

BACKPACK ADVENTURES

Episode 16

“The Candlestick Treasure”

Roman stepped out of the beat-up pickup and surveyed the South Texas brush country just north of Lake Amistad. He drew a deep breath. The cold front had whisked away the earthy, leftover summer smells of dry grass and parched soil. Hardy mesquite swayed in arroyos, dancing in the north wind. Roman could hear birds chatting with each other in the tall brush.

He was looking forward to dove hunting even if Travis, his best friend, had not been able to come this year. This year the September trip was not about hunting. His great-grandfather's hundredth birthday was the main reason for the long trip to the ranch where generations of the Castillo family had lived.

Roman had not minded leaving at three in the morning with his grandfather so they could hunt before the rest of the family arrived. Roman was very close to his energetic eighty-year-old grandfather, but he had always been scared of Papaw's father, Abuelito, who spoke only seldom and always in Spanish. Abuelito had been a tough gaucho who could train the wildest horses. He had raised thirteen children and outlived two wives. Now he was a leather-skinned, bowlegged wraith who stood a foot shorter than Roman. Roman never knew what to say to him. Abuelito had insisted on riding with them out to the cabin instead of waiting at the nursing home for the rest of the family. Papaw didn't seem bothered by his father's silence. Roman couldn't wait to get out of the truck.

Roman unloaded the heavy ammo box and the guns from the truck. He carried his backpack into the cabin. The backpack traveled everywhere with him. It contained his Backpack Computer, or BPC, as he and his friends in the Backpack Club called it. The computer could transport Roman through

space and time, and he and his friends had been on many adventures. He had recently made modifications to the computer's wireless keypad/scanner and he wanted to try it out at the cabin after the morning hunt. The remote location would be great for testing the scanner/Internet enhancement and the GPS capabilities.

I'm so glad my dad didn't become a rancher like Papaw and Abuelito, Roman thought. I get the best of all worlds that way. Love of the land from Abuelito, hunting skills from Papaw, and state-of-the-art technology from Dad. Someday, I'll have to tell Dad about the changes to his original time machine and how I linked it to the computer.

He carried Abuelito's cowhide stool from inside the cabin to the dirt-floor front porch so the old man could sit and enjoy the bright, crisp morning. Roman and his grandfather were trying to make everything comfortable for Abuelito so they could get out into the brush to stir up some birds.

As Roman opened the windows of the old lodge and let the cool air filter into the two musty rooms, he could hear Papaw and Abuelito talking outside. Papaw sounded annoyed, but finally gave in. He rarely won an argument with his father.

"Roman, I've got to go back into town and get Papa's medicine. He says he can't wait for the others to bring it out to him. I'll be back as soon as I can. He says one of the prescriptions has to be refilled."

It sounded funny to Roman for one so old to call someone "Papa" that at first he didn't realize what was happening. As he watched Papaw climb back into the rusty, old hunting truck and drive away, the reality of a good hour or two by himself with Abuelito sank in. Not to mention lost bird-hunting time.

“*Vaya aquí,*” Roman’s great-grandfather commanded. Roman walked over to where Abuelito stood with a shovel. The old man thrust the shovel at Roman, turned on one heel, and walked toward a *sendero*, a path that led through the brush and away from the cabin.

“What do you . . .” Roman began to ask, but then realized the old man was moving quickly and he ran to catch up.

For ten minutes, Roman walked in silence behind his great-grandfather. *Whatever medication he missed this morning, it wasn’t for his heart*, Roman thought, as the centenarian kept up a brisk pace. Abuelito stopped in front of a rock outcropping covered in prickly pear cactus. The large pads bore long, lethal-looking spines.

I sure hope he doesn’t want me to dig up those cacti, Roman thought. He loved the *nopales*, the tasty dishes his grandmother made from the scraped pads of the cactus, but had never tried to handle the pads himself.

Abuelito turned from the cactus and peered down the *sendero*. Roman looked around and all he could see was huisache and mesquite, cholla and prickly pear. Dried grass rustled all around, waist-high and filling in any space between the sticker bushes. He suddenly felt totally isolated. But then he remembered the animals: the javelina, the feral hogs, the coyote and the rattlers. No, he was not as alone as he might think. He should have brought his gun.

Abuelito stood silently, an inscrutable look masking whatever was going through his mind. Then he walked toward a large boulder, pacing off steps as he counted quietly in Spanish. “...*siete, ocho, nueve,*” he said.

“*Aquí,*” Abuelito said, pointing to the ground in front of him. Roman carried the shovel and pressed the tip into the cracked soil. He looked down at Abuelito, who just smiled up at him and nodded.

