

*better lands: THE ARRIVAL escorts the pandemic survivors through Fort Knox and unto the Kentucky peninsula where some will flourish, while others will lose their lives to something far worse than the virus.*

## **better lands: THE ARRIVAL**

By Susan Clawson

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SECOND EDITION

# better lands

THE ARRIVAL

Movie/Series  
development  
is underway



SUSAN CLAWSON

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*Susan Clawson*

Thanks for picking up the second edition of ‘better lands – THE ARRIVAL’ book 3 of the 5-book dystopian drama series. I’m **Susan Clawson**, the author, and hope you are enjoying the action-packed journey so far. Buckle up as the teams finally arrive in the better lands.

I am partial to the Vermont/New England area as I spent most of my life there. Several years ago, my husband and I moved further south to Massachusetts where we currently reside. Our story is unique in itself, having been high school sweethearts and playing the alto sax next to each other in the school band for 4 years, yet lost contact after graduation. Twenty-six years later we re-met on classmates.com and married 2 years later! And 18 years later, well, love definitely prevails! Between the two us, we have 5 grown children and 3 grandchildren. I have a background in the recruiting and sales management field. I love to write, travel, and yes, shop! I also find time to work on my collector dollhouses.

I started writing the ‘better lands’ series in early 2020 when a worldwide pandemic created such deadly chaos among us.

*Susan Clawson*

***Check out the entire series that is now in film adaptation for a streaming series!***

Book 1 – ‘better lands – THE DISCOVERIES’

Book 2 – ‘better lands – THE SOUTHBOUND JOURNEY’

Book 3 – ‘better lands – THE ARRIVAL’

Book 4 – ‘better lands – THE NORTHBOUND JOURNEY’ (in works)

Book 5 – ‘better lands – THE FINAL JOURNEY (TBD)

*Louisville, KY*  
*Rosa's Team 1*  
*6 Days After the Cincinnati Departure*

“Everyone’s waiting, Rosa. Are you ready?” Jean-Pierre asked softly as he approached a rock a few yards from the Ohio River, where his girlfriend sat.

She smiled slightly but stayed focused on the gushing water as it flowed downstream, constantly re-christening each rock in its path. At that point he knew she wasn’t going to answer, so he decided to take residence on a nearby rock and wait until she did.

It had rained a few days just prior to Team 1’s arrival in Louisville, Kentucky so the river was higher than usual. Some of the land was still soggy so team members had pitched their tents closer to the tarmac, while others decided to lay sleeping bags down on it. Not many people slept well and most were anxious for the day to begin as it would lead them to the last inside hub stop before heading to their final destination in the better lands. The Fort Knox Army base was only a ten-hour hike away and if all went well, they’d be there that night.

As Rosa remained motionless upon the rock, she thought about how her life had taken such an uncontrollable drastic turn over the last four years, yet it seemed like yesterday that it all had begun. She and her parents came back from their beachfront home in Barbados, just as the pandemic had hit. That same year she lost her dad, and shortly after, their home, which forced her and her mom to move in with the Chusos. They didn’t plan to stay there long, but then the virus took her mom along with most of the Chuso family. Left alone with Mr. Chuso and his sexual innuendos, Rosa finally got the courage to venture out on her own. She had no idea the impact the pandemic bestowed upon the rest of civilization as she thrust herself right into the heart of it.

Rosa thought about all the people that crossed her path from the time her and her mom left their home in Shelburne. There was Mr. Chuso, who, even before ever threatening to rape her, she hated. And a few months later, she still didn't regret pulling the trigger on him. Then there was Carmen, the lady she initially met while standing in line to get into the North Beach community. She wondered what happened to her as they were too far back in the line to get in. Then Sandy, Larry and Georgie became her yellow band roomies while living on the beach. She wondered if they ever found a safe spot to land after leaving the winter shelter on their own. And least, but worst of all, there were the thugs. The three she killed in self-defense. All but Blitz, who she later took a huge risk on, inviting him back to the community shelter.

Rosa smiled then glanced over at Jean-Pierre as she thought to herself, "And of course, Darcy and Jean-Pierre. I would have never gotten this far if it weren't for those two and Blitz."

Her thoughts momentarily flipped to Sofia's mom, Celina, whom Rosa decided to bring on board with them from the Cleveland stadium. It was with a heavy heart that they left her behind at the Cincinnati stadium after a brutal rape by a couple of Sons of Goddess club member misfits. There was no way she could have continued the journey, not at that point anyway. Rosa was comfortable with the fact that Hawk and Capone both assured her Celina would be in good hands. They also agreed it wasn't a place for her 7-year-old daughter to wait while her mother healed. Luckily, Jenny made it her duty to consistently stay by Sofia's side, helping the little girl's transition be a bit easier as they left her mom behind.

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The horrific ordeal still weighed heavy on the team. They had barely spoken to each other since they left Cincinnati. But upon

arriving in Louisville, it was as if a switch turned on. Something about the town itself seemed to cast a brighter light upon them.

