

Chapter 9

Weymouth

Vanessa and Rich looked at Doug with astonished expressions. He had suddenly realized that the Weymouth binder might show him what was going on with the database. That thought was motivating and frightening at the same time.

The trainees were the only people in line. The sub shop was normally so busy that customers who could not order quickly were skipped over. Doug, Rich and Vanessa had learned to know what they wanted before we came in.

Doug was worried about his tampering with the stock market. Molin didn't seem to be worried that he would be found out, outside of the company. But even he had no idea why the hack actually affected the market. What a coup it would be to figure it out for him.

He also had no idea if Vanessa's theory held any water. Doug knew that the major indices were the primary sources for media reporting of business trends. There were so damn many of them. There was no way this modeling program could be tapped into so many different databases. Not in more than one direction. Doug knew nothing about software, but he was sure that something this complex was extremely unlikely.

As they waited for their subs, Doug asked, "Vanessa, are you sure this sort of thing could be done?"

"A modeler for the entire global stock market?" she asked with a sarcastic smirk. "Sure, it could. It would take an

army of well-funded and well-managed programmers, and probably take years. But yes, it is possible. I think."

"Who would want to pour that kind of dough into a project like that?" asked Rich.

Vanessa responded, "This company could probably do it, but it would have a terrible effect on the bottom line. We just did this research, and you couldn't hide this kind of thing."

"Even outsourcing?" Rich asked.

"No, we would have found it. It would have been suspicious," she said.

"Shangzhen could have hid a project like that," Doug said.

"Did you find anything in your research of them?" Rich asked me.

Doug shook his head.

Vanessa looked like she was deep in thought. "How was the language in the program, was it in English?" she asked.

Doug answered, "Yeah, it was all in English. It was very simple, actually."

"Any English spellings, like program with m-m-e? i-s-e instead of z?"

"Now that I'm thinking of it, there was something weird. It used 'suburb' for 'city'. It took me awhile to figure out why Hong Kong was considered a suburb," he answered.

"Australian," she said. "The program was written there."

The subs came up, and the three took them and paid. As they left the shop, Rich suddenly raised his eyebrows.

“Shangzhen has an Australian subsidiary,” Rich said. “Remember Mr. Lawney? He was Aussie.” Rich and Doug got the inkling that Vanessa was probably close to the truth about how the program worked. “So what is the clue?” Rich asked.

Doug looked at them for a moment. He wondered if they wanted to embark on this journey with him. He felt bad for not telling them about the modeler in the first place. Now he had to tell them why they should find out what kind of mess he had gotten into. He had dug this ditch himself.

“Weymouth,” Doug said.

“You mean because of the store closing?” Rich asked as he looked down the street toward Kand’s boarded-up storefront. “Those goons asked about Weymouth.”

“They asked if we’d been there,” said Vanessa.

“What are you thinking?” Rich asked.

“There was an address in the binder, and the same address was in the Free Majority folder,” Doug told them.

“Holy shit, in Weymouth?” Rich asked with some hesitation.

“Something like 429 Main Street in Weymouth.,” Doug answered. “Apartment 5. And the zip code.”

“So you want to go see what’s there?” Vanessa asked.

“Yeah, there’s more,” Doug said. The others looked at him and waited.

Doug continued, “The address has the same numbers in it as the code for the database.”

“All the same numbers?” Vanessa asked

“It could be a coincidence,” said Rich.

“No. The order is the same and everything. Think about it,” he said. “Our company was working on an investment there. It could have been a funnel for other businesses.”

“A front. But we’re thinking it was Shangzhen now,” said Vanessa.

“Maybe the Shangzhen deal goes back a little further,” Doug said. “It was just a handshake. Unwritten. Remember, it was Weaver’s deal from the beginning.”

“He may have been working on it for years,” said Rich.”

“The land deal is 5 years old,” Doug said.

“You said this would take years to write,” Rich said to Vanessa.

“And it would take a smart group, like a bunch of MIT Computer Science grad students...” Rich said.

“The address,” said Vanessa.

There was a pause.

“So do you guys want to go?” Doug asked.

Rich and Vanessa were lost in thought as they all crossed the street and headed back to the office. Doug walked along in silence, waiting for an answer. He started to feel that they were ready to go along.

