

Chapter 17

Welcome to the City

The two police cars raced along the Long Island Expressway toward Manhattan. Kand and Doug were in the back seat of the first car, with Eric and Beth up front. Brey and the other two guys were right behind them. Eric did not turn on the lights on the roof, but there was no need. So far they had seen only a few other cars.

Eric was worried about hitting a roadblock on the bridge, and there was some discussion about tunnels, but they did not want to pay any tolls. They were still in uniform, but they were concerned that another department would either want to take over custody of Kand and Doug, or escort them to wherever they were supposed to go.

The problem was that Eric did not know where that would be. They had the uniforms and cuffs, and some of the lingo, but their logistics beyond that were sketchy.

One thing they had down was their plot, which Kand thought was extremely misguided, and which Eric thought was right on target. Doug didn't understand exactly what it was.

He looked out the window at the run-down neighborhoods they were passing through. These were a lot like the Weymouth neighborhood where Dr. Currier had his office. There was a grid of large four-lane streets, littered with paper and trash, dark from every other streetlight being out. These roads were lined with businesses of all kinds. There

were chain restaurants and convenience stores and some Mom & Pop businesses, mainly laundromats and consignment shops.

Between them, smaller streets were lined with homes, mostly half-painted double and triple-deckers, with back porches that sloped and teetered precipitously, and had dirt lots for yards. Doug had seen neighborhoods like these around Boston, and there were even pockets of them in Maine. He had never actually been inside one of these homes.

“The victims of globalization,” said Kand. Doug had not realized that he was watching him look out the window.

“What are you talking about?” said Eric. Doug was thinking the same question.

“Your use of global economics has ruined entire generations of your own citizens. You are blind to it.”

“There are always opportunities,” Eric told him. “Jobs are always changing with new ideas. People-”

“Tell me, where are your innovations? Where are your great factories?” Kand demanded.

“We trade in ideas now, not dry goods! Factories are the past. We are innovators in thought now!”

“You innovate in parasitism!” Kand yelled. He seemed ready to launch himself into the front seat.

“Guys!” Doug yelled. Beth did, too, but Kand was on a roll.

“Ideas are worthless! You create nothing but havoc.”

“The market takes victims, but the ready thrive. It is only the unready who suffer,” Eric said.

“You admit to causing suffering, but you do nothing-”

“Responsibility is a virtue for each to-”

“Responsibility is for all to share,” said Kand.

“We agree!” Eric yelled.

“Risk is for all to share!” yelled Kand.

“Yes! Now we are on the same-”

“Cost is for all to share!”

“Right!” Eric responded. “Everyone carries the burdens of civili-”

“Rewards are for all to share.”

Eric said nothing. Doug looked at Kand, and saw him grin slightly as he waited for an answer. He cocked his head toward the front seat where Eric sat.

Eric seemed to be searching for his words. “The market is not perfect, but it is like a creature itself. It seeks to bring comfort to anybody willing to work for it.”

“Rewards are for all to share,” Kand said again. “You can’t say that, can you?”

“No,” Eric said. “But each works for his own rewards.”

“Though you agreed about the rest,” Kand said.

“But work brings rewards. Profitability. Productivity. The rewards come in different-”

“Pay your rent with productivity. Pay for bread with stock values,” said Kand.

“You simplify because you cannot understand-”

Doug had had enough. “I understand it!” he screamed. He was sick to death of hearing this argument now that it had

turned to a topic he knew. Rich picked this guy out from the beginning. He talked like a character from Wall Street, but he was just an overeducated tool.

“Business is not that complex, Eric,” Doug continued, now that they were listening. “It does one thing, and one thing alone. It eats. When all is gone, it seeks to eat more. It only takes, and never gives. It will break its teeth on everything in sight, if allowed to.”

Doug guessed that he chose the analogy of eating because of his empty stomach.

Eric was different toward Doug than he was to Kand. He was far more respectful. “But business can also do great things when unleashed,” he said.

“Not when unleashed. Do you have any idea the regulations we deal with in banking? Without them, it would be a free-for-all.”

“But regulations stifle-”

“No. Business must be controlled, or it destroys,” Doug told him. “It’s just people. That’s why.”

Kand was calmer now. “It is up to the people who wield business to do great things,” he added. “Your free market is only possible under law.”

Eric said nothing and kept driving. Doug felt that the argument was over. For now.

Kand had pulled him out of the near-freezing ocean, and had helped him get away from people who had only malice planned for them, which was why Doug wanted to defend him.

But there was another reason. After meeting the poor family in Weymouth, and seeing the neighborhoods they were now driving through, and hearing his lectures on the Global Grid, an interesting thought came to Doug; Kand might be right.

They continued in silence, in part because factions in the car were mad at each other, and in part because they were anxious about running into a roadblock. They stayed quiet until they crossed the bridge and finally descended onto the streets of Manhattan. Doug felt the pressure was off, and looked longingly at the late-night bars and pizza joints they passed by.

Finally, Eric pulled the car over to the curb on a dark street somewhere on the East Side. They were near no pizza parlors. The area was mostly brownstones, and rather run-down, but not quite a slum. Half of the streetlights were out.

“We are here,” said Eric, as he and Beth stepped out of the car. Doug took hold of his door latch, and it wouldn’t budge. Eric reached down from the sidewalk and pulled on the latch. Beth opened the door for Kand.

“Sorry,” Eric said. “These are police cars, after all.” Doug looked back up the road, and saw that the other car had pulled into a spot on the far side.

He was about to ask about food, but there was still the matter of Rich and Vanessa. “So, what have you done with my friends?” Doug asked Eric.

“Nothing. They have joined us. They understand the purpose of our organization.”

“The purpose?” asked Kand incredulously, as he came around the car and stood very close to Eric.

“They willingly saw our path without any persuasion,” Eric answered, backing away. He started to walk down the sidewalk and put his hands in the pockets of his police jacket.

“They would never have joined you that easily,” Doug said, catching up.

“No, they did. Vanessa was eager. Your friend Rich was less amused, but he had nothing else going on, I guess.”

“What do you mean by that?” Doug asked angrily.

“Well, you guys were fired. That’s what they told us.”

“Who?” Doug asked.

Eric started to sound smug. “Apparently you got into something you weren’t supposed to, and brought all three of you down. Took some others with you as well.” He must have been talking about Brey.

Kand looked at Eric and narrowed his eyes.

Doug had been worried about his friends every minute, but he had forgotten that they were pissed at him. “So what did they tell you?” Doug asked Eric.

“They had a hysterical idea about our plan,” Eric said. He was chuckling. “They thought we were hacking the stock market in order to skim profits.”

Doug heard Kand huff loudly.

“So you didn’t write the database for PMW?”

“No, we wrote it, but only to be a modeler.” Eric said.

“And to crash the market?” Doug asked.

“No. We wish to keep the system in balance.”

“Then why would you write something that was way beyond what PMW asked for?” Doug demanded.

“You don’t understand the software business,” Eric said, turning to Doug. “We have a core code engine that we used for most of our projects. A lot of software companies do that. We used it for PMW and a lot of others.”

“So why did you make it control the market?”

“At first, we didn’t plan to. We developed a module to help us manage each client’s system through the net, and then found out what the module could really do.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen what it can do,” Doug said.

“I know,” Eric mentioned. “Coke.”

Doug shook his head. “Everybody fucking knows about that,” he said.

“Well,” Eric chuckled. “You have to understand we’re the ones paying attention to it.”

Eric stopped walking. “We’re here,” he said.

Doug looked up at the brick building. It wasn’t the upscale Manhattan he had been to before. It felt more like a cross between Boston’s Back Bay and the town they had driven through on Long Island.

But there was a difference. New York had an oppressive kind of attitude about it. Maybe it was louder, even in the middle of the night. Maybe it was the skyscrapers that towered over the brownstones. In Boston they weren’t so close nor so many.

As they stood at the bottom of the worn steps, the guys from the other car walked toward them. Once they got to the stairs, Brey kept his distance, at least from Kand. He didn’t realize that Doug planned to be a problem for him as well.

“So, I enjoyed debating with your friend Rich,” Eric said. Doug figured Eric was talking to him.

“Debating? Rich was head of the debate team at Stanford. If you came even close to debating him, it’s because he let you.”

“No, no. Not like that. I know he played it easy. I’m just saying I learned a lot from him.”

“Good,” Doug said. He didn’t really know why Eric mentioned his debates. He started climbing the steps, and the others followed him.

Halfway up the steps, there were probably a dozen or more, Eric stopped again. “You know, Vanessa is pretty attractive. You ever notice that?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“No reason. You weren’t involved, were you?”

“No!” Doug shouted. He already hated Eric, and he had a long list of good reasons.

“Oh,” Eric said and continued up the stairs.

When they got to the door, Eric fumbled through a set of keys as if he had no idea which was the right one. He chose his key and unlocked the door. The six of them entered the foyer, where Eric picked out another key. Again, he looked uncertain, but got it on the first try. They stepped into the dark

corridor, where Doug saw boxes and papers strewn around. He half-expected to see the Singapore boxes he had seen at Kand's store and in his dad's garage.

Although it was too dark to tell, the ceiling in the corridor was very high. The echo in the room was stark and vibrant. Doug figured that nobody else lived in the building.

Eric began to climb the stairs, which led up into an even darker void above. Doug jammed his foot into one of the steps. He needed food, he needed to know where his friends were, and now he needed light.

They climbed two more flights in total darkness. Finally, the group veered away from the stairs and Doug heard the jingling of keys. There seemed to be 6 locks on the door they were going into. He heard Eric open the door and a dim light came on as they entered. Doug looked up and saw a dim red bulb in the ceiling fixture. What he could see in the room looked like busted kitchen appliances. The apartment appeared to be a tenement.

They entered another room that looked like a living room with frayed paneling and beat-up furniture. It was also dimly lit by an undersized red bulb in a ceiling fixture. Everyone in the group glowed red like they were in a darkroom.

Eric went to a closet and opened it. He pushed coats aside and reached through them to the back wall. Then he gave the wall a powerful push.

The wall opened. Even in the darkness, it was not like a seamless secret entrance, but the run-down apartment and the broken furnishings were probably enough to hide whatever was going on.

They went through the opening in the back of the closet. It opened into a bare, black room. In the middle of the room stood dozens of flat-screen computer monitors mounted on pipes. It looked like the setup on a trading floor, but more mysteriously lit. The only lights in the room came from fluorescent fixtures behind the monitors.

It appeared to Doug as a larger version of Currier's covert office back in Weymouth.

A set of leather couches sat in the middle of the room near the monitors, on a shag rug, like in a corporate reception area. A black glass coffee table sat between them. A day-old Wall Street Journal and a few other papers were strewn on the table, looking like they had been read and put back together carelessly.

Against the opposite wall was a kitchen counter. This kitchen was a lot cleaner than the one they entered through. There was a stainless steel fridge, an oven with a hood, a dishwasher and microwave, and large sink. The place was nearly spotless.

One of the guys turned on a light under the cabinet and opened the fridge. It was packed with food. He pulled out a roast beef, grabbed some bread and plates, and started cutting

slices off of it. As Doug watched, Eric was talking, but he missed every word.

“I asked if you were tired,” Eric said.

“What?” Doug asked.

“Hungry, then?” Eric asked, noticing Doug’s fixation on the food.

“Yes.”

“Grab some food.”

Doug went to the counter and started cutting out roast beef from the hunk on the counter. Kand took just a bulkie roll. Doug opened up another bulkie roll to make a sandwich, and put as much meat down his throat as he put on the bread.

Some of the other guys took some of the meat as well, and pretty soon it was gone. Somebody poured a bowl of chips and put some Cokes on the counter. Doug poached one of them and reached repeatedly for more chips than he needed.

Doug noticed an open door in the wall near the monitors.

“Yes, they are in there. There’s no need to wake them,” Eric said. He had noticed Doug watching the door.

“The hell there ain’t!” somebody yelled from the doorway. It was Rich. He walked out to the middle of the room, and Doug put down his Coke and walked over and grabbed each of Rich’s shoulders.

“Man, I’m sorry,” Rich said, standing back. “You really were on to something.”

“What?” Doug said, bewildered. Rich was not the type to buy into stuff so quickly. Doug still didn’t trust these Free Majority folks.

“You said this thing was dangerous. It is. It needs full-time monitoring. That’s why they needed us.”

“What?” Doug said again. “What do you mean? Everything should be stable unless someone messes with it.”

“No,” said Eric. “It’s been going nuts ever since we left the office.”

Rich nodded. “He’s right. We think Molin started using it to skim the market.”

“Molin had no idea how it worked,” Doug said.

“But he found out from you. We think he tried to play with the database after you left,” Eric pressed.

“He commissioned it from you guys, why couldn’t you change the password?” asked Doug.

“We did. But whatever Molin did caused a permanent loop. It’s too entrenched in the system.”

“So shut the fucking thing down,” Doug said.

“We can’t,” Eric said calmly.

“Bullshit!” Doug yelled. “You wrote it. You can pull the plug.”

“No! We can’t. By now the glitch has spread throughout the system.”

Doug was furious. “You guys started this mess and now you can’t do anything about it?”

“We can. The best thing to do is try to stabilize it from here.”

“Jesus-”

“Doug,” Rich said. “These guys are the heroes.”

“Heroes? They abducted you!” Doug screamed.

“They had to,” Rich said. “I never would have gone with them otherwise.”

“How’s Vanessa feel about this?”

“She’s with it,” Rich said. “She’s with us.”

“Us?” Doug asked, turning around. Eric, Brey and one of the other guys had walked over, as well as Kand.

“Yeah, us,” said Eric.

“Hold on,” Doug said. “What about the glories of globalization? All that bullshit you were spewing at that seminar.”

“True! All of it.”

“But you guys are all about stock values, free markets, not gaming the system!”

“We’re not gaming”

“Bullshit!” Doug yelled. “You guys are some crackpot activist group being led by an evil genius. And you,” Doug said to Rich, “are a budding investment strategist who is getting his job back.” Doug could not bring himself to believe that Molin was stupid enough to mess with the database.

“Doug, there’s only one way to do that,” Rich said.

“I am going to straighten this out with Molin first thing tomorrow,” Doug told him.

Rich tried to calm his friend down. “Doug, these guys are right. They wrote it, they know how to fight it.”

“They’re lying.”

“No, they need our help,” Rich said.

“Kand, tell him these guys are lying,” Doug said.

“It’s not that simple. You have no idea,” said Eric.

“Kand,” Doug pleaded.

“Your friend is right,” said Kand. “Their system is too vast to shut down a code loop. It would only worsen things.”

“But you said they were misguided-”

“They are. But their mission is the lesser evil.”

“What do you mean, lesser evil?” Eric demanded.

“Your former leader has been going on about economic destruction for years,” Kand told him. “Balance the global system. Bring all cultures to the same level. It is coded in everything he’s ever said.”

“Nobody has ever been more for economic stability than Dr. Currier,” Eric told Kand.

“He has been laying the groundwork for some kind of economic destruction for a long time,” said Kand.

“Impossible!”

“It is likely you have no idea.”

Eric was ready to strangle Kand. “He has not. Like I told you-”

“He had you build the infrastructure already,” Kand told him. “This database-”

“Is a research tool, nothing more!” Eric yelled, moving closer and screaming directly into Kand’s face.

“Get the hell away from him!” Doug yelled, moving closer to Eric. Brey and the other guy tried to get in between.

“Currier would never have-”

“It wasn’t Molin!”

Doug had no idea who struck first, but he suddenly felt a closed fist against his right temple. He immediately ducked and threw a left uppercut into somebody’s jaw.

The entire room was a blur. Doug could see Rich trying to pull Eric back, and another guy holding Kand. Another blow hit him, but not squarely. Whirling around, Doug saw that it was Brey. He felt a huge swell of rage, but also pleasure. He had been waiting for this all night.

Doug had only been involved in a brawl once before, in college, and had given a sound drubbing to the other guy. He had pushed Doug during a pickup hockey game. The rapid pace of the game, and the tension brought about by the tied score, caused him to explode in rage. He discovered that he had a damn good right hook, and he bloodied his hand against the other player’s face.

Other times, Doug was unable to work up enough rage, so he didn’t get involved. This was not one of those times. He was tired, hungry, cold, pissed, and had a recent memory of wanting to put this asshole in the hospital. He nailed Brey’s face with a flurry of lefts and rights. Brey did not get another shot in after his first two. Doug had forced him halfway across

the room. Normally these brawls devolved into wrestles by now, but he wouldn’t let Brey fall.

“Doug!” yelled a voice between punches.

“Doug!” the voice called again. Doug stopped and waited for Brey to drop. He grabbed the wall, which was now only a few feet behind him.

Turning around, Doug saw Rich and Eric pulling themselves away from Kand and the other guy. By the door he saw a bunch of other people. There was Beth, and the other Free Majority folks, mostly, but also Vanessa. She was the one who called out.

“Shit.” Doug looked back at Brey, making sure he was done, then he turned toward Vanessa. “Sorry I woke you.”

“Get it out of your system?” she asked.

Kand and the other guys had mostly wrestled and struggled. It was clear that Doug and Brey were the focal point of everyone in the room.

Suddenly, Doug felt tired.

Vanessa came over and hugged him quickly. She looked unimpressed, but that was nothing new. Doug wondered if it was because he woke her and the rest or because he was doing something that she probably never imagined him doing.

“Sorry I woke you,” Doug said.

“Oh, I was awake already. You’ve got some rage in you, haven’t you?”

“Well, we’ve been through a lot.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Love to catch up, but there’s a lot more night left.” Then she turned away.

Well, that was a warm welcome, Doug thought. “See you in the morning,” he said.

“See you,” Vanessa said without looking back.

Rich came over and said, “Hey, don’t worry about it.”

Brey sulked away and went into another door that Doug had not noticed. A bathroom.

Eric and Kand backed away from each other. Eric raised his hands. “We have bunks for you. Everyone’s tired. Get some sleep.”

For once, Doug agreed with him.

Rich and Doug watched as everyone else went into the far doorway. When Brey finally came out of the bathroom, Doug was standing nearby. He did not look up, but he did not look as bad as Doug hoped he would.

“Hey,” said Rich, “trust me, he’s beaten. Reminded me of that guy at the hockey game.” Then Rich did a hand motion, like a fish flipping belly-up. Doug chuckled. That was their college gesture anytime they saw a guy fold, whether in sport or in classes. They hadn’t gotten to use it in business yet.

“Yeah,” Doug said. “You really think these guys are on the level?”

“I do. We’re doing the right thing.”

“So have you tried to get out of here?”

Rich looked surprised. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Doug narrowed his eyes at him.

“In the morning,” he said again.

Doug shook his head. Rich must have tried. Maybe there was truth to their story. Or maybe Rich was brainwashed.

Doug went into the bathroom to wash his hands. When he came out, Rich was gone. Beth was the only one there, standing by the doorway. Doug walked toward her.

“Everyone has a bunk,” she said.

“A bunk.”

“Yeah. Your friends are down at the end.”

They walked down a long hall, lit only by three nightlights near the floor. There were about 8 bunkrooms.

“Beth, can you tell me something?” Doug asked. “Do you believe in this thing? Is this right?”

“Tomorrow,” she said. Doug sighed. It was more from exhaustion than exasperation.

They got to the room and Beth opened the door. Doug went inside and took a bunk above Rich. Kand was already fast asleep on the other side of the room. Vanessa must have been somewhere else.

“Dude, wait until you see what we’re doing,” Rich whispered.

“I don’t know, man.”

“Tomorrow.”

Doug was asleep in about three seconds.