The city once known as the home of the Kentucky Derby, was visibly in shambles after the pandemic caused orders for thousands of evacuations and burn mandates throughout it. At its very best, the area had supported well over a million residents, and twice as many during the momentous horse races. It was a lively time that everyone looked forward to. Even through its ruins, something intriguing encased it. The feeling of excitement, possibilities, and charm was very much alive among the charred rubble. The familiar chatter of the team once again ignited as they walked through it.

As the team packed their belongings to get ready for their departure, the early morning sun dimly peeked through the leftover clouds. The air was somewhat cool, although the heat would most likely settle in as the hours moved on.

“Jenny?” Sofia softly asked as she struggled to zip up her sleeping bag.

“Yes, sweetie?” she responded lending a helping hand.

“Am I going to see my mommy when we get to the Army base tonight?” Sofia hesitantly asked as her big brown puppy dog eyes blinked back some tears. “I really, really miss her.”

Many nights Jenny had laid awake next to Sofia as she cried herself to sleep. Jenny could barely imagine what the little girl was going through. She winced at the mere thought of having no family around in such catastrophic times and then being thrown into a pack of strangers on top of it all. It was obvious that Sofia’s whole world was topsy-turvey as she tried to maneuver through all the chaos.

Jenny, much like Sofia and Rosa, even though she wasn’t an only child, understood what it meant to be one. Since her brother was much younger, they seldom had played together so she found ways to entertain and amuse herself. She never felt alone, always having



friends and family to lean on, although wished there were other siblings closer to her age that she could've shared late-night stories and adventures with. The one thing Jenny appreciated was that her mom was always there for her. It wasn't until the recent time she spent with Sofia, that she fully understood the scope of her mother's commitment. She missed her immensely and hoped that her parents and brother would make the journey with Darcy's team.

"I know you miss her, Sofia, and I promise, you'll see her soon," Jenny replied as she knelt down, tightly hugged her, and wished that was all it would take to make the little girl feel better, but it was far from it.

"She didn't die did she, Jenny? You'd tell me, right?" Sofia asked as her sad little eyes couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

Despite all she was told, Sofia couldn't comprehend why she couldn't see her mom anymore after the night she didn't return from the showers. Sofia had watched as everyone frantically ran around looking for Celina and knew something was wrong yet was told all was okay. Then the next day she was told that her mom was very sick and had to stay isolated away from everyone, including her, until she got better.

At that point, Sofia knew something very bad had happened and couldn't understand why nobody wanted to tell her the truth. She envisioned her mom in hiding, somewhere down the long dark, hallway near the showers. That was the last place she knew she was and the last time she ever saw her. Sofia wanted to work up the courage to sneak down there by herself and open up the doors along its path, where she thought her mom was. But the hallway scared her. She was afraid that some type of monster lurked about and would grab her and lock her away, like they did her mother.

When it came time for Rosa's team to leave Cincinnati, Rosa felt there was no other choice but to separate the mother and child and

bring Sofia with them. Because Celina was so severely beaten it was deemed too harmful for the little girl to see her, so they never got to say goodbye to each other. It was a challenging and frustrating moment as Rosa and Jenny led the tearful girl away from the stadium. All they could do was continually reassure her things were going to be alright and she'd see her mommy soon.

Jenny squeezed Sofia tighter and whispered into her ear, “No, Sofia, your mommy is fine. I promise.”

For a few moments, Jenny's thoughts momentarily took her back to the days when she was 12 years old and babysat the neighborhood kids who were all around Sofia's age. It was a learning curve, suddenly taking on new responsibilities of keeping little ones safe and in line but she never thought of it as a job. She loved being around the kids and interacting with them.

Meeting Sofia was an added bonus in her life and Jenny thought of her like the little sister she never had. She hoped they'd bond in that manner and be there for each other as time went on. Initially, when Sofia and her mom joined the team in Cleveland, it took a bit for the little girl to warm up to her, but after leaving Celina behind in Cincinnati, the two quickly became almost inseparable.

The morning sun was quickly rising as the team scurried around with the last minute packing. Jean-Pierre, Blitz, and Tank were tasked to tend to the smoldering campfires.

“So, Tank, this is certainly a bit different than stadium life, eh?” Blitz laughed, watching him dump some water on the hot coals.

“Nah, not really!” Tank chuckled as he watched the steam rise from the pit and mingle with the cool air. “You'd be surprised at the shit we've done and where we've done it. We haven't always lived at the stadium you know.”

Tank was more than happy to join Rosa's team when they left Cincinnati, especially after a budding friendship developed between

the two, initially clicking over a few beers and tattoo stories. In general, Tank was more of a loner, staying to himself, especially when newcomers arrived at the stadium. But Blitz was different. He was one of them.

Tank was born into the Sons of Goddess club via his father, so he never had the opportunity to live among civilians except for the few stints he had served in jail. He liked Blitz's stories about his after-the-club nomad life and respected his decision to take the journey to the better lands.

Blitz liked Tank's company. Something about him and his comrades seemed less volatile and more open to forming real friendships than the Sons of Arches club he had been associated with. He felt a tinge of jealousy as he observed the close bond most of the Sons of Goddess brothers had with each other. He couldn't change the fact he came from a dysfunctional family and had curled up with one of the more atrocious clubs in Canada but was thankful he was on a better path.

