

## **Chapter 6**

### **A Connection**

Kevin looked at the burned book on the table. He had no idea when Amanda was going to make something happen with the surveyor. The hotel tourist book wasn't going to be much fun. He laid the black book on top of the napkin, and started peeling at the edges, to find a page that would open. I carefully opened the book flat, and held it there for a few seconds to keep it open.

The first few pages were burned through, but after a few seconds reading what came after, it was clear to Kevin that it was a diary. The writing was hard to read, as if whoever wrote it was still learning cursive. He was never a fantastic reader of cursive anyway. Kevin could tell that the pen was one of those ink-dipped points, so this diary must have been pretty old. Maybe as old as the hospital.

Whoever wrote it used dates, but no years. As Kevin flipped through it, he saw that the writing got a little better with time, as did the grammar. The diary seemed to be written by a teenager or somebody even younger.

“September 14. We opened the door and saw the rabbit in the yard. It ran away and we chased it to the next yard. It jumped under a bush and we could not get to it. Even Casper chased it and Mother ran after us yelling “hey stop, hey stop” and the rabbit got into the trees and was gone.”

The diary was full of that sort of thing. Kevin flipped a few more pages.

“January 20. School was terrible today. Teach caught me writing on the wall next to my desk and I took home a note for Mother. She hit me with the switch. It hurt like a hot coal. Then she made me chop up the firewood and now I am in here with homework. There was no dinner or dessert.”

Poor kid, Kevin thought. It was heartening to see that he wasn't the first kid to get punished in school for being a complete dick. At least he never had to chop firewood. Kevin figured the writer was a boy. If not, then a Maine winter was tougher than he thought. He flipped a few more pages and kept reading.

“April 22. Those lads are jerks because they didn't think the car would work. Well, it did and it beat them in the derby. I got the last laugh. They're still a mean bunch, but they are a year older and they're all in the square nails club. I have a lot of work still but I will get the old machine right.”

The next few pages were difficult to follow because so much of the book was burned. Whoever this kid was, it was clear he was turning out to be a loner. Kevin would bet he turned out to be either a brilliant artist or a total washout.

Or maybe he became nothing, Kevin thought. Maybe the book was in the hospital because the kid it belonged to died there. That would be a shame. Just when he was starting to show some promise, he was struck down by some misunderstood disease.

Kevin tried to imagine this kid's life. There he was, chasing rabbits, defacing public property, building cars, and trying to hang out with the upperclassmen in their club. Then one day he runs a high fever, maybe he's kept out of school. Then the next day his fever is worse, and the doctor visits him. Kevin imagined that this was in a time when doctors still made house calls.

The doctor prescribes something like bloodletting, or a dose of mercury, and it doesn't work. He is taken to the hospital, where he deteriorates, coughing, in pain, unable to speak anymore. His parents bring him his journal so he can write. They stay with him through night after night, crying over him and imploring the doctors to do everything they can.

Finally, one evening, he is silent. No coughing, no breathing, and his parents wail and hold each other, lamenting the curse that has taken their boy, their treasure. Another young life claimed by the common cold.

Before the nurses can take the body, a fire starts in the basement of the hospital. They are powerless to fight it, and the local volunteer fire department has only one small hand-pumped fire engine. The flames rise into the sky, lighting up the night and drawing a large crowd from the surrounding town. Everybody watches their hospital, the pride of their village, burn to the ground.

Sixty years later, the hospital still stands as a mark of failure. The failure to recover and move ahead. The town elders still remember the night their future ended. That must be

why they were so bitter about it, Kevin figured. That must be why it took them so long to get out of their funk. Frank had called the building "the old bitch." They saw it as a monument of some kind.

Maybe that's how it happened, or maybe not, but there was one thing that bothered Kevin. The book had been there for sixty years, so why was it so easy to find? Anybody could have found it. Frank said that kids ran through there a lot. He himself insisted on going down to the basement to take a look.

Kevin could think of only one reason that he found it. The book was hidden in a crevice or a pile somewhere in the hospital, and it was uncovered when the bricks fell during the walk-through. That was how it went undiscovered for sixty years.

Maybe.

