

Chapter 19

Fire Sale

The interrogator walked into the room, yelling. He was obviously the head guy. Doug and the rest stayed down with their faces to the hardwood. A black-clad officer moved right to Doug and put his rifle muzzle within inches of his nose.

“Stay down!” yelled the officer. The two guys in the doorway dropped the battering ram and came into the room, guns wielded. The interrogator, with just a nod, ordered them to check the rest of the apartment.

“What’s going on?” Doug asked.

“Quiet!” the interrogator yelled. He looked around the room, and looked at the screens. When the other two officers returned, he nodded toward the closet. They checked it up and down in their typically deliberate way, guns pointed, and hair trigger-ready.

“Anything?” he asked them. They shook their heads.

“Stand down,” the man said. The officers pointed their guns to the floor and moved away, and probably relaxed a little, though it was imperceptible to Doug.

Doug looked up at the man, shocked that he had been found so quickly. He began to ask a question. “What are you-”

“Get up,” the interrogator said. “All of you.”

Doug, Brey, Rich and Kand stood up. Vanessa got up into a chair. Seeing all these guys in black outfits, Doug

realized that he and his friends looked pretty silly in their purple and yellow getups. He felt more ridiculous than before.

After a few minutes, another man came through the door; it was Todd Molin.

Doug noticed that Molin looked very different in his all-black outfit. Doug had never seen him in anything like it. The guy wore crisp dark suits with shirts brighter than a blank page, and was prone to wearing Hawaiian shirts on Fridays, and knit sweaters and London Fog jackets in the winter.

Now he was decked out like a S.W.A.T. team member, right down to the bulletproof vest. The only difference between him and the menacing guys with the guns was the black ball cap he wore instead of a helmet, like the interrogator.

Doug thought he actually looked less threatening as a government thug than an investment banking giant.

“Have a seat,” the interrogator said, rotating one of the chairs in front of the monitors. He nodded to the rest of the group to do the same, which they did. Meanwhile, his guys moved off around the room, to form a ‘perimeter’, Doug guessed. The frequency at which he found himself at gunpoint was starting to alter his vocabulary.

“Call me Agent Jacobs,” he said. “It looks like we just missed your colleagues; the ‘Army of the Free Majority’. What this means for you remains to be seen,” said the man, then he looked at Molin. “Alright, the floor is yours.” he said before moving to stand uncomfortably close to where Doug sat.

After pacing around for a few minutes, Molin pointed to one of the monitors.

“You’ve been on the database, have you?” he asked.

The database was frozen on the very obvious log-out screen.

Doug nodded.

“It’s how we found you. Can you log back in?”

“Yes,” Doug told him. He looked up at Agent Jacobs, who nodded impatiently. Doug turned around and did what Molin asked. Rich and Vanessa moved closer to see his screen, while Kand and Brey stayed where they were.

“We need to figure out how to stop this macro from running,” said Molin. Doug arched his eyebrows. He waited for a long time while Molin stared at the screen, looking at the various menus. Everybody was silent for a good five minutes before he spoke again.

Molin finally stepped away from the monitors and looked at his watch. “Shit, this is beyond us,” he said to Jacobs.

They all looked at him. Doug’s mouth moved. “What?” dropped out of it after some hesitation.

“This thing is beyond all of us. With one exception.” Molin turned and looked at Kand. “Kand, is it?” he asked.

Kand looked up at Mr. Molin calmly. Two officers moved toward him, but Jacobs held up his hand.

“You have been getting some deliveries,” said Molin.

“Yes,” Kand said, eyeing Molin calmly.

“Your store received a lot of stuff from Singapore.”

Doug looked at Rich and Vanessa. They had all seen the boxes from Singapore when they visited the store. Doug realized he had also seen them elsewhere.

“Mr. Molin,” Doug began. Jacobs held up his hand.

“Shhh. He did not ask you,” Jacobs said. Doug looked around at the other gunmen. One of them moved closer.

“The boxes are my business,” said Kand.

Molin kneeled to his level and leaned toward Kand. “I know that. I have been doing the same.”

Kand was silent and deadpan, but having been with him for a few days, Doug detected a tiny facial element of surprise.

Molin stood up and walked toward Doug. “Yes. I have been receiving the same boxes from Singapore as Kand. It is a coincidence, but is easily explainable.”

Doug was ready to burst. “Well, then, what was-”

“The boxes carried gold,” Molin explained.

“Gold!” Doug said.

“Yes, and so did yours, didn’t they?” he said to Kand.

Kand said nothing and looked away.

