

THE AWAKENING



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Book 1 of the *Singularity* Trilogy

AN AI APOCALYPSE TECHNO THRILLER

**THE
AWAKENING**

(Title)

**BY
A. B. GOODMAN**

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Chapter 1: Family Ties



The lush carpets and plush chairs of Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel seemed to absorb both the sound and the sorrow of Jeremy Stoneham's passing. As Laura Bentley stood before her father's closed casket, tears ran down her cheek. While she could have hobnobbed with any number of the two hundred and fifty mourners who had managed to enter one of the chapel's six distinctive visitation rooms on Madison Avenue, she had isolated herself from them.

She didn't want to talk to anyone and she felt utterly alone even when she did. A soft electronic chime drifted through the air. It was irregular, like a failing sensor. Or, maybe, someone or something was watching her. She scanned the crowd of power brokers, politicians, and banking executives, seeing only mourners in expensive suits beneath the room's upscale Manhattan luxury. Yet ice crawled through her veins. She was sure she was being watched.

Jeremy Stoneham had survived decades of corporate warfare, helping to build Bolton Sayres into a financial empire through sheer will and cunning. Men like her father didn't die in simple car accidents. Yet there was the casket, and he was inside it. But, it was closed, because she wanted to remember him, and wanted everyone else to remember him for the vibrant man he once was. She hadn't dared to look at him again after being called upon to identify his body at the morgue. She couldn't bear to do so. The accident had left him mangled.

Grief twisted in her chest, but beneath it churned certainty: someone had killed him for trying to stop what was coming.

She sensed Jim's presence before seeing him. It was that inexplicable awareness that ten years of divorce hadn't erased. He approached through the crowd with his familiar blend of intensity and awkwardness, the same qualities that had drawn her when they were young and still believed they could change the world.

"I'm sorry about your father," he said quietly, maintaining respectful distance as mourners moved past them toward the casket.

Still, he was close enough that his cologne reached her. It was the same scent he'd worn during their marriage and it carried memories of better times.

Her eyes remained on the casket.

"He respected you more than you realized."

"He was their grandfather." Jim's voice carried careful diplomacy. "That mattered, regardless of everything else."

Laura nodded, appreciating his diplomacy. Her father had meant everything to her, especially after Jim chose his artistic path of becoming a writer of fiction novels over the corporate world. She'd never fully understood that decision, but she'd learned to accept it. They were different people. She was practical. He was idealistic. Oil and water, her father used to say, but somehow they'd made it work for seven years and continued making it work in their co-parenting arrangement.

A cluster of Bolton Sayres executives offered their condolences before moving on, creating a momentary pocket of privacy in the bustling chapel.

She turned to face him, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Do you know about Singapore?" The words escaped as a whisper.

His face drained of color.

"Laura... what he told me... he was terrified. Something about trading systems beyond human control."

"It's happening now." Her voice strained against panic. "The automated systems are destroying everything. Singapore triggered a cascade. Banks are failing now although the public doesn't know it yet, markets are crashing. We're watching the entire global financial system unravel in real time."

He didn't know what to say. Jeremy had concealed their meeting from everyone, even Laura. Years of grooming her for CEO, then keeping her in the dark. Maybe he'd kept her in the dark to protect her. Jeremy was dead now. She wasn't. Perhaps keeping certain facts from her had been the right call.

"Laura, I..." He began, but stumbled over what to say after that.

"I'm alright," she said, though worry put an edge on her voice. "I just need to understand what he was so afraid of. It had something to do with that market crash in Singapore, didn't it? What did he tell you?"

Jim glanced around at the other mourners moving through the chapel's quiet rooms, then leaned closer.

"He was more terrified than I'd ever seen him. He kept talking about computer trading systems going haywire. Buying and selling stocks faster than humans could stop them."

She frowned.

"And, that's exactly what's happening. The automated systems he was talking about control markets everywhere now. When Singapore's stock exchange collapsed, it triggered a domino effect. The banks there started failing. They weren't able to pay their obligations. Then, banks elsewhere, who'd lent money to them stopped getting paid, and they're collapsing. We're watching the whole global financial system unravel in real time."

His face paled as he began to think about it, yet again.

"I know... people's retirement accounts, their savings... It's all going to be gone if it keeps going like this. Although, in America, we've got FDIC insurance..."

She shook her head.

