

# BACKPACK ADVENTURES

## Episode 3

### *“Hard River Escape”*

K.T. lay slumped against a concrete wall like a broken doll. A distant rumble nudged her consciousness. Darkness surrounded her, pierced only by a solitary streetlight that dimly revealed a row of identical houses as still and eerie as tombs. K.T. twisted her shoulders and felt the bulk of her backpack pressing into the damp ground. Her hands were cold against the wet grass and a chill ran over her as she rubbed her eyes and aching head.

I must have landed on my back and hit my head on the wall of this house, she thought. She moaned and sat upright holding her face in her hands.

Where am I? What time is it? Questions raced through her mind. This place seemed deserted. Hopefully, the computer in her backpack, the BPC, was not damaged in the fall and she could try again to reach her pen pal friend, Natasha, in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine. She reached for the key chain that hung from the backpack’s zipper and pressed a button that lit up a three-inch screen and tiny keypad. The time on the screen said 5 a. m., but the date made her gasp. And the location coordinates were gone!

“Ah! What happened?” K.T. exclaimed.

“Who’s there?” a voice called out from the shadows. A tall, skinny boy dressed in dark clothes and carrying a duffle bag emerged from behind a hedge and shone a flashlight directly in K.T.’s eyes.

“Ouch,” cried K.T., shielding her eyes with her hands. “Turn it off!”

The boy lowered the flashlight and walked toward K.T. “What are you doing here?”

He towered over K.T. In the dim light, she could see a boy with vivid blue eyes frowning at her. He had the beginnings of a mustache on his upper lip. Could she trust this boy? He looked only a little older than she. She had to find out where she was.

“I was on my way to Dnepropetrovsk to see my friend Natasha.”

“Was your family evacuated from Pripjat this week?” asked the boy.

“Pripyat? What do you mean by evacuated? Are we in Ukraine? What *is* the deal?” Questions tumbled from K.T.’s mouth as she tried to understand what had gone wrong with the BPC. Never before had it failed to get her to the right time and place.

“Slow down! My English is not good. Can you speak Ukrainian?”

“Not without a working BPC translator,” K.T. mumbled under her breath then added aloud, “No, but your English is OK. Can you help me travel to Dnepropetrovsk?”

The BPC must have broken in the fall. A desperate plan to reach Natasha was forming in K.T.’s mind and she needed help. She would have to trust this boy.

“No, I came here to find my father. He is fireman. He was with first to go to accident. My mother is nurse—she is working at hospital in Kiev where they take all the victims. I went with her. After ten days, we still had no word from Papa. So, I not evacuate with the children to summer camp. I come back here to Chernobyl to find my father. The river is closed, so I travel by foot at night. I left four days ago.” The boy rushed his story like someone who has not spoken in a week.

“So, we’re in Chernobyl?”

“*Nyet* (No).” We’re in Pripyat, a town three kilometers from Chernobyl. My home is over there,” he said, pointing to a plain white house across the street. “I found some food left inside, but they say to not eat it. It’s been irradiated.”

“Wait a minute, the accident—you don’t mean the Chernobyl nuclear accident, do you?” K.T. noticed the darkness was beginning to give way to dawn. She looked toward the sunrise.

In the distance, four buildings stood etched against the horizon. A smoky haze hung over them like a shroud. The rumble that had awakened her now took on the distinct sound of heavy machinery churning over and through the earth.

“Yes, of course, I mean Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident. What else?”

“Whoa! We’ve got to get out of here fast! What day did the reactor blow?” K.T. exclaimed.

The boy looked at K.T. like she was a space alien. “April 26, two weeks ago. Everyone evacuated for thirty kilometers. We are in Exclusion Zone now.”

“So it really is May 10, 1986, and I’m in the Ukraine, but like, miles away from Dnepropetrovsk, and we’re sitting here soaking up radiation from the worst nuclear

disaster ever. Summer was right: I shouldn't have rushed off by myself." K.T. sank to the ground, wrapping her arms around her legs and burying her head in her knees. She could hear helicopters overhead and the sound of trucks on a highway nearby. With daylight would come more people. Would she be allowed to travel to Dnepropetrovsk?

"It is not summer yet; it is still spring," remarked the boy as he sat on his duffle bag beside K.T. "My name is Nikolai." He offered K.T. his hand.

K.T. looked up and sniffed, wiping a tear from her eye. She shook his hand. "My name is K.T. and I wasn't talking about the season. Summer is my friend back home in Texas. She warned me not to make this trip alone. See, Natasha has been my pen pal for years and she's turning thirteen and having this big party and I was going to surprise her by showing up at her party and, oh my gosh. It's 1986! She's not even born yet!"

