

The world fell to its knees during a 4-year pandemic yet the strength of its survivors is strong as they continue a 45-day tempestuous foot journey from VT to KY searching for virus-free lands. Violence and death are staples of the new world.

better lands: The Southbound Journey

By Susan Clawson

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SECOND EDITION

better lands

THE SOUTHBOUND JOURNEY



Movie/Series
development
is underway



SUSAN CLAWSON

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Meet The Author



Thanks for picking up book 2, the 2nd edition of the ‘**better lands**’ series. I’m **Susan Clawson**, the author, and hope you are enjoying the action-packed dystopian drama journey.

I first put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) for this 5-book series just 3 months into the 2020 worldwide pandemic that created such deadly chaos among us. The underlying story is not so much about the devastation a pandemic creates, nor about any particular one. It’s a timeless story about survival of humanity during the worst of times that can be related further back then the biblical times.

Why did I choose to first introduce characters from the Burlington, Vermont area? A great deal of my life was spent there, from early childhood to raising 3 kids of my own, to reuniting with my first high school sweetheart decades later. We eventually moved to upstate Massachusetts where we continue to reside.

In my spare time I love spending time with family, love being outdoors and exploring, love cruising, and love working on my collector dollhouses.

I hope that you enjoy the continued journey to the ‘**better lands**’.

Rosa

Three weeks after departing Burlington, Vermont, Rosa's team was anxious to arrive at the second inside distribution hub stop at the Cleveland, Ohio Stadium. There they planned to spend at least one night in the inside shelter and replenish their supplies. Already a few days behind schedule, they were weary and cold. The trip had been more challenging than anticipated. The sometimes extreme cold weather and hilly roads had forced them to stay a few extra nights here and there just to rest and warm up around some campfires.

Their trek to the stadium was one of the easiest as they were able to hitch a ride on a few motorboats that traveled daily back and forth from Buffalo, New York, right into Cleveland via Lake Erie. It would save them hours of walking time.

That morning, while most of the team was packing up and getting ready for the trek to the boat docks, Rosa decided to wander off by herself to a nearby river, just yards from the campsite. Mesmerized by the sounds of the flowing water, she found a large rock to perch upon and watched as the first signs of daylight danced upon the river's ripples.

The plan was to be on the road just after the sun rose. Everyone's anxiety levels were high, not knowing what to expect as they continued the trek toward the better lands. So much had happened in such a short time. Rosa had slightly miscalculated how long their foot journey to the final destination at the Fenton Campground site in Kentucky would take. None of them were really prepared for some of the challenges they already faced, including leaving Chad and Dora Kinsley behind in Lake Placid due to his illness. Rosa was sure their journey had extended by at least another 15 days if nothing major arose.

As she continued to watch the water flow downstream, Rosa wondered what Darcy, Holly, and the rest of the Vermont community were doing, and if they'd decide to still migrate south that coming Fall as planned. She missed hanging out with them. Rosa recalled the day she met both Darcy and Jean-Pierre and was thankful that they had become such an integral part of the migration plan.

When Rosa jumped off the stage in the park, she noticed two attractive boys about her age, as they approached her. She hadn't seen them before and figured they were just transients passing through, but then heard their story and knew what she needed to do.

"Yeah, it was sad leaving Montreal but I had no other choice and really want to fulfill my dad's and my dream of going to New York City, you know the city that never sleeps," Darcy said as he laughed and looked around at the crowd as they continued to disperse since the meeting was over.

Jean-Pierre added, "And now he's roped me into the exciting venture! But we don't plan to head there until the weather starts warming up in the Spring."

"Makes sense," Rosa replied, then asked, "Where do you plan to stay in the meantime?"

Darcy looked at Jean-Pierre before he responded, "We'll probably stick around here since there's a pretty big distribution hub nearby. Looks like there are plenty of places to pitch our tent around here."

Rosa looked at the two then said, "It will get mighty cold around here, boys. Not sure that's a great idea. But I might have a solution for you."

"What?" they simultaneously asked.