“I don’t think so,” said Vanessa. “This is our job.”

Rich was more hesitant to back out, but did. “We were not supposed to have that binder. You heard Molin.”

They kept walking. Doug knew they were right. There was no way all of them should go to Weymouth. He had worked on the database, while Vanessa and Rich had not. They were not supposed to know about it, and it was better not to get them involved. But Doug was curious. Maybe there was nothing to see in Weymouth. Maybe the address really was phony. Maybe the software was just a modeler that PMW had bought access to, and was supposed to use only for research.

He still had no idea why it affected the market, or why the Free Majority had the code. That was why he had to go. Doug decided to go and see what was at that address.

“Okay, you guys, I am going to find out this weekend,” he said. Rich and Vanessa were relieved that he was not going to push them. “I will let you know if anything is there.”

“I wish you had told me about this thing before,” said Rich.

“No, you don’t,” said Vanessa. “We are better off being uninformed.”

The trainees got to the building and walked into the lobby. They stopped discussing the database once they entered, and kept the conversation to sports and fashion.

The cafeteria was a little busier than normal, probably because of the cold weather. There was a buzz, as if the party had been a little bit of a morale boost for the associates. Doug felt a little upbeat about things as well. He and his friends had

passed a test, sort of a rite of passage. They had outlasted a member of the training group.

Doug was sure that their jobs would get harder, but nowhere near as hard as Stephen and Karen’s. They were now without their leader. Doug felt bad for them, especially Stephen. His role had definitely changed. He and Karen were like a team without a star player. Whatever they were assigned, it would be up to them to organize and perform their tasks without Brey’s guidance.

He did not feel bad for Brey, but not because he deserved to be out of a job. He was certain to find another position pretty quickly. Doug had never realized that despite his jealous and demeaning attitude, he was a very capable investment banker. His natural instincts matched some of the VPs. Doug had watched him in meetings and conversations. He could focus like a laser on a person’s weak points, and he was relentless in negotiations.

In developing deals, Brey had what was called ‘detachment’. Feelings did not matter to him. Not even his own. He knew how to stick to his terms, and he always knew where his walk-away was. In personal relationships, the others had clearly found his buttons, but when it was about business, he was unshakable. He could turn it on. Doug actually admired that quality about him.

Molin fired him for a number of reasons. Brey was smart and aggressive, and had the tools, but Molin was on the

warpath to get one of the trainees. Firing Brey sent a message to the rest that their talents did not matter worth a damn.

Another reason he got canned could have been that he was discovered throwing files, but Doug had seen some of the partners angrily punching walls and swearing like pirates. That didn't matter as long as the reason was strong enough to support the bad behavior. If Brey was a full associate, he would still be at the firm.

Doug thought of one more reason that Brey was fired. He was caught with the Weymouth binder. That could have meant only one thing; He had been snooping around. The room where Doug got the binder was locked, and he suddenly realized that if Brey was suspected of snooping, he could not have been interested in the Weymouth binder unless Doug had mentioned it to him.

If Molin started to think about the binder, he would certainly be coming around to Doug.

The rest of the week went by without anybody else getting fired. The trainees barely even saw Molin. About midweek, Doug saw him arguing with one of the VPs, and then he stormed into a conference room. That was about it.

The three met with Joe Franklin and picked up some projects. Rich got in on some meetings with new clients. Vanessa got a very analytical project that kept her buried in spreadsheets. Doug sat in on some merger presentations and had a few proposals to draft for Joe. He even noticed that

Stephen and Karen were busy. The trainees didn't get much time even for lunch, so they mostly ate in the cafeteria.

It was a bad week for email. The email server seemed to slow down. On Tuesday, Doug heard Rich laugh at something, and then he asked over the cube wall if he had gotten the email yet. He had probably forwarded a joke that he received. Doug finally got the email about 15 minutes later. Vanessa noticed the same thing, and they chalked it up to a slow server. The problem kept up all week.

The computers were not the only electronics on the blink. The telephone started buzzing loudly in Doug's ear whenever he picked it up, and nobody knew what was going on. He finally went to find the IT people, and was told that they could get to it in a week. They were sure it was nothing.

