

DEATH METAL

A Novel by Mark All

CHAPTER ONE

David Fairburn's songwriting partner returned from the dead a year after the wreck that killed him and broke up their band.

Moments before Vince appeared in the studio control room, David had stood over the 1959 Goldtop Les Paul in his basement recording studio, gripping an axe in both hands. The guitar lay in its open case, cushioned on the plush lining like a corpse in a coffin. He resisted the urge to run his finger along the axe's polished steel blade. It was sharp enough to make kindling of the useless instrument.

He had spent hours playing riff after lame riff on the Les Paul, trying to write a song. His collaboration with Vince Buckley, the keyboardist in their band Penumbra, had been

synergistic. *Oblivion*, the album they'd begun before Vince's death, had exceeded the quality of anything they'd done before. Even so, David couldn't bring himself to work on the unfinished tracks, and he seemed incapable of generating any worthwhile ideas on his own. What little he did come up with had grown more self-referential over time, until tonight's recordings amounted to self-parody. It was time to accept reality. He was nothing without his partner.

David held the axe to his chest, bowing his head like a Crusader praying over his sword. "That last album was our destiny, Vince—but I can't finish it without you."

Blinking away tears, he focused his gaze on the traitorous guitar at his feet. The Les Paul had held only so much music and he'd used it up. The past year's frustration, failure, and desperation welled within him. He raised the axe.

"What the hell are you doing?"

David's breath caught at the sound of the familiar voice. He whipped around to see Vince Buckley beyond the studio's plate glass window, in the control room. The keyboard player sat at the

mixing board, staring at David, his expression unreadable.

David's hands went slack and the axe nearly slipped through his numb fingers. His late partner looked just as he had the night he died. Before the accident, not after.

Vince leaned forward and hit the talkback button. "Put that axe down before you cut off your foot." His voice sounded confident and cool in the hushed atmosphere of the heavily sound-treated room.

David detached from reality, as if under the effect of a dissociative drug. The light from the control room window suddenly seemed extraordinarily bright.

"Vince," he said tremulously. "You're *dead*."

Vince smiled cryptically but said nothing.

David placed the axe on the carpeted floor, his knees weak. He wanted to bolt from the studio, run screaming into the streets. Madness waited beyond the soundproofed wall of the control room. Yet he was compelled to go to Vince.

Though he didn't make a conscious decision, he found himself crossing the studio, moving in a daze around the drum

kit and past the line of guitar amps and cabinets, to the control room door. He fumbled with the knob, unable to grasp it firmly. With an effort of will, he wrenched it and shoved the door open, then stood breathing shallowly on the threshold.

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear,” Vince said. He looked right at home behind the mixing console, surrounded by the racks of preamps and signal processors he knew as well or better than David. Just like old times.

At the funeral, the body in the coffin had borne little resemblance to the man David had worked with for hundreds of hours in this studio, had played with on a thousand stages, and partied with on endless nights. The corpse had seemed to be someone else entirely, a flawed facsimile of his band mate.

Vince looked like himself now, but something was off. His skin appeared pale and taut, and David was sure it would feel dry and leathery, like old parchment. Even more unsettling, there was a wrongness about his eyes. As the seconds dragged by, David realized that they weren't blinking. At all.

Vince's presence palpably filled the room, suffused by a

faint fragrance of lilies with an underlying scent of decay. He had always seemed to brim with a powerful energy, like the libidinous drive of rock music, or the force of art struggling to create itself from the ether. Now that energy seemed darker, heavier, tainted by the sludge of primal fears and desires lurking at the bottom of the collective unconscious.

David's mind reeled as he fought to assimilate the undead man before him into his worldview, struggled to retain his tenuous grasp on sanity. He wanted to deny the reality of it, but a beguiling voice deep within whispered, *This is what you wanted, your second chance. It's this or take the metaphorical axe to yourself. The guitar was just a rehearsal, and you know it.*

Reluctantly setting aside an insidious, existential dread, David stepped into the control room.

"If you so much as scratch that Les Paul," Vince said, "I will kick your ass." The keyboardist's tone was laid-back but raspier than even his smoke-and-whiskey singing voice had been in life. "I want that guitar on the album."

"The album," David said thickly.

“*Oblivion*. I reworked the raw tracks and added new songs. I want you to finish it. With me.”

David shook his head and looked away from Vince, seeking some sense of normalcy from his familiar surroundings. He was having a conversation with a dead man—or worse, himself. Panic built within him like fire in an abandoned building. “I’m losing my mind. *You’re fucking dead.*”

Vince ducked under the console and shoved a tiny flash drive into the high-performance Mac Pro on the floor, then started clicking the mouse. “Life, death, it’s all relative. I’ve just moved on to another plane of existence. I have unfinished work here, however.”

That concept at least made a kind of sense, and offered some sort of plausible explanation for the impossible. Although his heart still raced like a meth-addled rat in a cage, David’s disbelief wavered and his agitation subsided marginally. As if Vince’s voice held some sort of hypnotic sway over him, he was coming to accept this insane situation as real.

Pro Tools opened across the two large computer monitors

above the mixing board. Vince selected a file and clicked Play. Bone-shaking heavy metal filled the control room at the volume of a passenger jet.

David stumbled to one of the office chairs and fell into it. He recognized the verse and chorus as one of the songs from the band's final sessions. A new pre-chorus and other sections had been added, and the arrangement filled out. Sections of the bass were obviously done by a software synthesizer, as were some of the guitars. The rest of the parts sounded like actual instruments, played adequately if not outstandingly, and the rough vocal was that of Vince rather than their singer, Alan Dillehay. The song didn't sound mastered, but touches of compression, reverb, and delay made it presentable, and the audio quality was pro level.

