

1. Forbidden Fat

July 2014

Camden, North London

The chip shop closed at one thirty on Friday mornings. By daybreak, the oil in the deep-fat fryers had a solid white crust, but still retained enough heat to gently warm Jay Thomas's outstretched palm.

In younger days, Jay had been fascinated by the way bubbling oil cooled to solid white fat, delving into the warm crust with a finger before making a half-baked attempt to smooth out the evidence. The oil beneath the white crust stayed hot and he'd have been yelled at for going near it.

Jay got yanked out of Memory Lane by a thump on the floor above. He shared the flat over the chip shop with his mum, stepdad and six siblings. The place was rarely quiet, but he'd learned to tune out noise, like his little siblings chasing around, or brother Kai cursing at FIFA 14.

But the floor-shaking crash of a case packed with studio

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lamps wasn't familiar, and nor was the shouting that followed it.

'Get the leads first, Damien!' a cameraman yelled. 'Then I can start wiring up while you're carrying all this gear in.'

Jay heard Damien grunt, then the twenty-something runner bolted downstairs and out the rear door to one of three vans the TV crew had parked in the courtyard out the back. Jay caught a glance, as Damien and a pretty runner called Lorrie exchanged words.

I already told you there's no leads in this van . . .

Well if they're not here we must have left them when we picked up the gear at ProMedia . . .

John's gonna blow his stack if . . .

As Damien headed up to break the bad news to his boss, Jay felt a nervous ache in his belly. His heart was thumping, he'd barely slept and his mum had given him a couple of Imodium to settle a rebellious stomach.

Getting picked for *Rock War* was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to Jay, but right now a chunk of him craved simpler days, driving his Lego trucks between chip-shop tables and standing up with salt stuck to his knees.

'Are you Jay?' a woman shouted.

Jay spotted her squinting through the letterbox opening, halfway up the shop's metal grille.

Someone else yelled from a top-floor window, 'Can we have some quiet on set, *pl-eeeease?* We're trying to shoot an interview.'

Rather than shout back at the woman, Jay made a 'go

around' gesture and headed out the rear door into warm air and breaking sun. It was Friday rush hour on the main road out front and a truckload of rubble rumbled by as the woman offered a slender hand attached to a wrist festooned with fluorescent wristbands.

'I'm Angie, director camera-unit B. Can you spare us ten for an interview?'

Jay ran a hand through his scruffy hair and shrugged. 'I kinda look like shit, and I'm still in my night shorts.'

'No worries,' Angie said, as Jay picked up an Aussie accent. 'The just-out-of-bed vibe is exactly what we're going for in this segment. It's the first day of summer holidays. You're heading off to *Rock War* boot camp. You're excited and a bit overawed, which is exactly what we want to capture on camera.'

Jay liked hearing that he was *supposed* to be excited and overawed. He didn't exactly agree to be interviewed, but Angie's arm guided him towards the pub next door anyway.

The White Horse pub and the adjoining chip shop had been owned by Jay's family for more than fifty years. The pub was run by Jay's auntie, Rachel. She lived over the pub, with her four daughters, a granddaughter and a few hangers-on. As Jay followed Angie through the White Horse's swinging saloon doors, he was surprised to see black sheeting taped over all the windows. Lights and cameras were set up to film interviews, with the pub's dartboard as a backdrop.

'I've captured one from next door,' Angie said, smiling triumphantly at her crew as she led Jay inside.

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The crew comprised a camerawoman, a sound man and a runner, plus Angie the director. Jay's cousin Erin stood at the bar, looking fit in tight denim shorts and a lime vest. She was tanned and athletic, and Jay felt really awkward. He usually only wore shorts in bed and was self-conscious about being skinny, hating the idea of his bare legs getting on TV.

'Do you think I could nip back and get some jeans?' Jay asked, as the runner swooped with a make-up kit and started dabbing foundation on his forehead.

'It's just so you don't look greasy under the lights,' the guy explained.

