

Episode 11

31 / Missing Star

It took a moment for Nehemiah to recover from the shock of the sudden revelation that the man who had been acting as the “lawyer” for his father was the same man he had written a letter to that morning. “So... did you get my letter?” he asked. It was the only thing he could think of to say.

“I did, I did,” said Dr. Templeton massaging the sides of his face where he had just pulled out the fake sideburns. He looked several years older without them.

“So, I suppose you are familiar with me already,” Nehemiah said waving his arm around the chilly bedroom to indicate the whole situation including his children and his sister, Melanie. He suddenly felt very uneasy about Dr. Templeton. If this man wasn’t his father’s lawyer, then who was he?

“I am,” Templeton answered. “And just to be clear I am indeed a lawyer — hired by your father. I can show you my credentials.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Nehemiah although he very much wanted to see them.

“Well, fine, I’ll get them for you anyway. Your father hired me to draw up his will just a few weeks before he fell ill. I was a friend of your mother’s. I am also an ordained minister — Episcopalian. I can get you proof of that as well. I pastor a small church in Philadelphia.”

“Yes, well, what about my letter?” said Nehemiah.

“That can be dealt with later,” said Templeton. “You can take my word for it — there is a standing invitation for your attendance at our gathering.” He pulled a pair of what looked like antique glasses out of his coat pocket and put them on. “Now, let’s take a look at that flag. Your father said that he meant for you to have it — that you would discover it soon enough. But you hadn’t, and I came back to help you along. Besides, I suppose you’re wondering why there are only twelve stars.”

“Yes,” said Nehemiah turning back to the bed that had been his father’s.

Dr. Templeton stepped up to the bedside and gingerly picked up a corner of the clearly aged flag. When he raised it, a thin coating of dust landed on the fabric and settled on the mattress. Running his hand beneath the fabric as though he were testing the weight and feel of the material, Templeton mumbled to himself. Finally, he said: “Based on my discussions with others whom you will soon meet, I believe this flag is a relic of the original Thirteen. Of course, when it was made, it had thirteen stars in a circle — one for each of the colonies — and all together to represent the forming of a union out of many. But, legend has it, that the white threads of one star was torn out of the flag as a symbol of those who did not believe in the formation of the union. The thirteen adopted it as a passcode of sorts — a secret sign that only the members of the Sunrise Society would be privy to. Of course, if you saw this flag up on a pole, flapping in the wind, you wouldn’t notice one star missing unless you were looking for it.”

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After their extended meeting with Dr. Templeton was over, Nehemiah drove home with a lot on his mind. He sent a text message to Michael and Sandra telling them that he had met with Dr. Templeton and that they no longer needed to try to find out who he was. They agreed to meet again in New York in two days.

32 / In the Shadow of the Alamo

Senator Rory Phillips was not too pleased to be caught in the middle of a huge protest in San Antonio during what should have been a brief stop in Texas. He slouched in the back seat of his black Sedan beside his assistant, Cebina. He squinted against the sunlight through the heavily-tinted windows and hoped no one in the crowd would notice him. “Are you sure we couldn’t have gone another way?” he called up to his driver.

“Nope, I’m following the instructions I was given,” said the driver.

“I’ve never been this way before.”

Although the air condition inside the vehicle was on full blast, Rory could feel the heat waves from the Texas sun beating on the outside of the vehicle, bouncing up on the asphalt, making the air shimmer. He could also feel the heat coming from the angry crowd that had massed around the Alamo. The aged, white stone fortress loomed up in its place set back from the wide avenue crammed with protesters and police in riot gear trying to keep them from overrunning the place. The police had formed two long lines — one on the lawn in front of the Alamo, and the other on the grassy area in the middle of the street. The protesters bulged between them — chanting, shouting, and generally ignoring the police presence. Several of them held up a huge yellow banner that read: “Texas — Independent Once! Independent Again!” Cardboard signs calling for secession jockeyed in midair.

On the far end of the Alamo Plaza, a cadre of burly looking men waved rifles in the air and chanted something furious about not letting the government take their guns. Parked nearby were media vans with huge satellite dishes and antennas mounted on top. News reporters filmed and interviewed and snapped pictures.

