

First Encounter

The Brown Rain Series

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Brown Rain Series: First Encounter

By Connie Cockrell

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Dedication

To all of the family, friends, and acquaintances who encouraged and supported me in this long journey.

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They Leave the School

Alyssa stared out of the front door of the Catholic school where she'd been born. It was an industrial-looking building, built in 1961, and it had been

a designated Civil Defense shelter since it was finished. In front of her was the old front lawn, now turned into a garden. It was over three acres of green growing things, the first time in just over seventeen years that the earth had clean soil and the ability to grow anything other than stunted, poisoned life.

Kyra saw her friend Alyssa standing there waiting for her, but she had one more goodbye to make. The community leader, Malcolm Smith, stood near her in the atrium of the school's front entry. At six foot one, Malcolm stood a whole head taller than Kyra. The Mother Superior was next to him. The nuns had supplied the school as their shelter all those years ago. Kyra and Alyssa had already said goodbye to her and the rest of the community at breakfast. She stood, fingering the beads of her rosary, whispering her prayers for their safe travels.

Kyra gave Malcolm a hug. His eyebrows shot up. Kyra wasn't one for hugging. "Don't be a sissy," she told him when she let him go. "I owe you, more than just a hug."

His close-cropped wooly hair was nearly pure white. He'd been the leader in this school building, a refuge from the toxic brown rain that began seventeen years ago and didn't stop for four years, from the beginning. His dark brown skin was wrinkled now, worry creasing his eyes. Kyra did her best to memorize his face. "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be able to take this journey."

"Don't go, Kyra. Talk Alyssa into staying. She can heal the earth from here, a base camp, circling out all the time."

She adjusted her pack straps. "I tried that, Malcolm. I've been trying to talk her out of this for over a year. She says she has to go. The planet is calling to her."

His mouth twisted. "You believe her?"

Kyra stopped fussing with her pack and looked him in the eye. "You know what she can do. None of the rest of us can do that. So, yeah. I believe her." Kyra's grey-blue eyes became determined. "She says she has to go. I have to go with her. Who else will protect her?"

Malcolm shrugged. "Just you. I shouldn't be surprised. She's been your special project since you were four. We'll miss you both." He clapped her on both shoulders "We'll miss you."

She took a deep breath. "Take care, Malcolm." She turned away and stopped at the door where she picked up a quiver full of arrows the community had recovered for her from a nearby hunting store and slung it over her shoulder. Then she grabbed her bow, string loosened. "I'm ready, Alyssa."

The sun was shining from a clear blue sky, making the seventeen-year-old's nearly white blond hair glow in the light. She wore it loose and it fell around her shoulders in a smooth flow to the middle of her back. A light breeze caused wisps of hair to float around her face. She smiled. "It's a good day to start, Kyra." She walked out the door and past the overhang into the garden.

Kyra pulled her waist-length braid of medium brown hair over her shoulder--the pack was pulling on it, and followed her friend. They passed several people they knew in the gardens, who stopped weeding and other chores to wave when the two women passed by.

It didn't take long to walk through the acres around the school that Alyssa had already cleared for their community in Midland, Pennsylvania. There was plenty of space for more gardens, even some livestock if they should find a surviving pig or goat or chickens. The teams had been looking since Alyssa had started to clear the land. So far they hadn't found any.

They were headed west to the other side of Midland where there would be a stream. Alyssa had chosen the direction. Kyra had wanted to go east, toward the sea. "It's important we go west," Alyssa had told her friend.

"Why?" Kyra asked as they stood in a classroom in front of a map of the United States, pulled down in front of the chalkboard.

Alyssa stared at the mountains, rivers and valleys in browns and blues and greens drawn on the map. "I'm needed to the west." She looked at her friend. "We're needed to the west."

Kyra shrugged. "Fine," she conceded. "West it is."

They stopped as they reached the edge of the brown. That's what Kyra called it. It was the remains of the toxic brown rain that covered everything and unless people wore protective gear, they had to remain in place. It had kept them trapped in the school for seventeen years. Under it, plants grew but they were sickly and stunted. Alyssa bent over and touched the oily brown slime, passing her hand over it in a swath. The slime dissolved, the plants turned from a nasty yellow-green to a more healthy green and began to stand up in the sunlight.

Kyra watched for only a moment. She'd been with Alyssa as she cleared the school grounds and had seen the process before. Now, she kept an eye on the path they wanted to take, steering Alyssa left or right as needed. As Alyssa cleaned a four-foot-wide area, Kyra looked for animals. She'd seen things slinking through the ailing woods, just out of sight.

At first she didn't believe it. Malcolm hadn't either when she'd told him about the sightings. "Can't be," he'd said. "You were just four. The rain killed

just about everything it touched when it came. That's why there are so few of us left. How can animals have lived all these years out there in the poison?"

She had merely shrugged. She didn't have any answer but she knew there were things out there and that they'd be hungry.

At mid-day she made Alyssa stop. Kyra poured some of their precious water over Alyssa's hands to clean them. Then they sat down to eat. Kyra had the provisions, the tent and her own gear. Alyssa carried her own sleeping bag, extra clothing, her water bottle and the few personal items she decided to bring. They sat with backs against the packs as Kyra passed her a bean cake and cut-up carrots.

The school had seeds, part of the Civil Defense provisions. What they didn't have were animals. The nuns hadn't even kept chickens. Since the school survived on grow-beds inside the school, next to all of the west and south-facing windows, their diet had been vegetarian. Beans were the primary form of protein. Alyssa ate in silence.

"I think we've come about two miles, Alyssa."

The pale young woman nodded. She never tanned, no matter how much sunlight hit her skin. "It's the woods. It takes longer to heal them than the open grassland around the school. It takes more energy, too."

