

Backpack Adventures Series

Dark Poison

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

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1 loading articles about the emergence of the
2 Underground Railroad. A third, Connie, a Hispanic
3 girl who liked math and science, had the search
4 engine finding blueprints of the Erie Canal from
5 New York to Canada.

6 The fourth, a blond girl named Summer, sat in a
7 wheelchair. She had just found a copy of a
8 Manhattan borough newspaper from 1872 in the
9 archives of the New York City Library website. She
10 scrolled along the faded newsprint till she came
11 across an article that made her gasp.

12 The others looked up from their screens to
13 check on their friend.

14 “What is it?” they asked in unison.

15 “Listen to this article title! ‘New York City
16 Philanthropist, Sullivan, Dedicates Memorial to
17 Immigrant and Runaway Slave Children.’ Could it
18 be our friend, Sully?” Summer wondered aloud.

19 “Sounds like he made as big a fortune as
20 Liberius,” suggested K.T.

21 “Yeah, I guess he never forgot his past if he did
22 strike it rich,” conjectured Jace.

23 “He was a team player, that’s for sure,” added
24 Connie.

25 Summer scanned the article. “Says here that he
26 never forgot anyone on the team. He even mentions
27 us.”

28 “WHAT!” the other three yelled, forgetting
29 they were in a library.

30 Summer burst out laughing. “Shhhhh! Just
31 kidding!”

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1 “Sully, we’ll find our own way out,” Summer’s
2 voice was barely a whisper. “Godspeed!”

3 Sully nodded to Summer and turned without a
4 word to lead Leviah out into the bright afternoon.

5 Just as they reached the stairs, he remembered
6 the candle. Would the youths remember to blow it
7 out when they left? He couldn’t chance it. He’d
8 seen the ravages of fire in the tenement houses and
9 known people who died because of someone’s
10 negligence. He’d better remind them to blow out the
11 candle.

12 Just as Sully opened the door, a flash of
13 brilliant rainbow light exploded in the tiny room.
14 The four strange scholars had disappeared. Sully
15 blinked and rubbed his eyes. He rushed to check the
16 secret entrance to the back alley. The heavy board
17 was still in place. He glanced at the false wall where
18 the poor dead baby lay. It was as he left it. As his
19 eyes adjusted to the dim room, he saw the faintest
20 thread of gray smoke rising from the stubby candle,
21 the flame extinguished. He backed from the room
22 and slowly shut the door.

23

24

25 EPILOGUE

26

27 Four teenage students worked diligently at the
28 computer terminals in the Public Library. One, an
29 Asian boy named Jace, was researching immigration
30 in New York City during the early part of the
31 1800’s. Another, K.T., a black girl, was down-

1 K.T. handed him a cloak and he wrapped the
2 baby's body in its dark folds. He placed the body
3 behind the false wall and moved the boards in front
4 of it. He would deal with the burial when he
5 returned from Buffalo and he willed his mind not to
6 think of the vermin that dwelled in the building.
7 Leviah was young and she could have more
8 children, free children, with her husband who waited
9 in Canada. Most of the women he knew had buried
10 at least one infant. Still, the storm of emotions
11 buffeted Sully's mind and he blinked back tears as
12 he pressed the last board into place. He purposefully
13 left Leviah's bag in the cell along with the goatskin
14 water jug.

15 Connie and Jace silently helped Sully put the
16 second cloak on Leviah who barely managed to
17 stand. Sully's hand ached as he pulled on the third
18 cloak. The bandage would have to be changed soon.
19 He could see a thin line of blood seeping out from
20 the edge of the cloth.

21 "Sully, if there was a way we could help,"
22 Summer offered, "would you trust us?"

23 "I...I'm not sure I would," Sully replied
24 truthfully.

25 "If we could..." Summer began, but Connie
26 touched her shoulder and shook her head.
27 Summer's voice trailed off into a deep sigh.

28 "Good luck to you if you stay on the streets. I
29 advise waiting till dusk then setting off at a quick
30 pace." Sully realized he didn't know where they
31 were headed.

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 up and down the canals from here to Buffalo.
2 There's talk of closing the border as well."