Roman stepped on the back of the shovel and pushed hard, expecting resistance from the rocky soil.

The shovel sank into the earth and Roman easily picked up the first shovelful and tossed it aside. The dry topsoil was rocky, but it crumbled beneath the assault of Roman's strong arms, and he soon dug a hole one-foot wide and two-feet deep. All the while, Abuelito leaned over the hole, his eyes darting back and forth, searching the earth.

Despite the cold front, Roman was sweating, and he stopped to take off his jacket. Abuelito bent into the hole and began scraping away with his fingers.

Abuelito picked up the shovel and gently tapped at what Roman thought was the tip of a smooth, gray rock. A soft, tinny sound echoed in the shallow hole. Abuelito deftly edged the shovel beside the object and pried up a gray metal shoebox-sized container.

"What's that?" Roman asked as he watched his great-grandfather slowly lift the small box from the hole.

"Ayúdame," whispered Abuelito as he struggled to lift the box from the hole.

Roman jumped to help him and was amazed at how heavy it was. As he lifted it, he wondered who had buried it there and how long ago. Abuelito could not have buried it by himself, but he certainly knew just where to find it.

Roman cradled the load in his arms. Abuelito picked up the shovel and began walking back toward the cabin. As Roman followed, the heavy box seemed to bounce with every step, in rhythm with his heartbeat. He blew the dust and grit off the top of the box and tried to read a faint inscription:

Eduardo M Castillo.

Back at the cabin, Abuelito sat on the little cowhide stool in the shade of the porch's tin roof. Roman placed the container on the ground in front of the old man.

Abuelito pulled a braided leather necklace from under his shirt. A small key hung on the necklace and he looked at it for a minute before lifting the necklace over his head.

Roman was curious to see the contents of the heavy box. What could make it so heavy? Gold? Guns? *It feels as heavy as Papaw's ammo box*, Roman thought ruefully. *It's probably just Abuelito's shotgun shells.*

He watched anxiously as Abuelito slowly fitted the key into the tiny hole in the box's side. His gnarled fingers gave a quick turn and Roman could actually hear the tumblers in the old lock falling open.

"Mira."

Roman looked into the box and saw only a few common objects. The box itself was interestingly made, with the same dull gray metal lining the inside of a wooden frame. It was as if the wooden box had been covered inside and out with gray metal.

Abuelito reached into the box and handed Roman a postage stamp. It was from 1973 and was a tribute to the Colonial pamphleteers who were the printers and newspapermen during the American Revolution.

"Su padre," was Abuelito's cryptic remark. Roman wanted to ask him what the stamp had to do with his father, but he couldn't remember how to ask in Spanish. *I'll ask Dad later*, he thought.

"Su abuelo," Abuelito gave as explanation for the 1948 Benjamin Franklin half-dollar he handed to Roman next.

"Me," the old man said as he handed Roman faded train tickets to Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia from July, 1920.

"You traveled to Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia when you were my age?" Roman asked incredulously, not expecting a reply.

“Sí,” answered Abuelito with a nod and a gruff laugh. He then lifted the largest object from the box. He held a pewter candlestick about ten inches tall with a flat, round base and a simple column. The socket at the top seemed too shallow for a candle to sit in without falling out.

Abuelito handed the candlestick to Roman who was amazed by how light it felt. *I guess the box itself is heavy because none of these objects weigh much*, thought Roman. He inspected the bottom of the pewter piece and he could make out a faint inscription:

E. W. Phil. 1789

Roman could feel Abuelito watching him. It made him nervous. He quickly handed the antique back to his great-grandfather. Abuelito’s smile faded and he placed everything back in the box, closed the lid, and locked it. He slipped the leather necklace over his head. Then he pulled his stool to the rough cedar plank wall of the cabin, folded his arms across his chest, and leaned back with his eyes closed.

Roman wondered why an elderly cowboy would have this weird collection: *Why did he bury it? Why did he have me dig up this box today? All I wanted to do was go hunting and empty some shots at a few delicious little whitewings.*

Roman was feeling annoyed at the old man who now snored softly. He wanted to look at the things in the box again, but there was no way he would get the key without waking the old cowboy.

Roman carefully carried the box into the cabin and set it on the worn top of the mesquite-plank table. He shut the front door and the only light now was from four small windows. He pushed aside the fishing tackle box they had used when they fished Devil’s River last summer. Three small, split-shot weights rolled to the floor and Roman was sure the clunk and rattle against the wooden floorboards

sounded like a bass drum. He stood to peer out the front window and could see the grizzled, gray hairs on the old man's head lightly wafting in the north breeze. *He must be sleeping pretty soundly*, thought Roman, as he sat again on the crude, mesquite bench that served as a dining chair.

