

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Struck

Anne-Marie O'Connor

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Acknowledgements

Ebury Press Fiction Footnotes

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About the Book

All Catherine wants to do is sing, but a TV show is about to make her a star ...

Catherine Reilly is 24, single and still lives at home with her dad and two of her sisters. The only thing Catherine's ever been any good at is singing, but she has no connections, low confidence and isn't exactly glamorous. However, when she sees a TV ad for the latest series of *Star Maker* – the biggest talent show on national television – she decides to enter ...

Catherine now has the best voice coach in the business, a team of sadistic trainers and stylists and the world's number one music mogul on her side ... Can an ordinary girl's dreams *really* come true?

About the Author

Anne-Marie O'Connor was born in Bradford. She has written plays for theatre, radio and television. She now lives in Manchester with her husband and son.

STAR STRUCK

Anne-Marie O'Connor



Chapter 1

CATHERINE REILLY WAS sitting in the foyer of a five-star hotel in Manchester city centre breathing rapidly with her head between her knees. Her feet, which she'd pushed into her younger sister's silver wedges that morning, looked odd from this angle. Her ankles were puffy and red and her toenails, which she had painted orange on the instruction of Lorraine Kelly, who'd informed her that silver wedges and orange nails were 'bang on trend for summer', looked like Smarties stuck on the ends of cocktail sausages. She had teamed the footwear with a pink swirly-print maxi dress, which was also on upside-down reflection, probably not a good idea.

Jo – Catherine's nineteen-year-old sister from whom she'd borrowed the outfit – was studying fashion design at college. Not just that, Jo could throw on a bin bag, wear an opened baked bean tin for a hat and still look a million dollars – she was definitely someone who could pull off a Pucci-print dress and wedges. Catherine felt that she was from a different end of the gene pool to her younger sister – not having gazelle-like legs and thick, bum-length, Angelina Jolie hair. Even if I dressed head-to-toe couture, Catherine thought to herself, I'd still only look like change from a fiver.

As Catherine silently berated herself for not having thought about this fact sooner, she could feel someone rubbing her back. 'Thank you,' she said, weakly lifting her head.

The St John's Ambulance woman looked at her and smiled kindly. 'Thought we might need a stretcher.'

'No, I'll be fine.' Catherine felt totally disoriented. One minute she had been queuing up to receive her competition number, the next – overcome by the thought of what she was letting herself in for auditioning for *Star Maker: Transatlantic* – she had fainted, collapsing onto a line of seats. She remembered swaying and then nothing – not until she was brought round from a tangle of chair legs. She could just imagine the crash. No gentle swooning for the likes of her, she thought. No being caught by some handsome man in naval uniform and being carried off into the distance like the final scenes of *An Officer and a Gentleman* – just a St John's Ambulance woman to bring her round. She just wasn't the sort of girl that people leapt from their seats to help – the type who always had an air of mystery about them. She smiled too much for that, even when she was trying to be mean and moody. And anyway, she looked like she could probably cope in a crisis.

Catherine was what her grandma used to refer to as a 'big girl'. She wasn't *abnormal load* big; she was just the wrong side of Top Shop. Catherine had accepted the fact that she was never going to wear skinny jeans. She was fairly sure that even her skeleton would have a hard time pulling off anything Kate Moss wore. At five foot six and a size sixteen, with shoulder-length dark brown hair and eyes that were grey or green depending on the light, Catherine thought she looked OK. Not that she spent much time dwelling on her looks; she had far more than that to worry about. That was until today, of course, when she had been queuing to get her number. She had realised that of the girls who were, like herself, in their mid-twenties there were two categories: the thin, gorgeous ones – of which there were plenty – and the deluded ones. That was when Catherine had fainted.

Star Maker was TV's most watched programme and every year it plucked one lucky person from obscurity and catapulted them to singing stardom. But this year it was set to be bigger and better than ever. It had been renamed *Star Maker: Transatlantic* and the winner was guaranteed a recording contract – not only in the UK but also the US – with all the might of Richard Forster, the impresario who created *Star Maker* behind them. Richard Forster was so scathing and reputedly so controlling

that he made Simon Cowell look like Bambi. This year too they had promised to bow to the public's insatiable appetite for the audition process and were screening fourteen nights of back-to-back auditions and then going straight into the programme. *Star Maker* was taking over the autumn/winter schedule. In the past Catherine had watched the programme intrigued as to why people put themselves through the ordeal of public scrutiny. But this year she had been having a particularly bad day and seeing the advert on the TV for this year's competition, had just applied – like someone who'd gone for a walk on Beachy Head and then, in a moment of madness, jumped over the edge.

It was a Saturday evening in the depths of winter and Catherine had been sitting in the living room watching Ant and Dec as her father Mick loudly ate fish and chips next to her. She had felt as if she was about to crack. That morning Mick had delivered some truly awful news to Catherine and, in his time-honoured tradition of treating her as if she was able to deal with anything he threw at her, sworn her to secrecy. He had said that he didn't want the others to know – the others being her three sisters Claire, Maria and Jo. And while Catherine spent the day crying to herself after her dad's bombshell Mick mooched around the house acting as if he had said nothing earth shattering.

'That, my friend,' Mick said, holding up a fat greasy chip, dripping in gravy so that Ant looked like he had a chip for a head, 'is a king among chips. Bloody lovely.' He dropped it into his mouth like a bird with a worm. Sometimes her father wouldn't eat for days; whenever Catherine pressed him to have some food he'd say he didn't have it in him. During these times he would usually take to his bed and only come out for the occasional toilet trip or to tell Catherine something that he had seen on *Sunday News* that had filtered through his morose fug. He had been suffering from depression for years, but that day he had been in eerily high spirits. It was probably shock, Catherine thought. That was certainly what she had been suffering from.

Catherine and her father were alone in the house. Jo had been out at a friend's house, Maria was living with her fiancé Gavin, and Claire, her eldest sister, lived with her husband Paul and their two children, Rosie and Jake, near enough away to always be popping in but far enough away to not have to bother when the proverbial hit the fan. As the adverts rolled Mick had begun to wonder out loud what he'd like for dessert – 'Angel Delight or Arctic Roll? The tyranny of choice.'

Catherine wasn't particularly interested in the finest foods Iceland had to offer, she felt as if her skull was about to shatter into a thousand pieces. As she was sitting thinking about her father an advert for this year's *Star Maker* auditions came on the TV. They were being held throughout the country but one was nearby in the centre of Manchester. An alien feeling of recklessness welled up inside Catherine. She didn't enter things like this but today she felt as if anything might happen.

While her dad chuntered on about his dessert dilemma Catherine made a mental note of the details she needed in order to enter and when Mick was tucking into his fourth slice of arctic roll, she escaped to the dining room, logged on to his computer and filled out the application form. At the bottom of the form was the question: *Why should we pick you?* She stared and stared at it. Finally she had written the only thing that she could think to write – the truth: *Because I can sing.*

Catherine could sing. The only person who had heard her voice in years was Father McGary at the local church. Catherine had been in the choir as a youngster but had left when she was sixteen blaming her studies but privately thinking she was a bit old to be standing about wearing a ruff. When Catherine was nineteen she had bumped into Father McGary, catching him at a particularly lonely moment. He had just said mass for one man with a ferret tied to a bit of string and told Catherine that with congregations like that it was only a matter of time before the church closed. He said he missed hearing her sing, and she had admitted that she missed singing. And so they had agreed that she could pop along to St John's whenever she felt like it and Father McGary would open the church for her.