On Friday, the three entered the cafeteria and saw a stack of plates and plastic forks. A cake box sat open, and Doug took a look. There were only crumbs left. Obviously, there was a birthday party he had not heard about. This was strange, since these were normally announced over the PA system. Rich and Vanessa had no idea, either.

They began to wonder if anyone else in the office was being affected by these weird events. Rich and Vanessa had also had the phone problems, and they thought that maybe they were being targeted by Molin to see who would snap next. It was just an idle thought, but Doug suggested that their email was being read because Molin thought they had joined a crackpot economic activist group.

“Don’t even joke about that,” said Rich.

Doug didn’t really think it was worth a joke, and he said so, but Rich was adamant.

“There is something going on,” he said. Doug usually trusted his instincts. “If you’re still thinking about going to Weymouth, I wouldn’t. They are watching.”

“If they’re watching, that’s more of a reason to go.”

Rich sat still in his cafeteria chair and looked at Doug. He knew he had made up his mind. Doug knew, too. He had decided to see what was going on in Weymouth.

On Saturday, Doug woke up a little earlier than normal. He usually got up around nine and headed to the gym. This was always a mistake, because the gym was busy every Saturday morning. He had not gone for the last few weeks, and was starting to feel the slack. He could also see the results in the bedroom mirror.

Doug had gotten so disgusted with his body that he found himself eating half a grapefruit. He turned on the TV and sat on the couch in front of it. He put down the grapefruit, which tasted something like bile, on the coffee table.

Doug looked at a Map of Weymouth on his laptop. Main Street was a long boulevard that stretched the length of Weymouth. The town was mostly rectangular, and stretched from the north coast to the south, where the air base was. He recognized the shape from the brochure.

There was a train station in the town, very close to where 429 Main Street was. It looked like he might have to walk a half mile or so. He wondered what the weather was like.

Doug had a tall window in the living room that overlooked the back street he lived on. The view was of the narrow street and the brick building on the other side. If he stood well to the edge of the window and shut one eye, he could see trees on the Boston Common at the end of the street.

Doug looked up at that window and saw sunlight. That was a good sign. Was it warm? That was another question. He clicked on a weather report and saw that the forecast called for sun and 40 degrees, with some wind.

Doug threw out the grapefruit and got ready for the trip. Weymouth was on the commuter rail line, which was like a low-rent version of the Amtrak he had taken to Maine. The seats were faded and torn, and the décor was cheap and out of date. It reminded Doug of a 1970s James Bond film. He sat on one of the least-worn seats and opened up the newspaper he had picked up at the station.

Doug usually went right to the business section, but the Saturday paper was pretty thin. There was a nightlife section where the business pages would normally be.

Doug looked through the section and saw some people he knew in the pages. There were photos of people laughing at the opening of a nightclub. He knew one of the girls in a photo, named Rebecca. Rich and Doug had both hit on her during their first weekend in Boston. They both got nowhere.

Doug met her boyfriend Jim a few weeks later ‘Small world’, he thought at the time, but Jim told him it was a pretty regular thing to bump into the same people a lot. Boston’s young socialite scene was small compared to a city like New York. It was full of people just like Doug; young, successful, and with more money than they knew what to do with.

Doug looked around the train. One thing was for certain; nobody in Boston’s young social groups would be caught dead on a commuter train on a Saturday.

Most of the riders looked like they had lost in life, and were through trying to succeed. There were a couple of elderly ladies who looked like they were keeping a medical appointment. There were some workers coming from an overnight road construction shift. Doug saw a woman with several old grocery bags that he hoped were full of groceries.

He felt out of place in his new cold-weather gear. He was dressed more to climb Everest than hike the main drag in Weymouth. He had a new North Face ski parka, a Polartec fleece, L.L. Bean hiking boots and Oakley sunglasses. To be fair, the sunglasses were actually Oakley knockoffs that he bought in Kand’s store for about 8 bucks. Rich bought a pair, too. They called them ‘Joakleys’.

Through the windows, the scenery was not much better. Doug saw downtown Quincy, a working-class city south of Boston. The train station was nice, but beyond that, he could see closed storefronts and litter blowing around. The roads

looked like they were in lousy shape, and he wondered if getting car was worth it.