Kyra held her hand vertically, palm away from her, and moved it until the lower edge of her thumb lined up with what horizon she could see. The sun was five hand-widths above the horizon. "Only about five hours of daylight left."

"I'll do what I can," Alyssa replied and closed her eyes.

Kyra let her nap and leaned back against a tree. Alyssa had been right this morning at the school door. It was a good day for travelling. The sky was a clear, cornflower blue on a fine mid-May day. Occasional puffy white clouds drifted overhead while a slight breeze kept it from being too hot.

Despite Malcolm's doubts, today Kyra had seen the occasional bug flying by and even ants under the dense cover of trees. *It's too bad the Brown smells bad*, she thought as she looked over at Alyssa napping. It wasn't an overpowering smell, just a lingering odor of rancid oil or medicine always in the background.

Her head snapped up at the sound of birdsong. Overhead, against the blue sky, she saw the silhouette of a bird. Her heart quickened and a smile crossed her face. "I told you, Malcolm," she whispered. She let Alyssa sleep for half a hand, then woke her up. "We need to get going or we won't have any water tonight."

Alyssa nodded, rose and put her pack back on. She worked, swinging her

hands back and forth across the path, four inches at a time. The two were going around the town. They decided it made no sense to clear the asphalt and cement of Midland more than she had already done. That work had allowed the members of the community access to the town for any remaining supplies.

It took time to heal the woods. Kyra made her stop once an hour to drink, holding the bottle for her so they wouldn't waste any cleaning her hands. When the sun set, Kyra dug the hand-drawn map she'd copied from the school room map of the local area out of her pack. In the fading light she studied the terrain around her, using her compass to check directions. She sighed.

"Alyssa, stop. We're not going to get to the stream tonight. It's getting too dark to see and it's probably another mile. We'll stop here for the night."

Alyssa stood up and stretched her arms up and over her head. "Okay." She looked around. They had stopped in a small glade, wilted trees surrounding a somewhat flat area. "I can clear this a bit so we have a place to pitch the tent."

After half an hour she had an area cleared big enough to pitch the tent and an additional area so they had a place to relieve themselves without stumbling into the oily brown slime by accident. At the edge of the clearing, Kyra used more water to clean Alyssa's hands. There was half a bottle left. Alyssa spread her bag inside the tent next to Kyra's and lay down.

"You need to eat," Kyra said as she handed Alyssa another bean cake.

She sat up and slowly ate, taking just a few sips of water after it was gone to wash it down. She lay back on the bag. "I'm sorry I couldn't get us to the stream."

"Don't worry about it," Kyra said. She hiccupped, the dry bean cake stuck in her throat. She took a small swallow of water, simply so she wouldn't choke on her food. One more sip followed the last bite of the cake. The rest of the water would make oatmeal for them in the morning. "We'll get there tomorrow."

In the morning Kyra woke first. Dew had fallen in the night and she used her bandana to wipe it off of the now healed grasses. She wrung it into the water bottles, then sucked on the bandana for what moisture she could get. By the time Alyssa woke, the oatmeal was cooked. Kyra handed her a spoon. The two of them ate out of the small pot.

"How are you?" Kyra asked as she scrubbed the pot with grass.

"Tired. But I can get us to the stream and clean some water."

"Good," Kyra said as she packed the pot away.

They packed their sleeping bags and the tent and hefted packs. Kyra made sure the tiny fire she made to cook breakfast was put out.

Alyssa went back to her stopping point and began to heal. The spring morning was warm and it got warmer as the morning wore on. It was noon before they reached the stream where she collapsed in a heap after clearing space right to the water's edge. Kyra gave her the rest of the water, no more than a cup. "Come on, Alyssa. I'll let you rest while I prep the spot. Then you need to clean the water."

This had been a major sticking point in their plans. Alyssa knew she could clean the water but water flows along. As soon as she healed the area around her hand, it was washed away by more toxic water. Collecting rain water was one solution. It came down clean, only contaminated upon hitting the earth. But it didn't rain every day. Some other method had to be found.

After weeks of trial and error on the stream that came from the spring at the school, they decided on just scooping it into a pot and she'd clean that, water, pot and all. It took time but it was the simplest solution.

Kyra pulled the pot from her pack and scooped up water from the small stream. The pot and the surface of the water were covered in a thin brown slime. She held the pot by the handle, which she had carefully kept out of the water, and carried it to Alyssa.

Alyssa sat up and ran her hands over the pot and then in the water. The slime disappeared. Kyra wondered again where the slime went. Did it go into Alyssa? Did she change it chemically? She'd asked Alyssa a few months after they knew she could heal the brown rain slime.

"I don't know," then thirteen-year-old Alyssa had said when asked the first time. She knelt over the tiny spot of grass she'd healed just out from under the edge of the pavilion that covered the spring the convent school was famous for. "I can see the grass, just like I can see the plants in the grow-beds inside. I can see what's wrong with them and make it right."

Seventeen-year-old Kyra had stood under the pavilion. She didn't want to touch the brown slime. "How do you know what's right?"

Alyssa had turned her head from the grass to Kyra and blinked. "I just know. It feels right."

Now, after the water was clean, Kyra poured it into the water bottles. She made six trips before the bottles were full, then made one more trip. "To clean up with," she told her friend. They cleaned Alyssa's hands with bandanas specifically for the purpose, then wiped down faces and bodies. "That feels better," Alyssa said. "I already miss the showers at the school, even if they were cold."

They drank their fill and decided to camp next to the stream. "It's harder than I thought," Alyssa said. "The acres around the school were easier."

"We'll get the hang of it," Kyra said as she set up the tent. "We have all the time in the world."

Alyssa nodded, but her eyes said something else.

