

Chapter 11

An Important Call

Doug was glad that he decided to walk back to his apartment. It would have been tough to dig out his train pass and slide through the turnstiles while carrying a box. The Green line was often too crowded to use while carrying something this big, and it would be hard to keep standing while the train lurched and weaved through the tunnels.

He was also glad because the walk gave him plenty of time to think. What stung the most about him, Rich and Vanessa being thrown out of the office was that they were pretty good trainees. If they were now suspected of tampering with the stock market for their own gain, it was a real tragedy.

Doug suddenly realized that if Molin had no idea how the modeler caused the market manipulation, he might have suspected that the trainees did. He knew Vanessa was a computer science major. He knew Doug had been messing around with the database, and he knew that Rich was their de facto leader. He knew they were inseparable most of the time. Of course he thought they would all be equally involved.

But did he think the trainees changed the software? Doug could not imagine that. They didn't have time, unless he thought they hacked the system during the weekend after they got the assignment. Could the three have done that? Doug had no way to know. He did know that whoever had changed the

database was aware of its power, and they were likely to be located right around Boston.

Doug crossed Arlington Street and entered the Public Garden. The trees and plants in the garden were mostly bare, and the ground, though still green, appeared frozen solid. Most of the leaves had been raked and the garden appeared very well manicured. Even under the crisp, bright sky, Doug felt a dullness about the colors in the garden, but maybe it was his mood.

As Doug left the garden and waited for a chance to cross the street, he heard his cell phone ring. It was in the inside pocket of his coat, and he had to put the box on the ground to answer it.

He opened his coat and grabbed the phone. It rang three times before he could answer it. Finally he heard a voice.

“Doug!” the voice yelled. It was Rich.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Are you home yet?” he asked. Doug figured he had driven Vanessa home and was planning to break Molin’s order and come over to hang out.

“No, I walked. I’m there in five minutes,” He answered.

“Do not go home. Do not go home. Hang on!” Doug suddenly realized that Rich sounded frantic.

“Rich, what’s happening?” he asked.

“Sorry. Whatever you do, do not go home.” Doug heard whooshing sounds through the phone.”

“Are you driving?” Doug asked.

“Yeah, listen. I should have said something back there, but Vanessa was so pissed,” Rich said.

“So what’s going on? What happened?”

“She got taken away!” he yelled.

“What?”

“I pulled up to the bottom of her street. She lives in Belmont, y’know, and there were people there waiting for her.”

“What people?” Doug asked.

“I don’t know. They had one of those black Chevy Suburbans, and... hold on!”

“What’s going on?” Doug yelled.

“It’s following me! It’s fucking following me!”

“What the hell is happening? Are they agents or something?”

“Dude, I have to go and drive. Hold on!” Rich hollered as Doug heard screeching over the phone. Must be tires, he thought.

Doug suddenly realized what was going on. The three of them were not being sent anywhere to continue the program.

“Rich, Molin lied. We got turned in,” Doug said.

“I know!”

“What should we do?” Doug asked.

“I don’t know. Just don’t go home!”

“Damn it!” Doug hollered. “They just wanted to avoid a scene in the office!”

“I gotta go. I will call you if I get away,” Rich said. He hung up.

Doug put the phone back in his coat. Rich was probably right. There would be agents waiting for him at his apartment, and he could not risk getting near the place to find out. Molin and Franklin got them out of there as quickly and peacefully as possible, so they could be arrested at home instead of making a scene in the office.

He started walking in the opposite direction. Doug could not go to his apartment, and he could not go back to the office. He headed toward the nearest subway station.

Rich was lucky he didn’t drive right up to Vanessa’s house. Doug had been there once. She lived on a one-way street, and it was a pain in the ass to drive in, because there were several more one-ways that led to an impossible intersection. Still, Doug was now running from the law in his car, and that wasn’t convenient.

Doug was glad to know that Rich had the sensibility to warn him. He was obviously not as upset as Vanessa. Doug and Rich went back a lot further, and they had differences before. Doug had never gotten him into this much trouble, though.