The day Rosa invited him to the Vermont Memorial Auditorium shelter changed his life. In his new reality he felt welcomed, non-threatened, and rarely misjudged, especially among the Sons of Goddess. They gave him a whole new outlook on 'brotherhood', and he looked forward to upcoming experiences. He was particularly happy that Tank joined the journey.

"I'm with ya," Blitz responded to Tank then looked at Jean-Pierre as he continued, "This kind of life ain't much different than the couch surfing I did when I was homeless at different times in my life. Hell, most of the time we slept in fields, under the stars, and next to our bikes. This ain't much different at all."

Jean-Pierre watched Tank throw more water on the dying coals and barely heard Blitz talking as his own thoughts drowned out his voice. For a moment he was back in his hometown of Stanstead, Quebec. Up

until the pandemic, it was the only place he had ever called home. It was the happier times he reflected upon. The years when his whole family was alive, and their house was filled with laughter and love. But once the pandemic blew into the small town, it slowly took them away from him.

He remembered how the homeless population grew and took refuge in and around the nearby college and fields. At least at that point he still had a roof over his head and his sister, Kate, by his side. He recalled the day Darcy came into their life, then Kate's death, and then the decision to migrate to Vermont. As much as he longed for days gone by, he knew there was no other choice than what he had embarked upon. It wasn't easy getting used to the new way of life.

The sound of Tank's belly laugh brought him back to reality, so he decided to go find Rosa.

## *Mike*

“Hey, Ducky,” Vape Man hollered from across the campsite to his long-time friend.

“Yeah, what’s up?” Ducky yelled back quickly scurrying toward him.

The two were among the many chosen by the Sons of Goddess’ President, Capone, to leave the Cincinnati stadium, strengthening Team 1’s manpower. Prior to departure, the tension had accelerated between the team and the club from all the chaos Snake and Griller had created surrounding Celina’s brutality. Rosa wasn’t sure she really wanted any of them to join their venture, but Blitz helped her realize it was in the best interest of the team that they did.

As Vape Man secured his sleeping bag to his backpack he asked his friend, “Where’s Mike? He was supposed to help finish packing up here.”

He looked around the site noting a pile of supplies still waiting for his friend take care of and was becoming agitated that he wasn’t.

Ducky quickly read Vape Man’s mind and replied, “Oh, yeah, well he and Bud just went down by the river to grab some more water to throw on the campfire coals. I’m sure they’ll be back soon as long as they don’t get too side-tracked. You know how Mike is.”

“Fuck man, no kidding. What a piece of shit! Every time he’s fucking tasked to do something, he drags his damn feet because he gets distracted. Once again I have to finish it up! And we didn’t need any more damn water! You should have told me they took off!” Vape Man exclaimed.

Ducky continued to dismantle one of the last tents standing as Vape Man stomped about. He was angry at himself for mentioning anything about Mike as he replied, “Yeah, well, that’s Mikey for ya. Don’t worry, I got your back. We’ll get this done in time.”

Vape Man wasn't happy with his comeback, so he again hollered out for Mike. Not getting any response, he got up in Ducky's face and angrily instructed, "Okay, you need to drop what you're doing right now and go find his sorry ass and drag it back here before I do!"

"I'm on it," Ducky replied.

He hated when Vape Man screamed at him, as if it was his fault. He also hated doing his dirty work for him, but knew if he didn't, the consequences would be far worse for his friend. Ducky quickly folded up the tent, then headed down the riverbank, immediately spotting the two run-a-ways.

Michael James Longhorn had joined the Sons of Goddess club just two years after Vape Man did. Mike's background was similar to most of them, having once lived in a low-income neighborhood on the outskirts of Cincinnati's city. But their paths never crossed, until the day Mike became a Prospect.

Mike's love for motorcycles was the main allure for joining the Sons of Goddess club. He couldn't afford his own and they were willing to give him one of their used, spare bikes to ride. He was in his glory. His earlier years had been filled with plenty of risks as he'd steal bikes, take them on a joy ride until the gas tank was just about empty, then leave them in a place the owners would eventually recover them. Luck had it, he was never caught.

Most of his childhood years he spent as an outcast among his peers, mainly due to being extremely introverted and excessively overweight. Eating junk food was his escape from the constant bullying he encountered on a daily basis, which only added to his weight problem, leading to more frustration and embarrassment. It was an endless cycle of self-destruction. Mike had almost doubled in size by the time he reached his mid-30's and was never interested in making any changes. When exercise or diet was suggested, it seemed

to intimidate and de-motivate him more, driving him further down the path of laziness and eating anything he could get his hands on.

Mike's self-inflicted disability prevented him from actively helping the club out with any strenuous projects. It was something they anticipated early on but still patched him in. At that time Vape Man vouched for him and thought he'd be able to initiate a change in behavior. But as days, months, and years went by, nothing changed. It was Ducky who ended up coming to his aid. He felt sorry for Mike and how Vape Man and some of the others treated him, so he'd complete the assigned, unfinished tasks for him, warding off punishment as much as possible.

