

Chapter 1

Dysfunction

The hospital was supposed to be one of the greatest advancements of its time. It had its own communication system, backup generators, oversized elevators, and wheelchair ramps. This was long before laws like the ADA required them. The building was an architectural marvel in its time. At least that was what some of the town selectmen said. All Kevin Logan saw was a demolished ruin of brick and char.

He was standing in an overgrown field, which used to be a parking lot in Harbin, Maine. The site was an old hospital that burned to the ground in 1947, after only a few years of service. It took nearly 60 more years for the town selectmen to get around to breaking ground for a new building. Apparently the decision to raze the building's remains was a subject of extreme disagreement.

That was why they called Kevin. This would be his first assignment as a lead architect with the firm. It was a simple job, he figured. The site would be landscaped, and the shattered brick exterior of the hospital would be replaced with a simple prefabricated condominium complex. The entire utility infrastructure was in place. This could be done by almost any architectural firm in the state, but for some reason, the selectmen chose to look elsewhere.

Kevin was pissed when Amanda, his boss, told him he was going to be lead on this project. Harbin was north of

Portland, while the firm he worked for was in Rockville on Long Island. It took only a couple minutes of geography to tell him that he faced a 6-hour drive each way. The big guys got all the gigs in Manhattan, and sometimes even got to live in downtown apartments paid for by the clients. But new Project Leads like Kevin had to cut their teeth in less glamorous locales. He figured he was going to spend the next year or so dodging moose and breathing the stench of every low tide.

The selectmen outnumbered the contractors and architects from our firm. They were dressed exactly as Kevin thought they would be, in flannel shirts, jeans, work gloves and ragged tennis shoes, topped off with green golf hats and brownish fedoras. One of the guys, the fattest, and clearly the boss, wore a tan trench coat. This was a grey and windy April day, considered in Maine to still be the dead of winter. Kevin was dressed in polypro, fleece and a ski jacket, and it felt about right.

These guys also spoke in the language he expected to hear, with the dropped r's and drawled-out syllables. Kevin had heard this accent in movies, and even though he expected to hear it on this day, he was still a little surprised when it came rolling forth from the selectmen's tongues. Maybe Kevin had thought it was an exaggeration. But the way these guys talked, he realized, the movies didn't even get halfway there.

From the firm, there was Kevin, a junior architect named Donny, and his immediate boss, Amanda. She was instrumental in getting the gig, but she kept saying, to Kevin

and all at the meeting, “Kevin, you will be completely in charge. Full autonomy.”

“Whatever,” he thought.

The firm also brought a couple of New York building and landscape contractors, to help with logistics and scheduling. Like Kevin, they were not amused by the prospect of driving and maybe living up here, but they were amused by the accents. It wasn't just the selectmen, everybody from the gas station attendants and the waitresses talked like that, too. It sounded like it took effort. The crew of New Yorkers joked that the locals just did it for their entertainment, and spoke normally when the flatlanders were gone.

The scariest thought for Kevin was, after a few minutes of it, he felt himself picking it up.

“Hey fellas, come look ovah hea-ah,” one of the selectmen called out. He was about to duck through a fallen chain-link fence and step into the building.

The group followed him through the door into what Kevin figured was the main entrance. Either that or it was a separate emergency entrance, another advancement at the hospital. The building was shaped like a giant ‘M’, and the entrance was right at the bottom of the central ‘V’. It was three stories high, with a basement, and some of the architectural features were already giving Kevin ideas, like the swept arches over the windows. He would be sure to use the ideas, if in fact he had full autonomy.

“Folks, look up the-ah,” said another one of the selectmen. He pointed up toward some of the charred beams above us. “Those are still holding up the wall. They don't build ‘em like they used to!” He seemed amused by the comment, and some of the other town leaders laughed with him.

A quick look above told Kevin that the beams had no structure left in them, and the brick walls held themselves up only because they were in a tight corner. The floors were completely gone. Kevin realized that this had either been one hot fire, or the lumber had already been salvaged. The walls themselves were only standing by luck, and the group had no business being inside. At a minimum, they all should have been wearing hard hats.

The landscape contractor standing next to Kevin, named Joey, smirked and shook his head slightly. Kevin caught the eye of my clients and chose a more diplomatic lack of expression.

