

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



# Chart Throb

Ben Elton

## About the Book

Crazed, no talent fame junkies . . . And that's just the judges.

*Chart Throb.* The ultimate pop quest. Ninety-five thousand hopefuls. Three judges. Just one winner. And that's Calvin Simms, the genius behind the show.

Calvin always wins because Calvin writes the rules. But this year, as he sits in judgement upon the Mingers, Clingers and Blingers whom he has pre-selected in his carefully scripted 'search' for a star, he has no idea that the rules are changing. The 'real' is about to be put back into 'reality' television and Calvin and his fellow judges are about to become ex-factors themselves.

Ben Elton, author of *Popcorn* and *Dead Famous*, returns to blistering comic satire with a savagely hilarious deconstruction of the world of modern television talent shows.

*Chart Throb.* One winner. A whole bunch of losers.

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About the Author  
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# CHART THROB

Ben Elton

For the ninety-five thousand



## 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 lahk 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 deevorce 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-*dooced* ba yo' charms into sur-rrenduhrin' mahself. Se-*dooced* 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 unnatteral 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 trerrble 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.'

## Beryl Blenheim

‘What do you mean, the pig won’t shit?’

‘The pig won’t shit, Beryl, what can I tell you?’

‘We should have used one of my own pigs.’

‘We thought we had a better chance of a decent shit this way. The people at the animal acting agency said they fed this one up big.’

Beryl Blenheim had been hanging about for hours, standing uncomfortably in a pair of gold stilettos and a Stella McCartney evening gown. Beside her on an antique coffee table lay a pair of Marigold rubber gloves and some Spray & Wipe disinfectant. The bucket of hot water had gone cold and been replenished any number of times. The afternoon was disappearing. Already Beryl had been forced to cancel a consultation with her plastic surgeon, who was a very busy man and had many bottoms besides hers to lift and therefore would have difficulty fitting her bottom in again at any other time that week. Yet still the pig would not shit.

‘Give her something to make her shit.’

‘We did. It didn’t.’

‘I have a life, Arnold!’

‘And I have a crew and if this pig takes much longer to take a dump we’ll be running into some serious overtime here.’

The crew in question were attempting to shoot a scene for the final episode of the current season of *The Blenheims*, a ‘reality’ television show featuring the ‘real life’ trials and tribulations of a dysfunctional show business family. One of the most popular themes of the show had

proved to be the ubiquitous incontinence of the family's numerous pet pigs and when storyboarding the closing episode everybody had agreed that pig shit must provide the principal source of humour.

It had all sounded so good at the pitching meeting.

'So Beryl is all dressed up to go with Serenity to the Recoverers' Ball, right?' Arnold explained. 'But the new pig keeps taking a crap so poor Beryl has to keep getting down on her hands and knees in her jewellery and evening gown to clean it up and when she finally gets into the car to go to the ball she still has her Marigolds on! And Serenity says, "Oh my God, Beryl, people will think we've come to clean the toilets," although it will sound so much funnier when she says it.'

'Do you think Serenity can remember that many words?' Beryl had enquired.

Arnold assured her that it was actually funnier when she didn't.

And so the shoot had been planned accordingly, though not for the day of the Recoverers' Ball. Obviously, if Beryl Blenheim did clean her own house, which she didn't, she wouldn't do it on the day when all of LA's première casualties gathered together to celebrate their collective triumph over the self-inflicted wounds with which decades of gargantuan personal indulgence had marked them. Beryl Blenheim, ex-druggie, ex-alchie, ex-food addict, ex-sex addict, ex-rock star and, most famously of all, ex-man, was after all the poster transsexual for the whole grand affair.

The plan was to shoot the pig shitting and Beryl cleaning it up a week earlier, when Beryl had an afternoon window, and then pick up the pay-off shot of Beryl going out still wearing her gloves on the actual night of the ball, which would have the added bonus of giving Beryl's wife Serenity a week to learn her line. Accordingly, on the day in question the crew had assembled at the Blenheim mansion to shoot the footage.

When the show had first begun, three seasons earlier, the camera crew had spent a substantial amount of time with the family, but as things progressed it became easier and easier to plan and storyboard the shows, until a tight professional working pattern had been established that was economical with both time and money.

‘I’ve scheduled an hour for Flossie,’ Arnold had said as he and the crew arrived. ‘We have three cameras, so she only needs to shit once and we can use three different angles to establish the three separate craps. We only need to tie you to the first one, Beryl, we’ll take the other two shits on close-up. Then we can use chocolate pudding to clean up.’