"Are you crazy in head?" Nikolai frowned and shook his head. "You must be one of those rich Texans if you fly to Ukraine just for party. I have more serious matters to worry about. If they find us in Exclusion Zone, soldiers will arrest us."

"No, wait... I'm sorry... I didn't fly here, I... oh, never mind," K.T. stumbled over her words trying to explain the inexplicable. How could she tell Nikolai about a computer that lets her travel in both space and time from her home in twenty-first century Texas? "I'm not crazy or rich, just lost. If I can get to Dnepropetrovsk, I'm sure Natasha's parents can help me get home ... somehow."

"Well, first, we have to hide before..."

Suddenly an armored car swung around the corner and zoomed down the street toward Nikolai and K.T. "Too late!" cried K.T., as four soldiers in radiation gear and armed with machine guns jumped from the truck and surrounded them.

"Keep quiet. Let me do talking," Nikolai instructed through clenched teeth. K.T. nodded. She held the useless keypad in her hand.

The closest soldier yelled at them in Russian through his mask, "*Это зона ограниченного допуска. Просьба покинуть ее немедленно.*" (This is the Exclusion Zone. You must leave with us at once.)"

Nikolai picked up his duffle bag and began to board the armored car.

"*Никаких сумок или поклажи.*" (Nyet, no bags!) growled the lead soldier grabbing the duffle bag and flinging it to the ground. K.T. felt her backpack being ripped

from her back and she quickly detached the keypad, folding her arms across her chest to hide it. She followed Nikolai into the darkness of the big truck slipping the keypad in her jeans pocket. It was her only hope now and she prayed the tiny tracking device still worked. Ten other evacuees were already crowded into the back of the transport: five little children on their old babushkas' laps, all asleep beneath the brightly flowered shawls of the three grandmothers. Nikolai listened to the whispers of the two old men sitting next to him.

"Pretend you are asleep," whispered Nikolai, putting his arm around K.T. so she could rest on his shoulder. "They are taking us in this transport to Kiev. It will take two hours to get there."

K.T. nodded again. The truck rocked gently through the early morning fog while its big diesel engine droned along with the myriad of trucks and machinery converging on Chernobyl for another day of ceaseless cleanup. Soon K.T. did not have to pretend to sleep.

"Wake up, K.T.," whispered Nikolai, nudging her gently. "We've reached Kiev, the capital. We must get away before they ask questions."

"But I thought you couldn't help me. What about finding your father?"

"I learned from old men that all firemen have been quarantined. I could not see him if I did find where they are keeping him. My mother already thinks I travel south to camp, so I go south. We take ferry down Dnieper River to Dnepropetrovsk."

K.T. blinked in the bright morning sunlight as the door of the transport opened and Nikolai helped her down to the cobblestone street. Throngs of people walked the wide boulevard beneath tall trees in full bloom with white fragrant blossoms.

Without warning, a black sedan screeched to a halt beside the armored transport and a man in a gray trench coat exited the backseat holding K.T.'s backpack. "Look, he's returning my backpack," K.T. said as she began to walk toward the man. He was talking to the soldiers, who pointed to K.T. Suddenly, Nikolai grabbed K.T.'s arm and dragged her to the other side of the truck.

"Hey, let go! I want to get my backpack!"

"Not from him, you don't. That's KGB. You never get home if he takes you. Come with me!" Nikolai answered, pulling K.T. onto the sidewalk and into the crowd.

The man began shouting and running behind Nikolai and K.T. as they weaved behind the trees and around the people. Now several police in uniform joined the chase, closing in on them. K.T. was aware they were running uphill in an ancient part of the city, but she had lost all sense of direction. They passed a beautiful old church, its white walls topped with gold cupolas. Still the men shouted and pursued them.

*“становиться! Это полиция! Задержать шпионов! (Stop! This is the police! Stop spies!)”*

“What are they yelling?” K.T. panted as she struggled to keep up with the long-legged Nikolai. They had turned into a narrow street that seemed to lead to a dead end.

“They say stop. They are police and we are spies. Just what was in your backpack?” huffed Nikolai, holding tightly to K.T.’s hand. With a quick jerk, he pulled her sharply to the left and through an arched doorway that led into a plaza. K.T.’s arm was aching, but she allowed herself to be dragged through the plaza toward a church with tall, slender spires whose gold tops shimmered in the sun. Dozens of smaller buildings surrounded the cathedral, with scores of passages leading off to more buildings. To K.T., they looked medieval, mysterious and like a perfect hiding place.

“Can we stop and hide here to rest? I’m exhausted.”

