

# BACKPACK ADVENTURES

## Episode 8

### *“March Madness”*

Choppy gray waves broke against the nearly deserted beach and a chill wind peppered the few remaining tourists with sand as they struggled to load toys, towels, chairs and children into the safety of their vehicles.

Connie shivered and pulled her windbreaker tight over her wet bathing suit. Goose bumps covered her long brown legs and her teeth began to chatter. She drew her jacket hood over her straight black hair.

“C-Can’t w-w-we w-walk back to your grandmother’s b-beach house?” Connie stuttered. “W-we’ve been looking for an hour and n-n-not found anything exciting. You’re crazy to stay out in this weather.”

K.T. seemed oblivious to the change in the weather. She had finally persuaded her best friend, Connie, to come out of the water once the clouds began to gather and the warm, sunny March morning turned into a dismal, cold front afternoon.

“I’ve waited for 11 weeks for the chance to use my new metal detector. I was crazy to wait while you swam and boogie-boarded all morning. Give me a few more minutes while I search for buried treasure. Here, you can wear my towel to keep you warm.” K.T. handed her big beach towel to Connie and immediately regretted her generosity. Her lightweight cover-up was no match for the easterly wind.

“Let’s go behind that big dune across from the pier. Maybe there’s more stuff up in the dunes. Ten more minutes and I promise we’ll go back.” K. T. pointed straight ahead and held the detector before her like a dog on a leash. She felt sand filling her beach shoes as she struggled up the dune.

Connie wrapped the towel around her and gave a sigh of resignation. She knew it was no good to argue with K.T. when she had a mission to accomplish.

K.T. dropped behind the dune and held the metal detector out over the white sands. She walked a few feet down the slope and felt the stored warmth of the morning sun seeping from the top layer of sand. Connie slid down the backside of the dune, nearly

bowling K.T. over. Her rubber sandals dug a trench down the slope and exposed the damp brown sand a few inches below the surface.

Suddenly, the metal detector's alarm sounded over one of Connie's skid marks. Both girls jumped. K.T. took a small pink plastic scoop out of the pocket of her cover-up. She scraped away the moist sand and found the corner of something sharp and hard.

Connie joined her in brushing away the bits of broken shells and packed sand. Her fingers ached with cold, but she dug her fingernail along the edge of the object, tracing its rectangular outline. Soon, the girls had uncovered the top half of a small wooden box with a corroded metal clasp and metal corners. Remnants of a heavy fabric still clung to the splintered wood. Neither girl had spoken, their breath coming in heavy pants as they struggled to free the box.

The box made a soft sucking noise as K.T. dislodged it. She handed the box to Connie and swung the detector over the hole they had created. It made no other sounds.

"That must be all of it," K. T. said disappointedly. As if cued by the letdown in her voice, a light misty rain began to fall.

"Come on, K.T. It's time to go back to your granny's. We can open this great treasure there. I'm ready to get warm and dry!"

"Might as well go back," complained K.T. "The beach is a typical spring-break-rainy-day-washout anyway. March is a crazy time for spring break. Spring break should be in July!"

As the girls trudged over the dune, the rain intensified, obliterating their tracks.

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K.T. and Connie huddled together under a flannel blanket, enjoying the warmth of dry clothes. They had placed a towel on the floor and set the sandy box on top. Gently, Connie picked away bits of the rotten fabric. K.T. tried to pry the metal clasp open, but the whole lock fell apart in rusty crumbs. K.T. held her breath as she lifted the lid and looked inside. A faded yellow silk bag lay alone in the box, the strings of its pouch closure still taut.

K.T. lifted the bag and was surprised by its heavy, lopsided feel. She sat staring at it, imagining rare coins and jewels.

“Open it,” commanded Connie. “Your grandmother’s note said she’d be back from the doctor any time now. She may not let us keep this in the house.”

“OK, OK,” K.T. answered, her hands trembling as she pulled the bag open with two fingers. She upended the bag and spilled the contents onto the towel. Three newspaper clippings, a military medal and a slim diamond ring fell from their shared hiding place.

“Bingo!” cried K.T., as she held the ring up to the light. A tiny diamond still shone in a dull white gold band. A delicate filigreed design was etched along the ring’s edge.

Connie examined the medal. A red, white and blue grosgrain ribbon was attached to a cross with ornate tips. On top of the cross, an eagle, encircled by a wreath, spread wide its wings.

“I wonder who this belonged to,” mused Connie.

“Must have been a child because this ring is too tiny to fit me, except maybe on my pinky.”

