

1

## The Exit Factor



My final series of *The X Factor* did have a few fun moments.



On 20 October 2007, I stepped out on to the *X Factor* stage for the first live show of the fourth series. For three great years I'd had so much fun, helped some really talented people get their first break, thrown a few gallons of water over Louis Walsh and had a spat or three with Simon Cowell. I hadn't laughed so much in a job in my life, or felt more comfortable.

I had spent a lifetime riding a roller-coaster, barely clinging on with my fingernails, from my chaotic childhood and confused adolescence to the adrenalin-fuelled years of life on the road, managing my husband's career. Finally things seemed to be slowing down. I'd beaten cancer. My children were all doing well. Ozzy and I had

## Unbreakable

---

moved into our new home a long way from the madhouse that became familiar to millions of viewers in *The Osbournes*, and we were looking forward to spending more time together and considering the possibility that we might even grow old.

The summer of 2007 had been a watershed. At the end of July, I lost my father. Don Arden was a legend in the industry, the Al Capone of rock promoters, famed and feared from LA to London. We'd spent half our lives at loggerheads – for twenty years we didn't even speak – but he was still my dad, a man I looked up to, who taught me all I knew and whom, for all his many, many faults, I loved. For the past few years he had been suffering from Alzheimer's, and the control freak who would happily have seen me dead a decade earlier was replaced by a sad old man who didn't know where or who he was, let alone anyone else. To be honest, his death came as a relief – at the end, he was just an empty shell and life held no more enjoyment for him. At least now the suffering was over.

That evening at Wembley should have felt like a homecoming, but as the audience roared us to our seats at the judges' table, I had a tight knot like a fist in my

## The Exit Factor

---

stomach. I knew before the show got started that this year was going to be very different. In fact, that's an understatement. It would prove to be a nightmare.

Looking back now, the signs were there from the start. I was just too busy and too tired to spot them. The success of a show like *The X Factor* depends not only on the quality of the contestants, but also on the chemistry that exists between the judges. And for some reason, the mix of Simon, Louis and myself had worked. We sparked off each other; there was a healthy rivalry, and we each brought something subtly different to the mix. Simon had strength of character and he was opinionated and outspoken. I was also very direct but delivered the message with more heart. In addition, Simon and I never agreed about anything, which made for good television. As for Louis, not only does he have a great knowledge of music and the business, he also has a fantastic sense of humour and he loved to egg us on. He was the one with the spoon stirring it all up. We weren't in competition with each other, not outside of the terms of the format of the show.

The first I knew that something was up was when I

## Unbreakable

---

had a call from the producer, Richard Holloway, who told me that Louis had been fired. I was shocked.

Simon is someone who can't stand still; he likes change. And as the owner and executive producer of the show, he could do whatever he liked. It was his prerogative. But I never for one minute thought it would happen. There was no personal animosity between them – on the contrary. Simon had signed two of Louis's biggest bands so they had ongoing business together.

We soon learnt that getting shot of Louis wasn't the last of the changes Simon had in mind. A fourth judge would be joining us, Dannii Minogue. I knew nothing about Dannii beyond her being Kylie's sister, and I have always had a great respect for Kylie. But in one of those strange coincidences it turned out that my then PA, Silvana, who herself hailed from Down Under, actually knew Dannii personally. Silvana's sister Tina, also a singer, had been at school with her, and in fact she and Dannii had started off in TV together. 'You'll love her,' Silvana said. And I had no reason not to believe her.

So on day one, there were four of us. Simon and me,

---

## The Exit Factor

---

then Dannii and Brian Friedman, an American choreographer drafted in to replace Louis. On day two Simon took me to one side.

‘It’s not working, is it?’

‘No, it’s not,’ I said. ‘It’s terrible.’

‘I’ll get rid of Brian,’ he said.

‘Bring back Louis while you’re at it.’

And so it came to pass.

If I’m honest, I’d expected Dannii to be a bit flossy and sweet. She looked like a little doll! But I quickly realised she was sharp, smart and ambitious. I respected that and thought she could bring something new to the show.

