

*Saturday 11 December 2004*

*Early Afternoon*

‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ Sharon screamed. ‘I’m giving you a fucking compliment.’

But I was now well trained in the bullshit that went on in rehearsal.

‘I said ‘it was a nice performance, Steve,’ she came for me again.

I just didn’t want to engage.

The week that 2 To Go had been eliminated I had witnessed this cruelty at first hand. In rehearsal, the judges were kind to them. On the night they slaughtered them to the point of tears.

This was only a dummy run – albeit the final walk-through before the live show tonight.

The judges *were* in situ, not on this occasion replaced by some runner or assistant producer but their words were only for the purposes of microphone level. It wasn’t meant to mean anything.

That’s why I wasn’t engaging with Sharon and her initial compliment had brushed over me after a dry run of one of my songs for the night.

I was focusing on the lighting guy, the camera angles and where I needed to be in relation to Kate Thornton.

It was the performance on the night counted and everybody knew that – the same for the judges as it was the artistes.

Yet, there was something venomous as she let rip.

Even though she had begun by saying it was a nice performance it was hardly an earth-shattering compliment. The fact that I ignored it brought out her true colours and weeks of pent-up frustration.

It brought back the comment she had thrown at Eileen at the after-show party a couple of weeks back when Sharon asked her why it didn't bother her if her boyfriend called her a Volvo.

This had been happening more and more as the show had progressed. Backstage, for fun and for the cameras, we had all been asked to compare our partner to a car. Not really knowing what to say, I replied Volvo, thinking reliable and efficient.

Out of context Volvo had now led to this.

'Who do you think you are? 'I'm giving you a fucking compliment, you fucking cunt.'

Kate didn't know where to look. I just smiled but inside I wondered what this week was becoming. The greatest moment of my life stood before me but the last few days had been nothing but stress from the moment Louis Walsh had called me Fred West to the farcical meal at Simon's.

And it was just beginning.

'You shouldn't even be on stage,' she ranted.

You could hear a pin drop in the studio. The scurry of activity and constant murmur of background noise fell silent. The last chance rehearsal had come to a screeching halt.

'You're nothing but a cab driver. You're cabaret. You shouldn't even be on the stage.'

Now, I *did* want to say something. Instead, I just looked at her again and smiled and the more I did so, the angrier she got. I knew my smile irritated her.

I could feel sympathetic warmth from Kate – caught in the middle. Only Simon could really intervene.

'Not now,' he urged, only for them to continue to fight it out in an on-going war of words.

When later that night Simon said on the live show that 'there's so many things I could say but I won't' I am sure he was referring to her whether specifically this crucial moment in rehearsal or the nightmare that she was perceived to have become backstage.

I felt Simon was genuine when he urged stop – a contrast to the manipulative filming of the dinner. For that though, he was in character. Now, despite the exchanges that we had all witnessed over the previous few weeks, this was him being real.

Simon once again got firm with Sharon and Kate led me away. Showtime was around five hours away. I couldn't get off that stage quick enough. I didn't see Sharon again until we went live.

When I did, I just felt sad. I wanted it to be a special day, like a wedding day particularly for all my friends and family who held such hope and joy. I was now on the cusp and beginning to sense it too but it was them who had put me here in the first place right from the moment my Dad saw the initial ad on the telly. I was used to giggling, and of course, had been here once before but it was my family who were on the so-called emotional rollercoaster.

I found out after that my friend Alan, who had been amongst the rehearsal audience, had gone to see Sharon in her dressing room to tell her she had me all wrong and that I was a nice guy with a credible track record. He left short-changed. There was no moving her.

By mid-afternoon my manager Tim came to my dressing room to see me. His advice was to just keep being nice and reminded me that I was winning on two counts – because I had rattled her and because week after week, the numbers said so.

But that wasn't the essence of our conversation.

With my dressing room empty and open, whilst Sharon had been tearing into me, I had returned to find the *Daily Mail* open at an article slating me. It was a double-paged spread. G4 were odds-on to win and I was nothing more than a slimy lounge room lizard.

Why were they doing this to me?

Tim implied it had come from Louis's camp. He was backing G4 all the way.

'What are they doing coming into my dressing room?' I asked.

It didn't matter. What Tim was to tell me next shook me to the core.

If the *Daily Mail* wasn't bad enough, the *News of the World* were about to turn my life upside down.

Win or lose, tomorrow's front page should have been about tonight's result. The whole nation expected. We were box office.

'They're running a story tomorrow,' I learned. 'You are adopted.'

I could take a mild insult from the *Mail* or a full on mouthful from Sharon, but this was something else and this had become personal.

It was one thing to label me a crooner or cheesy but to attack innocent people who didn't ask to be under the spotlight was a new low.

'This is bollocks,' I replied, laughing.

But Tim was unmoved.

Only through his lack of reaction did I start to realise the severity of what was coming. In seconds I went from laughing it off to doubting myself. I know this was a by-product of the whole make-believe world of the show.

They made telly, they held out dreams. It all looked so achievable and there were so many crew working on the show to a template of how to make that telly that some had crossed a line into fantasy world. Your sense of reality can change when you are on the show. Anything *is* possible.

