

Adult suspense series about human resilience and hope for survivors of a dying world. During a deadly pandemic, survivors journey by foot from Vermont to Kentucky in search of safe, virus free lands and are met with life changing challenges.

better lands: The Discoveries

By Susan Clawson

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A woman with long, straight blonde hair is seen from behind, sitting on a large, textured rock. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top and dark pants. A handgun lies on the rock in front of her. The background is a desert landscape with rolling hills and a body of water in the distance. The sky is a mix of blue and green. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

better lands

THE DISCOVERIES



SUSAN CLAWSON

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Meet the Author



Susan Clawson grew up in the Burlington, Vermont area and, for the past 14 years, has resided in a rural town in northern Massachusetts with her husband. They plan to move to the Kentucky area when they retire. Their children are all grown, and living throughout the U.S. Susan has worked in sales, marketing and training for most of her career. She is excited to present book 1 of a 5-book suspense *pandemic* series to her readers.

Look for Book 2 – as the story continues - this Fall:

‘better lands – The Southbound Journey’

The Beach Community

For the next couple hours, Rosa wandered aimlessly around downtown Burlington, lost, alone, and scared. All she could think about was Mr. Chuso coming home, finding the gun and her both gone. She envisioned him chugging down the new bottle of whisky as he figured out his next moves. It wouldn't surprise her to see his jeep patrolling the streets in hopes of finding her, so she knew getting out of sight as soon as possible was necessary; she just didn't know where.

Even though she had grown up around the area, she was on unfamiliar grounds by herself. She finally decided to take a break near the once popular floating boathouse restaurant. In its pre-pandemic days, it was a hot spot where tourists and local folks enjoyed food, drinks, and the serenity of Lake Champlain's gentle waves lapping against the docks, as well as views of the New York Adirondack mountain's landscape. It closed during the first round of the virus and stood boarded up, just waiting for its demolition like most of its surrounding neighbors.

Rosa decided to sit down on one of the rickety wooden benches, and after checking on her wound that had finally stopped bleeding, she watched a pack of seagulls fly overhead. Occasionally, some of them landed on the rock barriers of the shoreline, scrounging for any type of food that might be about. She took in the warmth of the noontime early summer sun and was momentarily soothed by the waves continually flapping against the rocks. She closed her eyes, trying to forget about Mr. Chuso and the world she was about to face, alone.

Other than the birds, the only other signs of life were a few homeless transients and local folks meandering by. Rosa could see a few yachts and smaller boats anchored offshore, just rocking back and forth on the small waves beneath them. A nearby sign forbid anyone to take residence on them, yet there was no visual security around to ward

off someone from doing so. On occasion, a cyclist or skateboarder passed by her, barely acknowledging her presence. A nearby public parking lot had been barricaded off to prevent any homeless folks from vagabonding in the vacant cars, vans, and buses that had yet to be burned.

Later that afternoon, after eating some of her crackers and throwing a couple to the seagulls, Rosa decided to head north in hopes of finding shelter for the night. About a mile and a half up the street, near an abandoned high school, she saw a sign that read: ‘North Beach Tent Community,’ with an arrow pointing down a long street that seemed to lead back toward the lake. Since Rosa’s family had access to their own beachfront, they seldom, if at all, ventured to any public beaches. On occasion, she had visited North Beach a few times with her best friend, so she felt somewhat familiar with the area. At the very least, she thought it might be a good place, out of sight from Mr. Chuso, where she could stay for at least the night. So, without hesitation, she followed the arrow.

The next two signs along the road led to a narrow dirt path in between two small open fields surrounded by woods. As she strolled along it, Rosa came upon yet another open field. At the far end of it was the lake. Just beyond a patch of trees, there were hundreds of people scattered about. Most had formed a line long enough to stretch across a football field and appeared to be waiting to get into some sort of event. Many small tents were set up close by. Some folks were sitting in chairs near them, and lots of young kids were running around the field. It looked like they all had been there for days, maybe more.

Rosa couldn’t believe all the folks she had stumbled upon and noted that the line wasn’t moving, so she wasn’t sure what to do. After several minutes of watching everyone, she decided to find out what was going on. She had a sense that something big was about to happen. Standing at the back of the line was a tall, older woman who appeared

to be in her mid-50s. Nearby was a man about her age, sitting in a lawn chair near a tent, talking to a couple of young boys. Rosa gathered up her courage to ask her what was going on.

“Excuse me, I was wondering if you could tell me what this all about? There are so many people here. What are you all waiting for? What’s happening here?” she shyly asked, stepping closer to the lady.

The lady’s face was covered with a cotton teal scarf, revealing only her hazel blue eyes that quickly checked Rosa over as she answered, “We’re just waiting our turn to hopefully get into the beach shelters where we can stay for the summer. Only a limited number of folks can get in. They should be letting folks down there soon, so we were told about two hours ago when one of them announced it through the speakers. I really hope we will get in.”