Roman opened his backpack and took out the keypad device that powered the BPC. He turned on the keypad, then powered up the BPC itself using the keypad's buttons. The green, luminescent screen showed a full battery and the time to be 9:30 a.m. Roman figured he had about a half-hour until Papaw returned. While Abuelito slept, he could test the scanner and the Internet search he had added to the BPC.

Roman had modified the keypad device to have a scanner that could be held over text or an object and could connect to a search engine on the Internet. The display showed a weak, but adequate, Internet signal. *My satellite link is working*, thought Roman, *so the GPS should work, too*.

He held the scanner over the box and an image of the candlestick appeared in the display. Roman squinted in the darkness. Something else was showing up – something long and cylindrical *inside* the candlestick. *What's that?* Roman wondered.

Roman trained the scanner on the candlestick and its strange, hidden contents and scanned it to do an Internet search. Just as he pushed the "Search" button, a familiar, twinkling light exploded in the room. Roman dropped the keypad but instinctively grabbed his backpack, and in an instant he had disappeared in a flood of crystalline sparkles. A gust of wind charged into the cabin and escaped through the back window. The only sounds were those of a hundred-year-old gaucho snoring peacefully, and two doves whispering in the brush.

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Darkness and the taste of blood were Roman's first sensations as he regained consciousness. He feebly edged his hand along his face and felt his swollen upper lip and the gash across his cheek. He

struggled to lift himself from the gritty floor where he lay face down. *Why is it so dark*, he wondered, *and where's my grandfather?*

Roman felt his way along the splintery wooden boards of the floor. His lip hurt and his head was still pounding, but his mind was clearing.

I must have fallen and been knocked out for hours, he thought. *Here's my backpack, but where's the keypad?* His hand touched a long, cylindrical, metal object and the memories again flooded his brain. The candlestick! Why had the scan of the candlestick knocked him down?

Suddenly Roman remembered the sparkling light and realized what had happened.

So, if he didn't start an Internet search, but instead initiated the travel program, where was he now?

As if in answer to the question in his mind, a young man's voice called out from beyond what Roman thought was the door.

"Hullo, Elias? Anyone up yet?"

"Aye, Watt, come on in and I'll share a cup of tea with thee," answered another male voice.

"This November wind has a bit of a bite to it, all right, so shut the door quickly."

Roman crept slowly toward the sliver of light, feeling along the floor with his feet so as not to trip. His left hand held his backpack and his right clutched the candlestick. He reached what he had correctly guessed to be a door and softly pushed it open, just enough to see into the room. He glanced back over his shoulder as more light filled the tiny, dark room. He was in some type of storage closet with shelves lining the walls. The closet was filled with candlesticks!

"Good morn', Elias. Hullo, Watt. I've brought more coals for the fire and a fresh pot of water for the tea," a young girl called out merrily as she emptied coals in a bucket on the hearth and set a

pewter teapot down on a long, wooden table. Roman thought she looked about ten years old, and the two young men probably his own age or a little older.

“Thank thee, Lydia,” replied Elias.

“You’ll have your chance to take my apprentice spot at the print shop sooner than you think, Lydia. That is, if you’re still dreaming of becoming a printer one day,” teased Watt.

“Just you wait and see, Watt Taylor! I do plan, not dream, to be a printer. I’ll be the first woman city printer for Philadelphia. I’ll be as famous as Master Franklin.”

“No one’s ever going to be as famous as ol’ Ben. And why would you want to be a printer anyhow? Making type slugs at a hot metal forge is no work for a woman.”

“Who says I’m going to be stuck in a drudge’s job?” Lydia shot back. “Miss Jane learned hot type and typesetting. Now she even teaches young male apprentices how to use the moveable type.”

“Working the print shop is really no better than the type foundry, Lydia,” admonished Elias. “All work has a certain amount of drudgery, and each worker deserves respect no matter what his position in life.”

The way they could argue so forcefully and still be friends reminded him of his friends in the Backpack Club.

“Well said, my friend, but you still speak from the vantage point of journeyman pewtersmith,” Watt mused. “Will you be so generous to the lowly grunt when you earn your master title? Methinks not. It’s not the work I detest, but the companionship. The whole print shop staff is sluggish and dull and colicky. The tea that we drink from the fine pewter mugs you gave us is the only thing that keeps them awake.”

Elias gave him a stern look. “Watt, there’s difficult folks in every trade, even mine,” he said.