Unfortunately the pig had refused to cooperate. The crew plus Beryl had been following the little potbellied creature as she wandered about for two and a half hours and still she would not defecate.

‘Look, I don’t have time for this,’ Beryl finally snapped. ‘You’ll have to use some stock footage, then shoot me cleaning up the pudding separately.’

Arnold was dubious.

‘The whole point of you being here in your party gown, Beryl, is to *tie you to the turd*. If we have to shoot you and the turd separately we really don’t have a story at all. The audience is just too media-savvy these days. Remember when we got burned cutting in shots of Serenity snoring through an all-night family row and forgot to adjust the clocks? “All night” was clearly only five minutes and those shots are still all over the internet, making me look like a dick.’

‘Well, I can’t stand here all day waiting for the pig to shit!’

‘Stock footage is high-risk strategy, Beryl. I mean every shitting shot we have is *out there*. They are TV *classics*. We have them featured on a special bonus DVD. I just don’t think we could get away with using them again.’

'I knew when we started this we should have gone with shitting dogs like the fucking Osbournes did.'

'Please, Beryl, *as if*. The whole pig thing has so given you the edge. They're much more rock 'n' roll and their DNA is really close to humans', which helps you with the mum thing.'

'I don't *need* help with the mum thing. I'm a fantastic mother. I've won awards.'

Beryl Blenheim was extremely sensitive on this issue. No matter how hard she worked to establish herself as an iconic matriarchal figure and truly modern mum, she would for ever be handicapped by the fact that she had, for most of her life, been a man. Her offspring were not hers by blood, but Serenity's, by a previous marriage. When Beryl had met her (his) wife, Serenity had been married to the owner of a chain of fried chicken franchises in Missouri, which Blaster Blenheim (as was) would patronize when swinging through the Heartlands on his Seventies Rock Revival tours. Blaster's heart had been won by Serenity's space-hopper-sized false breasts and ability (when drunk) to fart 'The Battle Hymn Of The Republic'. Serenity, for her part, had been wooed by Blaster's English accent and the fact he could get an entire red-hot chilli chicken into his mouth. They had run away together and Serenity had obtained a quickie divorce, having threatened her husband that if he forced her to sue for it she would claim infidelity and name a long-horn bison as co-respondent.

Blaster and Serenity were married at the Love Me Tender Chapel in Las Vegas and in the years before his sex change Blaster had been a loving, if drunken, stepfather to Serenity's twin girls, whom they had renamed Priscilla and Lisa Marie. Serenity had naturally been surprised when Blaster, in an effort to revive interest in his flagging career, had announced he adored fanny so much that he wanted one of his own, but being an amiable sort and completely fucked up on drugs and fried food she had gone along with

the new arrangement. Priscilla and Lisa Marie had suddenly found themselves with two mothers, a situation which they were forced to deal with very publicly after Beryl (née Blaster), enamoured of her new role as housewife and matriarch and jealous of the success of other self-publicizing rock mothers, had taken the decision to place the entire family on reality TV. There weren't many children who were forced, as Priscilla and Lisa Marie had been, to go to school knowing that the previous evening all their classmates had watched their stepmother demonstrating with the aid of a sausage and two new potatoes how she had had her dick removed.

'Forget the pig,' Beryl snarled. 'Put some pudding down and I'll discover it. Then stick the pig outside in a hedge and shoot her like she's trying to hide.'

'Once maybe but three times, Beryl? Three times you clean up the pudding but we never see the pig shit? That is *so* lame. This is our final programme of the season. If we're to buy the fact that you're late for the big dinner because three times you had to clean up pig crap then *we have to see the pig shit with you in shot.*'

'Well, it isn't happening, is it, Arnold?' Beryl shouted, pulling on her Marigolds. 'And I have a doctor's appointment. So just lay down some chocolate fucking pudding and I'll wipe it up.'

'I just think that this is the most horrendous artistic compromise,' Arnold protested.

'Do it!' Beryl replied, picking up her bucket and her Spray & Wipe.

Just then, the pig shat.

'Shit,' said Arnold.

'Did you get it?' Beryl asked.

'What do you mean, did I get it? I'm standing here in front of the camera. This is a *reality* TV show, Beryl, you can't have the director in shot.'



‘Don’t talk to me like that. I sold forty million albums when I was a man!’

Just as things were beginning to turn nasty the cameraman pointed out that Flossie was still hovering about admiring her steaming shit and that if Arnold gently edged himself out of the shot and Beryl then walked into it they could still tie the star *and* the pig to the turd.

