

Backpack Adventures Series

*Midnight at
the Marble
Tomb*

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.

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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 adventure of fishing under the full moon, but now it
2 was time to be home.

3 "Coming, Dad!" "Almost there."

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

6 As they reached the driveway and climbed
7 into the waiting van, Summer said, "I'm going to go
8 into the house instead of loading my chair in the
9 van. I've had enough fun for one night."

10 "Well, OK, if you want," Dr. Allen replied,
11 adding, "It sure is nice you kids can have fun close
12 to home."

13 They all exploded with laughter.

14 "We appreciate being close to home now
15 more than ever, Dr. Allen," Roman answered. "We
16 truly do."

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

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

8 "Come on, Travis, find us," Roman said
9 softly, setting the backpack down in the middle of
10 the group.

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

17 "OK, OK, take it easy. We've still got to get
18 back before Dad misses us. I've set the co-ordinates
19 for the barn behind the house so we won't have far
20 to walk. Everyone hold hands."

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

24 "Now!" yelled Travis as he pressed three
25 buttons at once.

26

27
28 "Travis! Summer!" yelled Dr. Allen from the
29 back door. He could just make out six figures
30 moving up from the river road near the horse barns.
31 He had waited up till midnight to let them have the

Midnight at the Marble Tomb

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

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

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

1 "The river's beautiful in the moonlight,"
2 whispered Summer.

3 "Yeah, I'm glad we convinced Roman and
4 Travis to invite all the sixth-grade Club members to
5 go fishing tonight," agreed Connie.

6 Connie's brother, Roman, sat next to her,
7 toying with his reel. He and his best friend, Travis,
8 had looked forward to this "full moon fishing trip"
9 for two weeks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

17 “Body piercing doesn’t really appeal to me
18 anyway,” Roman remarked as they neared the next
19 building. “How about you, Jace?”

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

30 Roman coughed and laughed at the same time.
31 “No money,” he said shaking his head. “No money.”

1 the time his dad had promised to drive the other
2 children home.

3 “Isn’t it about time to head back?” queried
4 K.T., breaking the silence. She set down her rod and
5 began doing jumping jacks, shaking the weathered
6 planks and bouncing all five of her friends. “I need
7 to move!”

8 A chorus of “be still” and “stop that” assailed
9 K.T., and she reluctantly stopped jumping.

10 “You can walk back anytime you want,”
11 drawled Travis, who had little patience for K.T.’s
12 antics. “Nobody forced you to come.”

13 “Oh, hush, Travis. You know none of us
14 would walk back alone past the cemetery, not even
15 you,” taunted Summer.

16 “K.T., can’t you just enjoy the moonlight and
17 the water? Isn’t this the most romantic spot on
18 Earth? The moon’s so bright we can even see our
19 shadows!”

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

26 K.T. smiled. She grabbed the keypad that
27 hung from her backpack. “That’s a great idea, Jace.
28 Thanks.” K.T. began to type. “Let’s see if I can
29 come up with this *exact* spot using the BPC. Most
30 romantic and beautiful place on Earth. Full moon.
31 River runs by it. Crowded.” She stopped as if to

1 think. “Oh yeah, it’s almost midnight and there’s a
2 tomb next door. Well, that should...”

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

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

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

20
21

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

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

7 “Are you a doctor?” asked Connie and K.T.
8 simultaneously.

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

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

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

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

27 “He’s so fatigued that he’s oblivious to the
28 needles and ink in his back,” muttered the young
29 doctor to Roman and Jace. As if he heard, the
30 emaciated young man raised his head and stared at
31 them with yellowed eyes.

1 passed, Jace could hear the unmistakable sound of
2 vomiting, and he fought the desire to look back and
3 see if the young woman was all right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

23 “Stay calm,” Roman muttered as he noticed
24 the shattered keypad.

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

29 “Four. There are four,” answered the small
30 built man in English. He was not much taller than
31 Roman. “You are foreign visitors? Can’t you read

1 the notices? No fishing.” He picked up the rods,
2 took a knife, and cut the lines at the rod tips,
3 gathering the hook ends into a tangled mess.

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

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

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

22 “Let’s go around to the other side while we
23 have a chance,” shouted Summer, pushing the
24 throttle on her motorized wheelchair to full power.
25 “We can talk when we get there. I think I know
26 what happened!”

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

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

1 "Yeah, this is not a very sanitary place. Be
2 careful where you step. I thought I saw a hypo-
3 dermic needle on the path," warned Connie.

4 "It's not just where you step," added Summer.
5 "Disgusting trash was hanging in those bushes that
6 kept trying to gouge me! Ugh!"

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

12 "How do we get out of here?" Jace
13 whimpered.

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

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

25 The smell of the Shahjahan Park was like
26 perfume compared to the alley. Animals of all
27 kinds—camels, donkeys, goats, sheep—were
28 clustered by slightly recessed doorways that served
29 as holding pens. The narrow street was once paved,
30 but now Summer's wheelchair had to dodge
31 potholes filled with murky water and clumps of

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

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

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

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

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

27 "Well, let's go see what everyone who
28 traveled here on purpose came to see," suggested
29 Roman. "The most romantic tomb on Earth."

30 "As long as we stay together so Travis can
31 find us all," added Connie as they struggled to move

1 through the crowds that walked in the opposite
2 direction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 The friends found themselves caught in a river
30 of people once more, and they struggled to hold onto
31 one another. Jace hooked onto the back of Summer's

1 chair with Connie holding his shoulders. K.T. clung
2 tight behind Connie. Roman lugged the fishing rods
3 in his left arm and kept his right hand on K.T.’s
4 shoulder. They looked like a funny conga line as
5 they inched toward the bus stop with people of every
6 race and nationality.

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

11
12

13 “Shahjahan Park,” Jace read on the bronze
14 plaque embedded in the stone column that marked
15 the entrance to a park that was a mixture of tall leafy
16 trees and coarse pathways. Flowering bushes
17 crowded below the trees and stretched thorny limbs
18 into the pathways, scratching the youths as they tried
19 to find a clearing to stop and rest. Summer’s
20 wheelchair was having a hard time rolling over the
21 trash that littered the mucky paths. Finally they
22 reached a shallow clearing and huddled together.

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

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

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