

Backpack Adventures Series

*Hard River
Escape*

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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1 Nikolai.” K.T. introduced as she put on the extra
2 backpack.

3 “Howdy,” Travis greeted the speechless
4 Nikolai. “Now, let’s go before we lose the coor-
5 dinates again. Glad you finally stopped moving.
6 We’ve been chasing you all day.”

7 “You and everyone else! Just give me a minute
8 to say good-bye.” K.T. turned to the old fisherman.
9 “*Cnacu6o* (Thank you).” May I take the frog with
10 me so my friends can see it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

18 “I could not fight all the others.”

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

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

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

30 “Travis! You found me!” cried K.T. “Nikolai,
31 this is Travis, Summer’s big brother. Travis,

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 Nikolai and K.T. to sit with their knees against their
2 chests, heads propped on piles of fishing nets. The
3 drone of his single engine lulled them both into a
4 deep sleep from which they awoke stiff and thirsty.
5 When they arose from the cabin, the sun had slid
6 near the horizon and the outskirts of Dnepropetrovsk
7 could be seen before them in the distance.

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

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

16 “*Спасибі* (thank you),” Nikolai told her.

17 “*Спасибі*,” said K.T.

18 “*Не за чмо* (you’re welcome),” said the fisher-
19 man. He said something rapidly in Ukrainian to
20 Nikolai who translated for K.T.: “He says he drinks
21 foreign bottled water because of what he has seen on
22 the river. My grandfather laughed at him because it
23 is luxury. He asks, who laughs now?”

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

31 “What happened?”

Hard River Escape

1 tumor on its side. K.T. really began to shake. The
2 air beneath the pier smelled grotesquely foul. “What
3 is that smell? Dead fish?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 The old fisherman gave one glance at K.T. and
30 returned to his work. His boat was small and
31 cramped, with just enough space in the cabin for

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

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

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

24 “Ah! What happened?” K.T. exclaimed.

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

1 "Ouch," cried K.T., shielding her eyes with her
2 hands. "Turn it off!"

3 The boy lowered the flashlight and walked
4 toward K.T. "What are you doing here?"

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

10 "I was on my way to Dnepropetrovsk to see my
11 friend Natasha."

12 "Was your family evacuated from Pripyat this
13 week?" asked the boy.

14 "Pripyat? What do you mean by evacuated?
15 Are we in Ukraine? What *is* the deal?" Questions
16 tumbled from K.T.'s mouth as she tried to under-
17 stand what had gone wrong with the BPC. Never
18 before had it failed to get her to the right time and
19 place.

20 "Slow down! My English is not good. Can
21 you speak Ukrainian?"

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

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

30 "No, I came here to find my father. He is
31 fireman. He was with first to go to accident. My

1 socks, tying the laces together and hanging them
2 over his shoulders. "Just wade."

3 The tugboat pushed the gigantic barge toward
4 concrete docks. "Why can't we just get off at the
5 dock?" K.T. asked, reluctant to take off her shoes
6 and go barefoot in the river.

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

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

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

24 "That wasn't so deep, after all," remarked K.T.

25 "No, another three meters back and we would
26 have landed in fifty feet of water," Nikolai replied.
27 "Beginner's luck. Now, let us see if we stay lucky."

28 He pulled K.T. beneath the piers and they
29 watched the police search the barge. K.T. began to
30 shiver in the water which was colder than she
31 anticipated. A dead fish floated by with a massive

1 “You didn’t seem too worried about the radia-
2 tion from Chernobyl.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 “Do not worry, K.T., you will not have to
30 swim,” Nikolai said as he removed his shoes and

1 mother is nurse—she is working at hospital in Kiev
2 where they take all the victims. I went with her.
3 After ten days, we still had no word from Papa. So,
4 I not evacuate with the children to summer camp. I
5 come back here to Chernobyl to find my father. The
6 river is closed, so I travel by foot at night. I left four
7 days ago.” The boy rushed his story like someone
8 who has not spoken in a week.

9 “So, we’re in Chernobyl?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 “So it really is May 10, 1986, and I’m in the
2 Ukraine, but like, miles away from Dnepropetrovsk,
3 and we’re sitting here soaking up radiation from the
4 worst nuclear disaster ever. Summer was right: I
5 shouldn’t have rushed off by myself.” K.T. sank to
6 the ground, wrapping her arms around her legs and
7 burying her head in her knees. She could hear
8 helicopters overhead and the sound of trucks on a
9 highway nearby. With daylight would come more
10 people. Would she be allowed to travel to
11 Dnepropetrovsk?

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

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

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

30 “No, wait... I’m sorry... I didn’t fly here, I...
31 oh, never mind,” K.T. stumbled over her words

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

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

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

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

29 “What do you mean?”

