

Backpack Adventures Series

Connections

by

Marguerite Swilling

*Produced through the Partnership for
Environmental Education and Rural Health,
Texas A&M University*



Marguerite Swilling, author of the Backpack Adventure Series, has loved reading, writing and science all her life. From writing and directing an original play in sixth grade, she advanced to essay competitions in high school and published poetry at Texas A & M where she majored in English and minored in Earth Science. Although she is a certified secondary teacher, Mrs. Swilling has spent the past twenty-three years in the business world and has written and presented training seminars on a variety of topics. Mrs. Swilling lives in Georgetown, Texas with her husband and two daughters.

Backpack Adventure Series

First Printing, May 2006

Produced through the Partnership for Environmental Education and Rural Health (<http://peer.tamu.edu>)
Larry Johnson, PI

Funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS)

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1 P.S. Coach thinks my ankle is actually broken
2 now. He can't imagine how Arianna's bag could
3 have broken my ankle.
4

5 P.P.S. Arianna had to sit out the whole time
6 too. Coach is going to make her run laps for being
7 so pushy on the bus. At least one good thing
8 happened today.

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1 I got lost in the woods trying to find where
2 Jace's team was playing. But I found this really neat
3 riverbank, by-o, or whatever Jace called it. The
4 water was yucky, but you could see a long way in
5 the distance. I was looking up at the sky (which was
6 this funky brown color) when I lost my balance,
7 slipped, yanked off my headphones and fell into a
8 hole. I sent a message with my keypad and the little
9 bit of battery I had left. Jace called Summer and
10 they found me. Well, Jace found me, but with
11 Summer's BPC and keypad. I'm really glad Connie
12 forced me to get the update from Roman for the GPS
13 software. Makes the BPC keypad into a little
14 tracking device. I would have been lost forever if I
15 didn't have the GPS. Jace has a crush on Summer.
16 Guess that's ok. He still came and found me and
17 was really sweet.

18 Summer said her rabbits weren't doing so well
19 and Jace had to sit out the matches because his
20 asthma flared up. I hope Travis and Connie and
21 Roman have better luck tomorrow. Summer met
22 this deaf boy who was showing guinea pigs. Sounds
23 like my neighbor from when we lived in Galveston.
24 His name was Joe, too. Wouldn't that be weird if it
25 was the same Joe? I remember he had the most
26 beautiful deep blue eyes.

27 Gotta go. Sorry this is so bumpy. Next time
28 I'll remember my pillow and to charge my battery.

29 LOL, K.T.

1 “Gently or you’ll yank it apart!” Jace warned.
2 K.T. slowed her arm movement and gingerly
3 grasped the CD player with her fingertips and then
4 her hand.
5 “OK, got it!”
6 “Hold on, K.T. If I lose you, I’ll come back.”
7 “Oh, that’s encourage...”
8 K.T.’s words were lost in the maelstrom of
9 light.

10 *****
11

12
13 Friday night, March 13

14
15 Dear Journal,

16 If this is a bit bumpy it’s because I’m writing
17 on a school bus as we return from my first--and last--
18 seventh grade soccer tournament. What a day! We
19 finally arrived in Houston an hour late and everyone
20 was hurrying to get off the bus so we wouldn’t miss
21 our first match. Big mouth Arianna shoved her
22 duffel bag down the center aisle and I promptly
23 tripped over it, spraining my ankle before we ever
24 even got off the bus. I was prepared to sit on the
25 bench and have a good visit with my grandmother
26 when Coach got a phone call from my mother that
27 Gran was confined to her house due to her
28 emphysema. Doctor’s orders. I was bored so I went
29 for a walk or rather a “limp” to listen to my CD
30 player. Thank goodness I took my BPC with me
31 too.

An Introduction to Backpack Adventures:

Welcome to the coolest club in middle school! Of course, no one outside the club can know just what makes this group so different. The secret is in the backpack.

Roman Castillo, a young teenage technology whiz, developed a powerful mini-computer that can transport people through space and time. He controls the computer with a wireless keypad complete with a screen that displays the co-ordinates for the time and space travel destination. He shared his invention with his best friend, Travis, as well as four others.

Travis Allen, Roman’s best friend since kindergarten, is the son of a veterinarian and loves animals, the outdoors and math. He wears western jeans and boots that highlight his long, lanky profile. He has a short temper except with his stepsister, Summer. He’s very protective of Summer and doesn’t like having her travel with the BPC as the group has nicknamed their awesome device.

