

Episode 13

37 / Brazen Act I

Nehemiah yawned as he gripped the steering wheel to navigate the early morning congestion around Philadelphia. He had finally asked for an extended leave of absence at the Trenton Police Department, telling his superiors he needed to handle some “family matters” — which, he reasoned, wasn’t too far from the truth. Now, with Ginny and Sandra helping him unravel the clues about the Correction, he felt a renewed sense of purpose.

After he received the text message from Michael, he had tried to call him back, but was unsuccessful. He was able to trace his number to a hotel in New York City, but when he called the front desk there, the receptionist said there was no one by that name staying at the hotel.

In his heart, Nehemiah didn’t want to get rid of Michael. The man seemed to be resourceful and he seemed to know a lot more than he had told. Nehemiah suspected that there were people controlling Michael whom he was accountable to and whom Michael didn’t want to cross.

Nehemiah shook his head. He didn’t know why Michael would send him a text message asking to talk and then not respond to his phone calls.

Can’t worry about that now.

Nehemiah checked his watch as the traffic began to bottleneck due to an accident in the far right lane. He glanced over at his daughter, Tonya, who was asleep in the passenger seat. The low sounds of squealing and screeching car wheels from the back seat told him that Cody was awake and engrossed in another round of the Real Racing 2 video game on his iPad.

Nehemiah tapped his fingers against the steering wheel and tried not to worry. He was sure he had left early enough to be on time for the gathering that Dr. Ronald Templeton had organized in Philadelphia.

Nehemiah thought it would be a good opportunity for Tonya and Cody to see a city where so much history had been made.

“Hey, look at that,” Cody called from the backseat.

Nehemiah turned and looked out the window. The sun’s rays bounced off the tall buildings downtown; the Comcast Center — the tallest structure in Philadelphia’s skyline — glistened in all its glass and metal glory, but a helicopter hovered nearby. Close to the upper third of the building, something had interrupted the structure’s smooth appearance.

It took a few moments of squinting and straining before Nehemiah could make out what it was. A ragged white texture was being unrolled across the face of the building.

“Some daredevils,” Tonya said as two figures — men appearing like midgets at such a great distance — dangled from rappelling cords. The wind whipped up and buffeted their banner sending the men spiraling out from the side of the building, the news helicopter recording their feat on video. The men persisted, holding the white banner between them until they finally stretched it across the front of the skyscraper.

The words on it, angry and red, said, “AMERICA IS DOOMED.”

38 / Brazen Act II

Somewhere in an alley in the city, a place where the sun’s rays had yet to reach, a man was being robbed.

The masked robber had followed his intended victim out of a coffee shop to a silver older model town car parked in the side street away from the main thoroughfare. The startled victim, a businessman in his early fifties with a big beer belly, turned around as the assailant shoved him back against the car.

“Don’t spill your drink,” the robber said taking the steaming coffee cup from him and setting it on the hood of the car with his free hand.

“Wha – What?” the man said stuttering over his words. He tried to hold his hands up, but the robber kept him firmly pinned against the back door of the car. “Look, I have a wife and kids. Please.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the robber said as he proceeded to pat the man down, feeling his pockets with a gloved hand. He didn’t seem to be in a hurry. “You had a wife and kids yesterday when you spent the evening with your secretary instead of going home to them.”

The victim froze. “Wha – What?” he spluttered again. Shoving against the robber, his pleading tone changed to one of anger. “How do you know that? Who are you?” He tried to grab the robber’s ski mask.

The robber shoved the man against the car and tilted his head back against the hood. “Better keep your voice down. Don’t want to draw attention to yourself, do you?”

The man’s fear returned. “Just... just don’t kill me...”

“I’m not interested in killing you,” the robber said reaching inside his victim’s inside jacket pocket and pulling out a wallet. “Don’t want your money either.” He tossed the cash from the wallet through the window onto the driver’s seat. “I’ve been following you for days now. I know what time you leave home and what time you arrive at your fancy investment firm up the street. I even know you skipped a board meeting last week to go golfing with your old college buddies.”

The businessman gasped.

“What I’m trying to tell you is: when we’re done here, you’d better not say a word about our little transaction. Isn’t that right? Answer me, now.”

“I’ll report you to the police,” the victim hissed between clenched teeth.

“Hmm,” said the robber. “That might give me a reason to kill you right now.” He reached for his belt, the man’s eyes following his gloved fingers. He didn’t know the robber was just bluffing.

“No, no,” he panted. “I won’t tell.”

“Good,” said the robber. Rifling through the wallet’s contents, the robber pulled out the man’s ID, social security card, and several credit cards. “Why kill you when I can... be you?” he said waving the cards in the man’s face. He shoved the wallet and its contents into his own pocket and stuffed the stunned businessman into the front seat. “Reach over there and give me your insurance papers and the papers on this car,” he ordered.

“No,” the businessman said, his face red with anger and fear.

“On second thought,” the robber said, “I am interested in killing you. Maybe I should just go ahead and inform your wife you won’t be home this evening either.”

