



The Downtrodden
The Brown Rain Series

Connie Cockrell

Author of the Gulliver Station Series

Brown Rain Series: The Downtrodden

By Connie Cockrell

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Dedication

To the family and friends, too numerous to mention, that have encouraged me along the path to author hood.

Acknowledgements

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Recovery

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

a while they could hear pursuers from the Community of the Children of God but it didn't last long. The pursuers 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."

The two had stopped at the top of the ridge at the edge of the woods where they had stood many days before. Alyssa sat down and Kyra collapsed beside her. They both watched; there were no lights following them. "Can we sleep here?" Alyssa asked.

"Can you make us a clearing?" Kyra responded. "I don't want to chance rolling into the brown rain."

Her friend swallowed and pulled her hair back. "Let me catch my breath."

They sat for several minutes as their heart rates dropped and breathing went back to normal. Kyra tried to listen for sounds of pursuit over the pounding of her heart. 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." 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 staggered over to sit beside Alyssa. "This will do till daylight, then we have to move."

The next morning they woke to the sun shining through the branches of the tree. Kyra was first and enjoyed the smell of pine filling the air. 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, stretched and trotted along the path they'd made days ago. "Where are we going?" Alyssa asked.

"I want to backtrack 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 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 vertically above the horizon," she said, demonstrating. "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 sunrise. 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. "Ha!," 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."

Kyra dug down to the bottom of the pack. She was really hoping for the tent as they had 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 we 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

said with another smile. "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 one map after another until she found the right one for the 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, anyway," Kyra told her as they finished eating. She held the map out, pointing. "Look. 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 into 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." Kyra put on her pack and adjusted the straps while Alyssa did the same. "Let's go."

At the five-day point, they found themselves on a cliff, with a small river running two hundred feet below. "This sucks," Kyra grumbled as they stood looking at the view. She pulled out the map. "I'm sorry, Alyssa." She smacked the folded map against her leg. "I didn't see these faint dotted lines marking the canyon. We'll have to go all the way around it."

Kyra sank to the ground and held her head. She had a headache. It had been nagging her from before their escape. Hunger was getting to her and it didn't help that she'd had little to eat before the escape as part of the community's effort to break her to their will. Tears began to run down her cheeks.

Alyssa walked over and sat down beside her friend. Her hands were still covered with the toxic, oily residue of the brown rain so she couldn't give her friend a hug. "It's a nice view though."

A snort escaped from Kyra. She wiped her eyes. "Sorry about that."

"You're hungry and tired." Alyssa comforted her friend. "I am too." She

pointed at the opposite headland. "You can see a little of the town from here. We'll just follow the cliff around to the other side and down. We'll be there soon."

Kyra nodded and got up. "Sure we will." She picked a newly healed dandelion leaf and blew her nose. Alyssa used a stick to dig up some of the dandelion roots. "We can boil these for dinner. I'll keep an eye out. There may be other things I can find."

It wasn't that easy. The cliff top was rocky and barren. Alyssa narrowed the amount of path she was clearing since it was mostly stone anyway. That helped them go a little faster than normal but not much. Hunger had weakened both of them and they had to stop more often. It was the end of the sixth day before they rounded the end of the canyon. The last day there was no water and they couldn't find a stream at the top of the ridge. "Where's a good rain when you need it?" Kyra joked through cracked lips.

Alyssa nodded but said little. Healing the land as they went took a lot of energy. Even with the narrow path, she was still burning through her reserves fast. Kyra could see dark shadows forming under Alyssa's eyes and her cheekbones began to stand out. It was mid-day when they stood at the top of the ridge overlooking the town of Fern Springs.

"I don't see any smoke," Alyssa whispered.

"Me either," Kyra croaked. "Let's go down and hope we can get into a house or something with dry goods."

They started down the scree slope. The rocks tumbled and Alyssa had a hard time cleaning a path. Twice Kyra, weakened from hunger, slipped and knocked rocks past Alyssa's head. By the time they reached the bottom, it was mid-afternoon. They stopped to rest, legs battered by the rocks. Alyssa ran her hands down Kyra's pant legs to remove the brown rain sludge, then her own.