She paused for a moment with her eyes sternly on Rosa, then said, “One rule to gain entrance is that we have to be in a group of four or we will be turned away.”

She glanced behind Rosa as if looking for more people. Rosa had no idea what she was talking about. As she stayed focus on the lady, she couldn’t help noticing her graying hair, pulled back in a lopsided bun, flop about when she spoke. Loose strands kept falling over her eyes that she constantly pushed aside.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean? What’s a beach shelter, and why does there have to be four in a group?” Rosa inquisitively asked.

“Well, dear, from what they’ve told us, there are about 20 lean-tos and room for about 40 tents along this particular beach line. That’s about 240 of us that will get access today. Although there’s a rumor running around saying there’s more space down there. But who knows. Anyone who has less than four with them or more than four will get turned away, so they say. Where’s the rest of your group, dear?” she

asked, as she again looked past her to see if anyone else was coming down the path.

“It’s just me, I’m afraid,” Rosa replied, feeling a bit uneasy with the new information, still not quite understanding what was happening.

“Oh my, how old are you, child, and why are you alone?” The woman asked in a soft tone.

“I’m 15,” Rosa answered, then added, “Both my parents died from the virus a while ago, and I just left a horrible living situation that wasn’t good for me. So, yeah, just me.” She felt her eyes temporarily welt up and tried to quickly blink back the tears.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, dear,” the woman concerningly replied as she gently rubbed Rosa’s arm for a few seconds before she continued, “Would you like some water? You surely must be thirsty.”

Rosa nodded no, then quickly asked, “This is all rather odd. Why is everyone gathering here and not in their own homes, or hotels, or other places? Why would anyone want to live on the beach in tents?”

The lady quickly glanced over at the man sitting close by as he cleared his throat and shrugged his shoulders, then she answered, “My dear, don’t you know? Most of these families lost their homes as they were all evacuated and burned. And most of them lost family members like you did. They have nowhere else to go except places like this or stay on the streets.”

Rosa knew there was a lot she didn’t know. It was quite obvious when she left the Chuso condo, shocked to see that so many places had been burned. She had no idea, or even knew about the extent of damage the pandemic had caused. Suddenly she got it, and fear crept in as she looked at the lady and the line in front of her, trying to put it all together in her head.

She slowly shook her head as she looked around then said to the lady, “I couldn’t believe all the burned buildings I passed by just coming here. I guess I didn’t connect the dots until now. My mom

really kept me sheltered the last few years, so I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that there's nowhere else for all these people to go because I just came from a condo and an area that is still standing. This is awful."

The lady sensed Rosa's fear and confusion as she replied, "I know dear, it is how it is, and it is sad. So many people died in their own homes and other buildings because of the virus, but when the new strain came, it could live in those structures without the people. Even in some vehicles, so that's why the order is out to burn down as many as they can. Some of the larger buildings are just boarded up, waiting to be burned, and may never be, but the vagrants and others still seem to take residence in them. It's very scary!" She was getting herself a bit riled up over the subject, then asked, "It's hard to believe that your mother kept all this from you at your age. How did you manage to not see any of it?"

"I did know, well, sort of. Like I said, my mother kept me pretty sheltered from all of this. I wish she had shared more," Rosa answered and as her eyes once again teared up, asked, "I have nowhere else to go, and it's only me. What should I do now? I can't go back where I was."

"Well," the lady softly said as she lightly put her arm around Rosa, "you'll have to find a group of people in this line that need an extra person so you can get in here. There are already four of us. My husband and our two teen boys." They all waved as she pointed at them, then continued, "So, I can't help you out dear, as much as I'd love to. But I do know there are some groups ahead of us that need an extra head. Occasionally they drift back here to see if anyone new has joined the line."

She paused for a moment to wipe away one of Rosa's tears that had escaped, then added, "I'm sure you'd be welcomed. All you have

to do is find them.” Then she pointed toward the front of the line and said, “And try to get upfront, as close as you can.”

Rosa wiped another tear off her cheek as she looked forward and calmly asked, “Just walk up and ask if I can join them?”

The lady nodded then removed her arm only to rest both hands on Rosa’s shoulders as she instructed, “Most importantly, we’ll all get tested before we can gain access. Any signs of the virus within any group of four will disqualify all of them, possibly even other groups that have been standing next to them. There are so many here who aren’t covering their faces and could be carriers. I know we don’t need to anymore, but we’re all so close together here and one never really knows.”

