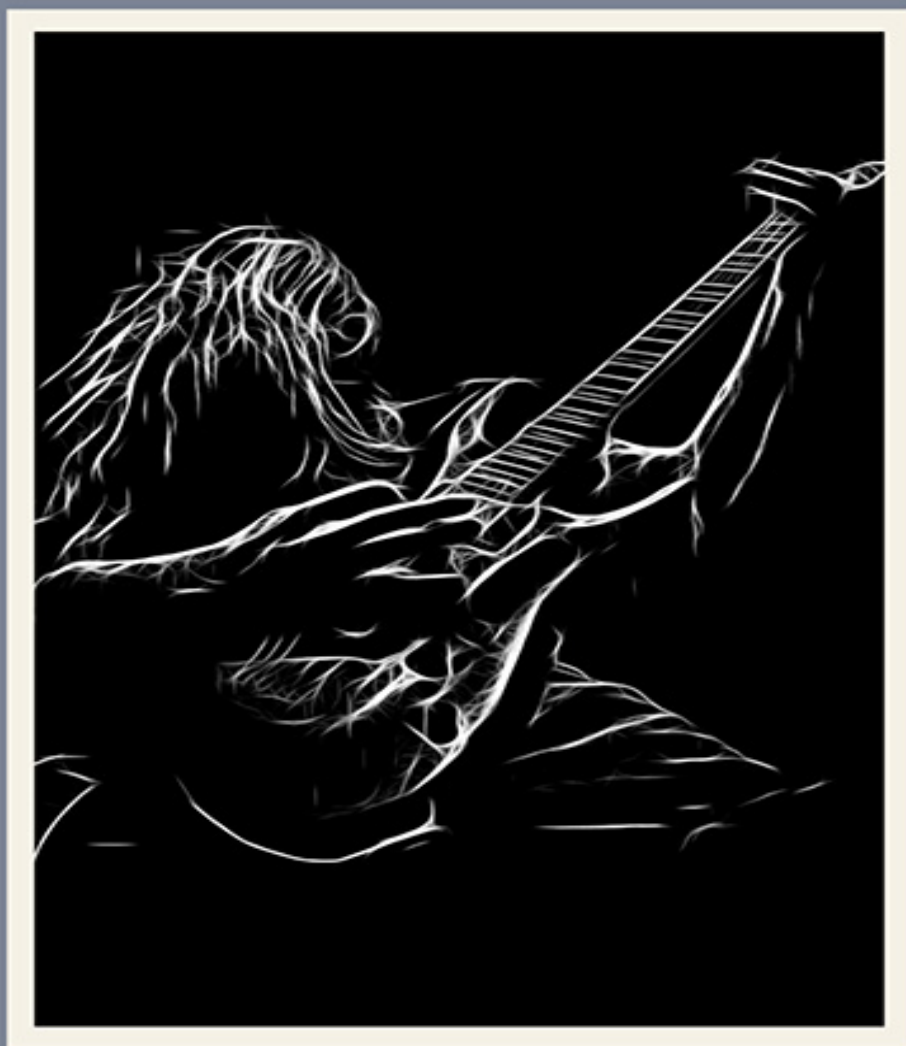


HELLCATS

A story of loss,
friendship and lots of
rock'n'roll



Kenny Behnke-Gapp

For Oli, Gitte and Bernd ...and the Elde

The Hellcats, Death Riders, Mad Vipers, Kryptoblood and Cerridwen are fictional. Feel free to listen to the other bands mentioned in the novel.

At a time when Lemmy was still alive, when one was allowed to smoke in pubs and stuff like that...

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Epilogue

Chapter 1

“Wow, that brew is really ace,” said Steve in his broadest Scouse dialect and put the empty can of Grolsch onto the table. “The Dutch can actually make good beer,” said Dave surprised and also got himself another can. “And a bit of gin for later, he, he”, said Steve and grabbed his drumsticks. He hit the table with them, the whole mess of beer cans, empty plates, ashtrays and other stuff – and Stuart.

“Hey, sod off, you’re getting on my nerves with those fucking sticks!” “Am I?” Steve grinned and continued, jabbing Stuart and Dave and drumming on some still filled beer cans. “Save your energy for later, for the show,” Alastair, the drum roadie, said with a broad grin. “I’m full of energy today!” said Steve and started to bounce about like a wild kangaroo. “That’s his way of dealing with stage fright, even when we were still a fucking teenage band playing at school,” said Dave smiling. “I can’t imagine the Hellcats as a teenage band playing at school,” replied Jim, the tour manager, who has seen worse in his life. For a metal band, the Hellcats were really well-behaved, innocent. But he would be damned to tell them, otherwise Steve would become even wilder and crazier.

“You should get dressed now. The Death Riders are starting. They just play for 45 minutes, as you know very well,” Jim rushed the guys. They were sitting in the rather comfortable and modern backstage area of the Modern Concert Gebouw in Enschede. With loads of provisions like Dutch beer, Jenever and pies and burgers which looked like something Moroccan. The changing rooms were at the back, but Jim didn’t want to poke his nose in there since boots, studded leather and lots of gear were spilling from open bags. It looked like, well, what it looks like when men travel.