“Kevin, have you seen the arches over the window openings? Graceful,” Amanda said. Kevin grimaced slightly. Autonomy or not, he knew the arches would make their way into the design, as her idea, not his.

The group arrived at the top of a set of stairs leading down to the basement. They were concrete, but a lot of debris had collected above the opening, and Kevin had no intention of going down.

“This was the way to emergency. An entire ward. Want to see mo-ah?” asked the leader of the selectmen, the fattest and one of the oldest, named Frank. He suspended a foot over the top step.

Kevin shook his head. “That’s not safe,” he told Frank and the rest.

“They-ah concrete,” said another selectman. He was a tall and skinny fellow, whose name was apparently Howie. Kevin figured he was also the oldest.

“It’s not that, it’s the floor over the basement. I wouldn’t walk on it, or under it.”

“Aw, kids run through here all the time,” said Frank.

Amanda stepped in, saying, “Sorry fellas, we think the original plans give us the info we need. This is just to determine the demo schedules.” Kevin was relieved, but also mildly peeved.

“Alright, alright. Let’s stay on the floor and see more up this way,” Frank said.

They walked further along the north wing of the “M”. Once they were away from the corner, Kevin saw that the bricks had collapsed down to the first level. This happened wherever there was a long unsupported wall. The building had no roof, no floors, and only charred beams crossing the gap between the walls. Kevin started to feel jittery about being there, and he could tell Amanda did as well. If the demolition contractor felt any trepidation, he didn’t show it.

The site was on a broad slope, so that the front of the hospital was one level above the rear. Down the slope, Kevin could hear a river in full rage. It dropped through a number of rapids as it flowed through the town, giving the town a reason for existing, at least in the old days. Today it could be an attraction, but Kevin had seen none of the usual trappings of a tourist town when they drove in. He made a mental note to visit the river sometime, on this visit or another.

As the concrete floor became charred wood, and Kevin began to seek out places where the floorboards were supported by beams. The only way to tell was by the location of the nails. He gingerly placed each foot as he tried to follow the others, and finally had to give up. Kevin could walk no further through the north wing.

“Kev, what are you doing?” asked Amanda. She was very eager to please these guys by appearing as macho as they were. Something about breaking the city-girl stereotype, he figured. Kevin had a feeling they weren’t impressed anyway.

“Amanda, I do not think this structure is safe,” he suggested. “It’s been standing as a ruin for 60 years.”

“Hey, folks, what’s the matter?” asked one of the selectmen.

“It’s just wood,” said Frank. “I know there ain’t much of it in the city. It won’t bite.”

Amanda looked at me with a mild scowl. He was being challenged by both her and the small town selectmen. Donny

and the two contractors stood expressionless, as if they agreed but wanted to stay out of it.

Kevin realized that life often comes down to making even the smallest of stands. “You really let kids play in here?” he asked the Mainers.

“Well, we put up the fencing, but they get in,” Frank said. “Not much we can do.”

“We’re not kids,” Kevin said.

“No. Not Frank anyway,” Howie laughed, pointing at Frank’s belly. Frank looked down and laughed with the others.

Amanda was still scowling. Kevin shrugged and placed a foot on one of the floorboards. It creaked, but seemed to be in pretty good condition. He joined Amanda and the guys again, ashamed at his failure to push the issue.

The old hospital creaked as the group walked toward the far end. Bitter wind blew through the openings in the building’s walls, and Kevin watched a crow settle on top of the structure above us. The clouds above it betrayed no features, just a barren blanket of grey to match Kevin’s mood. When they got near the end of the building, a pile of bricks and wood blocked the path, and the guys turned around.

“Well, what do you think, folks?” asked Frank. He was asking about the demolition estimate. Amanda and Kevin turned to our building contractor, Dave. He was a large guy who always seemed to have a dark 2-day old beard.

“Looks like there’s plenty of flat space for trucks and storage,” he said. “Mostly standard building debris. Any paint?”

“Most of the painted stuff went up in the fire,” said one of the selectmen. He was one of two who were probably alive when the building burned. Kevin knew the gravity of the question. If there was still painted wood to remove, it was likely lead paint, and would require special handling.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Dave. “There’s plenty of room for the equipment anyway. Where is the nearest transfer station?”