She stared at Rosa’s exposed face, unintentionally making her feel uncomfortable. Rosa didn’t think to grab anything of the sort to cover it when she had rushed out of Mr. Chuso’s home. She realized it once she breathed in the polluted air and wished she had. The next thing she knew, the lady handed her a semi-tattered cotton blend, tan scarf.

“Here, dear, take my extra one. You should wear it now.”

“Thanks so much. I wasn’t thinking when I left this morning,” Rosa said as she wrapped it loosely around her neck, adjusting it over her nose and mouth.

Rosa couldn’t believe the chaos the silent killer had cast upon everyone. To be in the midst of it all was heart-wrenching as she looked at the line of people. Now she knew they all were there because they had nowhere else to go, yet they all seemed excited for even the chance to get into the beach shelter. It appeared nobody was letting the situation impact their spirits or determination to survive in the new environment. It was a lot for Rosa to grasp, but it gave her hope and a new sense of willpower. She wanted to be a part of it all and maybe, in a small way, make some kind of difference.

“No worries, dear. It’s a lot to remember. We’re not even sure we’ll get in, as you see how big the line is. Lots of people have already come and gone, at least from the line in the back here, so we’ll see. My family and I have been here a little over a week, just waiting for this day,” the lady paused for a moment and then said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t even get your name, dear. I’m Carmen.”

“Rosa,” she replied, now feeling the heat of her breath bounce off the scarf, back onto her face.

Carmen continued, “Okay. So, the plan is that you get to the front of the line. Start there. Look for the folks that need another head. Most likely, they’ll spot you walking alone and approach you. Don’t take any offers until you check out the front first. Got it?”

Rosa nodded, still uneasy with the idea, then asked, “How did this all come about anyways?”

“Well briefly, let me fill you in,” Carmen said as her husband jumped up from his chair to join them, “The plan to create these beach communities with lean-tos and tent spaces along the lakeshore started several months ago and was led by a local advocacy group. The group of about 25 conducted research on and about the different projected waterfront sites, then they put a proposal together for the city council to approve.”

“Hey Rosa, I’m Ed,” her husband said as he interrupted and extended his hand to her, “This has been a pretty complex project. I’m surprised you hadn’t heard about it.”

“No I haven’t, but again my mother kept me away from all this stuff. I think she thought it would just all go away and wanted to save me the worry, but please, tell me more,” Rosa responded as she shook his hand.

Ed nodded at Carmen, then said, “Well, even though it was just a temporary, seasonal solution, the group saw it as a way to keep some of the people sheltered in a safer spot than the streets, away from

abandoned structures that house the virus. The one thing that seems to be consistent is that those living outside, appear to be less vulnerable to catching the damn thing. And so far, none of us out here have gotten sick.”

“Interesting,” Rosa commented.

“Yeah, so a lot of these type of safe shelters, not just here but all over the country, are located close to distribution hubs where essentials come in weekly via boats,” Ed said as he cleared his throat, then continued, “Burlington’s hub is at the old ferry docks, just down the street from the floating restaurant. These particular tent communities are opening on 16 state beaches throughout Vermont on Lake Champlain. There’s others too, but this is the biggest, most organized one. There’s also a winter plan in place to get folks out of the cold and move into nearby safe shelters when the time comes.”

“Where are those again?” Carmen asked.

Ed looked over at her then back at Rosa as he replied, “The local YMCA, the Memorial Auditorium, and I believe the middle school across the street from them.”

“So why is there even a limit on the amount of people that can live on the beach? I mean the shoreline is endless around the lake, right?” Rosa asked, “And why just four in a group? Surely there’s enough lakefront for anyone who wants to live there regardless if it’s a family of one or ten.”

Ed again responded, “Well, those are fair questions. There are many other communities along the shoreline, but again, this is the most organized one. This particular plan is something the city and state put together for just the 16 state-run beach sites. From what we heard, each site includes 20 or more wooden lean-tos with doors, I might add. The number is solely based on the size of each of the sites, and then 40 or more platforms are available for folks to pitch tents on. You know, keep them off the wet sand and all. The individual living areas were only

designed to have enough space for four. I think the reason why four became the magic number was to ensure that there are no vacant spots or overflow in each area, and the smaller the number, the easier it will be on the community.”

Rosa looked around at all the people hanging out in the field then replied, “I suppose that makes sense. But how can everyone just live on a beach?”

“Well,” Ed replied, “it’s liveable, believe me. Some of the amenities included are outhouses or porta potties, if you will.”

“Ugh,” Rosa commented, trying to imagine having to live full time with those type of amenities.

Ed laughed as he responded, “The public restrooms don’t always work because of the unreliability of the power grid. Same with the showers. A good thing is there are lots of woods surrounding each site, so firewood will be plentiful to use for heat, cooking, and hot water. Every individual living area also has its own fire pit and picnic table.”