“Not just difficult! Delirious, is the truth of it, Elias,” Watt continued. “Half the apprentices have the dangles – hands just hanging limp at their sides. The master complains continually of nausea and severe abdominal pain. Even though I know we’re not supposed to heat the type on these cold mornings, my fingers get stiff from cold if I don’t. I’m losing my appetite working those presses, and look here,” he said as he pointed to his upper lip, “I swear I’ve got blue gums. If I never see another printing press when I move to Virginia, I’ll be happy! Now why would I wish that kind of life on Miss Lydia?”

Watt turned to Lydia who stood with her hands on her hips. “Miss Jane has her father to thank for her successes and you, my dear child, are too ambitious for your own good,” he said.

“Why, Watt, I thought you said ambition was a good thing,” Lydia retorted. “I heard you telling Elias you were heading to Virginia to work for Moses Austin since he won the contract to roof the new Virginia capitol. You said he was the most ambitious entrepreneur you had ever known and that Philadelphia would not hold him for long.”

Elias and Watt both glared at Lydia.

“Eavesdropping is a sin, Lydia,” scolded Elias. Roman winced.

“Still, you might just make a fine newspaper editor instead of a printer,” Watt said jokingly. “Any more gossip you might divulge to others?” He stole a quick glance at Elias, whose eyes were fixed on Lydia. Roman leaned forward slightly, trying to see Lydia’s face.

“You have nothing to fear from me, kind sirs, for I am but a lowly child. *A lowly, female child.* I have other duties to attend this morning. Good day!” She flounced out of the room.

“She has spirit, I’ll warrant,” Watt said with a laugh after she had left.

“Aye, but will she truly hold her tongue if pressed for information? Not all share thy admiration of Austin. My affinity for foreign diplomats has already brought some suspicion my way. That is why I

asked thee to bring the document from the City Print Shop as soon as possible. My liaison from the Spanish emissary will be here in a moment. Would thou like to meet him?"

Watt pulled a small watch from his vest pocket. "No, it's nearly five. I need to get back to the shop before I'm missed. We've got another order of broadsides to print. Here's your Bill of Rights broadside."

Watt handed Elias a small, rolled-up piece of cream-colored paper.

"You will be missed at the City Print Shop even if you do not miss the shop. I shall never have as loyal a friend so near to government documents again."

The two friends shook hands, and Watt bade Elias farewell. Roman strained to see the document lying on the table. His head was feeling better now. He knew it was nearly five in the morning and that he was in a pewtersmith's shop in Philadelphia. Now he just needed to find the keypad and return home. Still, he was curious about the paper. He wondered if Elias would leave the room and let him have a closer look.

Elias poured a cup of tea into a pewter mug and took a sip of the steaming brew. No sooner had he touched his lips to the cup than there sounded a sharp rap on the door.

Elias hurriedly opened the shop door and welcomed a young man who looked vaguely familiar to Roman. He was short and wiry and dressed in fine clothes. He had coal black hair and steel blue eyes and looked to be in his mid-thirties. He glanced quickly around the room and for a moment, and Roman was afraid he had been seen. He could hear the newcomer asking a question in soft, lilting, heavily-accented English.

"That is only my storage room," Elias answered. "I assure thee we are quite alone. Look here, I have just obtained a broadside of the Bill of Rights for thee to carry back to New Spain. The Spanish colonists will be happy to know their new neighbor nation values personal freedom. New Spain's

friendship during our Revolutionary War will be remembered always. And, of course, we have the American Philosophical Society through which we can share important discoveries.”

“Thank you, Señor Wortham. I have personally enjoyed the debates and the sharing of knowledge by Señor Franklin’s fine society. Much has changed since the death of Don Bernardo de Gálvez. Miro, as governor, seeks alliances that benefit both New Spain and your young republic. The French are now embroiled in their own Revolution.” He paused to take a sip of the tea Elias offered him. Roman could see the gentleman wore a gold signet ring on his right hand.

The foreigner continued talking. “Trade along the Mississippi is growing and we three nations cannot help but come in contact. It is good that we all know what is important to each of our nations. Unfortunately, I must leave this morning with the emissary’s entourage. They are waiting for me now.”

He unrolled the paper and looked closely at the words.

“There is only one problem, Señor. This is not a copy. I cannot take the handwritten original.”

Roman’s jaw dropped and he nearly fell out into the room. It was a good thing both Elias and the Spanish emissary’s liaison were engrossed in looking at the paper. Roman watched as Elias’s frown turned into a look of steely resolve.