The Animals Reveal Themselves

Every day was much like the first. Nearly two decades of growth, even as stunted and sickly as it was, made the going difficult. Kyra revised her plan of five or more miles a day. Alyssa couldn't heal that fast. They inched along and the first few days Kyra was hyper-alert. Every sound was new and regarded as a potential threat. By the end of the day she was as exhausted as Alyssa.

After she became accustomed to the noises and eventually identified what made them, she began to relax. To keep her mind occupied she asked Alyssa about the plants she healed. "Can we eat any of this stuff?"

Alyssa stopped and stretched. She pointed at a small bunch of three-leafed plants that grew close to the ground. "That's wood sorrel. It has a nice citrus tang. It's good in salads and has a lot of vitamin C but it also has a lot of oxalate and can cause stomach cramps if too much is eaten." She grinned at Kyra. "It makes a nice tea, too. You can pick some if you like and taste it and bring a few stems with us. It would be nice to have a tea with supper tonight."

Kyra arched an eyebrow and regarded her friend. "You're not kidding? We can eat that?"

Alyssa nodded. "I know. It's a little strange to eat wild food after growing up in a shelter our whole lives, but I'm sure. We can eat it. Pick a sprig for me, would you?"

Kyra was unsure of this whole thing. Eat wild food? But Alyssa said it was okay. She sighed and stepped over to the three-inch-tall plants. The leaves were split into threes, a shamrock- looking plant. She picked two stems and stood up. Alyssa opened her mouth and Kyra put a stem and leaves on her tongue. She watched as her friend chewed, her eyes closed.

Alyssa swallowed and opened her eyes. "So that's what lemon tastes like." She glanced at the stem still in Kyra's hand. "You try it."

Kyra's lips pressed together as she held the stem between two fingers. She stared at Alyssa. Her friend laughed. "Go ahead, it's good."

With a sigh, Kyra put the plant in her mouth. The first sensation was of coolness; then she got the flavor of green, growing things. She chewed. The tender green stem crunched lightly between her teeth and a tart, slightly sour flavor flooded her mouth. It was such a surprise that she almost spit it out but

Alyssa was watching, a grin on her face. Kyra chewed some more and swallowed.

"What do you think?"

"I think that much flavor is a big surprise, but good. How'd you know so much about it?"

Alyssa turned and began healing again. "From the plant books in the school library. There were a lot of books in there about wild and domestic plants. I memorized all of it."

"Pretty cool, Alyssa." Kyra picked a few stems and tucked them into a pocket. "Speaking of food, it's been five days and I haven't found any animal we can eat. We'll need to divert into a town and try to find some food."

"Fair enough. Tell me which way to go and I'll get us there."

Kyra took out her map and studied it as Alyssa inched forward. Figuring four miles per day, they'd come about twenty miles. She looked at her map with the compass on top of it. They were heading in a north-west direction. A town was nearby but she understood they weren't traveling in a straight line. There was a stream about two miles away; she'd head for that and with luck they'd be there by nightfall.

"Looks like a town is nearby, maybe two days away. I'll show you on the map when we stop for the night."

"Sounds good, Kyra."

#

Two days later they stood on a hill overlooking a small town, called Station Mills, on the map. "It doesn't look like much does it?" Alyssa said.

Kyra shook her head. Some of the buildings had collapsed, age and snow damage, she thought. The main part of town looked intact. She hoped a grocery store would be on their path. "No sign of any survivors."

Alyssa shrugged. "Hard to tell. They'd be staying inside, the same way we did." She pointed. "That looks like a grocery, there on the edge of town."

Kyra looked where her friend was pointing. "Yeah, let's head toward that. If it doesn't work out, we'll head into town to see what we can find."

It took the rest of the day for Alyssa to clear a path to the building. "Yes!" Kyra exclaimed when they reached the front of it. "Greenway" was written in fading formed letters over the front door, the "A" hanging crookedly into the "W." Alyssa cleaned the old-fashioned door so Kyra could touch it. Kyra grabbed the rusting vertical hand-bar and pulled. It didn't open. She pulled harder. Still nothing.

"Maybe the other side," Alyssa suggested.

Kyra nodded and grabbed the bar on the left door. It creaked. "Must be

rusted shut." She took her pack off and, with one foot against the right hand door, pulled as hard as she could. The door screamed in protest as it opened four inches, leaving a rust trail on the cement under it. She grinned. "Let's see if I can get it open a little more."

She braced her back against the right hand door and shoved hard. The door screamed some more as it opened wider. "That should do it." She slapped her hands together to get rid of the dirt. "Let's see what the good people of Station Mills have left for us."

She slung her pack over a shoulder and went in, Alyssa following. "I talked to Malcolm about this before we left," she said over her shoulder. "Canned goods are off limits. After all this time, even if the cans haven't exploded with botulism, they're not safe to eat. We're looking for dry goods; pasta, rice, beans, cereal, anything like that."

"I've always wanted to try pasta," Alyssa said. "The cookbooks and stories make it sound wonderful."

Kyra studied the signs over the aisles. "Here, let's try this aisle."

As they turned, they could see the remains of plastic bags and boxes all over the floor. Three steps into the aisle, a rat squeaked and jumped off of a shelf in front of them. Alyssa gave a little shriek and jumped aside. Kyra stood wide-eyed and frozen in the middle of the aisle. "That was a rat!" She turned to her friend. "Did it look sickly to you?"

Alyssa swallowed and shook her head. "No, it looked healthy."

"Rats can be eaten," Kyra said quietly. "It looks like quite a few have been using this place as their pantry. Let's see if they left us anything." They searched the shelves, Alyssa simply looking because they hadn't cleaned her hands before they came inside. Rat droppings were everywhere, as were empty boxes and bags. They saw the occasional rat and the rare mouse scurry ahead of them through the store. They searched all of the aisles only to find more trash.