“The town dump?” one of the selectmen asked. Another selectman shook his head.

Frank put a chunky hand out to calm the others. “No, no. In Portland.” The selectmen nodded.

“Portland?” Dave asked.

“Ayuh. Just a little ways down the pike.” Frank pointed with his whole hand in a rough southerly direction.

“Little ways?” Dave asked.

“Little ways,” Kevin would come to learn about Maine parlance, meant quite a long distance. Up to an hour’s travel time.

Kevin watched the brick walls above them. There at the end of the building they were still a full three stories high. He noticed that the walls swayed slightly in the wind, or at least he thought they did. It was tough to tell against the featureless sky.

“The only problem with the site is the slope, and the river,” Dave said, mostly to Amanda.

“That’s two problems,” Frank said, obviously wary of the team’s first effort to raise the cost of the project. This bid was already won, but any town selectman worth his salt knew that major cost upgrades would be passed on to him. Kevin had to admit that he had done it before, by creating additional costs through unneeded changes.

“And the road in here might not take the heavy equipment we need,” added Joey.

“That’s three,” Frank said with a smirk.

Amanda stepped in. “Well, there will be cranes and loaders to handle the building. The slope means we will have to build footings, and the river means we’ll need DEP permits.” She was talking about local, state, and even federal environmental permits, which could bog down the project depending on the mood of the inspectors.

“Don’t worry about DEP,” said Frank. “I’ll work with them. We can also widen the road. We have right-of-way on both sides.”

“Okay. Dave, when can you get us something?” Amanda asked.

Dave looked around a bit longer. “I can have the estimate by the end of the week, or Monday.” He was talking about the estimated schedule. They had already estimated the cost based on our description of the site. Mostly Amanda’s write-up. Dave trusted her.

Amanda looked toward Joey with a questioning look. “I need to see more of the grounds,” he said.

Frank looked dour. “We were hoping to have an idea sooner. The people of this town are, well, kind of anxious to see it done.”

“They’ve been waiting a long time,” said Howie.

“Dave?” Amanda looked to Dave again.

“Look, we’ll try to have it end of day tomorrow, but no promises.”

Joey joined in. “Hey, they’ve waited 60 years, right?”

There was a pause while Amanda and Kevin held their breath. They knew that Dave and Joey weren’t brought along for their people skills.

Frank laughed loudly. “No, I suppose it’s been a long time!” he said. The others laughed, and Kevin let out a loud sigh, then he took another look at the walls above.

Frank settled down and told the group very seriously, “Look, there is a lot of history here. Some people are tied to this old ruin, but most of us just want it gone. It’s an eyesore. But we made a concession during the hearings.” He was referring to the town hearings about what to do with the land once the building was gone.

“What kind of concession?” Kevin asked.

“Some wanted a park, a memorial.”

“For what? I thought this place was open for just a few years.”

“A few years, yuh, but there’s more to it. We decided that part of the ground would still be a memorial, maybe part of the new building itself.”

Kevin looked at Amanda. She was on the bidding walkthrough, and never mentioned this to him. She shrugged.

It was weird already that the guys chose the New York firm without seeing a design. Now that Kevin was going to build a new structure, he needed more information. Maybe the reason for the memorial would help him with some design ideas.

“What is the rest of the story? What is the memorial for?” he asked.

“Well, some things happened during that time. A lot of folks are really pissed about it. I’d rather not get into it.”

Amanda and Kevin looked at each other querulously. Dave made a curious face.

Frank went on, “We just need some space for a stone or something. A bench or set of steps.” One of the other selectmen raised an eyebrow.

“Frank, did you mention the rocks?” the tall selectman, Howie, asked.

“What rocks?” asked Joey, figuring this was something that was going to be his problem.

Frank interjected, “Howie, there’s no reason to-“

“They’re the reason this place got built,” Howie demanded.

“What rocks?” Joey asked again.

“Just some cliff wall near the river,” said Frank. He seemed pissed. “Maybe a spot for the memorial, that’s all.”

“Probably worth a look,” Joey said.

“Probably not,” Frank said flatly.