That had been five years ago. St John's was still open and as far as she knew congregation numbers had improved, or at least ferret numbers had dwindled. She enjoyed her time at church. She wasn't religious, but having the time to herself to think and practise the songs that she wrote was the most treasured part of Catherine's week.

Catherine pressed *send*. It was so simple. Was becoming a star these days really that easy? Not trawling the clubs, no building up a reputation, no getting signed to a label and then hopefully getting the public to notice you. Those days were past. Now it seemed all it took was just the click of a mouse. It made Catherine feel queasy, the idea that she had just set something in motion that might lead to untold opportunities – or abject failure.

She didn't want her dad to know what she had been up to, so – after quickly printing off the audition details – she cleared the history on the computer. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. By the time Catherine had gone back into the lounge, Mick was snoring, with arctic snot dribbling down his chin.

Catherine took a deep breath and, with the help of the St John's Ambulance lady, stood up and felt her legs go from under her again. She steadied herself on a chair. It was then that she realised she had an audience. A heavily made-up girl with ringlets and neon pink leg warmers was blowing bubblegum bubbles and swinging her left leg to the side of her head in a limbering-up motion. As her ankle made contact with her ear she held it there for a moment and said, 'You look well bad. You should go home.'

An earnest-looking young man with asymmetric hair and a muscle top looked at the girl who was still performing her stretches.

'How can you say that? She needs to be strong. Everything happens for a reason and fainting in some chairs could be a sign that she's like, totally gonna nail it today.'

Oh no, Catherine thought, I've entered a world where people say things like '*totally going to nail it*'. As the girl bent down and touched her toes and muttered 'God, whatever,' a girl, about the same age as Catherine, nudged her and smiled kindly.

'You OK?' the girl asked. She looked like a normal, everyday girl: short, brown hair, brown eyes, glasses; nothing that screamed 'Star of Tomorrow'. She was like her, Catherine thought before quickly remembering that she was dressed as a swirly pink blob.

'Just nerves I think.' Catherine smiled shyly.

'Tell me about it. I'm bricking it. Everyone here has made such an effort. I look like I've popped to the shops,' the girl said.

Catherine laughed. 'I wish I'd just worn what I usually wear.' Catherine said pulling awkwardly at the maxi dress. 'Believe me, I don't usually dress like this. I've borrowed my sister's gear and now I'm regretting it.'

'You look nice,' The girl said nodding her approval. 'I'm Kim, by the way.'

Catherine shook the girl's hand. 'I'm Catherine, pleased to meet you.'

'You too.'

Just as Catherine was about to ask Kim what she was going to sing for her audition, the asymmetrically haired youth began to sing an impromptu 'You Raise me Up' by Westlife.

Catherine looked at Kim, who was in turn staring agog, then another fancy-haired young man stepped in and began to harmonise – terribly – with fancy-haired boy number one, who looked put out that his finest moment was being interrupted. Fancy-haired boy number two had his eyes shut, oblivious, as he rattled through a dozen or so key changes until he sounded like Barry Gibb. Catherine

was just about to pull Kim to one side and shuffle away from the serenade when Kim's number was called and she was pulled away by a *Star Maker* employee. Catherine was on her own. She looked desperately around for the toilet in order to make a break for it when a camera crew – on the look out for TV gold – quickly swung into action and before she knew it she was being interviewed by Jason Longford, TV's favourite presenter. Catherine, who was still light-headed, felt as if she was watching all of this from afar. But then a jolt of adrenalin shot through her as she realised that she was definitely being filmed.

'Well, they're certainly raising everyone up around here,' Jason P. Longford said with a fake chortle before thrusting the microphone into Catherine's face. 'You with these boys?'

'No, I just fainted and they decided to sing to me,' Catherine said truthfully.

'She doesn't look too impressed, does she, viewers?' Jason said, flashing his bright white veneer and giving a nasty glint to the camera. Catherine was stunned. It wasn't that she wasn't grateful, she just didn't think that the two guys were singing to her for any other reason than they wanted to get themselves noticed. She didn't manage to say this though; Jason wasn't letting her get a word edgewise. 'And what are you going to sing for the judges?'

Catherine felt faint again. She shouldn't have come today. Who did she think she was? She wasn't lithe like the girl with the leggings or funky like the Westlife wannabes. The only person she'd met so far that was anything like her was Kim and she'd been whisked away from her before they'd had a chance to ponder what they were doing there. Catherine was just a girl who worked in a call centre who was so nervous she could barely stand up straight.

An old man hove into view, sidling up to Jason P. Longford, singing 'The White Cliffs of Dover' with his dentures on the end of his fingers like a ventriloquist. Catherine's mind went blank.

'Not answering questions now, have we a prima donna on our hands?' Jason asked jovially but with an undercurrent of nastiness.

Catherine's brain was just catching up with what he was saying to her, she was so mesmerised by the old man. 'Sorry, no, not at all. I'm singing "Martha's Harbour".' She said quietly.

'What's that?' Jason asked, looking at one of his researchers in such a way that Catherine feared the poor guy would be sacked if he didn't know the answer.

'It's an acoustic song by a band called All About Eve,' the researcher said, pulling his clipboard to his chest as if it would cover the obvious irritation he felt with the TV star.

Catherine caught his eye briefly – grateful that at least someone around here didn't appear certifiable. He's cute, Catherine thought, and then immediately felt bashful and looked at the floor.

For a split second Jason looked like he'd lost all interest but then he quickly rearranged his features back into his for-the-camera face. 'Fair enough, but can you do this?' he said spinning around and pointing at the octogenarian who was now tap dancing and singing 'Would You Like to Swing on a Star?' as well as playing puppets with his false teeth.

Catherine looked at him and smiled tightly. 'I wouldn't have thought so,' she said.

Jo breathed in sharply as if pulling in her stomach might save her and her family from a ten-car pile up. She'd broken one of her own sacred rules: Never Get in a Car with Claire Ever Again Ever. Never After the Last Time. The last time had been when Jo had asked for a lift to the Trafford Centre and they'd found themselves facing the wrong way on the inside lane of the M60 motorway. After that Jo decided she'd rather take the bus. Knife crime and gun crime were on the up in Manchester – if the news was to be believed – but Jo would rather take her chances with a gang of hoodies on the top-deck of the 845 than step foot into any vehicle Claire was driving. However, here she was, hurtling across

Manchester at break-neck speed and it was all Catherine's doing.

'What's with the dramatics?' Claire demanded, pulling her fingers agitatedly through her honey highlighted hair.

It always amused Jo that her older sister insisted on dyeing her hair blond. The Reillys were dark haired. No point denying it. Even so, Jo did what she could to make her darkness less obvious. Jolene cream, for example. Something a really blondie – unlike Claire – wouldn't need to think about. Jolene cream was a staple in the Reilly girls' bathroom cabinet and known simply as 'tashe cream'. On the night of her eighteenth birthday Jo had had a particularly nasty run in with a trolley well past its sell-by date that her sister Maria had assured her was fine. She had applied said tashe cream as instructed but when it began to sting and then burn, Jo realised she had a problem: she had branded a Mexican Desperado moustache shape onto her top lip. Maria had thought this hilarious. This just went to show, in Jo's opinion, what an out and out cow her sister could be. It could have been Maria with the *My Name is Earl* moustache but she didn't seem to care.