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

1 leapt into the air above the churning waters between
2 the two huge vessels. No one noticed the pair at the
3 bow because all attention was focused on the patrol
4 boat coming up from behind. The ferry's cabin had
5 hidden their acrobatic vault from view. They landed
6 with a thud and scrambled behind a crate with words
7 stenciled in Russian. "We made it!" they cried out
8 simultaneously.

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

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

19 "Could be coats or computers. It only gets
20 worse as we go downstream."

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

1 trying to explain the inexplicable. How could she
2 tell Nikolai about a computer that lets her travel in
3 both space and time from her home in twenty-first
4 century Texas? "I'm not crazy or rich, just lost. If I
5 can get to Dnepropetrovsk, I'm sure Natasha's
6 parents can help me get home ... somehow."

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

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

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

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

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

23 "*Никаких сумок или поклажи*" (Nyet, no
24 bags!) growled the lead soldier grabbing the duffle
25 bag and flinging it to the ground. K.T. felt her
26 backpack being ripped from her back and she
27 quickly detached the keypad, folding her arms
28 across her chest to hide it. She followed Nikolai
29 into the darkness of the big truck slipping the
30 keypad in her jeans pocket. It was her only hope
31 now and she prayed the tiny tracking device still

1 worked. Ten other evacuees were already crowded
2 into the back of the transport: five little children on
3 their old babushkas' laps, all asleep beneath the
4 brightly flowered shawls of the three grandmothers.
5 Nikolai listened to the whispers of the two old men
6 sitting next to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 "I thought 'babushka' meant grandmother,"
2 said K.T. knowingly.

3 "It does. It means both. Grandmothers wear
4 these big flowery scarves. See, bend over and you
5 look like babushka."

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

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

16 "Nikolai, look!" K.T. murmured.

17 "We'll have to change our plans. He will have
18 the river patrol after us in no time."

19 "Can we change ferries?"

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

24 "Jump? Are you serious?" argued K.T.

25 "Take off scarf. We can leave it as decoy,"
26 answered Nikolai.

27 "You are serious! OK, OK. I'll jump." K.T.
28 tied the scarf to the rail.

29 The ferry slowed as it approached a barge
30 loaded with huge wooden containers. Holding on to
31 the rail and each other's hands, K.T. and Nikolai

1 Shevchenko, who believed in free Ukraine and in
2 our unique culture. Andriivska Church, so ancient,
3 and the Viking Founders monument built just four
4 years ago. Much places. I love it here. I want to
5 live in Kiev someday. But everything changes,”
6 Nikolai added sadly. “We are almost to end now.
7 Quiet now. We cannot speak English in public.”

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

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

13 “What’s that?”

14 “Be a spy.”

15 “Ha, ha. That’s a joke, right?”

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

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

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

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

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

9 “Hey, let go! I want to get my backpack!”

10 “Not from him, you don’t. That’s KGB. You
11 never get home if he takes you. Come with me!”
12 Nikolai answered, pulling K.T. onto the sidewalk
13 and into the crowd. The man began shouting and
14 running behind Nikolai and K.T. as they weaved
15 behind the trees and around the people. Now several
16 police in uniform joined the chase, closing in on
17 them. K.T. was aware they were running uphill in
18 an ancient part of the city, but she had lost all sense
19 of direction. They passed a beautiful old church, its
20 white walls topped with gold cupolas. Still the men
21 shouted and pursued them.

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

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

28 “They say stop. They are police and we are
29 spies. Just what was in your backpack?” huffed
30 Nikolai, holding tightly to K.T.’s hand. With a
31 quick jerk, he pulled her sharply to the left and

1 through an arched doorway that led into a plaza.
2 K.T.'s arm was aching, but she allowed herself to be
3 dragged through the plaza toward a church with tall,
4 slender spires whose gold tops shimmered in the
5 sun. Dozens of smaller buildings surrounded the
6 cathedral, with scores of passages leading off to
7 more buildings. To K.T., they looked medieval,
8 mysterious and like a perfect hiding place.

9 "Can we stop and hide here to rest? I'm
10 exhausted."

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

19 "Where are we, Nikolai?"

20 "Catacombs. We can rest here."

21 "How did you know about this place?" K.T.
22 questioned.

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

28 "There're dead people down here? No wonder
29 it's so creepy. You do know how to get out of here,
30 don't you?" K.T. was beginning to worry.

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

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

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

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

23 "No, not all. You see ugly parts soon enough.
24 But, I could show you many more wonderful
25 places."

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

30 "Our soccer stadium—it can hold over 100,000
31 people. Statue of our national poet, Taras