3 "Did he say why?" Sully asked in a whisper.
4 He didn't want to alarm the others needlessly.

5 Ryan looked up with honest green eyes, round
6 with fear he could not hide. "Something about a
7 poison," he whispered. "He called it 'my as may' I
8 think."

9 "Go back to your post. You've done a fine job,
10 Ryan."

11 Sully turned to face the occupants of his tiny
12 dwelling. Connie had picked up her bag and was
13 searching frantically through it. He felt for the small
14 black device in his pocket and tossed it to K.T.

15 "Is this what she's looking for?" Sully's face
16 was grim. "It's time we part ways, dearies. I hope
17 you've learned enough to print those articles for
18 your newspaper, but the lesson's over now. The
19 School of Sully's World is closed for the day due to
20 circumstances beyond his control."

21 "Maybe we can help you," K.T. began.

22 "I think not," Sully replied quickly. "The job I
23 have to do, you can be no part of." He turned to
24 Leviah and firmly took her by the shoulder, lifting
25 her off the cloaks. He pried her arms loose and
26 carefully took the cold body of her child. Even now
27 he could feel a slight twitch in the tiny limbs.
28 Leviah was like a zombie, alive but without
29 sensation. She stood swaying slightly as Sully
30 moved away from her.

1 beasts. My baby's strong. He's gonna be alright,
2 he's gonna be free after we gets to Canada. Ain't
3 that the truth of it?"

4 Sully placed his hand gently on Leviah's
5 shoulder. "Let me hold him, Leviah, let me see
6 what we can do for him..."

7 Leviah clutched the child's limp body more
8 tightly to her breast. "He ain't gone, he ain't gone.
9 He been twitching every few minutes, so I know he
10 ain't gone." Leviah began to rock her body back
11 and forth, all the time shaking her head from left to
12 right.

13 "Leviah..." Sully was at a loss as to how to get
14 the baby out of the hysterical mother's arms.

15 Just then a knock sounded on the thin wooden
16 door. Everyone jumped but remained dead silent.
17 The sharp rap shook the fragile door again, but this
18 time it was followed by young boy's voice.

19 "Sully--Ryan Kilpatrick. A word with you
20 about the pilgrims."

21 Sully rushed to the door and let in a sinewy boy
22 about nine years old with the brightest shock of red
23 hair Sully had ever seen on anyone. He was a
24 runner for Liberius, an orphan picked up off the
25 street and given a job in return for good meals, safe
26 sleep and the chance of an education.

27 "What is it, Ryan?"

28 "Liberius says you are to board the next barge
29 leaving for Buffalo. Find a way to get the pilgrims
30 to the Hudson docks in the daylight. Seems he's
31 heard that quarantine will be placed on all shipping

"Dark Poison"

PROLOGUE

1 Four friends huddled in the farthest corner of
2 the Public Library. The angry expressions on their
3 faces concealed the fact they were actually the best
4 of friends, bound by a shared secret: a backpack
5 computer that allowed space and time travel.

6 Summer, a petite blond sitting in a wheelchair,
7 broke the heavy silence. "Instead of just arguing
8 and wasting time, I think we should try Connie's
9 suggestion to use the BPC to see first hand which
10 topic would be more interesting for the newspaper
11 article assignment. We can check out Jace's idea on
12 immigration and K.T.'s idea for the Underground
13 Railroad. Connie and I will be happy with either
14 one, right Connie?"

15 "Sure, Summer. I don't care which we do as
16 long as we get started and finish this stupid team
17 project on time. We're two days behind schedule
18 right now." Connie stretched out her long blue jean
19 covered legs and nudged K.T., her best friend, with
20 the tip of her flip-flop sandals. K.T. scooted over on
21 the hard plastic chair and frowned at Connie.

22 "We can let K.T. tell us what year she wants to
23 go back to," Connie offered. She opened her
24 backpack and took out a small black keypad and
25 began punching numbers. "I've put in New York
26 City like Jace wants," she said with a glance at the

1 only boy in the group. "Now tell me what year,
2 K.T."

3 "1832, I guess," K.T. mumbled.

