

Chapter 5

A Call Back

“What do you mean, the riverbank is not in the project?” Amanda hollered. “What the hell are they doing up there?”

Kevin was busily pacing back and forth in his hotel room on the phone with Amanda. That wasn't the answer he was looking for. He lied a little, blaming the surveyor for the misunderstanding. Kevin was actually sure it was Amanda's fault. This was not covered in the bid package. He just knew it wasn't. Well, he was pretty sure, anyway.

“Amanda,” Kevin said. “I have a trace of the site plan.”

Amanda was terse. “A trace? No. We need the whole set. At least a copy”

“I tried. He said not to worry about the set, but-“

“Do you want me to talk to the guy?” she asked, almost matronly.

“No! No. I will get him to-“

“What's his number?” she demanded.

“He's at the town hall, um, I don't have it on me.”

“What's the surveyor's name?” Amanda asked, sounding more irritated.

Kevin continued to plead in futility. “I don't have his whole name. Just the first name-“

“The name.”

“His name's Ed. Ed the surveyor.” She had an uncanny ability to get results. Kevin felt like a complete fool.

There was silence on the other end of the phone, as if Amanda was writing the name down. E.D. Kevin thought. Ed. “What?” he heard Amanda say.

“Huh?” he asked.

“Did you say something?”

Oh, my God, Kevin thought. Did he say that aloud? “Nothing,” he answered.

“I'm calling him today, and you'll have the drawings,” she said. “You'll get maybe a day to take them to repro. I expect you in the office Thursday.”

“Okay,” Kevin said unconvincingly.

“Thursday,” she repeated. “On time.”

“Yeh. See you then,” Kevin said. He heard a dial tone. If Amanda had better luck with the surveyor than he did, she would be calling him back soon. He sat down on the bed, and hoped he would not cower like that again.

“You're a puss,” Kevin heard Kristen say. She was sitting in the corner of the hotel room, flipping through the local tourism book, which she had been doing while he was on the phone.

“Shut up.”

“But I tried to get the drawings copied,” she said, mocking him in a sing-song voice.

“I didn't sound like that. I said what I needed to say.” Kevin knew Kristen was right. He was a puss, but this was his

job. He wasn't losing my job over this. The next time his phone rang, he was probably going to do exactly the same thing.

Kevin already dreaded the next call.

"What the hell do they expect you to do up here, anyway?" Kristen asked, still flipping through the tourist book. "They got lighthouses and pine trees, and that's it."

"There's some pretty cool stuff here," Kevin said.

"Little gift shops and ritzy restaurants you'd probably like."

"Maybe. The ads are all hokey. Pure tourist trash."

"I thought you made your living writing that stuff."

"I do," she said. "It's not exactly the cure for cancer."

Kevin paused and looked at Kristen curiously. "What? Don't you like your job?"

She never looked up from the book. "Yeah. Well, sometimes I wish I was doing more."

"More? Like what?"

"I don't know, just, I don't want to get to where Dad is, y'know, and I did nothing."

Kevin shook his head in disbelief. "What's that sound?" he asked. "Is that a regret?"

"No. Just... it's not important."

"C'mon! What do you mean it's not important? What about all those people who would be wearing baggy jeans if you didn't tell them to wear tight ones?"

"Shut the fuck up!" she said with a smirk.

"And then, all the people who would be wearing tight pants when baggy came back?" Kevin laughed.

"Are you making fun of my job? What the hell do you know about my job?" she hollered. Kevin leaned back. Kristen was getting pretty defensive. He was starting to have fun dredging up some of their old sibling battles.

"I know you used to like it," he said. "What happened, anyway?"

"Nothing. It's just that all that shit I sell, you know, like the jeans. That's not what makes the world turn,"

"What?" Kevin said, laughing. "Of course it does. All those people out there are buying stuff you told them to buy. They open a magazine and see your ads."

"It's just ads. Colors, slogans, styles."

"But a lot of money passes because of those slogans," he told her.

"Yeah," she said, "but it's bullshit compared to what you do. You build things."

"Staircases," Kevin said.

"But you care," she said, looking down at the floor. "I'm not sure I do anymore."

Kevin had never heard Kristen sound uncertain about much. He remembered once when she was in high school, she had two boys calling on her, and she couldn't choose which one to go out with. She agonized over it for days, driving Kevin and Mom crazy.

Kevin figured she chose both.

He started to feel a bit sorry for her. Some of his cynicism was clearly starting to rub off. “Alright, what brought this on?” Kevin asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s Dad. He sounded so tired. Like he wasted his life and is finally figuring it out. It’s really sad.”