"Maybe in the back. The store might have had a shipment but never got it on the shelves," Kyra said. They headed to the back and Kyra slowly pushed open the swinging door. Rats went running in every direction.

Alyssa wrinkled her nose. "It smells in here."

Kyra held a hand over her face. "Yeah," she said as she took a shallow breath. "It stinks. Stay here and hold the door open. I'll do a quick search of the pallets." The storage area ran the width of the store. She checked the closest pallet. "It says it's macaroni and cheese," she called out. Kyra pulled broken boxes away from the torn plastic wrapping the pallet. Rodent droppings showered to the floor. "Hah!" she crowed. She held up an

undamaged box. "The rats haven't gotten to the center of the pallet. We've got food!"

She grabbed four boxes and moved to the next pallet, which was labeled "Rice Dinner." She pulled a few more boxes from the center and stuffed them into her pack. By the time she finished, she also had dried milk, oatmeal and Ramen in her pack. "I got enough for a week," she said as she approached the door. "I even found tea bags, though I'm not sure how good they'll be after all this time."

Alyssa nodded. "If they're spoiled, we'll just dump them. Let's get out of here, I can't breathe."

Dinner that night was in the town park, next to the creek marked "Mills Creek", on the map. Alyssa cleaned enough water for them to wash, drink and make one of the macaroni and cheese dinners. "Pretty good," Kyra said, "even though we didn't have any butter to add to it."

"I can see why there were so many recipes for pasta in the cookbooks." Alyssa licked her spoon. "Very good."

"I'm wondering if I should try to catch some rat," Kyra said as she scrubbed the pot out with clean grass.

"We don't need it yet, Kyra." Alyssa became serious, her green eyes narrowed and her lips pressed together. "I'd hate for us to kill anything if we have plenty of food."

Kyra chewed her lip. While she was eager to try out the skills Malcolm had taught her, she was anxious about the idea of killing an animal and then having to gut and skin it. "Later then."

#

The pair was outside their second town, two weeks after leaving their home in Midland. They'd just resupplied as they had in Station Mills. They were feeling pretty good. Alyssa was developing her stamina and they were moving along at five miles a day. Kyra was confident. They were healthy, moving along at a good pace and eating well. She'd seen some animals lurking in the woods but nothing came into clear sight. She didn't want to try to shoot an arrow at whatever it was, then spend time retrieving the arrow. She felt as long as it didn't bother them, she wouldn't bother it.

That evening Kyra built a small fire to cook over and was getting the pot and water ready when Alyssa said quietly, "There's a dog behind you."

Kyra froze. Her bow was behind her, strung tight and leaning against her pack but it was out of reach. "How far away?" she whispered.

"The edge of the clearing, about twenty feet." Her eyes were wide and Kyra could see her friend swallow. "It's a big dog, Kyra."

"Does it look sick?"

Alyssa shook her head a little. "It's not fat but it looks strong."

"Crap." She forced herself to stand up slowly. Her knees popped as they straightened. "What's the dog doing?"

"It's sniffing the air."

"It didn't move?"

"No, it's still at the edge of the woods."

Kyra casually turned. Now she could see the dog. She tried not to look at it as she took the three steps to her pack. The quiver was next to it. She put the quiver on in long slow movements and picked up her bow. When she looked again, there were three dogs, spread in a line at the edge of the clearing. "Alyssa, do you have your knife in your boot?"

"Yes," the young woman whispered.

"Stand up slowly and as you stand, pull your knife. Don't make any sudden or sharp movements."

Kyra watched the dogs as she nocked the arrow in the bow. "Are you standing?"

"Yes."

Kyra's stomach rolled and her heart was beating so fast she thought she would be sick. She swallowed and made an effort to breathe in slow, even breaths. "Stay behind me as best you can. If one of the dogs gets past me, you'll have to kill it before it kills you. Understand?"

"I understand," Alyssa said in a weak voice.

The first dog, what looked like a German shepherd to Kyra, began to circle the small camp to her right, its lip curled and wicked teeth visible in the fading light. A second dog circled to the left. Kyra felt her hands begin to sweat. She pulled the bow and held it. Maybe they'll go away, she thought.

The third dog approached straight into the camp, directly toward Kyra. She glanced at the first dog, it was still circling. "Alyssa, keep an eye on the dog to our left. Let me know if he charges, I can't watch all three of them at once."

"Yeah," she whispered.

Kyra held her shot. Now that it had come down to it, she was reluctant to kill the dog. She was reluctant to kill anything. She'd only shot at targets back at the school. Malcolm had told her not to hesitate.

"The first time is going to be hard, Kyra," he'd told her. A faraway look shone in his eyes. "It will be the hardest thing you've ever done, but if you're

threatened, don't hesitate. Doesn't matter if it's an animal or a human. Hesitation will get you and Alyssa killed. Take the shot."

Sweat ran down her forehead and into the outer corner of her left eye. She blinked and the center dog, crouched down, approached slowly. The first dog was on her right, also in a crouch. "Alyssa, is your dog in a crouch?"

"Yes. I think it's going to attack."

"I think so, too." Kyra pulled the string back just a hair more and fired at the center dog. The dog screamed and flipped around as the arrow hit it in the middle of its chest. She turned to her right and pulled a new arrow in one fluid movement. The first dog was charging. She could hear Alyssa scream, "Look out!" behind her. The first dog was five feet away when Kyra pulled the bow and shot it in the neck. She dropped the bow and pulled her boot knife while spinning around to Alyssa. The last dog was in the air, a snarl sounding as it leapt straight for Alyssa's face.

