

**Chapter 22**  
**Dr. Currier**

Jonathan Wilson watched as his son and the three others standing across the street from the New York Stock Exchange building wearing their purple trader outfits. He figured these damn Federal agents were out of their minds, sending these kids on a dangerous sortie like that.

They weren't really children, of course. Doug was twenty-four, and the others were the same age or likely older. But Jonathan knew they could not possibly have the experience to deal with whatever happens. It was obvious that the mission was determined because the authorities had no other option.

Far across the square, among the crowded sidewalks and general bustle of New York's financial district, Jonathan saw his son look toward him. Then he saw the black-uniformed men waiting by the surveillance truck follow Doug's glance, and Jonathan dropped into the gloom of the alleyway.

The fishing ruse off Long Island had worked. Just after Doug and Kand took the raft, the helicopters and Coast Guard vessels caught up with him. Jonathan produced his phony IDs that he kept with him at all times. The lieutenant who boarded the boat was a striped bass enthusiast, and was impressed by some of the deep-sea flies that they found on the boat. Jonathan was grateful to whomever he had stolen the boat from.

Now, because of his son Doug, he lurked in a filthy Manhattan alley, next to a large building with marble steps and

a large statue of George Washington. Apparently, this was the area where the first president was sworn in. The building was closed for renovations and Jonathan thought it looked like the kind of place where Reginald Currier would set up shop.

From this location, he knew, Currier could orchestrate everything that was going on, and then get away quickly, without detection. It was possible that Currier had the building wired to warn him if anybody entered. Jonathan avoided the main entrance, instead walking up Nassau Street to the alley.

Tourists flooded the area at this time of day. The Federal agents with Doug were the first on the scene, and Jonathan watched them frantically set up their weak perimeter while waiting for backup from the local police. He was dressed like a tourist, although rather bedraggled from the long boat trip. Jonathan realized that the time to get out of the way was now, before the Feds had the people to barricade the area.

People had begun to notice the increasing number of black trucks and police cars, and they gathered on the street corners to try to figure out what was going on. Jonathan quickly climbed an iron gate behind the large marble building, and was finally out of sight of the police and the onlookers.

Once over the gate, there were no doors or windows for the first ten or more feet up the side of the building, and the alley ended at the wall of the adjoining building. The only way in was to reach the fire escape high above, and do it without killing himself.

The fire escape was the type with swinging steps and a counterweight on the other end. The wall was completely flat, devoid of any hand or footholds. The opposing wall was made of weathered brick, and was probably close enough for somebody more athletic to scale the space between them. Jonathan was not that flexible.

Jonathan stood in the alleyway by the gate and took off the leather belt he was wearing. He was going to need something heavy. He saw a couple of bricks lying in the alley, and grabbed one of them. His belt was made with leather strands in a herringbone pattern, which allowed him to wrap the buckle end tightly around a brick. He swung the brick around the alley for a few seconds. It held.

He threw the brick upward to the stairs, making sure to avoid the swinging brick. It finally caught one of the steps on the third try, and Jonathan pulled the stairs down and grabbed the bottom step. He ran up the stairs. When he got to the landing, the stairs snapped back up with a loud clatter. Jonathan cringed, hoping the noise would not capture the attention of the cops outside or Currier himself.

He looked around for an entrance, and saw several large windows that led into the building from the fire escape. Of course, Jonathan knew, it was supposed to work the other way around. The windows were not a very effective entrance or exit, since most of them were painted shut, and one had an air conditioner in it.

Jonathan pushed on the glass in the window next to him, and found that the caulking holding the windowpane was dry and brittle. He started to chip away at it with his Leatherman, and it took a minute or two to remove the caulking around the glass and jimmy the pane out.

He pulled out the large windowpane and set it against the wall just inside the opening, then climbed through. The building was completely dark. The floor was covered with plastic paper and drywall dust. Workbenches were set up all over the room and power cords ran across the floor in all directions.

The building had not been worked on in a few weeks, and Jonathan remembered reading about the reason why. Apparently there was an air quality issue and the union had stopped all work until it could be resolved. Because of the building's status as an historic place, the work stoppage was the cause of some local political turmoil as well.

For now, the abandoned building was a boon for anybody who wanted to use it as a base for manipulating the stock market. Somebody like Currier.

Jonathan walked slowly across the room he was in, which seemed to be an office area, and entered a much larger room. The void overhead seemed to be at least ten feet high. This was obviously some kind of great room. It was mostly dark, except for a dull greenish glow from the large windows, which were covered with nylon tarp.

