

Chart Throb

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Extract

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And Still to Come

Some years from now

The nation had watched Shaiana cry so many times. Heard her voice crack as she struggled to complete her sentence.

'I just want this so much. I really, really want it so much. It's all I ever wanted. Since I was a little girl . . . It's my . . . It's my . . .'

She couldn't do it. Words failed her. Her lip quivered, her nostrils flared and a watery film spread across her eyes. The lids closed in an agonized grimace and squeezed out a glistening tear.

Just a tear, a single tear, but such a tear. One of the most scrutinized tears that was ever shed. Few tears in all history would be seen by so many and so often. Over and over again it had teetered momentarily upon the thickly mascaraed lashes of Shaiana's lower lid before tipping forward and rolling heavily across the downy expanse of that now nationally familiar cheek, tracing its course through the heavy blusher with which the make-up artist had struggled in vain to cover the tiny blemishes on Shaiana's quivering face.

The people in their millions had absorbed this scene immediately before the last break and also before the break which preceded that. They had seen it at the very beginning of the programme and in the trailers that had played throughout the earlier part of the evening. Those with access to the digital channels

had been able to watch the tear for nearly a week already and grainy stills of it had appeared in the press. It was also possible to download it to one's mobile phone by accessing the 'preview highlights' section of the *Chart Throb* website.

But despite all this massive exposure, up until now that tear had always been a future tear, a tear which, in the endlessly repeated phrase of Keely the presenter, was 'still to come'.

'And still to come, it's all too much for Shaiana.'

'Still to come, Shaiana struggles to keep it together.'

'Is Shaiana's dream turning into a nightmare? All that and more, *still to come*.'

And so the tear had teetered. A maybe tear, present and entirely familiar but nonetheless a tear in waiting. But now finally it had arrived. No longer a tear that was 'still to come' but all of a sudden a clear and present tear, a tear that was on its way. And for the first time (but most certainly not the last) the viewing millions saw it disappear beneath the square white plastic nail of Shaiana's outstretched finger as she rested her chin upon Keely's gorgeous skinny shoulder, and failed to find the word for which she was struggling.

'I just want this so much,' she repeated. 'I really, really do. I want it so much. It's all I ever wanted. Since I was a little girl . . . It's my . . . It's my . . .'

At the very last linguistic hurdle, emotion defeated Shaiana and words failed her.

'Dream?' Keely coaxed. 'Is it your dream? Is that what you're trying to tell us? That it's your dream?'

'That's right, Keely,' Shaiana sniffed. 'That is so right. It's my dream.'

Keely's bronzed, cadaverously muscular arms enfolded Shaiana's shoulders. Momentarily entwined, they made quite a contrast: the golden girl and the girl with the dream. It all looked slightly uncomfortable as

Shaiana's arm (the one which she had raised to wipe away the famous tear) became trapped in Keely's skeletal embrace. Briefly Shaiana's hand rested in the hollow of Keely's armpit and Keely's teeth rattled against Shaiana's big hoop earrings. Neither woman seemed to notice the awkwardness or if they did, they did not care. Emotions were running too high. It was all too much.

'You go, girl,' Keely whispered. 'Just you go, girl.'

'Yeah,' Shaiana sniffed, raising her eyes towards what would have been the stars had it not been daytime and had she not been indoors. 'God gave me this chance and I'm going to rock their asses!'

Calvin Simms

Some months earlier, one of the asses whom Shaiana intended to rock had been quivering with violent fury as its owner, Calvin Simms, came to the shocking realization that he, the ultimate manipulator, the man who with a single glance knew a person better than they knew themselves, had been had. Calvin always believed that he could read anybody. Anybody, it now turned out, except the woman he had married.

'A divorce?' he stuttered.

'Yays, Calvin,' his beautiful American bride of just two weeks drawled in her sexy, sultry Southern accent. 'Ah want a dee-vorce.'

They were standing in the hallway of the vast detached mansion in Belgravia that Calvin had assumed would be his and Dakota's marital home. Numerous items of matching luggage surrounded them. The two drivers who had helped them into the house had only just closed the front door behind them. He had *carried* her over that threshold not two

minutes before. His passport was still in his pocket, he still had sunscreen on his neck, he was still wearing *shorts and sandals*, which made him feel particularly ridiculous in the light of the shocking revelation that the honeymoon was most definitely over.

'We've only been married a fortnight!' he protested.

'Way-ll, believe me, darlin', it felt lak a ye-ah,' Dakota purred.

'Why bother with the fucking honeymoon then? Why not dump me outside the church?'

'Gotta consummate, pussycat. Cain't have you claimin' Ah withheld ma fay-vers an' gettin' a judge to declare our *nerptuals* null an' void.'