Where could he go? Doug had his wallet, and he could get on a train to Bangor as soon as possible. He wondered how far they would go to pick him up. Would they go to the subway stations? Would they go to the Amtrak station? Would they go to his dad’s? Should Doug call him on my cell phone?

Doug wondered how dangerous he could really be. He didn’t actually do anything to the software. He had no plan to

manipulate the stock market. His get-rich quick scheme was to work for an investment bank and make some big deals. Boy, did he screw that up, he realized.

Doug was almost to the train station when a car suddenly pulled up next to him. It was a very nice new silver Cadillac with dark windows. He stopped and looked at the car, and seriously considered running. The window rolled down, and a man in the driver's seat leaned toward him. "Directions," Doug thought. "Please be asking for directions."

He bent over and looked at the driver. It was a bearded man whose face he had seen before. He looked at the box of office supplies, still in his hands, and cursed under his breath.

"Get in," said the man.

He was caught. A thought immediately came to Doug. Wouldn't it have been a great idea to drop the damn box so he didn't stick out like a sore thumb? It was too late now. He put the box under one arm and bent down to the window.

"Am I under arrest?" he asked.

"No. I'm not here for that. But you are in danger."

"Where are we going? Are you a cop?"

"No. Get in!" he said.

"What should I do with this?" Doug asked, nodding toward the box I was carrying.

"Throw it in back. Get in. Hurry."

Doug opened the door and put the box in the back seat. He got in, and before he shut the door, the bearded man stepped on the gas and sped through the intersection.

"What's going on?" Doug asked.

"Doug Wilson, graduated this year from Stanford, Investment Banking trainee at Prichart, Molin, & Weaver, right?" the man said mechanically. He had a deep, scientific-sounding voice.

"Yes."

"Father's name, Jonathan, living in Maine. Mother, Elaine. Passed away just over 2 years ago."

"Right. How do you know all this?" Doug asked, a little frantically.

"Never mind that," the man said.

Doug looked down and shook his head. "Dammit," he said under his breath. It was loud enough for the bearded man to hear. He looked out the window, and briefly wondered if the door was unlocked, but the car was moving too fast. The best thing to do now was roll with the situation.

"You didn't get apprehended," the man said. "I'm not the government."

"So I'm not arrested?"

"No."

Doug paused and let out a breath. He wondered who was chasing Rich, and what was happening to Vanessa right now. If this guy was going to be such a big help, Doug had to know more about him. Did he know anything about Rich and Vanessa? PMW? Kand's store? Weymouth? Could he tell Doug what was going on?

Doug figured the best thing to do was to figure out what he had gotten into. He could feel his adrenaline rushing, but he could also feel the calm that Weaver told him about. Doug realized it was a good trait to have.

“So what happened to the others?” he asked the man.

“The other who?”

“Rich and Vanessa, my friends.”

“Yes. Sorry. We picked them up. They’ll be fine.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Doug asked.

“Are.”

“What?”

“Who Are We?” the man asked.

“Oh, yes, who are you?” Doug stammered.

“I am Dr. Reginald Currier,” the man said.

Doug was astonished. He sat there speechless, wondering whether this was a good or a bad thing. He was sure being picked up by the founder of the Army of the Free Majority was better than being picked up by Federal agents, but not better than simply going home and being left alone.

“So you guys have been following us?”

“Yes, we were. We’ve been watching you guys for some time. Boy did you guys fuck up.”

“Not them. I did it. I’m the only one who did it.”

“Did what?” Currier asked.

“Fucked up,” Doug answered.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. They’re involved now,” Currier said.

Doug looked at Currier. He was wearing a jumpsuit, like the kind rich people wear to the gym. He could not see a gun or a radio, but that did not mean he was not carrying them. Doug was glad to be safe, at least for a moment.

“So what is the Free Majority up to?” Doug asked.

“Well, we were hoping to enlist your help,” Currier said. “That was why we held the seminar on the same night your company held its celebration.”

“How could you have known about that?”

“It is like Eric said at the meeting. We have people in very diverse places, and that is how we get information.”

“What kind of places?” Doug asked.

“Well, like the Federal Reserve Bank, the SEC, major news networks, telecommunications companies.”