4 "1832 it is, then," responded Connie with a
5 false smile.

6 One by one they joined hands and then Connie
7 pressed a button and whispered "Go!"

8 A man sitting at a table behind some
9 bookshelves near the group noticed a flash of light
10 and looked out the window expecting to see a
11 thundercloud. The sky was cloudless blue.

12

13 *****

14

15 NEW YORK CITY, 1832

16

17 Sully carefully placed the rough wooden plank
18 across the opening at the base of the brick-walled
19 tenement building. The pre-dawn darkness was
20 beginning to give way to a humid sunrise that
21 promised another scorching day in the summer of
22 1832. He knew that the fugitive slaves he had
23 hidden deep in the recesses of the building would
24 suffer during the wait for nightfall, but the young
25 mother with her infant child assured him they could
26 handle the heat. After all, they had made it for the
27 past three months on the back roads from South
28 Carolina to New York in all kinds of weather. Sully
29 marveled that a twenty-year-old woman, barely two
30 years older than he, could have traveled alone so far
31 with a baby. Sully would have taken them to better

1 "Leviah, tell me what happened," Sully spoke
2 firmly, trying to sound as calm and authoritative as
3 Liberius.

4 "Mister Sully, we was doing alright. A bit hot,
5 a bit cramped, but alright. We slept a little and I
6 woke up when Josiah started fussin' and stickin' his
7 tongue out like he do when he's thirsty. Well, he
8 drank all the water I had in my goatskin water jug.
9 He kept fussin' and pullin' his little legs up like his
10 stomach done cramped... I thought for sure
11 someone would hear him crying." Leviah sobbed
12 and let out a low groan. "I set Little Josiah on the
13 floor and moved the boards out the way. I had to
14 find some more water." She drew a deep breath and
15 struggled to speak.

16 "I peeked out the door and there was a bucket
17 sitting by the stairs. So I snuck out the hallway and
18 dipped some water into the goatskin and brought it
19 back to him, but he wouldn't wake up to drink."
20 She started crying hard now.

21 Sully turned to look at the four young people.
22 K.T. and Connie were softly crying with their arms
23 around each other. Summer's hands were folded in
24 prayer. Jace studiously stared at the dirt floor of the
25 basement. No one said a word. Sully doubted
26 Leviah even knew they were in the room.

27 Leviah looked up at Sully and sobbed. "Mister
28 Sully, you saw Little Josiah this morning. Weren't
29 nothin' wrong with that child, nothin' at'all. We
30 traveled three months under the moon and stars,
31 'long rivers and roads, through forests filled with

1 answered the tap and Sully hurriedly pulled back the
2 boards that disguised the small cell which hid the
3 young mother and her infant. He lit a candle that
4 smoked badly in the sour air. The young mother
5 held her infant tightly to her chest and struggled to
6 stand after being cramped in the tiny space for so
7 long. Tears streamed down her face and Jace rushed
8 to help Sully lift her to her feet.

9 “Oh, Mister Sully, Little Josiah is sick. He’s
10 bad off, so bad off!”

11 At the sight of the pitiful woman and her limp
12 child, Summer covered her mouth to stifle a scream.
13 K.T. gathered the cloaks to make a soft place for the
14 woman to lie down while Connie fought to control
15 her nausea and found an old newspaper to use as a
16 fan.

17 As Connie began to create a slight breeze, the
18 unmistakable odor of diarrhea permeated the space.
19 Sully’s brow wrinkled in concern.

20 The infant’s clothing was soaked. His eyes
21 were sunken and closed, his skin, an ashen color.
22 Sully knew it was too late for the baby and a mixture
23 of anger, disappointment and failure clouded his
24 thoughts. He’d seen death on the streets. He had
25 watched his parents die slowly from consumption.
26 But he had cradled that baby only hours earlier. The
27 infant had been wiry and tough, alert and happy, as
28 healthy as Sully. Sully braced his shoulders and
29 prepared to do what had to be done.

1 quarters, but his apartment was the last “safe house”
2 in Five Points. All the other refuges were being
3 watched by the notorious gang leader, The Ferret, a
4 ruthless bounty hunter.

