

Chapter 1

“True is the friend who knows which stories to take to the grave.”

Ruth Bedell

Journalist, Editor

April 23, 1925 - October 18, 2003

—Gravestone for Section D, Lot 239

Section D, Lot 454

Late morning, early May

Pete Kovak, a.k.a. New Pete, a.k.a. Noop. He hadn't replaced an Old Pete when Ben hired him the previous week, nor was there a Senior Pete.

While training Pete to take over his job, Haley had just started calling him those names—and passing judgments Ben could have done without.

“Noop must have been bat-shit hyper as a kid,” Haley had said to Ben more than once.

He's still hyper, Ben thought. And he's still a kid. To me, anyway.

It remained to be seen whether the hyperactivity could be channeled to useful ends. Based on what he'd observed so far, Ben believed Pete was on course to be either a Grade A Fuckup or, possibly, the most productive grounds worker that Bolster Hill Cemetery had ever seen.

This morning, the occasion of Pete's first graveside service, the odds were favoring the former proposition.

BETH CASTRODALE

Ben had warned him that at these times, their most important job was to stand back and stay silent. But as mourners assembled by the grave, Pete started drumming his fingers on his thigh, and by the start of the committal prayer, he'd moved on to the change in his pockets, churning it slowly at first then working up to a steady three-four jingle so that by the time of the pastor's closing words, Ben had to tug Pete's sleeve and bring him to a full stop.

Now that the casket had been lowered, the last of the friends and family were heading for the East Gate.

Pete glanced in their direction then sprang into action and jumped the vault lid.

"Hey!" Ben called.

Pete swayed on landing then caught himself.

"I forgot. Sorry, man."

The rule was to wait until all the mourners were out of the parking lot, out of view, before any moves were made to fill the grave.

"Why don't you go get the dirt."

"I'm on it," Pete said, before taking off.

With Pete off for the truck, Ben called Haley for the backhoe and began clearing the site of flowers and chairs and turning back the artificial turf. Resting against a neighboring stone was the temporary marker, a laminated poster on two wooden posts that the funeral director had left for them to stake in once the grave was filled: *Anthony James Lekovic, Beloved Son and Brother*.

At the foot of one of the posts lay the ziplocked picture that the funeral director had mentioned in passing. "They meant to scan it for the marker, but obviously that never happened." It was a school picture of a goofy, skinny kid with a toothy smile, a kid at least ten years younger than the one they were about to bury.

Ben went to fold the last chair, pausing at the sight of a newcomer, a thirty-ish woman, tall, dressed in an oversize work shirt and khaki shorts. With that clothing and her purposeful stride, she looked like an adventurer from a nature show, and a *Key Largo*-era Lauren Bacall.

IN THIS GROUND

Ben guessed she wouldn't appreciate strangers paying too much attention to her looks, the very thing he was now doing. He turned away and kept himself occupied until she was safely past.

When he looked back in her direction she was well on her way toward the North Gate, presumably to the grave of the Unknown Vagrant, which had been drawing people in greater numbers than at any other time during Ben's twenty-odd years at the cemetery. The previous day a tour bus from Ohio had unloaded a crowd of senior citizens, some of whom, according to Haley, had heard of the mystery man on their local public radio station. At the gravesite they snapped pictures and took or waved away fliers from a rotating crew of demonstrators, who stood behind their usual signs: *Don't Dig Him, Leave Him; R.I.P., U.V.*

A mechanical whine sounded from the hill, and there was Haley in the backhoe, trailing Pete, who was going a little fast in the truck. Ben pledged to hold his tongue and did. Within twenty minutes the three of them got the vault covered, the back fill dumped and spread, the sod replaced, and the marker into the ground, ziplocked picture at its feet.

When they'd finished reloading the truck Haley tossed waters to Ben and Pete, and Ben downed his quickly. When that was done he found himself once again looking northward, though the grave of the Unknown Vagrant was out of sight, and so was the woman.

Pete followed his gaze and said, "Do we have a date for the exhumation yet?"

"Nope. But as soon as I know, you will."