Carmen excitedly added, “Yeah and I heard that cooking utensils, batteries, kerosene lanterns, candles, torches and all that good stuff should initially be provided. After that we’ll just have to get our own, but at least to start, we’ll have it.”

“This is all so much to take in,” Rosa said, thinking none of it sounded inviting and couldn’t understand why they were so excited.

Ed saw the discomfort in her face and replied, “Well, it’s darn better than hanging out in the middle of nowhere. It has more advantages than not.” He chuckled then said, “You’ll get used to it. We all will.”

Carmen piped in, “Yeah, you were lucky enough to have a roof over your head, until today. Why did you decide to leave it or was it under an evacuation order?”

Rosa didn’t know how to answer and wasn’t sure she wanted to so she hesitantly replied, “It’s a long story for another time.”

Before outside shelters were established, thousands of homeless people wandered the city streets and its outskirts. The unburned structures housed trespassers that illegally took possession of them. Thievery, property destruction, and uncleanness made conditions even worse with trash scattered about, urine and feces left behind in alleyways, and people unable to take care of themselves. Most had no choice. They were angry, frustrated, and scared. Tempers raged as physical and verbal fights among strangers eradicated the once peaceful area.

Transients continued to migrate into Burlington since it had the largest distribution hub in the state, which only added to the already unsettled population. Restrictions became tighter for the distribution of essentials with more people in need; some shipments were on a first-come, first-serve basis, which caused more chaos. The police force disintegrated and lost control of the city so pandemonium took over. The beach communities promised to alleviate some of the city's growing burden.

Carmen looked over at her family, then back at Rosa as she quietly said, "It's time Rosa. You can't linger here as much as I'd love to have you stay with us. You must get to the front of the line before the gates open. I'm sure you'll be someone's miracle and will be warmly welcome. If not for you, they'll be turned away, or so they say."

Rosa grabbed her hand and said, "I'm still not sure about all this but I trust you and thank you both. I wouldn't have known how all this worked without you. I can't believe everything that's happened and where things are now at. I hope I can find a group too, and I hope you all get in as well. I'll be watching for you."

Carmen pulled Rosa close and hugged her tightly, detecting her fear as she whispered in her ear, "You'll be okay, my dear, and God be with us both. If we get in this time around, I'll see you soon." She let go and pointed Rosa toward the lake, nudging her on her way.

Rosa felt her face flush as she was once again on her own, walking down the jagged line of people. She felt curious eyes upon her and didn't want to stare back. It was impossible to figure out which groups needed an extra person as people were scattered everywhere. Nobody approached her as she moved forward. Many were hanging out in large groups, while others were off by themselves, wandering about the field.

As she got closer to what seemed to be the front of it all, she heard a small, meek, yet anxious voice call out from just behind her, "Hey, you in the tan scarf. Are you alone?"

When Rosa turned around, she saw a young girl standing close enough that she almost bumped into her. She was about Rosa's height, appearing to be slightly older. Standing next to her, holding her hand, was a little boy no older than ten. His big brown eyes peeked over his Aquaman mask, blinking as their eyes met. On the girl's other side, stood a tall thin guy in his mid-20s. The three pairs of eyes intently locked on her, waiting for an answer.

Rosa's heart beat wildly with feelings of excitement and nervousness that flooded through her body. She knew at that moment, once again, her life was about to switch gears. The last few years had bombarded her with so many changes to a point it no longer was how much more she could take; it was just going with the flow and seeing where things took her. And at that very moment, she knew the three people standing in front of her needed her, and that was all that mattered. She was about to become part of the new community. She was in.

She quickly answered, "Yes, yes I'm alone."

The girl pulled down her flowered mask and made introductions, "Well, then. We hope you'll join us. I'm Sandy, and this is my little brother, Georgie, and my cousin, Larry! We're so happy that you came along! And just in the nick of time. You have no idea! Please, join us, please!"

Rosa watched tears roll down Sandy's cheeks while Larry and Georgie blinked back theirs. Then Sandy pulled her mask back up and grabbed Rosa's hand, pulling her closer to them.

"They're about to open the beachfront, and we would've been turned away if you didn't show up!" Larry exclaimed as he extended his hand out to Rosa.

"You have no idea how stressed we were! Where in the world did you come from, and more importantly, how long have you been here?" Sandy asked, talking a mile a minute as she continued to wipe her eyes, leaving behind some dirt streaks from her hands.

"Are you going to say yes?" Georgie's tiny voice interrupted, as he tapped Rosa's arm.

Rosa giggled then answered, "Yes, Georgie, I'm saying yes."

"Excellent," Larry replied.

"You have no idea," Sandy said as she gave Rosa a quick hug.