I had to ring Mum.

Questioning your whole identity was not where tonight was meant to begin and end. I was supposed to be running through a few drills with my vocal coach Annie Skates, well aware that I still hadn't learnt the words to *Against All Odds*.

My throat was drying with tension as the clock ticked towards the moment of no return and yet here I was trying to work out if my whole life was a fake.

Mum had the same reaction as me.

She answered all bubbly and I could hear Dad in the background saying 'What's he want, what's he want?'

She laughed in the same way I had moments before. It sounded like a Brookstein laugh.

Then she too fell silent as I batted it back to her as Tim had done to me.

‘They’re running a story that I am from Birmingham and my parents are ex-cons and crackheads.’

It was true that I didn’t really look like my dark-skinned Dad and my Mum was Estonian but in my head, I could replay all the family pictures from years gone by and I knew I was one of them and they were all of me.

As Mum’s smile dropped, I felt embarrassed even asking, putting them through this when this was their night as much as mine.

Those images of me as a baby that now came to mind definitely showed me with my sister, the same sister I have now. I know it’s me deep down, I kept telling myself, but I had to hear it from Mum herself.

What was I even thinking? They couldn’t have kept a secret like that for me for 35 years. It was rubbish

I told Mum I loved her and said goodbye then turned to Tim.

‘These are the games,’ I said, alluding to what had been brewing.

I didn’t dislike Tim, though I never warmed to him. After all, it was Simon’s people who paired him with me and Tim was very keen to be in with them long term.

This time, I suspected Sharon’s camp were to blame because of what had just happened.

I was now a far cry from that affable, blasé bloke who had sauntered through the competition. I had remained pretty relaxed throughout and forged friendships which meant that I shared the emotions when new friends also left the show. Unlike many of them, it hadn’t been the be all and end all for me until these last few days because I had been here in 1997. Now it *was* just me versus G4. It had become serious.

But these last few days and these final hours told me there was increasingly a third battle to overcome.

I had eaten tea around five and was trying to calm myself. I liked to remain in my casuals until as close to going live as possible. I was vaguely aware that the audience would be coming in by now and that the warm man Ian Royce would be doing his thing. I passed the odd celebrity in the ITV corridors but all I really wanted to do was get it over.

I still couldn't be sure of nailing the lyrics to the Phil Collins track and I am sure the snail's like speed with which it was coming together was a huge indication that my gut feeling was right. I shouldn't be even touching that song.

I needed to find a zone – there were less than 90 minutes to go. I killed the time sorting out my outfits, admiring the trappings of this fleeted stardom in my free Gucci suit and desperately trying to make my vocal warm ups count.

My phone was going into meltdown from friends at home and family who had arrived in the audience. I was beginning to calm for the first time since early afternoon.

Then, I got the call.

'Simon wants to see you in his dressing room.'

I was quietly out of the way upstairs; Simon was beneath, just a stone's throw from the stage.

I had still to change properly and do make-up. Time was now running out for learning those lyrics.

I was expecting a short pep talk as he had done warmly many times before. Perhaps, it was something last minute to do with the song or just the night in general. I wasn't even thinking it would be anything to do with Sharon from earlier.

None of these reasons were at the forefront of his mind as I knocked on his dressing room door.

'Come in,' he announced.

I didn't expect him to have company.

Simon was on the left, the former page three model and ex-girlfriend Jackie St Clair stood in the middle and on her left as I saw it was another of Simon's former women. Sinitta completed the trio.

Simon just sat there smoking and grinning.

What happened next has caused me much reflection over the years. Was it harmless banter or was it manipulation?

Jackie St Clair unbuttoned her long coat. That left just a little black thong and her high heels. It was impossible to avoid her enormous breasts as she strutted towards me. Then Sinitta followed behind.

I admit, for a second it was a turn-on and in younger days with different morals whether with a girlfriend or not, I might have been tempted.

Both had me up against the dressing room door. Sinitta undid her top.

My future wife Eileen was already in the audience – and Simon knew this. The problem for him was that she meant everything to me and I valued that relationship more than anything in life. I wasn't that desperate to win a talent show that I was about to throw something much more precious all away.

Both the girls began to touch me. I started to laugh. Simon just sat there beaming from ear to ear.

'I can't do this,' I shouted.

But still they continued.

They began to stroke my chest, reaching for my buttons, working their hands up my legs and touching me up full on.

My amusement had turned to awkwardness.

'No, no, I can't do this,' I repeated.

It didn't stop them.

'I think you're beautiful and lovely but I can't do this,' I said again as finally Jackie backed away.

Simon was still smoking and still smiling. His ex-girlfriends began to do themselves up.

Then I tore into him.

‘What are you doing?’ I shouted.

It was the first time my tone had ever been disrespectful to Simon yet as he sat there and I towered above him, I felt an equal too.

‘I thought it might relax you,’ he grinned.

‘This ain’t gonna relax me,’ I thundered back at him. ‘I’ve gotta go on stage and sing “Against All Odds” and I don’t even know the words.’

The girls left the room.

It had lasted no more than twenty seconds but left me fuming. It had been a crazy day with one thing after the other and the show hadn’t even started.