Nobody answered Jay's question about the jeans and he was too intimidated by all the fussing to ask again.

Two minutes later, he was on a bar stool in front of the dartboard, with a wireless microphone taped under his shirt, two cameras aimed his way and his cousin Erin on another stool next to him.

'All set?' Angie asked, as the cameraman let her take a look at his framing. Then she turned towards the two teenagers and tried to sound soothing. 'Try and relax, I'm going to ask a few questions about your bands. If you fluff your answer or say something you don't like, just start the answer again and we'll patch things up in the edit suite . . . Camera? Sound? OK, Bob . . .? Action!'

Angie put on the glasses around her neck, grabbed a question sheet from a tabletop and stepped close to Jay and Erin.

'I'll start you off gently,' she began. 'I want you both to

say your name, your age, the name of your band and what your role in the band is. OK?’

The two teenagers both nodded as Angie pointed at Jay.

Jay froze. It felt like he was seeing a hundred things at once: heat from the lights, sandbags holding the equipment stands down, two dozen cables sprawling over cigarette-burned carpet. Millions of people would see him this way for the first time – with slim white legs and hand-me-down Superdry shorts.

‘Loosen up around your shoulders,’ Angie said soothingly. ‘Imagine it’s just you and me, over a nice cup of coffee.’

‘Err . . .’ Jay began, feeling like all the moisture had been sucked from his mouth. ‘My name is Jay Thomas. I’m thirteen years old and I’m the lead guitarist with Jet . . . Was that OK?’

Angie gave Jay a double thumbs-up. ‘You’re a natural,’ she lied, before pointing at Erin.

‘I’m Erin,’ she said, looking coy as she flicked hair off her face. ‘I’m thirteen years old and I sing vocals and play guitar for Brontobyte.’

‘And how do you two know each other?’

‘We’re cousins,’ Erin said, smiling again. ‘We’re only two months apart in age and we live next door to each other. So when we were little, we were like that.’

Erin held up her hands and placed one on top of the other, before continuing. ‘In all my earliest memories, Jay is with me. Just rolling around the floor, playing tag. Wrestling and stuff.’

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‘Cute,’ Angie said. ‘But if you’re so close, how did you end up playing in different bands?’

Erin shrugged and smiled. ‘We’re still mates, but I don’t think we’ve been like, *mega* close, since . . .’

Jay spoke. ‘Probably year four or five at school. We started getting more into our own mates. And boys and girls are into different stuff.’

‘Sounds about right,’ Erin agreed.

Jay drew some relief from the fact that his cousin sounded as nervous as he felt.

‘As I understand, Jay, you used to be a member of Brontobyte,’ Angie said. ‘Can you tell me a little bit about that?’

‘I guess,’ Jay said warily, as he turned slightly on the bar stool. The camera operator silently gestured for him to move back to face the lens. ‘I started Brontobyte with two of my mates, Tristan and Salman, plus Tristan’s little brother Alfie. We played together for a couple of years, but there were a lot of musical differences and in the end I walked away.’

Erin scoffed. ‘That’s not *exactly* how I heard it!’

Jay turned towards her accusingly. ‘Well, I left, didn’t I?’

Erin seized the opportunity. ‘Jay gave his bandmates an ultimatum,’ she explained. ‘Either they replace Tristan as drummer, or he walks. Jay lost the vote.’

Jay scowled at Erin, angry that she’d chosen to dig up his humiliation. On the other hand, Angie looked pleased. She’d clearly been going for this angle all along.

‘It was hardly a fair vote,’ Jay explained. ‘Tristan voted for

himself, and Alfie knew he'd get his arse kicked if he voted against his big brother.'

Erin smirked. 'If you say so, cuz.'

'You weren't there,' Jay spat. 'And you would take Tristan's side now because the idiot's your boyfriend.'

There was a lull. Jay *was* angry, but he didn't want to fall out with Erin, or look petty in front of the camera. He shrugged and gave Erin a smile to indicate that he wasn't taking this too seriously.