Doug looked out the window as the car climbed a highway ramp. “Then why would you need me?” he asked.

“You have access to something we don’t.”

Doug figured he knew exactly what Currier was getting at. “You mean the database?” he asked.

Currier laughed. “Of course not. We created that.”

“What do you mean? How did you-”

“It was originally a software project for PMW, and our team led by Eric and Beth developed one hell of a ‘killer app’,” Currier said. “They never knew what it could really do,”

“You mean Molin was telling the truth?”

“Molin? What did he tell you?” Currier asked.

“Oh, he said he did not know why the database did what it did,” Doug said.

“No, he could not have known. He was never supposed to have the master code.”

“We thought it was something like that!”

“Who thought?” Currier demanded.

“Me and the others. We figured it was a stock market modeler that had different access levels,” Doug told him.

“Boy, does it ever,” Currier said. “You figured right.”

“So what did you need us for, then?” Doug asked.

Currier paused, he was in the middle of driving, and he checked the mirrors and took a left. “We need you for access to somebody.”

“Who?”

“Your father.”

Doug looked at the man carefully. “What?” he asked.

“Your father. How much do you know about him?” Currier asked.

“What do you mean?” Doug asked. He looked out the window, wondering what his father could possibly be involved in. He looked out the window and saw that they were on the highway now, heading south.

“Well, you know he was once part of our organization, right?” he asked.

Doug shuddered. Dad had told him a great deal about the Army of the Free Majority, but he seemed to be completely

out of sync with their beliefs now. Whatever they wanted with him could not possibly be good.

Doug stammered, “Why would you need access to him? He was at your meeting the other night. You had access then.”

“That’s not what I mean. We need someone to keep tabs on him. Let us know what he’s up to,” Currier said, with a pleading voice.

Doug was pissed. He would have jumped out of the car if they weren’t doing about seventy. “Well, there’s no way it will be me,” he said.

“Ah,” said Currier.

Doug looked out the window again. When he had first met the Free Majority people, or ‘Freemers’, he thought they were a bunch of meaningless activists. He found himself wishing that was all they were.

Currier drove on, and Doug could not read anything from the expression on his face. His cryptic way of talking was getting under Doug’s skin. He suddenly realized where the car was probably going.

“Are we heading south?” he asked.

“Not to worry,” Currier replied.

“We’re headed to Weymouth, aren’t we?”

“What do you know about Weymouth?” he asked.

“Almost nothing.”

“Well, yes, we are headed there.”

There was silence for a few more minutes. Doug kept his focus out the window as they headed to Weymouth. He had

no idea what else Currier needed him for, if not to keep a trace on his father. He suspected that the Army of the Free Majority might carry a grudge against people who had left, like the mob. Maybe it was one of those cult-like groups that never let you leave. For all Doug knew, the Free Majority developed the software on PMW's dime, and then decided to use it to tamper with the stock market and make a pile of money.

Maybe Doug's father had discovered that, and they wanted to silence him. Since he had freely visited them at the seminar, and nothing came of it, that seemed pretty unlikely.

But what did they want with Rich and Vanessa, Doug wondered. If they just wanted new members, this was a hell of way to go about it.

"So what did you find in Weymouth on Saturday?" Currier asked.

"You followed me on Saturday?" Doug asked.

"We try to be thorough."

"Then you know I found nothing there. 429 Main Street is just someone's house."

"No."

"Yes. All I did was piss off the people who lived there," Doug said, flustered.

"No, the address. It's wrong. We're going to 434. The office building across the street," Currier said. "You were there."

"I stopped to tie a shoe, nothing more."

"Well, you were on to something. That's where we wrote the software," Currier told him.

"I knew it," Doug said aloud.

"I thought you just stopped to tie your shoe."

Lost in thought, Doug almost forgot that he had just lost two friends and his short career was quickly spiraling the drain.

"Are the others going to meet us there, with Rich and Vanessa?" Doug asked.

"No," Currier answered.

Doug was silent the rest of the way. Eventually they pulled off the highway onto Weymouth's Main Street. It started to look familiar. Finally, Doug saw the fence that surrounded the Naval Air Base, and the office building. The apartment house and its neighbors stood across the street.