Massachusetts could not seem to take care of a road. In California, the roads were always in perfect condition, but that was because the weather was nearly always perfect. Boston and the state it was capital of was prone to sudden freezes, thaws, and freezes again throughout the winter. Maine had this problem as well, but most people there drove something responsible. The luxury cars Doug had his eyes on were not really reasonable considering the condition of the roads.

He looked back at the construction guys. The good news was that they would always have a job.

After Quincy, the scenery turned a little less urban. Doug looked through the front section of his paper, and read a couple of blurbs about new technologies. A company had figured out how to make a radio device that could run without batteries or a plug. Another inventor was working on collision detection for cars.

Molin often told the trainees to keep abreast of what was happening in the world. They were told to look out for companies that might be trying to expand or should be kept in mind as a potential partner for one of PMW’s clients. Mergers were never out of the question, either. Somebody at the firm usually knew somebody who knew somebody at the company in question, and it was just a matter of making the connection.

Often, a small company was started by an inventor with a brilliant new idea, but no money to build it. Or they did not

have the leadership skills necessary to grow the company. PMW saw this kind of thing all the time. A company with a great product was doomed by bad leadership, and the best thing for the inventor to do was to sell the patents and sail off to a Caribbean island.

The smart ones knew this. It did not matter to them if their invention got commercialized or shelved, just that they got the dough. It didn't matter whether they got recognition. If they were the bright minds they were supposed to be, they would just create some other gadget and sell it to someone else.

The inventor in the story seemed to be the other type. He was married to his invention, and claimed that it was a 'vision', that he 'wanted to see through to fruition'. His idea was the radio device that could receive its signal power through the air, because it required such low voltage. It could be used as a transponder, in order to locate and identify military personnel. His idea required millions to develop and manufacture, and he was funded by a Small Business Administration loan.

Doug almost felt bad for these inventors. They wanted desperately to see their life's work come to fruition. They imagined themselves rolling up their sleeves, building great companies, creating jobs, getting press, and becoming the pillars of their communities. The great entrepreneurial dream. In reality, this was available to very few.

These folks were often difficult to remove from a project. They were too attached to their craft, and they set

terms that eventually led to a buyer moving on to another idea. They were left to develop their own devices, and bankrupt themselves because they had no idea what they were doing.

This commitment was endearing in a way. It was the same reason Doug had chosen banking as a career. Early on, he imagined himself helping companies merge and expand, creating jobs and providing outlets for great new technologies. He thought of himself as a matchmaker, putting people together to build better companies and industries. He finally realized he was a moron.

The reality sank in after a few weeks at PMW. The firm existed to enrich stockholders. Its clients were extremely rich, professional greed-hunters who sought out the foolish and put them to work. The result of all that work was more wealth for the wealthy. By positioning himself in this career, and he did realize that it was pretentious to call it 'positioning', Doug hoped to connect himself to these incredibly successful people. He hoped to eventually be among them.

Doug made sure to keep learning from the people who led PMW. Molin, Weaver, Franklin, and even guys like Rich, who had owned their own businesses. These were his mentors. Whatever they thought, Doug learned to think. Whatever they did, he learned to do. It was the point of being a trainee.

The train started to slow down, and Doug looked up. The view through the window was a little more suburban now. There was a wide four-lane road lined by car dealers and fast foot restaurants. In between some of the muffler shops and

convenience stores were some houses that looked like they were being zoned out of their neighborhood.

A glance at his watch told Doug that there was only a minute or so until his stop. He folded the paper and put it in the bag with his laptop. The train came to a stop next to a raised platform that appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, compared to the neighborhoods he had just passed through.

Doug stepped out onto the platform and saw a wide field. It was a huge, vacant lot, and it was surrounded by a barbed wire fence. A swath of trees stood hundreds of yards inside the fence, and Doug could see bulldozers and other earth-movers parked near a hangar beyond them. This looked like a defunct naval air base to him.

The train left and Doug walked to the end of the platform, where a parking lot stretched around a bend in the road. On the other side, there were houses, mostly duplexes, and a bank. This was Main Street.

Doug walked maybe a quarter mile along the wide boulevard looking for number 429. The whole way, there were no trees, and he walked on a grassy shoulder only a couple of feet wide, with a narrow dirt path in the center.

The road itself was pretty busy. It was a Saturday morning, and this was a suburban collector road that led to all the supermarkets and banks. Cars traveled fast, and the lane next to Doug was only a foot beyond the grassy shoulder. This was not an ideal pedestrian environment.