And that was about the extent of my thoughts on Dannii during the early audition stages. She had seemed fine at that point. But then again, I hadn’t really had much to do with her. The audition stages can be quite a slog, travelling up and down the country. On top of that, I was making the journey over from LA. It was Birmingham one week, Manchester the next, Glasgow another, Cardiff another . . . So by the time I’d finished a long day of filming and given it my va-va-voom all, I’d invariably just retire to my room, have a bath, snuggle

## Unbreakable

---

up in my favourite pink, fluffy dressing gown that goes everywhere with me, then call Ozzy and the kids to see how their day had been.

More often than not, my body clock was still on LA time anyway, so hanging around the hotel bar after filming had never been my thing. I might have managed it once or twice, but most nights I could be happily curled up in bed by 9 p.m. So at this stage, I had only really seen Dannii when we were filming, we didn't socialise. From what I could tell, she seemed needy on set, but not with me. As it was her first time on the show, I think she was just keen to get it right, which was fair enough. As I say, she never bothered me. I would just do my bit then go off and seek my own space which, believe me, when you've had cameras thrust in your face all day, you desperately need.

After the audition stage had finished, I headed off back to America for the rest of the summer. The plan was to squirrel away at home and stay below the media parapet until the live shows started in October, so I didn't do any interviews during this period and, being in the US, I wasn't seeing any British newspapers at all.

However, my publicist in England would send me

## The Exit Factor

---

anything that related to me, and things started appearing in the press about how I was jealous of Dannii because I'm so much older, she's so young and pretty, she's so talented, she's so this, she's so that . . . blah, blah, the usual bollocks. I have been in the business a long time and know only too well that the media loves a good old feud story, it's all part of the game. If you prod someone in the chest with a finger it gets blown out of all proportion and becomes a 'punch-up', but at least the story usually has *some* tiny germ of truth in it. However, this one didn't and I genuinely had no problem with Dannii at all.

At first, I just mentally swatted it away, like an irritating fly. Tomorrow, I told myself, it will be chip paper. But the same theme kept on reappearing, building up a head of steam. As I hadn't done any interviews about *The X Factor*, I couldn't put the record straight. But never once in any interview that I'd read – and she seemed to have done about a million of the bloody things, and front-cover stories too – had Dannii said something along the lines of, 'Look, that's ridiculous, we get on just fine and there's absolutely no problem here.' And it irritated the hell out of me, because it was very simple: deny it and kill the myth. So I'm not saying

## Unbreakable

---

she perpetuated it, but from what I read she certainly didn't deflect it either.

By the time the first live show came around, I had worked myself up into a bit of a lather, particularly as the same old shit about me being jealous had started up *again*. Once you're on set, you hit the ground running. There's barely time to run to the loo during rehearsals, let alone address a thorny issue, so I decided that backstage before the live show started would be the best option.

Silvana and I talked tactics and decided that, given her history and friendship with Dannii, it would be friendlier and less confrontational if she approached her on my behalf.

So she headed off down the corridor, popped her head round Dannii's dressing-room door and asked politely whether she had a couple of minutes spare to have a quick chat with me.

No, she couldn't come now as she was getting ready, and apparently up against the clock. Well, that pissed me off. We had at least another two hours before the show started, so we were hardly pushed for time. Given the circumstances, I thought she could have been more gracious.

## The Exit Factor

---

About half an hour later, I asked Silvana if she would mind returning to the little madam's boudoir and asking again whether she could spare some of her precious time to grant me a brief audience. She reappeared again a couple of minutes later, looking sheepish.

'Sorry, it's another no. Maybe later.'

