

Chapter 3

Reading Material

First thing Monday morning, Kevin called the IT guy. After an hour misunderstanding him, he accidentally clicked on the button that allowed the VPN to start working. He got his file in half an hour, and started waiting for Dave's schedule. The proposal was pretty much in order. Adding Dave's info would only take a few minutes. Kevin started to feel like he knew what I was doing.

Sometime late morning, he talked with Dave about the scheduling, and he sent it over. Kevin was impressed, because it was actually pretty complex. It had little dots and diamonds and bars, and they were clearly labeled and loaded with notes and dependencies. He stitched Dave's work together with his files and got the thing printed in the hotel lobby. He had several copies in his hands by noon, and the meeting with Frank wasn't for two more hours. Kevin realized he could cut this trip short if he could see about the site plans and permits.

He headed back to Harbin and pulled up to a parking spot right in front of the town hall. There were few other cars. He looked up and down the block for a sign that said he couldn't park there during a certain time or on certain days. No sign. Kevin was parked legally, as far as he could tell. He wondered if this was the kind of town where the local cops used portable signs or something.

Kevin took his project file and walked up to the assessor's office. The hallway floor was still just as grimy as it was on Thursday. The office door was unlocked, and he walked in and stood in front of a desk that had last been laminated in the 1970s. There was an inbox with a couple of stamped letters in it, a bell, and an empty chair behind the desk.

Kevin could hear a radio playing country music in a back office. This was real country, not the rock-crossover drivel he listened to on the drive up. He stood there for a few minutes, wondering if he should hit the bell. Kevin put his files down, and was just about to ring it, when a short, bell-shaped man came out of the back office. He figured this was Ed, the surveyor.

Ed was bald, with a few strands of white hair combed over his reddish scalp. He had a thick white moustache and beard, and was wearing a faded plaid shirt, light blue pants and leather suspenders. Kevin thought he looked like a homeless Santa Claus.

"Don't you dare hit that bell!" He boomed in a voice that was much huskier than Kevin expected, and much more southern. "I hate that bell. Who are you?"

"Hello, sorry. I'm Kevin Logan, from Schonauer. I called last week."

"Last week. From what-hour?" Ed asked.

"Schonauer + Schonauer. The architect firm working on the condo complex on Upper Main."

“Condos?” Ed asked. He looked directly at Kevin’s eyes, with an expression that could have said, “Fool, you should have never set foot in this town”, or “Want some cheese?”

Kevin paused, and said, “Where the old hospital is.”

The assessor stared at him for another half minute. It seemed like forever to Kevin. He kept reminding himself that these guys had to be respected at all times, no matter what. They determined whether the project came off successfully, on time, or got bogged down in a mire of paperwork and delays. In an instant, they decided that they either liked you, or they could make you wish you never set foot in their dingy, wood-paneled offices.

“Yes,” he said. “The old Memorial Hospital. Burned 60 years ago, I’m told.”

“Right. I was hoping you-“

“Hoping? What are you talking about?”

“Well, I was hoping to get the site plans and start on the building permits.”

“And you think I’m the type who would rather bust your nixons than do my job because I’m some kind of inbred yokel, huh?”

Kevin was silent for a second. Ed had pretty much nailed it. “Well, no,” he sputtered. “Not that, but-“

“No? Why the hell not? You’d be right!” Ed said with a chuckle.

Kevin had to chuckle with him. Either what he said was actually funny, or he was just playing along. Kevin wasn’t sure.

“Well, except for the part about playing mind games rather than doing my job. Fact is I’d rather do damn near anything before doing my job.”

“Ha ha!” Kevin laughed. “Me too.”

Ed eyed him for another moment. “Hey, it’s your paycheck. Fact is, that old hospital has been waiting for someone to come along and flatten it for just about ever. Let’s see your paperwork”

Kevin turned the binder around for Ed, and turned it to the pages he would need. It was little more than a description of the site, the new building and parking areas. There were some sketch drawings, which were actually from a job the firm had designed in New Jersey more than a year before. Ed looked carefully at the documents for a long time. It was long enough for Kevin to start worrying.