Erin understood Jay's gesture, raising her hands and giving a false laugh. 'You say Tristan's an idiot, but wasn't he your best friend for like, seven years, or something?'

Erin's question stumped Jay, so he changed tack. 'I happen to take my music seriously. Whatever you think of Tristan as a person, he can't play drums to save his life.'

Jay realised that *I happen to take my music seriously* sounded pompous, and cringed.

'In case you haven't noticed, Jayden, your lead singer ain't exactly about to sell out the Sydney Opera House. And Tristan's drumming wasn't so bad that it stopped the judges from picking us for *Rock War*.'

'Who needs a great singer?' Jay said, needled but keeping up the smile for the cameras. 'Were Kurt Cobain or Elvis great singers? Is Bob Dylan a great singer? It's stage presence that counts. And as for the real reason Brontobyte got into *Rock War* . . .'

Now Erin's face flashed with proper anger. 'What?'

Jay shrugged, and put a hand over his face, as if to indicate

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that he didn't want to say it on air.

'No,' Erin said, leaning forwards and placing one hand on a hip. 'Brontobyte got into *Rock War* because what?'

'Fine, let's air *all* our dirty linen in public,' Jay spat. 'Jet got into *Rock War* because we won Rock the Lock and put a great three-track demo online. Brontobyte only got in because of your rivalry with us. Having two bands that hate each other makes for good TV.'

'Listen to yourself,' Erin sneered. 'You're just jealous because your band kicked you out and me and Trissie got together.'

Jay ignored his cousin and kept going. 'You're a novelty act. Brontobyte is like the old granny contestant. The one who keeps falling on her arse on that ballroom dancing show, or the four-eyed kid who can't juggle on *Starmaker*.'

Erin didn't reply straight away, and Jay felt anxious as her eyes drilled him.

'You're so full of it!' Erin snapped, as she aimed a slap at his cheek.

Jay ducked the slap, but there was no avoiding a powerful two-handed shove that sent him sprawling sideways off his stool.

'Chicken-necked geek!' Erin shouted, knocking a studio light flying as she stormed out of shot.

Jay spent a couple of seconds reeling on grungy pub carpet, before using the stool as a prop to get up. Once he was vertical and had straightened out his T-shirt, he realised that the camera was still running.

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Angie lunged with an off-the-cuff question.

‘Jay, Brontobyte and Jet are going to be spending the next six weeks in close proximity at the *Rock War* boot camp. With all this tension between the two groups, how do you think that’s going to pan out?’

Jay realised he’d been manipulated by Angie’s questions and decided not to give her anything more to fuel the fire.

‘It’ll be peachy,’ he growled. ‘Fine and bloody dandy.’

2. Best Summer Ever

Dudley, West Midlands

‘Hi! My name’s Summer Smith. I’m fourteen years old and I’m the lead singer with Industrial Scale Slaughter . . . Sorry, can I do that again?’

‘What for?’ Joseph, the director, asked. The little man wore a spotted cravat, a grey Father Christmas beard and gave the impression that he was directing next year’s Best Picture winner, rather than filming a reality TV contestant on a council estate in Dudley.

‘I dunno. Didn’t my voice seem funny?’

‘Your voice was perfection,’ Joseph said, before turning to the cameraman. ‘That’s a wrap.’

‘Can I finish packing my clothes now?’ Summer asked.

Joseph ignored Summer, and kept speaking to his cameraman. His toff’s accent wasn’t something you heard much around here. ‘I need establishing shots from this room,’ Joseph said. ‘Get some books, clothes on the floor.’

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The swimming medals are a must, and the photo of the mother on the radiator.'

Summer's bedroom was only a metre wider than her single bed, and even though she didn't have many clothes, the room never looked tidy because she had more stuff than fitted in her pink-doored wardrobe.

'I'd prefer to film out on the balcony,' Summer said. 'I'm sweating under these lights.'

