

BACKPACK ADVENTURES

Episode 6

“Midnight at the Marble Tomb”

The first full moon of summer illuminated the bend in the river like a floodlight. Six figures stood or sat facing the river on a wide pier that formed an oasis of space in the thicket along the banks. A narrow, gravel road led away from the pier like a lifeline back into the small town, sleeping and quiet, a mile away. The fishing pier was just a short walk from Travis and Summer’s house. The road passed by an old, abandoned cemetery over-run with grape vines and bushes. It was an eerie place, but not so scary to walk by in a group of six. The figures were as still as the tombstones that lay partially hidden by the moon shadows of tall pines.

K.T. peered out over the river, trying to see where the fishing line met the dark, swirling water. She didn’t understand why her two best friends, Connie and Summer, had begged to come along with the boys in their Backpack Club to fish the river in the moonlight. It was boring enough in the daylight. The rickety, old boards of the fishing pier were rough and splintery—not much fun to sit on. She was tired of standing.

Summer and Connie were perfectly content. They whispered as they held their fishing rods pointed toward the water. The two were having fun even though they hadn’t had a nibble in over an hour.

“The river’s beautiful in the moonlight,” whispered Summer.

“Yeah, I’m glad we convinced Roman and Travis to invite all the sixth-grade Club members to go fishing tonight,” agreed Connie.

Connie’s brother, Roman, sat next to her, toying with his reel. He and his best friend, Travis, had looked forward to this “full moon fishing trip” for two weeks.

Roman and Travis were eighth-graders and hadn’t really wanted a bunch of noisy sixth-graders joining them. Both their sisters, Connie and Summer, insisted on coming and bringing K.T. and Jace, too. And to tell the truth, Roman thought, the girls baited their own hooks and fished as well as the boys. K.T. was the only one who griped about fishing, but she tagged along anyway. She just had a hard time sitting still.

Roman glanced at Jace, the only sixth-grade boy member of the Backpack Club. He had been fishing for two hours without a nibble, but he never complained.

Travis sat on the other side of Jace and was fiddling with the worms. He hadn't caught anything either, but that was probably because he kept pulling his line in to check the bait on the hook. He cast again and checked his watch. Eleven-twenty. The moon was now directly overhead. In a few minutes they would have to walk back. His parents had told the Club not to stay out past midnight—which was the time his dad had promised to drive the other children home.

"Isn't it about time to head back?" queried K.T., breaking the silence. She set down her rod and began doing jumping jacks, shaking the weathered planks and bouncing all five of her friends. "I need to move!"

A chorus of "be still" and "stop that" assailed K.T., and she reluctantly stopped jumping.

"You can walk back anytime you want," drawled Travis, who had little patience for K.T.'s antics. "Nobody forced you to come."

"Oh, hush, Travis. You know none of us would walk back alone past the cemetery, not even you," taunted Summer.

"K.T., can't you just enjoy the moonlight and the water? Isn't this the most romantic spot on Earth? The moon's so bright we can even see our shadows!"

"If you don't want to fish, just play a game on your BPC," suggested Jace. K.T. was the only one who had carried her backpack to the fishing pier. The BPC was a computer inside a backpack that allowed the friends to travel in space and time as well as communicate with each other.

K.T. smiled. She grabbed the keypad that hung from her backpack. "That's a great idea, Jace. Thanks." K.T. began to type. "Let's see if I can come up with this *exact* spot using the BPC. Most romantic and beautiful place on Earth. Full moon. River runs by it. Crowded." She stopped as if to think. "Oh yeah, it's almost midnight and there's a tomb next door. Well, that should..."

"K.T., watch it!" Travis screamed, frantically reeling in his line. K.T.'s fishing line had drifted into the others, and her pole was being dragged to the edge of the pier. With a loud splash it fell into the water as the others struggled to hold onto their rods. Only Travis had managed to keep his line free from the snag.

K.T. grabbed onto Summer's arm to help her hold her rod. The keypad slammed into Summer's rod, and a burst of brilliantly colored light enveloped the pier.

Travis looked around him. His friends had disappeared, rods and all. The only things left with him on the pier were his fishing rod and the worms. Then he noticed something lying on the pier, reflecting the moonlight: the broken bits of K.T.'s keypad.

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As blinding light blasted the darkness, the five friends struggled to hold onto their rods and each other. All knew what was happening: the time/matter/relator device had been activated in K.T.'s BPC. No one knew why or where—or *when*—they were headed. The familiar swirling colors and winds surrounded the group for a few brief seconds that seemed like hours before they jolted to a halt on solid ground.

They had landed by a river—much wider than where they had stood on the fishing pier. The lights of a city filled the night sky, but the brilliant full moon was still visible overhead. The insect buzz of the wooded riverbank gave way to the hum of human voices. Their rods were a tangled mess on the ground beside them. They stood on a well-kept lawn that led right to the river's edge.