Rich had been listening intently, and Doug suddenly remembered that he was keen on precious metals investing as well. “Sir, what could gold from Singapore possibly have to do with this?” Rich asked. “Unless the premium was really low.”

The premium Rich referred to was the extra cost of purchasing gold. Most people think of gold as fancy coin collecting, but investors are a different breed entirely. They are ravenous and smart, and seek to buy gold at the lowest

premium. Gold is subject to a market-based trading price, of course, but dealers tack on an extra fee, or premium. Finding the lowest premium is the trick.

“You are mostly right,” said Molin. “A dealer in Singapore was temporarily subject to a computer glitch, and charged no premium. On top of that, he tagged his inventory of Singapore \$150 coins at about 35% less than market value.”

“35%?! That guy got hammered!” Rich exclaimed.

“Actually, no,” said Molin. “He didn’t. Somebody reimbursed him for the losses. Somebody who wanted their contacts to stay liquid in case of a massive economic event.”

“Like a market crash,” said Vanessa.

“Damn, how do I get in?” asked Rich.

“You can’t. It lasted for a few hours, and it was about a month ago. Very few people knew,” said Molin.

Rich frowned. This was like finding out on Monday that a Lexus dealer had been giving away cars all weekend.

“So how did you know about it?” Doug asked.

Molin looked at Doug carefully. “You know our acquirer, Shangzhen-Yi, brokers a lot of shipments through Singapore. That’s how I found out.”

“So you bought into metals even though you’re an investment banker,” Rich said with a note of irony.

“You’re damn right! Principles are irrelevant in a deal like that,” Molin told them.

Surprisingly, Doug chuckled. Molin had made his bones in stocks and banking, but gold is the antithesis of

corporate thinking. Gold is the ultimate conservative investment, usually ranking with insurance in terms of risk. Doug thought of precious metals as being for a special breed of people who tend to think the end is coming, any day, any time. The guys with bunkers full of shotguns and canned soup in the backyard. Not investors and leaders.

This was why Rich’s fascination with the stuff was a joke of Doug’s. He was with Rich in California when he bought an ounce coin. Some big name terrorist had just been killed in the Middle East, which drove the gold price lower than it had been in months. The owner of the shop shook his head and said it was ‘terrible’ for the price.

Doug thought that was kind of funny, because a dead terrorist was supposed to be a good thing, no matter what.

So now the group had learned that Molin was in league with the scorched-Earth crowd, and he even nailed the point home with his ‘Damn right!’ answer. Belligerent guy.

Doug had always preferred stocks because he understood them, but now they looked pretty darn lousy. The screen showed precious metals climbing consistently, regardless of what the rest of the markets did.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Rich asked.

Molin looked around. “Because when you invest in gold, you tell nobody. When you get it at 35% below market, you tell even fewer.”

“So that’s why so few people got in,” said Vanessa.

“That’s right,” Agent Jacobs said, stepping forward, “which brings us to this. He turned to Kand, who looked up at him. “How did you find out?” he asked.

Kand sat still. The two guys with rifles moved a little closer to him, and Doug felt a chill in the room. How Kand was going to answer this without proving that he was involved with something really bad, Doug had no idea.

“My wholesaler was also in Singapore,” he said. “He sold a lot of the goods for my store, watches and similar items, and he contacted me about the gold deal.”

Rich looked at his watch, knowing now that the bargain basement price he paid for it was probably a rip-off compared to the tip he didn’t get.

“Was this business legal?” asked Jacobs.

“Yes. I kept all my own books.”

“Thanks to us, they can’t help you now,” Jacobs said.

“I am certain of that.”

“So you got this tip, and acted on it.”

“Who would not?” Kand asked.

Doug had to admit that the urge to act on such a tip would have felt wrong to him. Insider trading was illegal, because a company’s stock could be manipulated by the very people who were inside. They could take advantage of information that had not become public.

But the metals market is different. Nobody is inside. Nobody can manipulate it. Nobody can lie about its value. It is

what it is. If one found out about a steal like the one Kand and Molin had found, it would be criminal not to act on it.

Molin added, “So, was there any other information? Was there any talk of this database?”

“No,” Kand said. “He said to keep it quiet, that things would get very interesting, very soon,”

“Yes, it probably will,” Jacobs said.

Doug looked at the screens with their fluctuating stocks. He looked at Brey and Rich, and he suddenly realized what Kand’s dealer had been getting at. Molin had been trying to make the same point.

“What would you do if you knew the ride was about to end?” asked Molin. “Would you tell anyone?”

Doug stared at him. Vanessa put her head in her hands. Doug thought she was crying.

“Or would you keep silent and make arrangements to protect yourself?”