Rory struggled to see where the crowd of protesters ended. He sighed in frustration as the crowd surged onto the street stopping traffic once again. He had seen the protests on television; it seemed like frustrated citizens were coming out of the woodwork in major cities to air their grievances — Seattle, Atlanta, San Francisco, New York, Dallas, Milwaukee, Denver. Of course, in the various sectors of the country, the issues were different — in Atlanta, people wanted jobs; in Seattle, people demanded education reform; in San Antonio... Well, to Rory, it seemed like everybody wanted to do away with the Union altogether. The bottom line, though, was that people either thought the federal government was doing too much or not doing enough. It seemed to Rory that widespread dissatisfaction was boiling just beneath the surface among the nation’s citizenry. That kind of dissatisfaction could lead to unrest, the destabilizing of the government power structure, and then, anarchy. The times are ripe for change, Rory thought to himself.

He settled back into his seat as a line of heavily-armed police officers forced the protesters back onto the grass, squeezing them between the opposite line of officers clad in riot gear. Finally, traffic began to inch forward again. Rory pulled out his phone. “What’s the address, again?” he called up to the driver.

“He didn’t give us an address,” said his assistant, Cebina. She tucked a stray strand of pale, blonde hair behind her ear. “He gave us coordinates.”

“He gave you...coordinates?” Rory asked incredulously, glancing at the driver in the rearview mirror.

“Yes, sir,” said the driver. “I put them into the GPS. We’re almost there now.”

It took them a quarter of an hour to weave their way out of the streets clogged by protesters and into a quiet, middle class, residential neighborhood on the west side of San Antonio. The houses were painted in muted tones — beige, light brown, white, and green. Huge trees shaded the wide yards and the street. Cebina watched as the sunlight danced across the tinted window, the rays making their way between the leaves that wavered in the soft breeze. The houses gave way to a high school campus. Since it was late afternoon, the parking lot was mostly empty, students and teachers having gone home.

“Are you sure you’re going in the right direction?” Rory asked.

“I’m sure,” the driver mumbled. He wasn’t sure. Nothing looked like he had been expecting, but the blinking green dot that marked their destination on the GPS device caused him to press forward. He drove past the high school campus and spotted a place where a dirt road jutted onto the pavement just as he was passing it. “There,” he said, slamming on the brakes. He backed up and turned right.

A dust cloud sprung up from behind the sedan as he drove down the dirt road, his steady yellow dot drawing ever closer to the blinking green dot on the GPS screen. He started to feel uneasy as the trees and shrubbery on either side of the road gave way to scrubby grass and patches of dry looking dirt. Compared to the residential neighborhood they had just left, this place looked like it should exist hundreds of miles away.

Yet, here it was.

The sedan slowed to a stop at a simple chain-link fence. There was a rolling gate and a keypad powered by a small solar panel beside it. Behind the fence, the ground was flat — scrubby grass and dirt — but crisscrossed with tire marks. In the distance, there were several low, beige colored buildings, probably deliberately painted to match the tone of the earth.

“This is it,” said Rory unbuckling his seatbelt.

“This is it?” said Cebina worriedly.

Rory got out and buttoned his suit jacket. “You can sit in the car if you like,” he said as he turned toward the gate. Before he could get far, he spotted a jeep racing toward the fence from the buildings. Two men were inside it. They were dressed in jeans, boots, and fatigue shirts. One of them had a gun. They rolled up to the fence.

“You Senator Phillips?” asked the driver.

“Yes,” said Rory using his most authoritative tone. Cebina got out and stood beside him.

“Dustin is expecting you all,” said the driver. He pressed a button on his side of the fence, and the gate rolled open. “You can just follow me on in,” he said.

Rory turned back to his sedan. “Let’s go,” he told the driver who was hesitating. He didn’t like the idea of being on the other side of the fence.

The jeep driver must have noticed too. “Don’t worry. We don’t take hostages,” he chuckled. “Only the Serpentine Column does that.”

Cebina and the driver shared worried glances across the roof of the sedan, wondering what on earth they were getting into.

33 / The Militia Leader

Dustin Moltinova stood at the entrance to the compound awaiting his visitors.

“I thought you might have backed out on me, Senator,” he said as Rory Phillips got out of the back of the sedan.