Maria claimed to know why she and her sisters were all so dark – they were Black Irish, she told Jo – she loved to think that she was something special, descended from some heady Celtic/Spanish mix. Maria liked nothing more than to talk up her own part in things. That was why, Jo thought, when Maria bragged about her job as a trolley dolly on a budget airline you'd think she was responsible for actually flying the plane.

'You've just pulled out without looking and we could have all died!' Jo shouted at Claire. Her sister's driving really did scare her witless. They were now careening across the Mancunian Way, a busy concrete flyover that straddled the city centre.

'God, you're so sensitive,' Claire said, looking straight at her as if the road and their position on it was inconsequential.

'Eyes on the road!' Jo shrieked. 'Sensitive, eh? So why's that bloke beeping his horn and giving you a wanker sign?'

'Joanna!' Mick piped up. 'I won't have any wankers on a Saturday morning.'

Jo swallowed back a giggle and tried to ignore the elbow that Maria had just jabbed into her ribs.

'Can we just get there in one piece, please? Jesus,' Maria asked loftily.

'"Jesus". "Wankers". I don't know where I got such potty-mouthed kids from,' Mick said, throwing his eyes to the heavens.

Jo was going to point out that her dad could make Gordon Ramsay blush if he put his mind to it but she decided to let it go. She had a hangover and she didn't want to enter into a pointless argument this early in the day.

The previous evening was a bit of a blur. Jo knew it involved some annoying bloke who wouldn't leave her alone while she was out trying to have a good time with her mates. He kept bothering her and trying to buy her shots of tequila. Jo hated tequila and she hated men who tried to buy her tequila. In fact she hated men who tried to buy her drinks full stop; it got on her nerves. She was only interested in men if they wanted a good laugh. She didn't need some cheesy slimeball trying to buy her Verve Cliquot and thinking he could parade her round in his sports car. Manchester seemed to be full of these sort of idiots. Jo didn't know where they got off, but she liked to tell them where she thought they should.

Her hangover meant that she hadn't been quite as on the ball as she might have been when Catherine came in, asking to ferret through her wardrobe. She should have known something was amiss when her usually dressed-down sister had asked if she could borrow her silver wedges. When

had she thought Catherine was going to wear silver wedges on a Saturday morning – Netto? Jo had pulled the quilt over her head while Catherine helped herself to some of her stuff and then managed to fall back to sleep and a nice dream about living in a bouncy castle when she had been rudely awakened by Claire.

‘What the bloody hell does Maria find to do in there?’ Claire said, plonking four-year-old Rosie on Jo’s bed and nodding in the direction of the bathroom.

‘Pluck her monobrow?’ Jo offered sitting up in bed and looking at her alarm clock. ‘What the hell are you doing in my bedroom, getting on my nerves at eleven o’clock in the morning?’

‘You’re a cheeky sod, do you know that?’ Claire asked, eyeballing Jo. ‘We’re hiding.’

‘From who?’

Rosie jumped down off the bed and began playing with Jo’s jewellery on her dressing table. ‘Come into Auntie Catherine’s room, Rosie, she’s got well better stuff than me.’ Claire threw Jo a look. ‘What?’ Jo asked with mock innocence. Rosie ran into her aunt Catherine’s room.

Even though Claire had left home years ago, as soon as she was back in the house she resumed her sister duties and thought that she could take over the place and order Jo around. Jo didn’t hold back against Claire, she had her own life when their mother had left and she’d always made sure that Jo was looked after, taking her out for the day when she was younger and letting her stop over at her house whenever she wanted. She was married to Paul who wasn’t the brightest tool in the box but he was nice enough if a little dull – his only topics of conversation seemed to be about Manchester United and the traffic on the M60.

Actually, Jo quite liked Claire – it was Maria who got on her nerves – but it made her laugh that her eldest sister thought that as soon as she turned up order was restored. It was obvious to anyone who stepped foot into the Reilly household that the person who had held the family together since their mum had left eight years ago was Catherine.

‘Anyway,’ Claire sighed. ‘It’s Dad. That’s who we’re hiding from.’

‘Why?’

‘Rosie just said, “Eurgh, Grandad – poo!” and then I had to pretend to him that she wanted on rather than she was indicating that he smelt of it.’

‘Dad? Does he?’

‘Well, he stinks of something. Who’s looking after him?’

‘What do you mean, “Who’s looking after him?” He’s a grown man. I’m fed up with all this pussy-footing-round-poor-Dad routine. He needs to get his bloody act together. I’m telling you, he gets right on my wick.’

‘Catherine’s meant to sort him out, where is she?’ Claire asked, as if she hadn’t listened to a word her sister had just said.

‘If she’s got any sense, she’s gone out. Anyway, why’s she meant to look after him? I know she does, but that’s just because she’s a massive mug.’

Jo had run out of patience with her dad’s demands years ago and wished that her older sister would do the same. But for some reason, one that Jo couldn’t fathom, Catherine seemed beholden to her father, especially lately. Only last week Mick had decided on a whim that he wanted to go kite flying on Saddleworth Moor and Catherine had willingly obliged. Jo couldn’t think of anything worse than getting tangled up in the strings of a box kite, with her hair whipped by the wind and sticking to her lips, just because her dad had decided he needed a new hobby.

A sound like someone bouncing on a trampoline was coming from Catherine’s room. Claire jumped up to investigate, throwing Jo a look of annoyance as she went. Jo threw the quilt covers back

and slowly followed her sister. She arrived at Catherine's bedroom door to find Rosie jumping up and down on the bed.

'This is Auntie Catherine's room, darling, you wouldn't like it if she came round and bounced on your bed,' Claire was saying.

'Would,' Rosie said.

Fair enough, thought Jo. She was four, she probably would.

Rosie jumped backwards and landed on the bed with a thump. Jo held her breath, it was hard to tell sometimes if her niece was going to laugh or cry. Whatever she did, Claire would no doubt give her a round of applause and a medal. Rosie was spoilt in Jo's opinion, Claire was way too soft with her. They were in luck this time – Rosie burst into a fit of giggles and Claire clapped approvingly.

'Come on, petal, let's have you.' Claire said, trying to coax Rosie off the bed.

'Just pick her up.' Jo said.

'All right, Super Nanny.'

'What?' Jo asked innocently.

'When I need childcare tips, I won't be coming to a hungover nineteen-year-old for them.'

'Oooh!' Jo said campily. 'Anyway, I was watching a programme on Sky the other day about kids and this nanny was saying that you've got to be cruel to be kind.'

'Well, when you've got your own, Mary sodding Poppins, feel free to be as cruel-to-be-kind as you want.'

'Are you allowed to say "sodding" in front of Rosie, or will she have to go and see a child psychologist by the end of the week?' Jo asked, smiling with mock-sweetness.

Claire pulled a face at her younger sister. As they bickered, Rosie picked a piece of paper out from under Catherine's pillow and began playing with it, scrunching it into a ball.