Joseph put a hand on Summer's shoulder, and stood close. Maybe it was just because there wasn't much space with camera and lights set up in her titchy bedroom, but she felt creeped out having two strange blokes invading her most personal space.

'I'm painting a portrait of you, sweetheart,' Joseph explained. 'This room. Your clothes, music, posters. In the hands of a skilful editor, a few brief shots paint a better picture than a five-minute speech.'

Summer didn't like the idea of a picture painted by the contents of her drab bedroom, but she didn't have the courage to argue with a director on the first morning of shooting. And she had more important stuff to worry about.

While the director headed out to set up the next shot in the living-room, Summer did an awkward dance with the cameraman, snatching up her clothes while he took the camera off tripod and filmed a few establishing shots and close-ups.

Summer didn't have proper luggage, so she grabbed stuff and pushed it into a pair of Lidl bags-for-life.

‘You’re not filming my dirty bras, are you?’ Summer asked.

The young camera operator was momentarily flustered, and Summer used his discomfort as an opportunity to take the framed photo of her mother off the radiator and drop it through the gap between her bed and the wall. The last thing she wanted to do was give someone an excuse to start asking questions about her mum.

‘Summer, darling,’ Joseph called airily. ‘Could you be a petal and come through to the drawing-room?’

Summer wasn’t exactly sure what a drawing-room was, but she found Joe in the living-room. Summer’s nan, Eileen, sat in her usual armchair with her oxygen mask dangling around her bust, and two old-skool hard-sided suitcases packed and ready on the sofa.

‘Your grandmother’s been telling me how hard you work looking after her,’ Joseph said, sounding genuinely impressed.

‘Washing, cooking, shopping,’ Eileen said. ‘Without Summer’s help, I’d be six feet under for sure.’

‘Don’t be daft, Nan,’ Summer said.

Eileen wagged her finger. ‘How many times have you called the ambulance when my lungs are bad? First time she called 999 she were barely six years old.’

‘Phenomenal,’ Joseph said, as he gave Summer a broad smile. ‘You’re a hero. So, Eileen, are you off to stay with relatives while Summer’s at boot camp?’

Eileen shook her head. ‘There’s no extended family, but

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- Lord be praised - Mr Wei kindly agreed to pay for me to spend six weeks in a respite home.'

Joseph scratched his beard. 'And Mr Wei is . . .?'

'My two band mates' dad,' Summer explained. 'Michelle and Lucy Wei. I feel really guilty taking his money, and putting my nan in a home while I'm off enjoying myself. But I've told her, if she doesn't like it, I'll leave boot camp and come straight back here to look after her.'

Eileen spoke firmly. 'I've told you *not* to worry about me, Summer. You've done more than your share and I'm sure there'll be nothing I can't put up with for a few weeks. Now get over here and plant one on your grandma.'

'I'll always worry about you,' Summer said, as she leaned forwards and kissed her nan on the cheek. 'Don't ever try and stop me.'

Joseph was touched by the kiss, and wished he'd had a camera rolling.

As Summer backed away, the cameraman came into the room and spoke like a foghorn. 'All done in there, guv.'

'Perfection!' Joseph said. 'So, we've got our little intro in Summer's bedroom. Now I want to film Eileen here telling us all about her granddaughter, and we'll wrap up on the doorstep with Summer and a tearful goodbye.'

'My nan's actually coming with us to the Weis' house. Their dad will take her to the care home later.'

'Yes, yes,' Joseph said. 'But we've got a wonderful story here with your difficult background and the way you've looked after your grandmother. If I have my way, this

segment about you will open the show.'

'I've seen the videos of you singing,' the cameraman said. 'You're beautiful, you've got a great voice and a gut-wrenching back story. You'll be going a long way in *Rock War*.'

Eileen cracked a huge smile. 'You hear that, my love? You're a red-hot favourite.'

Summer laughed. 'That's *not* what he said.'

'And you'll have to be careful,' Eileen teased. 'All the boys will be trying to get down your knickers.'

'Nan!' Summer gasped.