K.T. turned around and gasped, but no words escaped. The others pivoted to see what had made K.T. speechless. They stood gazing at a majestic, white building with spires and domes that towered above them.

At that moment, a policeman noticed the small group and ran over to them, shouting. They couldn't understand him. K.T. glanced at her backpack. The keypad was gone. Only a jagged edge of plastic dangled from the clip that had connected the keypad to the pack. That meant the translating software that let them travel to other countries without a language barrier was unavailable to them.

"Stay calm," Roman muttered as he noticed the shattered keypad.

Roman stepped up to meet the policeman who was dressed in a khaki uniform and black beret. "Hello, officer. My five friends and I were just trying to do a little fishing."

"Four. There are four," answered the small built man in English. He was not much taller than Roman. "You are foreign visitors? Can't you read the notices? No fishing." He picked up the rods, took a knife, and cut the lines at the rod tips, gathering the hook ends into a tangled mess.

Roman scanned his friends and realized Travis was not with them. His eyes locked with Summer's, and he knew she had missed her brother too. The grim realization that they were stranded far from home was written across their faces.

The policeman thrust the rods into Roman's hands and shoved the ball of tangled line at K.T. "You should learn to read and to count. Now, take your things and return to the sidewalk. The only thing you can catch here is one of the last buses back to your hotel. The Taj will be closing at midnight. Go now to the bus stop!"

The policeman pointed to a low-slung building several hundred yards away. It looked like an anthill with all the dark figures swarming around it. He abruptly turned and ran toward a large group of tourists who were streaming across the grass, ignoring the sidewalks.

"Let's go around to the other side while we have a chance," shouted Summer, pushing the throttle on her motorized wheelchair to full power. "We can talk when we get there. I think I know what happened!"

Halfway up the long walkway that led to the front of the building, Summer stopped her friends, who were breathless from keeping up with her. By now, all were aware that Travis was not with them and the keypad was useless.

"K.T., when we were on the pier, you were typing place descriptors, but you gave no coordinates, did you?" asked Summer. K.T. shook her head violently. "Well, I think the descriptors you typed programmed the BPC to fix co-ordinates for the Taj Mahal: romantic, beautiful, moonlight, by a river, crowded." She paused and added quietly, "Tomb."

"I wasn't trying to send us anywhere!" groaned K.T.

"We all know it was an accident. The lines got tangled, and the keypad must have activated when it crashed into my rod," surmised Summer. "Since we were all connected, we were all transported. Except Travis. His line wasn't tangled with ours."

"Don't worry," comforted Roman patting Summer's shoulder. "Your brother will figure out how to help us."

"Yeah, I know. I'm just thinking about him walking back home by himself. At least, we've got each other, even if we *are* thousands of miles from home. The way it looks around here, you could never get lonely in India," Summer commented as another horde of tourists approached them along the shadowy walkway.

“Well, let’s go see what everyone who traveled here on purpose came to see,” suggested Roman. “The most romantic tomb on Earth.”

“As long as we stay together so Travis can find us all,” added Connie as they struggled to move through the crowds that walked in the opposite direction.

“Yeah, don’t leave me,” yelled Jace, grabbing the back of Summer’s chair.

After skirting a high wall, they finally reached the front of the monument. When they rounded the minaret-topped corner, they gazed in awe at the beauty of the Taj Mahal: four long, dark reflecting pools bisecting manicured, formal gardens that lined broad, stone walkways.

And there, at the end of the grounds, stood the white marble mausoleum, glowing gently beneath the moon as if the dome were the source of the brilliant light. It was so massive and yet so perfectly proportioned that it seemed surreal.

“Do you think we can go inside?” asked Summer breathlessly.

“Let’s find out,” answered K.T. as she led the group toward the ornate front entrance.

Just then a policeman began to herd people away from the entrance. They could hear a recording announcing the closing of the Taj Mahal since the 11:30 tour, the last one of the night, had been sold out. First in English, then in an Indian language, then French, then Jace recognized Chinese. On and on the recording droned in various languages as more police led ever-increasing numbers of visitors away from the doorways.

The friends found themselves caught in a river of people once more, and they struggled to hold onto one another. Jace hooked onto the back of Summer’s chair with Connie holding his shoulders. K.T. clung tight behind Connie. Roman lugged the fishing rods in his left arm and kept his right hand on K.T.’s shoulder. They looked like a funny conga line as they inched toward the bus stop with people of every race and nationality.

“I’m afraid Travis won’t be able to transport us if we stay in this crowd,” worried Roman. “Let’s try to get some space around us. Look, across the street. That looks like a park.”