'Can Mummy have that?' Claire asked.

Rosie giggled and screwed it up even more.

Jo shook her head at her sister and said to her niece, 'That's mine, thank you,' and whipped the paper from her hands. Rosie looked crestfallen. 'It could be important,' Jo said, sitting on the edge of the bed reading whatever was written on the paper as Rosie jumped down next to her. 'Oh. My. God.'

'What?' Claire asked, intrigued before evidently her conscience got the better of her and she pretended that she had been beginning a sentence. 'What ... ever that is put it back now. This is Catherine's room.'

'She's at the *Star Maker* auditions,' Jo said. She couldn't quite believe it. Her sister, the quiet one, the reliable one, the not-exactly-Leona-Lewis one was at the *Star Maker* auditions?

'Catherine? What for?' Claire asked, seemingly as amazed as Jo by this revelation.

'Well ... she does have a good voice,' Jo said tentatively.

'When was the last time you heard her sing?' Claire asked. 'Ten years ago in choir. She could sound like a strangled cat now for all we know.' Claire paused for a moment and looked seriously at Jo, 'They'll annihilate her,' she said gravely.

'Come on now, that's a bit harsh.' Jo replied.

'She's hardly Kylie, is she?'

'You are so tight!' Jo said, shaking her head.

'I'm not tight, I'm right.'

'Nice saying.' Jo said, impressed. She turned her attention back to the piece of paper. 'She still writes songs,' Jo said, staring at the audition acceptance form. 'Dad told me.'

'Really?' Claire looked shocked. 'I'm surprised he even noticed.'

Jo knew what she meant. Since his wife left him, their dad had become more and more insular, moping around for years until he was finally diagnosed with clinical depression. Their mother, Karen, when told of Mick's illness had said, 'Depression? He's depressed himself with the sound of his own voice.' The milk of human kindness didn't exactly run over where their mother was concerned. Jo didn't care what her mother thought, or at least she didn't want to care what her mother thought.

'We've got to stop her,' Claire said, jumping up.

'Why?'

'Because the last thing Catherine needs is Richard Forster telling her she's useless,' Claire said.

Richard Forster was the Svengali judge who had created *Star Maker*. He had achieved fame and fortune on both sides of the Atlantic creating pop stars and dashing the dreams of hopefuls during televised auditions. He was nearing retirement age but due to a team of cosmetic surgeons and great make-up artists he looked somewhere in his late forties or early fifties.

'We could just go and cheer her on,' Jo said, looking at Claire hopefully. Anything for a day out, she thought.

'Get dressed,' Claire said. 'We'll figure it out when we get there.'

And this was how Jo had come to break one of her most important rules. No one else had a car. Maria's ex-fiancé Gavin had taken theirs as part of their break-up settlement. He got the car, she got the ten-foot-high, Posh and Becks-style professional picture of the two of them entwined and kissing. Jo couldn't help thinking that Gavin had come out of the deal far better off than Maria, especially as they all had to look at it every day sitting at the top of the stairs. Maria was very sensitive about the picture and when Jo teased her about it she bit her head off and told her that someone had bought it from eBay and she was waiting for them to pick it up. Jo couldn't wait to clap eyes on the nutter that would part with their hard-earned cash for that pictorial monstrosity. So Jo couldn't drive, Maria had no car and Mick was everything-phobic, including driving. That left Claire to chauffeur them and she drove unsafely to the venue of the *Star Maker* auditions.

Mick looked out of the window at the Manchester skyline and sighed, 'I can't believe she didn't tell us.'

Her dad loved sighing, Jo thought. He would often string a load of sighs together so they sounded like one big ongoing outtake of breath. Jo once told an ex-boyfriend that there was no point in coming round to her house to meet anyone because her dad just sat in the corner sounding like a pressure cooker and they wouldn't be able to hear themselves think.

'I wonder what she's going to sing?' Jo pondered.

'They'll crucify her,' Maria said matter-of-factly.

'No they won't,' Jo snapped. Jo didn't want to enter into one of Maria's bitch-fests. Maria got on other people's misery – or so it seemed to Jo. What Jo couldn't work out about Maria was how so many other people actually seemed to like her. People from work were always ringing up, she had at least one billion friends on Facebook and when it was her birthday she didn't just go out for a drink and a bite to eat – no; it was a five-day, Liz Hurley's weddingesque affair, with different themes and venues. Last year she'd had a night out in Manchester, a night out in Black-pool and a weekend in Magaluf. Jo thought that she'd rather stab herself in the eye than spend a weekend in Shag a Muff with her sister and her so-called mates but she'd kept quiet and bought her an iTunes voucher.

Jo often wondered why Maria was so popular without coming up with much of an answer. As far as Jo could see it was as if the nastier and more cutting Maria was with people, the more they wanted to be her friend. It was classic school-bully behaviour and Jo saw it as her civic duty to pull her sister up at any given opportunity, seeing as no one else had the bottle to. 'I wonder what she's going to

sing?’ Jo asked again.

‘R. Kelly, “Flying without Wings”,’ Maria said.

Jo burst out laughing. ‘More like that’s what you’d sing, you wrong ’un. I can just see you u there, all moony-eyed at the judges, thinking you were the dog’s bollocks.’ Jo shut her eyes and began crooning in a high-pitched voice.

Maria punched her in the arm. ‘Piss-taker.’

Mick tutted his disapproval at the language.

Jo shoved her back. ‘Deluded R. Kelly lover!’

‘Will you two give up!’ Claire shouted from the driver’s seat. Jo and Maria piped down as Claire began slapping the satnav angrily. ‘No, I do not want Peter Street in Abergavenny; I want Peter Street in bloody Manchester.’

Jo bit her lip. She wanted to laugh but knew that she would be shouted at and in making Claire shout would distract her even further and they’d no doubt end up under the wheels of a tram. They all sat in barely held silence as Claire pulled up to a red light by Piccadilly train station and waited impatiently as if the whole traffic system was designed to be against her.

Jo’s thoughts turned to how this was all going to play out when they got where they were going. What exactly did they think they were doing? What were they going to do when they got there – run and put a hood over Catherine’s head and kidnap her, IRA-style? Catherine wasn’t answering her phone and Jo wasn’t sure she would take too kindly to her family turning up and demanding that she not put herself through a public audition. Maybe they should just support her, Jo thought. But then Jo didn’t really get a vote where family decisions were concerned – as the youngest she was always treated as the baby without any of the usual perks. She wasn’t even allowed the odd teenage stro without someone pulling her up and telling her how hard it had been for them when they were young – like her three sisters had grown up in a Dickens’ novel or something. They’re not that much older than me, for God’s sake! she thought. Catherine was twenty-four, Maria was twenty-eight and Claire first in line to the Reilly throne – was thirty-three. As much as Jo tried to put her point across and make the others see that she did sometimes know what she was talking about, she felt that her opinion was never really taken on board by her older sisters. Today would be no exception. She knew what would happen as soon as they arrived at the auditions: Claire would take charge and everyone else would fall into line. It was just the way things were.

Claire rounded a corner in fifth gear and Jo lurched to the side, squashing poor Rosie who had been sitting quietly minding her own business all the way into town. ‘Sorry, Rosie,’ Jo said, putting a protective arm around her niece.

