

Episode 10

28 / Uncertain

Early Saturday morning, as he sat down to write an email to Dr. Templeton, Nehemiah had to admit to himself that Michael had been right about the prospect of e-mailing the man who had been communicating with Henry McAllen out of the blue. But he decided to do it anyway before he drove up to Tongass for his father's funeral. He unfolded the print-out of Henry's e-mail and set it beside his laptop on the kitchen table.

When he was finished typing, the email read:

Dr. Templeton:

We don't know each other. We have a mutual familiarity with someone -- Henry McAllen. I obtained your e-mail from a letter he was going to send you. Perhaps, you know or don't know by now that he is dead. Only three others that I know of are aware of his communication with you.

My name is Nehemiah Marcellus Dunn. I am a lieutenant in the Trenton, New Jersey, police department. My father, Eli Lyman Dunn, told me about a part of my family history -- the Correction -- just before he died almost two weeks ago. (I am attending his funeral today.)

As I understand it, you are organizing a meeting to be held in Philadelphia -- a gathering of those initiated (I think that is an appropriate term). It is my intention to attend this meeting. However, I am in need of the time and place.

I understand fully that you may not be willing to provide this information based on this e-mail alone. (With McAllen's death, it is clear that what we are involved in is bigger than any one person or any one group of people.) Perhaps, we can set up a meeting in a neutral location in order to establish trust in each other.

Your quick reply is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Nehemiah Dunn

Nehemiah closed his laptop and folded up the print-out. Sandra had scribbled her name and number on the back, so he texted her to tell her that he had e-mailed Templeton. A few minutes later, she texted back: OK. I looked him up online but didn't find anything.

InterestingNehemiah replied. He may have been using an alias to communicate with McAllenHe slipped the phone into his pocket as Cody came downstairs yawning and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The twelve-year-old was dressed in black dress pants and a white polo shirt.

"Ready to go?" Nehemiah asked.

"Yeah," Cody said as he helped himself to a bowl of granola cereal.

"Except for brushing my teeth."

"Why not?" said Nehemiah.

"Because it's dumb to brush your teeth before breakfast," said Cody as if that were something everybody knew. "Why clean your teeth and get them messed up right away?"

Nehemiah just nodded as he checked his watch. That made sense.

"Tonya," he called up the stairs. "You need to eat breakfast before we go. Hurry up."

"Coming, Dad," she called back.

Nehemiah poured himself a bowl of cereal and sat down to eat. A few minutes later, Tonya clomped down the stairs.

"Morning, sweetheart," Nehemiah said. He swallowed the mouthful of cereal he was chewing. "Um, what are you wearing?"

Cody snorted into his cereal.

Tonya was wearing a black, knee-length gown that ended in a flared and lacy skirt, nearly knee-high black boots with silver buckles, a black top with a skull and crossbones on it, and black net arm warmers. "We are going to a funeral," she said as if that explained it.

"Just because it's a funeral doesn't mean you had to go and pull out your goth kid Halloween costume," Cody said as he slurped the milk from his bowl.

"It's not a costume. It's fashion," said Tonya.

"You've been listening to too much Icon for Hire," Cody mumbled.

"Go and take o that top right now. You are not going anywhere wearing that," Nehemiah ordered. He figured that telling her to change everything and wear something more reserved would result in too big of an argument and he didn't have time for that.

"But...", Tonya started putting a hand on her hip.

Nehemiah shook his head as he pointed at the stairs. "I mean it," he said.

Tonya hurried and clomped back through the living room and up the stairs. "Mom would understand if she were still alive," she grumbled.

Nehemiah winced. It had been four years since Waverly's death, and he still hadn't come up with an appropriate response for when his kids used the "Mom-would-have" line. Just saying, "Well, Mom's not here," sounded too lame.

"She's gonna dye her hair pink like Ariel next," Cody said seriously. "Fair warning."

Nehemiah sighed and grabbed another bowl to pour Tonya's cereal.

