

The Fame Factor



Polly Courtney

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Аннотация

Have you got what it takes...? Does for the music industry what *The Devil Wears Prada* did for fashion. By day, Zoë Kidd lives a tedious existence, following orders and trying to appease her parents. By night, she's the raucous lead singer of all-girl rock band, Dirty Money. For six years, Dirty Money has toured the London scene, playing pubs, clubs, shopping centres and the odd public toilet. They're gifted, they're beautiful and they're determined to make it to the top. So when the American hit-maker Louis Castle appears at one of their gigs with talk of record deals and stadium tours, it seems as though their dreams are finally beginning to come true. But fame turns out to be more elusive and divisive than any of the girls could imagine... *The Fame Factor* is a fast-moving story of friendship, resilience and revelation, exposing the darker side to an industry obsessed with the limelight.

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The Fame Factor

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A V O N



To all the unsigned artists out there.

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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 wagging 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 remake 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 all right – 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 overpriced 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 unamplified 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 overzealous and underachieving 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 catcalling, 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 crammed 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 mouthwatering 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 on to her next harebrained 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 reborn 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 sweettalk 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 was 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 slackjawed 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 focused 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 of 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 drumsticks 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 midair, 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 rehash of an album that had photocopied sleeves and handwritten 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 of 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 Lincoln's 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 stopgap. 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 midway through their newest song and poking her drumsticks 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 carload 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.’

4

‘I think that covers everything,’ Brian Aldridge concluded, much to Zoë’s relief. Her balding boss was blessed with a gift for all things numerical, but he was also an incredible bore.

‘Don’t forget,’ he called out as people morosely filed out of the meeting room. ‘Rigorous Accounting Practices. RAP!’

The most irritating thing about Brian, thought Zoë, was that he genuinely believed he was interesting. His way of spicing up a presentation was to pepper it with his own acronyms, which just made you want to throw something at his shiny head.

Zoë found herself nodding as she passed through the door. It was a reflex she had developed at university for dealing with tedious lecturers.

‘...this afternoon, Zoë?’

Zoë faltered. She had no idea what he was talking about.

‘Or have you already done it?’

‘Uh...’ Zoë thought about answering, but decided against it. ‘Sorry, have I done what?’

He looked at her, brow deeply furrowed. ‘The British Trust audit.’

Zoë masked her mild panic with another smile. The British Trust was turning out to be something of a can of worms, largely because the charity was run by a bunch of sweet, well-meaning grandmothers who were incapable of using an abacus, let alone

a spreadsheet.

‘I’ve done the first run,’ she replied.

‘Could I see a copy, please?’

Zoë didn’t like his patronising tone. ‘I’ll email it to you now,’ she replied, leaving the meeting room and striding back to her desk.

Hoping she hadn’t left any gaping holes, Zoë dispatched the email and looked at her watch. Twelve forty-three. She was meeting Ellie at one. It didn’t seem sensible to get stuck into a spreadsheet with such little time. She opened a browser and typed three words into Google.

Results 1-10 of about 2,400,000 for ‘tepid foot hold’ returned the search engine. Zoë stared at the hits: The official TFH site, a couple of YouTube videos of live performances, a Last.fm profile, a MySpace page...even *Q* had a page for the band.

Zoë clicked on a couple of links. The country-rock fusion act had had seven top-ten singles in America and two platinum-selling albums, both making the top forty over here. Their lead singer, a guy called Toby Fox, was originally from London but now lived in LA with his model-actress girlfriend. Through Tepid Foot Hold he had won two Mercury awards, an *NME* award, a Grammy...Zoë squinted and reread the line. He had won an Ivor Novello award. An *Ivor Novello*. That was the ultimate achievement. It was more impressive than filling Wembley Arena or headlining on a bill that included the Eagles and Sheryl Crow – which, according to the articles, Fox had also managed to

accomplish. Ivor Novellos were the musical equivalent of the Oscars. They were for real songwriters.

She was about to search for 'Louis Castle' when her survival instinct kicked in, telling her to revert to her spreadsheet.

'Getting through it?' asked Brian as his middle-aged paunch drew level with her desk.

'Mmm...' Zoë squinted hard at a formula, following her manager's progress through the office. It was ten to one. She set her screensaver to 'Never come on' and stood up, draping her coat over her guitar as she eased it out from under the desk.

'Are you going outside?' Eric, her annoying neighbour, asked loudly. Several heads turned. 'Can you get me a Coke?'

'Ooh, Zoë, can you buy me a sandwich?'

'Will you be going anywhere near a newsagent?'

Zoë pulled an apologetic face. She didn't want to admit that she'd be gone for a full hour. Hour-long lunch breaks were frowned upon, especially during January.

'I'm, er...I've got to run a few errands,' she explained. 'Sorry.'

'Is that a guitar?' asked Eric, even louder, as though wanting his colleagues to appreciate his powers of perception. There was something about the pointy-faced auditor that Zoë found exasperating. He managed to turn every conversation into a competition.

'Oh, er, yes.' Zoë looked down at the case. 'That's the, um, the errand. Gotta drop it off somewhere.'

A minute later, the revolving glass doors spat her onto the

pavement and Zoë fled north, towards the barren wasteland of Shoreditch.

Ellie, it turned out, was running late. Ellie was usually running late. Her whole routine, if you could call it that, was set in a fluid version of time: one that was infinitely stretchable and infinitely compressible. Sometimes, she was early. Very occasionally, her clock coincided with Greenwich Mean Time and she arrived at a place exactly when she was supposed to. Most of the time though, Ellie was late. The only other person on the planet who inhabited the same time zone was Ellie's boyfriend, Sam.

Sam and Ellie lived in a caravan by one of the Thames's tributaries that ran through Hackney. Purchased five years ago from a group of travellers, the shack had initially served as a summer stopgap; a place to stay during the two months between first-year halls and their second-year student house. As it turned out, neither Ellie nor Sam made it as far as second year. Sam had been offered a choice by the college: to repeat his first year or to relinquish his place on the design course – which, truth be told, hadn't taught him much other than how to design the ultimate spliff – so he took the easy option and walked out. Ellie decided that she liked the vibe in the music shop on Denmark Street, where she had found herself working that summer, and dropped out as well. Five years later, Ellie was still at the shop, still living in the caravan with Sam, still smoking weed for breakfast.

'Hi!' cried Ellie, skipping across the road in front of a car, seemingly oblivious to its screeching emergency stop. 'Sorry I'm

late!’

The car zoomed off, its driver glaring angrily at their embrace.

Zoë checked the time on her phone as Ellie let them in. ‘I’ve got about forty-five minutes. I had to tell work I was running an errand.’ She pulled a face.

Ellie smiled placidly. She had no idea about the pressures of corporate life. Fortunately for her, at Desmond’s Strings there was no sneaking around behind colleagues’ backs, no faking enthusiasm for mind-numbingly dull tasks, no bullshit. Ellie enjoyed stringing guitars and chatting to the Led Zeppelin enthusiasts who passed through the doors of the shop. In fact, it was thanks to Desmond that they had this pseudo-rehearsal studio at their disposal.

They messed around with the fragments of vocals that had been floating around Zoë’s head for the last few days. *We say we will, we say one day / There’s never time, it runs away / The beat, it’s here, but do we care / We’re out of time, we’re out of air...*

Zoë felt herself loosening up, drifting away. Ellie’s chords changed the whole sound of the song. After a week of hearing her own imaginary backing parts, it felt as though the melody was finally coming alive.

‘This sounds great,’ she said excitedly. ‘D’you reckon we could get this polished in time for The Mad Cow gig?’

Ellie lifted her slender shoulders. ‘Sure.’

The Mad Cow was Shannon’s local pub. Run by an Irishman, staffed by Irishmen and frequented by an eclectic mix of Irish,

Caribbean, Polish, Russian, Indian and probably others; it was difficult to make out the accents above the din of the high-wattage amps. In fact, that was probably why everybody got along so well; nobody had the faintest idea what anybody else was saying.

‘It’d be good if we could get this on the DVD. Maybe this one and the six on our main set list.’ She was thinking out loud. ‘I wonder whether we can ask Eamonn for a longer slot...’

‘Good idea.’ Ellie nodded, trying out an alternative riff.

Zoë trailed off, smiling. Ellie never got involved in the planning. Brilliant harmonies and guitar solos were her fortes; turning up on time and helping with logistics were not.

‘Oh,’ she said, remembering something else. ‘I looked up that band Shannon mentioned – Tepid what’s-it. It looks like they’re really big in the States.’

‘Really?’ Ellie looked up, finally pulling herself away from the strings. ‘How big?’

‘*Big*. Google them.’

‘Wow.’ Ellie’s eyes were wild with hope and unfulfilled dreams. She didn’t care about the details; details were for somebody else to deal with – usually Zoë. She only cared about the dream. For Ellie, it was just a matter of time before a major record deal landed in their lap.

Zoë watched as she began to pluck at the strings, improvising. They had so much in common, in a musical sense. They both loved to play, to sing, to listen, to get swept up in its powerful,

intricate harmonies...But what they took from it was very different.

Ellie's world was filled with a select group of people, namely Zoë, Shannon, Kate and Sam. She only welcomed those privileged few, not caring what anybody else heard or didn't hear. Zoë, on the other hand, felt claustrophobic in that world; she needed an outlet. Having created the music, she had to share it. The more people it reached, the quicker it flowed from her and the better she felt.

Zoë knew she had changed since the early days. She couldn't pretend that the dainty office shoes and starched suit jacket were the only consequences of her lifestyle. Her choice of career path had had an impact on who she was and she resented that impact. She didn't like having to answer to Brian, having to fit in with the other po-faced clones, having to skulk around pretending to run errands...She didn't like living a lie. But at the same time, she knew that the changes had made her stronger.

Every day, the resentment inside Zoë piled up a little more. The day job, her parents and even some of her closest friends seemed to be doing their utmost to bring her in line. But Zoë was determined to escape. And the exit route, which seemed to be looking clearer every time she gazed at it, was the success of the band.

'Awesome,' she said, as they found themselves back on the chorus. 'That works. We'll try that next week.'

'Let's.' Ellie nodded, still playing. She got so wrapped up in

the music; sometimes it was hard to pull her out.

Zoë looked at the clock on the wall and felt something plummet inside her. ‘Shit! Is that right?’

Ellie glanced at her bare wrist as though half-hoping to find a watch there. ‘Um...’

‘Bollocks,’ Zoë muttered, having found her phone and confirmed that the time was indeed nearly half-past two.

She rammed her guitar into its case, yanked her coat on and stuffed her notebook and pencil into one of the pockets. Ellie watched her with a perplexed expression.

‘Gotta go!’ Zoë said, flinging herself at her friend in a hasty farewell gesture. ‘See ya!’

Ellie was shaking her head as she leapt towards the door. ‘Honestly, Zoë... You’ll give yourself a hernia.’

Zoë laughed and rushed out.

Brian was standing at her desk when she got back, rubbing a palm over the top of his shiny head.

‘Ah, there you are.’ He caught her eye, glancing down at her heaving chest and the guitar-shaped coat in her hand.

Zoë eased herself into her seat and waited for the inevitable reprimand. Her boss looked very serious.

‘I’ve been looking through your British Trust figures,’ he said, placing a print-out of her summary on the desk and wheezing a little. ‘Now, what do you see here?’

Zoë frowned. ‘Er, my summary?’

He pointed a stubby finger at the revenue line. ‘*Here,*’ he said,

looking at her.

‘Um...Four million, one hundred and sixty-two thousand, two hundred and eighty-five pounds, fifty-five pence?’

Brian cleared his throat. ‘Anything...strike you as odd?’

Zoë shrugged as politely as she could. ‘Is it a prime number?’

Brian closed his eyes briefly and shook his head. ‘It ends in five, Zoë, so no.’

She nodded slowly, pretending to give a shit. There was nothing odd about the figure, as far as she could tell, but then Brian had evidently spent longer thinking about the matter than she had.

Finally, he enlightened her.

‘Decimal points, Zoë! Pennies! We don’t need two d.p. in the summary, do we?’

Decimal points, she thought, pointing a trigger-finger at her boss and faking a smile as he started to bang on about RAP and obvious mistakes. *Decimal points*. This was what her life had come to.

‘Okay, so red for record, black for stop, and this slider thing does the zoom. Got it.’

‘No, you don’t need to press the black at all. Just use the red for record, then it’s the same button for stop.’

Zoë glanced warily at Shannon as they ran her friend through the controls one more time. It didn’t bode well.

‘Drinks, girls?’ the towering landlord called out from behind the bar.

At six foot ten, Eamonn Gallagher was, according to some websites, officially a giant. After thirty years’ serving pints in a bar of normal proportions, he had developed a permanent stoop, which, along with the gout-inflicted limp and the gnarled fingers, scarred from too many closing-time brawls, gave quite a fearsome first impression. But the girls were long past first impressions. Shannon’s local had become something of a second home in the last year and they all knew Eamonn on first-pint-on-the-house terms.