"What do ya think the chances are that any of those derby horses are still hanging around the area?" Mike jokingly asked Bud, shortly after they plopped down on a couple of rocks near the river, watching as it rushed past them.

Bud laughed as he threw a stone into the water, "Probably not a chance in hell at this point, but damn, just imagine if they were! That would make this trip fucking easier. If I saw one, I'd grab it, jump on it, and take the hell off out of here!"

"Yeah, I'd fucking do the same," Mike replied as he threw a few stones that landed just short of the river. "I still can't wrap my mind around the fact that the virus has attacked and killed off just about everything that breathes. It's some fucking scary shit, man. We're lucky to still be here!"

"No kidding," Bud responded. "I don't know how the fuck we got so lucky. Maybe in some fucking weird, twisted way, it was meant to happen. But why us?"

"Dunno," Mike answered. "But we're still here, so maybe that means we'll go down in history as being fucking famous! Nothing, not even that fucking virus, could kills us!"

They both laughed as Bud said, “Could be! Regardless, life still sucks, whether we’re famous or not.”

Mike threw a few more stones, still short of the river, then said, “But really, it would be cool if we found a couple of horses. However, on the brighter side of things, I guess all this fucking walking should help me lose a pound or two.” They both chuckled as he jiggled his belly.

“Well, at least we didn’t have to do the whole trip from Vermont like they did,” Bud said, looking further down the shoreline where Rosa and Jean-Pierre were sitting, their backs toward them.

“I wouldn’t have made it,” Mike replied.

Suddenly they heard Ducky’s voice yelling at them, “Mike! Bud! Get your asses back to the campsite now! Vape Man ain’t happy and if I didn’t come get you, he would have. So, get a move on it now!”

“We’re coming!” Bud shouted back as the two quickly hopped off the rocks, filled the pails with water, then started up the narrow path toward the camp. Ducky had already disappeared out of sight.

Bud stopped for a moment, looked back at Rosa and Jean-Pierre, then asked, “Should we tell them everyone’s ready to leave?”

Mike trudged along the path, trying to catch his breath as the water sloppily splashed out of the bucket, and answered, “Nah, they’ll be up soon. Let’s just get done what we need to before Vape Man comes after us.”

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Rosa was conscious of the commotion behind her but was knee-deep in her own thoughts, still about Celina. She couldn’t help wondering that if more complications developed, Sofia would be left motherless. It already was hard enough to listen to the little girl’s tiny cries in the middle of the night. She was thankful that Jenny was there to help out. Rosa also couldn’t help feeling somewhat responsible for



Celina's misfortune. If it weren't for that day in Cleveland when she agreed that both Sofia and Celina could travel with them, they'd still be together.

Rosa looked over at Jean-Pierre, perched on a rock a little further down the bank, patiently waiting for her. He always had her back and certainly had her heart. Every day she was grateful he was by her side.

She also was thankful she made the decision to bring Blitz back to the winter shelter after finding him sitting on a park bench near Lake Champlain. Things would have been different if she had pulled the trigger on him that day, but his streetwise background and hunger to live only aided in the team's successes as they journeyed through many unsettling situations. The migration had been far more difficult and scarier than she ever expected, and she realized, without those two men as well as others, she couldn't have ever done it on her own as she originally planned.

Rosa wondered if the virus hadn't struck, what her 16-year-old privileged life would have been like. She'd still be living with her parents in their beautiful, mansion-like home on the shore of Lake Champlain in Shelburne Bay. Her dad had promised her a small sportscar once she got her driver's license. And then there was the prom. For as long as she could remember, she had envisioned wearing a Cinderella-type gown, complete with crystal beads. Teens from the nearby boys' academy would have also been there, and she had hoped to catch the eyes of one of them. She shook her head as tears rolled down her cheeks. Life was so far from what it should have been.

The river continued to fiercely gush by, sporadically splashing some of its coolness against her bare feet as they dangled off of the rock. The world had drastically changed right before her very eyes, offering no indications of the luxury that once wrapped itself around her. She was still coming to terms with it all and had hopes that at least

a new life in the better lands would lend some peace to their changed reality.

“Hey,” Jean-Pierre said as he hopped off the rock and approached her, knowing it was time to get back to the campsite.

Rosa wiped her tears as he approached, then tried to cheerily respond, “Hey. I suppose it’s time, right?”

“It is,” he quietly answered, detecting a sadness in her voice. “You okay?”

She slightly nodded then focused back on the river’s heavy flow. Jean-Pierre moved closer and gently rested his hand on her back.

Rosa wiped a tear, as an overwhelming feeling of gratitude flowed over her. She smiled, thinking about Sofia and the fact she was traveling with them. Rosa thought about the others that supported the migration plan, all who had become her new family in the unpredictable new world.

“Okay,” she finally said as she took his hand, jumped off the rock, and whispered in his ear as they embraced, “I’m ready, let’s do this.”

***Fort Knox, KY - the Army Base***  
***Rosa's Team 1***

“I’m getting tired, Jean-Pierre. Are we almost there?” Sofia asked, as he carried her piggyback.

“What?” he jokingly responded. “I’m carrying you. How can you be tired? What about me?” He felt her squirm a bit as he started making horse sounds then ran her around Rosa.