The bright sky was a sharp contrast with Doug's sour mood. He still had no idea whether he was going to be asked or forced to join this strange operation.

Doug knew that if he helped them, it meant spying on his father. At the same time, helping him out was probably the fastest way to get back in touch with Rich and Vanessa and get them all back to work at PMW.

They drove into a convenience store parking lot about a block from the building. Currier drove around behind the store and parked the Cadillac.

Doug thought it was strange that if they were headed into the office building, that they would park a block away.

Currier got out of the car and motioned for Doug to follow him. Doug unlocked the door and got out.

“We’re going in through the back,” he said. The parking lots were connected by an alleyway, which they used to approach the building.

The entire lot was strewn with broken glass. The grass grew three feet high through some of the cracks in the pavement. The faded parking spaces were barely visible.

“So this is the Free Majority headquarters?” Doug asked.

“No,” said Currier, half-chuckling. “It is just one outpost. We don’t have a headquarters, really.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

Currier was silent. They walked up the back stairs where a glass door had been covered with plywood. Currier pressed a few buttons on the lock and the door clicked open. He went in first. It occurred to Doug briefly that he still had no idea what this guy was really up to. He wondered if he should make a run for it. If this guy was really as informed as he seemed to be, there was no way Doug would get very far. He knew too much about him. Doug followed Currier in.

The building was mostly dark. There were paper cups and scraps of plastic all over the floor. The only light streamed in from the door at the other end of the corridor. They climbed one and a half flights of stairs to the top floor. Currier unlocked a door that had a similar button-lock, and they entered a room that was completely dark. Currier turned on the light.

The room was bright white and full of technology. Several computers were stacked in a rack under the desk. There were three monitors above them. Doug also saw several other devices, cameras, CD burners, and a couple of black boxes that looked like hard drives.

He saw a stack of black notebooks at the end of the desk, and a credenza with a fax machine, copier, and a dozen or so black cellular phones standing in chargers. They had rubberized shells, and looked like small walkie-talkies.

Doug also saw binoculars hanging by the window, and a camera on a tripod with a long-range lens. The window shade was closed, but he knew it was the window that looked up the street toward the house at 429 Main. He leaned toward the side of the window to make sure.

This was where Currier probably watched as Doug visited the house. They could see where he climbed the stairs to the balcony, where he talked with the woman, and where he was accosted by the man.

Currier was probably flabbergasted when Doug crossed the street and loitered on the stoop to his own building. It was probably this detour that convinced them to go after him.

“Take a seat,” said Currier. He sat down in the plush chair in front of the monitors. He pushed a stack of newspapers off of a hard metal stool and pulled it over. Doug stepped over the papers and sat down.

Currier turned on the computers. They booted up much more quickly than the ones at PMW did. It was no operating

system Doug had ever seen. It looked like something from science fiction, silver and simplified. Doug always figured technology whizzes would have the best stuff.

Currier put on a headset and told the computer to open a search window. He tapped on an icon in the window and said, “Wilson, Jonathan.” The window immediately opened up a list of documents about Doug’s father. He looked at the list and said “Summary,” which was one of the documents. It opened.

“Your father joined the Army of the Free Majority during my first presidential campaign,” said Currier, “in 1968.”

“So he was one of your followers way back then?” Doug asked.

“Well, he was one of my students. I was an economics professor at Princeton, and had run for congress a couple of times, but ’68 was the first time I got national press.”

Doug looked at the file. “It says the group was made up of your students.”

“Yes. I had brought a bunch of them to Washington and they spoke before a Senate committee,” Currier said. “At the time, my ideas about economics were considered radical. I wanted to open up free trade, limit union power, create wealth all over the world. I said that protectionism in the US would cause strife elsewhere and eventually imperil our security.”

Doug thought Currier betrayed some of his composure as he spoke. He had more than a little passion about the subject of economics. Doug also thought the ideas made some sense.

“And if you look around the world today,” Currier said, “you can see that perhaps I was right.”

Doug nodded. “So the attention made you decide to run for president?” he asked Currier.

