

Episode 16

46 / The Prize is Near

Dustin Moltinova sat beneath the antlers of the huge deer's head on the wall in his office on his compound on the outskirts of San Antonio. To the outside world, he was an oilman and a heavy equipment manufacturer. Very few people knew that he was also a revolutionary. And, lately, it looked like his revolution would be getting off to a pretty good start.

He pulled his cowboy hat lower over his forehead and set his feet on top of the desk.

He had watched the entire Senate Interior Committee hearing on his computer to make sure Senator Rory Phillips had done what he promised to do. He had, and he had also later called Dustin to let him know that the Committee was closing down the investigation into armed paramilitary groups operating outside of the government's oversight. Thus, Dustin was able to continue slowly acquiring the military's surplus and out-of-date vehicles and equipment. Of course, acquiring guns, bullets, and the like were no problem at all. He personally knew the owners of several gun manufacturing companies and they shared his views. They were all too glad to help.

The only concern he had was that a few of his sellers had reported that another agency had been buying up surplus equipment and stocking up on guns and ammo at nearly the same rate he was. Dustin had checked and double-checked to make sure it wasn't one of his shadow companies. It wasn't. He remained very concerned.

Fortunately, he still had the ear — or perhaps, the mouth — of Nehemiah's sister, Melanie Dunn — a very powerful woman indeed. She had been keeping him abreast of her brother's whereabouts, and when she informed him that he was heading to Philadelphia, Dustin decided it was time to make his move. So he dispatched one of his most well-trained agents to the historical city. And now he was waiting to find out the results of that foray.

There was a knock to the door of his office, and Dustin took his feet off the desk and waited for the door to open. A man, bald and broad-chested with wide eyes like an ox, came in.

"Commander," he said. He had a voice that sounded younger than his middle-aged appearance would suggest.

"You come empty-handed, Gordon?" said Dustin frowning a little.

"Maybe empty-handed," said Gordon. "But not empty-headed." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded up piece of paper and set it on the desk. Dustin recognized it was in Gordon's own handwriting.

Gordon shut the door behind him and sat down in the chair across the desk from Dustin. "I know where the document is," he said.

"Are you sure?" said Dustin leaning across the desk.

"Pretty sure."

"Then tell me how you came by this knowledge."

"Yes, sir," said Gordon launching into the story of how he flew to Philadelphia, tracked down the only member of the Sunrise Society who actually resided in the city, robbed him of his identifying documents, and impersonated him at the meeting.

Dustin got a kick out of that. He laughed and pounded the table with his hand. "What was his name?"

"George Felleck," said Gordon.

"Then what happened?" said Dustin.

"As soon as I figured out that the Correction was hidden in the caverns of central Pennsylvania, I left as quietly as I could."

"You left before the meeting was over?" said Dustin in shock.

"I know, it sounds stupid, but I was thinking that we might get a head start on — what's his name? — Nehemiah, yes. We could get a head start and retrieve it before they did. Besides, once they discovered my early exit, they would likely be thrown on schedule wondering what happened. It would set them behind a few hours at least."

"And once they found out they'd been fooled, I'm pretty sure they'd realize what is really going on, and they'd hurry up and get to those caverns twice as fast as they would have before." Dustin fixed Gordon with a steely stare.

"Well, I'm sorry, sir. I did what I thought was best — especially seeing that I needed to get back in touch with you," said Gordon.

"It can't be helped now," said Dustin unfolding the piece of paper that Gordon had placed on his desk. He picked it up and looked at it closely muttering to himself. Finally, he set it back down on the desk.

"The prize is ever nearer," he said.

47 / El Fuego

Cody was already sitting at a table, his plate loaded down with three overstuffed pinto bean burritos, when Sandra walked into El Fuego in Philadelphia.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," Cody said without looking up, his mouth stuffed with food. "You're Sandra, right?"

"Yes," said Sandra, pulling up an extra seat to the table made for two. She studied the boy as he slurped a Mandarin Jarrito and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. With his curly black hair, round, curious face, and brown eyes, he didn't look much like his father. He caught her staring.

"What?" he said. "I'm eating. If I have food on my mouth it's perfectly okay."

"There are things called napkins," said his older sister Tonya walking up to the table. "Since you probably don't know what they look like I got extra." She set her plate — with a single taco and chips and guacamole — and a stack of napkins down on the table barely sparing Sandra a glance.

"And you are?" Sandra asked.

"Tonya," said the girl curtly. Sandra could see the girl's resemblance to her father in her blue eyes and the shape of her face.

"Is that all you're eating?" said Cody.

"Yes. We should have gone some place where they serve actual breakfast food," Tonya complained.

"Food is food," said Cody stuffing his mouth again. "What are we gonna do today?" he asked when he was halfway through his second burrito.

"Well, I was thinking we could go and see Independence Hall and then maybe the National Liberty Museum or the Philadelphia History Museum. They're both just a couple of blocks away from here."

"Sounds good," said Cody. "Although museums and I are not the best of friends. I usually break something."

Sandra chuckled. Tonya smiled.

"What do you do?" said Cody. "I mean, what's your job? Where do you work?"