“Looks okay to me,” Ed said after a few minutes shuffling through the binder. Kevin felt a huge relief. If this was how the permit process was going to be, maybe he had a good chance to get this thing done on schedule.

“I was hoping you have the site drawings,” Kevin said.

“Yeah, you said that already. Follow me.” He walked toward a room in the back. Kevin had to duck under the folding panel in the desk next to him. The panel should have been lifted instead, but it was burdened with stacks of paper.

Ed opened the door and turned on the light. Kevin saw that the room was painted dark blue. Two large windows high on the wall were also painted over in dark blue.

“Some of these drawing sets go back some ways,” Ed said as he pointed toward the windows. “Gotta keep them cool, in the dark. They’re like mushrooms, you know. Don’t grow much. Probably don’t taste very good.” As he babbled, he pulled rolled-up drawing sets out of tubes to read a code number written on the edge. He reached higher and higher, and then bent over to reach for a tube near the floor.

“Ah,” he said as he pulled out a roll of drawings from the bottom tube. He looked curiously at the writing on the edge, as if he didn’t recognize something. Then he took the set over to a large drafting table and began to unroll it.

“I don’t know much about this one,” he said. “The coding is not mine. That’s why I couldn’t find it right off.” He looked up at Kevin and grinned. “My system is much more precise.”

“This job is pretty old. How long have you been surveyor?” Kevin asked.

“Oh, six years, now,” he said. “Was a guy before who was here a long while before that. He passed, and here I am.”

He started poring over the drawing set. Kevin could see that it was old. One dead giveaway was that everything was done in pencil, and some of the terminology made the set easy to place within a certain era.

“Uh oh, it’s in cubits,” said Ed, then he looked at Kevin. “Just kidding!”

Kevin leaned over the set with him. He recognized the site, and the M-shaped hospital building, but something was missing.

“Where’s the river?” Kevin asked.

“This site is not bound by the river,” said Ed. “See that arrow?” He read the note next to it. “River to the east, 30 yards. MPL. That’s Maine Public Land.”

“30 yards?” Kevin said aloud. “That’s impossible. They were talking about landscaping the riverbank.”

“Not by this plan, they’re not,” Ed laughed. “Public lands by the note. Maybe they have some other plan with the state.”

“So the developers must have been here?” Kevin asked.

“They must have, but they ain’t been. I’ve heard of all kinds of ideas for the place, but this is the first anyone’s been by to do anything about it.”

Kevin slumped a little. All of the work he had done on the schedule so far was a waste of time. The contractors, Dave and Joey, had done their estimates based on dealing with the riverbank. Without that, the work was pointless. He had wasted a trip.

Kevin knew that the guys were going to be pissed. At least he should have been. He drove up here to meet with Frank for no damn reason. He was delivering a schedule that was obsolete. Frank had to have some answers for him.

“Ed, do you mind if I make some copies of these drawings before I go?” Kevin asked.

“Copies? Where?”

“You don’t have a way to copy these?”

Ed reached toward a bin and pulled out a roll of tracing paper. Kevin’s firm had these rolls all over the office, for quick tracing of drawings. He shrugged. If he had to trace the site plan, it was at least better than leaving empty-handed.

“Do you have the plan of the riverbank somewhere?”

Ed looked like he knew Kevin was going to ask.

“You’d look with the state for that. State land.”

The bell on the desk sounded out in the front room, and Ed looked at the door and frowned. It rang again. “You get busy with that trace and I’ll go see where the fire is,” he said as he turned to leave. Kevin looked back at the plan of the burned hospital and shook his head.

He traced the drawing and tried to copy down all of the dimensions. It would have been nice to have a trace of the riverbank, but the 30 yard note would have to do. Kevin folded up the traces and put them in his binder. Ed came back in.

“Well, all set?” he asked.

“Not really. I wanted to talk about the permit.”

“Sounds like you’re not there yet, son,” Ed said. “You need the completed drawings. When you’ve got that, we’ll talk.”

Ed was right. Typically a developer did the work Kevin was doing now, and came to the firm for a design. This project was different. The town hired an architect for a design before doing any of the groundwork, and it was starting to be inconvenient.

“Do you think I could borrow the set and get it copied?” Kevin asked.