Connie carefully laid the medal down and picked up a clipping. It felt brittle in her hands. “I don’t think so, K.T. These clippings are from 1918. Listen to these headlines: ‘Soldier Missing From Galveston Pier. Local Debutante Last to See Him.’ ‘Miss Dodd Arrested as Murder Suspect.’ ‘Mistrial Declared in Cooper Murder, Body Never Recovered, Dodd Freed.’

“What’s a debutante?”

“I’m not sure. Let me see if it says in the article.”

As Connie read the article aloud, K.T. reached to find the backpacks she and Connie always carried with them. She felt inside for the special computer that allowed travel through space and time. K.T. began to form a plan.

August 2, 1918

#### **Soldier Missing From Galveston Pier Local Debutante Last to See Him**

Galveston police authorities have confirmed that a local son, Lieutenant Arlis Cooper, US Army, is believed to be missing from a pier at Galveston’s east end. On July 31, at 11 o’clock p.m., a fisherman saw a couple stroll to the end of the pier and talk. The young lady was recognized by the fisherman from this paper’s recent photographs of leading socialite debutantes at the annual Debutante Ball as Miss Anna Ruth Dodd, only child of Dr. and Mrs. Josiah Dodd. The fisherman, Rufus Jones, saw Miss Dodd running from the pier a few moments later and then heard a call for help from the pier. Police have been unable to identify any other witnesses. Nor have they found the body of Cooper, living or deceased.

Colonel and Mrs. Hannibal Cooper have not seen their son since the evening of July 31 when he told them he was going to deliver a message of condolence to Miss Dodd, a longtime classmate. Miss Dodd had recently been distraught to learn of the death of another classmate, Private Johnny Schmidt, son of German immigrants, Rolf and Bertha Schmidt, who own a small meat packing business.

Miss Dodd has admitted to being with Lieutenant Cooper on the night in question, but has no idea what may have happened to him. She suggested he left to avoid being shipped back to France. Colonel Cooper has vehemently denied that such a vile suggestion has any validity.

Lieutenant Cooper and Private Schmidt joined the Army together by traveling to Camp Funston at Fort Riley, Kansas in February of this year, shortly before our own Texas National Guard was mobilized. Cooper received a commission as an officer due to his early military instruction. Anyone with knowledge of the whereabouts of Lieutenant Cooper should contact the authorities immediately.

As Connie finished reading the article, K.T. threw Connie her backpack, and slung her own backpack over her shoulder.

“You know where we’re going, don’t you?” K.T. asked, as she gathered the items back into the silk purse.

“East End Pier, Galveston, Texas, July 31, 1918 at 11 p.m.,” answered Connie, as she punched coordinates into the keypad for her computer.

K.T. compared the display on her computer to Connie’s and nodded. “Ready to solve a mystery before my grandmother gets back?”

“Ready,” Connie squeaked, as she pressed the keys, “or not!”

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When the swirl of rainbow lights settled on the sand behind the tall wooden pier, K.T. and Connie could make out in the moonlight the figure of a man tending to a small fishing boat just where the dunes began on the beach. The East End Pier was very much like the piers of the present day: wooden, covered in barnacles, moonlight slipping through the spaces between the boards. The rest of the Galveston beach was unrecognizable.

Before they had time to marvel at the changes in the beachfront, they heard voices coming toward the pier.

“Duck behind here,” whispered K.T., pulling Connie into a crouch below the pier. The girls grimaced as they felt the warm mucky water swirl above their knees and the silt and sand squish between their bare toes.

“O-O-O! It’s yucky under here and the water is so warm!” Connie complained. “I think a fish just bit my leg!”

“Hush, it’s only tiny crabs. You are never satisfied!” hissed K.T.

A couple clambered noisily up the deserted pier and headed to the very end. The man was young, barely eighteen, and wore a drab green Army uniform and heavy black boots. The woman was no more than sixteen and her long lacy skirts were of the finest material, soft and flowing, and just touching her ankles. Despite the heat, she clutched a brocade shawl around her shoulders like a shield. Her blond hair glowed in the moonlight and, even in its dim light, her beauty was evident. The girls could hear them talking, but couldn’t make out what they were saying.

“We’ve got to get closer,” K.T. decided. “Let’s wade out till the water drops off.”

“Where’s that?” Connie queried.

“We’ll find out, I guess.”

Connie rolled her eyes and followed K.T.’s dark figure out under the pier, closer and closer to the drop off. She tried not to think of the animals living under the pier where she couldn’t see. The girls reached the next to the last piling and felt the current change where the water deepened. K.T. motioned for Connie to stand still. They were almost directly beneath the couple now and could make out every word.