While Kevin was standing there pondering his own morbid imagination, his cell phone rang. It was Amanda, telling him to get his ass down to the Harbin town hall to get the drawings. She had talked to Frank, not Ed. Frank was technically the boss, and he probably tore the poor fellow a brand new sphincter. Kevin grabbed his coat and headed for Harbin.

When he got back to the town hall, he ran into the building to apologize to Ed. He did not mean to sick Amanda on his boss, but it was the only way to get the drawings copied. He walked down the hall to the survey office, and opened the door. Inside, just like before, nobody was standing behind the

desk, but Kevin could hear the same antique country music playing on a radio inside the office. He eyed the bell, about to ring it. It wasn't the best way to begin making apologies.

"You there?" Ed's voice bellowed from the small office. He came walking out and looked at Kevin. "I have been waiting for you, son." Surprisingly, he did not sound too angry.

"Ed, I'm very sorry about my boss," Kevin said, with his hand held out for him to shake it.

Ed ignored Kevin's hand. "That's the game, my boy. You ask me. I answer. Your boss asks my boss, and I answer differently," he said happily.

"Oh, well, sorry anyway."

"And that's your job, to play the fool," he said, chuckling.

Kevin looked at him with a curious look on his face.

Ed pointed right at him. "Yeah, that's what I mean. Perfect!" he boomed. He turned around toward the storage room. "C'mon!" he said with a wave.

Kevin ducked under the desk and followed him. Ed unlocked the door to the room and turned on the light. As they walked in, Kevin saw a drawing set leaning against the table.

"That's yours," Ed said. "Be very careful with it. I would like to have it back this time tomorrow."

Kevin walked to the drawings, and was about to pick them up. Ed held up his hand.

"Hold on for a moment," he said. "I have something to show you." Ed pulled another drawing set out of one of the bins. It was smaller than the hospital drawing roll. "This is something you might find interesting," he said as he rolled the set out on the table.

"What is it?" Kevin asked him.

"This town hasn't built a new housing development in a long time," he said. "Last time it did, it was this place."

The first page was a map of a small neighborhood of three or four blocks. The housing lots were mapped out, with little rectangular houses with garages attached. They had numbers, and the street names were already there, with names like Goodwin Street, Crystal Street, Norris Road, and Acre Drive.

"I recognize one of the street names. Where is this?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, these roads are just about a mile from here, south, I think," Ed said as he turned and pointed at one wall, then at another.

"Acre Drive," Kevin said, reading the map aloud. A little too loud.

"What about it?" Ed asked.

"Oh, well, somebody told me something about Acre Drive this morning," Kevin told him.

Ed cocked his head as if he was trying to think of something he knew about the road. "Been here longer than me, is all I know."

Kevin felt bad for engaging Ed in a meaningless conversation and wasting his time. Still, he had opened the door, and felt he had to enter the room. “You ever heard of the Claremont house?” he asked.

“Can’t say,” he mumbled.

“That’s what they told me, 14 Acre Drive is called the Claremont house,” Kevin said.

“Probably a family that lived there,” Ed said dismissively. Kevin couldn’t blame him. He was starting to disturb even himself. Then Ed shifted gears, after a few seconds deep in thought. “Claremont, huh? Hand me those drawings,” he said, pointing to the big hospital set.

Kevin picked up the hospital set and laid it on the table, where Ed rolled it out.

“Look here,” he said. “This is where the designers are listed.” He pointed to the information at the border of the drawings. Kevin had not bothered to look at it before.

Kevin looked down the list of people responsible for the building. There were the names of the building contractors, and the architects and designers. One of the names was M. Claremont of Harbin.

“I thought I saw that the other day. Mean anything to you?” Ed asked me.

“Who knows? Maybe the same architect built both the hospital and the houses.”

“Could be,” Ed said.

Kevin looked at the plans for the housing development. There was no Claremont. This was stupid. All because Kevin wanted to make small talk. He had dragged Ed through this long enough.

“Well, never mind. I should get going and get the copies made,” Kevin said. He rolled up the hospital set and took it under his arm.

“Okay, you should take this housing set, too,” Ed said, rolling it up. “Might help you with the hospital.”

