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Opening extract from
Gone Wild

Written by
Robert Muchamore

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1. Peanut Buttocks

Noah U da bestest! I vote twenty times 4 Frosty Vader afta every Rock War episodd. You in tha BEST band EVA. The others r all Willy heads LOLS and I hope Summer nevva comes bak!

YouTube post by FrostyFan609

‘It’s a little ghostly round here these days,’ Noah observed.

The fourteen-year-old rolled over black and white checkerboard tiles. Oak doors on one side of the balcony. The other had carved wooden rods, overhanging the grand ballroom at the heart of Rock War Manor. There was a GoPro camera mounted on the side of Noah’s wheelchair, recording footage for the sixty-three thousand followers of his vlog. His T-shirt had been sent in by a fan and read *Token Disabled Kid* in giant red letters.

‘All these bedrooms had contestants back in the summer hols,’ Noah told the camera, as he slowed down, nudged a

door and turned the little camera to look into a room.

There were bare IKEA mattresses. A squashed shampoo bottle and tatty neon pool shoes had been abandoned beneath a tubular metal bed frame.

‘Teresa and Jess from Dead Cat Bounce slept in here,’ Noah said, as his mind flashed with an image of Jess by the pool with lilac-painted toenails. ‘Voted off *Rock War* in week two. And I guess this whole house will be empty in five weeks’ time. Until season two . . . *Rock War* is pulling in the viewers, so season two is a safe bet.’

Noah took a right through a pair of swing doors, catching dust wafting from the manor’s decrepit warm-air heating system. Something came off his tyre tread on to his hand. Oily, light brown. He sniffed his palm.

‘One of the joys of being in a wheelchair,’ Noah told the camera, as he foraged for a tissue with his clean hand. ‘Peanut butter is far from the worst thing you can roll through.’

After wiping off, a swing left took Noah into one of three rooms that had been converted into classrooms. Traditional, graffitied wooden desks had been purchased by *Rock War*’s set-design team from some long-defunct boarding school, but the teacher’s workspace, storage cabinets and display board were clinically modern.

‘Ah-ha,’ the bearded Mr Fogel said, as he rose from the back of the empty classroom, behind a pile of exercise books. ‘The hotly anticipated essay, I presume.’

Fogel wore drainpipe Levi’s, thin tie and tan Dr Martens, like he’d done every day for the past thirty years. Noah slid three

lined sheets out of a pouch clipped to the arm of his chair.

‘Eight hundred words on *Political Change in pre-1917 Russia*,’ he said joylessly.

Fogel snatched the essay, then slammed it in his desk drawer like it had cooties. ‘I suppose you’re free to go and play with your little friends then,’ he said.

Noah seethed as he saw that Fogel’s pile of marking was topped by a half-finished crossword. Back home in Northern Ireland, Noah was a top student. But Venus TV – the company behind *Rock War* – had an eye on profit and kept the education budget to a minimum. Fogel and the other four teachers were fairly useless, and Noah realised that lessons at the manor were mostly about meeting laws on compulsory schooling, rather than teaching stuff that would actually be useful when he got back to his real school.

Getting to the ground floor meant backtracking past the ballroom to ride the only stair lift, then he wheeled outside and down the ramp at the manor’s main door. The main gate lay four hundred metres down a gravel path. But since there had been no recent scandals, journalists smoking outside the press tent were outnumbered by burly guards, dressed in rain-pelted bomber jackets.

Light drizzle crisped the November air, which Noah preferred to the fuzzy heat inside the manor. His hands were covered in gravel by the time he’d wheeled around to a former stable block that had been converted into rehearsal rooms for each of the twelve bands who’d been through the *Rock War* summer boot camp, plus two larger studios for music lessons.

‘Sadie?’ Noah asked, searching for his band mate and bestie as he rolled into his band, Frosty Vader’s, room.

But the light was out. The four members of Brontobyte were trying to play The Who’s ‘My Generation’ next door, and since Noah didn’t want to interrupt them, he chased down the chatter he could hear coming out of studio one.

It was crowded inside. Brothers Jay and Adam from Jet sprawled on beanbags, their permanently-hooded drummer Babatunde sat behind a kit, while the four members of Half Term Haircut sprawled out across the room. Up back, Dylan from Pandas of Doom sat in a cigarette haze, while Michelle from Industrial Scale Slaughter sat with her back resting against his piano stool.