Summer Martin, Travis’ stepsister, is two years younger than Travis and Roman. Her bright blue eyes are as merry as her laugh and her blonde hair is cut short and sassy. She loves to read and has a great memory for history and geography. She uses a wheelchair due to a terrible, traffic accident when she was five. Travis and his aunt built a motorized chair for Summer, and she can participate in just about everything with her two best friends, Connie and K.T.

Connie Castillo, Roman’s sister and Summer’s best friend, has long, silky black hair and her dark brown eyes are framed by thick, black lashes. She loves her brother, but sometimes questions the use of the BPC. Quiet and reserved, she is a serious student. Science is her favorite subject and dance is

her favorite pastime. She and Summer have a mutual best friend named K.T.

K.T. Watson, is an only child who loves her best friends, Summer and Connie, like sisters. She wears her curly, jet-black hair in dozens of tiny, tight braids so she'll look more like her favorite athlete, Venus Williams. K.T. is full of energy and courageous. A natural leader, she often instigates the adventures with the BPC. She loves soccer and cheerleading. She helped form the Backpack Club and brought in its newest member: her neighbor, Jace.

Jace Long, classmate and neighbor to K.T., grew up in China and moved first to California and finally to Texas. He loves soccer like K.T., is a whiz at math like Travis, and is especially close to Summer. As the newest member to the Backpack Club, Jace is the most reluctant to use the BPC for travel, but he thinks it's a great tool for communicating between the members and is the first to try the device for help with homework.

1 “No, she’s waiting at the edge of the thicket.
2 Let’s get you out of there and we can talk later. But
3 how?”

4 “Can you find your way back without the
5 keypad?”

6 Jace looked back at the dense undergrowth. “I
7 don’t think so.”

8 “Then I’ll have to reach up and hold onto the
9 keypad as you push the return buttons.” K.T.
10 moaned as she forced her right arm up over her head
11 and stretched as far as she could. Jace leaned over
12 the hole and stretched toward K.T., but they were
13 still a good two feet short of touching.

14 “It’s no use. You’re going to have to tell Coach
15 and I’ll get kicked off the team.”

16 K.T.’s muffled sobs could be heard faintly as
17 Jace frantically searched the ground for a stick or
18 piece of bamboo. His eyes stopped at the sight of
19 K.T.’s CD player and headphones laying on the
20 ground a few feet from the hole. Maybe he could tie
21 the keypad to one end and lower the other to K.T. If
22 they were both holding on, would that be a strong
23 enough link to bring them both back? Only one way
24 to find out.

25 He knotted the headphones around the keypad
26 and dangled the CD player into the hole.

27 “K.T., reach up and gently grab your CD
28 player. I’ve got the other end.”

29 “You found my CD player!” K.T. rejoiced
30 through her sniffles. She waved her arm above her
31 wildly.

1 “K.T! K.T. Watson!” Jace called out. He
2 checked the keypad. She had to be near here. As he
3 crested the top of the bank of a manmade bayou,
4 Jace could see smokestacks of refineries off in the
5 distance. Were those oil, gas or petrochemicals?
6 No way to tell. *Must be the volatile organic*
7 *compounds my science teacher was talking about*
8 *last week*, he thought. The sky above the tall towers
9 looked more like white than blue. Lighter too than
10 the brown that he saw when he looked straight up.
11 He could feel the tightness in his chest coming back
12 and he called out again for K.T.

13 A faint sound reached his ears. A low muffled
14 groan. A little to his left and down toward the dirty
15 brown water in the bayou. This water looks toxic,
16 Jace thought.

17 “K.T.!”

18 He slid down the bank till he reached a small
19 opening in the weed-covered soil. He had found a
20 hole about eighteen inches wide and he could barely
21 see the top of K.T.’s head.

22 “K.T., can you look up at me? What
23 happened?”

24 K.T. tried to twist her head up to look, but
25 couldn’t turn the whole way.

26 “Jace, I can’t move. My ankle really hurts. I’m
27 so glad you found me!”

28 “I didn’t really find you. I had to get Summer
29 to trace your GPS position with her keypad. I don’t
30 have that capability.”

31 “Summer’s here?”