That was it. I felt the familiar hot swell of fury rise in my chest, the same red mist that has blurred my better judgement on countless other occasions. I admit it. I have a very bad temper, but at times like this I just can't help it. I'm someone who wears my heart on my sleeve and I can't be contrived. Much as I would sometimes like to, I can't have a stern word with myself and retreat into a corner until I'm more composed. After an outburst, I have often reflected that it would have been far better to retaliate with a measured, devastatingly damning riposte. But instead, I always go BANG, say what's on my mind and then think, Oh shit, did I *really* just do that?

So I was off, heading out of the door like an Exocet missile propelled by sheer fury.

As well as Silvana, my publicist Gary Farrow was in my dressing room at the time, and so was the woman in charge of press for Simon Cowell's TV company Syco.

## Unbreakable

---

‘You lot are coming with me because I am going in that fucking dressing room *now*.’ I just wanted to deal with it.

I went charging down the hallway and hammered on the door. When her shocked assistant answered, I threw myself into the room. Dannii was sitting in front of the mirror, being made up. She had rollers in her hair, but still looked annoyingly gorgeous.

‘I want a word with you. What the *fuck* is going on?’ I demanded.

‘What are you talking about? I don’t understand.’ Her mouth had fallen open in shock.

‘I have absolutely no problem with you, so what’s all this negative press?’

‘I honestly don’t know what you are talking about. This is ridiculous.’ She looked uncomfortable. ‘I’ve got to get ready and I’m nervous, this is my first live show . . .’

And that was it. She turned back to the mirror and made it very clear that the conversation, if that’s what you could call it, was over.

Nervous! Oh *please*, she’d been prancing up and down on stages since she was a fucking foetus, so the

## The Exit Factor

---

notion that a few TV cameras were suddenly going to faze her was utterly laughable. Gary could sense that I still had plenty of fuel left in my tank for carrying it on, so got hold of my arm and started to guide me towards the exit.

‘Just stop it,’ I shot back over my shoulder at Dannii before flouncing out with as much dignity as I could muster.

It was her birthday that day and what made it even more annoying was that I had bought her a gorgeous Chanel handbag, which I’d left in her room earlier with a little card. It had cost me eighteen hundred quid; a lot of money whichever way you look at it. Oh well, I thought, she’ll probably give back the handbag after my little outburst, so at least something good will come of it. I rather fancied it for myself anyway. But no. Just as Zsa Zsa Gabor once said that she never hated a man enough to give back his diamonds, Dannii Minogue clearly didn’t hate me enough to give back a designer handbag.

A little later, we were all standing behind the giant screen that the judges walk through at the start of each live show. Simon was on camera right, with Dannii

## Unbreakable

---

next to him, then me, then Louis. Me and Louis were in a heightened state of anticipation, sharing jokes. By then, I had virtually forgotten the little contretemps. I had made my position clear – albeit loudly and colourfully – and, as far as I was concerned, we could move on.

But to my left? *Nada*. It was like the Berlin Wall had been rebuilt in the six-inch space between us. She wouldn't even look at me. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. She started whispering something in Simon's ear, like a bloody kid in the playground, and Louis rolled his eyes at me. We felt like we had herpes.

Then suddenly *The X Factor* theme tune came powering out of the speakers, once again sending goosebumps up my arms and back. I could feel the adrenalin pumping around my body, prompting a delicious exhilaration that, just for a few seconds, always made me feel invincible. And, invariably, prompted me to do something mischievous.

As the screen opened and we walked out to the thundering roar of the audience, I reached across and grabbed Dannii's hand, yanking it up into the air in a

## The Exit Factor

---

triumphant punch. Much later, in her autobiography, she writes about this moment as if it was something she welcomed, a peace offering that made her feel all warm and gooey inside, as if everything might turn out OK between us. Utter bilge, if you ask me. I could feel she was fighting with all her teensy weensy might to put her arm down and extricate herself from my grip, but as she only weighs about 3lb, I successfully managed to keep her arm up there, grinning maniacally and thinking, Fuck *you*, missus.

Dannii is stunning to look at, even prettier than Kylie, actually. Her skin is incredible and she has a perfectly proportioned figure, thanks to a little help on the top half. And of course, Simon fancied the pants off her. I get that. He's single, he's the boss and he can do what the fuck he wants.

