

# **THE LIGHT FROM DEAD STARS**

**WRITTEN BY  
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First published in 2010

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**CHAPTER TWO:  
THE CHRONICLES OF COTTON DAVE**

I was in the right place at the right time to grab the chicken.

Crushed and pouring with sweat I watched Larry Bain holding a sustained note on the Jupiter Four while his bass swung loose around his neck. Keith Schofield on the other keyboard rack held the same note while Don Nelson punished his drums with roll after roll of rhythmic detonations, and as the final note of the gig echoed out of the sheets of dry ice pumping over the stage and through the blazing red lights, Jerry Moore ran laughing over to Larry and grabbed his mascot rubber chicken. He seemed to throw it right at me. It would have hit me in the face if I hadn't caught it. I got fury from Larry yelling to throw it back but I was too busy stuffing the chicken under my coat and ducking under the tonnage of biker madness descending around me like a rock slide. An army of fists and hands trying to get the chicken but I was gone while they were still beating the guy they thought had grabbed it and hooked up with Jake and Phil at the back of the arena. The music rattled around my head as we left the show and rode the jostling crowd through the venue's corridors, ejecting us like angry ants from a huge nest. Outside, the night wind cooled me after the heat of so many bodies crushed together. Bikers roared by on Harleys, yelling and laughing as fans clutched tour shirts and programmes while heading for the coaches waiting to take them home. The yell of the fake tour shirt vendors and the smell of burgers from takeaway vans hit me with intoxicating familiarity. I'm laughing like a drain because I've got Ozone's famous rubber chicken stuffed under my jacket but I'm praying that Jake and Phil keep quiet until we get to Betty.

"I've just seen the best gig of my life," I say to them as we head to the car park, but Jake thinks the band were lost without Thomas Winter. I open my jacket and show them the chicken. They try to look unimpressed.

"Selling it on eBayeBay?" asks Jake.

"No one will believe it's the original," says Phil. "I bet there's a million joke shop rubber chickens getting flying goggles and jackets the second this hits the web site."

I'm not thinking of eBay. Since I caught the chicken, I've had a plan. I open Betty's passenger door and we climb in. Traffic is heavy out of the car park and joining the motorway back to the north.

"I'm going to give Larry his chicken back," I tell them.

"You're the saddest person I know," Jake tells me.

"Cheers,"

"Fucking hell," whispers Phil.

I take Larry's rubber chicken and sit it upright against the far corner of the dash and the windscreen so it looks as if the bird is scanning the road ahead. The motorway unfolds before me, sucked under the VW camper like a black carpet. Clusters of city lights glow like galaxies as I push my foot onto the accelerator.

I've followed Ozone since I heard them at a party thrown by Jake's older brother six years ago. I was sixteen, just out of school. Jake's brother had a music collection that went back into vinyl and BASF tapes. When the band started they were called Ozone Layer. At the same party I lost my virginity to a girl named Jenny while Night Scare played downstairs. I can still remember the feel and the taste of her, the way she moved beneath me, her eyes closed and her mouth slightly open in the gloom of the bedroom; Rich girl Jenny who went home for the summer, rebelling against her parents with weed and too much cider. I've always associated with music. Most of my life has played to a soundtrack. Being a DJ was the only career choice for me. There was always a song for a particular girl or a day out and there's been so much music to choose from. Everyone through Tangerine Dream to David Bowie to Led Zeppelin, but I've always come back to Ozone. The line up of the band is forever in flux but the sound stays recognisable. That's down to Jerry Moore who finds like minded musicians like Larry Bain to contribute and fashion the style. I could sing you every Ozone song word for word, even back on albums when they were called Ozone Layer. I know all the albums in order of release as well as the bootlegs. I have concert DVDs with CDs and an autographed copy of 'Requiem for Post Doomsday Parties' signed by Mitch Lane. I never made it as a musician. Not that I tried really hard but I can handle a Strat with some basic Ozone chords and when I'm drunk I can play Zeppelin riffs.

Phil and Jake fall asleep in the back of Betty with torn blankets over them, pulled from the boxes containing my decks and the racks of CDs, tapes and mains cables stashed on the floor. I drove all night while dabbing at the residual speed in my coat pocket and the dawn is reddening the sky as I pull into a service station and fill up. In the shop the night shift guy is bleary and ready for home. I pay at the desk. The radio is playing Ozone over the speaker system and the counter guy smiles back assuming correctly that I'm a fan because of my Ozone tour shirt.

"Singer's dead," he says.

"What?" I ask focusing on his name badge, which reads 'Gary.'

I go cold as I look at the VW camper standing by the pumps.

"Singer's dead," comes the repeat from Gary.

"Thomas Winter?"

“That’s him,” nods Gary.

The D.J. interrupts the last few chords of the song and I stand with my ear cocked to the ceiling speaker, oblivious to the line of truck drivers forming behind me. “That was Ozone with 'Challenger', the last song recorded with Thomas Winter on vocal. Reports of his death from pneumonia are shocking the music world as Ozone completed a show last night without their singer.”

Thomas Winter is dead.