Pete drained his own bottle and tossed it into the truck bed. "I still don't get what all the fuss is about, but whatever. I'll do what I'm told."

Ben had given Pete only the shortest version of the story: that they'd been ordered to move a historical gravesite from just outside the North Gate to inside the cemetery, because it was dangerously close to an ever-busier Route 4. In as many years, three visitors to the grave had been struck by speeding cars, the most recent one fatally.

BETH CASTRODALE

But a certain segment of the population “had issues” with disturbing the gravesite—thus the chanting sign holders and flier distributors. Their numbers had only grown since the posting of the Don’t Dig Him, Leave Him Facebook page, where an especially ardent opponent of the exhumation was sharing a video diary of her efforts to stop the dig. Somehow, the diary had gone viral, drawing even more protesters to the gravesite. To avoid the risk of additional accidents there, protesters and other visitors were required, sometimes with police enforcement, to stand within a pyloned safety barrier around the grave, and along that stretch of Route 4, the cops had started ticketing speeders more aggressively.

The longstanding interest in the Unknown Vagrant had always puzzled Ben, even though he’d grown up hearing about his oddities, including the self-made, sixty-pound leather suit he was said to wear in all seasons, as he walked his regular state-to-state circuit. The lesson Ben took was, if you’re the right kind of weird, in a public way, you might get enough attention to last past your lifetime, enough to earn a chapter or two in books of local history, or a feature in a television newsmagazine.

“Well,” Haley said, “I’m sorry I won’t be able to join you boys in that worthy endeavor.” Thursday was to be his last day on the grounds. After a week’s vacation he’d be starting in as the go-to man for Carl Jenks, president of the cemetery’s board. As grounds manager and Haley’s supervisor, Ben had had first dibs on that job, but he’d never wanted to work in an office.

“Meantime,” Haley said, “we’ve got other fish to fry. Not big fish, but fish.”

“What do you mean?”

“You been up to Section D yet, Ben?”

“Not today. Why?”

“There’s more crap than ever on the shrine.”

“I cleared it off yesterday. Late yesterday.” And last night was nothing but a regular Monday night, a school night.

Pete glanced anxiously between them. He started to speak but Haley cut him off.

“I know you did. But I saw what I saw.”

IN THIS GROUND

“Well, we better clear it again.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Pete asked.

Haley looked from Ben to Pete and back again and smiled.

“You haven’t told Noop about the shrine?”

“Told me what?”

Ben gave Haley the eye but didn’t say a word. Haley started this, so he could finish it.

“Pop quiz,” Haley said to Pete. “Tell me who’s buried in lot 421.”

Pete shrugged. “How would I know? Even if it was Jesus Christ, how could I tell from some number?”

Haley laughed. “Well, it isn’t Jesus Christ. But on the humble scale of Bolster Hill it’s close enough, I’d say. Wouldn’t you, Ben?”

“Enough, Haley,” Ben said.

Haley turned back to Pete. “Let’s cut to the chase, then. Do the Unknown Vagrants mean anything to you?”

“The Unknown Vagrant? The guy we’re digging up?”

“I mean the Unknown Vagrants, plural. Or just *the Vagrants*.”

“The band?”

“The band. I bet you know at least one of their songs.”

“Yeah, I do.” Pete closed his eyes and wagged his hand, as if to summon the memory. “Hold on, it’s coming to me. It’s coming to me. Ah-*hah!*”

He stomped one boot to the ground, turned his face to the sky, and started exuberantly singing “Leave Me in Peace,” the Vagrants’ breakout hit, which grew more loathsome to Ben every time he heard it.

Ben and Haley let Pete go on until he ran out of lyrics, which thankfully was before the end of the song. All through the performance Haley looked a little dazed, no longer so smug.