‘You’ve been stressed lately.’

There was no way Simon could really know that first-hand. He would have seen the *Mail* piece and was probably aware of the *News of the World* adoption story and had witnessed Sharon’s outburst that afternoon but he couldn’t have really known unless he was talking to Tim. I had seen him so little.

I recognised in an instant that he was boss and I had a girlfriend and if I had done anything in there, then they had a dark secret on me. I spotted that a mile off. My guard had up since last night. That meant one thing. They would own me.

‘Look, I gotta go,’ I stormed off. ‘I’ve gotta get dressed.’

My heart was racing all the way back to the dressing room. Over and over in mind were his words that he was trying to relax me. So were equivalent sexual memories of my past, and how they had made me feel at other key moments in my life. It felt all wrong and instantly wrong.



Yet, ten years later if I weigh up whether I did take it the wrong way or not, two events tell me otherwise.

The first was an equally casual and innocent-sounding friend of the family who dressed up *his* sexual fantasies to me as *my* introduction to porn in a Wimpy bar in South London only to abuse me.

The second was when I had come to watch Louis Theroux's documentary with Max Clifford in which Theroux interviewed Simon Cowell.

Clifford took them to Stringfellows and despite Louis saying he didn't want to be filmed, Max Clifford was still able to farm out pictures trying to implicate the interviewer with strippers.

Max Clifford had been on the Simon Cowell payroll for some time.

Both stories show the element of control. With such control comes planning. As I opened Simon's dressing room door on the way in, his two girlfriends were waiting for me and didn't hesitate.

Intended as innocent or not, this too bore the hallmarks of control.

I realised that they had the power to bury me.

'One leaves with a million pound recording contract. The other gets nothing.'

My heart should have been racing because I was about to step onto the biggest stage of my life but I couldn't even think about that at this point. I could hear the voice over begin. Somehow I had to find focus and put daylight between what had gone on since the dinner last night and what lay ahead. The truth was that I had felt isolated all week.

Annie was very warm and supportive before the show, trying to keep it light. I wasn't really hearing her words. My head was like a boxing ring – two trains of thought fighting each other. Everything that had gone on today, this week and the whole show versus whatever lay ahead, and fundamentally that I still didn't know the words to the song.

'Hello and welcome,' Kate began. 'After 50,000 applicants and 16 weeks of gruelling auditions, bootcamps and live shows and millions of your votes, it's the final.'

We were off. This was it.

Jackie, the make-up girl had been calming me down. The moisturizer she applied to my face had a comatosing effect. It blocked out the din of the angst dominating my brain. I didn't tell anyone about the dressing room incident. There was too much other stuff to stress over.

I had made my way to the backstage area, passing in a daze lots of people with headsets all bustling around. My hands were sweating even though I knew the drill by now. I felt they wanted you to do well even though they had a show to make. They were always very supportive. All I could think about was the words, the words and the words. I could take losing. I just didn't want to mess up. Then the other stuff would pop into my head. I was running my own VT in my mind. I knew it was going to be a long night with lots of hanging around. The journey alone to the stage area was the longest of all walks – right out of my dressing room, down the stairs, passing Simon's, taking a left. It went on and on until finally the runner had shone a light my way to point me to where I needed to be.

You sensed the whole world was watching. I could have peaked through the curtain and had a look. I didn't need to. You could feel it backstage. I was exhausted before we even began.

'You're on in 30,' said the runner.

There was no turning back now.

'You can go. Good luck,' someone said.

My legs were jelly. I wasn't exactly marching like a soldier. When I thought about it, I should have been quietly confident. I had been doing gigs long enough to read an audience and I had always been well received by the crowd. But I couldn't focus.

I took the two steps needed to cross the line...then another five towards Kate. I felt so much more ready once I was live. But even now, this was just an intro and I would have to repeat the whole process again several times during the night. Indeed they had cut straightaway to a tape of the press conference that we had held together – Simon and I with Louis and G4.

'There's no need for it to get ugly but you just never know with Louis,' Simon had begun.

The first question to me came from James Desborough at the Sunday People. Predictably, it was about Louis.

‘He’s a very aggravating little man. After Saturday, I won’t have to deal with him again.’ I meant every single word.

‘I don’t care if I never see Steve again.’ Louis replied. ‘I’ll be working with G4.’

It sounded like that was going to happen whether they won or lost.

‘G4 has an edge on Steve and he knows it.’

This was rubbish – especially as they had been in the bottom two every week. Besides, I wasn’t really focussing on them. I was concentrating on my own performance.

It wasn’t until five minutes into the show that I actually joined Kate on stage. They knew how to pad out half a dozen songs into a whole Saturday night.

Behind the curtain, I waited patiently with Simon and a runner. I saw Sharon briefly and complimented her on how she looked. She barely said a word back. Then, it was time to go. The runner ushered us forward and we were live.

I had no choice but to put to one side all the issues of the last 24 hours.

‘I think they like you,’ were Kate’s first words to me.

She looked amazing in her pale dress. As I crossed that line onto the set, I felt pretty good too, all things considered. I had made it to the final. The nonsense would stop after tonight and between now and then I had to hope that my singing would do the talking.