Amanda and Kevin stood in silence, confused. Joey smirked again and started walking toward the walls. Kevin felt the breeze stiffen and begin to howl through the destroyed building.

“Well,” Amanda said carefully. “Maybe we have seen all we need.”

Frank turned toward the wall where Joey was walking and looked up. He suddenly pointed and backed up.

“Lookout!” he yelled. Joey looked up and backed away. A couple of bricks crashed to the floor right in front of him, exactly where he was walking. We all looked up to see a small flock of crows or pigeons take off, spooked by the noise.

As Kevin looked up at the wall, he could feel the blood run from his face. The wall was swaying precariously in the wind, and he didn’t need to be an architect to tell that it was just about to collapse.

“Guys, let’s move!” he hollered. Joey, Dave, Amanda and Donny started walking the way we came. Kevin followed quickly, but the selectmen seemed to be doddering around for another exit. Frank stood firm, staring at the top of the collapsing wall, and Kevin thought he was muttering something. He heard a few more bricks hit the floor behind him and the entire group started running for the exit.

“C’mon!” yelled Amanda. She was right in front of Kevin, and paused to take off her medium-heeled red shoes. She looked back make sure Kevin was there, and as she looked past him, her face went white. “Run!” she screamed. She grabbed Kevin by the arm and they both started running at full speed. He wanted to look back, but Amanda kept pushing forward and he had to pay attention to the floor.

The crashing bricks and banging wooden planks started to sound like thunder. Bricks came down by the hundreds. Kevin felt that they were rushing right before the collapsing walls like surfers in a pipeline. Dave, Joey, and Donny jumped through a large window up ahead and ran away from the building. Kevin and Amanda were too close to the falling bricks and wood, and kept running for the exit they knew.

As they neared the door, Kevin could hear the thunder subside. Maybe it stopped or maybe they had outpaced it, but he and Amanda were not stopping now. Both of them rushed through the doorway and out onto the overgrown lot where the other three were still running. They finally stopped and looked back at the collapsing walls, huffing from the run.

The entire wall from the end of the building to the center, where they had just escaped, had fallen in. The wall on the other side had partially collapsed as well. The spot where the three guys jumped through was still falling. At least 100 feet of wall, that had been close to three stories high, had completely disappeared into stands of bricks no more than 6

feet high. Red dust rose from the piles of bricks and blackened lumber.

Kevin noticed that the other guys were covered in red dust, and so was he. Amanda’s white suit was covered with brick and charcoal dust. She was walking gingerly and holding one red shoe.

“God,” said Dave, as Kevin and Amanda neared. “Never been that close.” Donny’s face looked like it was glowing white under the red dust.

Kevin looked back wordlessly. He sort of knew what Dave meant. It wasn’t that they all could have been killed easily, and had no business being in the building. And it wasn’t that it was a cascade. One brick would have done it. It was a feeling Kevin had never felt before. It was emptiness.

He looked at Dave, who was a guy with a family and a house, the whole thing. Kevin had nothing like that. Dave would have been missed, but he wouldn’t. If he got pummeled by bricks, Kevin wondered what his epitaph would be. Probably “should’ve run faster,” or something like that. Nobody would have been at the burial.

Nevertheless, the fact that Dave or any of the others would have a life to miss, and Kevin did not, meant nothing right now. They were all on a level field. For any of them, being crushed by bricks would have sucked. They were all lucky to escape.

Dave had a look on his face that indicated he was starting to stew about this little near-death episode.

The dust began to settle over the building, and the five started to dust themselves off. Across the field, Kevin saw four of the five selectmen doing the same thing. The selectmen looked toward them and made no gesture. Kevin and the group began walking toward them. He could see that the only one missing was Frank.

The section of the crushed hospital wing where Frank was, where they had all been standing, was completely collapsed. Three floors of bricks and beams had become one huge pile at the eastern end of the 'M'.

"Boy, did you flatlanders run!" said one of the selectmen. The others chuckled mildly.

"How did you get out?" Kevin asked them.

"Oh, there's openings everywhere," he said.

"Where's Frank?" Amanda asked, looking at the dusty pile of debris.

"He's out," said another selectman.