Kyra threw her knife and hit the dog in the ribs, knocking it aside. It yelped and rolled. Kyra grabbed the knife from Alyssa, who stood frozen, and charged the dog. It rolled to its feet with a yelp and crouched, ready to lunge. All she could see was its mouth in a snarl and teeth ready to tear her apart. The blood pounded in her ears as she circled the dog. The thing must weigh about fifty pounds, she thought as she gripped Alyssa's knife. *It's wounded. I can do this.*

It leapt, her knife falling out of its ribs. She braced herself in a crouch for the impact. Kyra slashed with the knife at the animal's throat but it wasn't enough. It yowled as she spun to get out of its way. She crouched again, knife ready as the dog hit the ground, spun around and leapt at her again. This time she let the creature hit. It snapped at her, its breath foul in her face. From her left she could hear a yelp. *Alyssa!* But she had to deal with this dog first. Holding the dog's throat with her left hand, she swung with all her strength for the dog's ribs with her right. The knife plunged into the dog, and she could feel the blade scrape a rib as the knife went in up to the hilt. She pulled it out as she rolled over, the dog thrashing, and once on top, she stabbed it again. The dog screamed and she rolled to her feet in a crouch. *Where's Alyssa?*

In front of her, Alyssa stood over the first dog, Kyra's knife in her hand, blood dripping from the tip. The dog lay at her feet, unmoving. Kyra ran to her. "Are you all right?"

Alyssa stared at the dog, her eyes filling with tears. "I had to, Kyra. It was getting up. Getting ready to kill you."

Kyra reached out and took the knife. "You had to do it, Alyssa."

She sank to her knees and stroked the dog's fur. "They were just hungry, Kyra."

"Maybe so, Alyssa. But that doesn't mean we had to be their meal."

"I'm supposed to be a healer, not a killer."

"You aren't a killer, Alyssa. You protected yourself and me. Thank you. But that doesn't make you a killer."

Kyra pulled her friend up by her hand and walked her to the fire. She pulled some wood sorrel out of a pocket and dropped it in the pot of water and set it next to the fire. "Some tea will help. Take it off just before it boils, okay?"

Alyssa blinked at her. "What will you be doing?"

"I'm going to drag these dogs away from the camp and skin them. We'll need the furs in the winter. "

Alyssa paled. "Do you have to?" Her voice quavered.

"If I don't, they'll be wasted. Why shouldn't we take the furs? We'll need them this winter. The bodies will be left for the scavengers."

Kyra could see her sigh and watched a tear roll down one cheek, glistening in the firelight.

"Yes. I suppose so."

"You'll have to heal the toxins from them, then from me, before I start."

Alyssa nodded, shoulders slumped. She rose and walked hesitantly to the dog she'd killed. Kneeling, she ran her hands over the animal's fur. It was a gentle movement, petting the dog, almost an apology. When she finished with all three she went back to the fire and stroked Kyra's whole body. "I'm sorry," she whispered when Kyra tensed. "I know how private you are but I have to be sure there're no toxins on you."

Kyra unclenched her teeth when Alyssa finished. "S'all right. Has to be done. I'll get to work."

It took two hours and when she came back into camp she was bloody but had three skins rolled tightly. She used water from her bottle to rinse off and wash her hands and face. She left the skins away from the tent. When she finally sank down in front of the fire, Alyssa handed her a cup of tea. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you."

Kyra held the cup under her nose. The lemony scent of the wood sorrel helped clear her nose of the smell of blood and death. "That's all right." She drank the hot tea down. It tasted heavenly. "It's done now. I'll make dinner in just a minute."

Alyssa handed her the pot. "I made dinner. It seemed the least I could do after you protected me."

Kyra blinked. Alyssa hadn't done any camp work except to clean the water since they started. She took the pot; it held macaroni and cheese.

"I figured you could use your favorite."

"Thank you, Alyssa. That was thoughtful." She realized she was starving so she dug in. No meal had ever tasted so good.

As she scraped the last bits from the pot, Alyssa said, "I think it's time I did my share of the camp work."

Kyra stopped with the spoon halfway to her mouth. "Sure, if you're not too tired from healing. I'd like that."

Alyssa made more tea in Kyra's enamel cup and passed it across the fire. She took the pot and spoon and scrubbed them out with grass. "Good." She smiled at her friend across the flames.

They Arrive at Their First Survivor Community

When they started out the next morning, Alyssa was even more quiet than usual. At their morning break, Kyra broke the silence. "What's the matter?"

Alyssa was leaning against her pack, back against the tree with her eyes closed. "I don't think I'm cut out for the dangerous stuff." Her green eyes opened to gaze at her friend. "I wasn't much help yesterday."

Kyra snorted. "You had my back when I was wrestling with that damn dog. I think you have what it takes."

Alyssa sat forward. "How do you know how to fight like that?"

Kyra sipped from her bottle, then recapped it immediately. She'd knocked an open bottle of water over the second day out from the school. It had been hours before they came to another stream to replenish her supply. Now she recapped or recovered everything, as soon as it left her mouth. "You know Malcolm taught all of us how to use weapons, self-defense, all that stuff."

Alyssa smiled. "I wasn't interested in that, but yes; I could have joined the other kids if I had wanted to."

"Well, when I told Malcolm what we planned to do, he gave me extra lessons. He taught me how to fight someone bigger than I am, how to fight more than one person, how to fight animals. I carried massive bruises for months."

"He saved our lives, then." Alyssa chewed her lower lip, her delicate face a study in anxiety. "I can feel them, you know."

It was Kyra's turn to sit forward. "What do you mean?"

"It's how I can heal. I can feel the living plant, identify what's wrong and make it right." She looked at the ground and picked up a brown pine needle, twisting it between thumb and forefinger. "I could feel the dog's life and I snuffed it out." Tears flowed down her cheeks, falling silently to the ground.

Kyra crawled the three feet to her friend. She put her arm around Alyssa's shoulders. "That's tough, as sensitive as you are to the life around you. That makes you all the more brave for it."

