

## Episode 12

### 34 / Another Meeting

Nehemiah invited Ginny, Sandra, and Michael to his house so they could regroup and catch up on what they had learned over the past few days. They were surprised when Nehemiah told them about Ronald Templeton being his father's lawyer and what had transpired at the funeral.

"Well, that makes things easier," said Sandra who was seated beside her mother on the couch in the living room.

"It also means you had me wasting my time sitting in a hot car trying to hack into the school's e-mail system for hours," Michael grumbled as he dragged a stool in from the kitchen. He sat on it and folded his arms across his chest. He was now sporting a moustache.

"You offered to do it," Nehemiah reminded him.

"Next time, I'm going to exhaust other options before volunteering to help you," he said jokingly. "Well, what's next? Sandra, did you get into any trouble over...our little basement excursion."

"The police came by the office to question me twice," Sandra said.

"Oh?" said Michael leaning forward on the stool. "What did you tell them about me?"

"I tried not to say anything about you," Sandra said tucking loose strands of her auburn hair behind her ear. "But I couldn't get around explaining how I knew where Henry's body was or the fact that I had actually been there...right next to it. I mean, my fingerprints were all over that place thanks to you."

Nehemiah noticed Sandra shudder as she remembered what must have been a frightening ordeal.

"What did you tell them about me?" Michael said, his voice taking on a darker tone.

Sandra shrugged. "I told them what you looked like, pretty much. I didn't mention your name or anything else... We don't really know that much about you, Michael. Does anybody else see a problem with that?" She looked from her mother, Ginny, to Nehemiah.

"Yeah," said Nehemiah looking at Michael. "We don't even know your last name, or where you live, or even why you're helping us."

"You've trusted me so far," said Michael sitting uncomfortably on the stool. "And I haven't let you down. I haven't given you a reason not to trust me."

"I guess that doesn't count the time you tried to knock me off the top of a lighthouse," Nehemiah said.

Michael turned pale.

Sandra gasped. Ginny wrung her hands.

"N-no," Michael said. "There was...a bit of a misunderstanding there."

"Who were those guys who came to help you?" Nehemiah said. When Michael didn't answer, he went on. "If you tell us the truth, we can still work together, even if you are a mole. But we need to know. I need to know. I've got two kids depending on me to be there for them, and I can't be thinking of you as a liability." He motioned toward Ginny and Sandra. "These ladies shouldn't be put at risk by or for someone they barely know."

For the first time since they had met, Nehemiah thought Michael looked scared. He had seen that same look at times on gang members' faces in the interrogation room. Fear — not fear of the law, but fear about what would happen to them if and when word of their failure got back to their crime "boss" in the streets.

"I'll tell you the truth," Michael said, his voice quivering. "On a need-to-know basis."

"A need-to-know basis isn't good enough anymore," Nehemiah said.

Michael chuckled uneasily. "What are you going to do? Torture me?"

Nehemiah just looked at him coolly. "If you're not going to tell us, then I have to ask you to leave now and never contact any of us again."

Michael thought for a moment and then got off the stool and walked to the door. He turned back to the trio that sat watching him. Ginny was pensive, her lips tight. "Not even if your lives are in danger?" Michael said.

"No, not even then," said Nehemiah.

Michael shrugged. "You'll regret that when the blood runs." Then he opened the door and walked out.

Nehemiah, Sandra, and Ginny sat in silence until Sandra said, "Well, I guess that's for the better."

Nehemiah shrugged. "Maybe," he said.

"Maybe not," said Ginny. "You know what they say about keeping your enemies close."

### 35 / The Martial Question

Melanie Dunn stopped by Sbarro in the Pentagon's food court and ordered a plate of tortellini and a few slices of pizza. A server asking for it to be delivered because she couldn't wait for it to be fixed, she hurried to her office. Her assistant, Travis, jumped up from his desk when she entered.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you for the past half hour," he said.

Melanie pulled her phone out of her pocket and looked at it. "Dead battery," she said. "I told you I had a private engagement this morning. What seems to be the problem?"

"Only that you received a confidential letter. And the president just called for a video conference with the Joint Chiefs," Travis said matter-of-factly.