Through a brief introduction, Rosa found out that the three of them had been camping in that spot for almost four weeks, finding it quite by accident, just as the waitlist opened and the line started to form. It certainly explained why they were right up front. They hadn't traveled too far, coming from Charlotte, a rural town just south of Burlington. Sandy, 17, and her little brother Georgie, 10, had lost both of their parents six months earlier. They stayed at the family farmhouse until evacuation orders were in effect and it was targeted to be burned down.

Larry had lived farther south in Vergennes, Vermont's smallest town. Shortly after his parents and fiancé died from the deadly virus, Larry packed up and headed to Charlotte, only to find his two cousins left on their own. Once they no longer could stay at the house, they packed up and headed to Burlington to find better shelter. By luck, like Rosa, they landed on the community beach doorstep. All that time, they could not find a fourth person to join their group...until Rosa.

“Attention folks, listen up! Can everyone hear me?” a loud voice blurted out across the field.

Rosa spotted a short, plump, balding middle-aged man standing on a stage in front of them. He had a red bandana over his face and was dressed in a bright red t-shirt that hung over his jiggly belly, barely covering up the waistline of his jeans. He was accompanied by 25 other large men that looked like bodybuilders along with eight younger women, all uniformly masked with red bandanas and the same t-shirts. The man’s deep, raspy voice blasted through the battery-operated microphone into the many speakers set up on the stage and throughout the field. A few high-pitched squeals escaped as his finger tapped the mic a few times to make sure it was working.

Upon hearing the man’s voice, the crowd went completely silent and within seconds, acknowledged his presence as they hooted and hollered with excitement, knowing what was coming. It was the moment they had been waiting for. Kids scurried back to families; chairs folded up, tents were quickly disassembled, and the line began to form.

The man watched as everyone moved about and started to settle down, then he addressed them, “Okay, everyone! It’s time! I’m Al and I’ll be walking you through this process. Welcome to the North Beach community! We’re the first of many and I now declare that we’re officially open!”

Al stopped as the crowd went wild, breaking out in thunderous cheers. For a few moments he and his crew joined them, jumping about on the stage. Then he put his hands in the air, signaling for the masses to calm down, and continued with his announcement.

“First and foremost, as you all know, you must be in groups of four. This shouldn’t come as a surprise. There will be no rule bending here, no matter what age or condition you’re in. If you need an

additional person or two this is your time right now, to find them, or you'll need to move on."

He paused and watched everyone as they looked around, but nobody moved so he continued in a softer, more sympathetic tone, "We're sorry if this does affect any of you, but you all knew the rules when you got here, and again, we can't make any exceptions."

"We really dodged a bullet," Sandy whispered to Larry as he put his arm around her shoulders and nodded in agreement.

The crowd grew a bit restless as desperate shout-outs shot out among the crowd, asking for available bodies to join their groups. Some were demanding, others desperate, while some sobbed loudly when nobody rose to their pleas. Others left without incident, knowing they had no chance of getting in. Twenty of the bodyguards had already disbursed themselves among the large group, prepared for any problematic situations that might emerge.

Rosa stepped out of line, just enough to see what was going on behind her, and watched as many folks reluctantly walked away. She was a bit puzzled as to why none of them called out to her when she strolled by earlier, but she was thankful to have joined Sandy's family. There were enough unmatched groups that could have gotten together and formed sets of four, but for whatever reason, chose not to.

Al knew folks were getting more anxious, even enraged, so he shouted into the mic, "Okay, folks, no need to panic or be upset. Rules are rules. And you need to know, there's some good news here as 60 groups of four will get entrance into the community today. I know there are many of you that won't, so for all of you, we'll provide information with some other resources you can look into. Just know, all the other beach communities will require four in a group to get in as well. So please be prepared if you go there."

A few cheers could be heard as others shouted out, "Let's get moving!"

“Let’s do this!”

“Get on with it!”

Al continued, “Now, these eight young ladies standing next to me will come by shortly and give each person in your group a quick test to make sure you’re not a carrier of the virus. It only takes 15 seconds for you to clear, and then you’ll be handed a yellow plastic arm band to tie to your upper right arm and wear at all times. Even when you leave the community to head downtown or wherever, you need to have it on. This identifies you to this North Beach community. You can’t get back in without it or get other privileges it provides, so again, don’t leave home without it!”

One of the guys, upset hearing about the yellow bands, shouted, “What do you mean wear an arm band? What is this? Some kind of concentration camp?”

He got others riled up who then shouted out their concerns, and a burst of uncertainty flooded the unsettled crowd.

“Whoa, hang on now, everyone!” Al exclaimed, trying to get control of the situation.

Another angry shout blasted from the middle of the dismantling line, “Everyone, shut the fuck up and listen to Al and if you don’t like what you hear, then fucking leave! We all want to get in there!”