Rich looked down, shaking his head.

Molin and Kand were like insider traders, with knowledge about the future that few others had. They acted on it. Doug couldn’t blame them. It wasn’t even illegal.

“Now, the question is, who else got the boxes from Singapore?” Jacobs asked.

Kand sat silently. So did Doug.

“Do you know what happened to your contact?” Molin asked Kand.

“Naturally, contacting him occurred to me,” said Kand.
“He is gone. All contact lost. Vanished.”

“Disappeared,” Doug offered, looking at Jacobs.

Jacobs nodded. “That’s right,” he said.

“Somebody was following the money,” said Kand.

“Yes. The tip your dealer gave you was his error. Once your trades were being followed, he became a risk.”

“A risk to who?” Vanessa asked.

“To the person, or people who wanted to protect their network,” Jacobs said.

“A network that includes people like me,” Molin added.

“The master class,” said Rich.

Mr. Molin smirked. “You understand; whoever held information about a predetermined future had to be eliminated. That meant people like you and your wholesaler,” he said to Kand. “And you,” he told Doug and the others. “I even played a part in the dragnet.”

“You were all considered extremely dangerous, and expendable,” added Jacobs.

“Who is this network?”

“Let’s call them ‘insiders’. Somebody, or some group, are planning some kind of plot, and wanted to spread their wealth before putting it into action.”

Doug looked at the database again, and its fluctuating prices. “Do you mean this?” he asked.

Molin nodded. “Right. That.”

They all looked at the screens. Currier had implemented a macro that threatened the economy, and a gold dealer in Singapore had brokered the fire sale of the century a month before. Molin and Kand were recipients of one of the greatest trading tips of all time.

If Currier was behind the macro, Doug figured he was in on the gold trade too.

There was one other, Doug knew. His dad. He looked up at the officer standing around with their automatic rifles, and decided to say nothing.

A church bell rang somewhere outside. Doug remembered that they were all in a neighborhood on the East Side. He glanced at Rich’s watch. It was noon.

They were all silent for another few minutes, watching the screens. CNBC showed chaos on the trading floor. The day was only half over, and according to news reports, the NYSE chairman was considering closing the market. The strange fluctuations and the dire reports had scared everyone. Volume was low, and currencies were getting killed.

Of course, metals were climbing.

Behind the chairman standing on the balcony Doug saw something interesting. It was the suit of armor. Whether it was the same one they had seen in Boston, he could not tell. Doug looked at Rich.

“Yes,” Rich said with a nod. Vanessa nodded, too.

Something else caught Doug’s eye in the lower left corner of the screen. Three purple jackets moved through the

crowd. The backs of all of them looked familiar. One of them turned around to talk to the others. It was Eric.

Doug pointed at the three in the purple coats.

“I see them,” said Rich.

Doug turned around. Molin and Jacobs were already headed for the door with the riflemen. Molin stopped and turned around.

“I figured that was why you were dressed like that,” he said. “That’s where we’re going. C’mon.”

Doug, Rich, Vanessa and Kand practically jumped out of their chairs. Brey was a little slower. Doug turned back to log out of the database, and Rich turned around.

“Dude, never mind that,” he said.

Doug was already done. “salright,” he answered.

Vanessa shook her head at them and started running toward the door. Molin and the officer led everyone out of the building. They headed down the dark stairwell to the ground floor and out the front door. Two black SUVs and one surveillance van were double-parked in front. A meter maid was standing on the sidewalk writing a ticket for another car nearby, but Doug could see from the tickets up and down the street that she had ignored the trucks.

Rich, Vanessa and Doug got into an SUV with Molin and a driver, and Kand and Brey went to the other one. Jacobs went to the surveillance truck to meet with the people inside. After a few minutes he jumped into the SUV with Doug and the others, and they all roared off toward Wall Street. Doug

could tell by how quickly the Free Majority got there that they weren’t very far.

Now that it was noon, there was one difference that the Freemers didn’t have to worry about; lunchtime traffic. Boston was like this, when the noon bell rang, the streets swarmed with pedestrian locusts looking for the nearest stalk to munch on. It already felt to Doug like ages ago that Vanessa, Rich and he were members of that crowd.

New York’s pedestrians are a bit different. They outnumber Boston’s people armada by a factor of twenty, but they follow the rules. The light changes, and people go. The light changes again, and they stop. If they don’t, a phalanx of yellow cabs sits at the starting line ready to pick them off.

Maybe the cabs are the enforcers, since they are an overwhelming component of Manhattan’s total fleet. In Boston, maybe three percent of the cars are taxis. Having been in a position to do so many times, Doug knew it wasn’t a cinch to flag one down like people do in New York.