‘I’m really nervous now. I’m really excited.’ I told Kate.

I could see Eileen beaming in the audience. All around were banners for both G4 and myself. Everything had just gone up a notch.

‘By the end of the evening, I will wipe the smug smile of Louis Walsh’s face.’

Simon opened up for the evening.

Looking back, it seems a nonsense that so much was made of the judges' competition. It never really reached those heights again. I don't believe they could have known it would have crossed the line as much it did.

When G4 entered Kate said the same to them and any impact Louis hoped to make had been killed stone dead by Simon.

'I've been the underdog since the start of this competition and tonight I'm going to take the smug smile of Simon Cowell's face.'

Simon just rolled his eyes. Where had that underdog line come from? Just a week before, he had tried to join in when Sharon said that I was looking for sympathy. Now, he was playing that card.

The stage was set. They had made it abundantly clear there were two competitions tonight. To prove it further, the next package was set to the tune of "War" and Louis opened up with 'Welcome to world of Simon Cowell – population one' whilst reminding everyone that I was a 'cab driver who would sing karaoke at the weekend'.

All of this of course, severely exposed Sharon. She had effectively been made redundant for the night. Despite everything, I felt sorry for her when I saw her come on. She cut a lonely figure that night after Tabby had exited the week before.

'The show wouldn't be complete without her,' Kate announced as Sharon took to the stage doing a diva-esque dance to Aretha Franklin's "Respect".

It was about all she could really say without underlining the point further, insisting that Sharon was the only impartial judge tonight. Kate asked her if she had wiped the slate clean only for Sharon to say there was no slate and none of it was personal.

Of course, those people watching at home hadn't known what had gone on that afternoon.

She could say what she wanted now anyway. It was down to the public while she would sit there like a spare part. And yet, still I hadn't even sung yet.

Finally, after welcoming back all the other finalists, it was time for Simon to introduce me. I just wanted it over now.

‘I’d say that the ten seconds before Steve’s name was announced were the longest ten seconds of my life,’ Simon exaggerated.

I was grateful he addressed the over-confident line.

‘The one week you are at your most nervous it gets levelled at you you’re over confident. He was literally shaking.’

‘I cannot put into words how shocked I am it hasn’t ended yet,’ I replied, and I meant it.

And then came a massive thumbs up from Simon – words that have rung in my ears to this day.

‘I see his career lined up for him.’

‘I was once so downhearted disappointment was my closest friend.’

I finally got to sing some fifteen minutes into the show. Within seconds after the quiet vocal start, the audience were up on their feet and I relaxed. It was a good reminder that performance was never part of the pressure. That had all come from other places. I had hit the ground running and I knew it was going well when I ad-libbed to the crowd mid-song. The atmosphere was electric and even though I had barely rehearsed with them, I loved the gospel choir. Not only did it give the show a rousing start, it put down a clear point of difference to G4 – plus Lloyd was in amongst them which is where I felt he should have been all along. He deserved a place on that stage.

‘I loved the song...having fun on stage.’ I told Kate after. ‘There’s an atmosphere in the house tonight.’

All my backstage worries were forgotten. I was beginning to settle. In fact I felt fantastic. Jackie Wilson’s “Higher And Higher” had set me free. I knew too that whilst it was a major release of tension to get the first song of the way, I was still part of a TV show. I had become very camera conscious. It was always a juggling act engaging with the camera for people watching at home and connecting with the audience in the studio. So, as great as it felt, I was never lost in the moment. I was very much working. For now, I could relax and take a breather. It was G4’s turn.

Louis introduced them as ‘four of the nicest guys he had met in a long time’. I suppose that implied I was the opposite. He also stated they had the X Factor. It was a clever choice of words – so little had been made recently of that need for that something extra special. If he told the public his act had it, they might start using that phrase too and believe it.

G4 churned all the clichés of the show in their VT – it meant everything, it meant so much, it was a dream come true and it had been a rollercoaster. They were sickly-sweet perfect.

Then they tore the house down with “Nessun Dorma”. Their version was brilliant. It’s a song only the very best can sing. You would know a bad version if you heard it. Their rendition was right up there. I did feel they would be unable to better that performance on the night.

I watched it from the holding room. I wasn’t a massive fan of Jonathan’s voice but it didn’t take a genius to work out he was the image of the group.

Kate described it as a brave choice but actually it was right up their street. Afterwards, for anyone who was in any doubt, they reminded everyone it meant so much to them!

Kate was at pains to underline further the narrative of the show re-emphasising that one of us would leave with nothing and we both needed your votes. Premium rate phone numbers, of course, made them money too outside of the fact that the language they were using was pitching the show as the most aspirational and career-determining programme on telly. Not only were they after your money, they were also selling you a dream.

You couldn’t not get sucked in, both as a viewer and a performer.

Half an hour in and it was time for only my second song. Each judge had been asked to pick what they considered to have been their acts best choice from the series so far and Simon picked “Smile”. I was really happy with the choice. I knew I had to make it count because it only left me “Against All Odds” to do.