“You said he was dying, of course he sounded tired,” Kevin said.

Kristen looked up at him. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” she said.

“Alright,” Kevin said. He had no idea what to say next. He was never in a position to comfort anyone. It was awkward dealing with Kristen like this. She wasn’t always the happiest person he knew, but she was always confident. Kevin was incredibly likely to say the wrong thing right now. Only one thought entered his mind.

“Should we call Dad?” Kevin asked grudgingly.

Kristen looked at him with a wry frown. It was as if she thought Kevin was purposely trying to be a shithead. Maybe he was.

“Yeah, let’s call him,” she said. “I want you to be depressed, too.”

Kevin stood up and walked over to the table, where he sat down. He opened up his phone and placed it on the table. It had the conference feature, and he had used it hundreds of times. It sounded terrible. “What’s the number?” he asked.

“954-555-0402.”

Kevin dialed it, and after a few rings, Dad answered. Kevin couldn’t say anything right away. This was the guy who did nothing but drink his way through most of his childhood.

“Dad? It’s Kristen,”

They heard Dad’s voice through the loudspeaker. “Krissie, yeah, did you talk to your brother?” His voice was gruff, and slow. It sounded like talking was painful for him. Kevin looked at Kristen. She was right, he did sound sad.

“Dad, I did, we’re both here,” Kristen said.

“What? Uh, Kevin? Are you there?”

“Hello, Dad,” Kevin said, somberly.

“Oh, my God. Kevin, it’s been awhile,” he said.

Kevin was silent. There was a lot he wanted to say, and most of it was mean. Terrible stuff, really. This was a guy who spent a lot of his time trying to ruin their lives. Now he was trying to shoehorn his way back into them by dying.

“Kevin?”

“Yeah, Dad,” Kevin answered. “I know it’s been a long time. I guess I’m–“

“Don’t apologize to me,” Dad urged, then coughed. “I never earned it.”

“No. You didn’t.”

Kristen looked up at Kevin with a scowl. He could tell that she disapproved of his sullen behavior. Kevin didn’t care. He frowned back at her.

“Dad, I’m sorry for this,” she said. “Kevin is being a–“

“Krissie, don’t you dare. I deserve it,” Dad said.

“Well, I heard you were dying, Dad. I guess I can spare a few minutes,” Kevin said.

Dad stammered on the other end. “Yeah, yeah. That’s alright. It’s not like I, well... Listen, if you never called, I would understand.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said.

“So,” Dad asked. “Where are you guys?”

Kristen spoke up, “Dad, we’re in Harbin.”

“Already?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “Long story.”

“I was already here, Dad,” Kevin said.

“What? Why?” he asked, sounding surprised. Kristen sat back, as if she felt she could take a break from the conversation. Kevin narrowed his eyes at her.

“I am working on a project up here,” he said to Dad.

“Oh, that’s right,” then he coughed again. “You’re an architect.”

“Yeah, Dad. That’s what I was going to school for.”

There was a pause. “So what’s the project?”

“Just a condo development. Nothing special,” Kevin hoped that Dad would quit probing. He never knew Dad to care very much about what Kevin was doing. This was getting very annoying.

“Condos? In Harbin?”

Kevin didn’t want to get into any more. He hated being on the phone with anyone. This reunion with Dad would be better face-to-face, if only marginally. Still, he felt like he

should at least humor Dad for a while. After all, they were the ones who called him.

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “These folks called. They wanted to build a condo complex, and that’s what we do. It’s kind of our specialty.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s a good thing to do,” he said haltingly.

“We were wondering when you were coming up,” Kristen said.

“This weekend. Alright?”

She looked at Kevin questioningly. He was getting sick of making this drive already.

“Will you be okay to fly?” she asked Dad.

“Yeah. It’s not that hard to get around yet.”

Kevin was curious. “Dad, what do you have?” he asked.

Dad paused. “Oh, I’ve just done some wrong things, that’s all. Now I’m paying for it.”

“But what is it? Did you have an accident or something?” Kevin asked.

There was another silence. “Kids, I got what I deserved. That’s all.”

Kristen and Kevin looked at each other. She said, “Dad, I could tell him, but I’d really rather-“

“It’s cancer, Kevin,” Dad said.

“What?”

“Cancer. I have about six months, son.” Kevin could hear the weakness in his voice, and a lifetime of regret came spilling out. Kristen’s eyes watered, but he resisted. Damn it, Kevin thought, he was going to keep resisting.