“Where the hell is Darren?” asked Steve and gulped down another beer. The intro of the Death Riders and the first riffs could be heard from the outside. “He wanted to make a phone call,” said Stuart and shovelled peanuts into his mouth. “He should get his ass over here,” Steve moaned. He threw himself on the leather sofa and poked his drumsticks everywhere.

‘Teenage band’, that’s what Dave had said. Oh my god, that was so long ago! For a second, he could see himself as the lanky 17-year-old boy at Birkenhead Comprehensive School. He hadn’t been accepted to grammar school in Liverpool, much to the detriment of his parents, because music had always been more important to him. But they, after all, had given him his first drum kit when he was ten. And after having played in the school band, where he was forced to play all that boring old stuff, he wanted to have his own band. A heavy metal band. Like Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Motörhead. It wasn’t long before he had found the perfectly suitable lads. Dave on the bass, Darren on the lead and rhythm guitar, and since they couldn’t find a singer who fit their style, Stuart, the second guitar player, had to do the vocals. His screeching voice had somehow become their trademark. The small, tiny Stuart, who was 16 and still had short hair. As all of them had been babyfaced, they had tried to look especially fierce and wild, had worn long spikes and studded leather to scare the hell out of people and to be taken seriously. Steve lit a cigarette and thought of the old times. When they were still called Dragonheart instead of Hellcats.

And now they were in their late 30s, had published eight albums, had even been on tour in Japan. Sometimes, Steve just couldn’t believe it. When he is back at home after the tour, he should really dig out old pictures and posters. Small lads with a fierce look on their faces, playing rock star, living at their mum and dad’s far longer than other guys their age because they could not afford their own place and preferred

to invest their money in instruments, demo tapes, tour posters and a rattly old van. Incredible! And now they were here in this hall, courted by the press, with thousands of fans crowding the place. This tour had been particularly successful. They even made it into the U.K. charts with a ballad from their new album.

Steve's thoughts were interrupted when Dave let out an enervated "At last! Where the hell have you been?" next to him. He saw Dave throwing Darren a can of beer. "I need some stronger stuff!" is all Darren said. He grabbed the bottle of Jenever and gulped down a third of it. "Hey mate, what the fuck is going on?" Stuart asked. "Nothin," said Darren and stomped off. "Come on, you lot, get dressed!" Jim shouted clapping his hands.

Alex, the guitar roadie, burst in. "The girls outside are already wearing their cat's ears, ha, ha. The Death Riders won't like that." "They should be glad they've got the chance to play together with the Hellcats," said Jim and rushed Steve to the changing room.

Despite all those years and one or the other crisis, all the guys were close friends, but there was an even more special friendship between Steve and Darren. Steve's ex-girlfriend used to say they shared the same wavelength and were soulmates. Therefore, Steve immediately noticed that something wasn't right at all with Darren. It didn't look like just some annoyance you can overcome with a bit of alcohol. Before Steve took his stage outfit out of his bag, he went to the corner where Darren was putting on his leather trousers, angrily pulling at the straps on the side which had become entangled. "All good, Clarky?" "Yeah," was all he said, glowering at Steve. "What's the matter, mate? You can't go on stage like that." "Greta!" Darren spat and angrily searched his bag for a matching leather top.

Greta, shit....Darren's girlfriend. Who had made his life hell in the past few months. "Tell me after the show! Okay? We'll have a drink and some fun," said Steve. Darren just

growled and Dave looked at them questioningly. "Greta," Steve whispered before he turned to his gear. Dave rolled his eyes and tied his studded leather straps around his wrists.

Darren pulled a black torn and almost disintegrating vest top from his bag. He put a net shirt over it so that lots of skin was visible. After all, he spent hours in the tanning studio for a perfect body. Stuart would say that Darren should be their singer because he's the biggest poser under the sun. This thought made him smile for a moment.

But when he sat down at the dressing table to brush his long dark curls, his blood began to boil again. Once again, talking to his girlfriend had been a nuisance. Like so often in the past few weeks. Not only that Greta had decided against coming to the gigs in Holland as she had promised. No, she had made an awful scene again. She was sick and tired of it all; he was never at home; they never had any time together. Darren simply couldn't understand why she didn't give up her job and accompanied him on tour. He earned so much, she wouldn't need to work. They could have so much fun. Like in former times, when they went on their first big tours and Greta was almost more excited than he himself. But nowadays the only thing she did was nag. She wanted a real life, with a real home and children, steady, respectable, withdrawn.

Darren felt the adrenaline rising and almost pulled out some of his curls with the brush. Music was his life - and he should become the epitome of boring middle class and spend the whole day at home. Maybe even work from 9 to 5. He had worked so hard and relinquished so much, just to be in the position he was in today. A well-known rock star who was free and independent, who earned money with his passion, lots of money; who led an exciting life and was admired. Children - the last thing he needed.

Greta had always thought like him. They had been such a good team. How could they have ended up like this? And

the worst thing: her jealousy, a quite recent phenomenon. She claimed he had groupies and cheated on her all the time. One could see that from the photos, when he posed with fans. Those crowds of half naked girls with their stupid, damned cat's ears. Greta had talked herself into a rage on the phone. Those accusations had hurt Darren the most. He had never slept with another woman, although there had been opportunities enough. Of course he flirts with the fans, that's part of his job, it's fun. But everything within limits. He couldn't even remember a kiss or anything like that.