Nikolai gave her a smile. “We’re almost at very good resting place.” They entered one door-way that led to a cramped, dank hallway winding downward, curving like a spiral ramp, slick and treacherous. K.T. placed her hand on a wall to steady herself and felt rough stone coated with bits of mildew and spider webs. She jerked her hand back.

“Where are we, Nikolai?”

“Catacombs. We can rest here.”

“How did you know about this place?” K.T. questioned.

“My great uncle was monk here. This is called Pecherska Lavra, the Monastery of the Caves. He would bring me down here and tell me about all martyrs and holy men. This is where they are buried.”

“There’re dead people down here? No wonder it’s so creepy. You do know how to get out of here, don’t you?” K.T. was beginning to worry.

“Well, it has been long time since Uncle Gregorio showed me way,” teased Nikolai. “I will guide us right to hydrofoil station so we can take ferry downriver. The caves lead to Dnieper. It takes awhile, so we walk now.”

“You mean we’re under the city? I wish I could have seen more of it. It looked so old and beautiful,” mused K.T. as they slowly treaded from passage to passage. Dusty gas lamps illuminated the slippery steps, casting thin shadows across the low walls.

Nikolai stooped to fit beneath the arched portals hewn from the natural caves. “We passed Hagia Sophia, ancient Eastern Orthodox church that is now museum. U.S.S.R.-led government took many religious buildings and made them into museums. Boulevard you saw was the Kheschatyk, central street in Old Kiev. Chestnuts are very beautiful in May, no?”

“The trees with the white blossoms? Are those chestnuts? Yes, they are beautiful. Is all of Kiev like that?” K.T. asked.

“No, not all. You see ugly parts soon enough. But, I could show you many more wonderful places.”

“What would you show me, Nikolai?” K.T. smiled at her new friend, relaxing at last in the peaceful silence of the caves. Their pursuers must have given up, she thought.

“Our soccer stadium—it can hold over 100,000 people. Statue of our national poet, Taras Shevchenko, who believed in free Ukraine and in our unique culture. Andriivska Church, so ancient, and the Viking Founders monument built just four years ago. Much places. I love it here. I want to live in Kiev someday. But everything changes,” Nikolai added sadly. “We are almost to end now. Quiet now. We cannot speak English in public.”

“Wait, Nikolai, how do you know how to speak English so well?” K.T. marveled.

“I have studied in school since I was ten. I always thought I would need it someday for what I want to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Be a spy.”

“Ha, ha. That’s a joke, right?”

“Hush, we are at street to ferry now. Watch for our friend, Mr. Trench Coat. He will not give up that easy,” warned Nikolai with a sly smile, his eyes scanning the noonday ferry landing. “The shore is clear.”

“What? Oh, you mean the coast is clear. Nikolai, this spy stuff is not funny!” K.T. muttered through clenched teeth. She could feel the keypad in her pocket like a billboard: K.T. is a spy—see, she has a tracking device.

“I’ll buy tickets to Dnepropetrovsk. You wait here,” commanded Nikolai, leaving K.T. standing in the shadow of the doorway. She was glad to be hidden from view.

Nikolai returned with the tickets and a large scarf that he called a babushka.

“I thought ‘babushka’ meant grandmother,” said K.T. knowingly.

“It does. It means both. Grandmothers wear these big flowery scarves. See, bend over and you look like babushka.”

K.T. wrapped the scarf around her and followed Nikolai to the ferry platform. They boarded the hydrofoil and found a quiet place far to the bow of the two-story vessel.

As the ferry backed away from the dock, K.T. could see the dark slate-colored water that edged the banks in stagnant pools, oily and slick. She looked back at the bank and gasped. There on the bank, watching them depart, was the man in the trench coat.

“Nikolai, look!” K.T. murmured.

“We’ll have to change our plans. He will have the river patrol after us in no time.”

“Can we change ferries?”

“In a way. See that barge in front of us? When we get beside it, we will slow down to reduce wake. We must pass very close to it in this part of river. Be ready to jump.”

“Jump? Are you serious?” argued K.T.

“Take off scarf. We can leave it as decoy,” answered Nikolai.

“You are serious! OK, OK. I’ll jump.” K.T. tied the scarf to the rail.

The ferry slowed as it approached a barge loaded with huge wooden containers. Holding on to the rail and each other’s hands, K.T. and Nikolai leapt into the air above the churning waters between the two huge vessels. No one noticed the pair at the bow because all attention was focused on the patrol boat coming up from behind. The ferry’s cabin had hidden their acrobatic vault from view. They landed with a thud and scrambled

behind a crate with words stenciled in Russian. “We made it!” they cried out simultaneously.