Like a big win on a fairground coin cascade, the pennies in Calvin's head were tumbling down. *That* was why she had made such a racket in the sack! Screaming and shouting and beseeching the Lord Almighty to give her strength. She'd never made love that noisily when they were courting. In fact previously she had been rather clinical in her approach to sex, which, being a very busy man, Calvin had always appreciated. Suddenly, however, she'd seemed to feel the need to let the whole world in on her exertions. There had been complaints from other guests, and Calvin had been forced to book the surrounding rooms and compensate a middle-aged couple who claimed to have had no sleep at all. He had wanted to honeymoon in one of his many holiday mansions but Dakota had insisted on their staying in a very public hotel. Now he knew why.

'Ah do believe eva'body in tha whole o' Venice knows how *insatiably* you used ma poh weak body, Calvin. Ah wuz lil' more than a sweet young virgin chile an' you done jes about furked me intah a *coma*.'

Calvin stared at his wife. There were many ways one might have chosen to describe her, but 'sweet young virgin child' was not one of them. Thirty-four years old,

well over six feet tall, glamorous, sophisticated and now, it turned out, cunning as a snake. They bred them tough, those girls of the Confederate aristocracy. It had after all been only six generations since their great-great-great-great-grannies had been left with nothing but their looks and their well-bred gentility to survive in a cruel new world.

'Ahm dee-vorcin' you, honey,' Dakota purred. 'An' Ahm filin' in tha city of Angels, which means o'course Ah git half.'

Calvin's mind was reeling. Could she do it? A *two-week marriage*, for heaven's sake. Half? Surely not.

'On what grounds?' he asked.

'Mental cruelty.'

'Mental cruelty!' Calvin exploded.

'Uh-huh.'

'When was I ever cruel to you?' he protested.

'You ain't bin, honey, 'ceptin' *boring* me half tuh death 'bout how clever you are an' all,' Dakota sneered. 'We both know thay-at. But fortunately for me nobody else knows it, an' since you have so carefully curl-tivated an image as tha nastiest, cruellest, most *brutal* man on television, Ah don't imagine that a dee-vice court will need merch persuasion tah believe that you treat yo' sweet virginal bride tha same as you treat yo' dumb contestants.'

Realizing he was still holding his cabin baggage in his hand, Calvin put it down on the polished marble floor.

'Shall we go in and sit down?' he suggested.

'Nuh. Ahm leavin', ma car's outside.'

'What? Immediately?'

'Sooner if possible.'

'Have you been planning this from the start?' Calvin asked.

'O' course.'

'The very start? Three years ago?'

'Uh-huh.'

'You mean you *never* loved me at all?'

'Duh!'

Calvin's mind was filled suddenly with memories of their courtship. That spilt glass of champagne at the Versace show which had first led him to talk to her . . .

'*Ah am so sorry, suh! Did Ah wet yo' pants? Ain't I a fumble-fingers?*'

Had she engineered it? She had seemed so disarmingly frank and honest at the time, so cool and assured, wiping him down with a napkin and giggling in that confident, proud way that girls of the Southern aristocracy seemed to perfect in the cradle. It couldn't have been a set-up. And yet it seemed it had been.

'What about the Bay of Biscay? You really didn't love me then?'

'Double duh!'

The sunset had been so fabulous and they had found themselves alone and she had said she loved him. That was when he had proposed.

'Please, Calvin,' Dakota said, sounding almost bored. 'Don't look so *downhearted*. After all, honey, you never lerved me.'

Actually this was true, although he hadn't realized she had been aware of it. He had never really loved anyone but he had *liked* her enormously.

'Of course I loved you! Why else would I marry you?'

'Same reason Ah married you, Cotton Candy. Ta git sermthin' you didn' haive. You wan'ed a *wahf*. You'd dern your bachelor thing. Yew wan'ed a beautiful *wahf*. Fer kids, fer premières, ta make your parents happy. Ta git rid of all those gay rumours once an' fer all.'

Calvin could only gape. She was articulating his inner thoughts better than he had done himself. It was true: at forty-two, obsessed with work and dripping

with wealth, he had decided that a witty, intelligent, glamorous companion of childbearing age was what he required to complete his carefully constructed life. At the wedding, when they had the famous reading from *The Prophet* about twin pillars, Calvin had thought it very apt, for what he wanted most from his life companion was support, support that would enable him to continue unhindered with his world-conquering career. Now it turned out that instead of a pillar to prop up his life, he had got himself a wrecking ball to smash it to bits.

Remembering the wedding day brought another thought to his mind.

'You do realize *Hello!* magazine is going to want its money back, don't you?'

Dakota assumed an expression of infinite superiority.

'Ah have always despised yo' *common* and *grubby* side, Calvin. Thankfully Ah no longer have ta bear it. Ah'll see you in Californ-yuh!'

The beautiful, stately 'blonde bombshell', as the papers had not been able to resist calling her, turned on her four-inch heels and laid her hand on the door handle.

'You'll never get half,' Calvin shouted. 'Not even in California!'

Dakota turned back to look at him once more.

'Ah will git half, Calvin. Ah haive bin made a *fool* of. Ah wuz se-dooiced ba yo' charms into sur-rrenduhrin' mahself. Se-dooiced ba a may-un, a dirty *English* may-un who then *brutalized* me and shamed me unnatterally.'