“You’re silly,” Sofia giggled hanging on tightly to his neck.

Jean-Pierre had taken a special liking to the little girl’s spunk, curiosity, strength, and the infectious laugh she possessed. Most of her qualities reminded him of his little sister, Kate. He missed her every day, to a point he’d sometimes cry himself to sleep. But somehow spending time with Sofia seemed to ease a bit of the void her death had filled him with.

The virus certainly knew no boundaries when it came to his family. First, it relentlessly took his little twin brothers, next his other younger sister, and eventually his parents. But it didn’t stop there, several months later it took Kate from him. Jean-Pierre wondered if he hadn’t left Stanstead when he did if he’d be lying next to them in the graveyard across from their once lively home. He was thankful that he met up with Darcy and that he had convinced him to cross the Canadian border unto US soil, which led to his union with Rosa and eventually with Sofia. He was determined to do whatever it took to not become a victim.

Rosa just nodded at Sofia’s comment, then gently tapped her back as the two raced around her. She kept walking but she was tired too. The whole team was dragging. It had been a long day. They had three restless, soggy nights with little sleep. The first one had presented some high winds along with sheets of rain that swept through the tent site, uprooting most of them, and scattering stuff everywhere.

Everything was soaked, including most of their food supply. They salvaged what they could, and it was finally drying out, but they were hungry and weary during the final few miles to the Army base.

“When will we be there, Rosa?” Sofia asked as Jean-Pierre settled in, walking next to her.

Rosa sighed. She wasn’t happy that her patience was low with the little girl and tried not to sound frustrated as she answered, “We’re almost there Sofia, just hang tight.”

“Will my mommy be there?” she asked.

“Not yet,” Jean-Pierre quickly responded, as he bounced her about on his back, making her giggle again. He knew Rosa’s tolerance level was low when she picked up her pace, putting some distance between them.

Jenny rolled up next to them and playfully squeezed Sofia’s cheek as she said, “Remember what I said, Sofia, she’s not going to be there right away, but you’ll see her soon.”

Everyone was excited as they crossed over the Kentucky border, knowing they were just hours away from the base. Once there, they planned to stay a couple of extra days to rejuvenate, dry out some of the supplies and replenish a bunch of stuff that had been damaged in the storm. It was the last indoor shelter they’d stay in before arriving in the better lands. For the first time, they saw light at the end of the tunnel that would eventually bring the tempestuous journey to its end.

It was a little over nine hours into pounding the pavement when Sofia excitedly yelled, “There’s the sign! Look, Jean-Pierre! It says, Fort Knox!”

“You’re right, kiddo. It sure does! We’ve made it!” he exclaimed, relieved to finally lower her off of his back.

“This is really it!” someone shouted out.

“Thank God!” Vape Man yelled. “Time to partaaay!”

Mike laughed as he exclaimed, "It's damn time to rest and find some good food. I'm fucking hungry!"

Vape Man laughed as he slapped him on the back and replied, "That's no surprise you fucking big ox!"

Staged in front of the entrance, next to the welcome sign was an out-of-commission M3 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle. It was apparent it had been sitting there for some time, having no further use due to the ongoing decommissioning of the military.

As soon as her tiny feet hit the ground, Sofia ran over to the big tank and stared up at the large machine gun that was attached.

As Blitz approached, she worriedly asked, "Are we going to die?"

He laughed and squatted down next to her then replied, "No, not at all. It doesn't even work. This is just here to look at. It's one big tank, isn't it?"

"It sure is! Did Tank get his name from it?" she curiously asked as she ventured closer to it.

Blitz laughed again and answered, "No silly! I'm sure that's not where he got his name from."

"Who's talking about me?" Tank jokingly asked as he approached them, patting Sofia lightly on the head.

"Were you named after this big tank?" Sofia immediately asked.

Tank chuckled as he looked at it then answered, "Nah, how I got my name is a bit more complex than this big 'ole machine."

Tank hated the birth name of Lloyd Arthur Billings and had no idea why his parents cursed him with it. It had no meaning to any of his family members. At an early age, he asked everyone to just call him L.A. It was far cooler than Lloyd. It stuck for a while.

During his first stint in jail, he had gotten into a couple of fights and used his strong, muscular body along with his streetwise tactics to bully his way around the other inmates, so they didn't take advantage

of him. By no choice of his, but a gained respect among the inmates inner circle, earned him the nickname, Tank, and it stuck.

Sofia quickly lost interest in the machine and then asked Blitz in a low yet demanding tone, “Is my mommy here?”

Jenny was standing nearby, a bit frustrated that Sofia once again asked if her mom was there, even after being told she wouldn’t be. Jenny knew the emotionally fragile girl didn’t entirely understand all that had happened and why her mom hadn’t shown up yet. She was ready to once again walk her down that path when Blitz beat her to it.

He knelt down next to Sofia, gently grabbing her tiny hand as he replied, “No, little nugget, she’s not here. But you’ll see her soon, I promise. Remember she was really sick and is still trying to feel better so she can safely get here to you.” He gave her a big hug.