The music was powerful. The layered instrumentation filled the room like the fog of pot smoke that occasionally clouded the studio, with as heady an effect on David. He'd never heard music like this, with its striking modulations and mutations that wrenched his soul. Transformed almost past recognition from the first version, it was brilliant and startlingly original.

It was Art—but it was dark art. Penumbra had played a mash-up of modern, progressive heavy metal, and alternative rock with pop hooks, but this style seemed grounded in death metal. It was the sound of desolation, of nihilism; it evoked images of death. It portended impending doom.

“Turn it off!” David yelled. “Make it stop!”

Vince thumped the computer keyboard’s space bar with his thumb and faced David again, his gaze intense, his eyes still unblinking.

“Finish the album with me, David,” Vince said. “It wants to come out. It wants to *be*.”

“No.” David shook his head. “No! That material’s scary. Disturbing. It’s fucking ominous.” It was also seductive, and what that said about himself frightened him even more.

“It’s *real*,” Vince replied. “It’s the soul crying out for meaning and finding none.”

David leaped to his feet and paced in a short loop, his eyes never leaving Vince. “If that’s the sound of *your* soul, you’re not in a good place.”

“I’m right here, David. This is *our* place. This studio is our mystical kingdom, where the magic happens—and this music is magic, isn’t it?”

The music *was* magic. It was the most powerful music David had ever heard. He’d helped write it; it contained part of his own soul as well as Vince’s.

“Come on,” his late partner coaxed. “It’s genius and you know it. I shouldn’t have been taken from this life before we could realize this vision. The music wants to live. We can make it happen.”

A scary thought occurred to David. *What if something snatched Vince from the land of the living to prevent them from finishing this album?*

He shook his head again, confused. “This doesn’t sound like the music we started with. All the ideas are there, but they’ve...mutated.”

“David. You need this.”

“I don’t.”

“What have you done since I’ve been gone?”

David shifted his gaze to the studio beyond the window, only to find Vince's reflection confronting him, blurred and skewed. "I carried on. Life continues, with or without us."

"You haven't produced anything, have you?"

That wasn't exactly true. He'd produced a great deal of crap.

"You were always obsessive," Vince said. "You practically lived down here after the wreck, trying to recreate the magic, coming out only to eat and sleep and teach guitar to dumb kids who'll never amount to anything. You couldn't recreate the magic, though, could you?"

David whirled on him, angry. "No, I couldn't. Now you want me to play sideman on your album, which you wrote and recorded God knows where? I still won't have produced anything on my own!"

"Not true. You wrote much of this music. You'll add your parts to the new material, you'll come up with riffs and rhythms and solos no one else but you could."

"I'm suddenly going to be creative again?"

“Yes. You just need a partner. Alone, you dug yourself into a hole. Buried yourself here in this studio. Until Amber left you.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Your perception of reality is limited to this plane of existence,” Vince said, “but mine is no longer confined to a single dimension. I saw your struggle. I saw hers.”

David’s cheeks burned and he suddenly felt the loss of his girlfriend more keenly than he had when she’d moved out. He’d emerged from a two-day marathon here in the basement that produced nothing to find her and all her things gone. The truly frightening part was that he hadn’t much cared.

“She was fine with you going on the road,” Vince continued, “leaving her alone so long and so often. But leaving her alone *when you were in the house with her?* That was more than she could bear. You needed her, David, you need people. You don’t have to do it all by yourself, it takes a team. Lennon and McCartney, man.”

David stared into Vince’s unblinking eyes. Everything felt surreal. He was talking to a dead man. He wanted to tear his eyes

from his partner, to stand and shout that none of this was real, that it could not be.

Vince was right, though. David *did* need this project. He'd never accomplished anything remarkable, never proved his father wrong--at least not yet. He needed to validate himself an artist; to put the lie to his father's claim that he was a loser. The judgment of millions of music fans, bloggers, and critics could refute that damning accusation. It could also erase the memory of his father's scornful look every time he saw David with a guitar. David, a skinny kid too preoccupied with music to apply himself at school, let alone play sports or even hang with anyone other than what Daddy called "them sickly queer boys who *play music*," his voice dripping with disdain.

Vince rolled his chair over, reached out and placed his hand on David's arm. His fingers were cold and David shivered at his touch, but did not withdraw. He felt again the bond developed from the shared experience of creating art, both in this studio and on countless nights on blindingly lit stages.

"Let me help you, David," Vince said. "Accept reality for

what it is, and make the best of it. Let's create something that will rock the world."

David nodded slowly, a nervous excitement building within him, the rush he always experienced at the dawn of a new band venture. Two men did not a band make, though. "We can't do it all by ourselves."

Vince removed his hand and sat back in the chair. "Of course not. We'll need to get the band back together again."

"You're going to...appear to all of them?"

"That might not be wise. I'll just be *your* special friend. You can tell them you're working from files of mine you found."

"I found? Found where?"

Vince reached into a side pocket of his leather jacket and took out a key, which he pressed into David's hand.

"Safe deposit box," he said. "First Bank of Athens."

David looked at the key, then back up at Vince. But Vince was gone.

David jumped to his feet, as startled by the sudden disappearance as from Vince showing up in the first place. He

scanned the control room, then went to the studio door and stepped through, but both rooms were devoid of life.

In the center of the sound studio, the Les Paul's case was closed and latched. The axe was gone. The key was cold in his hand.