“What I really wanted to tell you was how I missed you while I was away, Annie, dear. Did you miss me? You must know how it pains me to tell you about Johnny’s last days. Johnny, the true-blue patriot, would want you to know the truth about his death. He was always such a stickler for doing the right thing, the foolish boy.” The young man’s voice dripped with sarcasm at these last words. He sneezed violently and blew his nose loudly into his handkerchief.

“I know all I need to know. His parents told me. They gave me his Distinguished Service Cross.” The young woman’s voice was nostalgic and calm. “There’s nothing you can do for me, Arlis, but leave me alone.”

“They gave you his Cross?” the man gasped. He was overcome with a coughing fit, his body shaking with every effort to catch his breath.

The girl recoiled from his coughing and from his comment. “Yes. Is that so surprising? His parents knew, it seems, even if mine did not, of our engagement to be married after the war.”

Arlis’ eyes were fierce as he sputtered through clenched teeth. “He didn’t deserve that medal. He didn’t even know what he was doing, the idiot. I ordered him to retreat. But no, Johnny wanted to be a hero. Once we reached France, he knew for sure he had come down with the Fort Riley fever. He was delirious, sweating, and shaking with chills. He knew he was as good as dead. He rushed forward to throw a grenade into a German trench, opening an escape route for one of our trapped platoons. He was disobeying orders, my orders, and they made him a hero.”

His anger made Arlis cough again and his body was wracked by deep rasping breaths. He fought to gain control and finish telling Annie how pathetic Johnny’s death had been. He wanted to hurt her now.

“He was shot through the leg, a minor wound that wouldn’t have killed him. The captain of the platoon that he helped nominated him for the DSC right there in that battlefield hospital. Even strangers could see he would die of the fever before he got off the battlefield. He died of some mundane respiratory tract infection, Annie. I guess I owe him my life because I got the infection from him so they sent me back home. But the fever didn’t kill me. And neither will the War. I am not going back.”

Annie had been staring in astonishment at Arlis. “You’re lying and you’re crazy! You’ve been jealous of Johnny ever since he moved here. His purity made your treachery all the more apparent to everyone. He considered you a friend even when you did nothing but compete with him and try to best him. Why he tolerated your presence, I’ll never know.” She turned to go and Arlis grabbed her shawl, stopping her.

“You ungrateful little brat! Your parents knew he wasn’t good enough for you. That’s why they told him to stay away from you.”

Annie clenched her fists. “Johnny left for Kansas so he could prove to my parents he was not a Kaiser-lover, but a patriotic American. You only followed him to keep competing, to show him up since your father could buy a commission for you,” accused Annie.

“Your betrothed, silly girl, didn’t have the good sense to stay well at Fort Riley. He laughed at all the folk remedies for warding off the fever: the onions in your bedding, the brown sugar sprinkled on hot coals, the whiskey toddies. He befriended flea-ridden dogs instead of shooting them outright. He washed dishes, Annie. He was a lowly private, the lowest of the low, a dishwasher. Maybe that’s how he spread the illness at first. Some said he was a German spy sent to bring the fever to us. Well, he got sick too. But he’s not laughing now.”

“You cad! You scoundrel! How dare you!” Annie raised her slender hand to slap Arlis, but he caught her wrist and twisted her hand back, pulling her closer. Annie struggled and freed herself from the shawl and his grasp. She ran all the way down the pier.

Arlis was seized by another coughing spell. He spit into her shawl and muttered, “I hope you get this fever too!” He stepped to the end of the pier and looked out over the water. “I’m leaving, do you hear me? I won’t go back,” he moaned, clutching the shawl. He reared back to throw the shawl into the sea and slipped on the slimy boards, bumping his head as he fell into the dark swirling waters at the end of the pier.

K.T. and Connie had been entranced, listening to the argument above them. When Arlis fell, their first reaction was to jump out of the way. Connie covered her eyes, but K.T. watched his body hit the deep water. K.T. started to swim to the spot where he had fallen, but Connie held her back.

“No, K.T., you’re not a lifeguard. We need to get help.”

“But we can’t be seen, or else how can we return?”

“I’ve already set my return coordinates. Call for help and then hold on to me. I’ll take us back.”

“Help! Help! He’s fallen in, he’s fallen...”

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K.T.’s breath was coming in gasps as she clung to Connie’s arm, rainbows of light swirling around them. They were back safely in her grandmother’s beach house, clothes dry, feet clean and warm.