“Connections”

1 K.T. winced as she lifted her head off the metal
2 bar that topped the school bus seat. When she
3 boarded the bus at four that morning for her first
4 middle school soccer tournament, she was wide
5 awake. The hum of the bus engine had lulled her to
6 sleep on the long, early morning ride. K.T. had been
7 playing soccer since she was five years old, but the
8 teams had always traveled in cars and had left the
9 night before for any tourney as far away as Houston.
10 As excited as she was to make the seventh grade
11 “A” team, she realized now that the travel would not
12 be as much fun. K.T. massaged her aching head.
13 Not only was the bus uncomfortable, but she missed
14 her old teammates. The only one from her former
15 league to make the school team was a girl named
16 Arianna who had been her least favorite teammate.
17 K.T. just couldn’t seem to get away from her snide
18 remarks and pushy, ball-hogging play.

19 K.T. felt the back of her head. She’d probably
20 have a bruise there from the stupid seat. *Why didn’t*
21 *I bring my pillow?* she thought. She glanced at her
22 watch. 6 a.m. She wondered how far they had gone
23 and how much longer before she could get off the
24 rumbling bus. At least the sun would be up soon.
25 K.T. peered through the grimy window and tried to
26 see the sunrise. She rubbed her palm across the
27 pane to wipe a clear spot. The glass was warm
28 against her skin even at this hour. March mornings
29 should still be cool, but an unseasonable heat wave

1 had settled over Texas for the past week and made it
2 feel more like summer than early spring. The game
3 would be sweaty today with all the humidity of
4 Houston added to the heat.

5 The faintest glimmer of light struggled to rise
6 above the horizon. It looked as weak as she felt. A
7 gray film seemed to coat the sky and obscure the
8 sunrise from her view. *Good*, thought K.T., *maybe*
9 *the clouds will keep it cooler. Maybe it'll rain.*

10 The bus braked suddenly and K.T. grabbed the
11 seat to keep from sliding onto the floor. Screams
12 and moans erupted as girls awoke to falling bodies
13 and sliding duffel bags. Friday morning rush hour
14 traffic had reduced the team's journey to a crawl.

15 "I can run faster than this!" hollered Arianna
16 from the farthest back seat. Her loud voice boomed
17 all the way to the second row where K.T. sat.
18 Arianna had chosen to sit with the eighth graders
19 whom she knew through her older brother, Randall.
20 Randall excelled in soccer on the eighth grade boys'
21 "A" team. He played several other sports as well.
22 He was as obnoxious and loud as Arianna, but the
23 two garnered attention like sports celebrities. People
24 just seemed to let them get away with more.

25 As the bus crept down the freeway surrounded
26 by cars, trucks and other buses, K.T. wondered if her
27 friend, Jace, was having a better morning ride than
28 she. He was headed to the same tournament on the
29 southeast side of Houston, but the boys' teams had
30 left an hour earlier. Maybe she could reach him on
31 the BPC. She lifted her duffel bag from the gritty

1 won't risk sending another message and losing the
2 power to her GPS." Summer clicked buttons on the
3 backpack computer and new coordinates flashed on
4 the screen of her keypad. "She's not far, but I can't
5 go where she is. No pathways are shown on the
6 screen. It's amazing how much information we can
7 get from the Global Positioning System. Satellites
8 thousands of miles away can help find a stolen car or
9 a lost friend just by bouncing beams from one point
10 to another and back. You'll have to use my keypad.
11 Why haven't you downloaded the GPS update from
12 Roman?"

13 "I keep forgetting to ask him for it."

14 Summer sighed. "Now I know what to get you
15 for your birthday next month!"

16 Jace blushed and shrugged as Summer handed
17 him her keypad.

18 "Good luck, Jace, and call me if you need more
19 help. I'll sit here till I hear from you."

20 Jace took off at a run, following the map guide
21 on the keypad screen. The device felt so light when
22 it was disconnected from the BPC. Summer was
23 right—there were no pathways in this part of the park.

24 Soon, he was in a dense copse of bamboo and
25 vines. Jace could feel that he was headed uphill. He
26 had been sitting on the bench all morning since
27 taking his asthma medication. His cough had
28 stopped, but the tightness was still there. He'd have
29 to pace himself to reach K.T. and still have enough
30 breath to get her unstuck from whatever predicament
31 she was in this time.