“No, we got slowed down by the protests,” Rory said. “Also, we weren’t expecting to have to come all the way out here.” Rory looked around at the buildings which appeared to have been freshly built. Construction materials were stacked on one side of the structures. He could see that what appeared to have been four separate structures at a distance was really just one big compound. The central portion of the dirt-colored building was two-stories high. Everything else was just one story. Rory got the feeling that much of what went on here happened underground.

“Well, come on in,” said Dustin turning and opening the door. “Let’s get you folks something to drink and then you and I can talk.”

When the metal door closed behind them, they found themselves in a narrow, dimly lit corridor. The carpet silenced the sounds of their feet. Rory tried to get a sense of what Dustin’s militia outfit entailed, but the doors along the corridor were shut and everything was silent except for the occasional, muted noise of what sounded like heavy machinery running. He figured that Dustin would not be as transparent as he had hoped for.

After showing Cebina and his driver to a waiting room that doubled as a kitchen, Dustin led Rory to his office. Unlike the rest of the building, it was brightly lit. The design was simple and rugged. A heavy wooden desk sat in the middle of the room, but what really commanded attention was the huge deer’s head that protruded from the wall behind it. Its antlers stretched narrowly from one wall to the other. Rory couldn’t decide if it was real or fake.

“Have a seat,” said Dustin motioning to the two chairs in front of the desk.

“I prefer to stand. This shouldn’t take long,” said Rory.

Dustin sat down in the swivel chair behind the desk. “You do know why you’re here,” he said.

“The Senate Interior Committee is holding a hearing on the FBI’s investigation into militia groups like yours on next Tuesday. You want immunity. Since I sit on that committee, you want me to put in a good word for you and your buddies around the country, whose intentions — might I remind you — are not exactly clear.”

“That’s not all,” said Dustin. “Go on.”

“You also want to ensure that there will be no federal crackdown or attempt to disarm groups like yours, is that correct?”

“You got it,” said Dustin. “That’s all we want. The government leaves us alone and we leave the government alone — for now.”

Rory finally sat down. “Explain to me why should grant you this favor.”

“Because, it’s in your best interest as well as mine,” said Dustin. He leaned back in his seat and clasped his hands behind his head.

“Believe me, I’m not a political man, but I know how your town works. Like dogs, you only act right if you’re given a treat. No offense to you and yours. But, there’s no need to stand on principle. We both know you arranged this meeting because you are searching for something that would give you more power, more status — if you found it. I am searching for that very same thing, only, in my case, I wish to give the power back to the people. It just so happens that I know more than you about where The Correction to how to get to it, and who will get to it first. So, you need my help.”

Rory just nodded.

“So we agree to help each other?” said Dustin.

“Not until you explain how this helps me get closer to my goal,” Rory said.

“Here is what I promise,” said Dustin, unclasping his hands from behind his head and setting them on the desk. “You make sure the feds don’t come down here harassing my people and trying to shut us down, and I’ll hand over The Correction to you when we find it... And we will find it.”

Rory sat back in his seat and thought for a moment. He thought he could be pretty persuasive with his colleagues on the Interior Committee. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea of allying with someone like Dustin, but he hadn’t gotten anywhere with the material that his men had stolen from Henry McAllen before leaving him to die. “Alright,” he said. “We have a deal.”

“Good,” said Dustin.

“I’ve seen some of the FBI report,” said Rory feeling the need to get inside Dustin’s head. “Authorities are mostly worried that these militia groups, yours and others, will foment unrest and cause uprisings and widespread panic.”

“That’s what you’re afraid of,” said Dustin. “But that’s not our goal. We like to say around here now is not the time for panic, senator. That comes later. And the only people who will be panicking then will be the suits in Washington as they watch the power they hold on to so tightly slip from their hands. But the government has no need to fear us now. You already have unrest on your hands. You saw it yourself.”

Rory stood up. “I take it that you are in agreement with those protesters by the Alamo.”

Dustin smiled. “Eh, some of us believe the same things,” he said.

“Although we don’t always think a protest is the best way to air our grievances, though they do have their place in a democracy. We’re different.”

“How different?” said Rory.

“You won’t see us shouting, or waving flags, or stopping traffic. But when we act, you’ll know it,” Dustin smiled to himself. “The world will know it.”