“Quick, K.T., I want to read those other articles,” Connie demanded, as she slipped off her backpack and reached to help K.T. out of hers. “At least we know Annie didn’t kill Arlis.”

“Yeah, she didn’t even know he fell. I’m sure she thinks he went AWOL,” K.T. agreed.

“A wall? What’s that?” Connie asked.

“Not ‘a wall,’ but A-W-O-L. Absent Without Leave. It’s running away in the Army.”

“Well, I think he drowned. Did you hear those heavy boots?”

“Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t. Let’s check out the rest of the articles,” K.T. suggested, as she opened the yellow silk bag and took out three papers, the ring and the medal and laid them on the towel next to the broken bits of the box.

K.T. and Connie huddled together again under the blanket and read the yellowed clippings that told the story of Annie’s arrest and indictment for the alleged murder of Arlis Cooper in spite of the fact that Rufus Jones had seen her leave before he heard the call for help. “Our call,” K.T. had surmised ruefully. Annie’s tattered shawl had washed up on the beach a few days later, but no shred of Cooper ever surfaced.

The girls read about the mistrial caused by so many townspeople being ill that a jury could not be formed. Annie’s father tended the sick, then complained of body aches. He died while she was isolated in jail awaiting trial. The judge finally freed Annie at Christmas since there was no murder victim’s body and no one to be jurors.

As they were reading the last article, K.T.’s grandmother returned.

“Hello, anybody home? Sure is quiet in here!”

“Hey, Granny, we’re in here,” called K.T.

“Well, I’m back from the doctor and I’ve made it through another winter season without the flu or pneumonia, thanks to my flu shot.” Mrs. Watson took off her jacket and sat on the sofa behind the girls. “When you get to be elderly like me with chronic medical conditions, you don’t want to become just another number in an epidemic.”

“That’s right, Granny. We don’t want you to get some mean old viral infection and go into the hospital.” K.T. grinned up at her grandmother. “Then we couldn’t come stay with you at the beach house for spring break.”



“K.T., that’s not nice,” laughed Connie.

“Granny knows I’m just teasing her.”

“Say, what are you girls looking at and what trash did you drag off the beach into my house?”

“It’s not trash, Granny, it’s a mystery. See, here are three articles about a murder that happened in 1918.” K.T. showed her grandmother the fragile clippings. Mrs. Watson scanned the headlines and nodded.

“I remember my mother and Uncle Rufus talking about this event when I was a little girl. Crazy Annie was in her forties then. She was all alone in that great big house after her mother died.”

“Uncle Rufus? Am I related to the fisherman in the story?” asked K.T. incredulously.

“No, child. Uncle Rufus was just a neighbor, but we all called him Uncle out of respect. He always felt bad that Crazy Annie had to go to jail even for a short while, though it might have saved her life. Everyone said that Annie was never the same after the terrible events of that fall. So much sadness.” Mrs. Watson laid the clippings tenderly onto the floor by K.T. “Where did you girls find these papers?”

K.T. handed the silk bag to her grandmother. “Inside this silk bag, inside this box buried in a sand dune down by...”

“The East End Pier,” Connie and K.T. said simultaneously, while exchanging knowing smiles.

“This ring and this medal were in the bag too, Mrs. Watson,” Connie said, handing the two treasures to her. They must belong to, um, somebody.” Connie caught herself just as K.T. gave her a gentle prod with her elbow. To whom they belonged was not something you could know from the articles.

“Well, I’ll declare, girls, you have solved a mystery. When I was about your age, in 1948, my sisters and I were out looking for stuff on the beach. I was just like you, K.T. We came up on Crazy Annie digging in a sand dune near East End Pier. She kept ranting on about ‘He stole it. He stole my treasure box. He came back from the dead and stole my treasure box with my ring and my medal.’ We ran away and told Momma. That’s when Momma had Uncle Rufus, who was about the age I am now, tell us the story

behind Crazy Annie so we wouldn't make fun of her or think ill of her. She lost her heart. Then she lost her mind. Kept searching on that beach for the next 30 years. Guess she forgot where she herself buried this box. These must have been from her fiancé who died in the Great War."

"I wish Uncle Rufus could tell us the story in person," said K.T. with a sigh. "Maybe all this would make more sense."

"No, K.T., Uncle Rufus passed away several years ago. And that's all of the story I remember." Mrs. Watson looked down at the faces of the two young girls.

"But Miss Anna Ruth Dodd just turned one hundred down at Stony Point ElderCare last month. I hear her mind wanders some, but the past is nearer to the surface than the present. Shall we pay her a call?"

"Can we?" exclaimed K.T. "Can we go today?"