1
2 Jace's response would have been a shout if they
3 had been together in person.

4 **NO!!! KT MISSING!!**

5
6 Summer locked into Jace's coordinates from his
7 last message and pushed the three buttons. She
8 hoped she had typed everything in correctly. Her
9 eyes were watering and her vision was blurry.

10
11 *****

12
13 Summer found Jace standing at the edge of a
14 wooded area beside a park with dozens of soccer
15 fields. He looked happy to see her, but his smile
16 quickly vanished and was replaced with a frown. He
17 handed his keypad to Summer and scrolled down to
18 K.T.'s message.

19 **Help! Stuck in well. Find me. No juice.**

20
21 "I understand everything except the juice part"
22 were the first words out of Jace's mouth.

23 "You understand about being stuck in a well?"
24 Summer asked incredulously.

25 "Not which well exactly, but how she could be
26 stuck in a hole around here. There are bayous and
27 drainage ditches all around the park and some of
28 them have tunnels where animals or people have dug
29 into the earthen banks. But what's the juice?"

30 "Her battery's probably almost dead. She never
31 remembers to recharge before she has to travel. She

1 floor and fished a small computer from beneath her
2 uniform. The hand held keypad looked like a cell
3 phone, but it could do much more. K.T. and five
4 others stayed connected to each other through the
5 "backpack computer" or as they called it, the BPC.
6 Roman, her friend Connie's brother, had developed
7 the computer from a project his father was working
8 on in the university computer lab. The six members
9 of the Backpack Club relied on the BPC even more
10 now that they were all into different extracurricular
11 activities in middle school. Roman was first chair
12 trumpet in band and Connie played volleyball,
13 danced, and ran track. Jace and K.T. were in band
14 and played soccer. Connie and K.T.'s friend,
15 Summer, raised rabbits in 4-H and her stepbrother,
16 Travis, raised steers. Travis and Roman had been
17 best friends since first grade.

18 It was ironic that this weekend all six of the
19 friends would travel separately into the Houston area
20 for different reasons. K.T. and Jace were going to
21 the same soccer tournament on Friday, but might not
22 even see each other all day. Summer and Travis
23 were at the Houston Livestock Show preparing to
24 enter their animals into competition. Roman would
25 be just north of Houston on Saturday for a State solo
26 final. And Connie would be coming to the west side
27 of Houston tonight with the track team. She had a 7
28 a.m. start time on Saturday in her first event, the
29 long jump. K.T. and Connie had joked they would
30 wave as their buses passed on the highway Friday
31 evening.

1 The BPC keypad glowed dim green and a
2 small red dot indicated the battery needed
3 recharging. *Drat! K.T. thought. I forgot to bring*
4 *my extra battery and there's no way to recharge on*
5 *the bus. Better save the battery. I'll just have to*
6 *look for Jace when we get to the tourney.* K.T.
7 smiled. She had just remembered that her
8 grandmother had planned to drive from Galveston to
9 the tournament and watch her play that afternoon.
10 Maybe the trip wouldn't be so bad after all.

11 The sun was higher now, but it was still a dull
12 red circle, like a flashlight with red cellophane over
13 the lens. K.T. could see a high, brown haze that she
14 had mistaken for clouds. She looked across the aisle
15 and squinted out the other window. The sky was
16 darker to the west, but she could make out long, low
17 clouds that stretched out like fingers laying flat upon
18 some invisible table.

19 The girls on the bus were moving and talking
20 now, unzipping duffel bags and opening small
21 coolers to take out breakfasts of juice and yogurt.
22 K.T. heard a phone ring in the seat at the front of the
23 bus where Coach sat. She couldn't make out the
24 conversation, but could tell Coach seemed upset.

25 When Coach stood up, the girls quieted
26 instantly. He swayed as he walked down the aisle to
27 the center of the bus and the girls gathered round
28 him. Coach was a former pro soccer player who
29 earned the girls respect with his skillful ball
30 handling and demanding teaching style.

1 Back at her truck at 10:20 am on that Friday
2 morning, Summer was waiting patiently for her
3 parents and brother to return. Her rabbits' eyes were
4 not improving and she wished she had an air-
5 conditioned compartment like Joe had for his covies.
6 The heat was making her drowsy and she tried to
7 find a bit of shade on the side of the truck. She
8 could tell this was going to be a long day.