He drew eyeliner around his eyes and put on some lip gloss, a light blue studded leather strap around his neck completed his outfit. Bangles, studs, leather adorned his arms. A mixture of Halford, Mötley Crüe and Twisted Sister. However, when it came to make-up, Dave tended to outdo him. Which was only logical, as Dave was gay. They usually talked about eye-shadow and stuff like that when they got prepared for the stage, but today Darren just glowered at the mirror and thought of home. Which didn't feel comfortable at all.

He had bought this beautiful 19th century house in Port Sunlight, just 20 minutes from Liverpool, a couple of years ago. Complete with garden and everything, absolutely idyllic. The ideal place to relax after a tour and to work in his studio, which consisted of two big rooms on the ground floor. Should he become a musician who just works in the studio? Composing jingles for washing powder ads with a hoard of screaming kids running through the house? No, thank you very much. This was not what he expected from life. And Greta neither, as he had always been sure. Who the hell had put those fancy ideas into her head?

Stuart bent down to Darren. "Everything all right, mate?" "Fair to middle..." Darren pulled himself together and switched to business mode. Although he was still mad as hell. Greta should have joined them in Rotterdam the following day, but he could forget about it now. To hell with

her, she should rot away in Port Sunlight. He wouldn't give a damn.

"Stu, should we share the solo of Metal Goddess again?" Darren asked trying to avoid Steve, who was still busy with his drumsticks and poked everyone. "Yeah, that was ace yesterday," Stuart said and took his towel. "I love being spontaneous. The audience seemed to like it, too." "Those little girls couldn't tell the difference anyway, they just stood there and adored you, whatever you played." said Dave with a smirk. He was wearing so much studded leather that Darren had to get out of his way if he didn't want to end up like a Swiss cheese.

Shouts for an encore could be heard from the outside, followed by some people screaming "Hellcaaats!!!". The roadies were fanning out to be there in time when the support act was finished. Steve robbed Stuart's hairspray and left a sticky fog all over the dressing room. He sprayed tons of the stuff on his blond hair, ruffled it, but after two minutes on the drums, his hair would be as straight as a ruler again. "Poser!" Stuart rapped him on his bum. "Fuck you!" said Steve, who envied him that mane of blond curls that almost reached his bum. "Like small girlyies," Jim complained. "I know you're a poser band, but sometimes it's just too much." But he seemed more amused than annoyed. Stuart planted a kiss on his bald head. "Yes, Daddy, we are a pain in the ass, aren't we?" Jim punched him and walked away muttering something under his breath. They guys laughed out loud.

Only Darren stood a bit apart, he still wasn't in the right mood. Looking forward to a show, all the excitement, impatience, out on stage at last, and then just music, music, what an ecstasy. That yearning for exactly that state of mind, every evening, again and again. All that adrenaline. But Darren just sighed. Until Dave pulled him over to the others who started to scream: "Fuckin' hell! Fuckin' hell! Fuckin' Hellcaaats!!!" Their common battle cry for many

years, a kind of ritual before every show. And, again, Steve bounced about like a goat gone wild, played a drum solo on a little wall, on a chair and eventually on Stuart's belly.

Before they started to roll about like puppies, Jim sent them out. The Death Riders guys were discussing angrily with a technician behind the stage. There must have been some problems with the sound. "What's wrong with the sound?" Darren pushed himself into the crowd of musicians and technicians and realised that this day was going to be even more rotten. "All good. A monitor had called it a day. But everything has been fixed. In the audience, the sound was great," Alex calmed him down and put his Flying V guitar into his hand. "If that fucking monitor calls it a day later, I will just naff off! Then you can play that fucking shit on your own!" Darren spat. He slung the black and white Flying V around his body, his favourite guitar, and plugged it into the tuner. Even though Alex had organised all of that before, as was his job. "What's wrong with him?", asked Tony, the Death Riders' roadie pointing to Darren. "Just leave him in peace, he's gonna be okay," said Jim and continued to hurry about.

The other guys left the pouting and complaining Darren to his own devices and looked down to the stage where Alastair was checking the sound of Steve's drum kit once again, that glittering kit with the cat's logo and the pentagrams on the two bass drums. Steve pulled Stuart closer to him and showed him all those fans. Lots of them, especially the girls, were wearing cat's ears. Some had put on make-up to look like cats.

Nobody could really remember how that had started out with those ears. Stuart wore a cat mask in a picture or during a show, on one of the album covers the "Hellcats" were pictured in hell with glowing eyes and long claws, leather and studs on their paws. Not long afterwards, fans showed up wearing cat make-up and those "ears" also used in the SM scene. Their then manager Adrian Summers had

immediately seen the potential of the whole thing and had hundreds of those wet-look ears produced as band merchandise. With pentagrams on or between the ears.

“Wow, lots of hot kitties!” cackled Stuart. “Mind them predators, they might scratch yer,” Dave teased him. After the show, Stuart would often go “hunting”, but in the end it was never more than perhaps a drink with a girl fan in the hotel bar because he simply loved his wife too much.

Waiting before the show started was something the guys hated; when things were still being prepared and moved on stage, when there was a delay and they could not start immediately. But sitting backstage was no option either when you were eager to enter the stage, play live, party; when you yearned for that special feeling you could just get in front of a crowd.