He saw a wide stairway at the far end of the room. Jonathan figured if he were Currier, he would want to be near an exit. There was likely to be another way down besides the main stairway. In the near wall he saw an opening with an exit sign above it. Jonathan looked carefully through the doorway, and saw stairs that led down, as well as a ladder leading up.

The staircase was dark, and Jonathan guessed that if Currier was here, this was his escape route. Something about the ladder got Jonathan's attention. It was not permanent, and it looked to be in unused condition. It attached to a hatch in the ceiling, like the entrance to the attic in an old house.

Jonathan looked at the floor and lifted the ladder slightly. The dust on the floor was unbroken, and he realized that the ladder was placed there recently. There were also no footprints anywhere near it. This ladder was dropped from above. It was Currier's getaway.

Jonathan stepped on the lowest step, and the hatch creaked forward. It wasn't a loud creak, but he knew that he couldn't get up the ladder any further without making a racket. He quietly stepped off of it.

Looking at the creaky hinges, Jonathan got an idea. He took out the Leatherman again and removed the bolts that held the ladder to the hatch door. Whoever trusted this was going to fall, and probably tumble the rest of the way down the stairs. The unbolted ladder leaned against the door perfectly.

Jonathan turned around to mount a frontal assault instead. He walked carefully across the floor of the big hall to

the main stairs. The main stairway led down, but a much smaller stairwell went up to a door on the landing above. This looked like it was once a balcony for the great hall, but it had been renovated some time ago. Instead of being a tall room, a ceiling was put in to create storage and office space.

Jonathan crept up the stairs to the door. It was unlocked, and Jonathan instantly regretted not having a gun on him. He set the Leatherman into a knife and held it in his right hand. He opened the door quietly.

There was a wide open room that looked much like a storage attic. The peaked roof of the building dominated the room. In the middle it was more than fifteen feet high. There were a lot of items covered in canvas against the walls and under the low corners.

In the middle of the room was a computer monitor setup, much like a trading desk used by a stock analyst. There were maybe a half dozen monitors, brightly shining toward Jonathan. A walkie-talkie stood on the desk in front of them.

In front of the whole apparatus was a man's silhouette, standing and facing away from him, appearing transfixed by the fluctuating numbers.

Jonathan gripped the knife tightly. He felt a surge of rage inside of him, and he pushed through the door slowly. He made absolutely no sound. This was going to be easy.

"Jonathan, I knew you'd find me," said the silhouette. Dad stopped in the doorway, holding the Leatherman close to his leg.

The silhouette turned around. He was gaunt, and wearing a jumpsuit, and he had a thick beard. It was Currier.

“Finally got your showdown, I see? Congratulations.” The old man had always tried to toy with Jonathan. He had a skill for manipulating people, especially young students. It was one of the reasons so many of his Free Majority members thought of him as their fatherly leader.

Jonathan hated this because he was smart enough to avoid being manipulated, but Currier kept it up anyway, as a method of insult.

“You should see this, on the network feed, they’re having a heated exchange. Very cute.”

“You must be very proud,” Jonathan said. He did not move forward.

“Oh, yes, I am. Young Eric has grown up nicely, like his father. A real leader with killer instincts.” Currier punctuated this with a small chuckle.

“Instincts, is that what you call it?”

“Well, look at your son, here,” said Currier, pointing at one of the screens. It was a security camera image of the trading floor. Jonathan saw his son arguing with Eric and pointing at something in the room. “There he is, screaming at a man with a handgun, while another holds an automatic rifle to his back. You might say he’s got a dying instinct,” Currier laughed.

Jonathan remained in his spot, his knuckles turning white from gripping the Leatherman.

“Runs in the family, doesn’t it?” Currier said calmly.

Jonathan shook imperceptibly. He knew he was being manipulated, and it was working.

There was some chatter on the radio on the desk, and Currier reached to turn it down. “They will never fix the modeler,” Currier said.

“They will. These kids will figure it out,” Jonathan answered. He was relieved to move on from Currier’s previous line of conversation.

“I saw some of the fixes they tried this morning,” Currier said with a grin. “Very one-dimensional, like they think this is a puzzle.”

“They don’t have years building their plan for destruction, like you do.” Jonathan said.

“Clumsy,” said Currier, shaking his head. “If you really want to know what I’m up to, simply ask.”

Jonathan stepped forward one pace, before Currier stopped him with a glance.

