

PERFECTION

The price of fame.

BY JOHN FRIZELL

“Jamie! I’m going to be on *UK Idol*!”
Ellie did a twirl, hands at her waist,
palms parallel to the floor.

“But you can’t sing.”

She fought down an urge to slap him.

“That doesn’t matter anymore. They
have autotune. What counts is how you
look!”

She demonstrated another dance
move.

“Let me know if I can help.”

She almost fell over in mid-step. Her
genius little brother had never before
offered help without demanding some-
thing in return. Perhaps he was feeling
guilty about wrecking her relationship with
her boyfriend.

“Please,” she said. “This means every-
thing to me.”

Help took the form of an image of her on
the big living room TV, which was plugged
into one of Jamie’s bulging, modified comput-
ers. Jamie videoed her dance routine and then
they ran it in slow motion and moused it into
shape, speeding up moves or slowing them
down, repositioning legs, arms and head.

“Is it perfect now?”

She nodded. He saved the routine.

It was the ultimate dance coach, a magic
mirror. When she danced in front of the
camera, the image on the TV highlighted
every departure from perfect: red for too
slow, blue for too fast, solid black showing
where an out of position body part should be.
She was sweating and aching after an hour’s
practice; forcing her body into the right
position at the right time was hard work,
but she was perfecting the routine faster and
better than she would have thought possi-
ble. Within a week, the TV might well have
been a mirror. Not even a trace of correction
appeared when she practised.

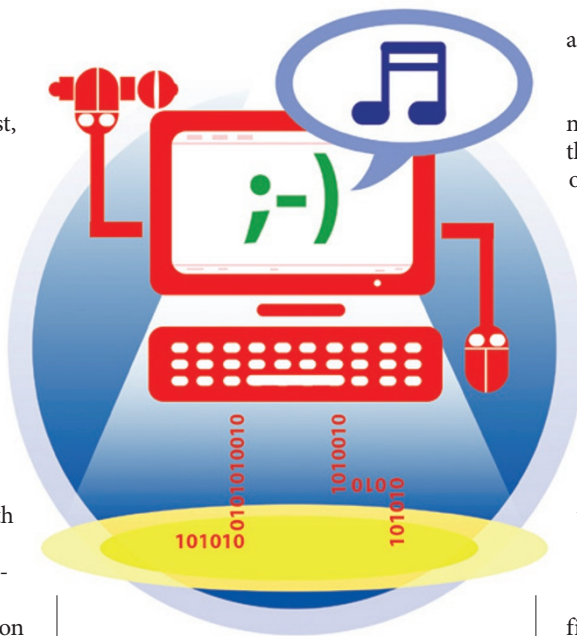
“Do you want to come with me?” she
asked. “I can get an audience pass for you.”

Of course he wouldn’t come. Jamie hated
crowds.

“I’d love to.”

Backstage was the best experience of her
life. The production staff were kind and
solicitous, they paid attention to her and
took care of her. The room crackled with
energy; the contestants were no longer just
hopefuls, they *were* performers and they
were about to perform. She wasn’t nervous
when she walked out onto the stage.

Half an hour later, as she met Jamie, tears



were still pouring down her face, ruining her
professionally applied make-up.

“What’s wrong? You got through to the
next show?”

“But I was awful. I got the timing of the
words wrong. The only reason I wasn’t elimi-
nated was because the boy who fell over was
worse. I even sang ahead of the backing
track. I was note perfect but the notes were
in the wrong places. What am I going to do?”

“Practice?”

“Can you make me something to help?”

“Sure.”

Ellie took a day off to recover from the dis-
aster. Jamie disappeared into his machinery-
crammed bedroom, where Ellie no longer
dared to venture. They met the next evening
in the neutral ground of the living room.

“This should do it,” said Jamie, pointing
at a stack of three of his mutant computers,
plugged into each other with a web of col-
oured cables. “It does for words what autotune
does for notes. You can teach it by reading it
the song in the correct timing, but it’s easier
just to input the sheet music or another artist
singing the song. Then it adjusts the timing
of your words to fit the music.”

She liked the way he said ‘another artist’.
If he could learn to be polite to people, she
might yet succeed in finding him a girlfriend.

“You mean this

doesn’t teach me, it
just does it for me.”

She liked the idea
of that. But there was

an obvious fault.

“It’s much too big. I can’t carry it on stage.”

“Don’t worry. It takes the audio from your
mike, processes it backstage and feeds it to
their hardware. I’ll need a stage pass so I can
operate it.”

“I’m sure I can arrange it.”

She had no problems. The girl she
usually talked to said she needed to talk
to her boss and her boss had to do the
same, but an hour later Ellie got a call
from the head of production saying it
would be fine. She had never talked to
the head of production before.

She put thoughts of coming glory
firmly out of her mind and did an hour
of practice on her new dance routine. She
was still getting a few corrections and for
the final she wanted to be move perfect,
note perfect ... and word perfect.

Production outdid themselves for the
final. There was a buffet of lovely catered
food and a juice bar with fresh juice, not to
mention people doing hair, nails, make-up
and shoulder and neck massage. Ellie loved
every moment of it. She belonged.

Again she was without fear as she waited
and this time her confidence was justified.
She didn’t win, but she was runner up, and
everyone knew that the top three always get
contracts and a career launch. She swept off
the stage in her designer dress, head held
high, bouquet in her arms, and accepted the
mostly genuine congratulations of her
follow contestants as she waited outside the
production office while the winner signed
his contract. Then the door opened to admit
her to her new life.

Jamie wasn’t very good at reading emo-
tions but even he could see that something
was wrong when she emerged.

“Did you get your contract?”

“No. They want to sign your system, not
me.”

She could feel the tears coming. If a
machine shaped your every action, your
work meant nothing. Jamie was looking at
her blankly.

“They want to sign a contract with you.”

“Great! I wonder if they’d like the dance-
teaching system too?”

The room resounded to the sound of her
slapping him. ■

John Frizell was trained in biochemistry
and works in ocean conservation for
Greenpeace. In his spare time he walks,
builds robots and sings.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY