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The Fame Factor

Written by Polly Courtney

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POLLY COURTNEY

The Fame Factor

AVON

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Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The American rolled his eyes. 'Give it a mo.'

Hutchinson looked back at the image, letting his gaze roam

over the rhythm guitarist, a gypsy type with dark, wavy hair and cat-like eyes. Then he saw the blonde on bass and laughed. 'Who's that – Britney Spears's little sister?'

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

Several seconds passed. Hutchinson looked at his watch.

'Look, Louis, I really don't have time for a Girls Aloud 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 sweet-talk some A&R rep into taking you on. Then, assuming you had enough decent songs inside you to fill a couple of albums, you were made.

Not any more. These days, there were more acts to go around. The internet was awash with talent. There were literally millions of artists pumping out tracks – something for everyone. Even the fan bases of the mainstream acts were carved up into smaller pieces. The days of bands like the Beatles, whose appeal reached

from brickies to housewives, were long gone. As a lowly unsigned act, Dirty Money had to shout as loud as it could to stand a chance.

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

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

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

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

Dear lead singer,

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

Your adoring fan x

Zoë smiled.

Dear Adoring Fan, she typed.

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

Zoë

She flicked back to the website and checked through the outstanding messages. There 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.'