The crowd shuffled about, not sure what to make of the curt demand, but Al finally gained control back as he shouted, “Let’s all calm down now, or none of us will be going anywhere other than the streets! Of course we are not a concentration camp! Come on, people! This is 2023! We’re all in a crisis, and without a way to identify folks to these beach communities, they’ll become overrun and non-existent!”

He paused for a moment as most everyone quieted down, then continued, “Look it, people, I know you all know that this is a privilege to get you off the streets and somewhere safe while we wait this pandemic out. Nobody’s controlling anyone. There just isn’t room for

everyone here and we have to live, at least for now, by the guidelines that have been set for our own safety. Just like living in the real world as we once knew it. We have rules to play by. If you don't want to play, then, by all means, nobody is making you stay.”

At that, the mixed crowd of supporters cheered and booed but eventually settled down letting Al continue. “Once you've cleared your test results, your group will receive a number, 1 to 60, then you'll step over here to the right of the stage and form another line.” He pointed to a spot about six yards away from him then said, “And when your number's called, you'll gather all your stuff, and I'll escort you to your new beach home. We're doing this one group at a time. There will be 60 groups, folks, so I'll need you to be patient and be ready so that we can move this along as quickly as possible. If all goes smoothly, I'll have you settled in before the dinner hour! Promise!”

Someone shouted out, “What happens if one of our group members tests positive?”

Al paused for a moment as he wiped some sweat from his forehead, took a drink of water then answered, “If you do not receive a clean test result, both you and your group will need to leave. No exceptions. And please, just keep your dignity and exit peacefully. I hope you all test negative!”

“Well, if he keeps talking, we're never going to get this ball rolling,” Larry snidely said, half to Sandy and half to himself.

“No kidding,” Sandy chuckled, “but we're so close now! I can't wait!”

Rosa was only half-listening, as her thoughts drifted between Mr. Chuso's threats and all the devastation she discovered once she walked away from his home. She wondered if he had noticed the gun was missing and was out looking for her. The new beach community seemed far enough off the beaten path that she was sure she was safe among the new chaos. Her body momentarily trembled with the

thought of what would happen if he did find her; then, she heard Al's voice get a bit louder and tried to focus.

"I need you all to pay close attention. Again, there are obviously more than 240 of you here. So, let's be civil about this. If you do not get a number, you have to move on to some of the other locations that will be opening soon."

Rosa could feel the tension growing among the anxious crowd. Those in the mid-to-back section already had their exit papers, since they had no chance to get in. She knew that Carmen and her family were one of them so her heart sank, knowing she may never see them again. She watched the people continue to dwindle away.

"Alright, are you ready, folks?" Al screamed into the mic, like an excited sports announcer.

Once again the crowd burst into enthusiastic cheers as he yelled out, "Let's get this ball rolling!"

At that, he lowered his mic, and the eight women approached the line of people, counting off groups of four, then giving them each a quick finger prick. By all good graces, nobody tested positive. Rosa and her new beachmates were issued their yellow bands along with the number three.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the middle of the crowd, a lady hysterically yelled, "No, please, please! My baby won't take up any room at all, please!"

The terrifying screams rang through the air shortly after one of the test ladies discovered a single mom holding an eight-month-old baby in her arms while three small kids clung to her legs.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, like Al said, rules are rules, and we can't bend them and let five of you through," The test lady sympathetically said as the kids started to cry.

"She's just a baby," the lady pleadingly sobbed, "please, she won't take up any extra space, I promise."

The test lady, as bad as she felt, told her, “I’m really sorry, it is what it is. Here is a list of other places where you can hopefully find safe shelter for your family.”

The mother ignored the handout, so the test lady gave it to one of the little kids, then unsuccessfully continued to try to get them to leave. All eyes were on them and Rosa watched as the mother became more frantic, dropping to her knees and begging to stay. All her children were frightened and confused by the scene she created, frantically screaming as they clung tighter to her. Six of the bodyguards and two other test ladies rushed over to help get the situation under control and move the family along as quickly as possible. It took about ten minutes, but the family was finally escorted out of the area. Their cries and pleas eventually faded off into the cool, evening air.

Rosa felt a pit form in her stomach and thought she was going to throw up. She was afraid for them and couldn’t believe things had reached a point of such extreme measures. The kids were helpless victims in it all, kind of like how she felt hours earlier. But Rosa was beginning to understand the new rules driven by the pandemic, even as confusing and unfair as they were. All she could do was look ahead of what was to come, and hopefully, it would lead to better days.

The North Beach Community

A few weeks had passed, and the new North Beach community settled in without much controversy, despite the close quarters the 240 folks had to adjust to. As promised, the first couple of weeks' essentials were brought in by some volunteers and divided up between the 60 groups. Thereafter the community assigned some of their own to continue to gather supplies.