9 The keypad device began to vibrate in her bag
10 and she hurriedly pulled it out, thinking it was
11 Travis trying to call her. It was not Travis, but Jace,
12 another friend of hers and a member of the
13 Backpack Club. He was at a soccer tournament not
14 far away from the Livestock Show. K.T. had told
15 Summer that Jace had a crush on her, but she really
16 just liked him as a friend. She watched as Jace
17 typed a message on the keypad.

18 **Help! Can't Find K.T.! No GPS!**

19
20 Summer typed a message back.

21 **I can't leave just to help you locate K.T. at**
22 **the tourney. She probably didn't charge her**
23 **keypad. Why would you need the GPS? Is the**
24 **tourney that big?**

25
26 Jace responded almost instantly:

27 **Find me first! No GPS! KT LOST!**

28
29 Summer's fingers raced over the keypad.

30 **KT lost the game?**

1 telling Travis, but hadn't they taken a chance
2 leaving her in the parking lot? Besides, she
3 wouldn't really be gone at all. She checked the
4 gates on her rabbit cages and took Joe by the hand.

5 "Remember, Joe, trust me!"

6 A swirl of colored light danced with the heat
7 waves above the black pavement and two kids
8 disappeared.

9
10
11 *Joe's hand gripped Summer's as the whirlwind*
12 *set them down in the hot parking lot beside his*
13 *family's vehicles, a large crew cab truck with a six*
14 *foot trailer. The trailer had three enclosed cages on*
15 *each side. A generator powered a small air*
16 *conditioning unit under the compartments. Two*
17 *guinea pigs with long coats sat quietly in the*
18 *temperature controlled cages. Their eyes look*
19 *beautiful, Summer thought. Joe looked in*
20 *amazement at the larger one and signaled that this*
21 *was the one that got away. Summer tapped his*
22 *watch. It was back at 10:00.*

23 *She looked once again into those deep blue*
24 *eyes.*

25 *"This time, hold him tighter!" she said with a*
26 *smile. "Joe, don't even try to understand this; just*
27 *do well in the show!" she said in answer to his*
28 *unspoken questions. She rolled back a foot and*
29 *pressed the three buttons again. Joe turned the*
30 *brim of his big white hat against the dazzling*
31 *lightning flash of color.*

1 "That was Coach Howard on the boys' bus.
2 They just reached the tournament. They beat the
3 rush hour traffic. We've still got another hour to go,
4 at least, maybe two if the traffic is as bad as Coach
5 Howard says it is." Coach paused and looked
6 around.

7 "That means getting to the tournament just
8 before our first match with no time to warm up," he
9 added. "Go ahead and eat breakfast. We'll do some
10 stretches on the bus as we get closer." He turned to
11 go back to his seat as the girls gave a collective
12 groan.

13 K.T. touched the window again. Hotter than
14 before. Though the sun's rays were filtered through
15 the brown haze, the sun's heat still managed to reach
16 the earth in full force. K.T. jumped in her seat as a
17 semi truck pulled up beside the bus and the truck
18 driver let out the airbrakes. The loud swoosh of the
19 brakes buffeted the bus and K.T. grabbed the
20 seatback in front of her.

21 She glanced outside the window and was
22 amazed to glimpse a herd of black and white cows
23 grazing in a field alongside the freeway. As the bus
24 inched along, the tall buildings of downtown
25 Houston were barely visible in the distance. The
26 tops of the multi-storied towers were lost in the
27 cloud-like vapors that hung like a shroud over the
28 city. K.T. thought it looked surreal. Cows and
29 ghost towers.

30 K.T. finished her breakfast and slipped on her
31 uniform. She used her duffel bag as a pillow and

1 tried to catch another nap. Arianna was in the back
2 throwing a seventh grade teammate's water bottle to
3 an eighth grader and laughing loudly. K.T. took her
4 headphones and CD player from her bag. Maybe
5 music would drown out Arianna's antics. K.T.
6 could tell it was going to be a long day.