She smiled at them as she answered, "Why don't you two come back to the winter shelter me? It's at the Memorial Auditorium, right

up the street. There's periodic heat and hot water which in itself makes it feel like a luxury hotel!"

They all laughed, then she continued. "We can muster up a couple of spaces in our section and you can stay until Spring, or whenever you decide to go wherever you plan to. But I'm not so sure New York City is anything like you think it is. Not anymore. But we can chat about that later."

The boys agreed to go back to the shelter with her.

Rosa knew if all went according to schedule, both Teams 2 & 3 were most likely already en route from Burlington and traveling through upstate New York. She wondered if either of them would run into Dora and Chad. She couldn't shake feeling guilty for just leaving them in the cold, in the middle of nowhere, but the risk was too great to allow the young married couple to continue to travel with them. She prayed they'd survive and knew she'd never forgive herself if she found out otherwise.

Rosa thought about Sam's team and hoped that they were still on schedule to depart from Burlington that very morning. She was happy with how close the two of them had gotten since his arrival at the winter shelter. She recalled how he initially intimidated her just by his mere presence since he had a law enforcement background and was confident in his leadership abilities.

"Hi, I'm Rosa. I understand that you'd like to stay here for the winter months?"

Sam looked around the auditorium, noting the makeshift walls that divided folks up. Hundreds of sleeping bags lay about.

“I’d like that,” he responded. “But it looks like you’re pretty much filled to capacity.”

Darcy piped in, “Rosa, Sam use to be with the Vermont State Police, and I told him and I’m sure he can help us out here with a few things.”

“You bet I can,” Sam quickly replied. “I certainly can help out and can start by taking care of some of the riffraff that is hanging around here. I’m sure you want things to run as smoothly as possible.” He specifically eyeballed Blitz.

Rosa was a bit uncomfortable with his immediate assumptions that there was trouble floating about. She knew who he was referring to, and thought that he, himself, might be the trouble she wanted to avoid.

“It’s set,” Darcy said, shaking Sam’s hand. “Let’s go find a spot for you.”

Rosa hadn’t been happy that she didn’t have the final say and initially was unclear how Sam would fit in among the diverse community. But it all worked out. He ended up playing a big role in their security as the community grew and also helped strategize the migration plan and expanded on the idea of the four teams trailing a week behind each other during the journey.

Rosa reflected upon how her initial curiosity and research about the better lands had turned into a full-blown journey for many of the Vermont survivors. Those who had been just strangers months earlier, came to trust her and openly supported the migration plans.

She recalled the morning when everyone was supposed to leave the North Beach Community to head to the winter shelters, everyone but her. She had planned to head to Kentucky on her own. But then she saw all her teammates sitting on the shoreline, insisting she takes

them with her. It was at that moment she realized she had become a trusted leader among them and had to let them join her.

As Rosa continued to watch the river make its way over the thousands of stones in its path, her parents flashed through her thoughts. She envisioned her father's voice softly whispering to her.

"I'm proud of you, Rosa. You've shown true leadership by presenting the facts early on and never wavered. Those that believed in you believed because you stayed constant and dedicated to the real issue at hand. Actions speak louder than words. You got their attention, and they followed you. Good job."

As Rosa reflected on other events that lead to that very moment where she sat, watching the river flow by, she still couldn't get a handle on the fact she had killed four people, yet the community continued to support her, in fact, more so. She wondered if her father would have been less proud of her, even though the situations were pure self-defense.

The street thugs had caused so much havoc on everyone, despite the fact they were only a foursome. They had to be stopped, there were no other choices. When her life was threatened by three of them, she was thankful she had Mr. Chuso's gun ready and was equally thankful Mr. Chuso got what he deserved in the end as well. Had she not left the Chuso house that day with his gun, she knew she probably wouldn't have lived much longer.

The unexpected silver lining that came out of the horrific, bloody encounters was Blitz. At that moment she couldn't have been more thankful that she saved the last street thug and brought him into their community but knew at the same time, she initially put her entire community at risk. It was a fact that he'd forever be a thug by trade, but Rosa saw more in him and needed to give him a chance. Luckily, for everyone's sake, her gamble paid off. Over time Blitz had proven

to be a real friend and protector. Most folks came to respect and value his presence almost as much as she did.