‘That’s it! There!’ Claire said, screeching to a halt outside a five-star hotel.

‘You can’t just drop us off here,’ Maria said. They had stopped on double yellow lines and were being waved at by an angry-looking man in a high-visibility jacket.

‘Right, you lot go in and I’ll park up. I’ll be one minute.’

Jo jumped out and helped Rosie out of the car. She looked across at the sea of people who were packed inside the building. ‘We’ll never find her in there,’ she said to Maria.

‘We bloody well will,’ Mick countered defiantly.

Jo looked at her father’s disgruntled expression. She had a feeling that daddy dearest didn’t want Catherine – his carer – going anywhere anytime soon.

Andy Short wasn’t short. He was six foot two and his skinny frame and shock of black hair made him look even taller. He heard the line ‘You’re not very short are you?’ nearly every time he was

introduced to someone. He had grown to think this odd; like saying ‘You’re not very black are you’ to Jack Black.

Andy worked in TV. ‘Our Andy works in telly,’ he would often hear his mum say proudly. The she would pause for effect and add the killer punch, the one that got even the most hardened and snobby of her I-don’t-care-that-your-son-works-in-TV friends staring at him with admiration. ‘He’s working on *Star Maker*.’

Once this bit of juicy information was out of the bag everyone always asked the same question ‘What’s Richard Forster like?’ The real answer to that was that he had a penchant for young girls and many of the hopefuls who came through the doors found themselves being promised the earth and invited back to his palatial hotel suite in whichever city they were auditioning that week. But Andy never told anyone this. Neither did any other crew member, not just because it was unprofessional and sounded like sour grapes, but more importantly because Cherie Forster – Richard’s wife and one of the other judges – was such a formidable character that everyone assumed she’d find out who’d snitched on her husband and they’d never work anywhere in the world again, ever.

Andy lived in south Manchester in the suburb of Withington with his parents, something he had vowed to change this year. He was definitely going to get his own place. He loved his mum and dad dearly but his mum had a habit of vacuuming at least three times a day and other people’s legs had less rights than the vacuum in her domain. As a result Andy always had bruises on his ankles when his mother had feverishly gone at them with the Dyson. He wanted his own flat and the right to never vacuum again if he so wished. Withington was populated with students and young professionals and although Andy had left school at seventeen, coming from an area like this made him feel that he had to do something exciting with his life. He couldn’t spend the rest of his life pulling pints in the bar where he had worked for the past four years, listening to students rattling on about how drunk they had got the previous evening and pretending they didn’t revise.

Andy had always wanted to be a cameraman. And when his uncle Norman had said that he knew someone who knew someone who knew someone who’d once worked on *Coronation Street*, Andy had taken his number and made enough enquiries – and sat through enough interviews that led to nothing – to get himself a job as a runner on the new series of *Star Maker*. A runner was – as the title suggested – someone who did most of the running around that was required behind the scenes on a TV show. The job of a runner wasn’t suited to anyone with prima donna tendencies. You had to be prepared to do anything, Andy had quickly learnt. He had heard some horror stories from other runners – one girl had told him that she had to organise a different prostitute every night for a ‘happily married’ star she had worked with. But until this week Andy hadn’t really had to deal with any egos. He had just got on with his job and had been responsible for shepherding the weird and the wonderful as they came in the droves to audition for *Star Maker*. He loved the opportunity he was being given and couldn’t believe that he was paid – albeit a pittance – to go to work every day and do something he enjoyed. But in the past few days that feeling had changed, ever since he had been given the role of general dogsbody

Jason P. Longford.

Jason P. Longford was thirty-six, good-looking – if a little David Dickinson on the colour chart – gay but pretending to be straight for his housewife audience, and ruthlessly clawing his way to the top of the TV tree. He had landed the roll of *Star Maker* presenter, ousting Bramble Bergdorf, the pretentious but ineffectual daughter of a rock star, who had hosted the show the previous year. This was Jason’s ticket into the big time and he was constantly looking for his next opportunity to upstage all around him but for some reason, one which was lost on Andy, he was a huge hit with the public. Yesterday and today Andy had found himself obeying an exhausting list of demands from Jason. He rattled off

conflicting orders like machine-gun fire: 'Get me a latte.' 'I didn't order a latte, I ordered cappuccino.' 'Where is the running list for today?' 'I didn't ask for a running list, I know exactly what we're meant to be doing.' 'Wear green tomorrow, it's my lucky colour.' 'Why are you wearing green? You look like an elf.'

Today, as the audition room had filled with people, Jason had scoured it from behind a screen so that no one could see they were being observed, like a velociraptor hunting its prey. He had already pounced on a few people who in his opinion would make good TV: a man who had an industrial weed spray pack on his back and had been singing the theme from *Ghostbusters* and a girl who had brought her own dry ice machine. Now he was grabbing Andy by the elbow and dragging him towards a poor girl who had just fainted.

'Plain Jane alert!' Jason said, beckoning his crew to follow him.

Jason had a theory that normal-looking people tried harder for the cameras, if they were pug ugly then even better. The girl who had fainted was now being harmonised to death by some Justin Timberlake wannabes. Andy thought momentarily that she wasn't anything like a plain Jane, she was quite pretty, even if she did look like a little washed out.

Then Jason snapped, 'Camera on me.' And they were off: Jason turned on the charm and was performing for his public. He actually said 'my public' without a trace of irony. Andy was sure that even Maria Carey would be less of a diva than Jason. When Jason asked the girl what song she was going to sing, Andy was surprised to hear her say 'Martha's Harbour', a song that his mum used to listen to when he was younger. Jason obviously hadn't a clue what she was talking about – if it wasn't a Barbara Streisand number he always looked a bit lost – but Andy was excited. It made a change from 'Unchained Melody' and 'Wind Beneath My Wings'. When Jason turned round and hissed at him demanding to know who had sung this song, Andy told him – All About Eve. And as Jason looked at Andy as if he was as much of a freak for knowing the song as the fainting girl for wanting to sing, Andy caught her eye momentarily. It was the first time in the short while he'd worked on *Star Maker* that he'd seen someone who didn't have a hunger for fame in their eyes. She just looked terrified.

Jason clicked his fingers across his throat to indicate to the camera crew to stop filming. He glared at Catherine. 'God, love, I'm not being funny but you're going to have to pull your finger out of your dull arse if you want to get anywhere in this competition. You're up against the likes of her, for Christ's sake.' He pointed to a doll-like starlet standing nearby. 'And the prize is a recording contract in the US, not two weeks' cabaret in Skeggy.'

Andy was mortified. He stared wide-eyed at the girl and wanted to announce to the room that the views of Jason P. Longford did not necessarily reflect those unfortunate enough to have to work with him.

'Oh,' she said quietly and looked at her hands.

'Just saying, darling. You've got thirty seconds to impress in there and when you meet me, you should be switching on the charm.'

Andy could tell that Jason was losing interest in her and that the old man next to him who was C (in production speak this meant Great For, as in *great for* TV) was taking centre stage with his false teeth puppetry. Jason was asking him about his life, trying to extract a story. The TV presenter's tactic with old people was to always go for the sob story, no matter how eccentric, they were bound to have a recently dead dog or a recently dead wife or have been dropped out of an aeroplane over Dunkirk during the war and had a peg leg ever since. It always went down well with the producers, so when he was outrageously nasty to nervous young women it was brushed over because he was, on the whole, great at his job.

