

ROCK WAR

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PROLOGUE

The stage is a vast altar, glowing under Texas moonlight. Video walls the size of apartment blocks advertise Rage Cola. Close to the stadium's fifty-yard line, a long-legged thirteen-year-old is precariously balanced on her big brother's shoulders. She's way too excited.

'JAY!' she screams, as her body sways. 'JAAAAAAAY I LOVE YOU!'

Nobody hears, because seventy thousand people are at it. It's noise so loud your ears tickle inside. Boys and girls, teens, students. There's a ripple of anticipation as a silhouette comes on stage, but it's a roadie with a cymbal stand. He bows grandly before stepping off.

'JET!' they chant. 'JET . . . JET . . . JET.'

Backstage the sound is muffled, like waves crashing against a sea wall. The only light is a green glow from emergency exit signs.

Jay is holding his queasy stomach. He's slim and easy on the eye. He wears Converse All Stars, ripped jeans and a dash of black eyeliner.

An immense roar comes out of the crowd as the video walls begin a thirty-second countdown film, sponsored by a cellphone maker. As Jay's eyes adjust to the light, he can see a twenty-metre-tall version of himself skateboarding downhill, chased by screaming Korean schoolgirls.

'THIRTEEN,' the crowd scream, as their feet stamp down the seconds. 'TWELVE, ELEVEN . . .'

On screen, the girls knock Jay off his skateboard. As he tumbles a smartphone flies out of his pocket and when the girls see it they lose all interest in Jay and stand in a semicircle admiring the phone instead.

'THREE . . . TWO . . . ONE . . .'

The four members of Jet emerge on stage, punching the air to screams and camera flashes.

Somehow, the cheering crowd always kills Jay's nerves. Thousands of bodies sway in the moonlight. Cheers and shouts blend into a low roar. He places his fingers on the fret board and loves the knowledge that moving one finger will send half a million watts of power out of speaker stacks the size of trucks.

And the crowd goes wild as the biggest band in the world starts to play.

1. CHEESY CRUMBS

Camden, North London

There's that weird moment when you first wake up. The uneasy quarter second where a dream ends and you're not sure where you are. All being well, you work out you're in bed and you get to snuggle up and sleep another hour.

But Jay Thomas wasn't in bed. The thirteen-year-old had woken on a plastic chair in a school hall that reeked of burgers and hot dogs. There were chairs set out in rows, but bums in less than a quarter of them. A grumpy dinner lady squirted pink cleaning fluid on a metal serving counter at the side of the room, while a banner hung over the stage up front:

**Camden Schools Contemporary Music
Competition 2014**

Debris pelted the floor the instant Jay moved: puffed wheat snacks, speckled with cheesy orange flavouring.

Crumbs fell off his clothes when he stood and another half bag had been crushed up and sprinkled in his spiky brown hair.

Jay played lead guitar in a group named Brontobyte. His three band mates cracked up as he flicked orange dust out of his hair, then bent over to de-crumb a Ramones T-shirt and ripped black jeans.

‘You guys are *so* immature.’

But Jay didn’t really mind. These guys had been his mates since forever and he’d have joined the fun if one of them had dozed off.

‘Sweet dreams?’ Brontobyte’s chubby-cheeked vocalist, Salman, asked.

Jay yawned and picked orange gunk out of his earhole as he replied. ‘I barely slept last night. Kai had his Xbox on until about one, and when I *finally* got to sleep the little knob head climbed up to my bunk and farted in my face.’

Salman took pity, but Tristan and Alfie both laughed.

Tristan was Brontobyte’s drummer, and a big lad who fancied himself a bit of a stud. Tristan’s younger brother Alfie wouldn’t turn twelve for another three months. He was Brontobyte’s bass player and the band’s most talented musician, but the other three gave him a hard time because his voice was unbroken and there were no signs of puberty kicking in.

‘I can’t believe Jay gets owned by his younger brother,’ Tristan snorted.

‘Kai’s the hardest kid in my year,’ Alfie agreed. ‘But Jay’s,

like, Mr Twig Arms, or something.’

Jay tutted and sounded stressed. ‘Can we *please* change the subject?’

Tristan ignored the request. ‘How many kids has your mum got now anyway, Jay?’ he asked. ‘It’s about forty-seven, isn’t it?’

Salman and Alfie laughed, but stifled their grins when they saw Jay looking upset.

‘Tristan, cut it out,’ Salman said.

‘We all take the piss out of each other,’ Tristan said. ‘Jay’s acting like a baby.’

‘No, Tristan, *you* never know when to stop,’ Salman said angrily.

Alfie tried to break the tension. ‘I’m going for a drink,’ he said. ‘Anyone else want one?’

‘Scotch on the rocks,’ Salman said.

Jay sounded more cheerful as he joined the joke. ‘Bottle of Bud and some heroin.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ Alfie said, before heading off towards a table with jugs of orange squash and platters of cheapo biscuits.

The next act was taking the stage. In front of them three judges sat at school desks. There was a baldy with a mysterious scab on his head, a long-limbed Nigerian in a gele headdress and a man with a wispy grey beard and leather trousers. He sat with his legs astride the back of his chair to show that he was down with the kids.