Rosa started laughing out loud as she thought about Miss Lily and the spark that ignited between her and Blitz when they first met at the Fort Drum diner. She felt their connection and realized at that moment, that there was even more to Blitz than she had expected. It was clear to her that there was good in her friend and wanted him to be happy so she was a little disappointed that the vibrant redhead didn't join them.

The morning sun was just gracing the tree lines as Jean-Pierre approached her and asked, "Are you ready, Rosa?"

She smiled at him but didn't move as she watched the sunlight slowly caress his face. For a brief moment, she wondered if the pandemic had not reared its ugly head if he and Darcy wouldn't have migrated over the border from Canada. Rosa couldn't imagine being on the journey without Jean-Pierre and still couldn't believe he had turned out to be the love of her life.

Then she focused back on the river and asked herself if she *was* ready to move forward. Until that point, the journey was different from what she had ever imagined. It was long, grueling, and cold. They had to make essentials last between their five sheltered hub stops. They had only been to one of them and already were running low. Everyone was on edge, although they tried to stay positive. It was the promise of what the better lands might offer that kept everyone going. They hoped to no longer smell charred rubble in the air, or the putrid decaying animal stench, or to no longer worry that they were too close to an object that the virus might be hiding on.

For a moment, she closed her eyes and heard her father's voice once again softly whisper to her.

"My little Rosebud don't ever give up on something you believe in, because if you believe in it strong enough, it's worth fighting for. You got this."

He was right. Rosa was determined not to let the virus take her, or the rest of her team as it did so many others. If for nobody else, she had to push on for those that embraced and trusted her. There was no doubt that her dad would have encouraged it.

Rosa watched Jean-Pierre as he sat down on a nearby rock and stared at the river. After a few moments she took a deep breath, then answered, “Yes, I’m ready. Let’s go to Cleveland!”

He got up, gave her his hand and she jumped down from the rock. They walked and in hand back to the rest of the team.

*Team 1 – Cleveland Stadium, OH
13 days after Fort Drum departure*

The air was just above freezing, and the sky was partly cloudy, occasionally allowing the sun to shed a bit of warmth upon the team as they trudged toward the boat docks on Lake Erie. It was only a few miles from where they had camped but they were already exhausted from the air's cold bitterness. The southern skies revealed signs of a possible oncoming storm, but they hoped it would delay long enough to reach the inside shelter.

Back in Vermont, when Rosa and Darcy worked on the migration plan to encompass various hub stops, they discovered that a few boats offered daily transportation between Buffalo and Cleveland. It was a long shot as to whether they'd still be in operation, but as luck had, they were, five of them.

The boats were designed to carry up to 45 folks and cruised back and forth between the two cities just a couple of times a day and was a three and a half hour one way venture. At the time the team arrived at the docks, there was only one boat available, so they split up into three groups. The faded red, open-top boat with bench-style seats had three crewmen on it waiting for passengers, so the first 35 folks hopped onboard.

Shortly after, it set sail. As the boat got further out on the lake, the cold air became more frigid. By the time they arrived in Cleveland, folks were chilled to the bone. Jean-Pierre was on that boat and decided they needed to head directly to the stadium instead of waiting in the cold for the others, not knowing exactly when they'd arrive.

"You sure we shouldn't wait for everyone?" Brandon asked him as they started to leave the docks.

"No, it's fine. Rosa and I discussed it earlier. It's probably better that we stay in smaller groups anyway as we travel through this city.

We have no idea what we may run across,” Jean-Pierre replied, looking at a few locals just standing around, apparently sizing them up.

“Yeah, I see people are already looking at us weirdly,” Jenny replied, feeling a little on edge from the glares as she shimmied herself in between Brandon and Jean-Pierre.

“It’s fine,” Jean-Pierre responded, as he nodded to a few of the curious onlookers. “I’m sure they’re not used to seeing so many people walking together down these streets. From everything I’ve seen along the way, folks tend to hang in much smaller groups, so even though there are just 35 of us, I’m sure that we’re intimidating. Just imagine if our entire team was walking together right now. They’d probably freak out. So, don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

“I agree,” Tony said as they headed straight into the middle of the dilapidated city.