Someone else comes into the shop. He is carrying a newspaper and it’s the headline! ‘OZONE LOSES VOICE,’ I go to the news rack and it’s over every edition in big black print. I grab one and pay for it with the fuel. It’s a short drive back to the motorway slip road and soon I’m doing sixty in the slow lane heading for Phil and Jake’s place...Jesus, they don’t know. I’m suddenly tired. I have to think. I’m driving my home about like a fucking snail. All that I own is with me. I look at my face in the rear view mirror as I pull into a lay-by and switch off the engine. It’s early. I can grab an hour and still get Jake and Phil to their precious day jobs.

I bought my funeral black nineteen sixty eight VW camper van two years ago, the same day I got my driver’s license. It cost me seven hundred and it’s never let me down. I named her Betty. I’ve driven across Europe in it, slept in it, ate in it, done drugs and had sex on top of it although not at the same time, and I will never sell it. It has a bay window style as opposed to the earlier split screen version and has the rounded look of the more popular VW. The later ones were squared off and looked chunky. I have the original service card, stained and creased from years of storage in the front dash compartment and I think the milometer has gone around twice. I can get a steady sixty out of the single port 1600 engine which is a recondition. In the back there’s a range of hot plates, a grill, a fridge, gas bottle storage, clothes space, a sink and cupboards where I’ve bolted a portable TV. A detachable table is stored behind the driver’s seat and black curtains edge each window but they are so thin they block out about one percent of the sunlight so I don’t use them. The two seat couch at the back of the van pulls out into a bed that sits on the well tested suspension. The rest of the space is taken up with boxes of CDs and tapes and my twin decks. Speakers are stored under the plumbing of the sink. No danger of a leak as I never use it. I’m a self contained unit; a small space craft in a universe of roads.

I sleep stretched across the front seats for an hour and a half and dream of yelling voices, guitar feed back and Jake and Phil laughing at me from a concert stage. When I wake rain is rattling on the roof of the van. My head hurts although I didn’t drink. I sit up and aim the remote and catch the news. The usual is happening, death, kidnap, knife crime, approaching recession, but at the end of the news the reader could be looking straight at me.

“The members of the rock band Ozone, famous for seminal albums Wonderland Avenue and Dark Energy will attend the funeral of their singer this week. Thirty four year old Thomas Winter passed away at his home after a short illness. The band’s management are expected to make an announcement later today regarding the future of the group but have assured fans that the Summer Solstice appearance at Stone Henge is to go ahead.” And then almost as an afterthought, “No past members of the band are to attend the funeral.”

Unbelievable. The band’s management must have shut them out after all the court cases. No forgive and forget I guess. The news moves onto the weather and I lose interest. I can see if it’s going to rain by looking out of the window, and the downpour is slowing and the cloud clearing. Jake and Phil stir and wake and I tell them the news as I reach under the seat and pull my laptop onto my knees. I switch on and load up Ozone’s web page. There are a few memorial pictures posted already. Thomas in his hybrid Spitfire pilot’s uniform and long great coat and various members of the band in concert poses with the light show ablaze around them. The blog says van loads of fans are heading for Henge. I dig out some speed from the dash and do a line for a wake up then start Betty. I stash the laptop under the seat and rub the sleep from my eyes.

“So what happened?” asks Jake, yawning and stretching after I tell him about Thomas.

“Read all about it,” Jake catches the paper I throw at him and they sit in the back sharing the tabloid like two kids with a comic.

“Shit.” mumbles Phil.

“Can you drop us at work?” asks Jake.

“Fuck that, I want to eat,” complains Phil.

“I’m going in, I’ll get food at the canteen,” Jake shoots back.

“Will you two ladies make up your minds?” I ask.

“What are you going to do?” Jake asks me.

“I’ve got a gig in Southport then off to Henge.”

“Hippy,” mutters Phil.

“You should come,” I offer.

“We got work.”

“So have I, what do you think is paying for this life?”

“It’s not a proper job,” laughs Phil.

“More fun than yours.”

“Piss off,” they chime and I laugh back at them.

I pull out of the lay-by and head for the motorway for the last stretch to North Bay, about ten miles. When I've dropped Phil and Jake off I'll head to Charnock Richard and see what's happening. My heart is beating like a hammer from under cut speed. A hot yellow sun climbs over bare trees casting an amber light among the shadows as I hog the middle lane. I guess I was just born to go, or born to leave and look for a future as none seemed available in North Bay. DJing developed from an 'out of boredom' experience and my mind's inability to be satisfied with reality. The boxes in the back of Betty are full of Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Motor Head, old eighties compilations like Axe Attack, Scorpions, UFO, MSG, Queen, Gong and of course Ozone. They are perfect for gigs like Southport and I always end a set with Ozone's 'Off the Planet' EP, my signature sign off. I'll be playing it as a tribute tonight. Poor Thomas Winter; died after a short illness. That doesn't sound right. I know something of the politics of Ozone from the biography written by their ex manager. The book is a bitter tirade against Jerry Moore and the music biz. As with most ex members and managers they came away from the band minus their money. Jake and Phil don't have much to say about the death of Thomas Winter. I drop them off in North Bay and tell them I'll be in touch. I guess they are the only two friends I have. We went to school and college together. They studied English and wound up in a call centre, I did Engineering and got made redundant first year out so I focused on my music collection. Now it earns me cash so I guess it all worked out in a Scooby-Doo kind of way. Another line of speed and I have the focus to drive back up the motorway to get breakfast then I'll sleep and be fresh for Southport tonight.