"Those are supposed to be scheduled ahead of time," Melanie said.

"Apparently, it's some kind of emergency. I think you should get going," Travis said.

"Fine. Give me the briefing."

"There was no briefing," said Travis. "Just this memo." He held up a faxed sheet of paper with the White House's logo and the President's seal. Melanie read the time for the video conference.

Melanie backed out of the office. "I have some food coming up from Sbarro," she said. "Should be here any minute."

"Lunch," said Travis. "I was just getting ready to go get myself some lunch. Thanks for looking out for me."

Melanie scowled at him.

.....

"Been waiting on you," said the chairman when Melanie arrived in the conference room. The vice-chairman, and the military service chiefs from the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and National Guard were already seated. Melanie pulled out her seat between the Army and Air Force chiefs.

"Excuse my tardiness, sir," Melanie said to the chairman. "My phone went dead and I didn't get the memo until a minute ago."

The chairman nodded. "Very well. We don't want to keep the president waiting."

The Joint Chiefs turned their attention to a large LED panel that took up the entirety of the back wall of the room. The President's Seal swiped quickly on and off the screen over a blue background. The image was replaced by the live stream from the White House. Melanie thought President Federson looked unusually grave. In his features, he was a slightly rotund man with a full head of black hair that Melanie suspected was only kept that way because he dyed it. His arched, bushy eyebrows were gray and seemed grayer since they had last seen him.

"I want to thank you for being here on such short notice," the President said, his tone thick and gravely. "First, I want you to watch this video which some of you may have seen already from the rioting in California." An aide pressed a button on a remote control and the screen filled with footage of a crowd gathered on what looked like a highway. In the distance behind them, flames rose nearly fifteen feet into the sky. It was difficult to tell how many people were in the crowd, but they were yelling and chanting. There had to be hundreds of them, but the haze from the smoke — or was it tear gas? — made it hard to tell.

The crowd suddenly surged revealing a line of policemen standing on the fringes of the crowd trying to contain the protest — if it could even be called that anymore. Sirens screamed as a fire truck tried to get to the location of the fire, but the crowd massed in the street refused to back down.

They chanted, "Let it burn! Let it burn!"

The scene looked like a war zone. Those on the outside of the protest clashed with police officers who arrested demonstrators indiscriminately. Apparently, the police vans were already full so they just sat the protesters on the ground and stood watch. Even those handcuffed on the ground kept up a raucous chant, "Fed-er-son, your term is done! Fed-er-son, your term is done!"

The screen flickered off, and President Federson reappeared. "That just happened a few hours ago," he said. "These protesters... criminals... set an oil refinery on fire and the word is that six workers were killed before they could get out. I have authorized the National Guard to step in to quell this disorder. And I want to inform you that, after consultations with several state governors, I am strongly considering declaring martial law not only in the region, but also in other areas of the country where similar caliber protests are brewing. In such a case, military installations under your command which are near the flash points will need to provide staging areas and personnel in order to preserve and in some cases restore the peace."

The Army chief cleared his throat. "We are prepared to do as you ask, but I must raise concerns over whether or not such action will only intensify matters." The other chiefs nodded their heads in agreement. "There may be a political solution."

"I'm afraid there is no political solution to this kind of anarchy," said the president.

"Listen to what they're angry about, sir," Melanie said. "You pushed for new taxes on America's oil infrastructure, and the companies are passing down the extra cost to the people. If you rescind the new taxes now, you will have a chance to restore calm in the coming days."

"No," Federson said. "The law is the law. I will not turn back from moving America toward an energy independent and environmentally conscious future. The benefits for our children far outweigh the costs."

"Then this —," Melanie said motioning toward the screen in front of her which still displayed the scene of the riots, "— is a cost I assume you are willing to pay."

### 36 / Michael's Truth

Michael drove around Trenton, New Jersey, for hours. He knew what to do, but he didn't know what to do. Uncertainty gnawed at his gut like a horrible stomach ache. He had really made a mess of things.

Twice, he drove past Nehemiah's house, parked his forest green Range Rover at the curb, and considered getting out, going back inside, and telling them everything. But, he just couldn't do it; that would put him in more danger. So, he just drove around some more.