7
8 *****
9

10 Jace climbed off the bus and immediately felt
11 the familiar burning in his lungs. He tried to stifle a
12 cough, but ended up choking and coughing even
13 harder. He quickly used his inhaler and felt some
14 relief. Jace tried to pull his uniform shirt over his
15 mouth and nose, but it kept slipping down as he
16 hustled with his backpack away from the bus and its
17 diesel exhaust fumes. The team was gathering near
18 the coaches. Some team members held water bottles
19 only, others had backpacks like Jace. All wore the
20 yellow and blue soccer uniforms of the middle
21 school they represented. Jace loved playing soccer
22 and he had easily made the top seventh grade team.
23 Most members of his select soccer team from last
24 year were on the "A" team and he also knew many
25 of the eighth grade players. A Chinese immigrant,
26 Jace was shorter than most the boys. But he was fast
27 and the coaches told him there was only one thing
28 holding him back from being a starter. His asthma.
29 So, today, at this first tournament, he really wanted
30 to excel.

1 looked at the photo of the small rodent and then
2 looked up at the boy.

3 "You lost your guinea pig? Is that what a
4 "cavy" is?"

5 He nodded and pulled the long clippers from
6 his belt loop. He mimicked cutting the cavy's nails
7 and the animal struggling and fleeing.

8 "I can see why. Those look awful!" Summer
9 said, pointing to the clippers. "Which way did he
10 run? I'll help you look." She spoke clearly and
11 slowly while looking straight at the boy who could
12 read lips so well.

13 The youth looked around and shook his head.
14 He shrugged his shoulders. The guinea pig could
15 have been in any direction by now and Summer
16 knew of only one way to find it.

17 Summer touched the boy's arm to get his
18 attention again.

19 "What's your name?" she asked as she handed
20 him a pencil and notepad from her bag.

21 "Joe." He printed in big curling letters.

22 "Hi, Joe, my name is Summer."

23 He smiled at the novelty of her name.

24 "Joe, if you'll trust me, I can help you find your
25 guinea pig. We can find it really fast. Do you know
26 how long ago you lost it?"

27 Joe looked at the large-faced watch on his
28 wrist and pointed to 10:00. It was now 10:20. *This*
29 *should be easy*, Summer thought. She took out the
30 keypad and punched in a few coordinates and times.
31 She knew she was taking a chance leaving without

1 shoulders shook as he too found the humor in the
2 encounter. He was tall and gangly, but probably
3 about Summer's age after all. His face was striking
4 with low set ears and a broad mouth and deep blue,
5 hypnotic eyes.

6 Summer looked straight in his face and asked
7 again in a normal voice. "Can I help you? What are
8 you doing?"

9 The boy signed an answer and then realized
10 Summer could not understand. So he mimed. He
11 pointed to her rabbits and used his hand to signal
12 running.

13 "You have a rabbit that ran away?"

14 The boy watched her lips and nodded, but put
15 his hands out again to show size. He held them
16 palm to palm about six inches apart.

17 "You lost a bunny? A little rabbit?"

18 He shook his head "No." He looked frustrated
19 and Summer could see tears in his eyes. *So maybe*
20 *he didn't have the same illness as her rabbits.*
21 *Maybe he was just upset. Or maybe my rabbits were*
22 *crying*, Summer thought. That's ridiculous. Kind of
23 like this conversation. Then she remembered the
24 registration packet that had all the animals listed.
25 She pulled it from her canvas bag and handed it to
26 him.

27 As soon as the teen saw it, he smiled and
28 reached for the packet. He quickly turned to the
29 page marked "Cavy" and handed it back to Summer,
30 pointing to a picture of a guinea pig. Summer

1 *And I start coughing the minute I get off the*
2 *bus*, he thought angrily.

3
4 I can do this, Jace told himself. Just stay calm
5 and use the inhaler. Move slowly and think about
6 something besides breathing. Focus on the game.
7 Focus. Pick a spot on the horizon and focus on that
8 while you breathe slowly and relax all your muscles.
9 Jace's mother had recently begun meditation therapy
10 for back pain and Jace thought it sounded like it
11 should work for his asthma too. He watched his
12 mother in her lessons and practiced with her all
13 winter. It had seemed to help and Jace even thought
14 he might finally be growing out of the asthma like
15 the doctor said could happen.

16 The bus ride to Houston had been quiet and
17 restful. They had sped down the freeway just ahead
18 of the commuter traffic and made good time. They
19 had even stopped to eat breakfast a few miles north
20 of Houston and Jace's asthma had not bothered him
21 then. Why now? he wondered. Why can't I just
22 make it through this day with no problems? Jace
23 followed his teammates to the sidelines of a large
24 green field where their first game would start in
25 about 45 minutes. Everything was going according
26 to schedule.