Charnock Richard grows out of the morning haze and I take the slip road and find a space at the edge of the car park so I can stretch my legs and get some air. I walk across the empty expanse of Tarmac, thinking of a full 'motorway special' breakfast when I hear a bumping noise coming from a nearby car parked by a line of tall metal refuse bins. Accompanying the thumping noise is a muffled shout of complaint. I approach the car. It's new and very shiny. The registration plate reads OZ 5 and my mind makes the connection to Ozone. Feeling stupid and a little scared, I lean close to the boot of the car and say, "Hello?"

There's a few seconds of silence, then, "Open it! Open it!" The muffled voice leaks through the metal of the car's boot. I grip the lock and pull the boot up and release a flapping bat shape launching like a vampire from a burning coffin. I get a glimpse of black clothes, a long black leather coat trailing like a cape and a flash of long red hair leading with a vicious swing from a tyre wrench that whooshes past my head. The wrench hits the tarmac and bounces away with a musical clang and I'm gripped around the throat by cold fingers as we fall to the damp ground struggling and viciously fighting. I dodge a blow from a scabbed fist and retaliate with a light head butt that throws him off and allows me to pin him to the ground. He tries to deliver a devastating blow, but his long and gaunt vampire pale face contorts into confusion.

“Who the fuck are you?” I shout at him.

“Steppenwolf,” the man says as I let him up and he dusts himself off....

I study the apparition from the car boot; long red hair, long black coat, a dark shirt and pants worn beneath it and heavy army jungle boots.

“You’re a thief?” He asks.

Sarcasm rushes in on the tail of my shock. “I just liberate dickheads locked in car boots.” I tell him.

A mischievous smile crosses his thin lips and I look into a pair of dark eyes where any arriving light is extinguished by drugs. “I’m the genie from the bottle. That means you get a wish.”

The man grabs my arm with his left hand and slams the car boot shut with his right. He glances furtively, looking for trouble or escape.

“Step into my office,” he says, pulling me toward the entrance to the service station.

“That’s *my* office,” I tell him as I grab the tire wrench and hold it ready for a swing at him.

“Chill, I thought you were someone else.”

“Who?”

“Not here. Come on,” he says, looking up at the clouds drifting across the motorway.

“I don’t even know you,” I complain.

“Don’t you want your wish?”

I frown and look at the man. I could probably deal with him if he gets stupid, plus I need to score, and from his eyes I seem to have released a walking dispensary. In the empty bathroom of the service station I splash hot water on my face. Steppenwolf is sitting cross-legged a short distance away on the Formica surface between two of the hand basins. He is studying his fingernails. I glance at him for a moment before drying my hands on a paper towel.

“Where did you get a name like Steppenwolf?”

He spits on the floor. “My name is Steven Wolf. My so-called friends gave me the nickname.”

“What friends?”

“I offer services to the music industry. Services you have to buy at certain locations.”

“You’re out of a comic book.” I tell him.

“Sorry, I’ve been on the road too long.”

“You deal drugs, right? What if I’m police?”

“But you’re not,” says Steppenwolf.

“What should I wish for?” I ask him.

“Drugs?” he suggests.

“I can get them on my own.”

“I need a favour,” smiles Steppenwolf.

“You’ve just had one. Remember who let you out of the car?”

Steppenwolf looks unhappy again but he’s on my ball park and he knows it. I could simply walk away and leave him but I don’t think he’d like that, assuming the driver of the car is nearby.

“That was luck, not a favour. It would have been a favour if you’d known I was in there,” he says.

“Were you travelling cheap?”

“There was a misunderstanding,” he smiles.

“What makes you think I need a wish?” I ask.

“Everyone needs a wish,” Steppenwolf spots my Ozone tour shirt. “Going to Henge? Want to meet the band? Hang out?”

I hide my excitement. “Sounds cool.”

If Steppenwolf spots my barely hidden eagerness he covers it and reels me in.

“I need a lift,” he says. “Do me a favour and I’ll grant your wish.”

I’m thinking of the moment I give Larry his chicken.

Steppenwolf smiles again, showing yellow teeth.

“Don’t you drive?”

“No.” He reaches into his coat. From one of the pockets he produces a back stage ‘access all areas’ pass. The Ozone logo is printed on it along side a hologram to prevent forgery. He throws it to me and I see it’s dated yesterday. This means he was at the gig in London. I wonder what kind of lunatic I’ve stumbled over and I look my reflection in the eye, weighing the situation.

“Ok, I’ll drive, but if you are a genie out of a bottle I don’t want the cork shoved up my arse for believing I’ll get my wish.”

“Ah, trust. Humanities blindfold.”

I consider the options.

“Why were you in the boot of that car?” I ask.

“A misunderstanding,” he repeats. “At least admit you’re interested?”

I nod and Steppenwolf extends his hand.

“Shake?”

The skin is cold like parchment and wax.

“What flavour?” I ask.

“Humour! There’s hope yet,” he laughs.