‘Can you get me a coupla beers?’ yelled Shannon, above the din. The place was noisier than usual, thanks to a large group of half-naked Antipodeans celebrating Australia Day in the corner.

Zoë wasn’t sure it was wise to ply the cameraman with drink before he’d even worked out how to operate the device, but there was nothing she could do. Sometimes, no matter how terrifying

it seemed, she just had to put her trust in Shannon.

‘Nothing for you, Zola?’ called the landlord as she passed the bar. He always called her that, after Zola Budd, the Olympic athlete from the eighties. He claimed that Zoë rushed around at the rate of the record-breaking runner.

‘No, thanks!’ Living up to her name, she pushed through the crowds to the backstage door. They were due on stage in twenty minutes.

Gigs at The Mad Cow were different from all the others. At most gigs, the girls were performing for a reason: because their manager wanted them to, because a certain A&R rep was supposed to be turning up, because the promoter was well-connected...Every stage was a potential stepping stone onto a bigger and higher one. But The Mad Cow was no stepping stone. They played here for one reason. Well, two if you counted the free drinks.

Six years ago – for reasons most likely associated with Shannon’s plunging cleavage – the landlord had granted them a Saturday night slot, when the band had been barely more than four girls with instruments and a few ideas for songs. They had played out of time, forgotten their set list, stood around discussing what to play next...It had been too soon for them to perform in public. But Eamonn had allowed them to see out the set and since then, Dirty Money had gone from strength to strength, outgrowing pub gigs like The Mad Cow. They were at a level where they could play every night if they wanted, anywhere

on the London circuit – with the recent exception of the Camden House. Now a slick, well-oiled rock machine, they turned down many of the gigs they were offered – but never The Mad Cow.

‘So,’ said Zoë, squeezing through the narrow door of the closet that served as their dressing room. Kate was sitting on the upturned mop bucket, tuning her bass. ‘Are we playing “Out of Air”?’

Kate shrugged anxiously. She raised the instrument to her ear and repeatedly plucked at her E-string. ‘New songs are always a bit of a gamble...’

Zoë needn’t have asked; she already knew how Kate felt. Kate was all about preparation, rehearsal and control. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy spontaneity; she got a kick out of being on stage just like everyone else. She just liked to *prepare* for the kick. She wanted every performance to be perfect.

‘I think we should do it,’ Zoë declared.

Kate nodded blankly. ‘Okay.’

Zoë squatted down next to the upturned bucket. ‘What’s up? Is it what’s-his-face?’

‘Tarquin?’ Kate turned her head, finally making eye contact. ‘No, I’m totally over him.’

Zoë tried not to baulk at the name. Really, it was no wonder she’d been having problems. ‘So what is it?’

Kate exhaled shakily. ‘It’s work. My boss.’ She looked into Zoë’s eyes. ‘Oh, it’s everything.’

Zoë shifted her weight, her knees beginning to ache. Kate was

training to become an actuary. Nobody knew exactly what that meant, except that it was something to do with measuring risk – something Kate was ideally suited to – and that the qualification process culminated in a series of mind-blowingly difficult exams that only about twenty per cent of applicants passed. The only other thing Zoë knew about the profession was that it ranked even higher than auditing in the tedium stakes, which was saying something.

‘Is the revision getting you down?’

Kate looked up at her through wisps of fine blonde hair. ‘No, it’s not that.’ She smiled ironically. ‘In fact, that’s the only thing that’s going well. I’m good at exams. It’s the job I can’t do.’

Zoë shook her head. ‘Don’t be silly,’ she chided. Kate was smart and hard-working. Although Zoë had never seen her in a work context, she could imagine her being good at her role. What was lacking, however, was self-confidence. ‘What can’t you do?’

‘They want me to stand up and *present!*’

Zoë looked at her. ‘What d’you mean, present? Like, in a meeting?’

‘Yes!’ cried Kate, highly distressed. ‘My boss is this high-flying guy called Mark and he’s insisting I do it, but I can’t! I just can’t!’

Rocking onto the balls of her feet, her knees in new leagues of agony, Zoë reached for Kate’s hand. ‘How many people?’ she asked.

‘Four or five – maybe six. They want me to stand up in front

of clients.’

Zoë looked at her. ‘Kate, you’re about to go on stage in front of two hundred sweaty, jeering louts. Why are you worried about a couple of clients?’

Kate baulked as though she couldn’t believe Zoë was making the comparison. ‘That’s totally different! Out there, I’m just playing an instrument. I can hide behind my bass. It’s impossible not to look good with a bass. You just rock up, play the notes and walk out. There’s no talking or answering questions...’

Try being lead singer, thought Zoë. Working the crowds was the most thrilling part of her role, but it was also fucking terrifying.

‘I could never do what you do,’ said Kate, as if reading her mind. ‘I wish I could, but I’m just not *like* that.’

Unable to feel her legs any more, Zoë pushed herself up from the floor and squeezed Kate’s shoulder.

‘Look,’ she said, looking down at her friend. ‘We’ve all got things we don’t like about ourselves.’ She hesitated for a moment, thinking about her own cowardice. She was too weak to even talk to her own family about her ambitions. ‘You’ve just got to live with them. And to be honest, most people wouldn’t even notice your flaws.’

Kate looked up with a grateful smile.

‘Hey, guys!’ Shannon bounded through the door, her mate in tow with the camcorder haphazardly slung over his shoulder. ‘Say something for the camera!’

Zoë smiled wearily. ‘Hi.’

Kate raised a shaky hand.

The cameraman gave up on them and swivelled back to Shannon, who was tipping back the remains of her pint. She swallowed, then looked around. ‘Where’s Ellie?’

Zoë looked at her watch. ‘Good point.’ The camcorder spun back to her. ‘She’s cutting it fine.’

‘Probably gazing at the Hackney skyline with Mr Pot-head,’ said Shannon. The recording equipment swooped back across the room.

As Shannon’s mate sought out the next piece of footage, the door swung open again and Ellie drifted in.

‘Hi, guys!’

‘Ellie, this is Gavin,’ Shannon explained, as the camcorder was pushed into her face.

There was a bang on the door. ‘When you’re ready, girls!’ It was Eamonn’s cousin, the promoter.

Zoë tried to hurry the group along, shooing Gavin back into the crowd and hoping that Ellie’s missed sound-check wasn’t going to matter. There had only been one gig where they’d had to stop playing to ask the sound engineer to turn on her amp. It wasn’t that Ellie didn’t care about the gigs; she was as desperate as everyone else to make a success of the band. She just couldn’t get the hang of time management.

With a quick nod, Zoë led them out from the darkness. After several hundred performances together, they knew the routine.

She walked to the centre spot, adjusting her guitar strap as the noise rose up from the room around them.

‘Get ya kit off!’

‘Girl-band!’

‘Tits out!’

One of the Australian revellers in the corner stood up and lobbed a beer-soaked flag at the stage, before toppling sideways and being removed from the premises in the crook of Eamonn’s arm.

Zoë looked round at the girls, smiling with anticipation. They were used to this. With an all-female cast, they had to work doubly hard to prove themselves, particularly in a place like The Mad Cow.

They kicked off with their rockiest number, ‘Delirious’, Zoë pouring her heart into it, watching as the hecklers slowly lost their nerve. A rush of pure, concentrated emotion coursed through her. It was moments like this that Zoë lived for. Offstage, she had an ordinary existence, but on stage, she became extraordinary. It no longer mattered who was listening. It didn’t even matter if nobody was listening. She was surrounded by and absorbed in the music, feeling more alive than she could ever feel in the day. No stomach-churning fairground ride, no skydiving trip, no surround-sound cinema experience could ever match the exhilaration she felt as she emptied her lungs into that microphone.

By the third song, the doubters were few and far between, but

Zoë knew they'd be silenced by what was to come. Ellie's guitar solo had that effect. Complete strangers had been known to throw themselves onto the stage, likening her nimble fingers to those of the masters, Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix. It was at times like this, when Ellie disappeared into a frenzy of movement and sound, drowning them in the beauty of her improvised tune, that the band came into its own.

A few weeks ago, they had featured on an obscure page of the Kerrang! website thanks to Shannon's brief relationship with the online editor. The review summed up their sound perfectly: *Loud and hypnotic, with an edgy disco beat beneath sweet, twisted lyrics, Dirty Money combine elements of The Strokes and New Order with frothy but powerful feminine vocals.* When she sang, she could see those words dancing in front of her eyes: Loud. Edgy. Powerful. That was Dirty Money. They were pop, but as another, less renowned reviewer had once put it, 'more Killers than Kylie'.

'That was amazing!' yelled Gavin, beating his way through the crowds afterwards, still shouldering the camera.

Zoë thanked him quickly, her mind already on the bigger picture. 'Did you get it all?'

He frowned at her. 'What d'you mean, all?'

Zoë's throat tightened. 'All...the songs. The gig.'

Gavin stared gormlessly for a moment, his mouth hanging open a little. 'Oh my God...I didn't realise you wanted the whole thing. I just got – you know, the first one? Where the guys were

doing that thing with the flag?’

Zoë closed her eyes, cursing herself for letting Shannon take responsibility for something so important. They *needed* this demo DVD.

It was only when she opened her eyes and spotted Shannon, suppressing a ridiculous smirk, that she realised that the joke was on her.

‘Oh.’ She smiled sheepishly. ‘Very funny.’

6

‘Dear, oh dear,’ muttered Brian, hovering over Zoë’s desk and grimly shaking his bald head.

Quickly navigating away from the band’s MySpace page, Zoë looked up and forced a smile.

‘What...’ said Brian, bending down and scooping up a handful of papers from her desk, ‘is this?’

‘I think, um...’ Zoë stammered. ‘I think that’s last year’s audit for...’

‘Clutter!’ he screamed, triumphantly. ‘*That* is what this is.’ He let the print-outs slither out of his hand and then, rather unhelpfully, picked off some random pages from other piles to make sure the paperwork was completely out of order.

‘It’s all organised in—’

‘Ah!’ he cried again, making sure most of the department could hear. ‘*Organised* clutter! Is that what it is?’

Zoë sighed quietly, watching as her boss picked off yet another sheet and put it down somewhere else. She knew what this was about. It wasn’t just Brian trying to annoy her – although he was trying to annoy her. This was about the new rule that had just come into force across Chase Waterman.

Weeks earlier, the powers that be on the seventeenth floor had enlisted the help of some highly respected consultants, whose job it was to improve efficiency in the company. Following a

lengthy period of consultation that included employee surveys and a series of experiments comparing staff productivity under different levels of ambient lighting, the troubleshooters had come to the revolutionary conclusion that auditors worked most efficiently whilst sitting in upright chairs, in silence, in natural light. But the beady-eyed consultants had also spotted another spectacular insight: *The best auditors tended to have clear desks.* It was this little gem that formed the seed of a new way of thinking at Chase Waterman PLC. They called it, imaginatively, the *clear desk policy*.

‘Sorry,’ Zoë said wearily. ‘It’s just, I like having everything to hand. It’s all in piles. I know where everything...’

Brian silenced her with a raised eyebrow. ‘ODOM,’ he said.

‘Sorry?’

‘Odom,’ he said again. ‘ODOM. An Organised Desk is an Organised Mind.’

‘Oh, right.’ Zoë nodded.

‘Let’s have it clear by the morning.’

Zoë let her eyes glaze over as her boss strode off to persecute some other employee. She stayed like this for several seconds, waiting for the irritation to pass before she got back to pretending to work.

‘There’s no need for paper these days, anyway,’ the weasel next to her piped up. ‘You can just do everything electronically.’

Zoë’s frustration ramped up a notch as her neighbour’s spiky hair poked into view.

‘Well, maybe I just like having piles of paper,’ she said, wearily.

She jiggled her mouse to see the time. Thankfully, it was twelve minutes to six.

‘What’s that?’ asked Eric.

Zoë quickly minimised the browser, annoyed that the oily-haired rodent had caught her out.

‘The GM audit,’ she replied in a monotone.

‘No, not that. The website.’ He wheeled himself up to her screen.

It was no good, she thought. He had seen it. And with a voice as loud as his, it was likely that most of the office would be seeing it if she didn’t shut him up soon.

‘It’s just a band,’ she shrugged, briefly showing him the page. Nobody at Chase Waterman knew about Dirty Money. It was her secret – her other life. Her colleagues wouldn’t understand if she tried to explain how it felt to strut onto the stage – to belt out her songs to a roomful of strangers.

‘Hold on! Go back.’

Reluctantly, she returned to the page.

Eric let out a low-pitched whistle. ‘Fuck me!’

Zoë cringed.

‘It’s a girl-band!’ Eric went on. He was practically salivating. Zoë could feel her breathing become shallow as she waited for the penny to drop.

‘Look at – oh my God!’ He slapped the desk with his palm.

‘That’s you!’

A couple of heads turned. Zoë rolled her eyes in an attempt to discredit his cry.

‘You’re in a girl-band!’ Eric laughed, peering at the screen and noting the name. ‘Dirty Money? Kinky, eh. What d’you sing? Are you like the Spice Girls? “Spice Up Your Life...”’