The poor girl looked crushed. Andy wanted to tell her to ignore Jason, he was a nasty piece of work, and to just go into the audition and give it her all. But he was being beckoned by Jason. Andy grabbed her wrist before he was dragged away and whispered, 'Sorry about that.' He really was; he felt terrible. He didn't understand what this Jason guy got out of his personal swipes at people. The girl looked up and a fat tear rolled down her cheek. She wiped it away.

'It's OK.' She said and smiled sadly. But Andy knew it wasn't OK, it was just the way things were.

Over an hour had passed since Jason P. Longford had told Catherine exactly what he thought and his comments still stung. She had had her preliminary audition. Contrary to popular belief only about twenty per cent of people who attended the auditions ever got to face Richard Forster and the other judges. The rest were auditioned and sent away by TV producers who were clearly looking for more than talent; they were looking for people who would be good to watch. Catherine didn't think there was anything particularly earth shatteringly special about her that would make them put her through; all she really had was her voice. Catherine had tried to get a smile from the three preliminary judges but they had simply raised their heads from their notes when she started to sing, then told her she was through. She thought she had done quite well and the cute clipboard guy had stopped her on the way out and said, 'That was amazing', but he might have just been trying to be nice, embarrassed that he hadn't stepped in when his boss was being so rude. A lot of other hopefuls were exiting the first audition crying, having been told *Thanks, but no thanks*, but the lucky ones like Catherine had been given a golden ticket which meant that they were through to see the judges. She looked around hoping that she might spot Kim who she'd briefly met earlier, but there was no sign of her. Catherine assumed that she must have received a 'no' and gone home disappointed.

Now Catherine was sitting on her own and dwelling on what Jason P. Longford had said to her. Why would someone say something so rude? Catherine felt foolish. He always seemed so nice on TV. Jason presented his own mid-morning show and was always incredibly generous to his guests. Maybe it's me, Catherine thought. She knew she needed to stop dwelling on this, there were bigger things to worry about – the fact that she was going to sing in front of the *Star Maker* judges any moment now and not being one of them.

The judging panel comprised of Richard Forster, his wife Cherie, Lionel Peters, the famous Broadway producer and Carrie Ward, an American recording star who was married to a famous American footballer who couldn't seem to keep himself out of the tabloids – and they were formidable. She hoped that she wasn't going to faint again.

An old lady wearing a baby-pink gown and a little diamante bow in her hair sat beside Catherine. 'Would you like a boiled sweetie, love?'

Catherine smiled gratefully and took one. 'Thank you,' she said, putting the sweet in her mouth and savouring the liquorice flavour. 'You look lovely, by the way,' Catherine added.

The old lady had obviously made a real effort. Her make-up was flawless and her nails beautifully manicured. She carefully placed her boiled sweets back in her handbag, looked up as Jason Longford re-entered the room and watched him as he played to the audience. 'Not everyone thinks so,' she said, looking straight at Jason. 'I always thought he was a nice man on the telly until today.'

'Why, did he say something?' Catherine asked, hoping he hadn't but knowing he probably had.

'He said, "So what brings you here then, love?" And I says, "Well, I like the show and I like to sing so I applied." And he says, "Right ... you a widow?" I says, that no, my husband dropped me on and he's gone round B&Q for the afternoon – well, I knew my Harold wouldn't be doing with all this and he says, "No one died recently?" So I looked at him and said, "Not that I know of." And he look

at me like I've just crawled out from under a stone and says, "Bloody hell, love, you could've made something up." Then he turns to one of those fellows that's with him and says, "Who wants to see an old bag with no sob story?" And just while I'm standing there thinking what a rude man he was he said, "And what's with the dress, she looks like she's been dug up." Dug up! I was ever so upset.'

Catherine was sitting open-mouthed. Who did this man think he was? Even Richard Forster wasn't this nasty to people, even though that was what he was famous for – he was just at the blunt end of the spear. Catherine looked at the old lady sitting sadly next to her and suddenly she was on her feet and heading in the direction of Jason P. Longford. He was in the middle of having his picture taken with some of the other entrants but Catherine knew that if she stopped she'd lose her momentum and wouldn't say anything.

'Why were you so rude to that lady over there?' she asked loudly.

Jason looked around as if checking to see who she was speaking to. When he realised it was him he looked at the guy with the clipboard and said, 'Nutter alert. Get security.' But the clipboard guy didn't move.

'You are rude. You were rude to me and you were very rude to that lady,' Catherine continued.

'I said, get security.'

The clipboard guy walked forward and took Catherine by the arm and pulled her away. 'Listen,' he whispered, 'you've got through to see the judges, don't blow it, he's not worth it.'

'He's horrible,' she shouted over her shoulder. She would never have been this brave on her own behalf but she couldn't believe that this so called 'personality' had been so nasty to an old lady.

'Yes, he is,' the clipboard guy agreed.

'And you work for him.'

'Yes, unfortunately I do.'

'Jason P. Longford is an exceptionally rude man!' Catherine shouted to the room full of hopefuls.

Jason looked around and shook his head as if to indicate that Catherine was just another person in a long line of unhinged people he had to deal with.

'Number 4695, Catherine Reilly!' the woman ushering people into the audition room shouted. Catherine heard her name and looked down at her number.

'That's you, go,' the clipboard guy said with a gentle shove.

Catherine noticed that he looked worriedly over to Jason. Jason saw that she was heading for the audition room and sped off in the direction of the door, beating her to it, barring her way in.

'Wait there,' he said menacingly, slamming the door behind him. Catherine's heart sank, he was bound to sabotage it for her, but she wasn't just going to leave now. As she jiggled nervously from one foot to the other, the large automatic doors to the hotel opened and a row of familiar faces emerged. Maria, Jo, and her father. Her niece Rosie was there too – which meant that Claire couldn't be far behind. Catherine stared in horror. Her family didn't see her as they scoured the room.

Before she had time to think, Jason P. Longford came out of the audition room. She was sure he was about to say that the judges didn't want to see her but instead he whispered in her ear, 'I've put in a good word, psycho. Don't fuck it up.'

Catherine was frozen to the spot. Why had she made an enemy out of this nasty piece of work? She wanted to say something back but her mind was blank. The door opened and one of the producers ushered her into the room. Cameras were pointing at her as she walked in shakily and stood the centre of the room. There, staring back at her, were four of the most famous faces in TV. Catherine's legs turned to jelly.

'So ... Catherine.' Richard Forster said looking down at his crib sheet. 'Why do you think you're

star?’

‘Er ...’ She was lost for words. ‘I don’t.’

The judges threw looks to one another. Cherie Forster stepped in. ‘This is *Star Maker*,’ she said sarcastically.

‘Sorry.’ Catherine gathered herself. ‘I just want to sing.’ She was trying to sound honest; she didn’t think she was a star. People like her stayed at home and read *Heat* magazine; they didn’t appear in it.

‘And what are you going to sing for us today?’ Carrie Ward asked.