‘Anyone seen Sadie?’ Noah asked. ‘Or my other band mates?’

‘Is that GoPro running?’ a lad from Half Term Haircut, who held a half-drunk beer, asked anxiously. ‘My ’rents will blow up if they see us boozing.’

Noah’s eyes stung from smoke as he looked around, seeing a dozen empty beer bottles on the floor as Dylan frantically stubbed out a hand-rolled cigarette and Michelle shouted, ‘Noah’s a narc!’

‘Camera’s off,’ Noah blurted, not actually sure whether it was or wasn’t. ‘I’m cool!’

Then there was a whole lot of drunk giggling.

‘Is that a spliff you’re smoking?’ Noah asked.

‘This is a no smoking area,’ Dylan grinned. ‘Any smoke you see is caused by a short circuit in my Hammond organ.’

‘Sure,’ Noah said, smiling awkwardly.

There was more guilty laughter as Noah raised his hands and started turning his chair around to exit. 'I'm sorry I interrupted,' he said stiffly. 'If you see Sadie—'

'Stick around,' Jay interrupted. 'We know you're not a narc, Noah. Michelle's just being psycho, as normal.'

Babatunde reached into a cooler hidden under a beanbag chair and pulled a green bottle. 'Stay and have a beer with us.'

The muscular drummer's words slurred like he'd drunk a couple already. Noah was only looking for Sadie out of habit, so he shut the door and rolled up to grab the just-opened beer.

'Cheers, everyone,' Noah said, not loving the taste as he sucked foam creeping from the bottle's neck.

Noah wheeled over towards the three members of Jet. He got on OK with them, while he'd always found Half Term Haircut a touch snobby.

'You finish that essay?' Jay's older brother, Adam, asked.

'Forced me to,' Noah said weakly. 'Mr Fogel's an ass.'

'I heard he got sacked from two schools,' Babatunde said. 'Can't control a class, then gets all macho and comes down on kids he thinks won't fight back.'

'Fogel properly sucks,' Noah agreed, as he did a little beer belch. 'All the catching up I'll have to do when I get back to school . . .'

'Not going back to school,' Adam said, smirking. 'This time next year, I'll be playing stadiums and licking beer off swimwear models.'

'Drink to that,' Babatunde said, raising his beer.

The guys from Half Term Haircut raised their drinks too.

‘You think *you’ll* win?’ their lead singer, Owen, shouted.

‘We sure as hell can’t *all* win,’ Noah said. Which made everyone go quiet.

‘All hail Lord Buzzkill,’ Michelle said, as she gave Noah evil eyes.

‘Noah’s not wrong though,’ Jay said, sensing his friend’s discomfort.

‘Did that whole bag of plums get eaten?’ Michelle asked drunkenly. ‘They were the *best* plums.’

‘Actually, Noah, you have a good ear,’ Dylan noted.

‘Plums, plums, plums!’ Michelle shouted, as she stood up and stomped around. But she was drunk and tilted into the wall, almost knocking the Hammond organ off its stand.

‘We’ve been working on our original compositions for Saturday’s show,’ Dylan explained. ‘Jay came up with this riff for a song he’s working on. But Half Term Haircut kinda tweaked it and they both claim their version is best.’

Noah liked that his opinion mattered. ‘I’m all ears.’

Jay grabbed an acoustic guitar and started playing the intro to a song. It had a good beat and Jay spoke as he played. ‘So here’s where Theo cuts in with the lyric. *Cut me slowly cos you’re cruel. Knife to my heart, something, something, something.*’

‘Where is Theo?’ Noah asked, as he realised Jet were a man down.

‘Magazine interview in London,’ Jay explained. ‘He’s not big on rehearsals.’

As Jay stopped playing, the guitarist from Half Term Haircut cut in with a similar riff, only faster. And Owen

sang the lyric. 'Life gone in a puff. Yesterday I had love. Today I'm just a shaaaaa-dow . . .'

When the guitar stopped, Noah held every eye in the room. He took a slow mouthful of beer while deciding what to say.

'Half Term Haircut have the better lyric, obviously,' he began.

Jay sounded irritated. 'I'm not asking about the lyric.'