Being in these black trucks made it a lot easier to get through the traffic, but the pedestrians were a different story. When the light was in their favor, they formed an impenetrable wall across every intersection. The trucks did not use sirens, and Doug had a disturbing feeling about why.

Doug leaned toward Molin and asked, “What did you mean when you said you were part of the dragnet?”

Molin paused, looking disappointed about something. “On Monday, our new bosses in Beijing ordered me to fire all

of you immediately. The only explanation was that you were being investigated for market tampering and working with subversive organizations.”

“But you knew-”

“That it was an honest mistake. Right. So I fought them on the decision, and convinced them to break you up instead. When you never turned up, I realized what was going on.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rich.

“I never knew what the database was capable of, but I did know something about the people who designed it. I put it together, notified the Feds, and here we are.”

“What did you know?” Doug asked.

“It doesn’t matter. Once we capture them, with your help, this will all be over.”

Doug wished he had a chance to download with his friends the night before. He suspected that Vanessa was still pissed about losing her job over this, but he knew Rich long enough to know they were cool.

Rich and Vanessa smiled a little, now that it looked like they would all get their jobs back.

Something that Eric said still bothered Doug, and he leaned forward, just as Agent Jacobs picked up the CB radio and was about to click it. “Excuse me. Do you know anything about a bomb?” Doug asked.

“What?” demanded Jacobs.

“The leader, Eric, said something before he locked us in. He said something about a bomb in the suit of armor.”

Jacobs was silent. He put the CB radio receiver back in its cradle. The driver looked at him with curiosity. Doug’s mind raced. Was that the wrong thing to ask? He wondered what would happen if he ignored it and the threat was real. This might have been a red herring, the ‘chatter’ that he’d heard so much about.

Jacobs turned around. “I need to know exactly what he said,” he said.

“He said to tell you about the bomb in the armor.”

“Tell who? Me?”

“Well, whoever came, I guess.”

“So they left you to be their scapegoats.”

“Yeah,” Doug answered.

“And they gave you that, hoping you might use it in your own defense.”

“Yeah, we all heard it.”

Molin looked at the other interrogator and seemed to be deep in thought.

“Is it just, uh, chatter?” Doug asked.

“Well, it has to be taken seriously, although it may be just blowing smoke.”

“We might know where the bomb is,” said Vanessa.

“Yeah, I thought nothing of it until I saw that suit of armor standing on the Stock Exchange floor,” added Doug.

“Fuck,” Jacobs said. “I saw that, too.” He picked up the CB again and started talking to the other trucks about

evacuation and the base of operation. Doug heard a lot of other jargon, and none of it sounded good.

“They’re going to evacuate the New York Stock Exchange?” Vanessa whispered.

“That would croak everything,” said Rich.

“It would be as good as an actual bomb,” Doug added. He shuddered at the prospect of a bomb in the Stock Exchange. “Sir, what if these Freemers just want to cause a panic?” Doug asked Jacobs.

Molin spoke up. “I know something about these people, and they are probably not bluffing.”

“What?” Doug asked in surprise.

“They will keep that ace in their sleeve, but they would rather just evacuate the Street.”

“So they can get away in the panic,” Vanessa added.

“Then let’s not give them the satisfaction,” Doug said, his voice cracking low. It sounded like a throatload of gravel.

Molin looked as if he was ready to disagree, and then said, “Yes. Going in there to force an evacuation would cause a panic. The markets would crash, which is exactly what they want.” Jacobs looked at him.

“So what do we do?” Rich asked.

Jacobs spoke up. “Well, the four of you are dressed for the trading floor. You’re wearing credentials. It seems they were planning on bringing you with them until something went wrong. So why not get on the floor?”

“They’ll see us,” Vanessa protested.

“Yes. They will. But they won’t see the building shutdown they were expecting.”

“They’ll try to leave,” Doug said.

“Yes. That’s when we will pick them up. In the back are some radios, so you can communicate with us. Let them see you in there, but don’t let them see you using the radios.”

Rich asked, “So we just watch to see where they go?” He sounded excited.

The trucks turned right. Doug could tell by the buildings that they were close to Wall Street already.

“Can we forward this plan to your bosses?” Molin asked Jacobs. He nodded and picked up the CB.

“Sir,” Doug said. “They have guns.”

Jacobs looked back at him. “Not in the stock exchange they don’t. Don’t worry about that.”

“But they may have gotten the bomb in,” said Rich.

Molin looked to Jacobs, who shook his head. “No,” he said. “Just try and stay away from them. Just go in. Locate them. Let them see you, and report where they go after that. That’s it.”