29 / Funeral

The late afternoon funeral ceremony for Eli Dunn was a small and brief affair. The wind was brisk and chilly, and the dusky grey sky cast a pallor over Tongass.

Nehemiah, Tonya, and Cody arrived on time although Nehemiah wasn't sure he had stayed strictly within the speed limits on the twisty roads that led up to his family's home. His sister, Melanie, was there, and as she had promised, everything for the funeral was taken care of. The closest members of the Dunn family -- Melanie, Nehemiah, and Nehemiah's children -- sat together on the front row of a makeshift outdoor chapel on the plot of ground behind the white Georgian-style home with the black shutters around the evenly spaced windows -- four on the first floor and five on the second. Nehemiah's mother had been buried on the plot seven years earlier.

Some of the miners who had worked with Eli showed up to pay their last respects as well as a handful of distant family members.

Nehemiah had trouble remembering some of their names, so he just smiled and shook their hands when they came to express how sorry they were.

As far as Nehemiah could tell, no one shed any tears as the local Episcopalian minister spoke a few solemn words over the casket. He couldn't help comparing this experience to Waverly's funeral where her entire extended family, her co-workers, and the students whom she had taught throughout her career showed up at the church. Lots of tears were shed, and, in a strange way, it pained Nehemiah to know that so many people were grieving his wife's passing. Of course, his own pain was compounded by the grief of his two children. Tonya retreated from him, her friends and the yelling and crying that had ensued when he finally put his foot down and said that Tonya would start going back to school.

Shaking his head as if to clear the cobwebs of memory from his mind, he focused on the simple, wooden casket as it was being lowered into the ground. He decided there was something good, beautiful even, about a life that had been lived fully so that no one was too disturbed when that life ended. He hoped that he could die like that.

After the burial, the members of the Dunn family gathered in the dining room of the house to share a meal and hear the reading of the will. The house had been cleaned, and everything was set in its place. Perhaps it was just the weather or the fact that all of the family members were gathered there or the smell of meatloaf and tomato soup, but the house seemed brighter and cheerier than the last time Nehemiah had been there.

The lawyer was a portly, grumpy man with thick auburn sideburns who was more interested in the meal than the reading of the will. He cut a huge slice of meatloaf before sitting down at the head of the table.

Tonya squeezed into a seat beside her aunt, Melanie. Nehemiah found himself comparing their features. They had the same sharp blue eyes -- a color so pale it was more like ice -- and the strong, determined face of Nehemiah's mother. Cody, on the other hand was more like Waverly with his curly, black hair and bright brown eyes. His easy-going way mimicked his mother too.

The lawyer pulled out the will and briefly reviewed its contents with those around the table. "Not much here obviously," he said. "The house and property are to remain in joint possession of Eli's immediate descendants --" He nodded to Nehemiah and Melanie. "It is to be a place for family reunions and appropriate community gatherings. Financial assets are to be divided evenly among Eli's grandchildren."

Cody nudged Tonya under the table. "That's us," he said.

The lawyer stuffed his mouth with meatloaf before continuing. "Artwork that the possessors of the property do not wish to keep is to be sold at auction and the proceeds donated to charity. That's about it. Everyone who wishes to have one will have copies of this will." He narrowed his eyes at them. "You all look like a loving lot of people, so I am sure there won't be any disputes or other nonsense that will require me to get involved."

"As long as I get my half of the money fair and square, you won't hear a thing from me," Tonya said.

That sent a ripple of laughter around the table.

"Duly noted," said the lawyer around a mouthful of meatloaf.

Nehemiah leaned over and whispered to Tonya, "I assure you, every penny will be going toward your college fund."

"Of course," said Tonya seriously as if she was offended that anyone would think she intended to use it otherwise.

30 / Circle of Stars

As most of the other family members said their goodbyes and prepared to leave, Nehemiah gave Melanie the rundown on all that had happened to him since they had last seen each other at the lighthouse. They stood in their father Eli's bedroom.