Noah twisted in his chair. He honestly preferred the faster version played by Half Term Haircut. But Half Term Haircut were the clean-cut, good-looking sort who'd always say the right thing to your face, while bitching behind your back. Whereas Jet were rough around the edges, but genuinely nice guys.

'I guess I prefer Jay's original,' Noah lied. 'But they're *both* good. Now I guess the question is, who gets to use the riff?'

'Well it's mine, obviously,' Jay said. 'Theirs is just an adaptation.'

Dylan shook his head. 'Jay, you can't float something like that in a songwriting session and then claim dibs. We're bouncing ideas. Half Term Haircut's version is different. It's not like they stole a finished song.'

Jay wasn't pleased, but dismissed this with his hand. 'I've got *heaps* of other ideas I can use.'

Adam put a hand in front of his brother's mouth. 'Keep 'em to yourself this time, dumbass.'

'Noah's right, both variants work,' Dylan said. 'Once you've polished them up, I'd be happy to work on the arrangements and record them with you.'

The four Haircuts and three members of Jet all nodded. Noah gave Dylan a confused look. 'Why are you helping these guys with their songs? What about your *own* band?'

Dylan shrugged. 'Eve and Max are writing the Pandas' song. She's barely speaking to me since we broke up and her brother never liked me to start with. Got sick of fighting every inch, so now I just rock up and play what I'm told.'

Jay laughed. 'But you're *full* of ideas, Dylan! I'd much rather you recorded our songs than the alleged professionals up at the manor.'

'Appreciated, bro,' Dylan said. 'I'd sooner be producing in a studio with a comfy chair and a nice fat joint than out on stage getting all sweaty.'

'Good job too,' Babatunde said, grinning. 'You ain't got the looks to be a pop star.'

Dylan scoffed, 'Says the boy in the permanent hoodie and ten-dollar shades.'

Babatunde gave Dylan a friendly finger, as Adam stood up, scratching his belly.

'Screw all of yous,' Adam said, as he rose from his beanbag and headed for the exit. 'Arse is numb, bladder's full, and my belly says dinner-time.'

Jay stood up too, holding his back like he was old. 'I'd better shift too. Publicity wants me to get my hair trimmed before tonight's premiere.'

2. Reality Bites

TV Hits magazine, November 18th issue

MONTHLY HIGHLIGHT

**Rock War: Battle Zone – Saturdays, 8 p.m.,
Channel Six**

While the revival of Karen Trim's Hit Machine has struggled to rekindle the audiences that once made it Channel Six's biggest show, teen upstart Rock War has risen phoenix-like to become the most watched reality show on British telly.

The warts-and-all approach puts the show in stark contrast to glitzier reality rivals, while strong online presence and contestant vlogs have made it a smash hit amongst tweens and teens.

The contestants' outrageous behaviour led to the withdrawal of show sponsor Rage Cola and almost to the show's financial collapse. But Rock War now has new

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backers and a huge fan base, reflected in the fact that the Rock War format has already sold to seven overseas territories, including Spain, France and Japan.

The next few weeks of Battle Zone will be crunch time for the teenage contestants. By the time you read this article, Rock War's original twelve bands will be whittled down to six. Upcoming shows will see three more bands getting the boot, leaving a final trio to battle it out in the season's finale, which has now been moved from its original mid-December slot to be shown live on Christmas Eve.

Bookmakers now rate heartthrob rockers Half Term Haircut and Theo Richardson's outrageously behaved Jet as joint favourites to win the competition. But hard-core rockers Industrial Scale Slaughter remain in the competition, minus their talented lead singer, Summer Smith.

Summer remains in hospital, recovering from a broken arm and serious internal injuries sustained in a motorbike collision that aired live on the BBC News channel.

While Rock War's producers remain tight-lipped, rumours persist that Summer could return for the final rounds. Always assuming that her band doesn't get voted off first.

London's Leicester Square was roped off. Forty-metre banners hung down from the giant Empire cinema, showing a flash Audi careering up a ramp, plugging the European premiere of *Chequered Flag IV – Ultimate Heist*. Supercars had been parked

in the square's centre, and there were flashes and squeals as DeAngelo Hunt stepped out of the cinema, waving a hand decked with huge gold rings.

Cast in hit US sitcom *Minefield* as a chubby eleven-year-old, DeAngelo had packed on muscle after the show ended, reinventing himself as the action hero in the billion-dollar-grossing *Chequered Flag* movies and spin-off video games. Still only twenty-four, a Hollywood producer couldn't even think of having him in their movie without cutting a cheque for twenty-five million.