You would have thought by now there was nothing left to say and that all anybody wanted were the performances but on came another VT telling my story. Apparently, I was scruffy and nervous with a big smile at my first audition, and Simon had done something he had never done before by calling me back after Louis and Sharon had questioned my attitude.

‘He found self-belief when we gave him a stage,’ Simon announced.

But I knew that all along. I was a singer and not a TV prop. They simply loved telling me things about me.

‘I hope he wins based on talent, being a nice person and being different,’ he rounded off.

Then to remind us of the other agenda, Simon said he wanted me to win 100% and him 1000%. I have yet to explain to him how percentages work!

Sometimes I would hear those tapes before playing and feel unrecognisable from the person they were portraying. Obviously, some of it was representative. You can't, for example, fake that moment when you find you have got through bootcamp. But none of it was really me. That's why I was at my happiest when the first notes of the song would start. I knew too that after "Smile" they were going to the judges for their first comments of the night.

I just wanted it done. I was tense. When I went for my costume change I had found water on the back of my shirt.

'How the hell is there water on the back of my shirt? It's been hanging on the back of the door.'

My clothes were in a different room. This was either careless from wardrobe or sabotage. Too much had already happened for me to have any doubts. Why were they doing this to me?

'I enjoyed both songs. I preferred the first one. I liked "Smile", even though it is on the new Westlife album.' Louis just couldn't stop himself.

This had happened too many times now for it to be anything other than an accident.

'Very pleasant, very nice,' he had nothing constructive to say.

Then Sharon started in what seemed a pre-meditated choice of words and a continuation of rehearsal.

'Love, you know I love "Smile"...it's hard for me to put it in words so I am going to use one of your quotes. You to me are like a Volvo. Reliable.'

I was speechless. Kate asked me if I had really said this.

'My girlfriend is here and I love her. I don't need to explain my relationship. It's perfect.'

Everybody knew inside the show that was a jokey conversation used out of context when I had just joined with a meaningless bit of chit chat earlier on in the series. She sounded ridiculous, and Simon agreed. But she showed her true colours too.

When Kate pushed her on if she actually liked the song, she still couldn't bring herself.

'What's not to like about Steve?' she replied.

A simple yes or no would have done. An ability to say either made her position clear. She couldn't answer the question in the negative for her own image. Nor could she say yes because that was her true feeling.

Simon tried to get the show back on track calling both performances 'superb' and saying that there was 'no question he could compete in today's market.'

The sooner that process began and I could get off this show the better.

I had to win yet, though.

On his next VT, I almost spat my drink out backstage as Louis took his digs and self-promotion to a new level spouting off about how 'every week G4 have shown they have the X Factor... in this world of manufactured fluffy pop music...' Accompanying the footage was Westlife – never a fluffy pop group – and the track "Flying Without Wings".

Oh the irony.

He said they had never got cocky and real singers. I think that was aimed at me. After their version of Bohemian Rhapsody, Simon was rightly generous towards them saying both their songs were 10/10 and Louis had done a great job making them credible.

Sharon had a lot more to say than when judging me calling Jonathan Ansell a 'superstar'.

'We've all grown into superstars in the competition,' he replied.

I think that was the lack of cockiness Louis was referring to.

With 45 minutes to go on the show, Kate called it as 'neck and neck'. They loved that desperate urgent language. Even Kate said she was bored of saying it. So far, there had been a million votes. Both G4 and were blown away by that. That number far outweighed any of the abuse I had received. I had to keep focussed on the fact that people were voting for me, despite what had been said.



Kate also said that they knew some people were experiencing difficulties getting through but added they had 25,000 lines open. That was an awful lot of phone lines if true. Experiencing difficulties and urging people to keep calling were once again virtually in the handbook of lines Kate had to trot out.

Before our final songs, they ran a tape looking back at the auditions from June that began with Louis, Sharon and Simon trying to define what the X Factor meant. This, of course, was a key selling point post *Pop Idol* and *Popstars*.

The irony that they then defined it in the compilation by showing so many of the shocking entrants was not lost on me.

Then, after another tape of the most memorable auditions and more reminders of the numbers to call, something strange happened.

Kate crossed to my dressing room. We were now at 2 ½ million votes.

‘I know how close I am,’ I told her.

She urged me to smile. I didn’t hear her and I couldn’t because I didn’t know what was going on. All I could hear was banging. I was trying to concentrate on what Kate was saying but this bashing on the wall from next door was distracting me.

Sharon Osbourne’s dressing room lay behind that wall. What on earth was she or whoever playing at? Her camp really didn’t want me to win at all.

It was a relief when they cut to another package – this time showing my friends and family visiting the so-called *X Factor* pod to leave messages. Relief turned to emotion as I realised how much I missed these people. I had thrown everything at the show. Life had been on hold. Yet they came out to support me week after week, and here they were again. Nephews, best friends, mates from Cranmer High School, even former baby-sitters! My parents offered down to earth parental advice saying ‘if it happens, it happens’...my sister Tanya reminded me to not be ‘distracted by some of the comments’.

I had to turn away from the camera still on me after Eileen’s message. I didn’t know any of this was coming and it was a lovely moment. Whatever happened in the next half hour or so, these people would still be there. That was all that mattered.