As folks gathered around the base’s entranceway, Rosa and Jean-Pierre headed over to talk with two of the guards who had come out from behind the gated booth.

Blitz, Tank, and a few others moved closer to them to listen in on their conversation and to be nearby if needed.

“What brings such a large group to this base?” one of the guards asked.

Rosa quickly responded, “Well, we’ve actually traveled here from Vermont and are headed to the peninsula, The Land Between the Lakes. We believe it’s virus free so that’s what brings us this way.”

The other guard moved forward and replied, “That’s one hell of a trip on foot. That must have taken weeks to get here.”

“Yup, but it feels way longer,” Jean-Pierre responded.

As they continued to talk with the soldiers, Vape Man commented, “I’m not sure how I feel about going inside those gates.”

Blitz was surprised to hear him say that, so he asked, “Why? What’s your issue?”

“Hey, I feel the same. You just never know. We might get in there, and not get back out,” Ducky blurted out.

“It’s not a fucking prison, you idiots!” Tank exclaimed as he joined in on the conversation.

Mike energetically stated, “Just get me the fuck inside and get me some food. I don’t give a shit what type of place it is!”

They all laughed, then Blitz looked over at Vape Man and said, “There ain’t nothing to worry about. When we were at the Fort Drum base, everything was cool. Folks actually catered to us there. It was fucking awesome.”

“Now you’re talking,” Mike replied as he clapped his hands in the air.

Tank added, “Yeah, and don’t forget, these bases are closing down. Nobody’s locking us in them. In fact, I’d bet my last dollar they’re scared as hell as to what’s next, like the rest of us. Shit man, they’re probably even afraid of us!”

Blitz chuckled then responded, “Well, I’d bet my last dollar that they aren’t afraid of us, in fact, mark my words. I bet some of them will want to come with us. That’s what happened at the other base.”

“Yeah, well where are they? Why didn’t they come with you?” Vape Man curiously asked.

“It wasn’t good timing at that point,” Blitz answered. “Rosa had a rule that we couldn’t pick anyone up along the way because we didn’t know what was ahead of us. We had enough of us to worry about. But truth be told, I wish we had.”

At that, everyone was silent as they waited for the go head to head inside the gates. In the meantime, Tank walked over to a small metal sign that revealed some information about the base. He had always been somewhat of a history buff and thought if life had handed him a different plate, he might have ended up being a history teacher of sorts.

The content of the sign revealed that the Fort Knox Army base sat on 109,000 acres, split up over three counties. The base was established during the first World War in 1918 and was named after Henry Knox, the Chief of Artillery in the Revolutionary War. Before the pandemic hit, 75,000 soldiers were behind the gates. A little under 2,000 were left. Many had been told to leave; others were dispatched to different areas of need and others were victims of the pandemic.

It wasn't an easy task to get on base. Initially, the soldiers feared trouble lurked within the group of travelers. They were hesitant to let them in due to their size, intimidated by some of the guys floating about in leather. After more conversation with Rosa, the younger soldier went to get some others to let them decide the outcome of the wayward team. Within a few minutes of their return, the gates opened, and the entire team was escorted to one of the dining halls. The team was pleasantly surprised that the lights were on, the air was warm, and a nice hot meal was waiting for them.

As they all sat down to enjoy the feast, Blitz looked over at Vape Man and Ducky while Mike was busy stuffing his face, and jubilantly said, "See, I told you there's nothing to worry about."

At the end of dinner, the team was brought to another building where they'd set up camp. As they entered the fully lit and warm auditorium, some local transients strolled about between the sleep areas and the restrooms. A few soldiers sat around a cluster of tables nestled in the far right corner, keeping a watchful eye on the activity in the room. Nobody paid attention to the large group as they were guided to the other side of the gymnasium where they'd stay for the next couple of nights. The team was anxious to unpack their damp possessions, grab a warm shower and settle in.



## *A Late Night*

Just as some of them dozed off, six soldiers dressed in camouflage entered the room. Five of them stood at attention by the door while the other headed toward the exhausted travelers.

The young female stopped as she got closer to the new guests, then blurted out, “I’m looking for Rosa Wells. Rosa, where are you?”

Rosa’s heart thumped hard against her chest as she watched the soldier’s eyes scour the area, waiting for her to respond. She felt frightened even though she was next to Jean-Pierre, not knowing why she was being singled out. Some of the others who were still awake pointed the soldier toward her location. For a moment Rosa wanted to crawl inside her sleeping bag and hide, but it was too late. Their eyes locked.

“Rosa Wells?” The Private asked, looking straight at her.

After a brief moment Rosa reluctantly sat up and answered, “Yes, that’s me.”

The soldier quickly approached her, then in a softer tone said, “Good evening, Rosa, I’m Private Rowley and I’m sorry to disturb you so late.”

Jean-Pierre and the many others who were awake listened as Rosa responded, “Private Rowley, what can I help you with this time of night?”

Rosa wiped her sweaty hands on her pants and then glanced over at the other five soldiers near the entrance way as she stood up. She suddenly felt a little faint, so she quickly sat back down on Jean-Pierre’s sleeping bag.