DeAngelo worked the crowd the way he'd been doing his whole life. High fives, autographs and near hysteria when he pulled his trademark move: removing a gold ring and throwing it into the crowd.

'You're beautiful,' he told them. 'You my people!'

But he was barely halfway down the red carpet when a bigger cheer upstaged him. A girl started rattling her autograph pad and yelled, 'Theo,' right in DeAngelo's ear.

'Whoa!' DeAngelo said, cupping his ear. 'You got lungs, girl!'

'Theo,' she repeated, rattling the notebook.

DeAngelo looked back towards the cinema, seeing four teenagers getting engulfed in screams and shielding their eyes from camera flashes. He stepped back into the centre of the red carpet and caught the ear of a leggy publicist.

'Who's all that?'

'They're from *Rock War*.'

'Am I supposed to know what that is?'

The publicist smiled. 'It's a reality show that's been a huge hit with your key teen demographic.'

'So, I should go say hi?' DeAngelo asked.

'They'll run that picture for sure,' the publicist said brightly. 'The tall good-looking one is Theo. Adam's the blond one, Jay's the skinny one and the black dude is Babatunde.'

'The white boys all alike,' DeAngelo noted.

'They're brothers.'

Jay was blinded by the flashes and shielded his eyes, even though media training taught him never to do that, unless he wanted to see a hundred pictures of himself looking gormless. Theo and Adam had dived off to kiss girls and sign autographs, so Jay found himself alone on the red carpet as a dozen gold rings reached out to shake.

'They tell me your show is hot stuff,' DeAngelo said.

Jay had seen *Chequered Flag III* at the Wood Green Cineworld with his mate Salman. He'd spent summer mornings watching Channel Four reruns of *Minefield* with his cousin Erin. *Now I'm on a red carpet with a movie star, a thousand screaming girls and two hundred people taking my photograph. DeAngelo has a really strong handshake and those rings dig right in.*

'Hey,' Jay said, hiding the pain in his hand as a TV journalist stuck a microphone in his face. 'How d'you like DeAngelo's new movie?'

'Great,' Jay said, as if he'd say anything else with DeAngelo's bulk looming. 'Maybe the best *Chequered Flag* yet. Roll on number five!'

'That's what I like to hear,' DeAngelo beamed, as he gave

Jay an almighty slap on the back. 'We're so proud of this movie, know what I'm sayin'? Lotta movie franchises go stale, but *Chequered Flag* is still at the top of its game.'

While Jay was the creative heart of his band, Theo was the bad-boy lead singer who was getting his name chanted by the crowd. The media wanted Theo and DeAngelo in the same shot.

'Good to meet you, dude,' Theo said, high-fiving DeAngelo and making Jay envy his brother's cocky confidence.

'I've never seen this *Rock War* show,' DeAngelo told the camera, as a hundred flashes popped. 'Judging by this crowd, I'd better catch a few episodes before I head back stateside.'

Theo looked good in wingtips and a tailored suit, but his skinhead and neck tattoo still gave off menace.

'So, Theo, was this your first movie premiere?' the journalist asked.

'Old hand,' Theo said. 'Went to one a few weeks back.'

'How was the new *Chequered Flag*?' the TV journalist asked, as DeAngelo smiled expectantly.

'Dick fungus,' Theo said. 'Cheesiest thing I've seen in a long time. Girl in that orange bikini was the only thing worth watching.'

Anger ripped across DeAngelo's face.

'Got no respect,' DeAngelo snarled, wagging a finger. 'People got a right to their opinion, but you just a rude little boy.'

Theo flipped DeAngelo off, then craned his neck and licked the TV camera lens.

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Every camera flashed as someone in the crowd shouted, 'Mess him up, Theo.'

The journalist faked horror for the camera, but was actually delighted to have something other than bland statements about how great the movie was. Theo would have happily tussled on the red carpet, but DeAngelo was a pro and cracked a smile as he eyed another TV reporter.

'Where you been lately, sugar?' DeAngelo purred, giving the reporter a kiss. 'That dress is beautiful.'

Adam shook his head at Jay as he followed Theo towards their waiting limo. 'I won't be holding my breath for another premiere invitation.'