“Oh, of course,” Currier said as he turned away again. “You never were straightforward. With you, it was always about implication and innuendo.”

“So are you responsible for this?” Dad demanded.

Currier laughed loudly, and went back to looking at the screens. Doug and his friends had entered the server room.

“Do you know who is responsible?” Jonathan asked.

“I do. Your own son is.”

Jonathan fell silent. Rage welled up inside him, despite knowing that Currier was only being manipulative.

Currier turned around. “My team built a database application for young Dougie’s employer a few years ago,” he said. “It was based on an impressive set of algorithms, you might call it a primitive AI. It was meant to form connections and infiltrate the market on its own.”

“I was told about this thing,” Jonathan said, trying to keep his shaking to a minimum.

“I had everything ready to start sometime early next year, but when your boy tampered with the modeler, he forced my hand. But first I had to find out something from him.”

“You had no business with my son!” Jonathan yelled.

“Oh, I sure did,” Currier answered softly. “I only had to find out if he told you about the database. He did not. Good boy. If he had, you would have gone running to your pals in the Senate.”

“You’re damn straight I would, and I still-”

“Where are they? Dammit!” Currier yelled as he tapped computer keys angrily.

“Where are who?”

“Your idiot son and his even dumber friend. They just left the room.”

“Where?” Jonathan asked as he stepped forward.

“There they are, going back upstairs,” Currier said with relief, then turned around again. “You’re only about five more steps from me, are you sure I’m not dangerous?”

Jonathan stepped no closer to Dr. Currier. “I think you’re a coward,” Jonathan said.

“A coward? That’s an angry word. People use it most often when they are scared.”

“What else do you call someone who sends his students on a death mission while sitting safely across the street?”

“Safely?” Currier was suddenly serious. “Do you think the explosives these kids smuggled into the New York Stock Exchange are a hoax? We are very much in danger.”

“So you are responsible for this?” Dad said.

“A very nice try, but no. I have been watching these kids for weeks. They figured it all out themselves. They worked to get on staff with the antique exhibitors. They delivered the replicas, and the stuff never got scanned. That’s how they got the guns in there, with quite a grim lot of explosives. Brilliant, I tell you.”

“Then what are you, their guardian angel?”

“Not exactly. Hold that thought,” Currier said, noticing something on the screen. “Eric, don’t lose your cool. Show your leadership,” he said quietly to the monitor. “Dammit! They just shot him.”

“Who?” Jonathan asked.

“Don’t worry, it’s not your boy. It’s Eric.”

Jonathan stepped forward again. “Is he alive?”

“Can’t tell. Dammit,” Currier said as he switched the camera shot to the lobby.

“Do you intend to help them?”

“Who, the Free Majority or your boy and his little friends?”

“Anyone.”

“I am only here to make sure that what is supposed to happen, happens.”

“And what is supposed to happen?” Dad asked.

“Balance.”

“Balance?”

“Let me be clear, a stock is supposed to represent the value of a company to the greater world, right?”

“Supposedly,” Dad said.

“See, even you have lost faith,” Currier said. “A company has value only if it sells something people seek, at a price people are willing to pay.”

“Of course.”

Currier went on, “but our stock market has been based on bullshit for decades. Companies no longer trade on the actual value of their wares and services. Now it’s all about profit multiples, built on the backs of people who will work for peanuts, and consumers who will build a lifestyle on credit.”

“What do you plan to do about it?”

“Nothing,” Currier said. “The macro is coded to take control of the entire market, and find balance slowly.”

“So you’ll take control without crashing the market.”

“No. If these kids solve their puzzle using this grid, it will stop the bomb, but will also balance the market, and company values will immediately revert to their actual worth.”

“Actual worth?” Jonathan asked, cocking his head.

“Please try to keep up. The value of every company’s stock will become representative of its actual value to the world. I trust that for most companies, that value will be far less than it is right now.”

“That’s a crash. You can’t let that happen!” Dad yelled.

“Please, there’s no need to yell. It might not happen, because these dolts will likely not figure it out. By then, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Do you know what will follow if they do?”

“Yes. Unprecedented economic turmoil. Massive layoffs. Global destruction.”

“Crime, starvation, death,” Dad said angrily. “You’ve thought of those things, haven’t you?”

Currier turned the radio up.

“Pull them back! Pull them back, Now!” somebody screamed from the radio. Currier turned the radio off and put it back on the desk.