But during filming it was obvious to me that there was some sort of relationship going on between them and, the more it progressed, the worse it became between her and me. It was unbelievably bad. She had now taken to walking past me in the hallway without even making eye contact. I'd like to say it didn't bother

## Unbreakable

---

me, but it did. A lot. After all, who wants to work in such an unpleasant atmosphere? The days were long and hard enough without the extra burden of spending hours sitting next to someone with a face like a smacked arse.

I had really enjoyed the previous three series, but this one was rapidly turning into an odious chore. I found it hard dealing with a sulker. So after a couple of weeks of this icy nonsense, I decided to instigate a meeting with her and executive producer Richard Holloway. I wanted to bury the hatchet. You can ignore an unpleasant frisson if it's just for one day, but this was going on and on, doing my head in.

The meeting was held in an empty dressing room at Wembley, on a Friday when we were doing rehearsals with our acts for the next night's live show. It was just the three of us and she perched on top of the counter along one wall, her legs dangling, her eyes staring straight ahead as if she was transfixed by something on the opposite side of the room. Anything but look at Richard and me who were sitting adjacent to her on a sofa. I cleared my throat and aimed my words at the side of her head.

## The Exit Factor

---

‘Look, I apologise if I have offended you. This isn’t pleasant for either of us; I just want to clear things up so we can get a more harmonious atmosphere.’

Nothing. Her gaze didn’t shift from the far wall, so I carried on.

‘What is it you want from me so we can get this to a professional level and get it to work? Shall I walk over hot coals? Eat broken glass?’

Again, nothing. Not. One. Fucking. Word.

Richard started talking to her in a low voice and she mumbled back at him, then he declared that as we didn’t seem to be getting anywhere we might as well draw the meeting to a close. And that was it. My attempt at making peace had fallen on deaf ears and we were back to cold shoulders and frosty silences. It was all far too school playground for me.

Thank God I had asked Richard to be there, because if you repeat these things, people might say you’re exaggerating, that she must have said *something*. But no, she said fuck all to me. Outwardly, she seemed all ‘Ooh, I love children, I love puppies’, but in my opinion she was dark, very dark. What you saw was most definitely not what you got.

## Unbreakable

---

And so the show went on, and on, and bloody on, for what, given the unpleasantness, seemed like an age to me. The closer she got to Simon, the more I felt that she started telling the producers what to do. Suddenly, from being the supposedly nervous new girl, she was saying, ‘This isn’t right,’ and, ‘Simon doesn’t like it this way.’

Every time I heard her do it, I had to embed my teeth in the end of my tongue to stop myself making a caustic remark. I’m surprised there’s not a dent in it to this day. Meanwhile, the antics behind the screen had gone up a gear, with her sticking her tongue in Simon’s ear and giggling like a bloody teenager whilst Louis and me stood there like a couple of gooseberries.

Then again, Simon was single and so was she. They could do what they wanted. But, for me, it made her so unbearable to work with that I just couldn’t take it. It was horrible. My stomach was constantly knotted with anxiety about it and as each show loomed I would wake up and think, Oh God, I have to spend the day sitting alongside *her* again. It had become intolerable so I asked to have a meeting with Simon.

He was staying in a suite at the Mandarin Oriental hotel in central London and liked to hold any meetings

## The Exit Factor

---

there, so he slotted me in for later that day. It was towards the end of filming *The X Factor* live shows, so the final was imminent and this series was about to become just a bad memory. I was here to fight my corner for the next one. I walked in, gave him a kiss on each cheek and launched straight in.

‘I can’t take it any more. It’s her or me.’

His expression remained impassive. Simon is used to dealing with various ongoing spats between the women in his life and clearly takes it all in his stride.

‘I’m not going to make that choice, Sharon. I would like both of you to stay.’

Inwardly, my heart sank. This was not what I wanted to hear, so I acted like he hadn’t said it and persevered.