“Don’t worry about that.” Ed said as he rolled the set and put it back into the tube it came from. He held up a hand behind Kevin, as if shooing him out the door.

“So we’ll get the set completed and-“

“I said don’t worry about it,” Ed said, sounding angrier than Kevin thought his jovial manner would allow. He locked the door to the drawing room and held his hand up again. Kevin took the hint and ducked back under the desk. He stood in the doorway for a second too long.

“We’ll see you again soon,” Ed said with a wave. He was reaching for a fedora and woolen coat on a rack by the office door. Kevin left.

He walked down the hall and took out the trace he had made. As he looked at it, Kevin heard the permit office door slam. Ed, in his coat and hat, locked it and lumbered off in the other direction, toward the rear of the building.

Frank was supposed to meet Kevin at his office, right there in the town hall. He still had about half an hour, so he figured he had time to write up some questions. There was a

vending machine in the basement, and a bench next to it. Kevin grabbed a bag of chips and sat down.

“How could the river not be on the plans?” he wondered. Frank would have to answer for this. Kevin was starting to wonder exactly what kind of backwoods outfit he was dealing with.

After a half hour, he put the trace in his jacket and went back upstairs to see Frank. His door was locked, and through the frosted glass Kevin could see that the room was dark. He began to wonder if they really wanted this place to be built.

He heard a door slam downstairs, and then footsteps coming up. Finally, Frank came strolling around the corner, removing his gloves.

“Ah, theyah you are! Hope you have the schedule!” he said to Kevin.

“Yes. But I have questions too,” Kevin said as he shook Frank’s hand.

Frank opened the door to his office. “Well, that’s alright. We’ll try to settle this thing,” he said.

The two men stepped into the office. It was paneled and dark, like Ed’s, but much cleaner. Dark bookshelves lined the walls, thick with frayed canvas-bound books. Navy velvet curtains hung in the windows. Frank pulled them apart and strapped them, brightening the room. He turned on his green-shaded desk lamp and a reading lamp in the corner. It was cozy, but brighter.

Kevin also noticed it was cold. A space heater stood in the corner, and Frank walked over to it, then turned away without turning it on. Kevin was just about to remove his coat, but decided to leave it.

“Don’t need the heater,” he said. “This is Maine. Anyway, what’s your question?” He gestured to the chair behind Kevin, and sat down in his worn desk chair.

Kevin sat down, and pulled out the binder. “Well, I have the schedule for you, but it was based on excavating the riverbank.” He put the binder on the desk.

“The river?” Frank asked, raising his eyebrows. “We said not to worry ‘bout that.”

“I thought you were talking about permits. Someone still has to-“

“No. No. We said not to worry. We’ll handle it.”

“What about the memorial you talked about, the rocks-“

“That’s not part of the excavation you guys are doing. Don’t worry about it. Let’s just see the schedules,” Frank said as he opened the binder.

“That’s the problem, it’s based on the riverbank, too.”

Frank looked up at Kevin. “I gotcha. I gotcha. That wasn’t nailed down. Funny, I thought we settled that with that lady. Andrea-“

“Amanda?”

“Yuh, that’s it. She left that part out, huh?”

“I guess,” Kevin muttered.

“Yeah, cute, but flighty, ain’t she?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say-“

“No matter. This just means things’ll go quicker, right?”

“Well, it’s not that simple. This change causes changes that affect the whole job-“

“Yuh, but less work, means less time, and less cost, right?” Frank said with a grin.

“Well, it’s not that simple-“

“I know it. I know it’s a little more complex, but if you’re not working the riverbank, you’re not in trouble for permits, cleanup and whatnot.”

Kevin sat back. He had nothing more to go on. He had delivered schedules that were irrelevant, and he was going to have to deliver this news to some very angry contractors, and Amanda. He had no idea why this wasn’t known already.

“So you got to head back to the city now?” Frank asked as he leaned back in his chair.

“Yes. More work to do,” Kevin said. “I should take the binder.”

“No need,” Frank said as he stood up, and pulled the curtains shut again. “We’ll get a good idea of how long this project isn’t going to take.” Then he looked at Kevin and grinned. Kevin eyed the binder. Leaving it might be a mistake, but taking it would be a bigger one. He stood up to leave.