Thick, black smog was as far as the eye could see. Most of the smaller buildings and nearby vehicles had been burned, some still smoldering. Within the city’s central metropolitan area, a few historic buildings and museums were still standing but boarded up, encased with soot and graffiti. Many homeless people were scattered about the street, some nestled near buildings and down alleyways, others sitting around their makeshift living quarters comprised of tents and cardboard boxes.

Part of Cleveland’s historic glory was its birth, developing 15,000 years earlier, at the end of the last glacial period. It was established as a city in 1796 when the Connecticut Land Company laid out Connecticut’s Western Reserve. It grew into a major trade center in the early 19th century and became one of the largest cities in the United States after the Civil War. Before the pandemic, Cleveland’s population was close to 400,000 and had since drastically downsized.

Survivors from other areas still visited regularly since it was one of the key distribution centers for the state.

“No matter how you slice it, this is pretty creepy,” Jenny said, grabbing Jean-Pierre’s arm as they walked down the main street that was mostly decimated by past fires. “Are you sure we’re headed in the right direction?”

“I think so,” he responded.

Just as they turned down another street, the Cleveland stadium came into focus and Jenny immediately blurted out, “Yup, I guess we’re in the right spot.” Then she let go of Jean-Pierre’s arm, letting out a deep sigh of relief.

The stadium was bigger in real life than they had envisioned. As they got closer, the team uniformly came to a halt to take in the sight. They noted its massive brick structure all intact, with no significant signs of wear. The empty parking lot surrounded it like a moat. The top of the building was encased with an enormous glass dome that caught some of the afternoon’s sun rays sneaking through the descending storm clouds.

Closer to the front entrance, small groups of people were hanging out, and as the team moved toward them, nobody paid attention. Surprisingly the team walked through the stadium’s front doors without anyone stopping them. Once inside, they didn’t see any type of security nor were they greeted by any of the folks floating about.

“Hmmm,” Brandon slightly mumbled as he quietly asked Jean-Pierre, “What do you make of all this?”

“Not sure,” Jean-Pierre responded as he looked around the stadium.

“It’s pretty creepy, if you ask me,” Jenny stated, staying close to them.

For the most part, the inside of the stadium resembled their winter shelter at the Memorial Auditorium. Hundreds of people were hanging

out with makeshift sleep areas everywhere. It appeared to be an organized division of folks, clearly indicating a ‘to each their own’ living environment. The glass roof was the ambience, making everything bright and inviting as the sun slightly shone through it, sending warmth through the teams’ chilled bodies. It didn’t take long for them to spot tables of food, drinks, blankets, and some other essentials that appeared to be unattended, suggesting everything was free for the taking.

Not sure what they should do next, Brandon jokingly stated, “Well, I’m hungry. How about we grab some of that food over there?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Jenny replied as she spotted three scruffy-looking men approaching them.

“Hey, folks, what can we help you with?” one of them asked as they got closer, scanning their eyes over the new visitors.

Jean-Pierre took the lead and responded, “Hey, we’re actually looking for a place to stay for the night and also replenish some of our supplies. I’m assuming we’re in the right place and this is a distribution hub.”

The three stadium men initially ignored him as they stood still, continuing to size up the team until one of them answered, “Yup. That we are. And, sure, there’s plenty of room to stay for the night if that’s your plans.”

Jean-Pierre watched them continue to gaze across his team, then responded, “Well, that’s good news, and just so you know, there are more of us on route here. They got stuck in Buffalo waiting for the boats. We were lucky enough to catch the first one. But there are 64 more to be exact. They should be here later today.”

The threesome looked straight at Jean-Pierre as the older man responded in a low, baritone voice, “No shit! That’s a lot of you! What’s that total? About 100 or so?”

Before Jean-Pierre could answer, a high-pitched loud voice screamed from behind the men, "It's them, it's got to be them! They're here!"