‘Look, if you did some audience research, I don’t think she’s even got a particularly strong fan base.’

‘What do you mean?’ He sounded weary.

‘She had a single out in the middle of the series, and it tanked.’

He stuck his bottom lip out, then shrugged.

‘It doesn’t matter. When I was on *American Idol* with Paula Abdul, she released a single that didn’t do very well either. But the audience still loved her.’

## Unbreakable

---

I could sense that the battle was lost, but I was a desperate woman so had one last try.

‘Dannii’s just a pretty face. You can get another pretty face.’

‘Sharon, I’m not doing it.’ His firm tone left me in no doubt that this wasn’t a matter for debate. ‘I don’t want you to go and I don’t want her to go either. So think about it.’

We were about to finish the series and then it was Christmas. Simon clearly thought that I would fly back to LA, spend some downtime with Ozzy and the kids, then calm down and change my mind about leaving the show.

In a way, he was right. Christmas came and went, and there was so much else going on, not least being a judge on the next series of *America’s Got Talent*. *The X Factor* wasn’t a topic of conversation at home; I think everyone in the family just presumed that I would go back. By the time March 2008 came around, the memory of all the angst had dulled slightly, so I *did* start negotiations for the next series, pencilling it into my schedule for that summer.

I’m first and foremost a businesswoman, so, knowing

## The Exit Factor

---

that I was quite in demand at the time, I decided to try and up my deal a bit. Men always get more money, that's just the way it is, and I thought, Fuck it, I'm going to push, push, push. With stuff like that, it's OK. I'm not asking Mrs Smith next door to bust her balls, I'm dealing with a corporation. The game is that you go in, ask for too much and know you're not going to get it, then settle for something in the middle.

Negotiations started and we were going back and forth on the money, unable to agree. On top of that, about a month before the auditions were set to start, I felt the familiar churning sensation in my gut at the thought of going through all that old shit again. There I was, in my lovely home, enjoying a relatively peaceful life with my family, about to leave them for a manic schedule of different cities and hotels alongside someone I was uncomfortable with, someone who gave me a fucking great knot in my stomach. What was I doing? It wasn't that I was afraid, more anxious. I started weighing up the pros and cons in my mind constantly, the only pro being the money. I went over it with Ozzy so many times that I think he stopped listening.

'I don't think I'm going to go back.'

## Unbreakable

---

‘Sharon, do what you’ve got to do, it’s your call. I just don’t want it making you ill.’

He had a point. I don’t handle that kind of stress at all well; it eats me up. It was just the thought of that toxic atmosphere again; of standing behind that screen just inches away from someone exuding utter disdain. I wasn’t building a career, I wasn’t promoting a record, I wasn’t hoping to get signed by a label. So why do it? It was like a spider’s web for me. There had been no humour, no fun moments, and I just didn’t want the pressure again.

Ultimately, the reason I didn’t do the next series was because I didn’t get the money I wanted, but the Dannii business was all mixed in there too. Afterwards, I spoke to Simon on the phone and he was really nice about it. I was still working for him on *America’s Got Talent*, so I knew that we were absolutely fine going forward. That’s one of the really good things about Simon: you can say your piece and he never holds it against you.

In fact, it was Louis and me who came up with the idea that he should replace me with Cheryl Cole. A decision that, ultimately, worked out really well for everyone.

\*

---

## The Exit Factor

---

When the publicity started for the next series with Cheryl Cole instead of me, word reached me back in LA that the stock line seemed to be that I had kicked up a stink because I felt threatened by the presence of another woman on the panel.

As I now work with four other women on a daily talk show in LA and get on famously with every single one of them, it's quite clear to me that when people clash, it has absolutely nothing to do with gender and everything to do with their personality differences.

We get on really well now, but when I had a bit of a ding-dong with Piers Morgan during the second season of *America's Got Talent*, no one suggested that it had anything to do with what sex we were. It was just a plain old clash of characters, that's it. There I was, a successful businesswoman in my fifties, a mother, a wife, and already well established as a judge on the show, being made out to be jealous of a young, single woman who, as far as I am concerned, can't sing for shit and couldn't cut a business deal if she fucking tried. Give me a break.