“Well, good luck,” Frank said. “When do you think we can get a new schedule?”

“I don’t know. The other guys have to re-do their work,” Kevin said. He dreaded making his next phone call to Amanda.

Frank opened the door, and gestured toward the hallway. “No matter,” he said. “People are anxious, but we’re not going anywhere.”

Kevin stepped out into the hall, feeling like he had forgotten something. The door shut behind him. Frank was not a strange person, he figured. He was just a town leader trying to get something done. In this case, something that had not been done for 60 years. Kevin ran down the agenda in his head. He was to draft the schedules, get the permits, and find out whether he was going to bother with the river.

“Don’t worry about it,” was what Frank said. Ed had said the same thing. Kevin didn’t know if these people were trying to be helpful or not, but it wasn’t working. He was worried. He pulled out the tracing paper, still in his jacket, and looked at it. 30 yards. The site was far smaller than he thought, and his ideas for it would need to be re-worked. It was a good thing he had not really committed anything to paper yet.

Kevin decided that he had to get an idea what the site looked like without the river. He had a tape measure. He had not checked out of the hotel so he could certainly take the rest of the afternoon walking the resized site. He could drive home tomorrow, when rush hour wouldn’t be a problem.

The site was not very far from the town hall. If Kevin was a walker, he would probably have done it. The car was parked by itself at the sidewalk. This town had obviously been in its glory at some point, though those days were now in the past. There were some rundown mills, a closed library, and churches that were badly in need of repair, one even missing a steeple.

The town hall was actually a gem, with proper Greek columns running up the front of the two-story brick building. Ivy had climbed the walls on both sides of the façade, but was now dead. The bricks were dark with age, and the mortar was cracked in between. But the building itself was sound. It only needed a little rework.

Kevin drove through the part of town that would usually be called a business district. The street was mostly lined with boarded-up stores and windowless apartments over them. Only a few stores were open. He saw a consignment shop, a hair salon, and a couple of jewelry and coin shops. There was another Greek-revival building that used to be a bank, but it was closed. A much newer single-story bank stood next to it. Further down was a building that Kevin recognized as a former major donut chain, but was now a local diner.

“When the chains abandon a town, it’s over,” he thought.

Kevin turned up the driveway of the hospital, and got out. The pile of rubble looked a lot smaller than it did when it tried to crush him, but it was still an imposing building. The

south end was still mostly standing, but there was no way Kevin would ever set foot in the thing again.

He took out the trace and his tape measure. The trace didn’t tell Kevin how far the hospital was from the river, so he would have to bushwhack his way to the bank and measure coming back. He walked around to the back of the building, and saw something very interesting. It was Howie’s car, the green Buick. It looked like he had driven in from a side road that Kevin did not see before.

He walked toward the car. Behind it, Kevin could see ruts leading into the overgrown brush. It would fit a car like that, but only barely. He really didn’t care why he was here. It would be nice to have some help with the measuring.

There was no Howie anywhere. He might have been in the building, Kevin figured. He wasn’t going in, so he went back to the task of measuring. He picked up a few sticks and tramped into the place where it was easiest to walk. The sticks were to mark the distance, because the tape measure would never cover 30 yards.

Kevin pushed aside the tall grass and bushes, and he could feel his shoes starting to soak through. Dammit! There was water in between the grasses. It was too late to give up now, so Kevin ducked under the branch of a sapling and stepped right through a spider web. “Fuck!” he yelled. He wiped his face and looked around. He was in a little grove of sumacs. At least the walking would be easier from here.

Through the trees, Kevin could see the river water churning by. It looked really cold. Just like the water in his shoes.

He got to the river and knelt down to poke a stick into the dirt. Kevin tested the river water and recoiled immediately. It was colder than anything he had ever felt that was not ice. He shook the frigid water from his hand and decided that a hot shower at the hotel room was now in his plans.

Kevin started to measure in as straight a line as possible back to the hospital. He got to the end of the tape, and put down another stick, right in the middle of the sumacs. A couple more of these and he would have 30 yards.