He continued to squawk, thrusting his shoulders left and right. “‘Who Do You Think You Are...” Which one are you? Posh? Sporty?’

Eric was not to know this, but for a serious musician, there was nothing more insulting than being called a boy- or girl-band. There were key differences between the likes of U2 and, say, Westlife, the principle one being that U2 was comprised of people who could play instruments and sing, whereas most of the boy-band magic happened in the recording studio with session musicians and a fancy mixing desk. Being likened to a member of the Spice Girls was, for Zoë, a little bit like Michelangelo being called a plasterer.

‘We’re not a *girl-band*,’ she spat, closing the browser and angrily shutting everything down. It felt as though a fuse had snapped inside her.

Eric let out a low *oooh*, gliding back to his desk and muttering something about Scary Spice under his breath.

Zoë marched over to the nearest recycling station and tugged it towards her desk, aware of several pairs of eyes nervously tracking her movements. In one swift action, she swept all

the paperwork into the bin and then kicked it back into the gangway. She didn't care what her colleagues thought. They were a bunch of ladder-climbing executives whose idea of exciting was wearing a brightly-coloured Donald Duck tie to work. She would show them, one day. She'd show them what it was to succeed.

'A glass of wine,' she said firmly. 'A large one.'

'Good day?' asked her sister, grinning as she paid for the drinks.

They were perched on high, space-age stools, surrounded by well-cut suits and polished brogues in one of the many identical bars around St Paul's. Unfortunately for Zoë and Tamsin, their places of work were at opposite ends of the Square Mile, a district that accounted for more than ten per cent of the capital's GDP and a good proportion of its spending too – as was evident by the hundred-pound round that was going on beside them.

'It wasn't the best,' Zoë admitted, her mouth already watering as she drew the large, dewy glass towards her.

She didn't feel as furious as she had half an hour ago. The walk had done her good. Listening to angry music always calmed her down.

'Anything in particular?'

Zoë took her first sip. She thought about telling Tam about the incident with Eric and the MySpace page, but decided against it. On reflection, her reaction to the little imp's taunting seemed a little melodramatic. 'Just the usual.'

A collective cheer rose up from the men on their right and the

girls shifted sideways on their stools. Padded shoulders jostling for space at the bar, the young men assembled themselves in front of a long line of pints, each one accompanied by a double shot of a viscous, brown liquid.

‘Nothing’s changed,’ Tamsin remarked, rolling her eyes.

Zoë wasn’t sure whether her sister was referring to the city boys or her attitude towards her career. Tam had never really understood Zoë’s take on life. She was sweet and supportive, always there for her little sister, but the fact remained, she couldn’t see why anyone would want more than a stable, well-paying job and a flat with a well-equipped kitchen.

‘It was in here that I first met Jonathan,’ Tam went on, clearing up the doubt. Zoë smiled at the thought of her sweet, sensible sister falling prey to the slick young predators in here tonight.

‘Did he look something like that?’ she asked, nodding towards the beer-drinkers, who were wandering the bar, bleary-eyed, wearing the shot glasses on their heads like small Russian hats.

‘They all look like that when they get together,’ Tam said, shaking her head. ‘Herd instinct.’

Zoë laughed. ‘Speaking of herds, how is life in the “second six” at the Inn?’

Tamsin took a large sip with closed eyes. ‘Fairly similar to the first six, to be honest. I still get mistaken for the secretary, still get told off for walking on the wrong bit of grass, still get no respect from anyone else in the courtroom.’

‘Oh dear.’ Zoë cringed, thanking fate yet again for her

abysmal A-level grades. The Inns of Court actually made Chase Waterman seem like a dynamic, forward-thinking place to work.

‘I guess things have improved a little,’ Tamsin conceded. ‘I was invited to the Spring Croquet Tournament the other day, and I’m actually on my feet in the courtroom.’

‘Wow. Really?’ Zoë raised her eyebrows, feeling a rush of pride tinged with just a small hint of envy – about the courtroom, not the croquet. Whilst she knew she could never sit in those stuffy wooden halls, wearing that wig and ridiculous gown, it would still be an incredible thing to know that your words, in some cases, made the difference between freedom and imprisonment.

‘Well, yes...Although typically, when the judge acquits our defendant he makes it very clear that he’s acquitting him for reasons *other* than those outlined in my defence. I don’t think they like the idea of a woman having influence at the bar.’

Zoë smiled. ‘It’s like being a musician. A few weeks ago I got ordered to leave the backstage area because it was “artists only”. I tried to explain that I *was* the artist, but this guy was having none of it. He thought I was some dolled-up groupie.’

Tamsin smiled. ‘How are things with the band?’

Zoë shrugged. It was the same every time someone asked. She always wanted to break some news, tell them that Dirty Money had been signed, that they were releasing an album, supporting some well-known act...But there was never any news. Not proper news, anyway.

‘We approached a few labels a while ago, but haven’t heard back. Oh—’ Zoë smiled sardonically, realising that there was in fact some news – bad news. ‘And our manager walked out on us.’

‘Jake?’

Zoë nodded.

‘He wasn’t much good anyway, was he?’

‘Well, no...’ Zoë sighed. ‘It’s the booking agent we’ll miss, really. But hey, we’ve had some interest from someone else – some American dude.’

Tamsin drew her head back, looking impressed. ‘Sounds promising.’

‘We’ll see.’ Zoë smiled. Her sister was trying to show an interest. She always did. She really wanted to help, but the truth was, she had never grasped her little sister’s obsession with the band. She knew what it was to be driven; that was an attribute they shared. But she couldn’t grasp the idea of public endorsement, of eminence...of *fame*. There. She had used the dirty word. Zoë wanted more than the monthly salary and the well-equipped kitchen. She wanted recognition for the music she made.

Was that so wrong? Was it bad, her desire to see positive reviews in the *NME*? To fill an arena with fans? To hear people scream the lyrics to her songs? Her family seemed to think so. Rock music was not an acceptable pursuit in the Kidd family. Classical music was another matter. Had Zoë continued with violin lessons, practising her arpeggios and working her way

through the ranks of the county youth orchestra, *then* they'd be proud. Had it been Mozart and Haydn blasting from her bedroom throughout her teenage years instead of Nirvana and Pearl Jam, then they might talk about her achievements. But perhaps it was better that they remained silent. In the words of one seventies pop duo, *some things were better left unsaid*.

'Hey,' Zoë looked at her sister, remembering something. 'Did you know Dad nearly played rugby for England?'

Tamsin spluttered, eventually swallowing her mouthful of wine and frowning. 'What?'

'Back in the eighties. He got accepted onto the squad. I think he turned it down for a place in chambers.'

'I didn't know, no.' Tamsin's brow remained furrowed. 'That doesn't surprise me, though. I knew he was good. I guess he just didn't want to take the risk. How did you find that out, anyway?'

'I heard him talk about it at your... ' Zoë faltered. 'Your dinner thing.' She hadn't meant to bring that up.

'Oh yeah. What happened to you that night? I couldn't find you during drinks.'

Zoë hesitated, not sure whether to tell her sister the truth. Tamsin knew how important the band was to her. She would understand about the rehearsal and the gig and the demo DVD... But the question was: would she see it as more important than her own celebratory dinner? *Was* it more important than the dinner that signified Tamsin's coming of age in the legal world?

'I...' Zoë tried to decide. She kept getting close to coming out

with the truth, then chickening out. ‘I...’

She was rescued by the sound of her phone. Quickly, she pulled it out of her bag.

‘Hiiiiii,’ came an unfamiliar, nasal drawl. ‘Is that one of the lovely young ladies from Dirty Money?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, quickly lowering the wine glass from her lips and trying to shield the mouthpiece from the noise. ‘This is Zoë.’

‘Zoë, hiiiiii,’ said the man. He sounded like a crank caller – possibly a fan from one of their less salubrious gigs. ‘This is Louis Castle.’

Zoë’s grip tightened on the phone. She could feel her heart rate quicken inside her chest. This was the man who managed Tepid Foot Hold’s career. The man who had helped Toby Fox win an Ivor Novello.

‘Hi!’ she squeaked breathlessly.

‘Just thought I’d drop you a line, y’know, t’say hi. I gat your demo DVD.’

‘Right.’ Zoë swallowed.

‘And I kinda like it. Or at least, I like the music. The DVD’s not gonna win any awards, is it?’

‘No. Um...Right.’ Zoë couldn’t speak properly. She wanted to apologise for the poor quality of the recording, to explain that they were a lot better in the flesh than the footage implied...But her mind was swamped by the single question: did he like the music *enough*?

‘So, I’m thinkin’,’ said the man, ‘if you girls are up for it, we should meet up. Chat a little. Talk about a management contract.’

There was a pause, and Zoë realised she was nodding into the phone. ‘Right,’ she muttered, shell-shocked. Then she pulled herself together. ‘Yes, great. Let’s!’

Tamsin was looking at her strangely when she got off the phone.

‘Is everything all right?’

Zoë forced herself to take a breath, then exhaled, slowly. ‘I think,’ she said eventually, to her baffled-looking sister. ‘I think Louis Castle might want to take us on.’

‘Beer for you...Beer for me...Whisky for Ellie, if she ever turns up...’ Shannon slid the drinks across the table. ‘Why’re you on orange juice, Kate? What’s up? It’s not right to celebrate without a proper drink.’

Zoë took her pint and shifted sideways, beginning to realise the scale of the task ahead. It was becoming apparent that their drummer’s feet had long since left the ground and it was going to be all they could do to keep her at the current altitude, let alone bring her back down.

‘Strictly speaking,’ she said, saving Kate from her explanation, ‘we’re not celebrating. There’s nothing to celebrate yet.’

Shannon let out an exasperated sigh. ‘Oh, party-pooper! We’re just about to get taken on by the guy who put Tepid Foot Hold on the global rock map – who, by the way, have just had their latest album go platinum. That’s reason to celebrate, if you ask me!’

Kate glanced anxiously at Zoë. ‘We haven’t even met the guy yet.’

‘I have,’ Shannon retorted.

‘Yeah, after about twelve beers at the end of a long night.’ Kate started manically stirring her orange juice. ‘We haven’t. He hasn’t met *us*. He might not like us.’

‘Of course he likes us!’ cried Shannon, lowering her pint with such panache that the head sloshed all over the table. ‘I mean...

Why wouldn't he?' On seeing the other girls' gazes drift upwards, Shannon looked round. 'Oh, hi!' She pushed the whisky towards Ellie as she drifted over.

Zoë sipped her beer as their drummer prattled on about other artists she intended to meet when they were up there with the biggest bands in the world.

'...the latest single by The Cheats. Have you heard it? It's *gorgeous*. I'm totally in love with the lead singer.' Shannon tipped back some beer. 'You know, Niall King?' she prompted, looking around briefly but not waiting for a response. 'He's Irish. Has the most amazing voice. Honestly, you *have* to hear him sing. Wouldn't it be awesome if we got signed by the same label?'

Zoë exchanged another worried look with Kate. This was getting ridiculous. They hadn't even got a manager yet.

'I wonder which label they're on...Ooh!' Shannon suddenly ducked under the table, emerging with her phone.

The others sipped their drinks while Shannon alternately fiddled and swore at her handset.

'No word from the labels, then?' Kate asked quietly.

'Not yet.'

Zoë felt guilty. She knew that the second word was superfluous. Their dirty money campaign had clearly failed. If any of the label reps had been remotely interested, they would have called by now. The bastards. They'd probably pocketed the money and thrown the CD in the bin, along with all the others. Or worse...Zoë thought unhappily about the other prospect: they

had listened to the CD and rejected it.

Sitting here now, waiting and hoping to get taken on by Louis hot-shot Castle, Zoë was beginning to realise that their little stunt might have actually set them back. If the heads of the labels had already turned them down, then no amount of schmoozing on Louis Castle's part would convince them to change their minds.

'Listen,' said Zoë, deciding to put the whole expensive operation behind them. 'I think, when we meet this guy, we should show him what we're all about.'

'Definitely,' agreed Shannon, looking up from her phone.

Zoë wondered whether she actually knew what she meant. 'He's seen us on stage,' she said, 'and he knows our music, but he doesn't know us. He doesn't know what we're capable of *between* gigs.'

Shannon was nodding, her brow creased in earnest.

'Our promotional capabilities,' Zoë explained. 'The way we can generate a buzz. The massive fan base we've built up.'

To say 'we' was generous, thought Zoë, given that she always did most of the work, but it was important that they felt like a team.

'Yeah!' Shannon agreed. 'We should show him what we can do!'

Kate winced. 'Please, not the Brent Cross gig... Don't tell him about that.'

Zoë balked at the thought. A few months ago, they had been asked to perform a few songs during late-night shopping in the

run-up to Christmas. It was the sort of gig they'd usually turn down, but the fee had been good and the promoter had guilt-tripped them into playing by telling them about all the orphans around the world who would benefit from the proceeds.