"I work for a publishing company in New York City."

"I want to go to New York City," said Cody.

"Maybe that can be arranged," said Sandra. She pulled out her phone and began to check the opening times for the nearby museums. "So," she said, "I know your father, Nehemiah, is a police officer..."

"Sergeant," said Cody.

"Right," said Sandra. "What does your mother do?"

"She's dead," said Cody. He scrunched up his face in thought. "Died when I was like seven — four or five years ago."

"Oh," said Sandra, her stomach twisted at his words. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"No, you're not," said Tonya.

Sandra looked at her, stunned.

"You want to date our dad. I saw the way you were looking at him across the street," Tonya said balling the napkins she had used in her fist.

Sandra's face burned red and her mouth fell open. Had she really been that obvious?

"Really?" said Cody turning his head to the side and studying Sandra as though he was just now really seeing her for the first time. "That would be cool," he said to Tonya. "We could, like, have a mom and stay again."

"No, it would not be cool," said Tonya. "Parents dating is gross." She got up to dump her plate in the trash can.

Cody watched her go and then leaned across the table toward Sandra. "Don't let her get to you. She's like that with everyone. Dad says she's still bitter over Mom's death."

48 / Independence Hall

A half hour and a short walk later, Sandra, Tonya, and Cody arrived on the steps of Independence Hall. The broad, two-story, colonial-style, red brick building had nine windows on the top floor and eight windows on the bottom. The ranger in the Visitor Center told them they would have to wait until the next tour group started up, so they went and walked in the Independence National Historical Park which adjoined the main structure.

While there, Sandra wondered how Nehemiah's meeting with the Sunshine Society was going. Reading about the Correction in Henry McAllen's book was one thing; actually knowing that it was out there somewhere waiting to be found was another. She shivered as the image of McAllen's prone body lying on the dusty floor of a library basement flickered through her mind. Her perception of the Correction and what it could or would do was still vague. But she was determined to help find it — if not for her sake, at least for Henry's sake, so that all of the work he had put in during the years before he was killed would not go to waste.

She checked her watch. "Time to go," she called to Tonya and Cody who had wandered off to different parts of the park. Cody came running. Tonya came at a much slower pace. Sandra turned and led them back to the Visitor Center to begin their tour. As they stepped into the Visitor Center, she marveled that the document which she, Nehemiah, and her mother Ginny, was seeking could be the undoing of the Constitution — the famous document which had been signed in Independence Hall in 1787. She was so caught up in this thought that she didn't notice the man wearing a heavy coat and a cowboy hat pulled down low over his eyes hand a ticket to the attendant and get in the tour line behind them.

Their tour guide was a gray-haired, grandmother of a woman. She smiled at the six people in her group and then launched into her historical monologue. She was interesting and engaging, but she talked so fast that no one could get a question in, and when someone tried, she always said, "I'm about to get to that," and went right on with her speech.

She smoothly ferried the tour group from one point of interest to another pointing out the features of Georgian architecture, the walnut handrail of the stairs Benjamin Franklin had used to get to his second-floor office when he served as President of Pennsylvania, and the Assembly Room where the Constitution had been argued over, written, and signed. After taking the group up into the clock tower, the tour guide led them next door to Congress Hall which had been used as the temporary capitol of the United States for nearly ten years. Between Independence Hall and Congress Hall, the man in the cowboy hat and heavy jacket slipped away from the crowd.

When the tour was finished, Sandra decided to take her charges to the National Liberty Museum, but Cody begged to see the Liberty Bell. "It's just on the other side of Independence Hall," said Cody. "I saw it when we were up in the clock tower. I want to see if they let people ring it."

"I'm pretty sure they don't," said Tonya.

The three then weaved their way back through the tourists and sightseers around Independence Hall and stepped up to the glass chamber that held the Liberty Bell. Cody led the way inside. Sandra looked around for a park ranger or somebody who looked to be in charge. But the Chamber was occupied and everyone outside seemed to be occupied.

In the middle of the chamber, the Liberty Bell sat, a few feet above ground. The familiar crack ran up its side. It glistened dully in the sunlight that came in through the glass walls. There was a rope around it for keeping people from getting near it.

Cody leaned across the rope until his fingers just grazed the side of the cool metal. "Touched it," he said.

"Hey," a park ranger materialized near the entrance to their little coming rapidly toward them. "Don't touch..." He never finished what he was going to say.

There was a sudden bang, and the glass wall to their right shattered. Something hard made a metallic-sounding ping off the side of the Liberty Bell.

Tonya screamed and covered her face with her arms to protect it from the falling glass.

"It's that man!" said Cody pointing out the space opened up by the bullet.

There was another bang and the park ranger fell dead. People outside the Liberty Bell Chamber screamed and ran.

Sandra saw the man in the heavy coat and a cowboy hat pulled down low over his face. He stood several yards away in the shadow of Independence Hall, and he was pointing his gun directly at them. He couldn't shoot again without hitting one of the dozens of people running between the Hall and the Liberty Bell Center. Taking advantage of the melee would be their only chance of escape.