5 As Sully pushed a large dilapidated wooden
6 shipping crate in front of the board, a brilliant
7 rainbow flash of light illuminated the narrow
8 alleyway. Sully whirled to see who had discovered
9 him. His hand caught on the edge of the crate and a
10 sharp pain made him wince as a rusty nail gouged
11 his left palm, tearing a deep gash in his work-
12 toughened skin.

13 “Who’s there?” he cried out, pressing his right
14 hand tightly over the wound to stop the bleeding.

15 The light disappeared and Sully counted three
16 figures about his size and one shorter figure, all
17 huddled in the shadow of the adjacent building.

18 Gangs of thugs roamed the crowded streets of
19 New York, anxious to fight, rob or “enforce” for a
20 rich patron. Some served the Southern plantation
21 owners who offered bounties for runaway slaves.
22 Had the Ferret’s gang found his secret entrance?

23 Sully didn’t want to fight, but he would in order
24 to protect his home and “guests.” At five foot eight,
25 one hundred fifty pounds, he wasn’t a giant Irish
26 fighter like the Plug Uglies, but he’d won his shares
27 of battles.

28 The four remained in the shadows and Sully
29 took a step forward, looking for something to wield
30 as a weapon. He spotted a discarded metal chamber
31 pot, obviously dropped from the fourth floor and

1 abandoned, and thought he might throw the pot at
2 the quartet and make a run for the street. His hand
3 ached and he needed to look at the cut in the
4 sunlight that was inching its way from the East
5 River to the slums of the Sixth Ward. How had they
6 traveled this far back in the alley without him
7 hearing them? How long had they been watching
8 him? Would it be safe to run from the alley or
9 should he stand and protect the hidden entrance?
10 The pain from the gash in his hand moved up his
11 arm and his head pounded with each questioning
12 thought. Sully could feel the sunlight cresting the
13 buildings, sending color and heat into the alley.

14 Daybreak had come and, any moment now,
15 chamber pots would be spilling their contents from
16 the windows above him.

17 Sully watched the four bodies huddle together
18 and could hear soft, whispering voices. Slowly, two
19 figures emerged. Sully's jaw dropped at the sight of
20 two strangely dressed young girls.

21 Both wore blue pants and cotton shirts that
22 barely covered their stomachs, much less their arms.
23 Neither had a head covering, and both had shoes that
24 showed their feet and toes. They must have been
25 robbed of their clothes, Sully thought, and were
26 embarrassed to be seen in their undergarments.

27 The taller girl had dark hair that reached all the
28 way down her back like a velvet coat. She carried a
29 bag on her shoulder and her skin was brown like the
30 Algonquin Indian maiden he'd seen at a free Castle
31 Garden concert when he was nine years old. The

1 "Stay close now. We'll visit the new fish
2 market on Fulton first and take lunch to some new
3 found friends o'mine back at Pearl and Cross. Mind
4 you, keep up, Miss Summer, with that magical chair
5 o'yours or street hooligans will cart you off."

6 "I'll be right behind her with K.T. and Connie
7 on each side," answered Jace.

8 "Right-o, Master Jace. Be sure to watch for the
9 potholes and keep to the middle of the street. Less
10 offal there." Sully led the way out of the quiet
11 sanctuary of the Chapman home and into the
12 sweltering midday rush of Broadway and Pearl.

13 Sully's young wards shed the heavy cloaks the
14 moment they entered Sully's basement-level room.
15 The wild jog through the crowded streets to the fish
16 market and the docks seemed to have drained them
17 of all energy. Connie had actually vomited when
18 she entered the building and Summer had explained
19 to Sully that none of them were accustomed to the
20 strong odors emanating from the poorly ventilated
21 hallways. Sully shrugged, for the smells of cooking
22 fish and unbathed bodies, stale spittoons and empty
23 gin bottles, rotting refuse and human waste were
24 unavoidable in the overpopulated brick
25 boardinghouses that stretched for block after block
26 in lower Manhattan. This was a good "safe house"
27 because the police would never be found near here.
28 They preferred to avoid the smells and filth of the
29 poorest neighborhood.