Their music had proved surprisingly popular with the shoppers and during their break, Shannon and Zoë had hatched a plan to make their final song especially memorable. At the time, it had seemed like a fantastic idea for Zoë to take the escalator to the next floor of the shopping centre, grab hold of one of the decorations that hung in the atrium and sing the next song whilst swinging, Tarzan-style, across the stage in front of the other musicians.

The decoration had supported her for long enough to attract the attention of most of the onlookers and a couple of burly but fast-moving security guards, at which point Zoë had plummeted to the stage via Shannon's drum kit, her landing amplified by her radio microphone. Surprisingly, they hadn't been asked back to Brent Cross Shopping Centre.

'Maybe not that one,' Zoë conceded. 'But Manchester,' she said, referring to a gig that she still maintained had come about as a result of an administrative error. They'd been supporting one of the biggest indie acts in the Northwest and the promoter had referred to them all night as 'Thirsty Money', but they didn't need to explain that. 'And Chiana.'

Chiana was a live music venue in Soho whose owner Shannon had somehow talked into letting them play. When it had

transpired that a couple of minor celebrities were drinking there, Zoë had managed to engineer a photo that revealed not just the inebriated celebrities but the whole of the Dirty Money setup, complete with promotional backdrop, which, following a mysterious ‘leak’, had appeared in one of the trashy free newspapers the following day.

‘It’ll all help, won’t it?’

‘Um...’ It was Kate. ‘Can we make sure we only tell him about the good stuff?’

‘Don’t be so—’

Shannon trailed off. A man was swaggering across the bar towards them, dressed in a giant, red and brown flecked shirt that must have been made to measure – possibly out of a set of Persian curtains. His garish, gold-buckled belt was only visible from the girls’ low vantage point, due to the flabby overhang.

‘Hiiiiiii,’ he called in a manner that Zoë recognised instantly from the telephone call. He had the type of face that had probably once been handsome: perfect white teeth and an overly warm smile, but it was difficult to tell with all the chins. ‘How are my adorable rock goddesses?’ He opened his hands to them like a preacher addressing a congregation.

Zoë couldn’t help glancing at Kate, who stared back at her, wide-eyed.

‘Good!’ cried Shannon, when it became apparent that nobody else was going to reply.

‘Good? Good! So, what can I get y’all?’

The ordering process took some time, mainly because every time one of the girls said the word ‘bottle’, the American would repeat it four or five times in various accents, then pretend to forget what the bottle was to contain.

‘Not funny,’ muttered Kate, as Louis Castle retreated to the bar, relaying the whole conversation to the barman in a booming voice.

‘Give him a chance!’ hissed Shannon.

‘At least he’s not trying to flirt,’ Ellie pointed out. They all cringed at the reminder of their old manager’s sleazy ways.

‘I gat you a double,’ he said, pushing a bucket-sized tumbler of Jack Daniels towards Ellie. ‘And here’s a vaardka for you, in case that OJ needs spicin’ up.’

The girls took their drinks and watched the enormous man arrange himself at the table, siphoning off nearly half of his pint with his first sip.

‘So,’ he said, looking at each one in turn, his eyes glistening behind the rolls of fat. ‘Are you ready for the big time?’

‘Yeah!’ replied Shannon immediately.

‘Mmm,’ added Ellie, presumably because Shannon had pinched her under the table.

‘Are you ready to *make it*?’

Zoë closed her eyes. Perhaps these lines worked on artists in Los Angeles or wherever he came from, but they really didn’t wash with her. ‘Have you got any ideas about labels?’ she asked.

Louis looked at her, eyebrows raised. ‘Woah!’ He looked

around at the other girls, grinning manically. ‘You’re quick outta the blocks! I only just sat down!’ He pointed to his half-finished pint. ‘Gimme a chance!’

Shannon laughed along with him, prompting Ellie to do the same.

Zoë forced a smile too. ‘Sorry. It’s just... We’ve been together for a while now and—’

‘Hey,’ he interrupted. ‘I know. You’ve been around a few years, hoping to get signed and now you just wanna grab that deal and run, huh? Yeah. I’ve seen that before.’

Reluctantly, Zoë nodded along with him. She had been about to explain that their manager had promised great things and never delivered, and that they didn’t want to end up in the same situation again, but Louis Castle had already moved on.

Zoë sat back and let the conversation flow around her. The manager quickly got onto the subject of his stable of successful acts in the States and his plans for replicating such success over here. Ellie and Shannon lapped it up, gasping and cooing and clapping their hands like small children. Kate, like Zoë, was doing her best to look convinced.

‘When you say, “package us up”,’ the bassist ventured, ‘what exactly do you mean?’

Louis turned to her, grinning enigmatically from behind his many chins. ‘I’ll tell you...over the next drink!’

Once again, he returned with a bumper round.

‘So,’ the large man began, returning to his seat and sinking

into his next pint. ‘What I mean, is make you “sellable”.’ He drew quotation marks in the air. ‘Like a brand. We need to make it obvious what you stand for.’

‘You mean, like our image?’ asked Shannon. ‘What we wear and that?’

‘Exaaaaactly,’ Louis replied. ‘And that includes getting you out of those old hooded tops and jeans!’

Shannon laughed. Zoë and Kate glanced at one another.

‘Don’t you think,’ Zoë said carefully, not wanting to offend the man, ‘that the image thing is only really important for manufactured pop music? Boy-bands, girl-bands...’

He smiled at her pityingly. ‘Honey, *all* acts have an image.’

‘But...’ she persevered. She wanted to explain herself. ‘I can see why the teeny-bop artists have a certain look... They have to appeal on the looks front, because there’s nothing more to them. But say... Coldplay? Razorlight? U2? It’s all about the music for them, isn’t it?’

The four faces flicked round to Louis.

‘Zoë,’ he replied, still wearing the sympathetic smile. ‘It’s *all* about the image, whatever the act. Why d’you think Brandon Flowers wears those cute little military jackets? Now, nobody’s telling me *he’s* not talented!’

Zoë nodded, annoyed that the manager had found an exception to the rule. As the conversation moved on to the subject of touring and festivals and broadcasting rights, Zoë started to consider the possibility that Louis might be right. If he really had

pushed so many acts into the American limelight, if he really had nurtured a band like Tepid Foot Hold from small-town act through to global superstardom, he had to know a thing or two about the music business, didn't he?

It was a few drinks later, all courtesy of the prospective manager, when the subject of representation finally came up.

'So, you think you're ready to jump on board?' asked Louis, smiling like a fat schoolboy.

'Yes!' cried Shannon and Ellie, who, by this point, looked ready to jump into bed with the man.

Even Kate had mellowed a little, Zoë noticed, watching her try not to smile at the manager's dubious charm.

He was like a holiday brochure, thought Zoë: slick, enticing and full of promise. But then, she thought, watching her drummer crash her glass against his and throw back her drink, he was a man whose job it was to place artists with record labels. His job was to 'sell the package'. Perhaps being like a brochure was no bad thing.

'Yes,' she said, looking across at Kate.

Eventually, the bass guitarist nodded.

'Great!' roared Louis, reaching out and grabbing one of Shannon's hands and one of Zoë's. 'That is *fantastic* news.'

After a period of mutual congratulation, they rose to their feet and stumbled out.

'I'll get a contract over to you this week,' he said, crushing each girl's hand in turn. 'Then we can talk about recording a few of

your tracks properly.’

‘Plopper – properly?’ Zoë was more drunk than she’d thought.

‘Yeah, you know. With a producer.’

‘We already have a producer!’ cried Shannon, presumably referring to the creepy architect who had wormed his way into her affections, wooing her with descriptions of his in-home recording suite and persuading the girls to use him to produce their demo CD.

‘What, Sleazebag Simon?’ asked Kate, grimacing.

The CD had turned out all right in the end, but Shannon had clearly blocked from her mind the memories of what she’d had to do in order to retrieve the disc from Sleazebag’s house.

‘Sleazebag Simon, eh?’ Louis chuckled. ‘You won’t be needing him any more. You’re in another league now, ladies!’

Staggering across the road like a malcoordinated, eight-legged animal, the girls relived some of the cheesier moments of the night, all scepticism somehow having dissolved and been replaced with childlike excitement.

‘We’re heading for the big time!’

‘*Big time!*’

‘We’re on the *fast train* to success!’

Suddenly, Shannon broke loose from the pack.

‘Louis!’ she called, waving her arms above her head as though she was drowning. ‘I forgot to ask!’

In the bleary distance, Louis tilted his head to one side, his breath forming clouds around his face.

‘Can you get us signed to Polydor?’ she yelled.

‘Why’s that then?’ he replied.

‘It’s my destiny!’ Shannon shrieked. ‘I’ve got to meet Niall King from The Cheats!’

It was almost possible, from where they stood, to see Louis’s eyes roll in their sockets. ‘I’ll see what I can do,’ he called, raising a hand, turning on his heel and walking off.

8

Zoë closed her eyes and let her head roll back on the velvet seat, imagining she was somewhere else. The sweeping string section built to a climax with a piercing blast of high-pitched brass and in her mind, the heroine held up the prize in her hands, victorious. Classical music always sounded like a soundtrack to her.

She opened her eyes again as the volume dropped to a pizzicato murmur, watching the polo-necked conductor as his arms jerked up and down like those of a Thunderbird puppet. The music was incredible, she couldn't deny that. But it didn't seem like something to be admired in its own right. There was no stage presence – no element of *performance*.

'Bravo!' yelled her father through the clamorous applause. He and thousands of others clearly disagreed with Zoë's judgement. 'Splendid!'

Presumably deciding that the thunderous ovation was not quite sufficient for an encore, the conductor disappeared from the stage, only to return seconds later with a camp flourish to take another set of bows.

'Magnificent,' muttered Zoë's father, nodding approvingly as they started to shuffle along the row.

Zoë looked at Tamsin and smiled. Their annual winter concert was nominally a treat for the whole family, paid for by their

parents in lieu of Christmas presents, but the appreciation was always somewhat one-sided.

‘Shall we go for a drink?’

Zoë nodded, catching her sister’s eye again. Clearly the glass of wine in the pleasant café overlooking the Thames was their mother’s favourite part of the evening. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy concerts or that she was overly fond of wine; she just couldn’t relate to classical music. Debussy and Wagner hadn’t featured on the Croydon council estate where she had grown up.

‘It’s such a pity you don’t play anymore,’ said their father, handing his daughters their glasses of wine. ‘You were both so talented.’

As a barrister, Rupert Kidd, QC was an expert in extracting the response he wanted. Zoë had discovered long ago that her father, though now in his fifties and approaching retirement, found her no match in an argument. She had developed a mechanism to suppress her instinct to rise to the bait.

‘Tamsin still sings,’ their mother pointed out. ‘You’re still a member of the Inns of Court Choir, aren’t you, darling?’

Zoë looked at her sister, torn between vindication and irritation. It wasn’t jealousy that she felt; more just the sting of injustice. Tam, in their parents’ eyes, could do no wrong.

‘But the orchestra...’ Their father wore a pained expression, which landed, predictably, on Zoë. ‘It’s such a tremendous thing to be involved with. Didn’t you enjoy being part of the first violin section?’

‘Of course I enjoyed it,’ she began, glancing at her sister, who was looking intently into her wine. Zoë knew where this was leading. It was a trick question. If she replied negatively, she would be implying that all those evenings spent practising for her violin exams and – more to the point – all the time and money her parents had lavished on her musical education had been for nothing. And that wasn’t the case. She *had* enjoyed playing the violin and she knew that her classical training was, in part, what made her the singer-songwriter that she was today. But if she said yes, she would face more questions about why she didn’t still play the violin, why she insisted on chasing her silly dreams with Dirty Money. She didn’t want to go there tonight.

‘But not enough to stick with it,’ finished her father.

Zoë took another gulp, willing herself to remain calm – to swim away from the bait. ‘I...’

She fought to explain herself in a way that somehow avoided the subject of the band. ‘It didn’t feel right, just playing the dots on the page.’

Her father frowned at her, looking mildly amused. ‘You would have preferred to play something *other* than the dots on the page?’

Zoë hesitated, wishing she could fashion an argument as quickly as her father. *She* knew what she meant. Watching the violinists tonight, their identical movements dictated by the flick of the conductor’s wrist, had reminded her why she’d given it all up. They were like foot soldiers in an army, following rules and taking instructions – never thinking for themselves. Zoë didn’t

want to be part of an army. She wanted to fight her own battles.

‘I’d rather have a chance to express myself,’ she said, realising that she was sailing dangerously close to the wind. ‘But I guess Tam still enjoys her music. Tam, d’you do concerts with the Inns of Court Choir?’

Without hesitation, Tamsin took up the mantle, sharing news of upcoming performances and swiftly moving on to the subject of her bumbling choirmaster and then the Inns of Court dog, Monty. That was why she made a good barrister, thought Zoë as she sank into her glass of wine with a grateful smile.

Conversation meandered through Tamsin’s court cases, then on to Zoë’s work, at which point people’s eyes started glazing over. Try as her parents might, they couldn’t show genuine interest in the inner workings of Chase Waterman Plc., no matter how pleased they were that she’d taken the role. There really was nothing to get excited about when it came to balance sheets and write-downs.