27 As he took his shoes from his backpack, he
28 thought about his best friends, the five other
29 members of the Backpack Club. K.T. would be at
30 this same tournament in a couple of hours, but he
31 wasn't sure if he'd have a chance to visit her or

1 watch her game. He actually hoped he wouldn't
2 have time because that would mean they were
3 winning and advancing in the competition. He
4 wanted her team to do well too. They could share
5 victory stories next week at school. Jace checked
6 the keypad device of the backpack computer. No
7 text messages or codes for call back. Despite the
8 greatest, albeit secret, computer in the world that
9 connected them, each one in the club was busy with
10 a different activity this weekend.

11 Even Summer and her stepbrother, Travis,
12 who were showing at the Houston Livestock show,
13 would be in different competitions and maybe not
14 get to see each other all day. Jace wanted to stay in
15 Houston and watch Summer show her rabbits, but
16 his mother said no. Jace had a crush on Summer this
17 school year, but he'd tried to act like everything was
18 the same as last year. No luck. He couldn't hide
19 how he felt. At first, he was afraid of what Travis
20 might think since Travis was a year older than
21 Summer and very protective of her. Travis just
22 laughed and teased him. Summer blushed and
23 changed the subject if anyone said something about
24 Jace liking her. Only K.T. had reacted negatively to
25 his admission that he wanted to go out with
26 Summer. He considered K.T. his best friend so he
27 told her about his crush on Summer. She said they
28 were all too young to have crushes, but Jace
29 remembered when K.T. had liked a boy in sixth
30 grade. Jace agreed with K.T. that their friendships

1 "Hello! Can I help you?" she called out loudly.
2 The boy just kept looking down and moving his lips.
3 His entire face was hidden by his hat.

4 "Hey, you! What are you doing here?" She
5 tried to sound bold, but her voice shook a little. The
6 boy was close enough now for her to see a pair of
7 very sharp clippers hanging from his belt loop.

8 The impulse to flee was washing over Summer
9 like the waves radiating from the hot asphalt. It felt
10 more like July than March and Summer could feel
11 the sweat beading on her forehead. Inside, she was
12 praying Travis and her parents would walk up right
13 now. Her hand rested on the BPC keypad. Her
14 throat hurt as she tried to call out again and her
15 voice just cracked in a timid "huh!" that was more
16 gasp than sound. The boy was at the trailer next to
17 her.

18 In the next instant, the teen turned and nearly
19 stumbled over Summer. His hands reached out to
20 catch his fall and he jostled Summer's chair, nearly
21 tipping it over. Summer could see the look of alarm
22 in his eyes which were a deep blue, but red and
23 watery. His eyes looked like her rabbits' eyes.

24 His fingers flew up in a flurry of gestures as his
25 lips mouthed the word "Sorry." He looked like he
26 was ready to run, but changed his mind when he saw
27 Summer was sitting in a wheelchair. Summer's face
28 wore a stunned look as she tried to find the right
29 words. An irrepressible laughter welled up from
30 deep inside and she burst out in a belly laugh. A
31 wave of relief swept over the boy's face and his

1 Travis with his steer in the big barn and had told her
2 to wait for them. Well, she was tired of waiting.

3 Summer was feeling anxious and cranky and
4 she wanted a soda. The heat was beginning to parch
5 her throat. Maybe it was the unusual heat wave that
6 had affected her rabbits' eyes. Suddenly, she caught
7 a movement from the corner of her eye.

8 Six parking places away, a teenage boy was
9 skulking around the trailers and truck beds. He
10 seemed to be looking for something, his head down,
11 his eyes hidden by a large white straw western hat.
12 Summer looked around. The parking lot had been
13 crowded with dozens of people nearby just thirty
14 minutes ago. Now, it was quiet, isolated, a lonely
15 expanse of trucks, trailers and vans that hid her from
16 view from the big show barn. Her hand instinctively
17 felt for the backpack computer in the canvas bag
18 hanging on the arm of her chair. With the
19 extraordinary BPC, she could push three buttons on
20 the keypad and be far away from here. But that
21 would mean leaving her rabbits.