The slender girl sniffled and wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand. "I suppose. I couldn't let the animal kill us."

Kyra squeezed her again. "That's right. We have a right to live, too."

The women moved on and for the next two weeks they worked on finding the right rhythm for themselves. Kyra still did most of the camp work in the evening; Alyssa was drained from healing their way across the countryside. But in the mornings, she was the one who made tea and breakfast and cleaned the dishes while Kyra took down the tent. The first time it rained, Kyra panicked until Alyssa declared the rain clean. They stripped and bathed in the shower, rinsing their clothing of sweat and dirt in the rain, then wrapped themselves in their sleeping bags. The patter of rain on the tent made them sleepy, so they rested the remainder of the day.

They were four weeks away from their school when they crested a hill and saw a town in front of them. "You think there are any survivors here?" Alyssa asked.

"Hard to tell; there weren't any in the last few towns. We'll check the schools, and any other big buildings where people could have sheltered."

"Wait." Alyssa pointed to the east side of the town. "Is that smoke?"

Kyra squinted in the mid-morning light. "Yeah. That's smoke coming from what looks like a factory. They must have some sort of water inside the building, like we did."

"New people, Kyra. Won't that be interesting?" Her green eyes sparkled with excitement.

Kyra thought about Malcolm's warnings concerning other survivors. "It's a vicious world, kiddo," he'd told her. "If you find any survivors, they're going to be tough and mean. Anything or anyone new is more than likely going to be viewed as a threat."

"That seems kind of negative, Malcolm. We're not mean," she remembered saying.

"Maybe, maybe not," he'd said. "But if someone came knocking on our front door I'd be very suspicious."

She pulled her thoughts back to Alyssa's question. "They may be

interesting. They may look at us like those dogs did, another meal to be had. We'll have to see." She turned to Alyssa. "Don't offer any information about where the school is or the town we're from, at least not at first."

Alyssa's eyebrows went up. "Why not?"

"Because we've left a trail back to them. If these are good people, that won't be a problem. If they aren't, well, no sense handing out directions."

"Ah." Alyssa nodded. "I'm going to have to tell them about what I can do. How else can we explain how we got here?"

Kyra scratched her neck where her braid lay. Little hairs were coming loose and making her itch. "I've been thinking about that for over a year. I talked to Malcolm about it, too. There's no good answer. I'd like to avoid talking about it at first, if we can. Who knows how people will react when they find out you have "magic" power?"

"It's not magic, Kyra."

"I know that, but they may not believe it. So let's take it slow, okay?"

Alyssa adjusted her pack. "Yeah. Makes sense. Shall we go?"

"Sure," Kyra hitched her pack up. "Down the hill and to the east. Let's hope we can get a look at the place before we knock on the front door."

#

Kyra banged on the door of the factory with her bow. It had taken all day to get here and the sun was setting. Her stomach was in a knot as she waited for an answer, Alyssa standing behind her. They'd washed her hands after she healed a path up to and including the door. Kyra hoped they would be nice people, glad to have news that there were other survivors, but Malcolm's warnings weren't encouraging. She rapped the bow on the door again; the metal door had a hollow echo.

It took a few minutes before they saw an eye peeking around the edge of the window. They could hear people inside, barely contained panic in their voices. Soon there was the sound of metal scraping across cement and of chains being removed from the doors.

Kyra and Alyssa exchanged glances. Their refuge had never been locked, chained or barred. There was no need. Who was around to come inside after the rain first started? The door had to be forced open; it seemed to have rusted in place. After a screech that echoed down the street, a male face peered out of the five-inch crack. "Who are you?"

The women had agreed that Kyra would be the speaker. She told the pale, dark haired visage, "I'm Kyra, this is my friend Alyssa. We're traveling and

saw the smoke from your chimney. We thought you'd like to know that there are other survivors."

The man ducked back around the door. The women could hear urgent whispering just inside. The head popped back around the door. "I'm Dan. This is the Community of the Children of God, Survivors of the Cursed Rain." He stared at them.

Kyra wondered what he was waiting for. "We're happy to meet you, Dan."

A whisper was heard from inside, and Dan nodded. "We need to move the door so you can come inside, if you'd like?"

"Yes." Kyra put on a smile even though she wasn't getting a good feeling about this. "We'd love to share stories with you."

Dan disappeared again and soon several sets of men's hands were pulling the door open. When the screeching of steel against concrete stopped and the dust had settled, Dan reappeared. "Please come in and meet the community."

Kyra felt as though it was some sort of trap but she'd already told them they would visit. She sighed, pasted on her smile and stepped inside the door, Alyssa behind her. Once inside, Kyra saw they were in a hallway in what looked like the office spaces of the factory. The walls were a dingy green though the space was well lit by daylight filtering through the dirty windows and the open door. The hallway was lined with several men who all stared at Kyra and Alyssa.

Kyra felt her hands begin to sweat. "I'm so happy that we've found survivors."

Dan nodded. "We are blessed indeed that you have come. Follow me. It's time to eat."

The two followed Dan through a labyrinth of hallways and open spaces until they reached a large space with tables set up in a communal dining room. This was comforting to Kyra, as their own community ate communally in the school cafeteria. What was uncomfortable were all of the eyes staring at them. Kyra had begun to think there were only men here until they reached the dining area. There she saw women setting the tables and bringing food out from the cooking area. Children ran around the space, playing tag until they saw the newcomers. They stopped to stare, too. Kyra's mouth went dry. She could feel Alyssa very close to her back.