“Well, it wasn’t just me that got attention. My students, like your dad, were very impressive in their own knowledge. They dressed in black suits and ties. They were well-groomed, and they were well-spoken. Remember, this was in the day when college students were mostly dirty hippies.”

“So they stood out,”

“Damn right they did. When I announced my candidacy, thousands of people latched on just because of the coverage my students got. Of course, the free-market message helped me drag in tons of money from national corporations.”

“You obviously lost, though,” Doug said.

“Yeah. In the end people knew a third party had no chance. With Johnson out, even the second party had none. The year was pretty much in the bag long before November.”

“That was Nixon, right?” Doug asked. He was no historian.

Currier looked up at Doug with incredulity. People like him, who spent their careers immersed in history and politics, probably thought people like Doug were worthless for not knowing the same arcane trivia. The Free Majority members seemed to carry the same pompous tone. It suddenly struck Doug that they and Currier were a tiny minority.

“Nixon won in ’68,” he said, turning back to the screen, “but many of my ideas still became policy. Hell, it was me who first advocated strengthening relations with China.”

“That’s right, only Nixon could go-”

“Enough,” said Currier. He had picked up Doug’s mocking tone instantly. Very perceptive, Doug thought.

“Since then, I ran for every presidential election,” Currier said, “becoming less and less important in each. I’ll bet you’ve never heard of me before now.”

“Well, not until we met these guys,” Doug said, pointing to the Free Majority folder.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter. My ideas have now fully permeated everything we do. Finance, manufacturing, trade, practically everything is open for business around the world.”

“Then why are you still running?”

“Well, now, it’s mainly about principle. I know I can’t win, but I know it is how to keep the Free Majority on target.”

Doug stood up and walked to the window. He looked at the house across the street. He was now even more confused about the Army of the Free Majority.

“But, if all they are is a political group, what do they want with my father?” Doug asked Currier.

“I know you don’t want to hear this,” Currier said, “but he is the key to an organization that wants to stop the very engine of economics.”

Doug looked out the window again. “There’s no way that’s possible,” he said.

“No, it is. He is a leader in a group that wants to destroy the stock market.”

“No,” Doug said, shaking his head.

“We need to find out what he is planning and stop it. We’ve already stopped one of his associates, that Kand guy.”

“No. No way.”

“Has your father told you anything about us?” Currier asked.

“I only know he used to be a member,” Doug told him.

“Did he tell you about the bumper stickers we had?”

Doug thought about the bumper stickers his dad told him about. The hateful phrases. “Yeah, he mentioned that,”

“And the boxes from Singapore? The Global Grid he kept in the garage?”

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you how your mother died?”

Doug glared at Dr. Currier. This felt like a violation of his privacy. There was no way he was going to let this discussion continue. “I’m done. We need to-”

“Did he tell you how he lost control of the car, how he plunged into the Penobscot River, how she died, but he walked away?”

“What the hell are you saying?” Doug demanded.

“I am saying your dad has been plotting something since leaving our organization. It is probably why he left. When your mother found out-”

“Bullshit!” Doug yelled, standing up. “My mother is off limits!”

“Did he tell you that she smiled?”

“What?” Doug said.

“She smiled,” Currier said, “when she died.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Doug said, as his eyes began to well up with tears.

“She always said she would, if she ever faced her death.” Currier said. “I thought it was pretty brave.”

“Why would she tell you?”

“Because she knew the stakes. Being part of the Free Majority. She was ready to die for our cause,” Currier told him. “She ultimately did.”

Doug slumped against the wall. There was no way Currier could possibly have known about the smile unless this was true. But his father was not a killer. The idea was insane.

“Doug, it’s just surveillance. If your father is doing nothing, then he’s doing nothing. But if the plot is real,” Currier said, “we need your help.”

Doug looked up and stared at Dr. Currier. “He did not kill my mother. Not over this garbage!”

“You mean economics?”

“No way.”

“It’s not garbage. Global economics drive everything we know about the world. Expensive cars, watches like yours, cell phones, video games, your job. You call that garbage?”

Doug was silent.