“I’m Dave,” I tell him.

“Cotton Dave?” he adds.

“What?”

“Your nickname.”

“I don’t have one,” I tell him.

“You do now.”

“What does it mean?” I ask.

“Your eyes are like two burnt holes in cotton. You like speed?”

I nod. We swap mobile numbers and the deal is sealed.

Steppenwolf follows me to Betty and when I open the door he slides into the passenger seat and glances into the rear of the vehicle.

“Cosy,” he says then turns and looks ahead. He sees Larry’s rubber chicken and slowly lifts it up.

“How did you get this?” He accuses.

“Jerry Moore threw it into the crowd last night,” I frown at him. “You were there? You have a pass.”

Steppenwolf puts the chicken back on the dash. “I was there at the start, then the fucking lights went out and I woke up where you found me.”

“Too bad,” I tell him.

“Too fucking bad for Hector,” Steppenwolf picks up the chicken and examines it again. “Larry must have hit the roof. Why did Jerry throw it?”

“I don’t know. He picked it up and threw it. I was in the way so I caught it,” I tell him as I start the van, “nightmare getting it out of the gig.”

Steppenwolf sniffs and smiles.

“So why did Hector get rid of you?”

“Scared of a drug bust. He forgets that my presence is sometimes the band’s inspiration.”

“You sell them drugs?”

“Exactly.”

I pull out of the parking space and head for the slip road. In a few minutes we are on the motorway doing sixty.

“You travel all the time in this thing?” he asks.

“I live in it.” I tell him.

Steppenwolf nods thoughtfully. “Henge should be worth it this year.”

“Almost wasn’t worth it, with Thomas dying...”

Steppenwolf spins in his seat to face me. His eyes are wide and ablaze with shock. “What the fuck did you say?”

I slowly begin to repeat. “With Thomas dying, the band might have folded and I’d have no Henge road trip...” then it hits me, “you didn’t know?”

“I’ve been staring at the inside of a fucking car boot. I haven’t seen a TV...talk to me”

I keep my focus on the road, overtaking a large lorry. “After the show I dropped my mates off, I’ve got a DJ gig in Southport tonight. The radio said that Thomas Winter had died, the website said that the fans are gathering at Stone Henge. You knew I was going to Stone Henge so...?”

“Every stoner with a VW camper and an Ozone shirt is going!” Steppenwolf stares ahead at the road, an uncomprehending look on his face.

"I'm not a stoner," I tell him.

"You're still going to Southport tonight?"

"Not now."

I decide to trust Steppenwolf a little more, perhaps the news has bonded us slightly. "Grab the laptop. It's under the seat."

Steppenwolf brings the PC up and onto his lap. He reads from the site.

"Pilgrimage," he says. "Short illness."

"What does that mean?"

"Thomas was very highly strung. Hector said he should have been. He went on route marches that finished at the gig. He'd turn up too exhausted to sing."

"That's where you came in?"

"Saved many a show," nodded Steppenwolf either missing or not acknowledging my sarcasm.

"How do you know you didn't kill him?"

"I wasn't there!"

"I mean the drugs."

"That's bullshit. Casinos don't ruin people, gambling does. All in moderation. Don't get on the fucking wrong side of me, you need me," he warns.

"I'm doing you a favour, how do I need you?" I ask.

"You'll never meet the band with out me."

"You might never get there without this lift."

Steppenwolf backs down.

"What do *you* think happened to Thomas?" I say to break the ice.

"Same as what happens to everyone in that band, Jerry or Hector Morgan."

"You think Hector killed him?"

"Not directly. Hector is one of those entrepreneurial managers. Nothing really to do with the music. Wouldn't know a hit if it punched him. He reminds me of those frogs on nature films, the insect walks by and then a tongue shoots out and gulp, you're gone."

“Nice guy.”

“Look under any rock and you’ll find a CEO like him,” Steppenwolf chuckles darkly. “Look under any rock and roll.”

“Don’t they have a road manager, Danny?”

“He’s got Hector on his back twenty four seven. It’s hard to function like that. Bands aren’t office workers. You can’t herd them around.”

“Sounds like Hector herds them around.”

“Faustian,” says Steppenwolf.

“Why don’t you phone the band?”

“I don’t want to spoil the surprise,” he snarls, “and I don’t know who else is behind this.”

Steppenwolf pushes his coat sleeve past his wrist and sees a strip of pale flesh. “Bastards took my watch!” he exclaims. “What time is it?”

“Coffee o’clock,” I tell him. “Hungry?”

“I’m going to sleep, haven’t seen a bed in months.”

Steppenwolf folds the laptop and puts it under the seat. He climbs into the back of the van and I glance at him in the rear view as he finds the boxes of CDs.

“There’s some old shit in here.”

“Only the best,” I tell him.

“Where’s the new stuff?”

“People want the classics.”

I hear Steppenwolf figuring out how to pull out the double seat into a camp bed. That done he pulls a blanket over himself and over his head to block out the day light, and goes still.

I have theory about random futures...