In Ben, an old resentment had resurfaced: that a song he’d written as a seriously drunk and depressed nineteen-year-old, a song spared by mere whim from his trash basket, had crawled its way up to the Billboard Top 100 months after he’d left the band. In the reviews and interviews preserved on the internet,

BETH CASTRODALE

Nick Graves—Ben’s stage name, one he’d believed to be far more *rock* than Ben Dirjery—was never praised or blamed for the number. And in recent weeks and months, since WBHL had resurrected it as an anthem for the exhumation protesters, no deejay had mentioned Nick Graves in connection with the Vagrants, not to Ben’s knowledge.

While Haley and Pete continued their Q&A, Ben tossed his empty water bottle into the truck bed then occupied himself with pulling weeds in the next lot. He could have walked off—should have—but he couldn’t help but stay and listen.

“So,” Pete said, “what’s this got to do with who’s buried in lot 421?”

“You know who the lead singer of the Vagrants was?”

“Uh, yeah. Vince . . . Vince something.”

“Vince Resklar.”

“Wait. Vince Resklar’s buried here?”

“Yep. He grew up just a few miles away.”

Since Vince’s death, his grave had been a nighttime assembly point for certain local youth, in recent years a steady number of second-generation Vagrants fans, mostly relatively well-behaved music heads. But since WBHL had resurrected “Leave Me in Peace,” since an old, post-Ben video of the band performing the song had been posted to the Don’t Dig Him, Leave Him Facebook page, things had changed: a new and more substantial crop of kids seemed to have taken to the band, and also to Vince’s grave. They’d started leaving beer cans and drunken tributes around it, and they’d worn down the grass and stirred up the dirt. With summer approaching and school drawing to a close, things were bound to get worse.

Haley finished his own water and tossed the bottle. “Now,” he said, “a truly curious young man might also be wondering if our fair cemetery has any other special connection to the Vagrants. Do you want to answer that one, Ben?”

Years before, not long after Haley started at the cemetery, Ben had made the mistake of going for drinks with him after work. The third or fourth beer had loosened Ben’s reserve; so had a Vagrants song (“Yes, I Can’t”) that started blasting from

IN THIS GROUND

the juke box an hour or so into their time at the bar. It was as if some kind stranger had fed those coins right into his ego's hollow coffers, and in repayment for the kindness, Ben told Haley he'd been an early member of the band.

When, the morning after their beers, Ben asked Haley to keep this information to himself, Haley didn't understand why. "If I was you, I'd be proud of being a Vagrant," he'd said. Ben's reply: "Well, you're not me." In the end, Haley agreed to keep the promise, but Ben had little confidence that he hadn't slipped up on occasion.

Now, Haley seemed to be taking pleasure in testing Ben, as if he wished to set off a final show of fireworks before exiting the grounds.

Rising from a patch of dandelions, which he'd been pulling up from the roots, Ben found Haley and Pete staring at him, waiting. Their stares seemed to trigger the buzzing at his right thigh.

Gratefully, Ben pulled the phone from his pocket.

"Sorry, guys. I need to take this." A lie. "Pete, clear off 421. It's right over there, on the other side of Acorn Path, just past the obelisk. Haley, I'll catch you after lunch in Millionaires' Row"—Ben's term for the mansion-like mausoleums that housed the once-wealthy dead. There, some crumbling masonry needed attention.

Ben wandered down the slope, holding the phone to his ear in case Haley and Pete were still watching him. He kept moving ahead, just to get away from them.

There she was again, the woman in the work shirt and shorts, marching back from the North Gate and cramming one of the protester's neon-colored fliers into the pocket of her shorts, not bothering to fold it. No tourist or curiosity seeker, it seemed to Ben. She looked like someone who was here by mistake, and she made quickly for the exit.

At last, in the more obscure reaches of Section B, he checked his phone and found a text from Cole, his daughter: *don't forget, i have drum lesson tonite.*

OK, he typed back. *I'll make grilled cheese before you go.*

As Ben made his way back to the office, and the fridge,

BETH CASTRODALE

and the peanut butter sandwich that was his lunch, he thought of another possible question from New Pete: *Why did Vince Resklar die so young?*

Perhaps Pete already knew some version of the answer, even though he'd moved into town only recently. Or he'd find an answer, from Haley or the internet or some other source—God willing, without involving Ben.