‘That’s right,’ Arnold agreed, hurrying behind camera. ‘If we can get you, the pig and the turd in the same shot, we have our story even if we didn’t see her shit. So take two steps back . . . Is Beryl out of frame?’

The cameraman announced that she was.

‘OK, Beryl,’ Arnold continued. ‘Step back in shouting, “I’m coming, Serenity . . .” then see the pig, see the big mountain of shit, curse the pig and clean up the turd.’

It worked like a dream. The agency pig even cooperated by suddenly positioning her back end over her turd as if having just dumped it and then, as Beryl entered shot, turning round and sniffing it in what looked like a deeply satisfied manner.

‘Coming, Serenity!’ Beryl shouted convincingly as if reacting to some angry off-camera summons. ‘Don’t be so fucking impatient! You want me to look fabulous, don’t you?’

Then she stopped dead and looked down at the pig in horror.

‘Flossie, you flea-bitten little ratbag. I’ll have you sliced up for bacon burgers.’

And then with genuine abhorrence, for this was after all a real pile of shit, Beryl knelt down and cleaned it up. When she had done so she even had the presence of mind to coo at the pig in her famous sexy mumsy voice.

‘I forgive ooo, ickle Flossie-wossie.’

When the shot was complete there was much joy and celebration.

'We can dub on a beeping car horn later and shoot Serenity calling for you next week,' said a jubilant Arnold.

Then a small voice piped up.

'Sorry, but I don't think we can use it.'

The voice was that of the continuity girl.

'What do you mean, we can't use the shot?' Arnold cried impatiently, for it was the lot of continuity girls always to exasperate their directors by pointing out that supposedly perfect takes were unusable because somebody had changed hats or walked out of the wrong door.

'Beryl had her rubber gloves on as she *entered* shot,' the girl replied miserably. 'I tried to say but you'd already turned over.'

'What's the problem?' Arnold demanded. 'She's supposed to be cleaning up shit, isn't she? You want her to do it with her bare hands?'

'Well, no, but our story is that Beryl is on her way to the car when she *discovers* the doo-doo. She's even shouting at Serenity that she's coming. Why would she be wearing rubber gloves to the Recoverers' Ball *before* she sees that the pig has been to the bathroom on her floor?'

There was an angry pause as everyone worked the story through in their heads and was forced to conclude that the girl was right.

'Fuck,' said Beryl.

'Maybe she'll do it again,' Arnold said, but Flossie had already retreated. In the end they were forced to make what for Arnold was the heartbreaking compromise of shooting all three of Beryl's cleaning shots using chocolate pudding - with no pig in shot at all. After that, Beryl rushed off to try to retrieve her cosmetic surgery appointment and one of her Mexican maids cleaned up the chocolate pudding and pig shit properly.

## The Other Bloke

‘Any messages, Maureen?’

Rodney Root was trying to sound casual and relaxed as he strolled into his Berwick Street office. As if it was all the same to him either way; messages, no messages, whatever, he was far too big a fish to worry about whether anybody wanted to communicate with him. Sadly, the truth was the opposite. Rodney was not busy, he was not in demand. He knew it and Maureen knew it, but the fact was never acknowledged. It was the elephant at the dinner table of their professional relationship. Rodney had spent nearly two hours over breakfast at Soho House, delaying his arrival at the office until almost 10.30am, in the hope that by mid-morning something interesting might have come in. He had eaten a full English fry-up, sausage, bacon, black pudding, soda bread and two eggs, putting on countless kilos he could ill afford, and for what? Nothing. Nothing had happened.

‘Your dress suit is ready at the dry cleaner’s,’ his faithful secretary told him, attempting to make this innocuous piece of information sound urgent and interesting.

‘Right. Good. Very good. That’s good,’ Rodney replied, as if his suit’s condition was all part of a larger game plan and everything was falling into place nicely.

‘And Iona rang. She wants you to call her.’

Rodney’s face darkened. If there was anything worse than no messages, it was a message from Iona. Nothing excites a man less than the object of a passion spent, particularly one to whom many promises were made and a shedload of guilt is attached. Rodney had come seriously to

regret his affair with Iona Cameron, which had blossomed so publicly after Iona's band, Shetland Mist, had been ignominiously ejected from last year's series of *Chart Throb*. Rodney had been, briefly, deeply infatuated with the pale young Scottish girl and, like many infatuated men before him, had made something of an arse of himself. Lost in the rosy haze of love he had publicly announced that, despite Beryl's bullying contempt and Calvin's studied lack of interest, Shetland Mist would surely be stars and that he, Rodney Root, pop Svengali and the ultimate rock 'n' roll insider (as Keely habitually referred to him), would make it so. Rodney's gushing pronouncements on live TV of faith in Shetland Mist's talent had been accompanied by an equally clear and slightly toe-curling enthusiasm for Iona's personal charms.