Finally, Doug entered an area with houses, and he saw number 401, then 407. He was almost there. A few more houses, and finally he found it. Doug was standing in front of number 429.

429 Main Street was a long, white house that had several additions. It was slightly dilapidated, but no more so than the other houses nearby. The parking area was long enough for 20 cars, but held only three, and one was on cinder blocks. At the back of the lot, behind a thicket of weeds that hung over a shed, was the barbed-wire fence that surrounded the Naval Air Base.

Something was clearly coming together. The address was on a lot next to the base. The base was a dead investment project for PMW, and now Doug was here because of a folder he got from an economic activist group that was closely aligned with PMW's business interests.

Doug knew that software developers were often creative types, and they did this sort of weird stuff all the time. Who would figure it out, besides a banking trainee who had been given the code?

He decided to check out apartment 5. It was around back, down the driveway. He walked onto the property and headed toward the dilapidated wooden porch that extended the length of the addition. The original house was small, and the addition in the back was long and narrow. The house and addition was shaped like a long 'L'.

Doug passed apartments 3 and 4, both on the first floor. Stairs led up to the wooden balcony. The stairs and porch were weathered and brittle. The porch looked unstable, but the balcony above looked even less safe. The stairs creaked as Doug climbed up onto them. He avoided some of the steps, because they looked like they would break right through.

Halfway up the stairs, he stopped to decide whether to continue and risk breaking his neck. Somebody definitely lived here. Towels hung over the railing above and a dead spider plant sat on the corner of the railing. There was nothing to do but walk up and knock on the door.

Doug had no idea what to expect. He reached the top of the stairs and stopped in front of the door. It was as weathered as the porch, and most of the blue paint had faded and peeled off. There was a frame for a storm door, but no door. The mailbox was on the floor, leaning against the metal siding. Doug could see the outline of the space where it belonged. On the door, he could see the outline of the number 5, but no number. He knocked.

Doug stood before the door for a long minute. He heard a shuffling sound from inside, and he continued to wait because of it. He was very anxious to leave.

He had never been to Weymouth. Being from Maine, he had been to Boston a number of times, but never beyond it. From the talk around the office, people from the north shore and the south shore were very different. A trip from the north

shore to the south shore might as well be a trip to Mars. People avoided it whenever possible.

Doug was just about to knock on the door again, but he heard a lock start to open on the other side. He put his hand back down, and the door opened.

A short woman opened the door as far as the chainlock would allow, and peered at him carefully.

“Hi,” Doug said.

She continued to stare at him. The apartment beyond her was dark, and through the narrow gap, he could not tell her nationality.

“I was wondering if you could help me?” Doug asked.

She kept looking through the gap.

“Do you know who used to live here?” he asked. He fully realized the absurdity of this surprise visit.

“I have lived here 16 years,” she said. Her accent sounded Hispanic, and she sounded angry.

“Oh, sorry,” Doug said. “I am looking for someone in the last 5 or so.”

“People need to leave us alone. We’re not hurting anybody,” she said. Doug saw her put a hand on the lock.

He was done, and he knew it. Doug started to back away from the door.

“Somebody else lived here, I’d know about it,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I have the wrong house,” Doug told her.

“Yes, you do.”

Thank you,” he said and started to walk away. He turned toward the stairs.

Doug was halfway down the stairs when a beat-up pickup truck pulled into the driveway. He looked up and saw the door to apartment 5 close. A guy stepped out of the truck. He had a dirty uniform, and he looked tired, like he had been working since before dawn. He wearily shut the door and took a toolbox from the truck bed.

The guy turned toward the stairs, and took one look at Doug. He looked up at the apartment door, and Doug saw that it had now opened wide and the woman inside had stepped out onto the balcony.

The man marched right up the stairs toward Doug.

“Who are you?” he demanded. He looked like he was double Doug’s age, but he had no intention of getting into a fight with anybody.

“Who the hell are you? What you doing here?” he asked again.

“I’m sorry. I was looking for someone. I had the wrong place,” Doug said.

“Yeah, you did,” said the man. He stopped right in front of Doug on the step below, blocking the way.

“Alejandro, stop!” the woman yelled. The two men looked up at her.