“I’m afraid somebody else has been shot,” he said.

“Who?”

“I can’t believe you never told him about his mother,” Currier said, switching gears.

“What?” Jonathan gasped.

“Who really killed her. You never told him.”

Jonathan’s eyes began to water. He would have lunged to slit Currier’s throat if he didn’t have suspicions that the man controlled everything that happened on the trading floor.

“He never needed to know that,” Jonathan hissed.

“I’ll bet you told him it was your own fault,” Currier said with a smirk. “You were always like that.”

“You scumbag.”

Currier arched his eyebrows at Jonathan. “Well, maybe you’re right. You didn’t hold the road.”

Jonathan could hold himself back no more. He lunged, wrapping an arm around Currier’s neck. Currier kicked him in the left knee. Jonathan stumbled away and swiped at the air with his knife.

Currier grabbed Jonathan’s arm and twisted it behind his back, forcing him to drop the knife. Jonathan tripped Currier with his opposite leg and sent the bearded man sprawling across the floor. He started looking for the knife.

Currier stood up and reached into his jacket to pull out a handgun. Jonathan grabbed Currier’s hand just as the gun went off into the ceiling. Jonathan pulled Currier’s fingers back, causing him to drop the gun.

The two men tripped each other and fell to the floor. Jonathan got a few good punches in, and then he saw the knife lying a few yards away, under a chair. He rolled over to grab it, and Currier kicked him hard in the back, producing a loud crunch. Jonathan screamed and reached for his lower back.

Currier scrambled to his feet and picked up the handgun. He held it over Jonathan’s head and smiled.

“I finally get to finish what I started years ago,”

Jonathan tried to sit up. Currier had wrenched his back pretty good. He writhed in pain on the floor, looking for something to hold on to.

“When did you discover who was chasing you that night?” Currier asked.

“I knew all along,” Jonathan answered through clenched teeth.

“I never meant to kill Elaine. Just you.”

“I was getting close, wasn’t I?”

“Close? Your discoveries prevented me from taking over the market years ago,” Currier said angrily.

“Discoveries?”

“You had no idea,” When you published your memo regarding the covert sale of defunct military bases, it shut down all government auctions. My attempts to broker them to China and build my base of operations went out the window.”

“I’m sorry to have wrecked your plans,” Jonathan yelled through the pain.

“You were about to testify in front of the Senate, making your suspicion of me and the Free Majority public. The funeral changed that. You ducked your country, and they canceled the hearings. You should have done it.”

“I would have moved mountains to give that testimony,” Jonathan said.

“Yes, but you couldn’t because of your bereavement. And you call me a coward,” Currier chided. “Still, I

disappeared to China, where I planted the seed of the mission we see playing out today.”

“And this mission will fail, too,” Dad said.

“Well, success was delayed, until now,” Currier said. He aimed the handgun at Jonathan and was just about to pull the trigger, when something on the monitors caught his eye. Currier put the gun away and walked to the screens.

What he saw amazed him. The price fluctuations began to stabilize. “They figured it out!” Currier said with amusement. “The market is balancing. Unbelievable!”

Jonathan could not see what was happening. He was unable to stand or even sit up. His back was injured too badly by Currier’s kick.

Finally, as Currier watched, the markets flattened out. They were stable. It was ten past 3.

“Amazing,” he said to Jonathan. “Those fools figured it out. I wonder if they have any idea what they just did.”

Jonathan reached for a chair and tried painfully to pull himself up.

Currier stood back and raised his arms. “Now, drumroll please!”

The market values started to trend downward. First it was a slow roll, then it turned into a rapid flow of cascading numbers. Companies started to hit values they had not seen in decades. Most companies and sectors crashed, but other things rose into the sky, like fuel and precious metals.

“I wonder if they’ll call this a ‘correction!’” Currier laughed loudly. The crash took less than a minute. When it was done, most indices were worth less than Jonathan or Currier had ever known them to be. Other prices, like an ounce of gold, had multiplied by about thirty times.

“Amazing!” Currier yelled. “Things will be different now, you can bet!”

Jonathan had pulled himself almost to a sitting position. He could see the screens now, and could see what Currier was talking about. Markets all around the world had been flattened.

“This is what the world should really look like,” Currier said, a little more calmly. “The only thing left is that grid.”

“Do you know how many lives you’ve destroyed today?” Jonathan said.

“Shut up, now. I still need to save my own.”

Dr. Currier picked up his radio and clicked it on. “Eric,” he said.