“What does it have to do with the hospital?”

“I pulled this out for you to take it, because the old development plan is pretty decent. It’s the sort of thing that would pass muster pretty quickly today, if you catch my drift.”

Kevin did. Amanda had obviously whipped up one hell of a diatribe. If the firm followed the same detail that somebody used in the old plans, Ed would streamline the permitting process. It wasn’t the sort of thing he would say out loud.

“Understood,” Kevin said.

“Truth is, son, Frank let me know about the uh, urgency, of getting this project done. Make some copies of both and it’ll be sure to please your boss. Frank said she didn’t sound none too pleased with us, or with you.”

“Yeah, Ed. Thanks. Thanks a lot,” Kevin said gratefully. He rolled up the drawings and picked up the set leaning against the table. Ed headed for the door and held it open.

“Remember, tomorrow, this time,” Ed said. “There’s a place to get ‘em scanned down in Portland, by the highway. I’ll give you the number out here.”

Ed went to the desk and wrote down the number on a slip, and Kevin thanked him and left.

Kevin realized he had underestimated Frank. He really was interested in finishing this project after sixty years. Kevin would have liked to bump into him to apologize.

Amanda could be pretty abrasive, even toward clients like Frank. She felt that honesty was the quickest way to get the job done, but for a lot of people who worked with her, it was unnerving. For folks like Kevin who had to work for her, it could be brutal. Her entire work history was a wasteland of bruised egos and broken careers. Kevin hoped to get to her level someday, and he hoped he could do it without being too much of an asshole.

Kevin called the copy shop from the car, and they assured him they could get this kind of thing done in time. It was easily an hour from Harbin, so he had more time to listen to that damn country music. He never found the stuff Ed was listening to, but he did find a station that played nothing but inauthentic drivel, and kept it there the whole way. Every time Kevin started to think it wasn’t all that bad, another song came on that sucked beyond measure.

He dropped the drawings off, and thanked the young dude with braces behind the desk. He didn’t seem to think they had the right size paper still in stock. Another guy assured him

they did, and that was good enough for Kevin. He left, glad to get back to another hour of that country music.

Back on the road, Kevin felt a little anxious about something. He realized that he was eager to get back into the diary again. It was getting interesting, and he was finally going to have some time to really dig into it. Kevin didn’t look forward to reading things very often. Ever since coasting through high school without cracking a book, he was never able to work up an interest. The diary was cool, he thought, because it was his. Except for Kristen, nobody knew he had it.

Thinking about the diary caused Kevin to blank out on the radio in the background. The hospital held this secret for so long, and he happened to be there to uncover it. Maybe the town would be interested in keeping something from its past, especially from the ruin that seemed to loom over the place for sixty years. If something was going to inspire Kevin about the design of the new condos, maybe the diary would help. Then he hit upon a better idea.

Kevin had read about architects using items and stories to inspire them in their designs. Wright liked to design places that mimicked the landscape. Calatrava was always using local history to generate his ideas. Pei tried to produce work that both honored the past and celebrated the future. Kevin wasn’t one of these guys, but if he ever wanted to be, maybe it was time he started thinking like them.

Amanda and the guys at the firm would be impressed if Kevin came back with an inspired design. Or would they? The

firm built standardized boxes for housing. The doors and windows were made by a company that gave them kickbacks to specify their stuff. The stairs and utility stacks were always in the same place, and the siding was always some synthetic material that was designed to keep maintenance contractors flush with revenue for decades.

Kevin could swear that the firm's designs could be recognized from 30,000 feet. They were the elevator music of architectural firms. Inauthentic drivel. Kevin resolved to change that, starting today.

Either that, or the guys back at the firm were going to laugh their asses off when he came running in with a design that evoked a sawmill, or a sailing ship, or seagulls. Or lighthouses! Those assholes would tear his design apart the second they saw it. He would never live it down. "What about the prefab dormers?" he could hear them asking already.

What a bunch of scumbags, Kevin thought. But they were right. So was Kristen. He was a pussy. He wasn't going to be some name-brand architect. He could hear the guys laughing heartily.