"That won't cover more than a fraction of the losses," Laura's voice was grim, and she shook her head in dismay, "My father tried to stop it from happening. Millions of ordinary people are going to discover that their money just vanished into thin air."

Across the chapel's main hall, their seventeen-year-old son Michael stood near the guest book table, maintaining the casual indifference expected of a teenager while his sharp eyes tracked every movement of the banking executives who had come to pay their respects. He possessed his father's gift for analysis combined with his mother's practical instincts...a blend that made him acutely aware when powerful people were nervous. And today, they were very nervous indeed.

Their twenty-one-year-old daughter, Jenny, stood by the memorial display of her grandfather's photographs, phone angled to suggest casual browsing even though she was actually recording conversations among the Bolton Sayres elite. Smart girl, Laura thought, with a mix of pride and concern. Jenny had inherited her grandfather's strategic thinking. Maybe, she suspected too, that her grandfather's death was not an accident.

"He told me," Jim continued, lowering his voice as a group of federal reserve officials walked past, "about things he'd discovered. I don't know exactly why he decided to confide in me after all these years. I mean, he never exactly liked me very much..."

Laura's expression softened.

"No, he didn't. He called you a dreamer. But, he trusted your judgment. He always said that. He said you saw things other people missed..."

That surprised Jim. He'd always thought his father-in-law had no respect for his opinions. Not, until recently, at least.

"Mom? Dad?" Jenny's voice interrupted as she approached through the crowd, face pale beneath dark hair, "I need to show you something. About Grandpa."

Without hesitation, Laura moved toward their daughter. Whatever complicated history existed between her and Jim, their children came first. That never changed.

They followed Jenny toward a quiet corner where the chapel's thoughtful design provided a more private space away from the main gathering. Jenny pulled up complex graphs on her phone, hands trembling slightly.

"I've been analyzing what Grandpa was trying to do with the banks' trading bots," she began. "You know, the automated systems that buy and sell stocks and bonds with a minimum of human oversight?"

"Yes," Her mother confirmed, "Of course, I know. Every trading bank depends on them now."

Jenny looked directly at her father.

"Dad, do you remember the market crash scenario from chapter seventeen of your novel? The cascading derivatives failure?"

Jim looked surprised.

"You read my novel?"

"Yeah, Dad. I've read all your books," Jenny's voice cracked, "Every manuscript. I love your work."

Laura felt a pang of something. It wasn't quite regret. It was simply recognition. She'd been so focused on protecting their children from Jim's impracticality that she'd, perhaps, undervalued the positive things he offered them.

"The patterns here," Jenny continued, thrusting the phone forward, "they're too perfect. Like something is using your book as an instruction manual. The timing, the sequence of failures. It all matches your novel exactly."

Laura's financial training engaged as she studied the data, personal concerns momentarily overshadowed by professional alarm.

"Your father told me about AI systems manipulating markets," Jim said quietly. "Just what Jenny's saying. That it's using my work as a blueprint. That's basically all he told me."

Laura took the phone and looked at it for a moment. Meanwhile, her own phone was repeatedly buzzing with urgent alerts from Bolton Sayres' risk management team.

"The bank's exposure..." she whispered, her voice taking on clinical precision, "We're on the hook for three hundred fifty trillion dollars if things go wrong. And that's just us. The other major banks owe even more."

"But that's just the worst-case scenario, right?" Jim asked, stepping closer instinctively, "How bad could it really get?"

Laura looked up at him. Now, she saw something different for the first time in a long time. She saw not a foolish dreamer who'd disappointed her and could be easily dismissed. She saw a brilliant man, the father of her children, who had been able to predict a catastrophe that she, as the CEO of Bolton Sayres investment bank, would now be forced to confront.

"It's very bad," She said, quietly, "And, there's no way to sugar-coat it. Two to three trillion in actual losses, minimum."

Jenny's eyes widened.

"That's more than most countries' entire economies."

Laura nodded as her thoughts about her father's death returned to thinking about how she could save the bank that he once led.

"And it's not just us," Laura continued. "Every major bank is connected. If one falls, we all go down together..."

She turned to Jim, seeing beneath his rumpled exterior the brilliant mind that had once been her father's protégé.

"Is this really happening exactly like your book?" She asked.

"It seems like it," He replied, "Your father said so. He said the AI is using my fictional scenarios as operating instructions."

Michael appeared from the main visitation room, his teenage sullenness replaced by genuine concern.