At last, Alex gave them a thumbs-up. “Right, there you go,” he said, still fiddling with Darren’s transmitter. Steve climbed up to the platform with his drum kit and took another swig from his beer can after having settled down comfortably on his stool. The intro was booming all over the place, a nicely devilish chant with demonic laughter, and the cat’s eyes of the Hellcats’ logo were glowing above the drums. Darren took his usual spot on the left-hand side of the stage, Stuart went to the microphone in the centre and Dave stayed on the right with his bass guitar. For the moment, at least. Without the spotlights on, Darren could see the people in the front row rather clearly, despite the darkness.

The intro had just faded out when big columns of fire shot into the air, right in the front part of the stage, and while drums and guitars were beginning simultaneously, Stuart let out his bloodcurdling scream, the beginning of “Warriors of the darkest nights”. The fans were screaming and Darren pulled on the strings like a madman. Aw, how good it felt to get rid of all the anger and emotions! This aggressive opener was really made for it.

Darren kicked the monitor, which then slid off into Stuart's direction. Alex just tapped his forehead and pushed the thing back to its position. But Darren felt better. With every staccato of his rhythm guitar he felt more relieved and more himself. Greta could kiss his ass. The whole world could kiss his ass. This was his song. He was a metal warrior, a rock star, free, no-one could tell him what to do. Damn, this felt so good.

They played another song with him on rhythm guitar, so he could keep his Flying V. He grinned towards Stuart who cheered on the fans. Everything was okay again, the way it should be. Dave ran over the stage with his bass, played next to Darren or climbed up to the drum platform, teasing Steve. The guys were relaxed and had fun. Steve had a huge smile on his face. Of course, his hair was completely straight and rather wet after only 15 minutes. Darren crashed into Stuart, when the latter didn't have to sing and was busy with his guitar antics. They both burst into laughter and played on.

The audience went berserk, sang along, threw cat's ears onto the stage and the security guys repeatedly had to carry off people who had climbed over the fencing. Darren took his Les Paul guitar, jet black, custom made, and played a five-minute solo. Even the last bit of frustration had left him by then. He lost himself in the sound, the different notes, his entire soul was music and sound. Like Randy Rhodes when he played Mr Crowley, Darren's favourite song. He played himself into a trance and hardly noticed Stuart nodding towards him, a sign to get started with the chorus. "On the guitar - Mister Darren Clark!" Stuart announced. The audience started to scream even louder and went completely berserk.

Darren felt utter bliss and was moving in spheres only he could enter, but it was time to get back to reality. He wiped the sweat off his face, gulped down half a bottle of water and found it difficult to get back into the normal rhythm of

the show. "A wicked way to hell," Stuart had announced, and at first, Darren had just played it on autopilot, still mesmerised by his solo.

Stuart jumped towards him and chased him with his guitar. They were having so much fun and "duelled" each other with their guitars, romping about like young boys. It occurred to Darren that Stuart should get himself a head-set for his microphone so that he wouldn't have to stick to his place in front of the mike stand when he sang. Stuart was always so full of energy and should be able to move freely.

"Finally, the drum solo, I'm sweating like a pig," Dave, who had moved to the other side of the stage, told Darren. They watched Steve, who was soaked in sweat. Luckily, the backstage area was provided with clean, modern showers...When the spotlights were directed on Steve, the other guys crept behind the platform, where towels, water and cigarettes were waiting for them. Dave had hammered it into Steve's head that his drum solos should never be shorter than a ciggy.

The blond drummer worked his toms and bass drums like a berserker, juggled his sticks, threw them high up into the air, almost drummed himself to death, included some tricks with the sticks. He was enjoying himself like mad, even though he had to acknowledge that his stamina had seen better days. The slightly increasing waistline made itself felt. Fuck, that great Dutch beer didn't improve things...Steve took a sip from the Grolsch can during a short break, grinning to himself. He then carried on smashing the drums to pieces, cheering on the fans, who were screaming "Hey!" along with his stomping rhythm. After a brilliant final he threw the sticks into the crowd. He almost hit Alex, who was re-attaching loose cables on the ground.

The other band members returned, poking each other in the ribs and fooling around. The end of the show was approaching, everything had worked out well, no technical glitches. With all the strain gone, it was pure fun in the end.

The pyrotechnics went off again, fiery fountains were spraying the air above the stage. The guys had to run for cover with every new burst of flames to protect their long hair from catching fire.

After the last song, Steve left his drums and came to the front, threw sticks into the crowd again. The other Hellcats shook hands in the front row, bent down for a second for some photos and it didn't take long for the mighty "Hellcats! Hellcats!" choir to fill the hall. The last light had disappeared, the sweaty guys eagerly grabbed some water bottles, high-fived each other, and the "Hellcats! Hellcats!" shouts were becoming louder and louder.

"Hey, let's do a third encore, they're in such a good mood," said Stuart and wiped off his smeared eyeliner to avoid looking like Alice Cooper. Wendy, the lady for "all important and unimportant situations" was already approaching him with eyeliner pencil and compact powder. "Thanx, hun, but not necessary, we won't take any pictures any more, and most of the press have left anyway," Stuart said. They had to go out again. "Well, "Kiss of the witch" or what?", Dave asked impatiently. "Yeah, mate, this one," both guitar players confirmed. A song from the first album that Darren had written in only two days and that had turned out to be the best one on the album. The fans always wanted to hear it as raw and inexperienced as on the record back then. They had wanted to re-record it for a long time, but no-one really dared to, afraid it wouldn't go down well with the fans.