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“Shahjahan Park,” Jace read on the bronze plaque embedded in the stone column that marked the entrance to a park that was a mixture of tall leafy trees and coarse pathways. Flowering bushes crowded below the trees and stretched thorny limbs into the pathways, scratching the youths as they tried to find a clearing to stop and rest. Summer’s wheelchair was

having a hard time rolling over the trash that littered the mucky paths. Finally they reached a shallow clearing and huddled together.

“Looks like this is not the best place to wait,” muttered Roman as he slapped at a mosquito. “I sure hope Travis has made it home and is working on a rescue!”

“It’s amazing a park can smell so bad! What *is* that stench?” asked K.T. holding her nose.

“You don’t want to know, K.T.” answered Jace. “Think about it: lots of people, no public bathrooms, nice wooded area...”

“Yeah, this is not a very sanitary place. Be careful where you step. I thought I saw a hypodermic needle on the path,” warned Connie.

“It’s not just where you step,” added Summer. “Disgusting trash was hanging in those bushes that kept trying to gouge me! Ugh!”

“OK, OK, so this was not the best place to rest. It gives me the creeps too. I don’t like the sounds coming from behind those bushes, either. Let’s head back to the bus stop,” said Roman. “Drat these bugs!”

“How do we get out of here?” Jace whimpered.

When the friends emerged, it was at another gate that opened onto the winding, crowded thoroughfare along the river. They could also see a long, narrow alleyway that led straight back to the bus stop. At the far end of the alley, a neon sign read “Agra Bus Line.” The white rooftops of the Taj could be seen behind it in the distance.

“OK, that’s the bus stop—probably the best place for us to wait. Let’s take this short cut. Just stay together!” Roman said as he carried the fishing rods like spears and led the way into the alley.

The smell of the Shahjahan Park was like perfume compared to the alley. Animals of all kinds – camels, donkeys, goats, sheep – were clustered by slightly recessed doorways that served as holding pens. The narrow street was once paved, but now Summer’s wheel chair had to dodge potholes filled with murky water and clumps of camel dung. The hodgepodge of two- and three-story buildings was a jumble of shops, homes, stables, and flophouses.

There seemed to be a festival going on—brightly colored banners waved from the building rooftops. Even at this late hour, shops were open and vendors sold all variety of products from tiny kiosks attached to the ancient stone buildings. Summer fought the urge to

wretch as she passed a stand with fruit and vegetables covered with gnats that a toothless woman swatted away with a rolled up newspaper. Above the fruit, dead chickens hung upside down, feathers and all.

Next to the fruit stand, a butcher shop displayed what looked in the dim light to be leg of lamb (with fresh meat available on demand, judging by the bleating sounds coming from the stall).

Across from the butcher, the acrid smell of shrimp, mussels and other shellfish permeated the night air as the fish vendor stirred a thick, iron pot over the tiny flame of a dung fire.

“Shrimp curry?” the vendor called, “Raw oysters?”

“Can’t we move a little faster?” pleaded Summer as they snaked their way through the crowded lane. “I don’t like this shortcut.”

“We’re going as fast as we can,” answered Roman, who was leading the way with Jace.

Jace’s attention was drawn to an open doorway where he could see a young woman who was holding her hand over her mouth. As they passed, Jace could hear the unmistakable sound of vomiting, and he fought the desire to look back and see if the young woman was all right.

“Keep moving, Jace,” advised Summer as she followed the boys. “There’s nothing we can do.”

Suddenly, the sound of splattering water erupted beside Connie’s feet. She jumped back and nearly fell over K.T. as a gush of water spewed from a pipe eight feet high on a wall. It seemed to lead from living quarters, and Connie hated to think what was in that water. No one on the street seemed to notice it. As she looked up, Connie saw pipes jutting from the walls above her with no place for their contents to go but into the street.

Just then a little girl of about five came and pulled on Connie’s arm, her palm outstretched. Connie was startled by how hot the child felt, how her lip quivered. Her big, brown eyes looked tired and drawn, and she moved as if her body ached. When Connie shook her head, the tiny girl disappeared into a darkened doorway.

K.T. was trying not to stare as an elderly man in the next doorway clutched his stomach in obvious pain. She tapped Connie’s shoulder and mouthed silently, “What’s wrong with him?” Connie simply shrugged, and both girls looked down in bitter helplessness.

A woman with a soft voice spoke directly behind them. “Don’t worry about all you see, children. If you think of the enormity of it, it will drive you crazy.”

K.T. and Connie turned to face the woman. She was a slender woman, in her thirties, with a long coal-black braid and deep, dark eyes framed by thick lashes. She wore a white, doctor's coat that stuck out from the traditional Indian garb like the Taj Mahal contrasted with this stinking alley.

"Are you a doctor?" asked Connie and K.T. simultaneously.