Rosa and her shelter mates were lucky enough to get into one of the lean-tos that offered a bit more room than being in a tent. They all got along well. Larry spent almost every day with Georgie, especially fishing, catching buckets full of them. Any extra fish were shared among the community. The boys were responsible for keeping the wood stacked that they used for their nightly campfires and also helped out some of the other families.

Rosa and Sandy spent some time together, mainly preparing most of the dinners. Sandy was good about keeping things in order as well as a watchful eye on their belongings. Not that folks were stealing from each other, but on occasion, some haphazardly wandered into their spaces and disrupted them.

Initially, Rosa spent a lot of her free time by herself, away from the community, just sitting on the rocks by the water, listening to the waves gently lap against the sandy shore. Many times she got lost in the familiar sounds that brought her back to happier times. She loved it when she and her dad spent hours on their beachfront in Barbados, building sandcastles while her mother sat close by, coaching and soaking in the sun's rays. Rosa cried every time the waves snuck up and washed away their masterpieces. The sense of losing something she deemed so valuable at that time took a while for her to get over. Little did she know at that time that much greater possessions would later be washed from her life.

As the weeks moved on within the beach community, Rosa spent a great deal of time visiting with the other members. She'd check in on how they were doing and offered to help out as needed. There were times she'd sit for hours and just visit with them. Despite the fact she was only 15, Rosa had a sincere, mature kindness about her that attracted many who began to lean on her for advice and share their continued frustrations and fears of the future. On occasion, she'd help sort out some conflicts that arose between the groups, working out peaceful resolutions.

A couple months after the North Beach community settled in and others had opened, food and other supplies became harder to get as the distribution hub tightened up on rations. The transport boats became less reliable, and when they did arrive, brought fewer supplies. It added to the tension among all the communities, a pressure to fill the void. Since there was no viable plan to deal with the shortages, or leaders among them to initiate one, a lot of disputes erupted, leaving many fending for themselves, not sharing when they found supplies.

Rosa saw her community start to unravel and knew something had to be figured out so that everyone would get equal shares of any supplies coming in the community. At that point, even though harmony among them was dissolving, nobody stepped up to take charge and eliminate the intense conflict that was brewing within them. Rosa was sure there was a happy medium and wanted to find it, quickly.

She recalled how her dad effectively managed over 350 employees, keeping the peace between them all. He gave them a sense of direction and security so they all played an equal part in the success of his company. If there was a way to apply anything he had shared with her to change their current course of self-destruction, she was determined to figure it out and make it happen before it was too late.

Once she formulated a practical plan, Rosa decided to present it to the community. One evening as everyone was hanging around their

campfires, she strolled down to the shoreline, took a deep breath, and hollered out to them.

“Hey everyone! How are you all doing tonight?”

The chatter quickly subsided as they all turned to see what she was up to.

“So, I just wanted to run something by all of you. Could you all gather around over here, so I don’t have to shout so loud? Please?”

Within a few minutes, most everyone meandered over, all curious to hear what she had to say.

“Look, as you know, we’re all in a bit of a predicament that I believe we can easily get out of if we all work together,” Rosa started, feeling the palms of her hands begin to sweat as her heart pounded hard against her chest.

Even though she had talked to most of the community on a one-to-one basis or in smaller groups, she had yet to address such a sizable crowd. It made her nervous and uncertain as she was worried about how they would respond to her taking on such a bold role.

“We know things have become extremely difficult, and some of us have decided to do things on our own, which I understand. But we need to keep in mind that we all are here for the same reason; first for survival and second to figure out what’s next for us. In the course of doing this, we need to look out for each other!”

For a moment, nobody said anything. They all stood, eyes on her waiting to hear what she would say next until someone from the crowd broke the silence.

“Makes sense, Rosa!”

Then another hollered out, “I agree! We need to take care of each other.”

The next thing Rosa heard was a disgruntled loud voice yell out, “Who made you the boss?”

“Let her talk!” another hollered.

The shout-outs made Rosa even more nervous, but she took a deep breath and continued, “Well, I have an idea that I think will help us all work together better as a team. As a community. And if you all approve, we can put it into action right away.”

“What is this? A town hall meeting? Now we’re going to have to decide what’s best for everyone. Fuck this! I ain’t looking out for anyone else!” one guy obnoxiously shouted as he sat by a nearby campfire, quite irritated his evening had been interrupted.

Rosa ignored him the best she could as she continued to face the group gathered in front of her, “It seems since the distribution hub has less to give us, we’ve all been drifting apart. It’s also led to some of us only fending for ourselves and not caring about anyone else. There’s definitely enough of everything to go around if we do it right, and we really should be sharing.”