So they had to get out on stage again, exhaust themselves, give it all, for one more time. The encores went by too fast and the guys weren't really in the mood to stop, there was still so much adrenaline in their bodies. But, at one point, it had to be enough. Jim flung some towels towards them and they left the stage. Steve noticed a girl with cat's ears who was biting and scratching a security guard to get backstage. But he wanted to take a shower

first. He was going to have a look later whether fans were still around. Moreover, he wanted to have a talk with Darren. Even if he seemed to have calmed down, Steve wanted to know what exactly was going on. Maybe his mate needed help.

Before taking a shower, however, everyone fell down onto the sofa where the Death Riders were hanging around. They got up and made space for the Hellcats, full of awe. "You were brilliant, fuckin' brilliant," said Kees the singer. "Hey, it's good fun with you lot," said Dave and went off for a beer. "Darren, you played an A at the end of "Doomsnight", what the fuck was that?" Stuart asked, nudging him in the side. "I know, I know. I just slid. Those strings suck, Alex has to exchange them later," said Darren and wiped off all the sweat. "Anyway, did you see all those cute girls, they were directly in front of you. I thought they were about to leap at you," Stuart said with a broad grin. "Far too young. Hey, there were some Japanese. Did you see their banner? Fan club Nippon, it said", remarked Darren.

"Do you think we stand any chance with those kitties out there?", asked Geert, the Death Riders drummer. "Give it a try!" Steve grinned. Dave glanced at him with a slightly sour look. Steve knew that Dave found Geert cute, but, alas, the latter was 200% hetero. Steve gave Dave an encouraging slap on the back. "You will find a nice tom cat, just wait for it," he whispered.

Wendy came in to collect the dirty clothes and take them to the laundry. But no way. Before getting undressed, Stuart and Darren needed to talk about the sound for ages, which guitar to use in this and that song, or whether "Merciless tales" should be played with more distortion. "Hey, you perfectionists, just relax! Let's party a bit!" Steve said to them. "Philistine, you don't have a clue. Sod off and smash on your drums!" was all Stuart said, smirking.

The whole backstage area was a mess, as usual. Jim was running to and fro and it took ages before everyone had got

changed and was ready. With wet curls and neatly dressed in a T-shirt with a skull and a pair of jeans, Darren came out of the shower and went to get the bottle of gin. But Steve pulled him aside. "Come on, the two of us could go to the hotel bar, then you can tell me what's wrong with Greta." "Ace, mate, now you reminded me of that shit again", Darren moaned, "and get lost with them drumsticks, you're a real pain." Steve poked Darren's belly with a stick and ran away chuckling. "This guy would drive me nuts!" Kees moaned. "That's what he does indeed. But that's the way he is," Stuart said laughing. "Hey, Stevie, what are you up to?" "I'm looking for a driver," Steve said and asked Wendy whether she could quickly drive him and Darren to the hotel. "Don't even think of it! I won't drive that hellish vehicle on the wrong side of the road! Why don't you look for the Dutch bloke?" "Where are you going? I thought you wanted to party," a disappointed Dave said. He was wielding his hairdryer like a sword, a glass of gin in the other hand. "We're having a private party today, just Darren and me." "And you're up to something. I can tell," Dave said chuckling.

Steve and Darren settled down on those plushy chairs in the Hilton bar and ordered a gin and tonic each. Darren found it amusing how the other hotel guests had looked at them indignantly when they had marched in here with their long hair. They should see them in their wild and fancy stage outfit!

"Right, now tell me what exactly is going on," said Steve, searching for his cigarettes. Darren started to talk and his glance became so fierce that he could have scared the hell out of people. Although he still looked like a baby-faced cherub with those long curls.

"Fuckin' hell, that's a nice shit!" Steve moaned sympathetically. "Why do women always end up like that? They want to have kids, settle down, soon the fun is over...but I wouldn't have thought Greta was like that. She

used to be a party animal, and I always thought she liked life on the road, the gigs, the tours.” “That’s what I also thought,” Darren growled. “Can you remember the tour we did after our first album? Greta was there, too, wasn’t she?” “Yeah...” “And Monica. Wow, I had still been together with Monica back then...You got to know Greta during that gig in Manchester, right?” “Nah, it was Chester. Hey, that was the gig when we wanted to take pictures of the cathedral.”

Darren seemed to get back his energy and good mood. “*In* the cathedral. And then we got kicked out. Stuart had brought such a funny bat costume and a skeleton.” Steve burst into laughter. “Yeah, our “Mr Crowley”, like Maiden had their Eddie.” “Holy shit, that was ace! The whole tour was sick! We even had two shows in Chester because it was completely sold out,” Darren remembered. “Of course, cos just a hundred people fit in there. And half of them were old hippies who were a bit shocked in the end, he,he. But the next day, all those metal heads showed up.”