“From Kiev to Dnepropetrovsk by barge is six hours or more,” Nikolai informed K.T. “This river, Dnieper, is third longest in all of Europe. It divides Ukraine into east and west. And it has become our central sewer.”

As if to underscore Nikolai’s words, the barge passed near some pipes that fed from a huge plant on the outskirts of the city directly into the water. Effluent gushed into the river. “What do they make there?” inquired K.T.

“Could be coats or computers. It only gets worse as we go downstream.”

After a while, the factories gave way to wide flat farms with thousands of acres planted in grain. “Rye,” explained Nikolai, “But do not let beauty of fields deceive you. True, Ukraine has good climate for agriculture and we are breadbasket of the Soviet Union, but fertilizers and pesticides, run-off from hog farms and dairy barns, all of these pour into our one big river eventually. Dams make lakes of Dnieper which slows flow and allows pollutants to build up more fast.”

K.T. watched the swirling waters, indigo beneath the warm May sun. She could see debris floating alongside the barge. In places, the trash built up into mini-dams, snags that caused the water to froth and foam like a soap that could not be washed away.

K.T. and Nikolai shared the water bottle he had bought on the ferry. It would have to last through the long, sultry journey. Already their dark clothes were hot to the touch.

K.T. and Nikolai dozed, hidden between two crates. When K.T. had asked her companion what was stenciled on the boards, he had calmly replied, “Explosives.” Nikolai explained to an anxious K.T. about the mining operations that lined the Dnieper: coal, iron ore, manganese, lead, copper, mercury and many other dense, heavy metals.

“Ukraine earth is rich in natural resources like fertile soils to grow crops and minerals to mine for industry, but we are becoming poor in water – fresh, clean water to drink,” Nikolai said. They had reached the broad Kremenchug Reservoir and could no longer see the shore. “It is hard to believe looking at this vast lake with mighty river running through it that we are filling it with toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes. I once swam in this river as child, but no more. I have seen what pollution can do.”

“What do you mean?”



Nikolai looked grimly at K.T. “Cancers, mutations.”

“You didn’t seem too worried about the radiation from Chernobyl.”

“That was accident. Not intentional environmental abuse. My grandfather was fisherman on this river. He saw how industrial development degraded Dnieper. He told me before he died that no amount of pollution reduction would ever bring back the fish and birds, the cycles of the river. He never knew the word ‘ecosystem’, but he lived the life of this river.” The anger in Nikolai’s voice surprised K.T.

“So that’s how you know so much about the Dnieper. From your grandfather?”

“I have no brother or sister, so I spend much time with him. His Ukraine is not mine. Even the climate is changed,” Nikolai added with a laugh. “I am sure it was never this hot when he was fourteen.”

K.T. was glad Nikolai’s mood had lightened. She could see the distant outlines of a small city on the western bank.” Is that Dnepropetrovsk?”

“No, this reservoir ends in hydroelectric dam at Kremenchug. There is oil refinery there, too. That’s what you see. Looks like this barge is bringing explosives for the coal and iron ore mines near here. We will have to get off and find another way downriver.”

“Get off? How? I’m not swimming in this water after talking to you. No way!”

“Do not worry, K.T., you will not have to swim,” Nikolai said as he removed his shoes and socks, tying the laces together and hanging them over his shoulders. “Just wade.”

The tugboat pushed the gigantic barge toward concrete docks. “Why can’t we just get off at the dock?” K.T. asked, reluctant to take off her shoes and go barefoot in the river.

“Because you have welcoming committee, Agent Backpack.” K.T. followed Nikolai’s gaze to the dock where two policemen waited beside their patrol car. “Be ready to ease off left side. Move fast away from the barge or it will pull you under.”

“Nikolai, have you ever done this before?” asked K.T., trembling as she secured her shoes around her shoulders. They stood together on the port side as the barge docked on the starboard. The water was murky and it lapped with sucking noises on the side of the barge.

As Nikolai opened his mouth to answer, the tug blew a deafening blast that startled K.T. so badly that she lost her balance and slipped into the water feet first. Luckily, the horn covered the splash as K.T. and Nikolai quickly found their footing in the knee deep water at the edge of the piers.

“That wasn’t so deep, after all,” remarked K.T.

“No, another three meters back and we would have landed in fifty feet of water,” Nikolai replied. “Beginner’s luck. Now, let us see if we stay lucky.”

He pulled K.T. beneath the piers and they watched the police search the barge. K.T. began to shiver in the water which was colder than she anticipated. A dead fish floated by with a massive tumor on its side. K.T. really began to shake. The air beneath the pier smelled grotesquely foul. “What is that smell? Dead fish?”