By the time, G4 Had gone through the same, Kate had plugged the tour, they had announced that one viewer had won a piece of Simon’s lifestyle and they had showed a few more awful auditions, 3 million people had voted. It was going nuts.

Out on the set, it was even madder. They had called back Robert Unwin.

And now he was performing live in the middle of the final.

Known for his high-pitched vocals, here I was on the biggest stage on UK television, watching him belt out “Tragedy”. And then the judges rose to give him a standing ovation. The Chickenman was back.

It was unbelievable.

‘They clearly loved you,’ Kate encouraged.

I think they loved taking the piss. It’s difficult to know if it was light relief at the highest point of tension or an undermining of the show.

‘I don’t know about coming back,’ he told Kate.

It was decent of him to clear that up. He looked like a rabbit in the headlights though, to be fair, that was his normal appearance.

And then the most cringeworthy of moment of TV I have ever seen happened.

‘Can I just say hi to everyone at Pic-A-Chic?’

He name-checked the factory where he worked. His fifteen minutes of fame didn’t end there. Our paths would cross again.

It was almost time to sing “Against All Odds”. I still couldn’t be totally sure of the song. That told me it was the wrong choice. Throughout the live shows, the songs I had felt were wrong for me inevitably became the hardest to learn.

After the awful footage of the previous night’s dinner, I was on.

I looked tired and drained, as though it was the end of the line. It very nearly was.

‘Somebody suggested this song after hearing it on the radio,’ Simon began. ‘He’s had a tough time in life...this song sums up him. It’s “Against All Odds”.’

Though, in previous shows that song was “Smile” of course. He loved that kind of narrative. He had become obsessed with the line ‘Take A Look At Me Now’ as if it was a statement of the power show. From pub singer and his gear in his Mum’s garage to one million pound recording contract. Take a look at me now.

It was a love song from a movie. It wasn’t a rags to riches story. It was about a guy who lost everything now living in ‘an empty space’. It couldn’t have actually been further from the narrative just as “The Impossible Dream” met it head on. Simon wasn’t letting me near that song. Time and time again, I told him. He just replied to keep focussed. We had been arguing about it all week. These were the first real cracks in our relationship.

I am not entirely sure if someone did hear it on the radio. At the back of my mind was just one thought – if I am a serious recording artist, is this the kind of song he wants to hear on the radio from me? That was only going to end one way – badly.

My nerves on the song proved right. I knew I had blown it. I fluffed one of the lines and every line that followed it haunted me. I had handed it on a plate to G4 right at the death.

Take a look at me now? Well, I looked gutted as the last notes hung in the air. I felt physically sick. Everything had gone in my head. I wanted the world to swallow me up. I had left everyone down. I felt especially bad for my Dad who had come to so many gigs with me. I knew I had blown it.

It went from bad to worse.

Louis said it was pretty good performance but he preferred the Westlife version. Right to the last, he just wouldn’t let that go – his face radiating no warmth or sincerity in my direction. Then when asked if he had anything else to add simply replied ‘this was ok – that’s all’ and stared straight ahead smiling.

So it was either a pretty good performance or just ok?

That contradiction was nothing compared to what followed.

‘No, not fabulous,’ Sharon begun.

My sister had shouted it out when Kate asked for Sharon’s thoughts.

‘For me, he’s not a superstar.’ She was still brewing from earlier. ‘I am so fed up of Mr Humble...an Mr Should I sell my Volkswagen...he’s been over confident from day one... he’s not what he seems...all that BS he gives out ...he’s even fooled Simon...he’s full of crap and he’s an average singer.’

Rehearsal was one thing – live TV was another all together. I knew how she felt about me but I wasn't.

'There's an awful lot that I could say,' Simon defended. 'But I won't.'

He was referring to earlier.

This really wasn't in the script. Sharon meant every word.

'I think it was inappropriate to be personal tonight,' Simon replied calmly only for her to talk all over him cackling 'he's a fake' like a hysterical old witch and shouting that Simon knew I was going to win. That was all about the weekly vote count, of which I had no idea.

Some parts of TV are for the cameras. That I had experienced the same just a few hours before tells you this was for real. She meant every word of it.

When Kate turned to me, I just sounded beaten and I felt it. I had begun with them calling me defeatist when I wasn't. Now I was ending that way and with reason.

Then G4 threw me a lifeline. G4 had chosen the Radiohead track "Creep". I thought it was madness. Even if they had put their distinctive stamp on it, it really wasn't a well-known enough song to be performing right at the climax of the show.

I had hated "Against All Odds" but I wasn't so daft to understand that at least it was very recognisable.

I really felt they had let me back in. My slip up on the vocal was probably also overshadowed by Sharon's outburst. One thing I was clear of though was that I didn't want to win for any other reason than being the best singer. Whilst there was an interval before the results show (which was on the same night in 2004) I wouldn't have long to wait.