By the time Alfie came back with four beakers of orange

squash and jam rings tucked into his cheeks there were five boys lining up on stage. They were all fifteen or sixteen. Nice-looking lads, four black, one Asian, and all dressed in stripy T-shirts, chinos and slip-on shoes.

Salman was smirking. 'It's like they walked into Gap and bought *everything*.'

Jay snorted. 'Losers.'

'Yo, people!' a big lad in the middle of the line up yelled. He was trying to act cool, but his eyes betrayed nerves. 'We're contestant seven. We're from George Orwell Academy and we're called Womb 101.'

There were a few claps from members of the audience, followed by a few awkward seconds as a fat-assed music teacher bent over fiddling with the CD player that had their backing track on it.

'You might know this song,' the big lad said. 'The original's by One Direction. It's called "What Makes You Beautiful".'

The four members of Brontobyte all looked at each other and groaned. Alfie summed up the mood.

'Frankly, I'd rather be kicked in the balls.'

As the backing track kicked in, Womb 101 sprang into an athletic dance routine, with four members moving back, and the big guy in the middle stepping up to a microphone. The dancing looked sharp, but everyone in the room really snapped to attention when a powerful lead vocal started.

The voice was higher than you'd expect from a big black guy, but he really nailed the sense of longing for the girl he

was singing about. When the rest of Womb 101 joined in for the chorus the sound swamped the backing track, but they were all decent singers and their routine was tight.

As Womb 101 hit their stride, Jay's music teacher Mr Currie approached Brontobyte from behind. He'd only been teaching for a couple of years. Half the girls at Carleton Road School had a thing for his square jaw and gym-pumped bod.

He tapped in time as the singing and finger clicking continued. 'They're really uplifting, aren't they?'

The four boys looked back at their teacher with distaste.

'Boy bands should be machine-gunned,' Alfie said. 'They're singing to a backing track. How's that even music?'

'I bet they win as well,' Tristan said contemptuously. 'I saw their teacher nattering to the judges all through lunch.'

Mr Currie spoke firmly. 'Tristan, if Womb 101 win it will be because they're really talented. Have you any idea how much practice it takes to sing and dance like that?'

Up on stage, Womb 101 were doing the *nana-nana* chorus at the end of "What Makes You Beautiful". As the song closed, the lead singer moved to the back of the stage and did a full somersault, climaxing with his arms spread wide and two band mates kneeling on either side.

'Thank you,' the big guy shouted, as the stage lights caught beads of sweat trickling down his forehead.

There weren't enough people in the hall to call it an eruption, but there was loads of clapping and a bunch of parents stood up and cheered.

‘Nice footwork, Andre!’ a woman shouted.

Alfie and Tristan made retching sounds as Mr Currie walked off.

‘Currie’s got a point though,’ Jay said. ‘Boy bands are dreck, but they’ve all got good voices and they must have rehearsed that dance routine for weeks.’

Tristan shook his head and tutted. ‘Jay, you *always* agree with what Mr Currie says. I know half the girls in our class fancy him, but I’m starting to think you do as well.’

Alfie stood up and shouted as Womb 101 jumped off the stage and began walking towards the back of the room to grab drinks. ‘You suck!’

Jay backed up as two of Womb 101’s backing singers steamed over, knocking empty plastic chairs out of the way. They didn’t look hard on stage, prancing around singing about how great some girl’s hair was, but the physical reality was two burly sixteen-year-olds from one of London’s toughest schools.

The one who stared down Alfie was an Asian dude with a tear-you-in-half torso.

‘What you say?’ he demanded, as his chest muscles swelled. ‘If I see *any* of you boys on my manor, you’d better run!’

The boy slammed his fist into his palm as the other one pointed at Alfie before drawing the finger across his throat and stepping backwards. Alfie looked like he’d filled his BHS briefs and didn’t breathe until the big dudes were well clear.

‘Are you mental? Tristan hissed, as he gave Alfie a hard shoulder punch. ‘Those guys are from Melon Lane estate. Everyone’s psycho up there.’

Mr Currie had missed Alfie shouting, *You suck*, but did see Tristan hitting his brother as he got back holding a polystyrene coffee cup.

‘Hitting is *not* cool,’ Mr Currie said. ‘And I’m tired of the negativity from you guys. You’re playing after this next lot, so you’d better go backstage and get your gear ready.’

The next group was an all-girl trio. They dressed punk, but managed to murder a Paramore track by making it sound like bad Madonna. Setting up Tristan’s drum kit on stage took ages and the woman judge made Jay even more nervous when she looked at her watch and shook her elaborately hatted head.

After wasting another minute faffing around with a broken strap on Alfie’s bass guitar the four members of Brontobyte nodded to each other, ready to play. When the boys rehearsed, Salman usually sang and played, but Alfie was a better musician, so for the competition he was on bass and Salman would just do vocals.

‘Hi, everyone,’ Salman said. ‘We’re contestant nine, from Carleton Road School. Our group is called Brontobyte and this is a song we wrote ourselves. It’s called “Christine”.’

A song I *wrote*, Jay thought, as he took a deep breath and positioned his fingers on the guitar.

They’d been in the school hall since ten that morning. Now it all came down to the next three minutes.