30 Sully tapped gently on the false wall he had
31 built at the back of his tiny apartment. A low moan

1 “What happened to thy hand?” questioned
2 Liberius.

3 “Just a cut.”

4 “Keep it covered,” Liberius advised
5 concernedly. “Last week in Boston, there was
6 rumor of a new miasma and I’d hate for my best
7 friend to succumb to poisons in the air.”

8 “Godspeed on your journey to Boston,
9 Liberius,” Sully said as he shook Liberius’ hand.

10 “Safe and quick be thine to Buffalo. Tell the
11 pilgrims to hope for the future.” Liberius turned to
12 Summer and added with a smile, “We have our
13 games as well.” He bowed slightly and left the
14 room.

15 Sully turned back to Connie. “Your bag, now,
16 Miss Connie, and the little box you hold in your
17 palm as well. I’d hate for you to miss the tour that’ll
18 obtain for you the stories you need for your
19 schoolmaster.”

20 Connie reluctantly handed both to him when
21 Summer gave her a nod of approval. Sully
22 examined the bag and could find no opening, only a
23 narrow strip of broken metal.

24 “How do you open the confounded thing?” he
25 muttered. Sully slipped the small black box with
26 numbered and lettered buttons into his pocket and
27 slung the bag on his left shoulder. A dull throbbing
28 pain extended from his hand to his elbow and he
29 winced. “Don’t worry. I’ll give your personal
30 effects back to you when we part ways.”

1 shorter girl was black like the woman he’d just
2 hidden. Her dark eyes flashed with courage. She
3 stood defensively with one leg extended in front of
4 her and leaned back on the other. Her fists were
5 clenched and her elbows bent so that one hand was
6 near her ear and the other in front of her. Sully’s
7 own defensiveness gave way to relief when he saw
8 the pair and he peered past them to see their
9 companions.

10 Behind the two girls was an even more
11 perplexing sight: a slim Oriental boy and a slightly-
12 built girl with short blond hair who sat in a Merlin
13 Chair. The boy held his hands like the black girl and
14 Sully surmised this was a fighting stance. They
15 looked harmless, but it was best to be sure.
16 Certainly, they weren’t bounty hunters.

17 “Can I help you?”

18 Before they could answer, a loud splash
19 sounded against the bricks behind them and all four
20 screamed. A chamber pot had been dumped into the
21 alleyway directly behind the group. The muck was
22 apparent in the growing daylight and by the smell.
23 With no sewers, the alleyways and streets served as
24 disposals for buildings housing hundreds.

25 Sully needed a plan to get the interlopers out of
26 the alley and hidden where he could question them
27 without interruption. Perhaps they were fugitives or
28 immigrants like him, and fallen on hard luck. Don’t
29 be fooled by these strangers, Sully’s reason told him,
30 just because they were acting foolish.

1 If only he could sneak them down Pearl Street
2 to Broadway, he knew his friend Liberius would
3 help them. After all, it was Liberius who had saved
4 him five years ago from gang retribution. At ten,
5 while working as a supernumerary at various fire
6 stations for meals and a place to sleep, he had been
7 recruited by the Dead Rabbits gang to be a tenement
8 runner, a courier for the landlords. After three years,
9 he was sick of gang life and ready to leave.

10 Liberius had literally plucked him off the
11 docks of New York's Harbor and secreted him
12 aboard an Erie Canal barge headed for Canada. He
13 likely saved Sully's life. The next five years had
14 been spent commanding barges owned by Liberius
15 up and down the heavily traveled Canal. Liberius
16 was now known as one of the wealthiest of the
17 freedmen.

18 Liberius would know what to do with these
19 newcomers. They didn't stand a chance on the street
20 dressed as they were. Sully motioned for them to
21 follow him.

22 "Follow me quickly or you'll be covered with
23 the morning muck."

24 "We're not going anywhere with you!" the
25 black girl spoke decisively.

26 "We can take care of ourselves!" added the tall
27 girl. In her hand she held a small black object. Was
28 it a weapon? Sully wondered. It looked more like a
29 large snuff box.