“Your father wants to destroy the balance of the world economy. All of what you know will end.”

Doug knew this had to be bullshit about his father. But what if it wasn’t? He decided to press Currier on this plot of his. “So what are you guys up to with the database? Are you trying to make money with it or something?” Doug asked, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

Currier looked insulted. “No,” he said. “We are trying to buffer the stock market from your father’s scheme.”

“How? By controlling it instead of letting it run the way it should?” Doug asked furiously.

“Without knowing what your father is up to, we have to,” Currier said. “The stock market is much like the Global Grid our students told you about. It is all about balance.”

“Well, the database is too dangerous. I saw it go out of ‘balance’ after toying with a stock by a few pennies.”

“We know you did. That’s why it is best to leave it alone, and your father can never know about it.” Currier turned to Doug with a look of concern. “Does he?”

“He doesn’t,” Doug said. At that moment, they both heard a helicopter flying nearby. Doug paused as Currier glanced toward the window. Then he continued, “At least I have not told him about it.”

Currier nodded. “Smart. I assure you your participation in this investigation will not be unrewarded.”

Doug suddenly realized that his father may have the folder about Weymouth. He wondered if – a gigantic if – his

father was actually involved in something that threatened the global economic structure, did he know about the Weymouth address or the building they were sitting in now?

“Well,” Doug started, while Currier looked at him patiently, “I don’t know what I can do. It’s my dad.”

“I can understand this is a shock,” Currier said, leaning back to look out the window. The helicopter had gotten louder.

Doug looked up. “What now?” he asked.

“First, we’ve got to get back to Boston. Don’t tell anyone you were here,” said Currier, still looking out the window. Then he walked away from the window. “Did you tell anyone else about the database?”

“Actually, not at first. Not until after I saw the Weymouth address on the back of your folder.”

“Then you told...” Currier said, expecting Doug to fill in the void.

“My friends, Rich and Vanessa.”

“Of course.”

“And Molin found out pretty soon on his own.”

Currier walked to the window again. “Hold on,” he said. “You wait here.” I have to go contact the others.

“What do you-“

“I will be right back,” he said, picking up a brown grocery bag that was sitting on a shelf the whole time. Then he opened the door to the corridor.

“Stay here. Stay right here,” he said before he stepped into the hall and shut the door. Doug stood up and walked

toward the window. He looked out and saw several black Suburbans barreling down the street toward the building. They had blocked the street, and he could see traffic just beginning to back up. Doug saw agents getting out of the trucks. He also saw the helicopter circling overhead.

At that instant Doug heard a noise in the hall. People were stomping up the stairs, and he turned to look at the computer screen, set to the summary of his father’s activities. Then he looked at the door, just as it opened.

“Hands on your head! Get on the floor! Now!” a voice screamed. Doug saw men dressed head to toe in black, with heavy vests, and automatic rifles. He followed the man’s directions by reflex. Suddenly, he was face down on the floor, and somebody put a knee in his back.

“Down! Down!” Doug heard as his hands were pulled behind him. A hand pushed his head into the carpet. He realized it was threadbare, abrasive and loaded with dust. All he could see were thick black boots. There were at least four men in the room, with more coming in.

Doug turned his head, and a hand pushed it right back into the rug. The knee pressed harder, and he felt several vertebrae crack against each other like knuckles. It hurt. His arms were pulled up almost vertically, forcing his face further into the rug.

He heard the men taking photos and turning the room over. A stack of papers fell over and he felt a binder against his face. The guys started leaving the room and Doug could tell

they were exploring the rest of the building. There was a lot of yelling.

The next thing Doug knew, he was pulled upright, and was kneeling, looking at the door. Men with automatic rifles were stomping around the building, kicking open doors and yelling “Coming in!”, “Floor two clear!”, and stuff like that. He could feel dirt and dust embedded in his face from the rug.

Suddenly, a white cloth was placed across his mouth. Something smelled terrible, like nail polish remover. Doug tried to cough, and felt like he was going to vomit. A survival instinct kicked in and he started to struggle against the hand holding the cloth. It was difficult, and then became impossible. Then everything went black.