'You wouldn't claim that?'

'Ah would, Calvin honey! Ah'll say you demanded unnattoral acts an' when Ah refused that you *beat me!*'

'You can't! It'll be your word against mine!'

'Exactly! Tha word of a sweet tearful Southern

Baptist girl against tha word of the most famous bastard in the world! Smug, sneerin' ol' Mr Mean from tha biggest show on TV. No jury in America is gonna have any terrrble believin' that you tried to stick yo' nasty *English* rapier where no Christian wahf should let it be sterck.'

'This is outrageous! It's theft, pure and simple. You are trying to steal from me.'

'Oh, come on, Calvin, yo' a thief yo'self. Why, evabody knows that *Chart Throb* is jest *X Factor* with differen' judges. *Nastier* judges. *Much nastier* judges. You stole it! An' now Ah'm stealin' from you.'

If Dakota had been attempting to make Calvin even angrier she was certainly succeeding, for this was his sore spot, the one fly in the sweet ointment of his vast fame and wealth. There could of course be no doubt that Calvin's show, *Chart Throb*, the latest in a whole series of wildly successful television talent shows, had been lifted pretty much wholesale from the shows that preceded it. Calvin never denied it, nor that he had cast himself in the Simon Cowell mould as the rude, acerbic English judge. Nor did he deny that he had gone out of his way to recreate the elements that made up a successful judging panel. He had hunted down a mumsy reality TV star with a publicly dysfunctional family. He had found himself a pleasant-faced pop professional who had been looking for television exposure. He had studiously recreated all the elements that had made *X Factor* such a triumph, and had been so successful in doing so that *Chart Throb* had eventually eclipsed the original model. This was the point that Calvin never tired of explaining to people. It wasn't that he had done anything new, only that he had done it better.

'There *is* nothing new anyway,' Calvin protested. 'I didn't rip off anything that hadn't been ripped off before. *X Factor* was just *Pop Idol* and *Pop Idol* was

just *Pop Stars*, which started in New Zealand as it happens, and it all comes from *New Faces* and *Opportunity Knocks* . . .'

'Whatevah, Calvin!'

'No! Not whatever! Rob me if you like but I'm not having you insult me like this. The reason my show's the most successful is because I'm the best at doing it! Why do you never hear about *X Factor* any more? Because of me. I'm the King now, because I do things my way!'

'OK. So you're better than the last guy at bein' a rude, sarcastic lil' shit on camera. Big deal, Calvin, whoopidingdong.'

'There's a world more to it than that and you know it,' Calvin snapped. 'It's what I do *behind* the scenes that makes me the best. I have the *touch*. I *understand* the process. When it comes to manipulating the public I am fucking *Goebbels*, mate. I *make the fiction real*. Nobody gets it like I get it.'

'Goebbels, eh?'

'Yes, Goebbels.'

'Yo' mother must be very proud.'

Yet again Dakota turned on her heel to leave, but Calvin grabbed her arm.

'All right, darling!' he said. 'How about this? You want half of everything I've earned?'

'Tha's raht, Calvin. Ah do, an' Ahm gonna git it too.'

'How about I give you a chance to get *all* of it?'

Dakota leaned against the front door.

'Ahm listenin' . . .'

'You say *Chart Throb* is just a rip-off. That I'm just another rude English guy who got lucky. I say I bring a unique talent to my show. I say it's what I do *behind* the cameras that matters . . .'

'Ah know, Calvin. You *never* tire of tellin' me.'

'Well, we're currently doing the preliminary vetting sweep for the new series of *Chart Throb*. I challenge

you to name a ringer. Put up anyone you like and I will ensure that they win the competition. If I succeed, you walk away with nothing. If I lose, you get it all.'

Dakota looked thoughtful, clearly taken by surprise. This was a bold challenge indeed, much bolder than anything she might have been expecting.

'Ah cain choose anybody?'

'Well, they have to be British or Irish . . . and not a paedophile. Even I couldn't swing a Gary Glitter!'

'Thait's yo' only stipulation?'

'Yep. Put up anybody you like, except a paedophile, and I will turn them into this year's Chart Throb.'

'Well, Ah must say, this does appeal ta ma gamin' instincts.'

'Thought it might.'

Dakota's family, among other things, bred horses and twice a horse named in her honour had won the Kentucky Derby.

'O' course Ah couldn't allow you ta weight the other candidates.'

'What? You mean pick eleven other people with even less chance of winning than the one you nominate? I could do that, I suppose, but it would make a pretty shitty show. Let's say this last year *Chart Throb* averaged eight and a half million viewers. If we drop below eight this time, even once, I lose the bet by default.'

'You'd risk everythin' on this, Calvin?'

'I'm risking nothing. I know I can win. I'll give you a day to nominate your ringer.'

'Well. OK then. Ah accept yo' bet. An' Ah don't need a day to choose either. Ah've already decided.'