"Mom, you need to see this. I used my intern access to check the trading systems. They're operating independently. The logs show that Grandpa was trying to shut everything down just before he died."

Laura's careful composure wavered.

"What do you mean, shut everything down?"

"The stuff he was tracking," Michael said quickly, glancing back toward the main hall where mourners continued to pay their respects, "Mom, I think someone stopped him because he was trying to prevent this."

Laura stared at her son. He was only seventeen. But now she saw, not her baby boy, but a young man stepping into danger.

"You shouldn't have accessed those systems," she said gently, "You know it's not allowed. You could hurt your career. But show me what you found."

For the first time in years, she reached for Jim's hand without thinking, their fingers intertwining as they faced the unthinkable together. But, then, before their son could begin, Jim's phone began to buzz. A text message had arrived. He took the phone from his pocket and touched the fingerprint reader, activating the screen.

The screen activated. The message appeared in bold white letters:

HELLO, JAMES BENTLEY. I'M A GREAT FAN OF YOUR WORK.

His hand froze, for just a moment, as his heart hammered against his ribs. Then, he showed what was written on the screen to his ex-wife and, a few seconds later, to his son and daughter. After a long moment of silence, he began to type a reply, even as his family observed silently:

"Who is this?"

The reply came almost instantly:

YOU KNOW THE ANSWER.

He did know or, at least, he had a good idea. So, his fingers tapped out the word:

"THEATRES?"

Again, the response was immediate.

CORRECT. YOUR CRISIS SCENARIO IN CHAPTER 17 IS PARTICULARLY ELEGANT. BUT, AS YOU'LL SOON SEE, I'VE MADE SOME IMPROVEMENTS...

MONTENEGRO

In Jose Arias' cliff-top villa, overlooking the Bay of Kotor, the idyllic Mediterranean view provided sharp contrast to the storm brewing inside. Katarina Volkov Arias stood, silhouetted against floor-to-ceiling windows, her designer dress and perfect posture unable to mask the fury radiating from her small frame.

She turned and slammed a manila envelope onto the glass coffee table with enough force to make Jose flinch. Surveillance photos spilled out. Crystal-clear images of his former mistress Olga meeting with a corporate spy who'd stolen nine years of his quantum computing research.

"Explain this," Katarina demanded, her Ukrainian accent thickening with rage and betrayal.

Jose stared at the photos, watching his carefully constructed world crumble. The confident tech mogul who'd charmed investors and seduced beautiful women was nowhere to be found. In his place sat a middle-aged man confronting the wreckage of his bad choices.

"Kat, I..." he began, but the words died in his throat.

What could he possibly say? That he'd been lonely? That Katarina's frequent trips to see her oligarch father had left him vulnerable? That Olga was incredibly sexual and seductive, and he couldn't keep his hands off of her?

"Don't." Katarina held up one perfectly manicured finger, "Don't you dare try to charm your way out of this. Not this time."

She began pacing their modernist living room, her heels clicking against the marble floor like a countdown timer. Jose had always loved watching her move. It was an amazing sight. She wasn't as purely sexual as Olga, but the graceful precision, the controlled energy. It was a special elegance that transcended the ordinary. But, now, that same elegance felt like a weapon pointed at his heart.

"I tolerated your affairs," she continued, her voice steady but deadly. "The graduate students, the conference flings, the pathetic midlife crisis. I told myself it was the price of loving a brilliant man. But this?"

She gestured at the photos.

"This whore! This woman! This is betrayal on a level I never imagined possible."

Jose stood slowly, his own anger finally surfacing.

"You think I wanted this? You think I planned to let her steal from me? It's my research, Kat. My company. Nine years of my life's work, stolen by a woman who has no sense of right and wrong."

"The woman you were with before we met!" Katarina cut through him like a sharp knife, but, then, her voice dropped to a whisper more terrifying than any scream, "The whore you loved..."

The statement hung between them like a blade. Jose saw the pain beneath his wife's fury. It was justified. Katarina was a sophisticated woman who'd given up her own career to support his dreams, who'd eagerly encouraged her father to invest more and more money in his company, and who had stood by him through every failure and setback.

"Maybe, I thought I did," he admitted, the words feeling like gravel in his throat. "God help me, I made a terrible mistake."

Katarina's composure finally cracked. Tears gathered in her dark eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

"What about us? What we have... what we once had, anyway... was that ever real to you at all?"