There’s the guy almost killed in a car accident then goes to church to give thanks only to be crushed by falling masonry from a building site. The woman who goes on a chat show and DNA results prove that the neighbour she is arguing with is her sister and they didn’t know it. Jake and Phil don’t believe in random futures, they think life unfolds like a map, the routes ready printed for us to follow. That’s why they have day jobs. I’ve been out here a few hours and already picked up Ozone’s drug dealer from imprisonment in a car boot. He didn’t know Thomas was dead. This is fate. This is what I tried to

tell Jake and Phil years ago when I got made redundant from a shit-hole factory. If you stand still, nothing happens. The world passes on its way to somewhere. Move around and you hit probabilities crossing everyday life. I'm out here. I'm really doing this, the motorway rushing under the van and the thrum of the VW engine soothing and familiar.

Then I see girls.

There are four of them standing on an embankment by a rusty Vauxhall Vectra. The hood is up and the hazard lights blinking. They have rucksacks at their feet and I can see at first glance that they are all hot, all about my age, and all have long legs. I hit the brakes and pull over behind the Vectra. No point waking Steppenwolf, he'd only be pissed off and cramp any style I might have. I'm under no illusion, they'll just want a lift, but the male fantasy of hot girls in distress never fails. The girls grab their bags when they see I am stopping and run to the passenger side of the van. Then I see they are all wearing Ozone tour shirts. The first girl to the van, a vivacious blonde with hot blue eyes, sees my tour shirt and jumps up and down with excitement.

"Are you going to Henge?" she squeals.

"Yes I am," I admit. "Come on, get in."

They don't hesitate and within a few seconds I have four gorgeous companions, a generic collection of slender bodies, fresh long hair, big smiles and intoxicating perfume.

"I'm Asha," says the dark haired Asian girl who slips into the passenger seat next to me. "That's Julia," the blonde waves at me, "Sarah," statuesque, large breasted, tight jeans and a wide smile, "and Charlotte," blonde, shy, petite, probably the wall flower.

"I'm Dave."

"Hi Dave!" they all chant like a cheerleaders club. I'd better not be dreaming.

"What about your car?" I ask as I pull off the hard shoulder and rejoin the traffic, just beating an Eddie Stobart that roars past in the overtaking lane.

"Its dead," says Sarah. "Piece of junk."

"My car is not junk," says Julia.

"Where is it now?" counters Asha.

"If we were in the AA a hunky mechanic could would come," suggests Sarah.

"Well you got me instead," I volunteer.

No one replies and I think I just pissed on my fireworks.

“What do you think about Thomas Winter?” I ask to change the subject. They all express their feelings on the tragedy but none of them has a theory as to why.

“Are you on holiday?” Asha asks me, and I try to keep my eyes on the road. She has the most incredible legs cut by denim shorts at her thighs.

“I’m a DJ. I go to Henge every year,” I tell her.

Julia, Sarah and Charlotte are now in the back of the camper and leaning over the front seat so they can look in the direction of travel. They don’t notice Steppenwolf under the blanket or seem to make any connection to the rubber chicken on the dash. Christ he must be dead to the world. A van full of girls and this guy doesn’t wake up?

“What do you do?” I ask Asha.

“We just worked six months in Europe,” says Julia.

I’m genuinely impressed. “Doing what?”

“Bars, cafés.”

“Are you students?”

They all chime in together, “That obvious?”

Sarah smiles at me. “You were a student too?”

“College; Engineering,” I nod, remembering, “wasn’t worth shit. This is better.”

“We use travel benefits,” says Julia.

“What brought you back here?”

Sarah rests her chin on her entwined fingers and studies the road. “Money’s always running out, jobs in bars are just as bad as jobs in bars here. We were back half a day when we heard Thomas was dead then the Henge thing came up,” says Sarah. I can’t help thinking which one I’d like to sleep with, knowing full well it would be all four at once. A sweat suddenly springs onto my back at the thought and I take a breath.

“How many do you think will be there?” I ask, my change of subject voice must be filled with sexual connotations but I can’t help it. The girls all belong on commercials for hair and beauty products.

“A lot,” says Sarah.

“A fucking lot,” echoes Julia.

“Thanks for stopping,” says Charlotte.

“My pleasure,” I nod, privately in agony and silently drowning in the smell of perfume. We drive in silence for a while. Julia opens her rucksack and takes out a few energy bars, handing them around. “Want one?” she asks me.

“Yeah, thanks, I might need the energy later.”

Asha stiffens and the whole atmosphere in the van turns cold and paranoid.

“What does that mean?” she asks.

“I’ve been driving all night, came up from London to drop my mates off,” I explain, glancing between Asha and the road ahead as I struggle to understand what I’ve said that could be wrong.

“Really?” says Asha, now threatening.

“Yeah I could do with a...”

I swear on my rarest Ozone bootleg that I was going to say shower.

“Shag?” asks Julia, joining the hostilities.

“What?”

“A shag?” asks Charlotte.

“I was going to say shower,” I protest.

“Always the same isn’t it?” says Julia. “A hard-on in a camper van, four girls and he thinks it gives him unlimited pants access.”

I try to reverse this quickly deteriorating conversation. “Wait a minute, we’re getting off on the wrong foot...”

“I fucking hate guys like you,” says Asha. “Would you have stopped if we were four fat chicks?”