I could do no more. My performances were over. I had to sit and wait. In the gap between the shows, I tried to unwind. Simon was smoking like a chimney outside his dressing room. My phone was in meltdown. It had been an extraordinary day. Beyond the simple fact of being in the live final of a TV talent show for the second time in my life, I had been on the end of an avalanche of abuse, circumstance and negativity. In isolation, any one of the day's events would have seemed extraordinary. Together, they were just madness. I was beyond exhausted.

My new manager Tim Byrne had come to see me in my dressing room.

‘I can’t believe Louis is going on about Westlife,’ he said what we were all thinking. ‘Sharon was out of order. Don’t let it worry you. Just ignore it.’

It was easier said than done.

‘I knew I’d mess it up.’ I told him how pissed I still was about the song.

It felt like a loser’s song, not a winner’s track. I wanted to record *The Impossible Dream*. I thought it was a better song for me and a more appropriate message.

‘Even if you don’t win, you’ll get a deal,’ he re-assured me.

I had to double-take. What did that mean? Were G4 being told the same? What was the point of the whole shenanigans of the last few months if it didn’t matter in the end?

I was amazed and it took the edge of everything. But I was still fuming about the fake thing. She did a lot of damage with that word. It was a narrative that was forever to be attached to me – and this from a woman who had spent thousands on plastic surgery. How much faker could you get? I knew in my head that the judges’ competition made it a battle of egos.

When it was time to go again, all the usual re-capping began. In the package, they included Sharon’s Volvo comment and her rant.

I had no idea what the voters made of it. I didn’t know if it was a factor. All I knew was what I felt, and it hurt. There was more footage in the VT of the comments than there was my singing. That in itself tells a story.

‘So have you had a chance to reflect?’ Kate asked Sharon.

It was as though there had been words in the gap between the shows.

‘Everybody did great,’ she batted it back.

Then she was off again.

‘People are mad at me. I can’t apologise for people playing the victim.’

She couldn't let it go, even if someone had had a word.

'I won't put up with anyone who is fake,' Simon tried to counter.

'G4 have the X Factor, they deserve to win,' Louis was shameless in his plugs.

'By the way Sharon, just enjoy the show,' Kate concluded the section somewhat lamely.

When she crossed to us on the backstage cam, G4 and I were in the same dressing room. There was one minute left to vote.

'I'm fine. Very nervous. I didn't do my best in the last song. I am sorry for the people who voted for me. I don't want to let anyone down,' I told her.

And now she announced that 7 million votes had been cast. When we passed the million figure earlier, I was shocked. Seven was just extraordinary.

'To win it would be amazing,' I signed off.

It was time to re-enter the stage.

It all hung on this moment.

'After 50,000 applicants and 16 weeks of fierce competition, this is it. Only two acts remain – Steve and G4.'

As Kate began the now familiar drone of padding out the results, I stood immediately to her right. On my shoulder stood Simon. Across the stage, G4 were to her left. Collectively, nobody knew where to look – ahead with a glazed vision towards the audience, trying to make a family member or close friend amidst all the TV lights and crew...or simply down at our feet as our fates were called.

'One of them is about to become the winner of the X Factor. The other leaves with nothing.' Kate delivered the iconic soundbite, unaware that the future would show this to be a sham.

'The public have been voting all night and I'm about to deliver their verdict. Good luck to you both. Can I ask the official adjudicator for the vote please?'

This was it.

That music that plays on the TV at this point matched every raging heartbeat inside me. In the gap, the audience filled the void with equal cries of 'Steve' and 'G4'.

Kate announced that it was now 8 million votes.

'OK you ready?' she asked. The pressure of those votes weighed heavily on me. This meant a lot to many people than those on the stage.

'The winner of the X Factor is...'

Then...nothing...twenty seconds of silence interspersed with a crowd holding their breath before bursting into a frenzy.

I looked skyward, closing my eyes. Louis was smiling, shaking his head. The G4 boys were all linked – their arms round each others shoulders. Simon looked calmly into the distance whilst Sharon was chatting to her vocal coach in the audience.

Then she called it.

'Steve', she shouted, after looking left to G4 and closing her eyes herself.

I had done it. I had actually won the whole competition. Simon jumped on me almost punching me. I couldn't react because my back was still aching! I shook my head in disbelief but it just looked like I had a migraine.

In the audience, Mum and Dad were hugging and everyone was congratulating Eileen. On stage, I made my way across to shake hands with G4. They were more than gracious in defeat. I couldn't begin to imagine how shattered they must have been.

The camera panned to Sharon. She was clapping politely.

'Congratulations, you are the winner of the *X Factor* and a million pound contract,' Kate shoved the microphone in my direction.

'I don't believe it,' was all I could muster, smiling back at her but shaking.

‘I am shocked. I cannot believe this is happening,’ I uttered as she raised my hand like a boxing champ.

Seconds later, they wanted me to perform.

‘I’m shocked. I can’t sing,’ I told her but before I knew it she was announcing my debut single would be released on 20 December and I was on. And I still didn’t know the words.

This time it didn’t seem to matter. I was mixing the vocal with nervous laughter and confusing the lyrics again confusing ‘sit’ with ‘walk away’. For once, Louis would have been right – Westlife’s version probably was better.

I recovered to hold it together for a couple of verses before ad-libbing a ‘thank you – that’s all I gotta say’ in the middle.