"I mean I've gone from not really believing in any of it to... people being killed over it," Nehemiah said. "It's pretty much been the weirdest couple of weeks of my life." He wondered what Michael and Sandra were doing right now.

"I imagine it would be," said Melanie as she tucked a strand of silver hair behind her ear.

Nehemiah had turned his phone off throughout the funeral. Now he pulled it out to see if Dr. Templeton had replied to his e-mail. He felt a tinge of disappointment when he saw that there was no reply.

"Did you ever find out who those men were who attacked us at the lighthouse?" Nehemiah asked.

"I did," said Melanie. "They were traced to a militia group based in Texas. They call themselves the Black Eagles and they have cells all across the southwest United States. Since your Michael was one of them, I am assuming he is acting as a double agent for some reason."

"It appears that way," said Nehemiah.

"I wouldn't trust him if I were you," said Melanie. "And I certainly wouldn't be giving him assignments. I would have had him arrested when I had the chance."

"I wanted to," said Nehemiah. He hoped he hadn't made a bad decision. "What do these militia groups want?"

"The same thing everyone else appears to want -- the Correction and what can be done with it. Hopefully, your meeting with the Sunrise Society will make things clearer."

"Yes, hopefully," Nehemiah said.

Just then, Tonya and Cody came into the room from exploring the house. Except for Cody's visit with his father earlier, the siblings hadn't been to Tongass since they were little.

"Ready to go?" asked Nehemiah.

"I guess so. Everyone else is gone," said Tonya as she sat down on the bed and smoothed the worn blanket.

Cody stared at the four-drawer dresser against the far wall thoughtfully. "You know," he said slowly, "we never opened the bottom drawer."

"What?" said Tonya looking confused.

Nehemiah followed his son's gaze to the drawers of the drawers had a golden latch. Three of the latches were simple ovals, however the one on the second drawer from the bottom was a half-oval carved with the eyes, nose, and rays of a sun. Nehemiah now remembered that his father had been telling them about the meaning of the name "Sunrise Society" just before he had died. The half-sun was the sign of the society, and his father had died with his eyes fixed on that golden latch. "No, we didn't open that drawer," Nehemiah said, feeling kind of foolish for not thinking about it earlier.

"Why are you all acting so weird?" Tonya asked. "What's in the drawer?"

"You weren't here," Cody said as he briefly explained to his sister what had occurred when he had come up to Tongass with their dad the day Eli had died.

Nehemiah yanked the drawer open. He felt another tinge of disappointment when he saw what looked like a folded piece of fabric resting inside. Somehow, he had been hoping for something a bit more monumental.

"What is it?" asked Melanie coming up to stand beside Nehemiah.

"I don't know," Nehemiah said looking up the folded material. It was dusty and felt heavier than it looked. He set it down on the bed and unfolded it. "It's a flag," he said observing the aged material. The red and white stripes were so dirty, they were almost black and brown. A circle of stars adorned the upper left corner of the fabric.

"The old American flag with only thirteen stars," said Melanie. "I'm not sure this has any particular meaning."

"This one only has twelve stars," Tonya said matter-of-factly.

Nehemiah counted just to make sure. "That's strange," he said.

"Never heard of an American flag that just had twelve stars. The stars represent the colonies, and there were thirteen colonies before the flag was made."

"Maybe this will help," said Cody as he stooped to pick up a piece of paper that had fallen from the fabric as Nehemiah was unfolding it. Nehemiah took the paper and studied it. It was a drawing of the star circle on the flag. There was a tiny script beside each hand-drawn star.

"I think the writing tells which colony the star stands for," Nehemiah said, "but I can't really tell in this light."

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance," said a voice by the door.

Nehemiah turned around to see the lawyer standing in the doorway. "Excuse me," he said. "Do you need something?"

"I believe you wanted to see me?" the lawyer said. As he spoke, he reached up and pulled the sideburns off his face. "I got your e-mail this morning." He stuck out his hand to Nehemiah. "I'm Dr. Ronald Templeton. My pleasure to meet you."