Private Rowley moved closer then squatted next to her and answered, “Well, a couple of our Officers would like you to join them over at one of the dining halls for a brief meeting.”

By then some of the other team members had gathered around just as Jean-Pierre sarcastically asked, “Now? At this time of night? That makes no sense. Can’t they wait until the morning?”

“No, sir,” the Private responded to him as she stood up and looked at Rosa. “They said it won’t take long.”

Rosa wasn’t sure what to think but wanted to know more before she made any commitment. “Well, in all due respect, Private Rowley, my team and I have had a long day and just want to get some rest. What is so important that it can’t wait until morning?”

Private Rowley knew Rosa was skeptical about the request so carefully replied, “I certainly understand but it’s nothing to worry about. They just want to know more about the better lands and understand what your actual mission is. They are the need-to-know right now type of guys and this is the best time for the conversation. It’s okay, really.”

“Shit,” one of the other members said. “Who the hell do they think they are? Have they no respect?”

“It’s okay,” Rosa assured her concerned teammate.

“Well, one thing for sure,” Jean-Pierre hastily stated as he stood up, “she isn’t going anywhere without me or Blitz.”

The Private eyeballed Jean-Pierre and some of the others whose eyes were glued upon her then replied, “I’m sure that’ll be fine.”

Rowley stood in silence until Rosa finally nodded in agreement and said, “Okay, just give me a few minutes so we can get ourselves together. Where are we meeting these nocturnal, curious soldiers anyways?”

“I apologize for their demand, Rosa, really. And I’ll be waiting over by the doors with the other soldiers, and we’ll escort the three of you there,” the Private respectfully responded as she gently patted Rosa’s shoulder, then headed across the auditorium to wait for them.

“This is just a bit weird don’t you think?” Jean-Pierre asked as he watched the motionless soldiers stand by the entranceway. “Why all of a sudden at this time of night do you suppose they need to know about the better lands? Something feels off. They could’ve waited until morning.”

Rosa hopped up then replied, “Yeah, I totally agree. I have no idea what’s really going on but we’re about to find out. Go get Blitz and I’ll be with you two shortly.” She headed toward the restrooms.

The three were quietly escorted to the dining hall, and once inside, noted how empty it was.

“This is creepy,” Jean-Pierre stated then whispered to Rosa, “Why didn’t they just come to you?”

Blitz cleared his throat and replied, “Better yet why is this happening at all?”

The five soldiers stayed back at the door while Private Rowley brought the three across the dining hall and down a small corridor. She opened the door at the end of it and motioned for them to go in. In front of them, they saw a large wooden table with three soldiers sitting around it. One of them stood up and motioned them to have a seat.

“Ah, so you’re Rosa,” one of them said as they all slowly sat down. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with us tonight. We’re sorry about the inconvenience of such a late hour, but we were anxious to talk with you. Please allow me to introduce us. I’m Major Tilton, this is General Howell, and Sergeant Major Godfrey.”

“And who are these fine young men with you?” the General asked as he got up to shake their hands, with Godfrey right behind him.

Rosa felt a little shaky as she replied, “Jean-Pierre and Blitz.”

Tilton asked, “Can I get any of you some water, coffee, soda, or anything else to drink before we get started?”

Major Geoffrey Allen Tilton was a 36-year-old, 5-foot-seven-inch thin framed man, weighing all but 135 lbs. when wet. He was a health

fanatic, a cyclist, into yoga, clean eating, and loved his whisky. Tilton was soft-spoken, a graduate from West Point, top of his class, and had done a couple of combat tours. Married for ten years and divorced just before the start of the pandemic, he had no children. At that point, the military was his life.

After the guests declined the beverage offer, Tilton continued, “The reason we asked to see you is that we’re curious about the complex migration plan you’ve put together and your thought process in doing so. We heard you are the muscle behind this movement. From what we understand, there are some rather large groups of people traveling from up north through some very remote areas down to the peninsula. I dare say, it’s a very risky move. You must know by now, that even the hub stops aren’t the safest places to rest your heads, and let’s not discount all the places you stopped in between them. On top of that mess, there’s no guarantee of what you’ll find when you reach the peninsula. Truthfully, I really think this is the most absurd journey that one could embark upon, especially in such large masses.”

None of them were sure how to respond. Rosa cleared her throat and then meekly replied, “We know there’s no guarantee about what we’ll find once we get there. We have no way of knowing if the land will be virus-free or not. But that is the chance we all chose to take.”

“Do tell,” the General said.

She felt a bit uncomfortable as all eyes were on her but cleared her throat again and continued, “This all started when I originally planned to make this trip on my own after some research I did. But, to my humble surprise, the day I was leaving, everyone from my tent community insisted on coming, so I stayed for the winter, and then more people wanted in as I gathered more information about the migration. There are even more in Vermont waiting to make their way down in the Fall.”

The General stood up and walked around the table toward her as he said, “Well, that’s quite a story, young lady. Of course, you can’t possibly think you’re the only ones that heard about these rumored, virus-free lands. There are a few of them around the country. It makes sense you chose Kentucky and not the others further west of here because of where you lived. Maybe you could help us understand why you didn’t send a pilot team first, like 20-30 folks, instead of putting hundreds of lives at risk without knowing what is really out there.”