The phone was silent for a minute or two. Kevin started to wonder if the connection was broken.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, Kevin,” he answered.

“I’ll be there on Saturday,” Kevin said. Kristen looked up and smiled. She brushed a tear from her eye.

“Good,” Dad said. “I’d better go.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, Kevin,” Dad asked. “Where is this condo being built?”

Kevin was surprised by the question. It sounded like he actually cared. “Well, there’s this old hospital that burned like, sixty years ago, and the town wants to replace it.”

There was silence at the other end.

“Dad? Dad?” Kristen pleaded.

“Yes. I’m here,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing. Nothing. Just, sixty years is a long time. A real long time.”

“Yeah,” Kristen said.

“So why do you want to meet us here?” Kevin asked.

“Kevin, I’ll tell you about that on Saturday. I get into Portland about noon,” Dad said. “Bye.”

“Bye, Dad,” Kristen said.

Kevin waited a few more seconds. “Bye,” he finally said.

With that, Dad hung up. Kevin stood up and started pacing the room again.

He looked back at Kristen. He had to know why Dad wanted to meet in Harbin, even though he was still trying to feign indifference about his visit. “Why does he want to meet here? Do you know?” Kevin asked.

“I have no idea, Kev,” she said. “I asked. He said he had a lot to tell us.”

Kevin tried to figure it out. “It’s probably some old cemetery. You remember how he used to drive us around looking at graves?”

Kristen shook her head. “No. I think there’s more to it than that.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you trust him?” Kevin asked.

“What?” Kristen shouted in surprise. Kevin could tell it had never even occurred to her. She wasn’t gullible, but maybe with Dad she was too willing to believe.

“Do you think he’s lying about being on his death bed?”

“No!”

“He said it was cancer. There’s a lot of cancers, right? Did he say anything about what kind?” Kevin grew more

certain of his skepticism. Dad was the type to make up shit like this, but not get the details nailed down. Mom caught him in a lot of lies because he was such a sloppy liar.

“Kevin,” Kristen said in a level voice that let him know she wasn’t going to argue this point again. “He told me it was liver cancer. It started as pancreatic cancer but it spread. By the time he was coughing up blood, and went to get it checked out, it was too late. He’s not lying when he said he has about 6 months,” she said.

Kevin knew almost nothing about cancer, but he knew that it was generally something to avoid. If Dad had 6 months left to live, he had to wonder how he was going to get on a plane and fly here.

“Kris, that’s bullshit,” he said. “He’d be in a bed. He’s lying about something.”

Kristen frowned and started flipping through the book again. “I can’t believe you, Kevin.”

“Can’t believe what?”

“You just don’t care that Dad is dying, do you?”

“No.”

“I thought you were just pretending to be an asshole about it. But you really are.”

“What are you talking about?” Kevin demanded.

“He wants to try to make things right,” she said.

“Well, it’s too little, too late!” Kevin yelled.

“Damn it, Kevin! Just grow a heart for once!”

“The guy deserves what he’s getting. He said so!”

“Give him a chance,” Kristen pleaded.

Kevin walked to the window and looked out. There they were, the happy people making the rounds of the shops and bistros. He was in here yelling at his sister about their dying father. She was right. What pissed Kevin off was not that he was trying to get in touch after years of ignorance. It was that he did care. Kristen had nailed it. He did not want to get to where he was, with no time left, and with nothing to show for a life of sixty-five years.

“Saturday. What the heck. What do you think he wants?” Kevin asked.

“I don’t know. I told you that.”

Dad had some answering to do. On Saturday, Kevin would figure out what he was up to. He just wasn’t willing to believe this guy who had given him so many reasons to despise him.

“Hey,” she said. “What is this, by the way?” She held up the black book that Kevin had found at the old hospital. It was still wrapped in the napkin, but char was leaking through onto the table.

“Oh, leave that alone, it’s charred,” he said. “I got it from the hospital.”

“Looks like a diary.” She said.

“I know. I haven’t had time to open it.”

“Hmm,” Kristen said as she put the book down, clearly unready to touch it with her clean, manicured hands. “Well, I

should probably get going. I've got to check out of my place and get home. Want to come up together Friday?"

"Friday?"

"Yeah, unless you want to drive at five in the morning Saturday."

"Good point. Yeah, keep in touch."

Kristen grabbed her stuff. Kevin smirked as she put her purple hat and red gloves back on. She shot him a look that clearly said, "Go to hell." Then she opened the door.

"Later," she said.

"Later."