"I don't see him," Kevin said. "How did he-"

"Ayuh, he's out. Theyah he is!" Howie said as he pointed down the hill.

Frank came walking from behind the building. He was apparently unharmed. Kevin had no idea how he got out, and he wasn't interested in asking.

Frank looked at us and grinned. He lumbered slowly up the hill toward the others.

"The ol' bitch ain't happy about this, is she?" asked Frank.

"You go ahead and call 'er that," said Howie. "Tryin' to get yuhself killed?"

Frank didn't even break his pace and waddled off toward the cars. The others followed. Amanda watched them go, then looked at the single shoe in her hand, and back at the fallen building. Kevin noticed that the ground was still quite hard and cold, which was why she seemed to be limping. The millions of tiny frozen pebbles under her nylon-clad feet could not have been comfortable.

"You're driving," she said to Kevin before she tiptoed off toward the selectmen.

They walked after the selectmen. Kevin knew that there was a lot more to do before they could put estimates together, but all of them were too shaken. He did not think they were up to the rest of their tasks for the day.

Joey went straight to his truck and put his clipboard on the seat. Dave went straight to the selectmen.

"So will this make the demolition easier?" one of them asked.

"I don't know what kinda backwoods operation this is, guys," Dave yelled, "but in the city this shit gets people locked up."

"Relax, everyone's fine," Frank said. He was treading dangerous ground with Dave. Dave didn't mention some other things that happen when people get careless on the job.

Dave glowered at Kevin and Amanda. He went to his truck, and suddenly realized his clipboard was still back in the

piles of rubble. “Damnit!” he said with a kick at the dirt. Joey came back around his truck and leaned against it with his arms folded. For the first time, the selectmen looked a little scared.

“Okay, okay. This could have been bad,” Frank said.

“Could have?” hollered Joey.

“Folks, I know we shouldn’t have gone in there, but-“

“You said kids play in there!” Dave yelled at them.

“Yeah, but this was different. In 60 years-“

“How is this different?” Joey demanded. He stood up from leaning on the truck.

“Nothing’s happened in 60 years,” Frank said.

“Nobody’s been hurt.”

Amanda looked at the two of them. “Guys, c’mon!” she said. “We do kinda need to know what is so secret about this building. It seems weird that-“

“Secret?” said Howie. “There’s nothing secret. It’s been a long time coming, and it needs to go.”

“Right. It needs to go,” said Frank.

“Then what took 60 years?” Dave asked angrily. “The fucking Coliseum hasn’t been there 60 years.”

Actually, it had, Kevin thought to himself. But he understood the point Dave was making. It was strange, in this age of immediate returns, to leave a site undeveloped for a few months. Forget about 60 years.

“It just,” Frank stammered. “It’s been a tough decision for the town.”

“60 years?” Amanda asked.

Frank lowered his eyes to the ground. “We just take things slowly up here,” he said.

“Slowly? 60 years-“ Joey chuckled.

“Please don’t ask again,” Frank said as he looked directly at Joey.

They were all silent for a few minutes. Kevin looked back at the pile of debris they had just been standing inside. It was definitely a close call, closer than he ever wanted again. But before very long, the site would be completely different, with a circular driveway and parking area, gardens, and a new condo complex with some kind of modern massing scheme. Kevin was still considering bricks as the main design element.

“Guys, do you need to see any more?” Amanda asked the two contractors.

“Just get me the site plans,” said Joey. He turned to get into his truck.

“I’ve seen all I need,” said Dave. “Gonna need this driveway widened.” He shook hands with Amanda and Kevin, then went toward Frank. Frank slowly held his hand out and they shook. Dave had a bear’s grip.

“So we’re all set here?” asked Frank. “A few days?”

“Monday,” Amanda told him. They shook hands with the selectmen and watched Frank get into the passenger side of Howie’s green Buick. Donny and Kevin got into Amanda’s car and in a few minutes they were on the road, headed for their rooms back at the motel. They had another day to get the site plans and talk to the permit office.

The Face in the Wall

“Y’know, you could have said a little more,” Amanda told Kevin as they drove. He stared at the road, too numb to be annoyed at her.

There was a ton of work to do. Hopefully, Kevin figured, it would be easier than today’s efforts.