Zoë’s father emptied the last few droplets of wine from the bottle as his wife rummaged in her handbag.

‘There you go,’ she said, handing Zoë a small plastic parcel.

Zoë unwrapped it and smiled. The label on the jam jar had faded, but the contents were still intact. There were probably over two hundred plectrums in total, collected by the members of Dirty Money throughout their university years. They came from all over: Gigs, friends, festivals... Some were freebies, some had been bought, some borrowed and never returned. Zoë turned

the jar round in her hand, feeling suddenly emotional as the memories came hurtling back.

‘Have you got my...’ Zoë glanced under the table and then looked at her mum, frowning. ‘Guitar?’

An awkward glance passed between her parents.

‘Mum?’

‘Well...no. I’m afraid we gave it to the charity shop.’

‘Wh—’ Zoë couldn’t speak. She looked at her mother, then her father, then down at the table. This was no oversight on her parents’ part. They hadn’t accidentally put the guitar in the wrong pile. Zoë had explicitly asked them to keep it aside. They had thought about this and acted with the sole purpose of proving a point.

‘We assumed you wouldn’t mind,’ said her father, raising his eyebrows as though nothing was amiss.

‘You hadn’t used it in years,’ her mother added.

Zoë could feel her breathing quicken. She felt angry and hurt and sad all at once.

‘I loved that guitar!’ she cried, unable to keep the wobble from her voice.

‘Yes, um...’ Her father looked around the restaurant. ‘Don’t make a fuss, now.’

‘You haven’t even *seen* it in years,’ her mother went on.

Zoë’s chest was heaving, her bottom lip quivering ominously.

‘That’s not the point,’ she managed, as the pressure built up behind her eyes.

They all knew what the point was. It wasn't anything to do with how much or how little she used that guitar. The point was one they'd been avoiding for years – the point that her parents refused to accept her for who she really was.

They saw her in a particular light – the light in which they *wanted* to see their daughter. They saw the successful young professional, a high-flying financier. They turned a blind eye to the traits they didn't like – or worse, tried to stamp them out. They detested her dogged resolve to take an alternative path. *That* was the point here, although Zoë couldn't say it because tears were choking her throat.

'You're getting all het up over nothing,' chided her mother, pushing a tissue in front of her.

Zoë blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes, determined to regain her composure – to not let them win.

'I wanted to keep that guitar,' she explained, her voice strengthening with every word. 'The band's going well.' She sniffed. 'I know you don't like that idea, but it's the truth. And you know... One day, I might want to look back and say, *that was the first guitar I ever played.*'

Her parents exchanged a dubious look but said nothing. Their doubt spurred Zoë on.

'We've got a new manager – a proper one. He's from the States and he looks after a lot of top acts over there.'

'Well, that's good news.' Her father smiled primly.

Zoë's blood started to heat up again. She knew what her father

was doing. He was playing along, saying all the things that a supportive parent would say, but not meaning any of it. His words were hollow. This was his way, and it frustrated the hell out of her.

‘How many acts does he manage?’ asked her mother.

Zoë bit her lip. The sudden display of interest in her band was pathetic. It was all false. She wanted to scream and walk out on them, but she knew that they’d claim that as a victory so she stayed put.

‘Lots,’ she replied, preparing to recall some big-name Blast Management acts.

Her father started doing up the buttons on his coat, his expression clearly designed to imply concern about her response.

‘What?’ demanded Zoë. ‘What’s that look for?’ She knew, deep down, that she should have just said her goodbyes, kissed her parents and thanked them for a lovely night.

‘Well, I suppose *some* of his acts must become successful...’

A nasty feeling crept over Zoë, not just because her parents were playing games with her – implying that Louis took on hundreds of artists, of which only a handful got anywhere near the charts – but because she knew that they were probably right. Dirty Money *was* just one of thousands, maybe millions, of bands in the world that were fighting for attention from the masses. Even Louis Castle couldn’t guarantee any sort of success.

For a moment, Zoë stood there, clutching the jar of plectrums and trying to formulate a smart response. Then she realised that

nothing she could think of would outwit her father, so she gave up and forced herself to smile through the tears.

‘Great concert tonight,’ she said, kissing her dad on the cheek.

If he was surprised at the turnaround, he didn’t show it. ‘Lovely to see you too.’

Zoë hugged her mother, who gave her a guilty, awkward smile, then turned to her sister and buried her face in Tam’s collar. She knew that Tam was on her side, even though she didn’t fully understand what Zoë was trying to achieve. She knew what it was to be wrongly convicted.

Before the tears could well up again, Zoë raised a hand and stepped out onto the South Bank, walking quickly, the cold wind bringing fresh tears to her eyes. She loved her parents, she really did. They were the sort of parents who had always tried to be ‘right behind you, whatever you choose to do’. But they weren’t. They couldn’t help it. They were right behind Tamsin, because she was in the right place, but ever since Zoë had stepped out of line, they had resolutely failed to follow.

Her father’s last dig was still ringing in her ears. He knew her so well; he knew exactly how to piss her off. He was a professional when it came to messing with people’s minds – especially hers. Only a few hours after getting off the phone to Kate and agreeing to sign Louis’s contract as soon as possible, here she was, doubting her whole future with the band.

The orange glow of the Houses of Parliament shone back off the surface of the Thames, Big Ben’s face shining like a

lighthouse at one end. Zoë stopped and pulled out her phone. There was something her father *didn't* know about her. All the years of playing in Dirty Money had created something inside her that even Rupert Kidd, QC wasn't aware of: her resilience. He was underestimating her.

It was late, but Zoë didn't care. In another industry, like auditing, nobody would call their manager at ten fifteen on a Wednesday night. But this was the music business. And this was important.

'Yeah?'

Clearly Louis hadn't added her number to his phone, thought Zoë, feeling slightly embarrassed as the thumping background beat pounded into her earpiece. Maybe Louis was busy signing another act. She hesitated for a second, then cast her doubts aside.

'Louis, it's Zoë. From Dirty Money.'

'Hiiiiiii!' he yelled. 'How's it goin'?' There was a grunting noise that implied Louis was levering his body into an upright position.

'Not bad. Um... ' Zoë faltered again, wondering whether this was in fact an entirely inappropriate thing to do. Then for a second time, she forced herself to go on. 'I just wanted to ask. How many acts have you got on your books?'

A loud 'pshhhhh' came down the line, temporarily drowning out the ambient hum. 'I guess, twenny? Maybe thirdy? I don't count them very often.' He laughed. 'Gin please, no ice,' he yelled.

'And how many of your artists are signed to labels?'

‘Sung to Mabel? Who’s Mabel?’

‘How many of your acts are *signed*. You know,’ she said, speaking loudly and slowly. ‘Signed to a label.’

‘Oh! Jeez. I dunno...about half, at the moment? A little more, maybe.’ A rustling noise drowned everything out. ‘Just a splash of tonic, thanks.’

Zoë nodded to herself, feeling a weight lift inside her. Half. That was a decent proportion. She wished she’d had such a statistic ten minutes ago.

‘Why d’you ask?’ cried the man, above the din. ‘Not getting cold feet on me, are ya?’ He laughed again.

‘No,’ Zoë replied. ‘Course not. Just wondered.’

‘Well, that’s just as well,’ said the manager, after a slurping noise and a smack of his lips. ‘Because I got you lined up for making a demo track with Clive Berry next week!’

‘Clive Berry?’ Zoë repeated. She must have misheard. Clive Berry was a *name*. She had read about him in *Q* and the *NME*. He wasn’t up there with Mark Ronson but he was definitely known in the industry. She had a feeling he’d produced the early tracks of bands like Suede and Placebo in the nineties.

‘Clive Berry, yeah.’

‘Cool,’ she said, dumbstruck.

‘Saturday,’ he said, with another slurp. ‘I’ll bring the management contracts with me then, yeah?’

Zoë mumbled something, lost for words.

‘See you there at nine a.m. Saturday, bright and early!’ he

yelled as the background noise swelled. 'It's Soho Studios, just off Tottenham Court Road.'

'Cool,' she said again, but she had a feeling Louis was no longer listening.

9

‘Give the high-hat another tap,’ said the producer, frowning earnestly at the myriad of dials and sliders before him. ‘Mmm, that’s better. Again?’

Zoë glanced across at Kate. They’d been in the studio since nine o’clock this morning and it was beginning to get dark.

‘That’s it,’ declared the man, scratching his neatly-trimmed goatee.

‘HALLELUJAH!’ came the familiar sound of Shannon’s voice, booming through one of the mikes.

Clive Berry gasped and swivelled back to the button marked Comms. ‘Don’t touch that!’

Zoë, Ellie and Kate, like meerkats, leapt up from their seats to see what Shannon had done wrong.

‘WHAT, THE MIKE?’ Shannon’s voice boomed again.

‘Yes!’ cried the producer, irate. ‘The mike that we’ve spent all afternoon positioning to give you the perfect sound...Don’t touch it.’

Zoë was beginning to understand how the man made such impressive records. If he was this particular about the setup, she could only imagine what he was like with the mixing.

Finally, after the long-haired engineer had made the necessary adjustments to the microphone and skulked off again, Shannon was permitted to give it another go and the whole process started

again.

Clive Berry was a man of few words. Or perhaps he just didn't have much to say to the members of Dirty Money. Zoë got the impression he wasn't particularly enjoying his day's work. Maybe he resented their manager for lumbering such novices on him for so many hours – or weeks, as it was looking likely to be. It was unbelievable how slowly and carefully everything had to happen.

Having spent most of the day squashed up behind the producer in the small, sterile booth, Zoë had had plenty of time to marvel at the pine-floored studio with its carpeted walls and faux-natural lighting. Expensive guitars stood on stands about the place and an array of gold discs hung at eye-level around the room.

Clive's fingers flitted about the gigantic control panel as though it were the simplest instrument in the world. Zoë was used to watching the engineers at gigs during sound-checks, and of course she'd seen Sleazebag Simon at work, but those mixing desks looked like Fisher Price toys in comparison. This setup looked like something from Starship Enterprise.

The door squeaked open and a rotund face poked round.
'How're we doing, guys?'

It was Louis.

Zoë, Ellie and Kate straightened up. The man, as of six hours ago, was now their manager. The demo recording was being made at his expense, so it didn't do to look bored or ungrateful.

'Getting there,' said Clive, without looking up.

'Mind if I...' Louis moved the rest of his sizeable self into the

room and pulled up a chair next to Clive. Zoë sensed that the producer would have preferred to be left alone, but as the supplier in the relationship, he didn't have much say in the matter.

'OK, try that again,' Clive barked.

For what seemed like the hundredth time, Shannon bashed out the opening sequence of 'Sensible Lies', stopping at exactly the point Clive held up his hand.

'That's great. I think we've got it.' The producer nodded, playing something back in his headphones.

'WHADDAYA MEAN?' Shannon's voice filled the small room. 'WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE SONG?'

Clive looked at her through the glass. 'We'll loop it. You don't need to play the whole thing. Yup, we've got the ending too. You can come back this side.'

Shannon didn't move from her seat. She looked confused. Zoë glanced at Ellie, then at Kate. She too was surprised to hear that they wouldn't need to record the whole percussion track – that the hours spent positioning mikes and testing beats had all been for thirty seconds of capture – but that was clearly the way things worked.

'Maybe someone could go and get her?' suggested Louis, nodding his head at the crestfallen drummer, who was still on her stool, staring incredulously at Clive.

Zoë hopped off her seat and pushed through the double-sealed door.

'*Why aren't they doing the whole song?*' hissed Shannon as Zoë

prised her away from her beloved kit. *'Idiots!'*

Zoë cringed at Kate through the glass. Clearly Shannon had forgotten that the studio was filled with microphones.

'It may seem idiotic,' Clive said calmly as they returned. 'But it gives a much cleaner beat.'

Shannon looked at her shoes, clearly not in the mood for apologising.

Suddenly, the tiny room became filled with the sound of the 'Sensible Lies' introduction. It was loud, throbbing and slightly hypnotic. The beat went on, and on, and on. There was something intriguing – addictive, almost – about hearing exactly the same bar, repeated over and over again. Zoë could feel herself being drawn in.

'Bass line?' Clive suggested, swivelling round.

Kate rose to her feet and reached for her guitar. Her hands were trembling, Zoë noticed.

There were further adjustments of microphones and appearances from the engineer, who crept in and out of the studio like a nocturnal mammal on a hunt for food. The headphones turned out to be too big for Kate's head, so the lank-haired young man had to improvise, fixing them around the bassist's forehead with a rubber band.

The first take was aborted when the rubber band snapped, ping-ponging across the room and leaving the broken headphones to slither down onto Kate's guitar. The second take, performed with the engineer standing behind her, lightly clamping the

headphones to her ears, was note-perfect.

‘Nice,’ said Clive, beckoning for Kate to come back to their side.