Steve kept on reminiscing and waved to the bartender. Darren was quite drunk at that point, but he urgently needed another G+T. His frustration had returned. “Greta took part in all that fun. Sometimes, she was the wildest of us all. She would go from club to club till six in the morning and always knew who threw a party.” Steve didn’t know what to say. “Sorry, mate, I’d really like to help you. But I don’t have a clue about chicks. You know that I’m not good at relationships, they never last long.” “Can they really last? When you’re a musician?” Darren lit another cigarette. Steve shrugged his shoulders. “Remember Marcia? She always wanted to come to the gigs, but then she was jealous when a female fan wanted a picture, just a fuckin’ picture,” Steve said gloomily. “And that’s the other thing! Greta has suddenly become terribly jealous! It really pisses me off, all the more because I always behave!” Darren became so furious and gulped down his gin in one go. “What a cow! That’s so mean!” said Steve. “What shall I do? Tell

the fan girls to sod off? No, you won't get an autograph, no pictures. Cos the missus doesn't want it. Ridiculous. Bullshit..." Darren wasn't really stable any more and almost slid off his plush chair. Steve caught him in time. He wasn't very coherent any more, either.

"You know what," he said, as he poked the straw of his drink here and there like a drumstick. "Tomorrow we party hard and go cat hunting. Let it rip, mate, and Greta will really have a reason to be jealous!" Darren shook his head. "That's of no use!" "Of course it is! You're gonna have fun. Before you have to settle down and become a father." But Darren just moaned. He was tired and felt that he had become pissed as a skunk in the past two hours. So he wasn't really angry when the bartender gently ushered them out of the bar.

"What a dump is that? We gonna have fun right now and party!" Steve bellowed as he almost fell over the sofa next to them. Darren pulled him along, hoping he wouldn't puke in the lift. Steve was still in the mood to drink and have fun and dragged Darren to his room. "Where are the other?" Darren asked with a slur. "In bed. Wimps," Steve murmured and jumped to the mini bar. Vodka, not too shabby. They shared the bottle and emptied it soon. "An' tomorrer, oops, tomorrer we go kitt - kitt - kitty hunting, ouks," Steve mumbled. "Yeah, fuckin' hell, hellkitty, oops, hunting," Darren bleated.

Chapter 2

Holy shit, what a thick head! Darren woke up because someone seemed to be driving a drill into his brain. Bugger! He was lying on his bed still dressed. At least on his own bed...Steve...? Well.....yes, last night. That had obviously been a bit too much, that vodka. Hunting kitties...oh my god! He hadn't had such a hangover for years. He crawled down from the bed and went to the bathroom. An unshaven zombie with red eyes and wrinkles stared back at him from the mirror. Disgusting. 12 a.m., bugger it! Luckily, Rotterdam wasn't far away and they didn't have to fly anywhere.

He peeled his clothes off and took a long shower. After having taken two aspirins, he dropped himself onto the bed, still half wet. He called room service. Far too early to meet his mates. Steve won't feel much better either. He hoped that Jim would leave him in peace for some more minutes.

He still felt very sick when his breakfast was delivered, but those funny Dutch chocolate crumbles, hagelslag, made him curious and he even managed a slice of toast.

They were to leave in an hour's time. He could hang around with the guys - or talk to Greta again. If she took the plane right now she could make it to the soundcheck, and afterwards, they could spend a minute or two at the hotel. He drank the last sip of his tea and reached for the phone.

The talk turned out to be a disaster. "I'm sick and tired of living like a nomad! I want you to grow up, Darren! You have earned enough money, we could enjoy life now!" Darren felt as if someone had punched him hard on the nose. "It's not about the fuckin' money! Don't you really get it?! Music is my life! And not in some bloody studio. I have to be out on stage!" At one point he just put down the receiver. Full of

rage and frustration, he took his bag, put on his leather jacket with all the silver studs, hid behind his sunglasses and trudged into the lounge.

“Hey man, you’ve seen better days,” Stuart greeted him. “Fuck you!” Darren threw himself into a leather armchair and pouted for a while. “What’s wrong with him!” one of the Death Riders asked. “A thick head,” Jim moaned, “and Steve won’t look any better. He threw me out of his smoke-filled cave.” Steve only showed up when the driver arrived. With sunglasses, too, and white as chalk in the face. They all clambered into the little van. “We’re gonna hunt kitties tonight,” is all Darren told Steve. He slouched on his seat, closed his eyes and didn’t move any more.

The hall in Rotterdam could easily hold 15,000 people and looked rather modern. “WASP played here last week,” said Dave as he carried his bass into the building. Nobody else was allowed to touch the old Rickenbacher. “Why don’t you take that bloody guitar to bed with you?”, the guys regularly teased him. One after the other they had a look at the stage, went out again to the van to get their gear and other stuff.

Loaded with bags, they heard loud squeals and screams. Three girls with cat’s ears were running towards them from the trucks. “Hellcats! Hellcats!” they shouted. “Stuart! Stuart!” , “Hey, Darren!” They beleaguered the guys. “Yeah, right, an autograph, quickly, and then off with you!” said Jim enervated. “Hey, hang on, the Japanese girl is cute,” said Steve who had recovered again. “Steve, it’s time for the soundcheck. And who starts a soundcheck?” “Jim, you’re a slave driver. No rock ‘n’ roll spirit!” Steve complained and hugged the Japanese girl for a picture.