The General shook his head as he stared down at the young, school-aged leader sitting in front of him, trying to comprehend that she actually orchestrated and implemented the plan. He knew there were holes in it that all of them were oblivious to. Big ones at that. He paced in silence, back to his seat.

General Robert Lee Howell, a 55-year-old, short, stout man rarely stepped out of his serious persona, even on his time off. He had spent his entire life under the military umbrella thanks to his father’s long-standing career as an officer in the Army. Constantly moving about wasn’t always easy on the family and the transition to new homes got harder the older he got.

Howell credited his mother for staying in their marriage, but recalled many times he and his siblings thought she was going to kick their dad out. Many nights were spent sitting on the staircase listening to their parents argue, mainly after his dad returned home from long tours. His mother was seemingly convinced he was with other women during those absences and the arguing only intensified each time he came home.

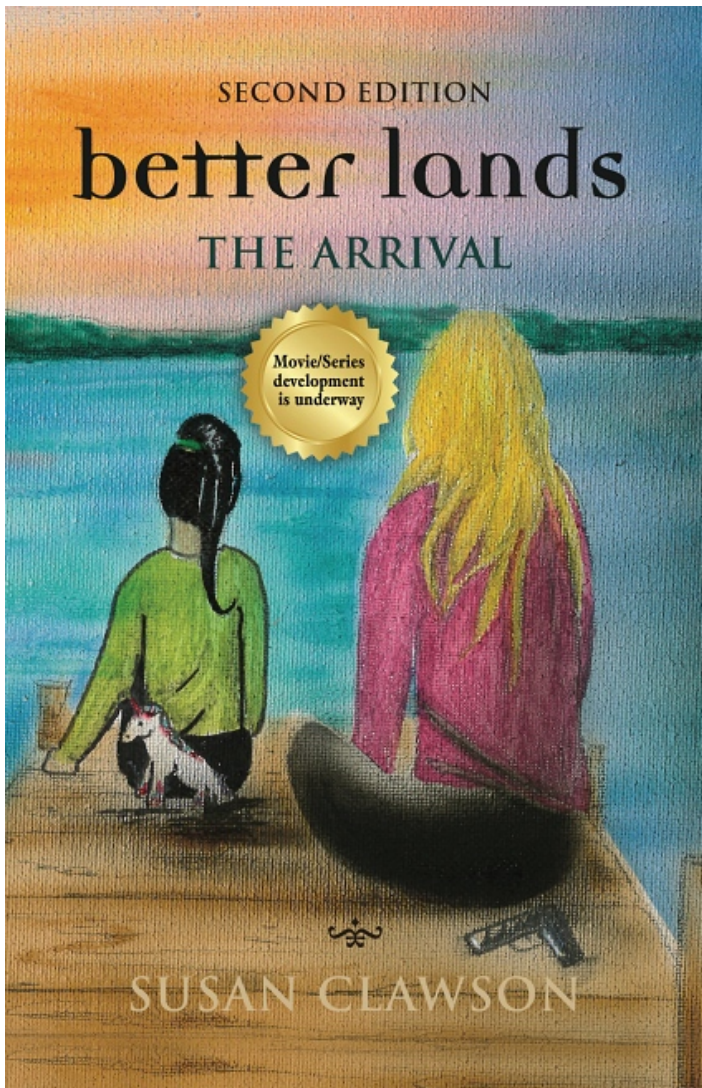
Shortly after graduating high school, one of Howell’s best friends talked him into attending military school with him. Even though Howell wasn’t excited about a military career, he knew it was an easy out-of-the-house deal, so he eventually agreed. He graduated from West Point at the top of his class, then went on to proudly serve his

country. He married and had children of his own. But his worst fear came to fruition. Being stationed for long periods of time away from his family, he found other means to occupy his otherwise long, lonely assignments.

His wife eventually took their two kids and left him after his third combat tour. Thereafter he remained single and immersed himself in his work. Howell climbed the military ranks, successfully reaching Major General status. It was shortly after being assigned to the Fort Knox base, that he planned to retire but then the pandemic hit. He was asked to stay on to help out with its closure.

Rosa watched as the General sat back down, pulling his chair closer to the table. She didn't like being interrogated and didn't trust what he was up to. He was making it clear that he really didn't approve of their journey. She momentarily questioned herself as to whether it was a selfish move on her part, to let so many folks travel with her and wondered how great the risk really was.

Thoughts of Celina's brutal attack quickly fled through her mind before she once again cleared her throat and replied, "Yes, believe me, I understand there's a lot of risks involved with this journey. That's why I originally wanted to do it on my own, but again, everyone insisted on coming with me. I couldn't say no. They knew the risk too. Our plan may not be one hundred percent solid, but it certainly was better than doing nothing before the third virus strain attacks us. I suppose we all made our own choices between the two evils, and I didn't have it in me to say no to those that didn't want to stay behind. So, here we are."



*better lands: THE ARRIVAL escorts the pandemic survivors through Fort Knox and unto the Kentucky peninsula where some will flourish, while others will lose their lives to something far worse than the virus.*

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