Ellie, as expected, rattled through her part in a single take. There was a bit of a discussion afterwards between Louis and Clive about whether her short instrumental, which was undeniably impressive but which had veered away from the metronomic click-track, would have to be rerecorded to fit with the click, but Zoë eventually convinced them that nobody else would be playing at that point, so it didn’t matter whether there was a bit of ‘rall’, as the producer insisted on calling it. It was incredible, the care and attention lavished on each microsecond of sound.

‘Was it OK?’ asked Ellie, re-entering the cramped room, her guitar still around her neck.

The producer nodded without looking up. ‘Very good.’

‘Very, *very* good,’ Louis added. ‘There are not many people who can lay down a track like that so quickly, huh?’ He looked at Clive for approval.

Clive nodded again, still fiddling with his dials. He clearly wasn’t one for lavish praise.

Zoë felt a rush of pride, mingled with nerves. Even though the producer wouldn’t admit it, she could tell that her band members were nailing it. Most artists, she imagined, would take hours to record a single track. She hoped she’d live up to their standards.

‘Vocals?’

Zoë nodded. It was time to find out whether she would.

It was only as she positioned herself in front of the glass screen, allowing the engineer to tweak the angle of the microphone and make tiny adjustments to the height of the stand, that Zoë stopped to think about how incredible it was that Dirty Money was here at all.

A couple of weeks ago they'd been scrapping around, trying to work out whether their best chances of 'getting spotted' lay in Camden or Chiswick, dreaming up ridiculous ways of attracting the attention of label managers, and now here they were, having their sound immortalised by the most expensive equipment money could buy.

'When you're ready,' Clive's calm voice came through the headphones above the sound of the click.

Zoë glanced at the roomful of people and drew a breath. The beat was distracting. It was just a tick, every one exactly the same as the last. *Exactly* the same. It was disconcerting. It reminded her of being eleven and being made to practise her violin scales in time with the metronome.

Click, click, click, click.

'Everything okay?' asked Clive.

Zoë nodded. This was ridiculous. She was a musician. She was supposed to have an imagination. All she had to do was pretend that she was standing on a stage in front of a couple of hundred rowdy fans, spotlights on her face, Shannon's drumsticks counting one, two, three, four.

Finally, she did it. Perhaps it was the quality of the amps or the carpeted walls, or the fact that she'd consumed about eight cans of Diet Coke over the course of the day and her body was filled with sugar and caffeine, but Zoë's voice sounded stronger and more powerful than usual. She was enjoying it, too. It wasn't quite the buzz she got from standing up on the stage, but it was a thrill, nonetheless.

'That was great,' said Clive as she finished the first take. 'Hold on one sec.' He fiddled about for a while, twisting knobs, pushing sliders and pressing buttons. 'OK, it's in the can.'

Zoë grinned at the girls as she returned to the cramped, overheated room. It was pitch black outside now and there was a strange sense of...well, perhaps comradeship wasn't the right word. It wasn't a bond, but there was definitely a *closeness* between them: the band, their manager and the producer. Even Clive and his greasy-haired assistant seemed to be warming to the girls now that they'd laid down their tracks so efficiently.

'So!' cried Louis, leaning back in the chair and making it creak rather ominously. 'Shall we press play?'

Obediently, the producer did exactly that.

Zoë looked at the other girls, her mouth slightly open with wonder. Everything about the track was pristine: the beat, the bass, the harmonies and her vocals. It sounded as though somebody else was singing her part. Pure and perfectly in tune, there was no shouting to be heard over drunken revellers, no missing words where she'd had to duck to avoid a flying pint

glass, no white noise between the notes. The whole song was... utterly clean.

Afterwards, nobody said anything. The girls were too stunned and the men were looking at one another with narrowed eyes, as though subliminally discussing what could be done to make it sound even more perfect.

‘Strings?’ said Louis.

Clive frowned slightly but didn’t disagree.

‘Maybe just in the chorus,’ Louis added, backtracking a little.

After a period of twiddling, pushing and pressing, the song came back on, this time with a sweeping string section beneath Zoë’s chorus.

‘Um...’ Zoë wasn’t sure what to say. The song sounded good; there was no doubt about that. But it didn’t sound anything like it was supposed to. The whole point about ‘Sensible Lies’ was that it was angry, with caustic lyrics that talked of the burning frustrations of living a double life. They were turning it into a happy singalong ditty.

‘Amazing, isn’t it?’ said Louis, shaking his head at the wonders of the mixing desk.

Zoë glanced at the other girls, wondering whether they were thinking the same thing. Shannon just looked wildly excited, her earlier snub clearly forgotten. Kate was frowning, either in concentration or doubt, and Ellie seemed miles away.

‘Maybe some sort of...’ Louis looked at the producer and rubbed his fingers together. ‘*Tchyka-tchyka-tchyka-tchyka?*’

Zoë's expression turned to one of alarm. The noise coming from Louis's mouth was like the backing track of some boy-band ballad.

Again, there was some activity on the keyboard-like part of the mixing desk. Moments later, the song came back on, slightly slower than it had been before and complete with *tchyka-tchyka* beat. Shannon's part was almost inaudible beneath the electronics.

'I'm sorry,' said Zoë, rather louder than she had anticipated. She lowered her tone. 'But I think it sounded better before all the strings and everything.'

Louis looked at her, tilted his head, then turned to Clive.

Clive raised his brow, a look which Zoë interpreted as *I'm not going to say anything*, but which Louis clearly read differently.

'Let's go with what the producer thinks.' He smiled as though Zoë didn't really understand. 'We can fiddle about 'til the cows come home, later. No need to worry about it now. We got plenny of time!'

There was a brief silence in which Zoë nearly argued but then caught Shannon's eye and stopped herself. The drummer was clearly concerned about falling out with their manager on day one.

'Of course,' she said softly. 'Plenty of time.'

'The other two numbers?'

With her excitement only mildly marred by her frustration, Zoë sank back into her chair as Shannon prepared to lay down the

beat for tracks two and three. After the recording of 'Delirious', an argument broke out that ran along very similar lines to the first one, so by the time they played back 'Run Boy Run', Louis and Clive had clearly forged some sort of alliance that meant they weren't going to meddle with the track – at least, not in the presence of the girls.

It was nearly ten o'clock by the time the four musicians fitted themselves around the cymbals, amps and drum stands for the journey home. The combination of hunger and exhaustion meant that emotions were running high.

'I see what you're saying,' said Shannon, shooting out at high speed from the parking space. 'But you can't diss the guy who's just taken us on as manager.'

'I can if he's wrecking our tunes,' replied Zoë. She couldn't believe the drummer was willing to sacrifice their musical integrity in favour of some bolshy hot-shot's ideas.

'I agree,' said Kate, her neck bent at an unnatural angle to avoid the snare drum that was occupying the space where her head should have been. 'That last version sounded like an early Boyzone number.'

'Boyzone sold a lot of records,' yelled Shannon, swerving frighteningly close to the kerb.

'But not *our* type of records,' argued Zoë, concerned that Shannon was focusing on the row and not the road.

'He's a decent manager! Look what he's achieved with other bands.'

‘Decent managers leave the producers to do the producing,’ Kate pointed out as Shannon embarked on an ambitious overtaking manoeuvre.

‘He seems to know what he’s talking about,’ Ellie pointed out, blissfully unaware.

‘Exactly!’ cried Shannon, buoyed by the support. ‘I don’t think it would be a disaster if we ended up releasing something like—’

‘I am *not* in a boy-band,’ Zoë growled. Then she realised they were outside her flat. ‘Oh, right.’ She thought about making a final point, then decided it could wait. ‘Thanks for the lift.’

‘No bother. I’m sure Louis will run it past us before he sends the demo to the label guys, anyway. Right?’

Zoë eased herself out of the car. ‘I’m sure.’

She slammed the door shut, patting the roof as it lurched off, trying to cleanse her mind before she entered the flat. She would worry about the CD another time. Burdening James with her Dirty Money issues was something she’d done too much of lately.

The place was in darkness. It was only as Zoë crossed the threshold that she realised that something was wrong. Not wrong, exactly. Just...amiss. It felt as though she’d forgotten to do something, or left something behind. She just couldn’t work out what it was.

James, when she finally tracked him down, was sitting on the sofa in the glow of the small table lamp. His short hair was lightly gelled and glinting. As he turned, Zoë noticed something else shining out. Something on his wrists. Cufflinks.

‘Why—’ Zoë stopped and closed her eyes, suddenly realising what it was. ‘Oh God,’ she said, crumpling at his feet. ‘I’m so sorry.’

It was Saturday the eleventh of February. She had forgotten about their date.

‘You must be joking!’ cried the brunette, visibly gagging. ‘I mean, no disrespect to him or anything, but it’s a *singing* contest. You can’t win if you can’t sing.’

‘That’s discrimination.’

‘She’s got a point though,’ said the girl next to Zoë – someone she vaguely recognised from previous events James had brought her along to. ‘JJ was a terrible singer.’

‘Not true,’ claimed another. ‘He had a good voice; he just wasn’t always in tune.’ She downed the remains of her wine and readjusted the fashionable sack-like top that hung from her shoulders.

Zoë let the argument wash over her as she mashed the cheesecake crumbs into the plate with her fork. They were, as far as she could make out, discussing the controversy surrounding the Talent Tout final, an event that had taken place more than two months ago. Over the main course they had dissected no fewer than six contestants’ performances, ranging from Maureen, the cleaner from Norwich, to 4U, the boy-band from Salford that featured in its ranks an albino and a midget gymnast.

‘Well, call me un-PC,’ said the brunette, ‘but I say the boy deserved to lose. Denzel White was by far the best act.’

‘You’re un-PC,’ declared the girl at the end of the table. ‘Denzel White is a dick.’

Zoë tried to recall something from the times Shannon had sat her down to watch the acts in their final rounds of auditions. She remembered Denzel White; it was impossible not to. In the last few months of the previous year, the whole nation had gone crazy for the North London rapper – his pearly teeth shining out from billboards, his lyrical voice pumping out from the internet, his cheeky smile winking from magazine centrefolds. But the other finalists...Nope. Zoë drew a blank.

That, in a nutshell, was why she didn't believe in the merits of Talent Tout. It made great television, but it didn't make rock stars. She had never entertained the idea of subjecting Dirty Money to the ordeal. Her band deserved more than five minutes of fame. They deserved longevity and musical respect. They wanted their songs to *mean* something. They wanted to make their own decisions about what to wear and when to smile. Nobody got that from appearing on Talent Tout.

Denzel White was a prime example. He had been hyped to superstar status within the space of about three weeks, his background spun in a way that spectacularly endeared him to the UK public, and now what? He hadn't even released an album. He had enjoyed his brief accolade and then he had plummeted back into obscurity.

Kate was with Zoë on this; she understood that the show wasn't right for the girls. Shannon disagreed. She bought into the Talent Tout dream, swallowing it hook, line and sinker, seeing the show as the obvious route to stardom. In her eyes, the twelve million

weekly viewers spoke for themselves. Ellie, when pushed, agreed with the drummer, which made for an ongoing rift between the two halves of the band.

Zoë glanced longingly at the other end of the table, where James and all the boyfriends of the marketing girls were engaged in a drinking game that involved a burned cork and a piece of cheese. Zoë wished she'd been smarter and manoeuvred herself into a better position when they'd all sat down. In fact, she wished she hadn't agreed to come out at all. If it hadn't been for her hideous Valentine blunder then she might have let James come alone, but that wouldn't have been fair. She owed it to him to be here tonight.

James had been quiet for the two days that followed their supposed date, making it difficult for Zoë to know how to react. For her, when something was troubling her, she let it all out, exploding with rage or misery or angst. But James wasn't one for confrontation. He just stewed, keeping his feelings locked up inside. She had apologised, of course, trying everything she could think of to make it up to him. She hated the fact that occasionally, her relationship ended up taking a back seat to her music, but she wasn't sure James understood that. She needed him to understand.

Tonight, as they'd set off for the restaurant, Zoë had seen the first sign that her message was getting through. James had slipped an arm around her waist and asked, quietly, whether she had heard any news from Louis Castle. Now, looking down the table

at his merry, cork-charred face, it looked as though his sulk had been long forgotten.

‘How d’you think that poor guy felt?’ the first girl went on, like a dog with a bone. ‘Being kicked out because he was deaf?’

‘Deaf?’ Zoë spluttered.

The girls whipped round, all staring at her.

‘How could you *not* know JJ was deaf?’ asked one.

‘Well...’

There were gasps of astonishment and wary looks.

‘I...I must’ve missed that episode,’ she said sheepishly. It was as though she had confessed to not knowing of Barack Obama. She felt her phone vibrate in her lap and pushed the thick linen tablecloth aside.

Oh God. Just played it.

Boy-band-tastic. He’s

taking it 2 Universal

this wk :-(Kx

Zoë closed her eyes momentarily and took in the news. Louis must have sent them all copies of the demo CD. He had got the tracks edited and without even telling them, set up a meeting with Universal. She felt deflated. How could he do that? *Why?* They’d written the songs; they knew how it should sound. If Louis was putting *tchyka-tchyka* versions of their songs in front of record labels, he wasn’t showing them the real Dirty Money.