“Clarky, those three look like the right thing for tonight, don’t you think so?” Steve whispered to his friend. A tall Dutch blonde held on tight to Darren and drooled over him. He thought of the quarrel with Greta in the morning - and

gave Steve a nod. "Come to the trucks after the show, sweeties," Steve suggested and the girls squealed and tugged on his T-shirt. "Good Lord, now it's enough!" Jim bellowed. Stuart reluctantly let go of his Dutch lady and winked at her. "That's the right attitude, Darren!" said Steve and slapped him on the back, then he raced off to his drums.

Most of the work had been done by Alastair, but as a perfectionist, Steve always wanted to check his drums himself again. He pushed the snare a bit to the right, adjusted one of the bass drums. Dave and Darren sat huddled together on the stage with their legs dangling down, smoking, and Darren wanted to know whether he and Steve had missed out on anything last night.

"Stu, your turn!" Sam's voice came booming from the mixer console. Stuart took his Explorer guitar and let it roar. The Death Riders joined the Hellcats, looking at Stuart in awe. They handed Dave and Darren some beer cans. Everything took longer than planned although the team operated so well together. "The acoustics really suck!" Sam bellowed into the microphone. "And turn down your amp, Stu, that sounds like a cat in heat!"

The atmosphere on and next to the stage was rather tense. Jim discussed animatedly with the promoter, Wendy brought in the freshly washed stage outfit and ended up being the target of Jim's anger. The monitor sound was a catastrophe. "Ha, just like yesterday. Believe me, this shitty monitor has called it a day," Jan, the Dutch guitar player, told the Hellcats. Alex set off to work with a screwdriver. Steve was pissed off because he had to wait for ages until everybody else's problems had been solved. He threw drumsticks in all direction, which, in turn, drove Alastair mad.

At last, everything was fixed and the lads relaxed. They played three entire songs, and at one point, Stuart started to play the "Trooper". The rest of the band played along

laughing and full of enthusiasm. Darren pushed Stuart away from the microphone and sang from the bottom of his heart: "You take my life, but I'll take yours too!" The others, even the support band, sang and screamed along. "What the fuck are you doing?" Sam's voice bleated from the monitor. But the guys were having fun and ignored him. They played "Shout at the devil" and had the time of their life. As Sam had switched off Stuart's microphone, Darren used the mike he had for the backing vocals. He was so eager to sing those songs and enjoyed himself mightily. Stuart jumped over to him, they took turns singing and Dave joined in, too. "Shout, shout, shout at the dev..." Silence. No sound from the guitars either, just Steve could be heard smashing powerfully on the cymbals. Sam's voice could be heard again: "I'm delighted that you seem to have a lot of fun, but we've got a bloody job to do here. The Riders still need to do their soundcheck and the doors open at 7." The guys highfived each other, bounced in the air and ran backstage. That little spontaneous session had been exactly their idea of fun.

Stuart snatched an acoustic guitar before they went backstage. They were greeted by a huge buffet with all kinds of delicacies, the fridge was filled to the brim with drinks. "Shit, I still have an interview to do with the *Rotterdamsche Omroep*", came to Stuart's mind. Darren took the acoustic guitar from him and strummed a bit on it while Stuart sat down on a sofa in the corner with a journalist. Dave and Steve heaped burgers and salad on their plates and threw a slice of pineapple to Darren. "You see, you can't leave your paws off a guitar, but I must always put away my drumstick" Steve teased him. Dave snatched Steve's stick and speared a slice of pineapple with it. Chuckling, he provided the whole band with pineapple like this. "Me sons are 16, but more grownup than you twits," said Wendy matter-of-factly. "Aw, sweetheart!" Dave kissed her on the cheek. "Don't take the piss out of me, or

I'll drive that stick up yer queer ass." The guys roared with laughter. Whoever had taken on Wendy had done well. Rough, funny, with a heart of gold, just like they knew it from their working class mums and nans.

Darren couldn't be persuaded to have his picture taken. Without stage outfit and still a bit hung over, no way. "Come on, I know you like to pose," Stuart tried to coax him. But Darren couldn't be bothered, he'd rather strum on his guitar, have a beer and be left in peace. In the end, however, he talked shortly to the journalist. Stuart took the guitar and tried out something. "Something for a new song?" said Darren questioningly. "Maybe. I've got quite some ideas for the new album anyway." "Me too. I had recorded a bit at home." "And this time I'm gonna write the lyrics, he, he!" said Steve and squeezed himself between the two guitar players. "You're a buffoon! Sod off, get changed!" Stuart laughed and chased Steve away.

It was really high time they all got changed and prepared. "Everyone in black today," Dave announced. "If you like," said Darren. Yesterday's clothes weren't completely dry anyway. Wendy came shuffling in with boots and sneakers and complained. "Boo, lots of naked men!" "Why, we're wearing briefs," said Steve solemnly and chose a vest top with the band's logo on, black, of course. "Don't we have a pic where we're all on in briefs? Like Maiden during the Live after Dearth tour?" he then asked his mates. "Nope, and don't you get any ideas. Just look at that pot-belly of yours," said Stuart and put on black latex trousers with lots of studded belts and chains around them. "You are no spring chicken either, mate!" Steve pouted.