I’m speechless for the one vital second that condemns me and decide to cut my losses. “Look, if you want to get out, I’ll pull over. Call the fucking AA on your mobile, fuck it.”

“Oh yeah, fuck it now you know you’re not going to get any,” says Charlotte.

“The offer of the lift still stands. When we get to Henge off you go, no sweat,” I almost yell at them, for making me out to be a rapist instead of an opportunist. Then I feel the point of something sharp on the back of my neck and my knuckles go white on the wheel. All the moisture leaves my throat.

“Out,” says Sarah.

I glance at Asha. Her brown eyes have a fire behind them that says Sarah means business. I let my foot off the accelerator and glance in the rear view, not to check the traffic but to send a psychic message to Steppenwolf. There is no movement from under the blanket and I have to admit I'm no Uri Geller. I stop the van and step out onto the hard shoulder. Cars and huge juggernauts roar past. The noise of the motorway fills my head as I watch Asha slide into the driver's seat. They all give me the middle finger as Betty pulls away, leaving me in a cloud of exhaust....

...A huge black cloud glides into position above me like the spacecraft in Independence Day and empties its rain in one ten minute burst. When I am completely soaked, it moves on and the sky clears, but more clouds are building on the horizon. I start to walk, heading away from the motorway.

There's nothing to say and no point screaming about it. I can cut across this field and get to back to Charnock Richard. Once there I can figure out what I'm going to do. I should call the police, but instead I call Steppenwolf. His phone rings three times and goes to voice mail. I leave a message. It's a polite one along the lines of, 'Steppenwolf! Fucking wake up!'

I look out at the suddenly ugly day. A cold wind grips the sunlight veined clouds, gathering in the western sky like igneous mountains the colour of wet parchment. The wind is rising and the temperature drop makes me shiver in my soaking clothes. What a nightmare. No food, no Betty, no shelter. At least it isn't October. I walk for an hour across serious mud and cow shit in fields with water logged depressions that would take too long to walk around, so I trudge through them, flooding my boots and drenching my socks with stinking shit flavoured rain water. Rabbits scatter and birds squawk, wondering if I am edible. It takes a few seconds of realisation before I understand why the morning grips me with perfect clarity and why the smallest detail is magnified. I watch a spider attack and wrap its victim in a rain jewelled web stretched between two thistles. A flock of black birds glide out of distant trees, flying low on an insect sweep while the dull roar of an aircraft climbs into the cold air, pushing aside the silence. My skin tingles where the splashed mud and rain touches me and another descending veil of water streams down from above and into my face, soaking my hair. There's no guarantee that I'll ever catch Steppenwolf and the girls and for the first time in my life I could be really screwed. I look again at the wide world reborn just for me in this wild morning, my destiny evolving like a mutant creature from a primordial swamp. I nod to the invisible forces of fate and mentally throw the dice. My boot sprays mud as I fix my direction across the open fields and hope for a change of fortune.

Then I see the house.

I hadn't noticed the building before, which feels strange as the structure is tall and should have been visible from the motorway. The house stands three storeys high. Warm lights punctuate the dark rectangles of gothic towers on the wings of the main block. I feel as though the house is toying with me,

or I'm wandering in shock, taking a few steps back or moving to the right and throwing myself off course. As I make my final approach I discover it to be surrounded by thick impenetrable hedges and from beyond the dense foliage I hear music. I stop my slow progress through the mud and crouch low by a bramble thicket that snags my jacket and pours rain from its leaves onto my left hand making me shiver and shake the droplets from my fingers. I squint at the building. The day will never brighten to its full potential due to the heavy cloud moving slowly overhead like magician's smoke. I bury my feelings under the mud on my face and leave the cover of the brambles, moving on the house as if it's an enemy barracks I must infiltrate. What I'll do once inside the perimeter hedges I have no idea. The weak light bathes me as I arrive at a gothic portcullis set into the north face of the hedge. It reaches to a height of at least twelve feet. Gargoyle faces contort in the black wrought ironwork and I avoid their stares as I slowly push open the gate and step into a lavish world of split level paths and stretches of hexagonal lawn punctuated by tall fountains spitting grey water into the falling rain. The scent of rich soil turned by wind and storms fills my nostrils and smoke drifts lazily from the chimney pot. I orientate myself in relation to the house, discovering I've used a side gate that brings me to a large open space. I crouch low and move through the gardens, the landscape revealing its mysteries as I go. Aware of the house's proximity I glance up at the dark monolith and imagine the house crawling like a wounded animal to the top of this small rise, dragging the hedges around itself for warmth and shelter during a monstrous storm and shaking its rampart fists in defiance of the lightning. I can feel the building staring back at me with stained glass pain, a mutant collision of brick and timber casting its oblique shadows of dread and premonition as another burst of cold rain cries from the slates. I endure the cold beat of the rain which is absolutely hammering and pissing directly down my neck. I can only hope this makes me look pathetic enough for the owner to let me in and dry off but there is no answer at the front door. Warily I follow the path around the side of the house to the back and stare through the rain at the sight before me.

There is a large stone circle in the back garden.