“Can do,” Doug said.

The trucks pulled over to the curb near Wall Street and stepped out. It was another tow zone, and Doug saw a meter maid down the block start marching toward them, then pause and decide to cross the street instead, whistling.

Jacobs looked at the CB radio. “We’re stopping here to set up operations, just in case we have to evacuate the place.”

They went to the back of the SUV, where Jacobs opened the tailgate and pulled out a large plastic box. He opened it and gave Doug and the others each a walkie-talkies.

Brey and Kand came over and Jacobs handed a radio to Brey, who looked surprised. “Sorry,” he said to Kand. “Your profile prevents me from getting you involved. Hope you don’t mind staying out here.”

Kand nodded. For a guy who had been put out of business and nearly assassinated by Jacobs and his men, Doug thought he was fairly understanding.

“The channels are set. Remember, find them, make eye contact, radio back, and leave. That’s it. Ready in ten minutes,” said Jacobs. “That will give us time to put people on the perimeter. In plainclothes. We don’t want to start a panic.”

The group nodded. The mission sounded easy. Doug figured they would see the Free Majority pretty quickly.

“Ready?” Molin asked.

“Yes,” they said, but Doug wasn’t. He didn’t think any of them were. His stomach felt lighter than air. Only Brey said nothing. At least he was honest.

“Lean in, here,” said Jacobs. As soon as they all did, he whispered. “I am taking a huge chance here. We should be going in with full force.”

Doug and the others nodded.

“If you don’t see them, get out. We’ll do the rest.”

“Okay,” Doug said. “What’s the rest?”

“Evacuation.”

Doug, Vanessa and Brey looked at each other, and Doug felt a barely perceptible nod from them.

“Okay, we’re ready,” Doug said.

“Good luck, guys,” Molin said.

“Ten minutes, then go in,” said Jacobs.

The four waited to cross the street. They were not near a crosswalk, and cabs were zipping by. Because of a stoplight up the block, there was a periodic lull in the traffic, and the four ran across during one of them.

They turned the next corner, and there it was; Wall Street. Doug felt like this was supposed to be his world. As different as Rich, Vanessa, Brey and Doug were, they shared a dream; being in the heart of the financial world and doing something impressive. The fact that the Exchange was technically on Broad Street didn’t matter to him.

Not one of the four MBAs ever imagined entering the New York Stock Exchange building with phony credentials while performing a mission for the government. Doug felt a strange lack of purpose being here armed with walkie-talkies.

In a way, they were still doing what they had envisioned. Instead of being here to help the street keep churning out billions in growth, they were here to make sure it didn’t come crashing down by somebody’s contrived mechanism. It had crashed before, and would crash again, but not by artifice. That could not be allowed.

Vanessa looked at the building and checked her watch. “Eight minutes,” she said.

“In, find them, and get out,” said Rich.

“Radio back, then get out,” Doug said.

“Right,” said Brey.

They stood and considered what would happen if this didn't work. At least Doug did. He would be surprised if the consequences of failure weren't foremost in all of their minds.

The group began to look suspicious standing outside dressed like they were. They were supposed to be on the floor, and everybody walking around knew it. It would be very strange for four traders to stand across the street from the exchange for this long without smoking. Everyone walking by must have thought that they were wasting some trading house's valuable time.

“Six minutes,” said Vanessa.

Doug saw some bankers walking down the street to grab a smoke. He watched one of them finish his cigarette, stamp it out, and then remain where he was. One of the plainclothes agents, Doug thought. At least he wasn't dressed in bright purple and yellow.

“Four minutes.”

They waited. Doug could not detect any more agents. Then he saw something very interesting. A man stood near the entrance to a narrow alley at the end of the block. Doug blinked. It looked a lot like his dad. The man turned and looked in his direction. It was Jonathan.

He stared at Doug for a few seconds, and then ducked into the alleyway.

“Guys,” Doug asked, still looking at the alley his father ducked into. “What if there is a bomb?”

“No way these Freemers would use it,” Rich said.

“It would be against their whole ideology. A bluff,” added Vanessa.

Brey just shook his head. He agreed with Rich.

“But what if there's some kind of convoluted reason it's what they want?” Doug asked.

“No way,” Rich said again. “They want the markets to continue. They're all about globalization, commerce, trade.”

“I don't know anything about this group, guys,” said Brey, “but I think they really do want to stop this turmoil.”

“Maybe,” Doug said. God, he hoped Brey was right.

“Shit,” Vanessa said. “One minute.”

“Let's go,” Rich said.

They crossed the street and approached the security barrier. It was on.