THE DEATH OF IGGY IN THE KEY OF G

The lid was sealed on Iggy Steinhart’s dark mahogany coffin. I let out the breath I’d been holding since walking into Salon C of the funeral home, grateful to whoever had talked his brother out of an open casket. I’d seen the bullet hole through his cheek the night he was shot and prayed some over-ambitious, spackle-happy mortician hadn’t promised him ‘*No one would ever notice.’* Yes, they would.

I rested my hand on the narrow box, studying an old 8x10 photo of Iggy, shredding out a riff on his gold top Les Paul in our first band, and said farewell.

“Do you think he would have approved?” Iggy’s brother, Gregory, asked as he shook my outstretched hand.

“You mean the choice of casket? Doubtful. He would have wanted something with a guitar finish. Say, birds eye maple.”

“You’re the one who found him, right?”

I nodded. “We were loading up our gear after a gig. I found him slumped against his van.” What I didn’t mention was the hole in his face and brains sprayed across the side of his truck.

“Did you see the guy?”

“Just an old minivan squealing out of the parking lot. The license plate light was out. The cops said it wasn’t enough to go on.”

Gregory’s eyes narrowed. “Did you take his guitar?”

I stepped back. “Look, I realize you’re an attorney, and asking shitty questions is what you do. But never ask me that again.”

He stuffed a business card in my pocket. “I had to ask.”

“No, you didn’t.” I turned and headed toward some friendlier faces.

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Iggy’s missing Gibson Les Paul was a piece of Kalamazoo art. But then, his entire guitar and amp collection was amazing, and he would surprise me and Bobby, the bassist, with some of the others he brought to the gig. Iggy started most nights on a ’61 Fender Stratocaster, then would strap on a vintage Paul, a Thunderbird, or a 335. That night, he had brought along a 1959 red sunburst Paul, his favorite. That’s the one Iggy’s killer took, along with his ‘65 Fender Twin Reverb amp.

Iggy brought in a crowd, even to this last appearance at a funeral home. A steady line of Detroit’s best musicians filed past their fallen comrade. Every one of them had a story of their experience with Iggy—some good, some not so much. That went double for anyone buying or selling equipment. Iggy was shrewd and knew what your guitar was worth down to the knobs, machine heads, and number of copper wire windings around each pickup coil. He once ruined a business partnership with his best friend over a rare Martin Acoustic. When it came to money or vintage guitars, keeping friends came in a distant third.

I wondered for a moment if his killer was here, and began watching for mannerisms and clues. I owed him that much.

Bobby nodded from across the room as he worked to line up his next gig. Playing was all he did, and despite our bandmate being murdered, he still had a family to feed. I quit chasing that pie in the sky years ago, and my income came from the dreaded ‘*day job.’* I still played, though, because I couldn’t imagine life without performing great music with great players.

Two members of Mitch Ryder’s band walked past, and behind them stood a guy who didn’t belong: Lenny Ballantyne. He and Iggy hated each other since the bad business deal, and I imagined him pulling the trigger and making off with the equipment. I started toward him, but he caught sight of me and turned toward the door. I followed him out the front door to the rusting hulk of an ancient minivan. He scrambled in, and I blocked him from closing the door.

“What’s the rush?” I asked.

“I just remembered I hated that guy.”

The mess inside the van told me this was probably his current residence. Was he even working these days?

“You know anything about his missing gear?”

He glared at me. “Go to hell. You think I had anything to do with that?”

“You had more motive than anyone. You guys didn’t part on the best of terms.”

“That’s because he screwed me over, and you know it. We had a deal to share in everything. Then, a kid walks into our store with his grandfather’s acoustic without a clue what it’s worth, and Iggy keeps it, breaking our deal.” He lowered his head. “I don’t even know why I came here. Maybe I was looking for closure. I don’t want to hate him anymore. It makes me sick carrying around all this anger.”

His voice cracked as he spoke. Everybody can lie. This was gut-felt remorse.

“I’ve known that bastard for fifty years. This is not how I wanted it to end.”

I believed him. It would have been easy to point a finger and say we had our guy. But it wasn’t Lenny.

I walked back toward the entrance as Iggy’s brother came running out. “Where is he?” he yelled. “Where is that son of a bitch?”

I held a hand up. “It’s not him, trust me.” He looked ready for a fight with anyone, so I made sure it wasn’t me and walked away.

A few people had migrated to the refreshment area, and I headed there to grab a Coke. Bobby sat down beside me. “Dale Farkler needs a drummer this Friday. I told him you were open.”

Dale isn’t one of my favorites. He’s an unimaginative magpie who reminded me of being onstage with a loaf of white bread. Then again, doing another gig seemed the proper way to mourn a fellow musician. “Guess I could stomach a weekend,” I said.

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Dale’s gig was at a club I had played many times with Iggy and Bobby. Dale’s song list was uninspiring and ripe with overplayed hits. It’s funny how performing some songs can leave you feeling dirty.

Sipping a beer at the end of the night, Dale’s bass player, Joe, a long-haired, always happy side man for hire, sat down and told me about Dale’s divorce. “His wife caught him red-handed with a little blonde he kept on the side. She got lawyered up, and she’s taking everything.”

“He did it to himself,” I shrugged.

“Hell hath no fury like a cheated woman. Her lawyer said she could take his guitars and amps.”

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“She took his SG and Strat. He has to start over. Just like he’s forcing her to do. She already emptied their bank account. He went to load up for the gig and found she’d smashed the tubes in his amplifier. He had to borrow the one he used tonight.”

I hadn’t even realized what he was playing through. A Fender Twin Reverb. Probably a 1965.

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    “His mental fuse is blown. He pops at the littlest things. Hey, let me know if anybody needs a bass player.”

We shook hands, and I sent a quick text before breaking down my gear.

Dale’s amp was stowed deep in his old minivan, where I couldn’t photograph the serial number. I saw something else that twisted my gut. Iggy always bought the original case with any guitar. The missing Les Paul case was beat to hell, its brown tweed skin worn through, and the wooden shell was exposed along the bottom edge. But that case was worth five grand and increased the guitar’s value.

Dale had tossed a moving quilt over it, but I got a glimpse of that back edge and knew what I was looking at.

“Aren’t you the nosy one?” Dale said, bumping me out of the way and pulling down the tailgate. I stepped back and stared at the empty lightbulb socket over the license plate.

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My head filled with the image of that old beater speeding away. *This* old beater. I was sure of it. Dale didn’t waste time searching for words to explain and scrambled toward the open driver’s door. A large figure stepped out from the shadows, blocking his way.

Gregory Steinhart.

“Hey Gregg,” Dale squeezed out of his tight, dry throat.

Gregory stepped closer. “He was your friend.”

“What are you talking about? And what are you doing here?”

Gregory motioned toward me. “I got a message. Someone spotted my brother’s missing equipment. Care to explain?”

Dale’s head swiveled toward me with a terrified, trembling smile. “You called him? Why?”

“You know why. Iggy had no shortage of enemies. Why did it have to be someone he trusted?” I looked at Gregory. “You want me to call the police?”

“No. I got this.”

“You sure? Because I—”

His eyes narrowed. “Go home.”

“Gregg, I think you should—”

“Go…home.”

That’s what I did. My last glimpse of Dale was out the rearview mirror. Pressed up against the driver’s door of his minivan. Just like Iggy.