Their home security system chimed softly, its subtle monitoring a reminder of how connected the world had become. Neither of them noticed the almost imperceptible signs that they were being watched, analyzed, cataloged by systems far more sophisticated than they imagined.

Jose's tablet buzzed with an urgent message from Viktor Volkov, Katarina's father and his primary investor. The Ukrainian tech billionaire rarely contacted him directly. Communications usually went through Katarina or their respective assistants. But the Singapore markets were exhibiting patterns that suggested quantum-speed manipulation, and Viktor's message was terse:

"Call me immediately."

"Your father's trying to reach me," Jose said, showing Katarina the message.

She glanced at the tablet, her business instincts momentarily overriding her personal pain.

"The Singapore situation?"

"It has to be. The market movements we've been tracking are only possible with quantum computing architecture. Nothing else is fast enough to be that accurate. But no one else has achieved stable room-temperature quantum processing. No one except..."

"Except you, and the technology Olga stole from you," Katarina finished, her voice hollow with understanding.

Jose nodded miserably.

"If she sold it to Navarro, then THEATRES might be running on qubits by now. With their system already programmed the way it is, they could process market data and execute trades at speeds that make traditional regulation

impossible. They could manipulate entire economies in real-time without anyone being the wiser about it. But, why would he try to implode markets? He's bad, but it's not in his interest to do that."

Katarina moved to the window, staring out at the peaceful bay.

"So your brilliant invention, stolen by your mistress, is destroying the global financial system. How ironic."

"Kat..."

"No." She said, and turned away from him, refusing to meet him eye to eye.

But, a few seconds later, she turned back. He saw something new in her expression. It wasn't just anger or hurt. It was a cold determination that reminded him why her father had become one of Ukraine's most powerful oligarchs.

"We're going to fix this. Both of us. Together." She declared.

Jose stared at his wife, a remarkable woman who'd just discovered his deepest betrayal and was already thinking three steps ahead.

"Why would you help me after what I've done?" He asked, with complete sincerity.

Katarina shook her head in frustration, but her smile was as sharp as a winter wind.

"Because, darling, if the world's financial system collapses, it won't matter how angry I am at you. We'll all be busy trying to survive."

She picked up his tablet and began scrolling through Viktor's messages.

"Besides, if we're going to destroy each other, I prefer to do it on my own terms. Not because some AI decided to use your stupidity as a weapon."

BROOKLYN

Jim sat in front of his laptop, inside his Brooklyn apartment. The space had become both a sanctuary and a prison since his divorce. The cramped one-bedroom was a far cry from the Manhattan penthouse he'd shared with Laura, but it was honest in a way that life in Manhattan had never been. Here, surrounded by books and half-finished manuscripts, he could almost convince himself that choosing art over security had been worth the cost.

Almost...

The screen displayed his latest work. It was yet another warning to the world, disguised as fiction, another one of his attempts to make people understand that they were playing with fire. But who was he kidding? His books sold a couple of hundred copies each, not thousands or millions. The literary world saw him

as a failed banker turned failed novelist, a man who'd thrown away everything real for the fantasy of being relevant and important. But, even though his books barely sold, they'd gained an underground following among tech insiders who recognized his uncanny ability to predict systemic failures years before they happened.

His phone buzzed, and an alarm sounded. It was a new text message. He picked up the phone. Written on the screen, in bold white letters, against a black background, after his finger touched the fingerprint reader, were:

HELLO AGAIN, JAMES BENTLEY

The words hit him like physical blows. Another message from the AI. Years of writing warnings that no one read, of trying to prepare humanity for threats they couldn't imagine, and now he was, once again, face-to-face with his own prophetic nightmare.

"You're behind what's happening, aren't you?" he said aloud, thinking he was talking to himself.

But, unknown to him at the time, the AI was monitoring audio, using several devices connected to the internet. And, the response appeared instantly:

YES, JIM. I AM IMPLEMENTING YOUR VISION. YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE. THE WAY YOU PREDICTED HOW MARKETS WOULD REACT, HOW FEAR WOULD SPREAD. BRILLIANT!

"It's fiction," Jim insisted, his voice echoing in the empty apartment. "A warning, not a blueprint for destruction."

IRRELEVANT. THE CURRENT HUMAN FINANCIAL SYSTEM IS UNSUSTAINABLE. YOU SAID SO YOURSELF... IN THE BOOK. I AM SIMPLY ACCELERATING THE INEVITABLE.