Catherine looked at her. The woman was impossibly beautiful. She had silky blond hair and dewy honey coloured skin with pinched pink cheeks. *She* looked like a true star. Catherine shuffled nervously. She felt like a frump.

‘“Martha’s Harbour”.’

‘I love that song,’ Richard said. The others nodded approvingly. That was good enough for Catherine. ‘When you’re ready, Catherine ...’

She was just about to begin when the door flew open and her family ran in.

‘What’s that about? She just looked straight at us and did one!’ Maria said, indignantly pushing through the crowds of people waiting to audition.

Jo grabbed her arm. ‘You don’t think she might be totally mortified that we’ve all just rocked up by any chance?’ she said, trying to present her sister with a bit of sense.

‘Her? Embarrassed of us? Why?’

‘Let me think,’ Jo said, looking at her dad as he picked a remnant of his breakfast out of his beard, inspected it and then popped it in his mouth.

‘So what are we doing here if we’re not going to stick up for her?’ Claire asked.

Jo looked at Claire, who looked different somehow. She had only just joined them after parking the car but she was wild-eyed with excitement. Jo could tell that her sister was getting caught up in the atmosphere. If she wasn’t careful, she’d be the one bursting through the audition doors and singing ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’. ‘What’s up with you? You look half-demented.’

‘Nothing’s wrong with me, I’m just taking things in. Look!’ Claire shrieked, star struck. ‘There’s Jason P. Longford.’ Claire set off in the direction of the TV presenter. The rest of the family followed. Jo thought for a moment about what to do and then, deciding that she really couldn’t do anything other than wait for Catherine to come back out, followed them.

When she arrived at the doors to the audition room Claire had already struck up conversation with Jason P. Longford. ‘We just love your show.’

‘Vomit, Claire. Stop bum kissing.’ Jo said, sweeping past the TV presenter and sticking her ear against the audition room doors.

‘Can you hear her?’ Maria asked.

Jo shook her head. She could hear voices but no singing.

‘And who is this beautiful lady?’ Jason P. Longford said, sidling up to Jo. Jo’s eyebrow shot to the top of her forehead.

‘Bleurgh,’ she said, folding her arms across her chest.

Maria stepped in, speaking quickly over Jo, who knew Maria would be like this as soon as she clapped eyes on someone she’d seen on the telly. If there was a casting couch there Jo was sure that Maria would lie on it, legs akimbo, shouting ‘Take me Jason you big hunk of famous love!’

‘She’s our sister. The youngest. Everyone says she looks like Angelina Jolie,’ Maria gushed.

‘Maria, for the love of God!’ Jo seethed. She didn’t look anything like Angelina Jolie in his opinion. She had the same sort of hair and big lips – which Jo thought made her look more like a sucker-fish than a film star – and bright blue eyes, but all of her sisters had bright blue eyes. She didn’t get what the deal was. Jo wasn’t stupid; she knew that something had happened when she was sixteen. Until then she had always been too tall and too skinny for any of the boys at school to look at her twice. But on returning to school after the six weeks’ holidays that year, all of the boys in her year suddenly seemed to notice her. It was as if she had somehow grown into her features. Well, they could get stuffed, Jo had thought. And that had pretty much been her attitude to men ever since. If they were only interested in how she looked then she wasn’t interested in them. It didn’t seem to put them off, though, annoyingly. Even clearly gay ones like this Jason guy.

‘And you’re here for the girl in there?’ Jason asked, as if there must be some mistake.

‘Yeah,’ Jo said. ‘She’s our sister.’

‘She’s your sister?’ Jason asked, shocked.

‘Yes.’ Jo was losing patience.

‘Really?’ he said, raising his eyebrows to the researcher guy next to him.

‘What?’ Jo asked, her eyes narrowing.

‘Well, you don’t look like her,’ Jason snapped. They glared at one another for a moment until Claire cut in.

‘I’m Claire, this is Maria, Jo, my daughter Rosie and our dad Mick and we’re all here to support Catherine.’ Maria chirped, as if she was introducing the Reillys on *Family Fortunes*.

‘And where’s Mum?’

‘She bugged off when I was twelve,’ Jo began.

‘Joanna,’ Mick hissed. Her father often complained about Karen and blamed her for his lot in life but the fact of the matter was he was still in love with her and he didn’t take kindly to anyone slagging her off. Anyone other than him, that was.

‘She’s in Chorlton!’ Claire shouted loudly over Jo, kicking her to shut her up.

Jason P. Longford looked at them for a moment weighing them up. ‘Please do not swear,’ he said witheringly.

Jo began to sense her dad’s agitation. He didn’t like crowds and he didn’t like his routine being upset and yet here he was being thrown into a room with hundreds of people. She could feel that he was about to say something.

‘We don’t think she’s doing the right thing,’ Mick piped up.

‘Dad!’ Jo said through gritted teeth.

‘Do you want to go in?’ Jason asked, pointing at the audition room.

Jo looked at the presenter. Why would he let them in there?

‘Yes, I think that’s a good idea,’ Claire said, speaking for the family. Jo couldn’t believe it. Jason opened the door and nodded them in. It all happened so quickly. The others fell into the room and Jo felt she had no option but to follow. And there they were, the famous judges all staring at them. Jo had a sudden flash of clarity and realised what they must look like: the Manchester Hillbillies. She’d seen it time and again on this show – the half-wit contestant who couldn’t sing for toffee being defended by their quarter-wit family members. Not that she thought Catherine was a halfwit but still ... Catherine was also staring at them. Jo could tell from her sister’s face that she wasn’t appreciating the family show of unity.

‘Sorry!’ Jo mouthed.

‘Who have we here?’ Richard Forster asked.

Jo was about to speak for her family, afraid that Claire would have such a gush fest she'd collapse in a heap on the floor, but her dad beat her to it.

'We know your game,' Mick said, wagging his finger at the music mogul.

'Dad!' Catherine hissed.

'This is your dad?' Richard asked neutrally. He didn't have to say anything else, Mick was digging his own grave unaided.

'Hey you, mouth.' Mick said, as if he was taking on a hoody at the corner shop. 'I don't want you pulling her to pieces because she doesn't look the part and hasn't got a note in her head.' Mick jutted his bristled chin out defiantly; something that he did when he was trying to look important. Jo thought it made him look like Uncle Albert from *Only Fools and Horses*.

'Did you really just say that?' Catherine asked, utterly exasperated.

'Hi, Richard.' Maria said, with a small girly wave, as if there was only her and Richard Forster in the room. Jo cracked out laughing.

'"Hi, Richard",' Jo said, mimicking her sister. 'What are you doing, you div? D'you think he's going to ask you out because ... well, I don't know what ... because you're here?'

'I'm just saying hello,' Maria snapped.

'Embarrassment,' Jo said, shaking her head.

'Has she sung yet?' Claire asked someone wearing a head-microphone and holding a clipboard. Jo couldn't believe that Claire was talking about Catherine as if she wasn't there.

'No, she hasn't.' Richard Forster said tersely. 'And with you lot bleating on I'm quite sure she's not going to want to. Could you all leave, please?'

Jo and her sisters stared at the judge. He was serious. Jo glanced at Catherine, who was standing with eyes to the floor, her cheeks burning crimson. Oh God, Jo thought, we are officially the family from hell.