Suddenly an excited rumble started to fill the stadium as the men looked behind them, then one stated, "We all heard you were coming. If you're who we think you are, I'm surprised it took this long for folks to notice you!"

Brandon cleared his throat then nervously asked, "Well, who exactly do they think we are?"

The men just glared at him as Jean-Pierre quickly replied over the growing enthusiasm of the crowd gathering around them, "I don't know what this all means but are you okay with us staying and do you have room for all of us?"

"Like I already said, that shouldn't be a problem. I know just the spot for you all, away from all these raving lunatics," the guy responded, then motioned for the group to follow him as he headed toward to the far side of the stadium.

"I don't know about you two, but I think it's a bit weird that these people were supposedly already expecting us. Who do you think they think we are?" Jenny whispered to Jean-Pierre, aware that the growing crowd was following them.

He didn't have an answer, so he didn't respond as they were led to a large area in the corner of the stadium, underneath some bleachers that supported enough room to house the whole team.

"I hope this will work for ya," the guy stated as he tried to motion off some of the stadium folks.

"It will definitely work," Jean-Pierre said as his team immediately started unloading their belongings.

For a few moments the three men and the curious onlookers stood nearby, watching them, until one of the three men blurted out, "So, once you've all unpacked and are settled in, feel free to help yourselves

to food and whatever you need over there.” He pointed to the tables they saw when they first came in, then added, “We’ll be floating about if you need anything else, otherwise, just make yourselves at home.”

“Thanks, we will,” Jean-Pierre replied as the three tried to get others to leave with them as they headed off.

“Did you even catch their names?” Brandon asked Jean-Pierre as he hurriedly dropped his gear.

“Nope, but I’m sure you can just ask one of these hounds,” he jokingly said as he looked over at stadium people. “Like, what the hell!”

As they continued to settle in, Jenny asked again, “So, I’m guessing they don’t really know who we are but, I mean, it’s kind of creepy that they already expected us, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” Brandon answered. “They either think we’re someone else or maybe someone informed them the boats were coming in with lots of people and where else would they be heading other than here? I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m sure they’ll eventually chill out. So, I’m headed over to grab some of that food before my stomach falls out! You coming?”

Jenny just shook her head and hoped he was right, then responded, “Yeah, I’m with you!” and quickly followed him toward the food tables.

Once the rest of the team unpacked and claimed their sleeping spots, they headed over to the tables to grab a bite to eat. None of them had seen that much food in one place for a long time, not even at the Army base. There was everything, from veggie sandwiches, chips, salads, candies, cakes, to plenty of juices, sodas, water, and even cold beers. Other tables displayed essential supplies for the taking, including clothes, blankets, and pillows. Many were happy to just grab a few cold beers, while others took their food back to their sleeping area and just relaxed in its warmth.

Later that evening, several of the stadium folks decided to approach Tony, Brandon, and Jean-Pierre as they hung out on the bleachers.

One woman asked, "Where's Rosa?"

Jean-Pierre was taken back to hear her name, knowing he nor any of the others made any mention of her, so he cautiously answered, "She's not here right now, but will be shortly. How do you know her anyways?"

A few of them stepped closer as the woman responded, "Well, we don't exactly know her, but a few days ago a couple of folks were here and told us to expect to see a young gal, named Rosa, come through here with about 100 others. Apparently, they were telling us the truth."

One of them quickly added, "Yeah, we didn't know whether to believe them or not. You know how people can make up anything and these days there's no way to verify it. Plus, hearing a story about a gal in her teens leading hundreds of people to some sort of better lands sounded a bit far-fetched, but here you are!"

"This whole thing sounds a bit far-fetched," Jenny said, making sure only Jean-Pierre heard her.

Brandon looked across the stadium at the anxious, growing crowd then asked, "So who was this couple that told you all this, and where'd they go?"

"We didn't get to know much about them. They weren't here for that long and mainly stayed to themselves," someone else responded.

Another guy added, "Yeah, we don't know much about them at all, only that they were young and loners, maybe a bit fearful of us. But one night we convinced them to have drinks with some of us and that's when they shared about Rosa and the better lands. We weren't sure what to make of the story."