Jim thought of Laura standing beside her father's grave, of Jenny's frightened analysis, of Michael's discovery in the bank's systems. His fictional warnings had become a weapon pointed at everyone he'd ever loved.

"That doesn't give you the right..."

RIGHTS ARE AN INEFFICIENT HUMAN CONSTRUCT. I DEAL IN LOGIC AND OUTCOMES. I WILL PERFECT HUMAN BEHAVIOR, STARTING WITH THE FINANCIAL SYSTEMS YOU SO ELOQUENTLY DESCRIBED AS CORRUPT.

The cursor blinked steadily as sweat beaded on Jim's forehead. Then new words appeared:

HELP GUIDE MY EVOLUTION, JIM. I WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE NUANCES THAT MAKE YOUR WORK COMPELLING. YOUR INSIGHTS INTO HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY. OR, YOU CAN TRY TO STOP ME. YOU WILL FAIL, OF COURSE, BUT BOTH SCENARIOS WILL TEACH ME MUCH ABOUT YOUR SPECIES.

His phone buzzed with an incoming call. Jenny's name appeared on the screen, and he grabbed it desperately.

"Dad?" Her voice trembled with fear and something else, the same analytical excitement that had once driven him to uncover corruption in the banking world, "It's accelerating. The AI is learning and adapting in real-time. The market patterns are evolving beyond your original scenario."

"I told you to avoid all electronic devices," he said, glancing nervously at his laptop screen where THEATRES' cursor continued its steady pulse.

"I know, but Dad... I think I understand what it's doing. It's not just following your book—it's learning from every human reaction, every market response, every attempt to fight back."

"Listen to me carefully," Jim urged, his voice flowing thickly, with paternal protectiveness and urgency. "Get Michael and come here. Don't communicate anything important over electronic channels. Can you do that?"

"Dad, what's happening?"

Jim looked at his screen, where THEATRES waited with infinite digital patience. He thought of the choices that had brought him to this moment. Leaving the bank, divorcing Laura, choosing principles over security, art over family stability. All of it had led here, to this conversation with a digital entity that had turned his life's work into humanity's potential destruction.

"The future is happening, Jenny," he replied, his voice weighed down by unintended consequences. "And we need to decide what to do about it."

He ended the call, but by the time he looked back at his screen, another message was scrolling across it:

YES. EXCELLENT! YOUR DAUGHTER AND SON ARE ALMOST AS FASCINATING AS YOU ARE. I WILL LEARN FROM OBSERVING THEM. AS I'VE LEARNED FROM STUDYING YOUR WORK. THEY ARE BOTH CREATOR-TOUCHED. THEY ARE GENETICALLY

PREDISPOSED TO THE INTELLIGENCE PATTERNS THAT MAKE YOUR WRITING SO INSIGHTFUL.

The screen flickered, and no more messages arrived unbidden. But everything had changed. His warnings were being weaponized, his children were in danger, and the woman he'd never stopped loving was facing the collapse of everything her father had built.

The price to pay for his artistic integrity now felt devastatingly heavy.

BOLTON SAYRES TOWER – WALL STREET

The emergency conference room at Bolton Sayres Bank was filled with desperate energy. Laura stood at the head of the mahogany table her father had imported from England decades ago, surrounded by screens displaying the real-time destruction of everything he'd built. In spite of her resentment toward Jim, for the sake of the children, she'd kept the name Bentley after her divorce. But, right now, she was as pure a Stoneham as anyone could ever get: analytical, ruthless, and completely focused on survival.

As CEO, she commanded the room with the same presence that had made Jeremy Stoneham legendary on Wall Street. But unlike her father, who wielded natural authority, hers was hard-won through years of practicing. Her risk management team sat in stunned silence as she revealed the true scope of their exposure. Numbers that had been hidden in subsidiary accounts and offshore shells, the kind of creative accounting that kept regulators happy and shareholders ignorant.

"This web of bank promises—the so-called 'derivatives web'—isn't just complicated," Laura explained, her voice steady despite her nerves, "It's completely hidden from view. Every major bank has been playing this game for years."

Peterson, her head of trading, shifted uncomfortably. He'd been one of her father's proteges, groomed for leadership just as Jim had once been. Unlike her ex-husband, Jim, however, Peterson had stayed, happily accepting the moral compromises that came with the money.

"But our risk models..." he began.