Kevin pulled onto Harbin's main road, and headed back toward the hotel. He crossed the river, and could see the hospital's southern flank a couple of miles upstream. The church steeples near the town hall poked above the trees up ahead. Then a road sign on the left caught Kevin's eye. It was Acre Drive. He thought for a minute as he drove past it.

Somebody named M. Claremont designed the hospital. What if Kevin could go check out the house that this Claremont lived in? He could at least get a little background on the original designer, find out what the dude was all about, and maybe put a little bit of it behind his design of the condos. What the hell, he figured.

Kevin turned the car around and took Acre Drive. He followed it for a short distance, and rounded a couple of bends. He saw few houses. This was one of those winding suburban streets with its houses mostly hidden behind tall hedges. On one side of the street there was no sidewalk. On the other, a narrow strip of pavement was separated from the road by a stretch of grass and dirt, and there was no discernible curb. Somebody had used some of the strip for a flower garden, but most of it was either overgrown or bare.

Finally, Kevin saw number 14. He pulled to a stop right in front of it, and left the car running. This would be strange, he thought, if somebody saw him idling in front of this house in the middle of the afternoon. Then, on cue, he saw the curtains move in one of the windows in a house across the street. He pulled out a map from the glove box and pretended to read it.

There was nothing special about number 14. It was a simple Cape style house clad in weathered shingles. It was trimmed in white, with black shutters, and looked like it was in reasonably good condition. There was a doublewide garage at the end of the gravel driveway, connected to the house by a

short breezeway. The door to the breezeway looked like it was the only door that was ever used. The front door in the middle of the main house had a three foot drop to the lawn, and no stoop. The whole thing was surrounded by a weathered rail fence and a tall green lawn.

A cute house, Kevin thought. He put the map down and thought about leaving. He saw the curtains move again in the other house, and figured it was time to leave. He had learned nothing about M. Claremont.

Just before Kevin could step on the gas, he looked in the mirror, and saw a car pulling up the road. It was one of the beaters from the diner, and to his horror, he saw that it was Annie, the waitress. She slowed down when she saw Kevin, and then pulled into the driveway. Shit! There was no way she would know who he was in this car. She hadn't seen it because he rode with Kristen that morning.

There was only one thing to do. He floored it.

Kevin had been parked far enough onto the dirt patch that the car slipped and threw up a hell of a rooster tail. He peeled out into the road and took off down the street. At some point, according to the map, it was supposed to connect with Crystal.

Kevin drove for another few hundred yards, looking for Crystal Street. The houses got newer as the road wound further into the wilderness, until they were giant plastic mansions with tall windows and lawyer foyers. Some of the houses were empty, and still had for sale signs out in front. The last few

houses, he could tell, were never even built. It was just vacant lots and tumbleweeds.

Another thing that had not been built was Crystal Street. This road was a dead end. Kevin had to turn around and pass 14 again, hoping that Annie and her nosy neighbor found nothing weird at all about a stalker with New York plates laying a slab on her quiet street.

He drove slowly, hoping Annie would have enough time to go inside. He rounded the bend and approached the house. There she was, standing in the driveway, looking right at Kevin. She didn't even put down her grocery bag. As he approached the house, he slowed down, just in case Annie was some kind of protective housemarm. She saw her move and took it.

Annie walked right out into the middle of the street in front of the car. Kevin stopped.

She walked over to my window, and there was nothing he could really do now. He rolled it down.

Annie smiled, "There's nothing to be scared of, kiddo," she said.

"Uh, how'd you know?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, we don't get a lot of New York plates around here," she said. "I knew it was you in an instant."

Kevin looked over at the other house, and saw the curtains move again.

Annie noticed too. “Don’t worry about Meredith. She just likes to keep tabs on things. Where’s your gal pal?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s Kristen, my sister.”

“Your sister? Well, listen, shut that thing off and come on inside,” Annie said. She walked toward the driveway and let Kevin park the car. This lady must be cracked, he thought. He was a customer at her diner, and now here he was sitting in front of her house waiting for her to get home. If Kristen was here, he could understand. But by himself, Kevin could have been some serial killer, who drove 7 hours from New York looking for a victim.

There was nothing to do now but go along.