“Who is he?” the man demanded.

“He was looking for them,” she said.

Doug looked at her in surprise. She looked pretty pissed.

“Oh, those people got to stop bothering us,” said the man, looking back at Doug. He narrowed his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know who you mean,” he said.

“They keep coming here,” the man said. “They say they looking for some army or something.”

“There’s no army meeting here,” the woman said.

“I wasn’t looking for a meeting,” Doug said. The man cut him off.

“We know what’s going on. There’s some kind of meeting, some kind of group. We have nothing to do with it.”

“No, nobody thinks that,” Doug said.

“It’s always the same people,” he said, cutting Doug off. “We see their suits, their fancy cars.” He looked around the driveway as if looking for Doug’s car.

“We see the leather bags they carry,” he said as he pointed to the bag in Doug’s hand.

“No, I’m just looking for-”

“You got no business here,” the man said. “You always say you will help. You never help. You say you’ll open a factory. You’ll build schools. And it never happens. We know. We see the bulldozers in the field over there,” he pointed to the Naval base behind the house. “Left to rot. Five years,” he said. “You say you’ll bring jobs. But we are still here. Still waiting.”

“Leave us alone,” said the woman.

The man stood to one side and motioned for Doug to pass. Doug hiked up his bag on his shoulder and slid past him. There were no more words to say. He got to the bottom of the stairs and kept walking without looking back. He could tell they had not moved until he got to the end of the driveway.

Once out of sight, Doug took the Free Majority folder out of the bag and looked at the address. He figured the people who developed the stock modeler chose a random local address as the master code. The address was probably unimportant to them, and the office they used was in a building nearby. Doug looked around and saw his target; a low office building stood across the street, about a block further down. All of the blinds were closed. The building appeared to be vacant. It was the only office building up and down the road.

There was little traffic, so Doug crossed the street and walked toward the building. He figured the engineers who had designed the software must have worked here and used the address of a nearby house as their code. They did not consider the possibility that an innocent couple would forever be harassed by people looking for the Free Majority headquarters or a defunct software company.

The building was a brown two-story building that looked 30 years old. The entrance to the building was overgrown, and Doug saw that the windows in the front entryway were not covered by blinds, but paper. One window on the second floor had blinds that were partly open.

He stood on the front steps of the vacant building and looked at the house. Beyond the house, Doug could see the bulldozers that the man talked about. From this distance, it was hard to tell, but it looked like the machines were surrounded by tall grass and weeds that grew through the pavement underneath them.

Doug walked back down the stairs and started to walk toward the train station. There was a wide sidewalk on this side on the street, so he continued along it until he had to cross and follow the street back to the trains.

What the hell was the address all about? If the Army of the Free Majority wanted to recruit people, this was no way to go about it. They did not have a phone number, a website or even an email address. If he wanted to contact them, there was no way to do it.

Doug was not sure if he wanted to join the group. He was not sure if they really wanted to make the world better off through globalization, or if they were just a business cabal trying to make more money. At least he was not coy about his role in the world. Doug was an investment banking trainee. He wasn't trying to create a better world. He was just trying to get a better place in it, and he made no other promises.

Still, the man's ranting had almost made him feel guilty. Doug was coddled in life, but what the hell was wrong with that? He was lucky, and he knew it. He worked in a fast-paced, cutthroat business. Sometimes deals fall through. It happens all the time. The man at the house was pissed because

he was promised a new job and new schools that never came. That's called marketing.

When PMW was part of the deal to develop the Naval base, there was no doubt they hired a public relations firm to help them sell the project to the town. The local paper probably parroted their lines, and people were told that the development would mean a better city and better opportunities.

These promises fell through when the deal stopped, but that's life. Not every project happens, and not every investment generates returns. For the money that was lost on the project, a lot of money was made somewhere else. A lot of factories were built, and a lot of good things happened. So they didn't happen here. On balance, Doug thought, the investment banking industry does a lot of good things.

He got to the train station and looked at his watch. The next train was coming within the hour. One thing was for sure, he saw no sign of people with a pro-globalist plot, and no underground economic skunkworks. All he saw was an angry guy and his wary wife. Doug started to be pissed that he was berated by this guy. It was not his fault that the dude's ship never came in. Not everyone can have the luck, he thought.