'Iona's a gorgeous, gorgeous girl,' he had said with tears in his eyes. 'And she deserves to be a big, big star. She *will* be a big, big star. She should have a contract, she *will* get a contract. The whole band will have a contract and Iona will be a big, big star.'

'And you're going to make that happen, are you, Rodders?' Calvin had teased wickedly in the time-honoured manner of judges' banter.

'I shall make it so,' Rodney had replied pompously. 'These kids deserve better than you and Beryl have given them and I intend to see that they get it.'

Iona had been absolutely thrilled with Rodney's gushing attention to her and also of course his passionate and highly public commitment to her band. After all Rodney had once been a big recording star, one half of The Root and The Branch, an early-eighties techno pop outfit which had scored a respectable number of hits and had even charted once in the States. Admittedly Rodney had been the less celebrated member of the team. In those days techno duos had often been made up of one nerdy instrumentalist who stood almost motionless behind an assortment of keyboards

occasionally depressing a key, and a flamboyantly homosexual vocalist who strutted about in various PVC outfits grabbing all the limelight. Rodney, as the songwriter, had ended up behind the keyboards while The Branch, who was, in fact, a heterosexual lorry driver from Aberystwyth (whom Rodney had recruited via an advert in *Time Out*), pulled on the pink plastic hotpants.

Rodney's virtual anonymity within his own band had been a source of massive irritation to him for nearly twenty-five years but nonetheless he had once been a star of sorts, and he had gone on to write a number of identikit hits for various boy bands before sinking into complete obscurity in the mid-nineties. His career had been given a second lease of life when Calvin asked him to become a judge on *Chart Throb*. Calvin had hoped to find a genuine pop manager who had actually developed real recording careers, but unfortunately all the real players in the industry had got wise to the dissatisfactions of playing second fiddle to a charismatic bully and Calvin had had to settle for Rodney.

Rodney and Iona had embarked on a very public affair which in the early weeks went as far as an *OK!* magazine cover shoot with heavy hints of an engagement to follow. Rodney's ardour, however, had soon evaporated. What was Iona, after all? A struggling part-time singer who worked in a shop. During the brief explosion of publicity that had surrounded Shetland Mist's appearance as *Chart Throb* finalists she had seemed glamorous and fresh, a real star and a fitting consort for an important man such as Rodney. But the life of an instant celebrity is short indeed, and within weeks Rodney found himself attached to a woman who added nothing to his equation but herself, which he was quickly tiring of. Apart from anything else, she was not half so cute without the *Chart Throb* costume and make-up department's constant attentions. During the white heat of the *Chart Throb* finals Rodney had scarcely seen the object

of his passion apart from when she was performing with her band or being filmed for the inserts. It was this television creation that he had fallen in love with. Poor Iona looked very different when dressing herself in the bedroom of Rodney's penthouse flat while he lay in bed staring at her critically over the dome of his middle-aged spread. Suddenly Rodney noticed the tricky legs, the slightly asymmetrical boobs and the droopy bottom. Suddenly the Scottish accent that he had briefly found so musical and charming was saying things he didn't want to hear.

'My ma and da are coming to London, can we take them to dinner? The band has a gig at the Islay Folk Festival, everybody's really hoping you can make it.'

The Islay fucking *Folk Festival!* Islay was *six hundred miles away*.

Love had quickly died and irritation set in, irritation that this rather ordinary girl, with an ordinary life and an ordinary family, had gatecrashed his important and busy existence. Rodney quickly concluded that he did not want her in his life and he most certainly did not want her in his bed. She was suddenly turning him off as violently as she had briefly turned him on. So he dumped her.

'I just think we were both a little mad there for a while,' he told her. 'This was never truly meant to be.'

Iona had taken it with dignity, although she was devastated, having imagined that she loved him.

'Will I still see you?' she asked. 'Will you still be helping us out with the band?'

'Of course,' Rodney assured her. 'Of course, of course, of course. I *believe* in you guys . . . although sadly I can't make Islay.'

All that had been last year and was now for Rodney a deeply embarrassing memory. He had done nothing for Shetland Mist and probably couldn't have done much even if he had tried. Contrary to the *Chart Throb* myth, Rodney was not the 'hitmaker of pop' and with the best will in the