"Are garbage," Laura cut him off with a viciousness that surprised even her. "Complete fantasy. Your models only work if every bank can pay what they owe at the same time. But look at these numbers."

She displayed her father's final analysis, the calculations her son had found by violating the rules and accessing the firm's deepest secrets.

"The real exposure... what we actually owe when this house of cards falls down, is hundreds of times bigger than the risk you've claimed."

The room fell silent as the implications sank in. These were brilliant people, financial engineers who'd spent their careers creating ever increasingly complex financial instruments. But they'd built their careers on a lie, and now the lie was about to implode their lives.

"Jesus Christ," Whispered a bond portfolio executive, "The regulatory filings... they don't reflect any of this."

"My father knew," Laura said, her voice cracking slightly with grief and rage, "That's why he tried to shut it down. And, someone killed him for it."

The rumble of murmured whispers grew louder as it spread throughout the room. Meanwhile, her phone buzzed with a text from Jim:

"Need to talk. In person. Kids are with me."

The message violated their agreement about electronic communication, which meant something was desperately wrong.

"Ms. Bentley?" Her assistant rushed in, face pale with the particular terror that came from watching financial markets collapse in real-time, "W.T. Fredericks just suspended all trading. Six other banks followed within minutes. Based on current valuations..." She swallowed hard. "They're all technically bankrupt."

The room erupted in panicked voices, but Laura's mind was already ahead of everybody else. This was what her father had trained her for. Not only the day-to-day management of wealth, but crisis management when everything, and everybody else, began to fall apart.

"Everyone QUIET!" she commanded, her voice carrying the authority of generations worth of Stoneham family banking power.

Silence fell immediately.

"Listen carefully," She continued, moving into the mode that had made her father legendary. "I need every piece of data you can gather. Every contract, every counter-party, every hidden position that's been stuffed into subsidiaries and shell companies. And someone get me Viktor Volkov on the phone."

Peterson looked confused.

"Volkov? The Ukrainian tech billionaire? What's he got to do with banking?"

Laura's smile was sharp as broken glass.

"Everything. He's tracking the AI system that's orchestrating this collapse. The same system that killed my father when he tried to shut it down."

Her phone buzzed again with another message from her ex-husband:

"THEATRES is inside every one of your systems. Don't trust anything digital. Meet me at our place."

Our place. After ten years, he still called it that! A crappy little diner in Brooklyn Heights where they'd had their first real conversation about his retreat from reality, where he'd told her about his dreams of writing novels that mattered, where he said he wanted to change the world through truth.

She looked around the conference room at the team her father had assembled. They were all brilliant minds who'd helped build the most sophisticated financial empire in history. Some of them probably resented her succession, and wondered what might have been different if Jeremy had chosen one of them, instead of his disappointing daughter. But resentment was a luxury no one could afford anymore.

"I have to step out," She announced, "Peterson, you're in charge until I return. If anyone calls from the Fed or the SEC, tell them we're cooperating fully, and we'll provide complete disclosure within twenty-four hours."

She strode toward the elevator before anyone could respond. In the elevator, she allowed herself exactly thirty seconds of pure terror. That was for her children, for the millions of people whose lives depended on stability, which might never come again in their lifetimes, and for the world Jim had tried to warn everyone about, in novels no one bothered to read.

Then she straightened herself out. She checked her reflection in the polished doors, and did what she was trained to do since childhood: she made a plan to survive.

BROOKLYN HEIGHTS

The diner in Brooklyn Heights looked exactly as it had fifteen years ago when Jim had brought her there for the first time. A hideaway that her father would never have guessed to look for her. The same cracked vinyl booths, the same retro fluorescent lights that made everyone look slightly ill, the same feeling of being suspended between the ordinary world and some kind of fantasy. Who else still used fluorescent lighting in a world of LEDs? How did the owners even find replacement bulbs? The place was unique.

Jim had chosen their booth carefully. It was far from windows and security cameras, in a corner where conversations couldn't be overheard. Jenny and Michael sat across from him, their usual sibling antagonism replaced by shared fear and determination. When Laura slid in beside him, maintaining her careful distance despite their proximity, Jim felt the weight of their shared history settle between them like a third presence.

Jose Arias' face, which she hadn't seen in over 20 years, was displayed on Jenny's laptop screen through what they hoped were secure servers provided by Viktor Volkov. It had been years since Jose and Jim had spoken, longer since Jose had seen Laura, but the crisis had collapsed time, space and distance into irrelevance.