He heard a stick crack somewhere beyond the trees. Kevin looked up, and something was pushing the bushes around. He stood up, waiting for his first encounter with a large Maine animal. Maybe this was the moose he'd been waiting for, or maybe something worse. Kevin reached for a tree branch and tried to break it off. It wouldn't even bend. He was going to have to take this creature on barehanded.

Something lurched through the brush. It was black, and leathery. Actually, it was leather. It was a fedora. Under it was Howie. Kevin let out a deep breath.

"Howie, hello!" Kevin called.

"Who's there?" Howie asked, still coming through the brush. He sounded surprised.

"It's Kevin Logan, the architect."

Howie stepped into the thicket of saplings. He was looking ragged. He wore a black coat and the fedora, and a pair of muddy work boots and gloves. His face was dark with mud as well, and Kevin wondered what he had been up to. He was carrying a shovel and a filthy burlap sack. It looked like he was carting dirt, but not a lot of it.

"What are you doing here?" Howie asked, still surprised.

"Just came to measure the site," Kevin said, gesturing toward the river and the hospital behind them. "I could actually use some help."

"Sorry, boy," Howie said, holding the bag up for Kevin to see. "I have some appointments to keep myself." He started to walk past Kevin, moving in a hurry.

"So what are you carrying?" Kevin asked.

"Son, there's some things that are sacred. I shouldn't tell you what this is, or where I got it."

"Sorry."

Howie eyed Kevin and grinned. "Let me ask you this. Do you fish?"

"Fish?" Kevin asked almost derisively. He had never even considered taking part in a sport that involves standing in a cold river holding a stick. "No, actually, I don't."

"Well, then, you won't be a threat," he said, holding up the bag. "In here, are some of the fattest, juiciest angleworms in the northeast. Fish love 'em. You can't tell anyone where I got 'em."

Kevin laughed. “No problem!” he said.

Howie raised an eyebrow and dropped his voice.

“There’s places along this river where you fish, and others where you just kill time.”

“Secret’s safe with me,” Kevin said.

“Nobody,” Howie said as he pointed at Kevin’s nose.

“Not Frank. Nobody. I was never here.”

“Gotcha.”

Howie stepped over a bush and headed back to his car with his prize. Kevin knelt back down and continued measuring. He heard the Buick start up and drive off through the overgrown brush.

When Kevin was done with the measurements, he found that there wasn’t really much room between the existing building and the boundary. He needed to know how much work needed to be done to rip up the foundation. He looked back at the hospital. The basement looked safe enough. It was concrete, not brick. The falling bricks had brought down the floor, so he figured whatever could fall, had fallen.

Kevin walked toward the entrance to the emergency ward. Wooden doors had collapsed into the opening, and he stepped over them into the dark basement. He kept an eye on a quick escape in case anything started to move. Kevin measured the thickness of the foundation. This could help him determine how much weight needed to be removed. In the darkness, he could see columns that had fallen over. It would

be nice to count them, but this place was too dangerous. This was going to be another estimate.

Kevin walked a little further into the darkness and stepped on something that wasn’t a brick, or a board. It felt softer. Oh, God, he thought. It must be a dead animal. He leaned over to see what was under his foot. It was definitely not a rat or anything like that. It looked like a small board. It was partially burned, and as Kevin’s eyes adjusted he saw that it was a book.

Kevin picked it up. He couldn’t tell whether it was supposed to be black, or had been charred. It looked like everything else in the ruined building. He started to open it, but the pages were stuck together, and it was hard to open the book without destroying it. Charred pages started to crumble out of it. If this had been here 60 years, it probably wasn’t worth taking.

He tried to decide whether to take it. It might be an old hospital chart, detailing some disease that by now was easy to cure. It might be some old medical textbook, or some novel read by a patient as he waited to die. Maybe it was somebody’s diary. That could be fascinating. Kevin took the book and went back to the car.

The book was so charred that his hands turned black. Kevin vigorously wiped his hands with a paper towel from the car, and then wrapped the book in one. This wasn’t really a long day, but it felt like one. He had skipped lunch, and he was

starving. Kevin headed back to the hotel for a shower and dinner. Maybe tonight he could find that cheeseburger.