Joseph and the cameraman both laughed at Summer's red cheeks, as Joseph started giving instructions on how to set up lights for the interview with Eileen.

The upbeat mood broke when a breathless runner charged into the apartment. He was a uni student doing work experience. Quite beaky-looking, but he seemed really nice.

'There's three . . .' the runner gasped, before pausing to suck up all the air in the room. 'Three guys downstairs. I tried to get a fresh camera battery out of the van, like you asked. But they want to know why we're filming on their *turf*. Then one of them said he wanted fifty quid, and when I tried to open the back doors, he smashed the door mirror.'

'Little buggers,' Joseph said, as he straightened up purposefully.

'A satellite channel filmed a documentary about this estate a few years back,' Summer said. 'A lot of people got pissed off, saying it made us look like we were all dole bludgers and chavs.'

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‘Well, let’s go see if they can be reasoned with, shall we?’ Joseph said.

The cameraman was forty centimetres taller than Joseph and blocked his path. ‘What if it gets hairy? Why don’t we call the cops?’

Joseph squinted at the cameraman. ‘I’ve been in this game for thirty years, and I’m at where I’m at because Joseph Tucker *always* keeps on schedule. If we call the cops, it’ll take half an hour for them to arrive, by which time the bad guys will have run off. Then we’ll waste the rest of the morning giving pointless statements.’

Joseph barged past his cameraman, grabbing his white-handled cane from a coat hook as he charged out. Summer followed the cameraman and runner, with Eileen shouting ‘You be careful,’ after them.

Summer hoped that she might know the lads by the van, but after eight flights of stairs, she emerged cautiously out of the stairwell and saw unfamiliar young men in trainers and tracksuits.

‘So what’s this, a blasted shakedown?’ Joseph demanded, as he closed on the three men, extravagantly twirling his cane.

‘We don’t like people from outside filming here,’ the smallest of the three lads said, in an accent from somewhere out of Eastern Europe.

Joseph ignored him, and went straight to the biggest lad. He had a bull neck and skinhead. Clearly the leader, he stood blocking the hired van’s rear doors.

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‘Time is money,’ Joseph said, as he fearlessly faced down the huge man. ‘Back off now, lad, before you make a fool of yourself.’

Summer couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Joseph was at least sixty and not particularly well built. He wore old-man trousers that almost went up to his armpits, and suede moccasins half a step removed from carpet slippers.

‘Fifty quid, Santa Claus,’ the big guy said, as Joseph stopped less than a metre away.

‘Very amusing,’ Joseph said, as he tapped his pockets, rattling some small change. ‘You’re not getting fifty pence. Now let me in my damned van.’

As Joseph took a half-step towards the white doors, the thug made a lunge to push him away. As soon as the big lad was off balance, Joseph crouched, hooked his opponent’s ankle with his cane and sent him sprawling to the ground. Summer was shocked, not just by the way Joseph had knocked down a much larger opponent, but by the way he’d made it seem effortless. More like a dance step than an act of violence.

‘You old shit,’ the thug roared as he rolled on to his bum, before springing up and making another charge.

Joseph became a matador, sidestepping the charging bull, before delivering a neat karate chop to the back of his neck. The pain from this blow made the thug land hard on his kneecaps. Joseph took a step back and raised his walking cane.

‘Still game, sport?’ Joseph asked confidently, as the thug

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spluttered. His two pals didn't fancy their chances either, and after a tense moment the trio skulked off, hands in hoodies, expressions like little boys told off by their dad.

'God help me if I forget to back up the SD cards,' the cameraman joked. 'Where'd you learn that, Joseph?'

'Royal military police,' Joseph explained, as he puffed out his chest and swung his cane under his arm. 'I might be light on the scales, but I've seen off a few like him in my time.'

Joseph seemed a much grander figure to Summer as he theatrically threw open the van's rear doors.

'Voilà,' he said. 'Now, get your spare batteries, set up in the living-room. Let's interview Grandma and leave this tiresome place before anyone else tries it on.'