It's not the kind of thing you expect to see in a rain storm off the motorway but considering how today is going I really shouldn't be fazed. The seven stones are tall, about eight feet, and appear to be manufactured granite, smoothed and equally spaced, the kind of stone you see at garden centres populated by people with ten acres of land and no idea how to fill it. There is one stone out of place and it is lying in the arms of a complex winch system. A hole is already dug to accommodate the stone monolith and I can see that the hole is deep, about five feet, which makes the stone in the winch thirteen feet tall. Whoever has done this has managed to winch the stones into place using precise measurements.

As quickly as it began, the rain stops.

I stand dripping and staring at the stone circle. Druids? Human sacrifice? I just want to get dry and find Betty, not get mixed up with some motorway cow field death cult. The back door to the house opens and a figure appears. It is a man in his early twenties dressed in a heavy water proof

Bergerhaus jacket and muddied Wellingtons outside of black jeans. He has a tall pink Mohawk cresting a shaved and pale scalp.

He sees me and does a double take.

“Thank Christ! Give me a lift with this fucking winch will you?” he asks me, as if he has known me all my life and is annoyed I have turned up late to help.

“I’m bloody soaked!” I tell him.

The man is unconcerned. “Yeah? I was born bloody soaked! Get this stone into the hole and then come in for a brew.”

“What are you doing?”

“Studying old stones,” he replies.

I tilt my head at him, questioning his answer. “What, like Charlie Watts?”

He points at the huge monoliths as if I haven’t seen them. “Standing stones.”

“Oh, you mean Keith Richards?”

The man stares at me. “You going to help, or not?”

I shrug and trudge through the mud to the big winch, a collection of heavy ropes and pulleys based around a squat platform and a painted yellow jib. I follow the man’s instructions as he winches the stone into an almost upright position and the weight of the vast rectangular block shifts and slides forward, falling perfectly into a vertical position in the deep hole.

“Ok, let’s dig and we’re done.” He throws me a shovel and reluctantly I help fill in the hole and surround the base of the block with Earth. As we work I catch glimpses of his face. An easy grin spreads across the thin features as he finishes his task and a gleam in his eyes tells me that this is not the end of my journey. The Pink Mohawk is freaking me out though. It starts to rain again and the heavy drops liquefy the mud around me.

“Cheers mate. Let’s get out of this shit,” he smiles and I stare back, confused and convinced he has mistaken me for someone else. A feeling of nervous dread comes over me as I wonder if I’ve stumbled on a serial killer. We go into the house, the door opening to reveal a claustrophobic oak panelled corridor stretching away from me like a dry throat. I take several quick steps inside, following my host and then stand absolutely still, listening for any movement. My host steps back and closes the oak door, pressing his weight against the wood and easing it into its frame. He relaxes as the door settles onto its lock with a protest from swollen frames, then he turns and I stare along the hallway into ancient darkness melted from the original

blackness that existed at the beginning of the universe, before light, before anything.

“You act like you’re expecting me.” I tell him.

“I was expecting somebody,” my host replies.

“But not me?”

“No, not you. But somebody. And here you are.”

“Who are you?” I ask.

“Kelly. South Central Kelly to those who know me.”

A nut case!

But hopefully a nut case with a car.

“Nice ornament,” I tell him as I nod to outside. “Thanks for the mud.”

“It’s more than an ornament and the mud is free, my pleasure,”

We step into the cathedral ambience of a vast book lined study; the darkness fluctuates as we step over the threshold. A huge rectangular table of black wood dominates the centre of the floor space. The carved legs are at least twice my waist measurement and I doubt I could reach the centre of the table from any of its edges. A thick pad of blue leather punched at its edges by fat brass tacks covers the table all but for an inch of oak boundary. On this boundary, lights perch on stands and cast a reluctant glow across open stacks of books and charts placed with deliberate care across the blue leather. At the base of the pile, huge open tomes the thickness of suitcases form the foundations for towers of smaller text books filled with Victorian scrawl and complex drawings. The light spills over the yellowed charts parched with age and pinned to three flip chart boards placed at the far end of the room. Scrolls are tacked open at their corners, hanging like condemned prisoners forced to reveal all under torture. My unease at the style of lettering and the nature of the maps and diagrams adds to the unsettled breath on these long dead pages, resurrected by some curious inquisitor of information. Hand drawn maps and sketches that resemble the stone circle in the garden cover three out of four of the pages on the flip charts. I pick a drawing and see that it is a sketch of Stone Henge. Under the lights of the study, Kelly’s thin face is the colour of frozen moonlight on ancient steel. Beneath those features I feel the presence of more years than the flesh confesses to living, with a body dominated by angular bone structure and tension wired sinew. I meet his stare last of all. Black radiation pours from them like an involuntary leakage of information from a library of deadly secrets.

“See anything you understand?” he asks.

I glance at the huge tomes and sketches lit by the strategically placed book lights then I walk to the table and look at the charts. Kelly watches me, letting me discover the place for myself.

“Where were you going?” he asks. “It’s not the weather for marching across a field.”

“Stone Henge,” I tell him.

“That’s a long walk.”

“My van was stolen. I was going to the services to call for help.”

Kelly frowns at me.

“Know a band called Ozone?” I ask.

Kelly nods “Heard of them.”

“They’re playing a tribute gig at Henge for the singer who just died.”