30 "You're not, eh? Well, you'll be wishin' you
31 was safe and dry soon enough...I was only offering

1 the future hold?' Like the subway idea. We thought
2 it would be nice to greet immigrants with a
3 welcoming statue symbolizing freedom."

4 "Surely, that would be fine, but ships dock all
5 over: Fulton Slip by the new fish market, Whitehall,
6 James, Coffeeshouse, Castle. There's many thinks
7 we have enough folks as is, no need to encourage
8 'em."

9 "There are more practical ways to welcome the
10 immigrants," interjected Liberius. "For instance,
11 with decent housing and food." Liberius checked
12 the time on a simple gold watch and replaced the
13 timepiece in his vest pocket. "But that's another
14 cause. It would be ironic to use 'freedom' as our
15 motto until all are truly free."

16 Liberius stood. "I must leave for Boston now,
17 but thou art welcome to stay. Sully, I know you
18 leave on the evening barge. If thou trust these street
19 urchins, perhaps a lesson could be arranged."

20 Sully nodded.

21 "They could see the city for themselves, meet
22 immigrants and émigrés, as well--for their writing
23 exercises," Liberius said with a smile.

24 "Aye, that I could do," Sully said with a wink
25 of his eye. He turned to the four youths. "It'll be
26 hot with those cloaks outside, but better than being
27 mugged as the 'Odd Rags' gang. You can travel
28 without the cloaks--after dark. And just to set my
29 mind at ease, I'll be taking that bag o' yours." Sully
30 turned to Connie and extended his left hand.

1 Liberius turned to face all four youths who had
2 huddled together at Sully's outburst. "Am I
3 wrong?"

4 "You are quite correct, Mr. Chapman,"
5 answered Summer. Sully could see her hands gently
6 holding K.T. and Jace's arms, one at each side as
7 Connie stood behind her. "It's time for us to give
8 honest answers."

9 Summer's blue eyes met Liberius' piercing
10 black gaze without wavering. Sully thought to
11 himself that even if she was lying to them, it wasn't
12 done with intent to harm.

13 "We want simply to learn about the
14 Underground Railroad. We know the abolition
15 movement is growing and we want to support the
16 movement in our school newspaper. Nothing more.
17 We would never want to endanger lives, if that is
18 what you fear."

19 Summer continued, "If we learn about
20 immigration as well, that'll be great. That was
21 Jace's first choice for a newspaper report. He
22 emigrated from China several years ago."

23 "Yeah, I always wanted to see the Statue of
24 Liberty," Jace said, moving toward the window.
25 "Can you see her from here?"

26 "Thou wilt find no statues in the house of a
27 Quaker," Liberius answered with a shake of his
28 head. "That would be idolatry."

29 "Sorry, Jace, that's 1885," Summer said with a
30 chuckle. She noticed Sully's quizzical look and
31 added, "It's a game we play. We call it 'What will

1 you the hospitality of the finest home in the Sixth
2 Ward. You won't stand a chance on the street
3 standing there half-naked!" Sully began to jog off
4 towards the street.

5 Alarm broke out amongst the youths.

6 "Wait! We'll go with you!"

7 Sully turned to see it was the blond girl who
8 had called out to him. She was rolling toward him
9 as the others reluctantly followed. No one pushed
10 her chair and she did not turn the third small wheel
11 of the chair. Most paralyzed people who used a
12 Merlin Chair turned a small third wheel to roll the
13 two large wheels beneath the chair. How did she
14 move?

15 "How?...No... Never mind. Enough time for
16 questions when you're well-hidden." Sully's
17 pragmatic nature took over.

18 "Let's see," Sully mused aloud, "How to get
19 you down a few blocks without anyone seeing you
20 on the street?" He paused. "H-m-m..."

21 "I know! I'll borrow the fire engine from the
22 station captain across the street and you can ride the
23 few blocks we need to go. There'll be fewer
24 questions if you're out of sight. Wait here."

25 The foursome dutifully followed his direction
26 and he thought how gullible children could be. He
27 would have never trusted a stranger that quickly. He
28 paused at the water pump in front of his row house
29 and washed the now-dried blood from his palms.
30 The gash was deep. Sully tore a strip from his
31 shirttail and cursed the fact that it was his last good

1 piece of clothing. He wound the remnant around his
2 hand and deftly tied it into a bandage. Now he'd
3 have a scar on the bottom of his hand to match those
4 on his knuckles.