The businessman reached over to the glove compartment and jerked out a handful of papers.

“All of it,” said the robber.

“Are you done?” the businessman growled.

“Yes, thank you for your cooperation,” the robber said as he folded and pocketed the papers the man had given him. He grabbed the coffee cup from the top of the car and offered it to the man. “Enjoy your latte,” he said cheerfully.

The robber walked away ignoring the string of profanities the businessman hurled at him.

39 / Thirteen Minus Two

“Your destination is on your left,” the automated voice of the GPS system in the SUV said. Nehemiah switched off the machine and turned right into the parking lot of El Fuego, a California-style Mexican restaurant two blocks west of Philadelphia’s Independence Hall.

“Breakfast, finally,” said Cody unbuckling his seatbelt.

“I’m only parking here because Starbucks is too crowded right now,” Nehemiah informed him. He and Sandra had decided to meet at the coffee shop across the street.

“But we might as well eat while we’re here,” Cody said. “Kill two birds with one stone...sort of.” Tonya nodded in agreement.

Nehemiah checked his watch again. “Why don’t you guys go in and order. I’ll go and get Sandra and we’ll come back over here. I don’t want to risk being late.”

When Nehemiah spotted Sandra sitting at one of the outdoor tables at Starbucks, the first thing he noticed was her worried expression. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“I think something bad happened to Michael... or is happening to him.” Sandra turned her phone screen toward him. “He sent this like fifteen minutes ago... Good morning, by the way.”

“Good morning,” Nehemiah murmured as he leaned over to read Michael’s message: Tell Nehemiah not to bother to contact me. No need for us to communicate further. Be careful who you talk to. It’s best you forget I even existed. —M.

Nehemiah held his breath at the end of the message, uncertain of what to think. Sandra’s perfume tickled his nose. He stood up and rubbed the back of his head. “Well,” he said slowly. “I think we shouldn’t worry about him now. He’s on his own.”

“If you say so,” Sandra sighed standing up from the table.

“I’ve got to get going,” Nehemiah said. “The kids are over there getting breakfast. I don’t know how long this gathering will take but we can meet up at the museum like we planned.”

“Okay, see you then,” Sandra said.

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Nehemiah pulled into the Thomas Jefferson Hospital parking lot and got out to walk the rest of the way to the chapel beside the cemetery. He carried with him the flag with the missing star that he had retrieved from his father’s house a week earlier. Taking a shortcut through the burial grounds, he came upon the large, stone, gothic-style structure. The cool air and the weathered stone reminded him of Waverly and how she had always enjoyed spending time in quiet places like this. His thoughts wandered to happier times as he gazed up at the spires tipped in crosses.

“Well, if you just keep standing there, you’re going to give us away,” boomed Dr. Ronald Templeton’s voice from the doorway.

“Uh, yeah,” Nehemiah said as he started to climb the steps. “It’s just been a while since I’ve been in a church.” He shook hands with Dr. Templeton as they entered the cool, airy, dimly-lit interior. The sanctuary was empty. “Where is everybody?”

“Downstairs,” said Dr. Templeton leading him off to a side door and then down a flight of stairs. “We prefer to meet in a place where people won’t get suspicious if the door is actually locked.”

“I agree,” said Nehemiah.

Dr. Templeton fumbled with the lock on the basement door. “Don’t worry,” he chuckled. “I’m not going to lock us all down here.”

Nehemiah was about to respond when turned he and Dr. Templeton heard footsteps in the hall. They both turned to see a man hurrying toward them. He wore a white dress shirt that seemed too large for him, and red and black suspenders that held up rumpled black pants that also seemed slightly too large for him.

“Mr. Felleck,” said Dr. Templeton. “The last one arrives.”

“I was afraid I would be late,” said the man. He stuck out his hand to Nehemiah. “George Felleck. Pleased to meet you.”

“Nehemiah Dunn,” said Nehemiah. He noticed that the man didn’t quite meet his eyes.

Finally, Dr. Templeton had gotten the right key into the lock and furnished the door open. The brightly lit interior of a large, well-furnished study greeted them. Dr. Templeton had that modest look on his face that people get when they are showing something they put together themselves to someone else. The walls of the room were lined with wooden shelves stacked with various books, papers, statuettes, and works of art. There was a large round table in the middle of the room which comfortably seated at least eight people. There was a desk on the far side of the room as well.

“Well, I should be all here — all eleven of us,” said Dr. Templeton proudly. “Or, I should say, all eleven of you” He spread out his hands toward the nine people sitting in the chairs scattered about the room.

Nehemiah stood at the doorway and took it all in. Ever since his father Eli had passed down the knowledge regarding the Correction to him and his sister, his greatest fear had been that it was all a wild goose chase — that there was never really a Sunrise Society or a document signed and kept secret by those who foresaw the day when America would need a second revolution. But, here he was, standing amidst the descendants of people who had done just that. The feeling was overwhelming. He walked in and pulled up a chair to the round table.

“Welcome to the first official gathering of the Sunrise Society in over 220 years,” Dr. Templeton said.