Darren didn't follow their squabbling any longer, put on his boots and thought whether the Explorer was better for the first song than the Flying V. Its sound was more in line with that hard, aggressive opener. Or wasn't it? He chose a necklace with a pentagram, applied some eyeliner and looked at his latest tattoo. On his left shoulder. They had

done a good job at that tattoo parlour in Manchester, he should get another one once he was home again. Home? He somehow wasn't in the mood to think of home. It just meant endless quarrels with Greta. But maybe she would be her old self again by the end of the tour?

Steve interrupted his thoughts. "Clarky, those three sweeties we met in the afternoon are in the first row. The Japanese girl is so cute." Darren grinned. "I think they're rather normal fans than groupies." "Don't be such a pessimist!" Steve passed him a can of beer and disappeared again.

Darren heard Dave complain that his perm was growing out too quickly, that he looked old with black lipstick. "Those worries of yours! I will never manage a poser band again," Jim groaned. He called them all to his corner to tell them about the tough schedule the next day. They would have to be in Amsterdam by 2pm and do some interviews there. Stuart would talk to the TV journalists, Darren and Dave would do the radio shows, Dave and Steve would meet with the metal magazines and the local newspaper. "So, no antics tonight, beddybies right after midnight," "Yes, Dad," Dave grunted as Darren let out a disgusted "Slave driver!" The lads would rather discover Amsterdam, visit one of those lovely coffee shops, have a decent spliff and glide through the grachts on a boat.

It seemed that the stage was ready for the guys. "Fuckin' hell! Fuckin' hell! Fuckin' Hellcaats!!!" the band shouted and everyone looked for their instruments. Dave chose the pitch black bass for the first few songs. Darren slung the Explorer around his body and plugged in the transmitter. The audience was making an enormous noise, and when the fireworks started, the whole hall was boiling. Steve's hangover seemed a thing of the past. He smashed on the drums like a berserker and grinned like a Cheshire cat. Darren was mightily amused by Stuart's "Scream for me Rotterdam!" Bruce Dickinson had always been Stuart's idol,

even when he was in the school band. Stuart would wear the same stuff like Bruce, announce the songs just like him. Iron Maiden were their idols, beyond reach. But then, after their fifth album, they went on tour with Maiden, as their support act in the U.K. Amazing things had happened in the past few years. The Hellcats were terribly successful and no-one could stop them, even at a time when so many fantastic new bands appeared, especially from Scandinavia. At times, Darren thought that none of this could be real. That he would have to canvass all the small clubs in Liverpool, Manchester, in the whole of Merseyside again to get a gig and toil on the Docks during the day.

Stuart seemed to have a problem with the sound. Something was wrong with the pick-ups on his guitar. "Play a solo!" Dave nudged Darren to the centre of the stage with his bass. Not too bad, a good opportunity to run riot with his guitar. Unlikely that anybody noticed this had not been planned and wasn't even part of the song. Stuart stood in the background bouncing up and down like an angry monkey. He gesticulated wildly and angrily grabbed the other Les Paul. Somehow, they made it through the song. The atmosphere out there was overwhelming, the fans had so much fun - just as much as the band. Stuart tried to talk to the audience in Dutch and his friends almost burst with laughter. When he disappeared for a second and returned with an orange top hat, the crowd roared even more.

Another successful show had come to an end. The tour was going really well. The venues were filled, new fans had been attracted, the whole of Europe was keen on the Hellcats. Steve had already thought about prolonging the tour. The others had liked the idea too. The Hellcats were called back to the stage again and again, they played three encores again and Dave even had to play a bass solo.

Steve had put aside some cat's ears before so that he could put them on his head now and toss them into the crowd. He winked at the girls in the front row and put ears

on Stuart's head. The photographers came running back. What a spectacle on stage! Darren decked out Jim and Alastair with ears and pulled them onto the stage. "Hurry up, I have to dismantle the drum kit!" Alastair shouted into Darren's ear. But the lads were in the mood to party and played a fourth encore. Something old again, "Demons and Angels", a rather slow song.

It was really enough then. The lads were soaked in sweat, had blisters on their fingers and needed a good pint. Steve waved to the Japanese girl again and made signs meaning he wanted to meet her later. As some fans were standing at the entrance to the backstage area, pushing and shoving against the security people, the Hellcats went to the fence, signed tickets and CDs, had their pictures taken with some fans. "Well, if you really want a pic with a sweaty monster with smeared make-up..." Stuart said to a woman with cat make-up. Everyone rushed backstage then to have pint and to toast each other. Darren actually liked that Jenever stuff. Although he had also asked Wendy to prepare a gin and tonic for him. Good old Wendy, the "mother" of the whole crew.

Stuart fetched his Ibanez guitar which had given up the ghost and doctored about. "Have a shower! I'll first have to take care of the other guitars and the pedals and all that stuff," said Alex, his technician. "Nah! This fuckin' pick-up has to be exchanged. What a shitty thing, this mustn't happen!" "I know, I'll see to it. But the spareparts are in the truck now, I'll do it later." Darren sat down next to Stuart and they both screwed here and there. Steve told him to hurry up as they wanted to meet the girls. Darren still didn't know whether that was such a good idea. He drank some gin, right from the bottle, to put him in the right mood for some adventures. "Are you guys going off on your own again?" Dave complained. "Friend Darren needs some diversion. With some cute kittens," Steve replied and