“Thou must take this back to New Spain. I have promised people, important people, that New Spain will have the Bill of Rights even before they are fully ratified. There are only two states left to sign the ratification. North Carolina will sign this month. People will feel betrayed if this document is not brought to New Spain and copies made for all to read.” Elias took the paper and rolled it into a tight scroll. He reached for the tall candlestick on the table and Roman watched in disbelief as he inserted the famous document into the candlestick.

“But this piece of paper is precious to your nation.”

“Whether this is one of the original fourteen handwritten drafts or just a handwritten copy from an original does not matter. We have printed thousands of broadsides and papered every city, town, village, and hamlet. Still, it may not be safe just now for a representative of New Spain to be seen carrying this document back home. Would thou accept a candlestick from a frustrated pewtersmith? See, it is worthless, as I have built the candle socket much too shallow.” He set a small cap into the top of the column, perfectly hiding the contents inside.

Roman felt the top of the candlestick he held. His whole thumb could fit into the candle socket. He set it on the floor. This was not the candlestick from the box! That candlestick was being passed this very moment from Elias to a diplomat from New Spain.

“My five-year-old son, Abel, would delight in such a gift! The worth of the gift is not always measured in its usefulness. A very wise man named Ben once said, ‘. . . observe with Concern how long a useful Truth may be known, and exist, before it is generally receiv’d and practis’d on.’ Thank you for sharing a useful truth, even if it might take us a little while longer to practice it.”

Suddenly, Lydia’s voice could be heard calling for Elias. Her calls grew louder as she drew nearer.

“Please forgive me if I do not see thee to the door,” Elias apologized.

“I understand,” responded the diplomat.

“It would be unfortunate if my young friend saw us together, as she has an insatiable curiosity and tendencies toward the sin of eavesdropping.”

“I’ll let myself out as you go to meet her,” the diplomat said.

“Good journeys, then.” Elias gripped the young man’s hand.

“*Muchas gracias*,” he replied.

Roman watched as Elias left the room and the foreigner slipped the signet ring off his finger and placed it on the table.

“Let it not be said that Eduardo Maria Castillo de San Juan did not repay a kindness,” he said to no one. He quietly slipped out of the room.

Roman’s heart was pounding. He had to find the keypad and return, but he had just heard this stranger call himself by the very name he had seen on the gray metal box. *Who is this person? Am I related to him? Is that a family heirloom that he just gave to Elias?* Roman had to have a closer look. He peered around the storage room door and saw that the door leading from the room to the rest of the building was shut. He crept to the table and picked up the gold ring. A large, curling “C” covered the flat face of the ring. Inside, in tiny script, was the name “Eduardo Maria.”

As he read the inscription, a strange sensation came over him and he froze in place. The fire in the hearth flickered gold and orange, but the room was filling with sparkling diamonds of brilliant light. *This is not a November sunrise*, thought Roman as he was bathed in the radiance until he totally disappeared.

* * *

Roman’s eyes were wide open when he finally came to a stop, standing upright with his backpack clutched in his left hand and the signet ring in the right. His great-grandfather was staring at him and holding the keypad, his finger on the button marked “Return.” He gave Roman a little nod, set the keypad device back on the table, and returned to his stool on the porch.

Roman let out a big sigh and nearly crumpled from relief at being back in one piece. He deposited the backpack on the table and scooped the box into his arms. He carried the box to the front porch and set it down in front of Abuelito.

“I—you—,” he stuttered. Where should he begin? “You can understand English, can’t you?”

“Sí, mijo.”

“Well, I can speak a little Spanish, too. What you saw in the cabin was, well, it was—”

“No problema,” Abuelito interrupted. *“Tengo cien años. No creo nada. Creo todo.”*¹

Roman smiled as his great-grandfather, the tough cowboy, shrugged off the vision of his great-grandson returning in a cloud of light.

Roman placed the signet ring in the time-worn hands of the old man. *“Feliz cumpleaños.”*²

Abuelito squinted at the inscription and flashed Roman a bright smile. He slipped the necklace off and quickly unlocked the gray box, his fingers lightly brushing across the name inscribed on the top. He gently placed the ring into the box. He lifted the candlestick and handed it to Roman.

Now it was Roman’s turn to smile. He gingerly pulled the shallow candle socket cap from the column and turned the stick upside-down. A brittle, but intact scroll slid out of the tube into Abuelito’s hands. His knobby fingers gently opened the scroll and they looked at the handwritten copy of the Bill of Rights together. The ink had faded so that you couldn’t tell if it was handwritten or printed, but the words were still legible, its message still clear.

¹ “No problem. I am one hundred years old. I believe nothing. I believe everything.”

² “Happy Birthday.”