Dan showed them to a table and invited them to sit. He sat down with them after they dropped their packs on the floor behind their chairs. They were joined by a teenaged boy, a girl who looked to be a little younger than him, and two smaller boys. They stared at the visitors. A woman hurried over and poured water into the glasses in front of each plate. She eyed the pelts

attached to Kyra's pack and sniffed at the reek. Kyra expected an introduction but the woman hurried off. She came back moments later with a pot of stew and placed it on the table, then sat in the chair next to Dan.

At the front of the room, a man stood up. "Let us pray." Kyra noticed that even the children looked down and raised their hands to the ceiling. The room went silent immediately and he intoned, "Dear Lord our God in Heaven. Bless us this day for our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as you forgave those of your dear son, Jesus. Thank you, Lord, for the gift of visitors to our community. We ask that you protect us and guide us, today and every day. In Our Father's name, Amen."

"Amen," the community at the tables repeated.

Dan took his hands down and the rest of the table followed. "Welcome, Kyra and Alyssa. This is my wife, Ruth, my son," he pointed to the teen boy, "Andrew, my sons, Garth and Howard, and my daughter, Jessica."

Kyra looked at the wife first. "Nice to meet you, Ruth. I'm Kyra and this is my friend, Alyssa." She turned to the children. "Nice to meet all of you." The little boys stared, the teen boy sat up straighter but the wife and the teen girl both refused to look Kyra in the eyes. Ruth stood up and, serving the visitors first, scooped stew into the bowls. Her husband was next, then the boys, oldest to youngest. The girl was served, then Ruth scraped what was left in the pot into her bowl. There was only about half of what everyone else had. She sat down in her chair, put her hands in her lap, and stared at her food.

Dan picked up his spoon and began to eat. The boys did too, then the girl, then Ruth. Kyra and Alyssa exchanged a quick glance, then began their meal.

"Thank you so much for sharing your food. That's very generous of you," Kyra said as she spooned up a bit of the stew. She blew on it, then tasted. Like in her community, the stew was vegetarian. It's seasoned well so they must have salt, she thought. "It's very good, Ruth," she said after she finished the first spoonful.

Ruth's spoon stopped halfway to her mouth, she stared a moment, then her eyes, both surprised and frightened, went back to her plate. Dan glared at Ruth, then returned his gaze to the visitors. "It's our custom that women not speak at the table."

Kyra blinked, her mouth full of stew. She quickly swallowed. "You don't talk at meals?"

The boys fidgeted in their seats and stared at Kyra.

"No, men talk. Women listen."

She bent her head in acknowledgement and shot a quick glance at Alyssa. She gave a barely perceptible shrug and dipped up another spoonful of stew.

Kyra's mind was racing. *What kind of place is this? Ruth looks terrified.*

She gazed around the dining area. At each table, only the men were talking. Women and children were silent, eyes on their food. The meal went quickly as each person focused on eating. As soon as Dan was finished, Ruth leapt up and took his bowl and spoon. She gathered hers up and then the girl's bowl, the small boy's and the teen boy's and then Kyra's and Alyssa's. Kyra had just finished eating but Alyssa still had half a bowl of food. She noticed the children had eaten all of theirs.

"Come," said Dan. "I'll show you the facilities and then your room. You must be tired."

The two stood up, picked up their packs and followed Dan. He showed them the restrooms, modified from the original factory arrangement so that the waste went outside the wall. "Rinse your deposit out of the tube with the water in the bucket," he told them. Nearby he showed them the shower area, also divided into a men's and women's side. "We heat the water with sunlight," he explained proudly. "Hot showers."

Kyra had to admit a hot shower sounded nice. Her community, while it had running water from the spring the Catholic School was famous for, had only cold showers. They'd never heated it. After the shower room he took them along a makeshift hallway. It was obvious this was built after the people took shelter in the factory. Kyra was surprised to find that he showed them into a real room. "We've put beds in here and the door locks." He looked a little nervous. "For your privacy."

"Thank you, Dan," Kyra said as she looked around the room. Lit by a single smoky lamp burning what smelled like fuel oil, it seemed to have been a storage room. The ten-by-fifteen foot space was windowless. The walls were peeling industrial green paint while the floor was bare cement. Two beds were against the facing side walls. "We'll be very comfortable here."

"In the morning after breakfast, our leader Joseph will meet with you. He'll explain everything." Dan stared at the two young women. Kyra felt as though he were eyeing a piece of meat.

"We look forward to meeting him, Dan. Thank you for your help today." Kyra remained in the middle of the room and waited, Alyssa behind her.

Dan nodded and backed out of the door. "Um, unless you're visiting the facilities, it's best you stay in here. The old equipment in the factory can be dangerous."

"Good advice, Dan," Kyra said as she pasted on a smile. "Thanks for the word of caution."

"Good night," he said and closed the door.

Kyra breathed a sigh of relief, pulled her pack off and dropped it on the right-hand bed. Alyssa stared at the door. "Does this feel wrong to you?" she asked.

"It does." Kyra tried the bed. It wasn't too bad, better than sleeping on the ground. "We'll go to the bathroom, wash up, then get back in here. No one goes without the other one, okay?"

Alyssa pulled her pack off and set it on the floor beside her bed. "Agreed. This place is creeping me out."

Kyra nodded. "Me, too."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Connie Cockrell began writing in response to a challenge from her daughter in October 2011 and has been hooked ever since. Her books run the gamut from SciFi and Fantasy to Contemporary to Halloween and Christmas stories. She's published Five novels and three collections of short stories and has been included in three different anthologies. Connie continues to write about whatever comes into her head.

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Her books are available in print at most online retailers.

Her next book, a novella, in the new Brown Rain series, *The Downtrodden*, will be out near the end of October, 2014. See the excerpt below.

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Excerpt from *Brown Rain, The Downtrodden*

Alyssa and Kyra ran as best they could through the dark. They didn't dare get off the path Alyssa had made weeks ago or Kyra would be poisoned. For awhile they could hear pursuers from the Community of the Children of God but it didn't last long. They were working with torches and the light was too dim for them to see a path they didn't even know existed.