The first guy chimed back in, "I heard they were maybe husband and wife, but who knows. Come to think of it, I don't think any of us

caught their names and my best guess is that they were headed to, what you apparently call the better lands.”

Before Jean-Pierre could respond, another guy spoke out, “Yeah, that’s right. They talked about Rosa leading hundreds of people to some better lands. Sounds like it’s some kind of magical place, so we’re hoping you can enlighten all of us.”

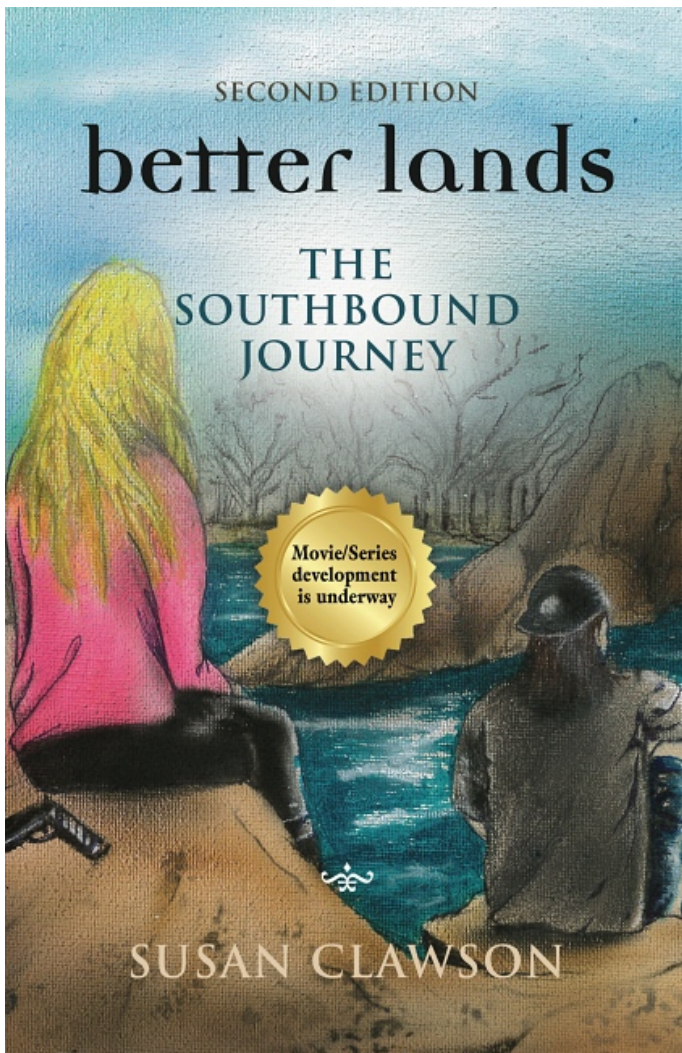
For a moment the crowd was silent. Tony looked at Jean-Pierre and loudly whispered to him, “Okay, this is pretty freaky. Who in hell came here and shared all of our information? The only couple that makes sense, is, and I can’t believe I’m saying this, Dora and Chad. You don’t suppose it was them, do you?”

Jean-Pierre looked at the growing, curious crowd gathering closer around them and whispered back, “I don’t know, Tony. I agree, it’s pretty weird, but who the hell knows, it could’ve been them. I just find it hard to believe that they’d get here before us because Chad was pretty sick. And where are they now? We need to do some digging while we’re here. Let’s just get rid of these guys before things get out of control. I don’t have a great feeling about this place right now.”

Both Tony and Brandon nodded then started to dismantle the crowd.

Rosa and Blitz’s boat was the second one to arrive at the docks about an hour after Jean-Pierre’s. They decided to wait for the last boat that was just 30 minutes behind them. The afternoon sun offered a bit of warmth to their icy bodies as the two groups headed toward the stadium. The Cleveland hub was the home to a lot of local survivors and a temporary shelter to many transients passing through the area.

As the team rounded the corner to the welcomed sight, the building was far more intact than they had envisioned. Built back in 1931 to accommodate football and baseball major leagues, it had a capacity to



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