“Bullshit!” shouted another voice further back on the beachfront. “You’re lecturing us like we’re in grade school and news flash, you’re just a kid yourself! If we don’t look out for ourselves, ain’t nobody else gonna do it for us! Especially you!”

“Shut up, Frank!” a man screamed from the crowd.

“Yeah, let her talk!” shouted another.

Rosa felt a bit intimidated by the remark but as she looked around at all the anxious eyes planted upon her, there was a sudden sense of empowerment that came over her. They all wanted to hear what she had to say, so she cleared her throat, ready to address them again.

“My goal is to help all of us make this a true community, and with all your help, we won’t let anyone fall by the wayside. There’s already too much turmoil going on for each of us. We need to be able to depend on each other, it will help make things better. We have no idea what the future holds, and we have nobody else but each other right now.”

Rosa paused as someone yelled out, “Amen to that!”

Followed by, “You’re spot on. Tell us more!”

“How do you see it working?” another asked.

“What’s your idea?”

“You go, girl!”

Rosa watched as most everyone inched a bit closer, then responded, “I believe if we divide up certain responsibilities like finding food and essentials, gathering campfire wood, cooking community meals, along with other duties, as long as everyone participates, this will fix itself. This sets us on the path to equally share and create a true sense of comradery.”

“Great idea, Rosa!” a lady in the front of the crowd shouted.

“Not a bad one!” another agreed.

“That will never happen!” barked another disgruntled guy as he walked away from the gathering.

“Yeah, never! I don’t see it!” another yelled, following him.

Rosa felt the tension build and quickly continued before more negativity could surface, “Hold on, everyone. Think about this. We have nothing to lose by giving it a shot! We already have a group of guys that go to the distribution hub and others helping out in some other areas. You know that has worked well for all of us, so why not just expand the concept? And we all get involved as a team instead of just for ourselves. Something has to change, and I know deep down every one of you agrees. We’re all we have. Right here, right now. We’re family, no matter how you look at it. So, let’s take care of each other,” she paused for a moment, then asked, “Who’s on board?”

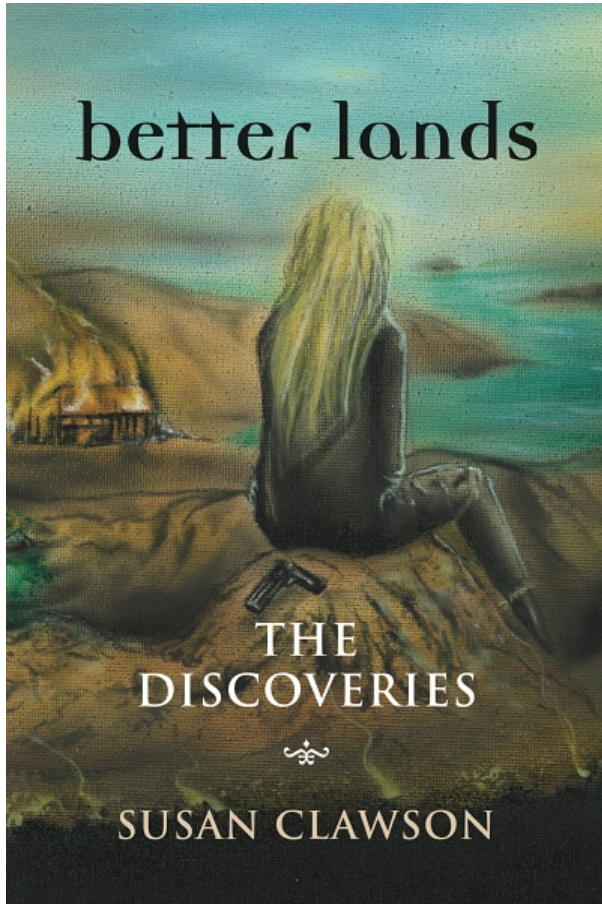
For a short time, the crowd chattered among themselves until one man yelled out, “That is a damn good idea! Why didn’t we think of this earlier? Count me in!”

Within seconds others followed with, “Great idea, I’m in!”; “Let’s do it, I’m in”; “A brilliant concept!”

“Count me out!” one guy gruffly shouted over the crowds’ growing enthusiasm, then walked away, followed by a handful of others.

It didn’t stop the positive vibes from flowing as the group started praising Rosa, jumping up and down, clapping and chanting, “Go Rosa! Go Rosa! Go Rosa!”

Early the next morning, per Rosa’s request, the supporters of the plan got together to establish the community’s new teams. Rosa wanted everyone to take part, but there were several who refused even though they liked the concept, so she let them be. By an unexpected unanimous vote, Rosa was chosen to be at the helm of it all. As days went on, the plan had proved to be a gold mine as food became more plentiful, spirits were higher, folks watched out for each other more, and the tension level lowered.



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