The run up the hill overlooking the town was hard; neither of the two young women had been fed well during their imprisonment. At the top, Kyra called for a stop. "Wait, Alyssa," she gasped, heart beating furiously. She felt as though she were going to vomit. "I haven't heard any noise behind us since two blocks away from the factory. I think we're safe."

Alyssa turned to look down the hill as she dragged in breath in great rasping sobs. The dim moonlight showed her hair stuck to her face. "I don't see any torches."

They were stopped in the spot where they had first looked over the town. Alyssa sat down, Kyra collapsed beside her. They both watched; there were no lights following them. "Can we sleep here?" Alyssa asked.

The two had stopped at the top of the ridge at the edge of the woods where they had stood many days before. "Can you make us a clearing?" Kyra asked. "I don't want to chance rolling into the brown rain."

Her friend swallowed and pulled hair that was stuck to her face back and into the rest of her hair. "Let me catch my breath," Alyssa said.

They sat for several minutes as their heart rates dropped and breathing went back to normal. Alyssa began healing the ground around them while she sat there, reaching out around her and clearing a space. "I'll do the best I can," she said. "It's too dark to see here under the trees."

"Big enough for us to lie down," Kyra told her. "I don't know what's in our packs. Joseph may have taken the tent and who knows what else. I won't know until I can look in the packs." She could feel Alyssa nod more than see her.

The teen got up and leaned over, creating a space under a large pine tree where they would have a little shelter, then she healed the tree. She sank down, back against the newly healed bark. "That's all I can do," she told her friend. "I'm just too tired and hungry."

"Good enough for me," Kyra told her as she stepped lightly to sit beside Alyssa. "This will do till daylight, then we have to move."

The next morning the sun woke them by shining through the branches of the tree. Kyra woke first to the smell of pine and sunlight in her eyes. She yawned and listened. There was no sound of pursuit. She nudged Alyssa. "Get up. I want to go before Joseph convinces the men of the community to follow our path."

The two stood up, stretched and trotted along the path they'd previously made. "Where are we going?" Alyssa asked.

"I want to back track a bit then see what's in my pack. I hope the maps are still there and our tent, at least. The rest of the supplies would be a bonus but I suspect Joseph may have taken most of it. My pack feels too light."

They walked and jogged for about the time it took the sun to move another hand above the horizon. "How do you know that's an hour?" Alyssa asked when Kyra called a halt.

"It's a trick Malcolm showed me," Kyra said as she shrugged off the pack. "You hold your hand horizontally above the horizon. Then move it up little finger where the thumb was until you reach the sun. If it's morning, that's how many hours it's been since sun rise. In the afternoon, that's how many hours until sunset." She shrugged as she knelt on the four foot wide path, next to a stream. "It's not totally accurate, like the old time clocks, but it's a fair measure."

Alyssa sat down to rest, careful to keep her hands to the edge of the path. "Do you have any water left?"

Kyra unslung one of the bottles they had filled before their escape. "A little; let me pour for you." She rose and walked over to her friend. She tipped the bottle to her mouth. "Drink as much as you want. If the pot is gone, I'll dip water with an empty bottle and you can clean that before I fill the rest."

Alyssa drank it all. "Thanks," she said as she wiped her mouth on her shoulder.

Kyra went back to the pack. "Let's see what that miserable excuse for a

community leader left us."

She pulled out spare socks, a spare shirt and a packet of dried bean cake. "Hah," she cheered. She counted. "Ah, he tried one, didn't like it and left the rest," she grinned. "At least we have something to eat." A little lower in the pack was their tiny cooking pot. "Nice," she held it up. "We can cook and dip water."

Alyssa grinned. "That's something anyway."

She dug down to the bottom of the pack. Kyra was really hoping for the tent as they had to abandon their sleeping bags at the factory when they escaped. "Got it," she crowed triumphantly. She pulled it out and unfolded it as much as she could in the limited space. "It looks undamaged as far as I can tell. We'll be cold at night but we'll be out of the wet, at least until we get to a town where I can find supplies."

"How about the maps?" Alyssa asked. "I'd hate to have to just wander around in the woods till we stumble on a town."

Kyra reached into the pack and felt around the bottom. "Wait, yep," she smiled again. "He left the maps in the bottom. "Can you fill the bottles while I check the map? I want to move on as soon as we can. I still feel too close to the Children of God."

Alyssa nodded and got up. Kyra handed off all of the bottles and opened maps until she found the right one for this area. After Alyssa cleaned her hands, they split a dried bean cake. They rested about an hour and checked Alyssa's pack. Since she carried only her own things, most of them were still there. "Glad for that, at least," Kyra told her as they finished eating. She held the map out. "Look," she pointed at the map. "This is the town we just left. We want to go west. If we follow this stream till mid-day then head a little north, we'll come to Fern Springs. It looks like it was a good sized town. We should be able to find food and gear there." She plucked a blade of grass and held it first against the map key, then the map. "It may take five days or so."

"What if the Community of God cleaned it out years ago when cars still worked?" Alyssa asked as she stood up and brushed off her hands.

"I thought of that." Kyra put the map at the top of her pack. She'd repacked the rest of the gear before they ate. "We'll have to deal with it as best we can. Maybe they just hit the big stores and skipped the hiking and sporting goods stores. All I know is that it's the closest town and we need food and gear. We have to try."

Alyssa nodded. "I'll keep my eyes open for edible greens. We can stew the bean cakes and maybe dress them up a bit."

"Sounds like a plan." Krya put on her pack and adjusted the straps while

Alyssa did the same. "Let's go."

The Downtrodden is due out the end of October, 2014.