5 He was thirsty. He held his head under the
6 water spigot as he pumped the handle up and down.
7 Though the water was cool, it smelled foul. Sully
8 decided to wait for a drink from the pump in front of
9 his friend's house. Perhaps the water was fresher on
10 Broadway. Sully didn't always trust the water in
11 Five Points. Rumors had circulated of rival gangs
12 poisoning the water supply of the Sixth Ward.
13 Broadway was on the border of the Sixth Ward and
14 afforded less opportunity for tampering or so the
15 street wisdom taught.

16 Sully returned with draft horses pulling a
17 wagon with ladders and hoses. Without a word, he
18 lifted the small blond girl out of the chair and settled
19 her gently between the coils of the fire hose. She
20 had a shy smile, but her eyes sparkled. Though she
21 was light as a feather, Sully could feel the strength
22 of her arm muscles as she placed her arms around
23 his neck.

24 "Pardon me, miss, for having to cover you with
25 the horse's blanket, but it's for your protection."

26 "I understand," she replied as she scooted down
27 under the coarse red cloth. The others followed,
28 scrunching below the hoses and ladders as Sully
29 wedged the surprisingly lightweight chair between
30 them.

1 at Whitehall Slip." Liberius' voice rose ever so
2 slightly as he spoke. He took a deep breath and
3 turned to Sully. "That's where I met Sully, down at
4 the docks, preying on innocent immigrants just as
5 someone had preyed upon his own parents."

6 Sully's face flushed as he felt all eyes on him.

7 "My days as a runner for the tenement gang
8 lords were numbered, Liberius, for I had not the
9 stomach for cheating poor folk of the little they
10 owned. If you'd not found me and knocked some
11 sense into this Irish head o' mine, I'd 'ave ended up
12 on the wrong side of a knifepoint."

13 "But here thou are, my good friend, bringing
14 me four destitute students whom thou supposed
15 were cheated out of clothing they say they were not
16 wearing. Tell me, what dost thou make of the
17 scholars' tale?"

18 "M'thinks it strangely coincidental they arrived
19 in my alley, just appeared in all honesty--today of all
20 days--and say they want to learn about a railroad
21 under the ground."

22 "Actually, I chose 1832 because of the New
23 England Anti-Slavery Association," offered Connie.

24 Sully stood up quickly. "Who are you? Who's
25 paying you to spy on us?" The fear he had first felt
26 when he realized he was not alone in the alley
27 returned. "I shouldn't have left the alley unguarded!
28 How could I have been so stupid as to trust these
29 juvenile traitors?" Sully berated himself aloud.

30 "Calm down, Sully. I don't think these children
31 have told us everything, but I doubt they are spies."

1 ground railway thou mentioned?" Liberius
2 smoothly changed the subject.

3 Sully watched the faces of the four friends. He
4 knew Liberius was leading the intruders into
5 divulging information. He'd seen Liberius "play
6 dumb" in order to learn facts about possible
7 obstacles before transporting runaway slaves to
8 Canada. For the past five years, he'd been part of
9 the safe house network in New York. He'd never
10 lost a "pilgrim."

11 "It's the Underground Railroad," interjected
12 Jace, "At first, I thought it meant the subterranean
13 railroads built below the streets of New York. You
14 know, the subway."

15 "But I told him about Harriet Tubman and how
16 runaway slaves were helped to freedom by a
17 network of safe houses," added K.T.

18 "Sub-what? Harriet who?" Sully interjected
19 with a puzzled look on his face. He was beginning
20 to think the four were certain to be sent to
21 Blackwell's Island if they continued to speak such
22 lunacy. "What kind of fool would put a steam
23 locomotive beneath the earth?"