22 What if he wanted to steal her rabbits? How
23 could she leave them?

24 The teen was edging closer and she could see
25 his lips moving, but no sound came to her ears. It
26 was too late to shut her rabbit pens up in the truck
27 bed or try to move them into the truck. She couldn't
28 very well hide either. She took a deep breath and
29 decided to confront the youth before he reached her.

1 were more important than anything else. Still,
2 thinking of Summer made him happy.

3 "Jace, get on the field. Stop daydreaming!"
4 Coach Howard's voice shook Jace from his reverie
5 and he jumped up too fast. A cough racked his chest
6 and he buried his face in his shoulder to stop it. Too
7 late. Coach heard the sound and turned around.

8 "You havin' an asthma attack already this
9 morning? Have you used your inhaler?"

10 Jace nodded, afraid to speak for fear of
11 coughing.

12 "Can you take your medication now?"

13 Jace frowned, but nodded again. He'd have to
14 sit out the first match for sure if he took the meds.
15 This was not how he wanted today to start. He
16 swallowed hard and answered softly.

17 "Coach, give me a few more minutes. It was
18 just the bus exhaust fumes. Let me sit out here in
19 the open for ten more minutes. If I still feel like I'm
20 going to start wheezing, I'll take the meds, I
21 promise."

22 Coach Howard looked hard and long at Jace.
23 He thought of Jace as a good kid, hardworking,
24 intelligent, a great soccer player, well-liked and
25 respected by his teammates. Coach Howard shook
26 his head as he surveyed the high, brown, gauzy
27 clouds that reduced the rising sun to an orange glow.
28 Coach knew the rest out in the "open" would not
29 likely clear up Jace's asthma attack. He'd coached
30 an asthmatic player two years ago who ended up in
31 the hospital for a week after the Houston

1 tournament. Was it safe to let Jace find out for
2 himself that he'd need his medication?

3 "Ten minutes. Sitting. Check back with me
4 before you try to go on the field."

5 "Yes, sir," Jace answered as he sat down on a
6 rusty park bench. He could see the concerned looks
7 of his teammates as they started the stretching
8 routine. Focus. Relax. Breathe. Jace could tell it
9 was going to be a long day.

10

11 *****

12

13 Summer sat in her wheelchair near her rabbit
14 pens which were perched on the tailgate of her
15 family's truck. She had brought three pens of
16 rabbits to Houston yesterday and Travis had brought
17 his steer. They were both looking forward to
18 showing at the Houston Livestock Show for the very
19 first time. Summer was ready to choose her best pen
20 to enter, but now faced an even more difficult
21 choice. All of her rabbits had pink, watery eyes.
22 She had seen no infection before she left so she
23 could honestly answer the judges that she had not
24 intentionally brought sick rabbits to the show. They
25 were eating and drinking just fine and she found no
26 blood or soft droppings or regurgitated food in their
27 pens. She checked their paws and teeth. Everything
28 seemed normal. The rabbits seemed slightly
29 lethargic, but Summer attributed that to the long
30 drive to Houston.

1 Now, she had to cull the best of her rabbits and
2 enter weepy-eyed does into the tightest competition
3 she'd ever faced. *I'll probably be disqualified*
4 *anyway*, she thought glumly to herself. Her
5 normally cheerful disposition had melted away after
6 a morning of trying everything she could think of to
7 clean her rabbit's eyes. Her own eyes had itched a
8 few times, but she was afraid to scratch them in case
9 her rabbits were harboring a virus.

10 As she took her favorite doe from the pen and
11 stroked its soft, brown coat, she tried not to think of
12 how much time she had put into this project. She
13 was the only one in her 4-H club to bring rabbits to
14 Houston, the metropolitan Mecca of livestock
15 shows. Everyone else was showing larger animals:
16 sheep and goats, pigs and steers. They all told her
17 the rabbits were a waste of time, but rabbits were the
18 only animals she could hold in her lap and care for
19 and not have to lead around a show ring. As
20 comfortable as she was with her motorized
21 wheelchair, she was still not ready to parade an
22 animal in front of strangers.

23 She carefully placed her favorite doe in the
24 freshly cleaned pen and began to weigh the other
25 rabbits. She wished her friends, Connie and K.T.,
26 were here with her. They had enjoyed helping her
27 and watching her work with the little bunnies and
28 were amazed by how fast the rabbits had grown.
29 Both of them were doing other things today and she
30 couldn't ask for their help. Everyone had something
31 else to do. Her mother and stepfather were helping