He was doing what he thought was best for the band, of course. He only made money if they made money – Louis took twenty

per cent of whatever they got; that was the agreement – but Zoë felt he was making a mistake. She was worried that he would turn them into another homogeneous, straight-off-the-conveyor-belt pop act. They were better than that.

She sighed, just as the phone buzzed again in her hands.

Wow! Have u heard
CD? It rocks! + I had
gr8 idea 4 celeb
endorsement: I can
get us on Irish TV
with a star! Shan x

Her frown melted into a smile. Shannon always had a great idea. You couldn't fault her enthusiasm. Zoë wondered how the tracks actually sounded. Deep down, she had been half-expecting something like this. Louis Castle didn't consult his unsigned protégés when it came to dealing with big-time labels. He called the shots. And maybe, given what he had achieved in America, the girls should just put their trust in his judgement.

After several attempts to catch James's attention, she made contact with his sleepy blue eyes. He and the others around him had reached the hitting-wine-glasses-with-forks stage of the evening, which suggested that it might be time to go.

'Bus?' suggested Zoë as they wandered into the damp, night air.

James grinned hazily at her, trying to focus. 'Little...*black bus*?'

Zoë smiled. When James got drunk, he turned into a chilled-out caricature of himself. He became more...well, more like the old James. He always maintained a grip on reality, just a skewwhiff version of reality. So when he pushed open the door of their flat and found, behind it, a small brown parcel marked SOHO STUDIOS, he seemed to know exactly what it was.

‘D’you think this is for you?’ he asked, holding the package just out of Zoë’s reach.

‘James, please...’ She grabbed at his long, muscular arm, stepping on a pile of junk mail and skidding to the floor.

‘You want this?’ he goaded, waving the brown box around as she crawled onto all fours.

Using the parcel, he led her onto the sofa where she collapsed on top of him, dizzy and panting.

‘Will you put it on?’ Zoë pleaded, as James unwrapped the disc, at arm’s length. The note enclosed, which he eventually relinquished, was written in neat, female handwriting – presumably belonging to Louis’s PA.

Hope you like. Will be meeting the Universal boys this week. Fingers crossed.

Louis

James reached back and switched on the hi-fi system. Stretching, he inserted the CD, raised an eyebrow seductively at Zoë and, with excruciating slowness, moved his finger across to the Play button.

Zoë sat up, straddling her boyfriend and starting to undo the

buttons of his shirt. She wanted to hear the tracks but she also wanted a piece of James. His eyes were filled with mischief and she could feel his hand – the hand that wasn't controlling the stereo – working its way up her thigh.

The introduction to 'Delirious' started blasting out of the numerous speakers and she suddenly stopped. She could feel the colour drain from her cheeks.

'Oh my God,' she said, feeling instantly sober.

Fleetinglly, she wondered why he'd put that track first, when 'Sensible Lies' was so much better, but there were bigger things to worry about.

It was like being punched in the stomach. She couldn't think about anything – couldn't articulate a response. All she could do was listen to this...this *sound* that was filling the lounge.

'It's fucking *disco*,' she spat, when the song got into its groove.

If James replied, she didn't hear him. Her ears were focusing on the clinical beat. She waited for Ellie's chords to come in, then the vocals. It was unrecognisable. Like listening to somebody else's music.

'Fuck!' she yelled, as her own voice sang back at her above the sanitised riff. She wanted to cry. 'What've they done?!'

The song finished and, transfixed, Zoë waited mutely to hear the next butchered track.

'Zoë?'

Zoë listened to the mutilated rendition of 'Sensible Lies'.

'Zoë,' James said again, propping himself up on the sofa and

pulling her firmly towards him.

‘What?’ she asked, distracted by a cheesy key-change that had been inserted just before the second chorus. It was unbelievable what they’d done.

‘I said, this is amazing.’

Zoë looked at him and frowned. They both seemed to have sobered up now but James wasn’t making any sense. ‘What, amazingly *bad*?’

‘No,’ he said, pushing himself up on the sofa so that she was sitting in his lap. ‘Listen to it.’

In silence, they listened to the instrumental that preceded the final verse – ordinarily, Zoë’s favourite part of the song.

‘Seriously,’ said James, wrapping his arms round her waist and squeezing her against his body. ‘Imagine you’ve never heard of this band.’

Zoë closed her eyes in anguish, letting her head roll back on James’s shoulder. She *had* never heard of this band. It wasn’t hers. This was not the sound of Dirty Money.

Enveloped in James’s arms, swaying gently to the unfamiliar music, Zoë tried to force herself to hear it afresh. She heard the pulsing beat and the harmonies and the catchy tune...

The song finished and the final track came on. ‘Run Boy Run’ was one of their most uplifting numbers. Zoë tilted her face upwards to tell James that he was right, that she was too obsessed with the band, that she was sorry for sometimes neglecting her commitment to him, that she really was grateful for his

unwavering support. But she didn't get a chance, as James's lips were pressing against hers.

The phone rang for the second time in as many minutes.

‘It’s Brian again.’

Zoë’s typing became even more frantic.

‘The email still hasn’t come through.’

‘Uh...Really? That’s weird.’

She scanned the main paragraph, trying to stem her internal panic. In fact, there was nothing weird about the situation at all. It was simply that Zoë had failed to complete the audit in time and was now shifting the blame onto the mysterious workings of the client email server.

‘You did cc me this time, didn’t you?’

‘Yep,’ she replied, quickly typing Brian’s name in the cc box. She hadn’t wanted to lie, but the client had called her this morning and launched into a long story about firewall issues at their end and it had slowly dawned on Zoë that they were assuming she’d sent the audit the previous week, and...well, it had just seemed simpler not to make the correction.

Brian grunted. ‘Very strange. I’ll get onto IT.’

‘No,’ she said quickly, knowing that even the cretins employed by the Chase Waterman IT department would spot that no email had been sent from her machine. ‘I’ll do it. I think it might be something to do with my computer anyway.’ She checked the message one last time and pressed Send. ‘Oh, it seems to be doing

something now.’

‘I’ll leave it with you,’ he barked.

Zoë slumped back in her seat and let out a heavy sigh. She didn’t like disappointing clients, but it seemed to be happening more and more these days. Perhaps it was because of her workload. Nobody else seemed to have so many projects on the go at once – or at least, nobody else seemed to struggle with the volume of work. But then...She leaned forward again and squinted to check that the email had been sent. Nobody else spent hours every week taking calls from promoters, liaising with venues, updating websites or slipping out to write songs. Nobody else came in to work with a raging headache, their eyes bloodshot from the late nights in sweat-filled bars.

Maybe it wasn’t possible to combine the two careers, Zoë conceded. Not that the band was a career, exactly. She didn’t know the exact definition, but she had a feeling that ‘career’ had something to do with making money. So far, if you added everything up over the years, Dirty Money had probably lost them a few thousand pounds.

Her mobile phone started buzzing its way along the desk, flashing *Unknown number*. She snatched it up, preparing to explain to the client, yet again, that the email was on its way.

‘Hiiiiii.’

‘Louis?’ she checked. This was surely the call they’d been waiting for.

‘Yeah! How you doin’? What’re you up to?’

Zoë pushed back her chair and sloped off towards the lift lobby. Good news or bad news, this wasn't a conversation she wanted to have in front of her colleagues.

'I'm...I'm at work,' she replied, not entirely sure whether Louis expected an answer or whether it was simply one of those rhetorical Americanisms.

'Oh yeah.' Either Louis hadn't wanted an answer or he had simply forgotten that most people, at half past eleven on a Wednesday morning, were at work. 'Where's that then?'

'Near Liverpool Street.' Zoë stepped backwards as a pair of suited men strode out of the lifts, resisting her urge to scream for an update on the Universal meeting.

'Great! I'm in Shoreditch. Not far at all. Can you meet me in half an hour?'

'Wh—' Zoë faltered. She wanted to know *now*, not in half an hour. Why couldn't he just tell her by phone? And how on earth was she going to round up the others at such short notice? Kate would be stuck in some important meeting about pension funds, Shannon was probably sweet-talking some media client over an early lunch and Ellie needed at least twenty-four hours to get anywhere. 'I can try and get everyone along,' she offered half-heartedly.

'No, just you for now.' Louis cleared his throat.

'R-right,' she replied hesitantly. If Louis had bad news then she didn't see why it was her job to deliver it to the rest of the band. She wasn't a spokesperson.

‘Meet you in The Bathhouse at noon?’ It was an instruction, not a question.

Zoë dropped the phone from her ear to check the time. As she took a breath to respond, she realised that the line was dead.

The following twenty-five minutes were not very productive. She couldn’t concentrate on intangible assets when there were so many questions vying for attention in her head. Why did he want to meet her alone? What did he have to say that couldn’t have been said on the phone? Was it bad news? Had Zoë’s phone call the other night somehow damaged their relationship with the manager? Was he going to cancel their contract? Zoë stopped pretending to work and walked out. Honestly, she was getting like Kate with her worrying. There was no point in fretting over things that hadn’t even happened.

From the outside, The Bathhouse looked like a miniature Russian church, complete with coloured tiles, dome roof and painted dovecote. Inside, it was a hip, candlelit wine bar with carpeted walls and sparsely-placed chandeliers. Zoë entered with caution, alarm bells ringing. Was it normal for managers to meet with their acts in such dark venues? She barely knew Louis Castle. Perhaps it was all a sham – perhaps he wasn’t *the* Louis Castle she’d read about on the internet.

A waiter ushered her over to the alcove nearest the grand piano, where Louis could be seen, reclined in an armchair, his large, chunky hands clasped around a tumbler of amber liquid. Zoë’s anxieties began to lift. It was obvious that for the manager,

there was nothing unusual about this at all. Whereas auditing conversations were conducted under the harsh strip lights of seventh-floor meeting rooms with small cups of water, in the world of rock and roll, candles, sofas and whisky were still par for the course.

‘Hiiiiii!’ He was smiling as he heaved himself out of the seat, which Zoë took as a good sign. ‘What can I getcha?’

Zoë tried to relax. Even in her paranoid state, it seemed unlikely to her that a manager would summon his act at half an hour’s notice just to buy them a drink and then drop them from his list. ‘An orange juice, please.’

Louis drew his head back in disdain, clearly waiting for her real answer.

‘I’m working,’ she explained.

He waved a hand. ‘We’re all working, honey.’

Zoë shook her head, grinning faintly as she slid into the leather seat opposite. To her knowledge, only one person had ever turned up at the Chase Waterman offices drunk. And he’d been a lapsed alcoholic in the throes of a nervous breakdown. Even at Christmas, people stayed sober. There was no way Zoë would risk even a sip of alcohol, knowing what her nosy neighbour was like. Unless...unless Louis’s news was big enough to eliminate the need for the sensible career in auditing altogether – which, Zoë knew, was unlikely.

After a couple more attempts, Louis relented and allowed the waiter to take her abstemious order.

‘So! I got some news for ya.’

Zoë leaned forward, her forearms resting on her thighs. She dug her fingernails into the flesh of her palms. ‘Yeah?’ she said as innocuously as she could.

‘Two pieces of news, actually.’

Zoë nodded, incapable of unclenching her fists.

‘The first is about Blast Management.’

She nodded again. His expression was infuriatingly neutral.

‘I didn’t tell you before, but, well...I’ve sold the company to Universal.’

Zoë’s jaw dropped. She wasn’t entirely sure what this meant, but she knew it was big. Universal had acquired Blast Management...So...So, now what? Was this Louis’s way of saying he was walking out on them?

‘Don’t worry, I’ll still be running the shop,’ he said quickly, clearly sensing her concern. ‘It’s actually a part-sale. I get to keep fifty-one per cent and I’m contractually obliged to stay in charge – at least for five years.’ He grinned smugly.

‘Oh, good.’ Zoë was still trying to work things out. He wasn’t leaving the firm, but now Blast was part of Universal, which meant...what, exactly? Other than the fact that Louis Castle was probably a multimillionaire, if he hadn’t been already.

‘This is good news for you,’ he affirmed. ‘Don’t look so worried.’

Zoë managed a smile, feeling ignorant and small. She reached for the juice that had appeared on the table.

‘It means that Blast kinda has a permanent foot in the door of some of Universal’s labels. *Island, Polydor, Vicinity*...I mean, it’s not like we couldn’t have gotten into conversation with them before, but, you know, their doors are kinda *propped* open now. And in return, they get first pick of the artists we manage.’

‘Wow.’ Zoë didn’t understand exactly how the propped-open-door model worked, but she sensed that on balance, the acquisition was a good thing for Dirty Money.

‘Which brings me onto—’

‘Hold on,’ said Zoë, spotting the potential pitfall in the arrangement. ‘Does that mean that Blast can *only* sign artists to Universal labels now?’

‘No, we can go elsewhere once Universal has had its pick. They just get first dibs. But...’ A grin spread across Louis’s face. ‘As it happens, you don’t need to worry about that. Not after my meeting with Vicinity last week.’