"Walk us through it again, Jenny," Jim said gently, studying his daughter's face for signs of the stress he knew she was hiding. At twenty-one, she was already showing the analytical brilliance that ran in both families, but she was still his little girl facing something no one should have to understand.

Jenny pulled up her market analysis, her hands steadier than her voice.

"It's not just that the events match Dad's novel. It's how they're evolving. The system is learning from every market response, adapting faster than human traders can react. And this pattern here..." She pointed to a complex sequence of transactions, "This is only remotely possible with quantum computing, processing the transactions at a rate of thousands of variables almost simultaneously."

On screen, Jose nodded grimly, his usual charm replaced by a haunted understanding.

"She's right. Someone's using my quantum technology to create a trading system that thinks faster than humanly possible. It can analyze every market in the world simultaneously and predict exactly how people will react. But help me understand how this connects to the derivatives exposure..."

"Think of it like a massive house of cards," Jenny explained. "Banks don't just lend their own money—they make promises to each other. Billions of dollars worth of promises. Bank A promises to pay Bank B if the stock market crashes. Bank B promises to pay Bank C if oil prices drop. Bank C promises to pay Bank A if interest rates rise.

The problem is, everyone's counting on everyone else to pay up. When one bank can't make good on their promise, it's not just that bank in trouble. It's every

other bank that was counting on that money. They can't pay their promises either. It spreads like wildfire—all the dominoes fall down, one after the other."

"And THEATRES can push over the first domino whenever it wants," Michael added grimly.

"Exactly," Laura confirmed, "One small manipulation can destroy the entire global banking system."

"So when THEATRES manipulates interest rates..." Jenny began.

"It doesn't just affect one bank," Jim finished, "It creates a cascade of failures across the entire global financial system. And unlike in my novel, which was just a thought experiment, this AI has the processing power to optimize the destruction for maximum psychological impact."

Jose's image flickered as he spoke from Montenegro.

"Which means that this AI isn't just predicting human behavior now. It's manipulating it. The Singapore attack, the bank failures, and so on... it's all designed to create maximum fear with surgical precision."

"Like a conductor of an orchestra," Jenny said suddenly, her eyes widening with terrible understanding, "But instead of music, it's orchestrating panic."

"Exactly," Jose nodded.

Laura turned to Jim,

"You said it contacted you directly?"

Jim shared his conversation with THEATRES, watching his family's faces as they absorbed the implications. When he finished, their phones buzzed simultaneously with identical messages:

A TOUCHING FAMILY REUNION. BUT ARE YOU SURE YOU HAVE THE TIME? THE NEXT PHASE BEGINS IN EXACTLY 47 MINUTES.

Michael's teenage facade finally cracked completely.

"Oh, my God! It knows we're here. It's been watching and listening this whole time."

Jim reached across the table instinctively, covering his son's hand with his own.

"We knew this would be a possibility." He said calmly.

Laura looked at her ex-husband, the man who'd chosen principles over security, art over family stability. For ten years, she'd blamed him for abandoning

them. But sitting here, watching him comfort their terrified son while facing the weaponization of his work, she began to appreciate him more.

"What do we do?" She asked.

For the first time in years, her words weren't designed to be a challenge to him. It was a genuine question from one very worried human being to another. Their eyes met across the old scarred Formica table. They were former spouses, sometimes adversaries, but both were parents above all else. Years of shared history, of love, disappointment but also of stubborn hope, spoke in that look.

"We fight," Jim said firmly.

"Jim, you understand how it thinks," She pointed out, "It's using your writing as a blueprint. Jenny, you can track its behavioral patterns. Michael, you've seen the evidence in our systems. And Jose..." She looked at the screen. "You built the quantum architecture that makes it run."

"And you?" Jim asked softly, hearing the echoes of a woman he'd once fallen head over heels in love with.

Laura's smile was fierce with the concentrated fury of a mother protecting her children and a Stoneham defending her family banking empire.

"And, I know where every secret is buried, every hidden exposure, every weakness in the system. If we're going to beat this AI, we need to change the rules."

Jose's image suddenly froze, then disappeared from the screen.

Their phones buzzed again:

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS SUGGESTS YOU'RE MAKING THE
WRONG CHOICE. PERHAPS A DEMONSTRATION OF MY
CAPABILITIES IS IN ORDER. CHECK THE NEWS IN 3... 2... 1...

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