Kelly looks at me like I have descended from heaven.

“I knew it! I knew it!” He yelps.

“What?”

“Look, look,” he waves me around to the other side of the table to where a large and ancient parchment depicts a drawing of Stone Henge.

“I got this map from the Henge druids. They’ve had it for years.”

I look closely at the drawing. It shows Stone Henge as if viewed from above. In the nearby field, strong lines of force are depicted, radiating out from a central point.

“Is this meant to be rays of light?” I ask.

Kelly nods enthusiastically and points to the glowing mass of radiating beams where a human face hovers. A ghost with a familiar face.

My mouth is suddenly very dry. “How old is this drawing?”

“About two hundred years,” says Kelly with a satisfied smile.

I stare at the drawing, the meaning racing ahead of my mind. “This light is the upcoming Ozone concert for Thomas Winter.”

“Who?”

“The dead singer,” I tell him, “and his ghost looking over the scene.”

Kelly folds his arms in a defensive gesture. "I didn't know what it meant until you just told me."

I swallow. "I need to ask you a question."

"Go on."

"Are you crazy?"

Kelly grins. "No more than some guy lost in a field who suddenly finds himself working on a stone circle."

First Steppenwolf and now this, what the hell is going on?

"Hadn't you better get to the services?"

"I think I'll keep walking." I tell him.

"Chill out, I'm just pissing with you. Get a shower then we're off."

"What? Where?" I ask.

"To prove my theory," grins Kelly.

My mobile rings. I check the display. It's Steppenwolf!

"Oh, wakey, wakey dickhead!" I yell down the phone at him.

"You ungrateful bastard," comes the reply. Steppenwolf's voice sounds full of sleep, "not waking me with a van full of chicks."

"They stole the van," I protest.

"I know. I'm here with them."

"Where?" I ask.

"At Charnock Richard."

"What do you mean you're with them?" my imagination is running in the wrong direction.

"I got the van back. Where are you?"

Where do I start with that one? "Don't ask. Wait for me and I'll catch up in about an hour, ok?"

"No worries, we aren't going anywhere."

I can't hold onto the image in my head any longer. "Listen Steppenwolf, you aren't, you know?"

"What?"

“Having an orgy in my van?”

A crackle of static accompanies Steppenwolf’s laugh, “Love to say yes, but their minds are on something else.”

“I’ll catch you up, wait for me.”

“I’ll be here, dude.”

The connection cuts.

“Who was that?” asks Kelly.

“Friend of mine,” I tell him, not wanting to get into the story.

“The bathroom is on the first floor second on the right,” Kelly tells me.

The house seems to sigh with satisfaction as I ascend the stairs as if it were digesting me like a delicious morsel. Each stair pushes a gasp of dry wood through the thick carpet. The banister runs under my palm like a varnished wooden tongue, tasting me for later. At the top of the stairs I find myself in the gloom of a high ceiling corridor that runs the length of this wing of the house, the gloom deepening to more impenetrable darkness before reaching the outer wall. I locate the bathroom door, its dusty name plaque screwed to the thick panelled oak at eye level. I place my hand on the door handle and look back along the corridor at the identical doors punctuating the corridor like sealed mouths in their frames. A curiosity to explore the rooms fills me for a few seconds before I realise I might be missed. The absence of running water and the noises from the bathroom would alert Kelly to the fact that I was not where I should be. In the bathroom my mud streaked face stares back at me from an ornate Victorian cabinet mirror above a marble basin mounted with pearl and brass taps. The fittings look imported from ancient Rome and restored to perfection. The bath itself looks carved from the solid rock once imbedded in a mountain plagued by ancient volcanic activity. There is a modern shower head installed over the bath.

“Not short of a few quid,” I mutter to myself as I spin the spokes of the hot tap. Blessed steam rises from the clear boiling water and I add a few twists of cold before stripping off my muddied and sweaty clothes and stand in the water. I watch the mud drip from my fingers. Every muscle I possess relaxes in the hot water as I inhale pure steam. I step from the shower and as I decrease the flow of water I notice a likeness printed on the pearl domes in the centre of the tap’s spokes. I lean closer to study the face and wipe steam from the smooth surface. The face of a statue stares back piously from the pearl and I find the resemblance to Thomas Winter so close that I shiver down to my bones. The taps drip hypnotically from the gold metal as I dress myself and towel my hair dry. I leave the bathroom carrying my muddy boots in my right hand and make my way along the corridor to the wide stairs leading back to the study.

“What is this place?” I ask Kelly as I start to put my boots on.

“It’s a residency. The University owns it.”

“Are you a professor or something?”

“Phh.D, ancient artefacts.”

Kelly throws a book with his photograph on it in my direction. I drop my laces and catch the book. There is a photograph of a slightly younger Kelly looking back at me from the back dust jacket. I look at the library shelf and see there is a row of books with his name on the spines.

“How old are you?” I ask him.

“Twenty four.”

“Guess you don’t sleep much?”

“Come on. Your friend’s waiting. We’ll talk in the car,” says Kelly, gathering a pile of thick folders, charts, drawings and note books and loading them into a large back pack.

Sweet! I’m back in the game...

TO BE CONTINUED...