Nikolai sniffed, “Yes, and oil refinery. Not very pleasant combination, no? Here the air is polluted as well as water. Let’s get out of here!”

K.T.’s toes curled as she shuffled through the dark liquid. Her feet felt like ice cubes. Cold and miserable, she thought about Summer and her other friends, her home, her lost backpack. How would she ever get home? Nikolai had helped her escape so far, but how much longer would their luck hold? Were her friends even trying to reach her? She was stirred from her thought by Nikolai’s hand holding her back.

“Be still, K.T.,” Nikolai whispered. “Wait here. There is fishing boat that I think belongs to one of my grandfather’s old friends. Let me check it off.”

“Out, check it out. Nikolai, I don’t want to get anyone in trouble. Maybe I should just turn myself in.”

“No way, Agent Backpack. We come this far. We finish the escape!”

“Nikolai, I’m not a spy! Don’t you believe me?”

“Comrade, I believe you. But will the others? No. So, we go fishing.”

The old fisherman gave one glance at K.T. and returned to his work. His boat was small and cramped, with just enough space in the cabin for Nikolai and K.T. to sit with their knees against their chests, heads propped on piles of fishing nets. The drone of his single engine lulled them both into a deep sleep from which they awoke stiff and thirsty. When they arose from the cabin, the sun had slid near the horizon and the outskirts of Dnepropetrovsk could be seen before them in the distance.

The old man cut the engine and dropped the anchor. He took two bottles from a cracked wooden box and handed them to Nikolai and K.T. For the first time all day, they could stop moving.

“Bottled water? From Switzerland?” K.T. wondered aloud, opening the cap and taking a long drink. It tasted wonderful. “How do you say ‘thank you’ in Ukrainian?”

“*Cnacу́до*,” Nikolai told her.

“*Cnacу́до*,” said K.T.

“*He za чmo* (You’re welcome),” said the fisherman. He said something rapidly in Ukrainian to Nikolai who translated for K.T. “He says he drinks foreign bottled water because of what he has seen on the river. My grandfather laughed at him because it is luxury. He asks, who laughs now?”

The old man lifted the top off a plastic bucket and showed them what was inside: a mottled green frog sat on a layer of mud covered with dirty water. He sat on two of his three hind legs, his tiny front legs barely keeping his head out of the water. The man handed the bucket to K.T. who sat dumbfounded, peering at the frog.

“What happened?”

“Who knows? Rain falls through smoke at Kremenchug refinery or runs from mines into groundwater or from farms into rivers. Or here at Dnepropetrovsk, they find uranium in city. See that pile of rocks over there near shore? That is slag pile—waste soil and rocks, natural things, no? Only chemicals and metals in them are not safe once unearthed.” Anger filled Nikolai’s voice once more.

“You’d think someone would invent the technology to clean it up,” K.T. sympathized as she stroked the frog’s speckled back. It felt smooth and soft, delicate and vulnerable.

“It will never happen, just like Ukraine will never be free.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. You could find a way, Nikolai. You’re smart. You care about the river.”

“I could not fight all the others.”

“Nikolai, you fought all those for me. Promise that if Ukraine becomes free, you will find a way to reverse the damage.” K.T. felt the keypad vibrate in her pocket. Someone was trying to reach her. “Promise.”

“It will never happen, but, OK, I promise,” shrugged Nikolai.

Suddenly the boat began to rock as a whirlwind of flashing colors appeared on the bow with a boy in the middle of the swirling rainbow. He was wearing a backpack and holding another in his arms.

“Travis! You found me!” cried K.T. “Nikolai, this is Travis, Summer’s big brother. Travis, Nikolai.” K.T. introduced as she put on the extra backpack.

“Howdy,” Travis greeted the speechless Nikolai. “Now, let’s go before we lose the coordinates again. Glad you finally stopped moving. We’ve been chasing you all day.”

“You and everyone else! Just give me a minute to say good-bye.” K.T. turned to the old fisherman. “*Cnacuōo*. May I take the frog with me so my friends can see it?”

The old man nodded in bewilderment, handing the bucket to K.T.

“K.T., you speak Ukrainian!” exclaimed Nikolai.

“Only with a functioning backpack computer. Look, it’s too much to explain. Thank you, Nikolai, thank you for everything. I hope you find your father. And remember your promise!”

K.T. tossed the broken keypad to Nikolai. “Keep it. I’ll find you someday. I promise. Nothing is impossible.”

K.T. clutched the bucket tightly as she and Travis pushed their keypad buttons. And they were gone.