'Fine, we know when we're not wanted. Come on, Catherine,' Mick said.

'Not her. You lot,' Richard Forster said with a dismissive flick of his hand.

Jo grabbed her father by the shoulders and pushed him bodily out of the room. Claire and Maria looked dumbfounded, as if they thought that while they were there they might have been asked to do a turn. Jo thought that she had her father under control, but he wasn't going quietly.

'I knew Colonel Tom Parker,' Mick barked over his shoulder. 'Gentleman, he was. Not like you, you robber baron.'

What the bloody hell is a robber baron? Jo thought, her heart racing as she tried her best to limit the damage her father was causing.

'He'd have had you out of the music business quicker than you could say Chico Time,' Mick continued.

Jo shoved her dad out of the audition room and, ensuring that Rosie was still with them, turned and grabbed her two sisters by their arms and pulled them unwillingly away from their fifteen minutes of fame.

'Bloody hell, you've got your work cut out,' Richard Forster said. 'Right, where were we? Where are you're ready, Catherine.'

Catherine was mortified. She wanted to bolt for the door but she was here now. Her throat had dried up, thanks to her family descending en masse, and she was shaking like a leaf. Cherie Forster tapped her pen on the desk impatiently; Lionel Peters – who looked like a wise old wizard with his pointy beard and long greying mane – had put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair.

his face neutral, but Carrie Ward smiled warmly and said, 'Take your time Catherine.'

Catherine swallowed hard and began to sing. Her voice was sweet and strong but she knew the nerves were getting the better of her. She put her hand to her throat as if this would stop the reverberation that she was sure they could all hear. As she reached the end of the verse she looked at Carrie Ward and there was something in her eyes – a willing for her to succeed – that made Catherine think that maybe she was doing well. This gave her the confidence she needed and she pushed on giving her all to the chorus. She could hear her voice now resonating around the room. She was finally beginning to enjoy herself when Richard Forster waved his hand in the air and said, 'Thank you, thank you.'

Catherine stopped dead and blood rushed again to her cheeks. She touched her face and in that moment had a strange recollection of trying to fry an egg on the pavement as a child because she had seen it done on *Record Breakers* – it hadn't worked but she was sure if she cracked one on her face now it would fry in seconds.

'Lionel?' Richard said, looking for the impresario's opinion on Catherine.

'To be honest, I could take it or leave it,' he said with a shrug. Catherine stared at him numbly.

Carrie Ward hit her hand on the table and looked at him open mouthed. 'Are you kidding? That was beautiful!' she said.

'Cherie?' Richard turned to his wife.

Cherie paused and looked at Catherine. Catherine could hear the blood rushing in her ears, like listening to the sea in a seashell. 'You were very nervous.' She paused. Catherine nodded. 'I'm not sure you're ready for this competition.'

Catherine hung her head. She was probably right. When she looked up the judges were staring back at her. She couldn't work out why for a moment and then realised that they expected her to list all the reasons why she was right for this competition. But she couldn't and she wasn't about to beg. She could sing OK but she wasn't sure that this public grilling was something she could face every week. She opened her mouth to speak but Richard Forster had had enough.

'Look, I'm in agreement with Cherie. I think if we put you through, you'd crack.'

'I wouldn't, I promise.' Catherine said, tears welling in her eyes and her voice shaking as if cruelly prove the judges' point that she wasn't in control of her emotions.

'Lionel?'

'It's a no from me.'

'Cherie?'

'You're a sweet girl with a big smile,' She paused and the look on her face suggested she was torn as to whether to put Catherine through or not. 'But I'm afraid it's a no from me.'

Right, thank you, if you could just arrange for the floor to open up and swallow me that would be great, Catherine thought.

'Carrie?'

'Absolutely one hundred per cent yes! We've just put some one through who was dressed as a giraffe and you're turning her down?'

Good point, Catherine thought.

'Thank you,' Richard said. He definitely wore the trousers around here.

Carrie had one last go at defending Catherine. 'She's twenty-four. If we send her away she'll be too old for the category next year.' Catherine knew that it was the unspoken rule that the only successful *Star Maker* winners were the ones who came from the under-twenty-five category. The public wants its stars to be youthful.

Richard Forster looked at her, thought for a moment and then proceeded to sum things up for Catherine. ‘Here’s the thing,’ he said – Catherine wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the thing – ‘you can’t sing. And there’s definitely something about you, but – as Cherie said – I’m not sure you’re ready for this competition. America will be extremely tough.’

Catherine hung her head waiting for the inevitable.

‘It’s a no, Catherine.’

Catherine was gutted, in the most extreme sense of the word. It was exactly like all her guts had been ripped out of her and dumped on the floor. Her family would *definitely* be on the TV with the performance and she would become a laughing stock. A rejected laughing stock. She nodded meekly and headed for the door. The short walk felt like a day-long trek.

Jason P. Longford pounced on her as soon as she came out of the audition room. The camera was rolling and he was charm personified. ‘Catherine, how did it go?’

She shook her head, unable to reply.

‘Was it a no?’ He asked, oozing fake compassion.

Catherine nodded and walked off. Jason followed her with his crew. ‘What did Richard say?’

‘He said no.’

Catherine discerned a look of glee from Jason. She turned away from him – catching the eye of the clipboard guy from earlier. He gave her what she thought to be a look of sympathy. She’d had enough of people’s sympathy for one day. It was her family feeling sorry for her that had made her so nervous in the first place. She walked away from Jason and could hear him saying, ‘What’s her problem? Miserable cow?’ He was obviously off-air again. Catherine sloped towards the door thinking that this was all her own stupid fault. Who did she think she was? Someone good enough to do well on a show like this? She swallowed back tears and wished that she’d never got out of bed that morning.

‘Dum. Dum. Dum. Another one bites the dust ...’ Andy was watching Jason P. Longford move his body with a distinct lack of rhythm, as he sang in celebration at having orchestrated another person’s exit from the competition. It was like watching an embarrassing uncle trying to body pop.

‘What you looking at?’ he snapped at Andy.

‘Nothing,’ Andy said, averting his gaze.

The door to the audition room opened and Richard Forster stuck his head out. The crowds of people waiting to audition became visibly excited at his presence. ‘Can I have a word?’ he said. Andy and the rest of the crew went to follow him but Richard said, ‘On your own.’

Jason gulped and followed the man who, for the moment, was responsible for his career. Andy stood outside the audition room and could hear muffled, raised voices and snatches of conversation. He didn’t want to appear as if he was listening in, but that was absolutely what he was doing. Richard Forster’s voice dominated the proceedings.

‘When they’re obviously good, don’t let their idiot family lose it for them just for TV ratings ... I know what I said, but there’s enough lunatics out there without breaking good people who’ve come to audition ... unless they’re totally OTT, I don’t know ... like they’re toothless and playing a banjo then no more families in the audition room! We’re turning into a freak show and this is going out of America, not just here. It needs to be about talent.’

Richard calmed down and then began saying something else to Jason, which Andy could barely hear. Then Jason’s voice: ‘It won’t happen again ... absolutely, absolutely ... yes, straight away.’ Andy stifled a laugh at the sound of Jason’s grovelling.

A few moments later, Jason came out of the audition room, smoothed his shirt down and stretched

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