He stopped at a McDonald's and ordered two cheeseburgers, a large carton of fries, and soda. He ate and thought and ate and thought.

After he balled up his trash and threw it away, he checked his watch. 6:43 pm. He figured Ginny and Sandra had left Nehemiah's house by then. Maybe he could go back now and talk to Nehemiah alone — man-to-man. But, no. He didn't want to put him in a position where he was keeping secrets from the two women.

Michael sighed angrily as he sat at the intersection outside of McDonald's and waited for the light to change. He had really messed things up, and put himself, his family, and a bunch of other people in danger. He punched the steering wheel and was rewarded with a loud honk and a suspicious glance from the lady in the red convertible to his right. Michael looked over and smiled apologetically.

Leaning over, he opened the glove compartment and pulled out a wallet. It was filled with \$2,000 cash and a one-way ticket back to Moscow. He took the cash out and counted it. He could just bail now — go back to Russia, move his family to a new city, and act as if the past couple of years had just been a dream. It was an attractive way out. With a murder investigation underway in Boston, it wouldn't be long before U.S. law enforcement would start looking for him. Good thing he was in the U.S. under a false name and a forged visa. Good thing also that he didn't have a credit card trail. But his cash was running low. He'd have to choose sides...and soon.

The light changed, and he headed for the highway back to New York still wondering what to do.

He could just go back to Oklahoma, return to the Serpentine Column, and try to act as if nothing had changed.

That thought made him shudder. Too dangerous. He was convinced the Caliph was crazy, but Pyotr Porzezinski had said he could be trusted. Besides, what was it the Caliph had said to him before he left Oklahoma to pose as a doctor in New Hampshire those many months ago? "I'm always watching you."

Michael felt uneasy remembering those words now. He looked around the vehicle which had been given to him to make the cross-country journey. He peered at the dashboard, and examined the ceiling above his head, fully expecting to see some tiny, blinking diode indicating that he was being monitored remotely. He had removed the tracking device from the bottom of the vehicle and turned off the GPS monitoring on his cell phone weeks ago. So, even if they could see him, he was certain they couldn't know exactly where he was.

He had stayed in communication with the Caliph's people in Oklahoma on a weekly basis, and they had never mentioned or hinted that they were unable to monitor his whereabouts. Nor had they challenged the veracity of the information he was giving them — which hadn't always been completely truthful especially after he had found out who Nehemiah's father really was and why. The Correction mattered so much to the few who knew about it.

Waves of tiredness seemed to wash over him. He really had no idea what to do. Each of the paths before him seemed equally fraught with danger. He decided to get back to his hotel in New York City, pack all of his things and hopefully have a firm decision in the morning.

On impulse, he sent a text message to Nehemiah. Can I call you in the morning?

He shut off his phone, not wanting to know what Nehemiah would say, either yes or no, until later.

No sooner had he set his phone down on the passenger seat than the Range Rover's radio began to crackle. Michael's forehead scrunched in confusion as he turned the volume knob back and forth trying to shut off the noise. The sound began low and statically and slowly grew. A voice seemed to be caught in the noise, like a radio caught between two stations.

Michael was about to give up trying to turn it off when the static cleared and a voice spoke.

"Michael, it has been a long time."

The blood drained from Michael's face, and a shiver ran down his spine. He knew that voice. It was the Caliph, his voice both nasally and direct. "You appear to be wavering in your commitment to the cause. You have the choice to come home immediately and of your own will in order to re-establish my trust in you. If you choose rightly, pull over to the shoulder at the next exit. Two of your comrades will be waiting to bring you back. And if not..."

Michael looked up the road and put his blinkers on. He slowed as he caught sight of the black Ford Expedition parked just past the next exit. He drove up slowly alongside the SUV, squinting to see into the heavily tinted windows. Someone honked their car angrily from behind and then whipped around him and sped off. Michael was fairly sure the men in the SUV were masked. They looked eyes with him and nodded as he slipped past.

"...just know you will never escape me."

Michael slammed his foot on the gas pedal and took a down the highway heading north.

He didn't have to look behind him to know he was being followed.