Zoë stared, holding her breath. She needed to hear it in plain English before she could allow herself to get excited.

‘Do you mean...Vicinity want to sign Dirty Money?’ She could barely control her voice.

‘Well, not exactly,’ he replied, looking briefly uncomfortable. ‘I’ve had a few meetings now, with Edgar and Jenson and that... Basically, they really liked the band, but...well, it doesn’t quite fit with what they’re looking for right now.’

‘Oh.’ Zoë looked down at the table. She felt deflated. And confused. Louis had led her up this path – building her hopes,

dropping hints, flashing that giant smile of his...

‘See,’ Louis swilled a sip of whisky around in his mouth and then finally swallowed. ‘There’s trends in the music industry. Hot things come and go. A few years ago, two lads from Manchester came down in their dirty T-shirts and suddenly indie was big – everyone wanted to sign hairy guys with guitars. The labels don’t wanna miss the next “wave”.’

Zoë nodded impatiently. She was no hairy guy, guitar or otherwise.

‘This year, bands just ain’t hot.’

‘So...’

‘Honey, they wanna sign you.’

Zoë frowned. It was the way he emphasised the last word that worried her.

‘They’re looking for a female solo act,’ he explained, confirming her suspicions. ‘A *real* singer. A Florence. An Amy. A Lady Gaga, you know? They’re all about girls with big attitude as well as a big voice.’ His piggy face poked out from inside all the chins, blinking and grinning at Zoë.

This was absurd. Zoë couldn’t sign to a label without the others. She was part of a band. They came as a four. This was like trying to sell a car on the basis of only one of its cylinders. It just couldn’t happen.

‘Jeez, Zoë...’ Louis swallowed a mouthful of whisky and planted the glass on the table. ‘I was kinda expecting a bit more enthusiasm!’

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled, trying to fend off his indignation while she straightened her thoughts.

‘This is *Vicinity* we’re talking about. Universal. You know?’

Yes, Zoë knew. She knew exactly how big a deal this was, which was why she felt so low. It was a massive thing to turn down.

Zoë had never considered the idea of standing on a stage without the others. She didn’t know whether she even could. In principle, perhaps it was possible. They were her songs; it was always Zoë on vocals. But in reality...

‘How would I sing without them?’

It was a stupid question. She knew as soon as the words left her lips that she needn’t have asked it.

‘You’ve heard of session musicians?’

He was being sarcastic now – presumably miffed that Zoë hadn’t jumped at the proposition.

‘But what’s wrong with Kate and Ellie and Shannon?’ she pressed.

Louis raised his eyes heavenward and let out an exasperated sigh. ‘Because Kate and Ellie and Shannon would make it a *band*, and a band is not what the label is looking for.’

It was Zoë’s turn to sigh. This wasn’t how things worked. At least, it wasn’t how she’d imagined things worked. Based on everything she had read online, every story she’d heard on the grapevine, artists got signed on the basis of who they *were*. Louis was implying that the record companies just conjured up a series

of typecast moulds and then asked the managers to fill them.

‘What about other labels?’

‘What about them?’

‘Well, isn’t there a chance one of the Sony labels might go for Dirty Money? Or Warner, or...’ She trailed off under Louis’s withering gaze.

‘Honey,’ he said, as though she were four years old. ‘When you got a deal on the table, you don’t go pissing around with the competition.’

Zoë nodded, feeling like a cornered animal. There *had* to be a way of making things work for the band. She tried one last tack.

‘Don’t you...I mean, Blast...Doesn’t Blast represent Dirty Money?’

Louis nodded slowly, his face dipping in and out of his fatty neck. ‘Of which Zoë Kidd is a part. I represent the interests of the band members. So when I hear that a label wants to sign one of those members, I kinda wanna make it work.’

His tone suggested that Louis was running out of patience.

‘What happens if I say no?’ she asked quietly.

He was shaking his head now, looking at her as though she was mad. ‘Then they find someone else,’ he replied, loudly and slowly.

Zoë gulped. She couldn’t believe it was this mercenary, this...*premeditated*.

‘So, are you in?’

Louis raised an eyebrow, trying to smile despite his evident

frustration.

Inhaling deeply and letting out a slow, shaky breath, Zoë met his gaze. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’ll have to think about it.’

Suddenly, she had to get out of this dark, cosy place. She had to breathe. To think. She stood up and gave a brief, awkward wave goodbye. The sound of Louis’s empty glass slamming down on the table echoed around the empty bar as she climbed the stairs.

‘Don’t think for too long!’ yelled the manager. ‘Plenny of wannabes out there!’

‘We’re Dirty Money, and you’ve been amazing!’ yelled Zoë.

There was a whoop from the front of the hall, where Crazy Jeff could be seen bobbing around, arms waving. Then a deathly quiet fell on the room. Zoë stood, her features set in a broad smile, silently willing Shannon to bring them in for the final song.

The crowd had not been amazing. In fact, nothing about tonight had been amazing. In terms of reception, the gig ranked somewhere alongside the one they had played in the geriatric hospital five years ago. They had played well, but the audience, made up mainly of self-conscious art students and young fashionistas, just hadn’t warmed to them. Perhaps the Hoxton crew never actually warmed to anything; they were just too cool.

She should have known that tonight would be a disaster. Not just because of the huge decision that hung over her like a black thundercloud, a cloud she was struggling to keep from the girls, but because the promoter was a renowned money-grabbing bastard. He had done exactly what money-grabbing bastards always do and put on a mixture of funk, electro-pop, rock and a trio of Ukrainian keyboard players in the hope that more genres would attract more punters. Zoë wished she had turned it down.

Ellie played them out with an impressive solo that was wasted on the pouting crowd and, to the sound of muted clapping, Zoë

led the girls offstage.

‘Fockin’ hell, that was hard work.’ Shannon barged her way into their dressing room – a cubicle no larger than a public toilet and not dissimilar in terms of smell. ‘What’s wrong with these people? It’s like they’ve had broomsticks shoved up their arses or something.’

Ellie laughed quietly. ‘I think one of them did actually have a broomstick.’

‘There was definitely one dressed as a tree.’ Kate nodded as she started quickly packing away her guitar.

‘We should’ve thought,’ muttered Shannon. ‘We’re playing in the most pretentious district in London. We should’ve planned it better.’

‘What d’you mean?’ Zoë frowned, not feeling like getting drawn in but unable to see how preparation would have helped.

‘Well, look at us!’ Shannon waved a dismissive hand over her body. ‘We look like freaks!’

Even Zoë managed a laugh. Hoxton was the only place in the world where you felt like a freak for wearing jeans. One female member of the audience tonight had been dressed in a kneelength foil wrap, of the type that runners get given at the end of a marathon.

‘No,’ Kate said earnestly. ‘We shouldn’t change our image just because of who we’re playing to.’

Zoë sensed that the bassist was looking to her for support. Ordinarily, she would have given it. She was, as ever, speaking

sense. But today, Zoë kept her head bowed and started rummaging randomly in her guitar case. She couldn't bring herself to discuss what they should or shouldn't do to improve Dirty Money's chances of success – not when she knew that their manager was waiting for her to sign off on their demise.

'I didn't mean – ugh!' Shannon cried out as she stepped, mid-shoe-change, in a puddle of brown liquid on the floor. 'This place sucks.'

Shannon was right. The place sucked. As did most of the venues they played. There was a reasonable probability, she knew, that Dirty Money would be forced to continue playing gigs like this, in clubs where the floors stank of piss, the promoters were short-sighted gits and the crowds didn't know your name. It was quite possible that the girls would never break free from the grubby London music scene, that they'd still be here with their zimmer frames in fifty years' time, still trying to make it onto the international circuit.

They never talked about it, but they all knew the truth: it was possible that their dreams would eventually fizzle. Yet despite the odds, they kept plugging away. And up until two days ago, Zoë had never stopped to doubt it. But now Louis's proposition was taunting her, goading her away from the path they were on.

'Quick drink?' asked Shannon, holding her sodden sock at arm's length and slipping her bare foot into the shoe.

'I said I'd meet Sam.' Ellie pulled an apologetic face.

'Sorry,' Kate mumbled sheepishly, pulling on her coat. 'Gotta

go.'

'I can't.' Zoë dipped her head as the drummer's attention turned to her. She couldn't wait to get out of this place – away from the gig, away from the girls. Away from everything that reminded her of the decision she had to make.

'What?' Shannon threw her hands in the air. 'Why not?'

'I...' Zoë could feel the drummer's eyes upon her. She tried to think of a bullet-proof reason. 'James...'

'James can wait. So can Sam,' she said, glaring at Ellie. 'Lord knows, he makes people wait long enough.' Shannon stormed over and grabbed Ellie's jacket. 'Come on. We're going for a pint. I need to tell you about the Irish TV thing. Kate?'

Kate was pulling faces into a small makeup mirror. A smirk crept across Shannon's face.

'Hang on...' She peered at the bassist. 'D'you have a *date*?'

Kate swung her guitar onto her back and headed down the corridor, avoiding the question.

Shannon gave chase, leaving Zoë to lock the flimsy door. By the time she caught up with them, Kate's cheeks were glowing and squeals were coming from both Ellie and Shannon.

'Your boss?!' shrieked Shannon. 'Oh my God!'

'Stop it!' Kate glared at the drummer as they slipped through the back entrance into the noisy club. 'He's here somewhere.'

'You shouldn't have a problem spotting him,' Ellie remarked, as a girl in a floor-length nightie and full Indian headdress walked past. 'Can't be many actuaries in here.'

It was true. Within seconds, they had identified the suave man in the pinstriped suit at the end of the bar. He was finishing a Corona and pretending to be busy on his BlackBerry.

Under strict instructions to leave them alone, Shannon, Ellie and Zoë hung back while the misfits left to find another late-night bar.

‘Cute,’ remarked Shannon, approvingly.

‘Mmm.’ Ellie nodded, with less conviction.

Shannon rounded on Zoë as they elbowed their way to the bar. ‘What’s up with you today?’ she demanded. ‘You’ve hardly said a word all night.’

Zoë shrugged. ‘Headache,’ she said, pointing up at the nearest speaker.

Shannon pulled her head back and squinted at her. ‘You’ve not had a headache in six and a half years.’

Zoë managed a little smile. This was the problem; the girls knew her too well.

‘Is everything okay with James now?’ asked Ellie, presumably referring to a conversation they’d had the previous week about the missed Valentine’s date.

‘Well,’ Zoë gnawed on her lip, wondering whether it was unethical to do this. It was, she decided, but she couldn’t think of another option. ‘It’s still not great, no.’

Ellie tutted supportively. Shannon leaned over and yelled their drinks order at the barmaid, then turned to Zoë, eyebrows raised. It was apparent that more details were required.

‘We’re just... I dunno. It’s partly my fault for spending so much time with the band.’ She felt awful for doing this. ‘He just doesn’t seem to understand.’

Shannon pushed their drinks over. ‘Men, eh.’

Ellie gave a wry smile. ‘Poor you.’

Zoë sipped the head off her pint, relieved to see a lanky figure lollop through the crowds and appear at Ellie’s side.

Zoë raised a hand as Sam caught her eye, watching with a mixture of adoration and envy as he slipped a hand around Ellie’s waist, whispering something into her hair and kissing her on the forehead. Their relationship was as beautiful now as it had been six years ago. They still fitted perfectly together – physically, intellectually and spiritually. They wanted the same things from life – the same things they had always wanted. Zoë couldn’t help wondering whether she and James still fitted perfectly together.

‘So.’ Shannon elbowed her in the ribs. ‘Kate’s seeing her boss, eh?’ Zoë nodded half-heartedly, concerned for their bassist’s relationship – which, based on track record, would be over in a fortnight – but quietly pleased to be back on neutral territory. Being a blue-eyed blonde, Kate had a habit of finding herself brash, chiselled men who, for the first few dates, were ‘the perfect match’. Inevitably, as the charmer discovered that Kate wasn’t trophy wife material, things turned sour and the city slicker would leave her for a six-foot Barbie, further crushing Kate’s self-esteem. ‘Why does she do it?’ asked Shannon. ‘Get with all those toss-pots, I mean.’

It wasn't a new question. The subject of Kate's doomed relationships had reared its head many times before.

'It's a confidence thing,' said Zoë, finding herself getting drawn in.

'Is it?'

Zoë sighed. 'I think so. She doesn't realise that she's pretty and funny and talented and all the rest of it, and she gets flattered into it because she doesn't realise she could do better. Then the tosspots use up all their flirtatious lines on the first few dates and the relationship fizzles. Obviously, they don't want to be the ones getting dumped, so they get in there first.'

Shannon looked at Zoë across the rim of her pint glass. 'You know,' she said slowly, 'I think you might be right.'

They sat for a while, thinking, drinking, immersed in the techno beat.

'Anyway!' cried Shannon, springing to life again and reaching for Ellie's sleeve. 'The TV thing!'

Zoë gulped her mouthful of beer, overwhelmed by a fresh wave of guilt.

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