With tickertape falling all around me, I turned to see all the finalists behind me. Without a doubt, it was my worst performance of the series – some of the others were nearly strangling me. It was chaos on the stage.

I could spot Eileen beaming in the audience. I wanted the rest of the night to be about her and family.

‘Thank you, thank you so much, oh man. Oh my God.’ I was talking nothing but gibberish as the song ended.

I had no idea what happened next. It was new territory for all of us.

‘You got what you always wanted. You are a recording artist.’ Kate told me but that was for later.

I wasn’t really taking in anything at all.

‘I’m always amazed. I don’t want to wake up. This is so funny. You’ve changed my life beyond belief.’ I announced.

‘It’s what this competition is all about,’ Simon announced.

Then he promptly snogged Kate. Even the main man needed his release of tension.



As the credits rolled, it turned out that 22 million votes had been cast all series. That was a phenomenal amount of revenue and support. It had been massive. I was truly ecstatic to have won and to finally have some sort of indication as to how much good feeling there was through the numbers of voters but I was also relieved.

Straightaway after I had to do the Xtra Factor – the world and his wife seemed to be on the show. It's a blur. I have little recollection of it except that nobody seemed to really know what lay ahead.

Ben: "How does this work Simon. Is Steve a millionaire now?"

Simon: "He will be by the end of the year probably yeah"

Ben: "Tell us what a million pound contract means, is that the amount of money you are investing"

Simon: "Well the money is important obviously but whoever won the competition it's such a show of public support so as long as we make a good record - and we will make a good record- then he's got a chance of what we've always promised the winner"

Ben: "So that's the amount of money you are willing to invest in Steve to make it work?"

Simon: "The minimum amount"

Ben: "The minimum amount! So it could be more than that?"

Simon: "It could be more yeah"

Ben to Steve: "How do you feel now that Simon's going to be your boss for the rest of your life?"

Simon: "It's the other way round now - he's my boss. That's how it works in the music industry".

In my head, I was struggling to take in the achievement whilst all around me trying to weigh up what was fake and what was real. Even in the moment of victory, and in fact especially in the moment of victory, there was so much already to mistrust, as amazing as it was to win.

No longer would I have to stand there and take the weekly character assassination from Louis and Sharon and finally at the age of 36, I might now get a genuine shot at the music business. My original expectations to just get more gigs had been a genuine motivation. Now, I understood what lay before me.

That was to come. I still had some unfinished business to deal with.

I knocked on Sharon's dressing room door. One of her staff had earlier hit me on the head for no obvious reason. It wasn't just on the air that she was after me. It was coming on all sides.

'I won,' I told her and smiled.

Then she began to spin, saying that I had hit a member of her team. It was total bullshit. Even when it was all over, she was still at it.

'Don't hit my staff,' she yelled at me and began to walk off.

'Whoa whoa whoa,' I cautioned. 'Excuse me, your assistant hit me on the head. Now she's accusing me of hitting them. I've got witnesses so don't even think of going to the press with this.'

The early incident with the *News of the World* seemed ages ago but served as a reminder. Some people were out to get me.

'Just fuck off, get the fuck out of my dressing room,' she screamed.

'Sharon, the *X Factor* is over. I don't know why you hate me.' I replied.

And it felt great. There was nothing she could say. The public *had* voted and it was me not her. There was no way she was ruining my moment.

'Don't give me that,' she replied. 'I hope you fucking fail. You've got your deal. I hope you fucking fail.'

We were done. There was nothing left to say and there was no point attempting to say it. I knew I was on the moral high ground. She had been out of control for much of the day. She wasn't about to ruin my last hours at the show.

Louis had also blanked me walking past muttering 'I'm so glad this show is over.' And I felt that way. I genuinely enjoyed all the decent, hard-working people on the crew. More or less without exception, they worked long hours under pressure and were still great to be around.

But when it came to it, I wanted to withdraw. It was made worse than even though I was the winner, the aftershow get-together was limited to me plus two! I was doubly resolved not to stay.

I had a few formalities to complete but I was determined to get the hell out of there as soon as I could.

For the benefit of the press, I found myself signing a contract backstage. I've no idea what I was putting my name to. Ironically, the man doing the honours was a guy called Tim Bowen who I had met before the competition when through bizarre circumstances we had met in a sauna.

In of those forced moments of conversation, I had found myself telling him that I had entered a singing competition. He told me he was in the record industry. He asked my name politely and said he would keep an eye out for me. Now, he was signing me up and offering me champagne.

After showing our faces at the party, we did manage to get away meeting up with everyone across the road an Italian. Even there though a paparazzo took my picture on a long lens through the window. In an instant it all changed. I was now fair game to the world at large. Sharon and Louis might have gone but everyone else wanted a piece.

Despite having been told not to go to bed too late because I had a full day ahead, we partied privately until 3 am. I needed that moment with my family. I had to be around those people who hadn't changed throughout the process when everything was going on around me. People were coming into my life thick and fast and many wouldn't stay the course.

It might have looked odd to not stay at the TV studios long into the evening but I knew it was the right to do. I needed the right people around me before it all started again.