"Yes, I am. I work at the district hospital not far from here. A health care professional could work twenty-four hours a day and not make a dent in the sickness that plagues these streets."

She gave the girls a grim smile, and they called to the others to meet their new friend, Dr. Patel.

Roman told her they were headed to the bus stop—which was the truth—and thankfully she asked them no more questions. People in India, it seemed, were accustomed to seeing children on the streets alone.

They were halfway up the alley now, and the shops were a little larger. Signs above arched doorways advertised "Acupuncture" or "Tattoos." In front of one shop, a thin young man sat with his head in his hands as a tattoo artist pricked an intricate design across his back.

"He's so fatigued that he's oblivious to the needles and ink in his back," muttered the young doctor to Roman and Jace. As if he heard, the emaciated young man raised his head and stared at them with yellowed eyes.

"Jaundice," whispered the doctor. "Probably hepatitis." She raised her voice, "I know you had to have all your vaccinations before entering India since we are still considered a developing country. Isn't that correct?" The Backpack Club looked at each other with raised eyebrows, weak smiles and hesitant nods.

"My stop is at the next building—a woman my age with liver cancer. She is beyond my help, but I have become her last friend. I bring drugs to ease the pain. Safe travels to you, young friends. Stay healthy! And watch out for the body piercing shop in the next block. They are notorious for luring young people into their store." The young doctor ducked as she entered a ramshackle building with a sign that said "Hotel."

"Body piercing doesn't really appeal to me anyway," Roman remarked as they neared the next building. "How about you, Jace?"

Before Jace could answer, a beautiful young woman dressed in a silky sari and displaying several body piercings of her own glided out of the building to stand directly in front of Roman. She held a gleaming gold hoop in one hand and a glittering diamond stud in the other. In the squalor of the alley, the jewelry worked like a mirror, catching the radiance of the moon and flashing it back into Roman's eyes. The woman said no word, but her meaning was clear.

Roman coughed and laughed at the same time. "No money," he said shaking his head. "No money."

The woman whispered in his ear, her voice deep and husky, "You have other things you could use to buy with." She pointed to the sign above the shop, on the second floor. In six-inch letters, barely visible from the street, it said: FREE WILL CLINIC—BLOOD BANK—ORGAN DONATIONS.

Roman shuddered and turned quickly from the woman. "Come on, Jace. Let's get the girls out of here!" For the first time in the alleyway, Roman was not only disgusted, he was scared.

They picked up the speed, anxious now to get to the safety of the bus stop. They were all curious to know what luck Travis was having in finding them. Had their parents found out now about their secret?

As they passed a relatively clean-looking building at the end of the street with the word "Clinic" painted on the window, Roman wondered who would come to this street for dental or medical or surgical procedures? How could you trust the equipment or the blood transfusions? But then, what alternative did these people have?

The bus stop was still bustling, so they walked out into the plaza facing the Taj Mahal. Their journey through the park and the notorious alley shortcut had taken only about twenty minutes, but it seemed like a lifetime. Summer was the first to voice what was on each one's mind.

"In just ten minutes, Dad is going to start looking for us. If Travis can't locate us by then, he'll have to tell Dad all about the BPC."

"I'm sure Travis can find us—he found K.T. once before," stated Roman with confidence as the others murmured their agreement. "K.T., let's be sure the backpack computer is on full power."

K.T. handed her backpack over to Roman who had designed the original BPC. He adjusted a few keys and checked the power settings.

“Come on, Travis, find us,” Roman said softly, setting the backpack down in the middle of the group.

A sudden lightning flash of color filled the plaza around the circle of friends. Travis, visibly shaking, smiled with relief to see Summer and the others. A shout of joy greeted the lone traveler as his friends converged on him with hugs and back slaps.

“Ok, Ok, take it easy. We’ve still got to get back before Dad misses us. I’ve set the coordinates for the barn behind the house so we won’t have far to walk. Everyone hold hands.”

Travis gave orders that the others were only too eager to follow. The circle of six grasped each other’s hands.

“Now!” yelled Travis as he pressed three buttons at once.

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“Travis! Summer!” yelled Dr. Allen from the back door. He could just make out six figures moving up from the river road near the horse barns. He had waited up till midnight to let them have the adventure of fishing under the full moon, but now it was time to be home.

“Coming, Dad!” “Almost there.”

Dr. Allen could hear his children hollering back their answer. He went out to start the van.

As they reached the driveway and climbed into the waiting van, Summer said, “I’m going to go into the house instead of loading my chair in the van. I’ve had enough fun for one night.”

“Well, OK, if you want,” Dr. Allen replied, adding, “It sure is nice you kids can have fun close to home.”

They all exploded with laughter.

“We appreciate being close to home now more than ever, Dr. Allen,” Roman answered. “We truly do.”