what didn't. If Ellie discovered a new set of chords that improved the sound, there might be a nod or a smile, but if the new bass line was off, nobody would bother to point it out.

It wasn't always like this in a band. As a teenager, Zoë had sung, or rather, shouted, in a head-banging metal group that consisted of two tone-deaf guitarists and a drummer with a limited sense of rhythm. Being in Dead Canvas had been the exact opposite to Zoë's experiences in Dirty Money. With the boys, their rehearsal time had been spent alternately yelling at one another and passing round joints. The girls were different. They had an understanding. Perhaps because they'd been friends for over half a decade, ever since their early Goldsmiths days, they never needed to state the obvious.

Six years ago, Zoë had been lugging a battered old suitcase up the concrete steps of her first-year halls of residence: A drab, flat-roofed monstrosity that filled the gap between the A20 and the ugly sprawl of New Cross Gate. She had two guitars slung over one shoulder and a rucksack over the other – a consequence of her own stubbornness, having declined her parents’ offer of a lift, following a row over her A-level grades.

Ironically, Zoë’s ‘shockingly poor results’ (her mother’s words) were both the product and the cause of her unrelenting passion for music. Looking back, her memories of sixth-form involved jamming, songwriting and lying around hatching plans to become a big-time musician. With the benefit of hindsight, her grades shouldn’t have come as a surprise to anyone. But they had done.

Expectations had been running high, following Tamsin’s straight-A performance. There was a sense that Zoë would follow in her sister’s footsteps. She was bright enough; in previous exams she had matched Tamsin’s results, sometimes even beating her older sibling. But the motivation hadn’t been there. Maths and history and economics had slipped down in her priorities, while music had climbed to the top.

Even with her father pulling strings from his chambers in Lincolns Inn Fields, there was no way Durham would accept her into their hallowed law department. Which, as it turned out, was a blessing in disguise. Had Zoë never set foot on those concrete steps that led to the Goldsmiths first-year halls of residence, she would never have made friends with Ellie, and consequently would never have come into contact with Shannon or Kate.

Ellie had offered to help carry her belongings up the steps, which, of course, had led to a conversation about how they

both played the guitar. It turned out that the girls' box-like rooms were on the same floor, so in the first few weeks, while everyone else was making spurious friendships and trying to find their way, Zoë and Ellie were hiding away in their poky student bedrooms, trying to find their sound. By the end of the first term at Goldsmiths, they had become inseparable.

Ellie probably would have been happy to go on like that: Jamming, singing, chatting and jamming. But by the second term, they had written some songs of their own – songs that were too good to keep hidden amongst the chocolate digestive crumbs of Rooms 5a and 5d.

Zoë put up ads around college for a bass guitarist and a drummer. The intention had never been to form an all-girl quartet. It was only when, during the informal audition in Ellie's bedroom, Kate had quietly introduced herself – she was studying Finance, the same as Zoë – that the idea of a female ensemble had presented itself.

Finding a drummer had been the problem. Decent female drummers were rarities. They did get a call from one girl, but then when they'd all met up, having chatted at length about the prospect of forming an all-girl group, it had transpired that the drummer's repertoire consisted solely of the thumping beat to 'We Will Rock You'. It just wasn't going to work.

Eventually, they had taken on a young man called Hans, a sweet-tempered foreign exchange student from Denmark. He was only around for the remainder of the year but he sufficed as a stop-gap. Zoë had arranged for them to play at the Goldsmiths spring ball and it was there, in the middle of the beer tent, that Shannon had made herself known. Making use of her low-cut silk dress, she had talked Hans into stepping down for one song and shimmied her way into his seat.

Three minutes later, it was obvious that they had found their drummer.

‘Hold on!’ cried Shannon, stopping mid-way through their newest song and poking her drum sticks behind her ears. ‘I heard something.’

The other parts trailed off and for a moment, there was quiet.

Then they all heard it. *Thud, thud, thud.*

‘Mrs Costello,’ they all said, in unison.

Mrs Costello was the downstairs neighbour. For someone who lived beneath a bunch of noisy Irish girls that included a drummer and a DJ, she was a tolerant woman. But when the broom handle started banging, the girls knew it was time to stop. It was a small price to pay in comparison to the studio fee.

Waiting for Ellie and Kate by the door, Zoë checked her phone. One missed call from her mum. She dialled to hear the inevitable voicemail.

‘Hello dear, only me. Lovely to see you tonight. Pity we didn’t get a chance to chat. You seemed to arrive late and then you, er, disappeared ... Anyway. I wanted to ask, I’m having a bit of a clear-out. You didn’t want your old guitar, did you? I’m taking a car-load to the charity shop.’ Zoë let out an involuntary squeal. ‘There’s a ... speaker-thing, too. You know the one I mean? Black ... sort of square, lots of holes in the front ... I’m not sure whether it’d be any use to anyone. Perhaps I’ll get Daddy to take it to the tip. Oh and that jar of old plectrums - can I throw that away? We’re trying to make the spare bedroom look a bit more presentable. Let me know. I’ll see you soon. Bye.’

Zoë growled angrily and deleted the message.

‘Your mum?’

Zoë looked up. James was standing in the doorway. He must have driven round to give her a lift home.

‘Hello.’ Zoë tried to match his smile. ‘Yeah, my mum. She’s trying to throw out my old guitar.’

Shannon and Ellie poked their heads round from the front room.

‘What?’

‘What?’

‘And my old practice amp. And you know that little pot of plectrums I collected at uni?’

‘*Sacrilege,*’ hissed Shannon, shaking her head.

James was frowning. ‘Um ... Perhaps I’m misunderstanding, but if you haven’t used these things in the last two years, do you really need them?’

There was a collective gasp. Zoë drew a breath to explain, but Shannon got in first.

‘It’s not a question of need, James. It’s a sentimental thing. You can’t throw out your first guitar.’

‘Oh. Right.’ James nodded, nonplussed. ‘And ... the amp?’

‘Okay,’ Zoë nodded reluctantly. ‘Maybe that can go.’ The connections had always been a bit loose anyway. ‘But the *plectrums ...*’

Kate raised a hand and slipped out. ‘Sorry – gotta go.’

James looked into the darkness and quietly called out to her. ‘Chin up, eh. I’m sure it’ll work out.’

The girls looked at one another; presumably Kate had been telling James all about her latest rejection by Henry or Hugo – the names blurred into one.

‘You gotta have words with your mum,’ Shannon said firmly. ‘Make her change her mind.’

Zoë nodded, handing her guitar to James and stepping outside. The truth was, she had to change her mother’s mind about a lot more than the fate of her old guitar.

'Oh and Shannon?' she said, poking her head back into the warmth of Shannon's flat. 'Nice one on the Louis Castle thing.'

Shannon grinned back at her. 'Tepid Foot Hold, I'm tellin' ya. Go check 'em out.'