When the book *Sweet Revenge: The Intimate Life Of Simon Cowell* came out in April 2012, the author Tom

## Unbreakable

---

Bower wrote that Simon had said the following about Dannii: 'I had a crush on her. It was Dannii's hair, the sexy clothes and the tits. I was like a schoolboy. She was foxy. She was a real man's girl. Very feminine.' Bower also wrote that Simon had told a friend, 'There were a few bonks and then it petered out while I was in America.'

Publicly, Simon still hasn't admitted to the affair, but Bower told the media that he had confirmed it to him privately. When I heard this, I felt like shouting from the rooftops, 'See? I was right.'

I wouldn't say I felt vindicated as such, because I didn't feel guilty of anything in the first place, but it proved I hadn't been making it up when I said she had an uppity attitude as she was fucking the boss. To my mind, she must have felt it was a case of 'Don't fuck with me, because I'll tell him'. She clearly felt that shagging Simon gave her a vicarious power and it was so immature, not to mention deeply bloody irritating to deal with. Now that she's in her forties and has a young child, she's probably a very different person. The trouble is, when you get by on your looks, where do you go as you get older? But to be honest, other than having to

## The Exit Factor

---

remember what happened between us for the purposes of writing this book I just don't think about her now. If I saw her at an event, I wouldn't say anything. I probably wouldn't even acknowledge her.

Now, as I enter my seventh decade, I find I *am* losing my temper less often, probably more to do with wilful self-improvement than any chemical shift prompted by age. I am really trying not to be confrontational, but at least if I am, I find that I can get it out there in a more measured way and then move on.

These days, if someone is doing something I think is annoying or wrong, or I just don't agree with it, then I'll say, look, whatever you're doing is wrong and it's annoying me, so would you please stop. Or words to that effect, give or take the odd cuss here and there. Then they will either deny it, tell me I'm imagining it, or admit it and say that now they know it bothers me they will stop forthwith. Then it's done. No grudges. I'm not the sort of person who will hate you or never talk to you again. I'm just not that way. Besides, things change in a second and you might suddenly see a quality in that person that you've never seen before, something you didn't notice when you first met them. So you can't

## Unbreakable

---

use a first meeting as a barometer, I know that now. I have definitely become less kneejerk in my reactions to people and, I hope, more tolerant.

When it was announced that I was going to be a judge on the tenth series of *The X Factor* this year, naturally the press, ever keen to stir up a feud, asked Dannii for her thoughts on my return.

‘That’s risky. Either people will go, “We have moved on,” or go, “Amazing.” I won’t be watching, I haven’t watched any of the shows since I left,’ she replied.

Obviously, I took the job and I certainly wouldn’t have done so if *I* thought it was a risky decision for either me or the show, so I don’t agree with her. But you know what? The older, wiser, mellower me feels that nobody agrees on absolutely everything and that she’s perfectly entitled to her opinion. It really doesn’t bother me.

Knock yourself out, Dannii love.

For me, this whole sorry episode in my life can be summed up by something Ozzy said at the time. Unless someone is a really well-established star, he hardly ever knows who they are, and sometimes I can tell him a story a hundred times and he forgets what I’ve said. I’m

## The Exit Factor

---

sure that, during the early audition stages, I had told him I was working with Dannii, before it all went horribly wrong. But knowing him, he probably hadn't computed the information.

Anyway, the night of the showdown in her dressing room, I came home to Welders, our home in Buckinghamshire, tired and upset. I was still in turmoil about it, and I curled up on our sofa in the kitchen and let rip with, 'Dannii Minogue did this,' and 'Dannii Minogue did that,' as Ozzy sat opposite me.

After a couple of minutes, I glanced across to find him looking faintly perplexed.

'I didn't know Kylie had a brother.'