24 Liberius laughed out loud. "Railroads under
25 the streets! We're trying to convince the city
26 officials to build sewers and waterworks that give
27 clean water, not the filth from the former swamp
28 upon which our fine borough sits. All they approve
29 is more brick tenement houses, five, six stories high
30 where greedy landlords cram as many poor
31 immigrants as possible the moment they disembark

1 Sully whistled to the team and the massive
2 Percherons cantered down the cobblestone pavement
3 of Pearl Street toward Broadway and the home of
4 Sully's friend, a freed slave named Liberius
5 Chapman.

6 As Sully expected. Liberius opened his home at
7 once to the four strangers. Liberius provided cloaks
8 for the three young ladies and closeted all four of
9 them in a secure room high atop his two and a half
10 story wood frame town home. Here they could
11 survey the city without being seen.

12 Their gracious host had offered fine English tea
13 in Adams china teacups with crumpets and jam.
14 Liberius was only twenty-five, but he had already
15 made a fortune as a merchant with a good head for
16 business.

17 Sully watched the faces of the youths as they
18 introduced themselves. The blond with the bright
19 smile was aptly named "Summer," thought Sully.
20 The brave warrior was K.T. and her tall friend was
21 named Consuela, though they called her Connie.
22 Jace was the athletic boy whom Sully could see was
23 very protective of Summer. Jace had never left her
24 side since Sully had lifted her from the wagon into
25 her chair.

26 Sully listened as his friend, Liberius, began to
27 question the four strangers.

28 "Tell me, now that thou art comfortable and
29 free to speak, how thou came to be in Five Points in
30 such a state of disarray." Liberius' Quaker language
31 and mannerisms seemed especially suited to his tall

1 dark frame and calm face, but he sounded more like
2 a man in his fifties than one in his twenties.

3 “Sir, we’re dressed like we always dress,” K.T.
4 answered without trying to hide her exasperation.
5 “But if thou want us to wear these cloaks, we will.
6 We just need to get some information for a report
7 we’re...”

8 Summer interrupted K.T. “We’re students and
9 we were given an assignment to research
10 immigration or the Underground Railroad and write
11 newspaper articles about the topic.” K.T. and Jace
12 began to argue.

13 Neither one could be understood as they talked
14 over each other. Summer rolled her chair to position
15 herself between her two friends.

16 Summer gave K.T. and Jace long looks. They
17 clamped their mouths shut and glared at each other.
18 “We are supposed to work as a team.” She glanced
19 at K.T. and Jace. “But we kept getting into
20 arguments about which topic would make better
21 newspaper articles.”

22 Both Jace and K.T. started to protest, but
23 snapped their mouths shut when Summer frowned at
24 them sternly. She continued, “So Connie suggested
25 we observe evidence of both topics in New York
26 City. We are in New York, aren’t we?”

27 Sully shot a glance at Liberius, but remained
28 quiet. Summer’s answer raised alarms in Sully’s
29 mind. What school allowed girls and boys to work
30 together as a team or even be in the same course of
31 study?

1 “This is Manhattan, the southern tip of the
2 island named New York. There are four other
3 boroughs surrounding us. New York is a huge city
4 of over 180,000 people, many of whom are
5 immigrants or first- generation Americans like
6 Sully,” Liberius spoke softly.

7 “We all come from immigrant stock,” Summer
8 rejoined evenly.

9 “Yes, but not all came willingly to this great
10 nation. I was born a slave on a sugar cane plantation
11 near New Orleans. During the War of 1812, I was
12 orphaned and my owners went bankrupt. A
13 childless Quaker couple found me and bought me in
14 order to give me freedom. We moved to
15 Philadelphia where I was-” he paused, “more or less
16 accepted.”

17 Liberius took a sip of tea. “At fifteen, I
18 convinced my adopted parents to allow me to
19 apprentice as a deck hand on the barges traveling the
20 newly opened canals in New York. At eighteen, I
21 was captain of one of the first barges on the Erie
22 Canal. At twenty, I formed my own shipping
23 company.”

24 Sully could see on the faces of K.T., Connie,
25 Jace and Summer the same look of incredulity and
26 admiration that he had felt when he had first heard
27 Liberius’ story.

28 “The last five years have allowed me to further
29 my prosperity and share it with others. I believe
30 everyone should have the freedom to make a life of
31 their choosing in America. Now, what is this below-