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"I have visitors, do I? How lovely? Did you bring me a birthday present?" Even at one hundred, Miss Anna Ruth Dodd had a charming smile. All eyes fixed on the genteel old lady with gray wisps of hair peeking from beneath a robin's egg blue knit stocking cap that perfectly matched her blue dressing gown.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Annie, my granddaughter and her friend found something of yours down at the beach today. They'd like to return it if that's OK with you."

Miss Annie looked expectantly at Connie and K.T., who had a sudden onset of shyness. What if she starts to cry? K.T. thought. Or worse yet, to scream?

"We were, um, exploring in the dunes with my new metal detector and we found this wooden box. Well, it was pretty rotten and the metal clasp kind of broke as we tried to open it, but..." K.T. paused. "This was inside the box." She handed the yellow silk bag to Miss Annie, who had listened with a puzzled look that turned into a frown of concern.

"The things inside the bag were OK, though," Connie added.

The girls watched expectantly as Miss Annie's slender fingers, covered with age spots and wrinkles, shook as she pulled open the bag.

Ever so gently, she drew the cross medal and then the ring from inside, ignoring the newspaper articles. Her eyes filled with tears of joy as she gazed in wonder at her long-lost treasures.

All was quiet in the narrow room with the drawn drapes, the tick of a wall clock the only sound punctuating the silence. Finally, Miss Annie spoke and the girls felt like they could breathe again.

“So he did bury it, after all. Near East End Pier, was it not?” She looked up at the girls for confirmation, which they gave with quick nods. They glanced at Mrs. Watson as Miss Annie continued. “He said that was where he took it after he stole it from my home. Everyone thought I was the crazy one, but it was him.”

Miss Annie felt inside the bag for the newspaper clippings but did not take them out. “I suppose you girls read the articles and would like an explanation, eh? Well, it’s a short, if ugly, story.”

She drew a breath and seemed to focus somewhere high on the wall near the ceiling, seeing things from long ago. “These two things, the ring and the medal, represent my happiest and my proudest moments. Once in my life, I was in love with the bravest, most honorable person I’ve ever known.”

Miss Annie’s face glowed with a warm smile that seemed to melt the years away, revealing the beautiful young woman she had been in 1918. Then she touched the yellow silk purse with the clippings. Her face fell back into its wrinkles and lines and her blue eyes lost their sparkle.

“These are reminders of sadder times, of loss and betrayal. I never murdered Arlis Cooper. Nobody did. He didn’t die that night, though I have to admit I wished he had. No, he managed to turn an accidental fall off the pier into a way to torment me.” Miss Annie’s voice was momentarily filled with bitterness. Then a big sigh washed away the anger and she spoke matter-of-factly.

“First, he devastated my parents with accusations that I was a murderer, which they did not believe, and with the fact that I had walked out on that pier late at night, unchaperoned, with a notorious scoundrel. My parents disapproved of my acquaintance with Arlis. I only spoke to him because Johnny had befriended him. Johnny was the only real friend Arlis ever had.”

“He repaid that friendship with jealousy and envy. He faked his death that night—I believed he had run away to avoid going back to war. But I could not prove his deception, as he never showed up anywhere near Galveston for many years. After my mother’s death in ’48, Arlis returned, broke into my home and stole this box.” Miss Annie noticed the looks of skepticism on the faces of her three visitors. She pulled a yellowed piece of paper from her pillowcase and handed it to K.T. The writing was faint and faded, but the message was still legible.

*I have stolen your treasure box, Annie, dear. You can find it buried in the dunes at East End Pier. I shall be with you always...Arlis.*

“So he did steal it and bury it,” K.T. remarked.

Miss Annie nodded. “He knew I would look for it, that searching for it would drive me mad. There were other notes, cards in the mail over the years, always taunting me. The last was an obituary in 1978—the funeral home had been instructed to send it to me upon his death. So I knew the clues were over, the game was finally up. He must have thought I would never live this long, long enough to be blessed with the return of my treasures.”

“I’m glad we could make you happy. Miss Annie,” K.T. said with a smile.

“There is one more thing you girls could do for me,” Miss Annie said, as she slipped the note from Arlis into the silk bag. “Bury this bag deep in the dunes at East End Pier. I don’t want to travel to the past anymore. You don’t think that’s crazy of me, do you?” she asked with a gentle smile.

“Miss Annie, a little March Madness, digging in the dunes, burying the past, is not crazy to us,” K.T. answered. She put her arm over Connie’s shoulder.

“Not crazy at all,” agreed Connie with a laugh.