They were in a small park. Alyssa had cleaned the rusting metal bench so they could sit.

"That was fun," Kyra whispered, her eyes closed.

"Yeah," Alyssa said.

Kyra nodded off then jerked her head up. "Can't stay here. Let's get moving. There's a gas station over there. Maybe there's water or food."

Alyssa nodded and struggled to her feet. The quarter mile seemed to take forever to cross but eventually they reached the door. Alyssa cleaned it and Kyra broke the glass. Any dry goods had long ago been eaten by rodents but they did find a tub full of water sitting under the collapsed ceiling.

Kyra sniffed at the surface and looked at her friend. "Can we drink it?"

Alyssa dropped her hand in the tub. It reminded Kyra of how Alyssa would put her hand in the water of the spring at their Catholic School refuge. "I can heal it clean." She closed her eyes and after a few moments, pulled her hand out. "We can drink it now, just dip the bottles in."

Kyra dropped her pack, unslung the bottles and filled one up. She handed it to Alyssa. "I'm assuming your right hand is clean now."

"It is." Alyssa nodded and took the bottle. She drank it in little sips. "Don't drink a whole bottle at once, Kyra. You'll get cramps and throw it all back up."

Bottle in the tub, Kyra grunted. She really wanted to drain that bottle but Alyssa was the biology expert. She sat on the floor, her back against a collapsed shelf and sipped. Alyssa joined her after cleaning her other hand just outside the door. It was the best water they'd ever tasted.

Moving On

As for food, the damaged gas station was a bust. They spent the first night in a house, cheering when they found a Mylar packet of rice dinner in a cupboard, untouched by mice. The next day they began their hunt for food. On Main Street they found a hiking store where they acquired two sleeping bags in the back room, still in plastic-wrapped boxes. Kyra actually whooped.

The other bags in the store were full of mouse nests. They also managed to replace their knives which had been stolen by the Children of God. Kyra was happy about that. Since they'd escaped she'd been afraid of running into more wild dogs or even wolves. Memories of the fight with the last feral dogs they'd run into haunted her dreams. She wanted a knife for close fighting.

The shop didn't have any bows or arrows. She felt that lack most of all. A knife was good but better to have some distance between her and any enemy. It was her best weapon and she felt naked without it. The store also had two cases of dehydrated food, one of chili and one of chicken stew. The mice had demolished the chicken but there were several packets of chili that were still in good shape. Those went into the packs. The grocery store in the center of town had been thoroughly looted. "Looks like the Children did get over here," Kyra said as they left the empty store.

"Maybe there's one on the outskirts," Alyssa said as she bent over the sidewalk, clearing a way. They stopped by any store that looked as though it

would have gear or supplies, but it was the same as the grocery. By noon they were resting in the park in the center of Fern Springs where the town had erected a pavilion, similar to the one at their school over their spring. Kyra had found packets of honey at the hiking store and shared them out, two for her and two for Alyssa.

"I wonder what happened to the bees." Kyra had her back to a pavilion support as she squeezed crystallized honey into her mouth.

Alyssa licked her fingers. "They may be all gone. The brown rain covered everything. Without flowers the hives, even the biggest ones, wouldn't have been able to survive more than a year or two. The rain lasted four years."

Kyra gazed at the little park. She tried to imagine what it looked like all green grass and leafy trees, the little stream from the spring meandering through the park, flowers growing on its banks. It wasn't possible. She was so used to seeing everything covered with the gray-brown oily sludge from a toxic rain that ended over a decade ago that she couldn't imagine anything else. The color of the path that Alyssa had healed so they could get to this pavilion was a startling green against the depressing oily sludge. "How big do you think this park is?"

Alyssa looked around. "A quarter acre, maybe." She turned to Kyra. "Why?"

"Just thinking how nice this park would be if it was green, the way it should be. Maybe animals could come and eat the grass, drink the clean water." She waved her hand. "Never mind, it's a silly thought."

"No it's not. This is exactly what I came out here to do." She stood up. "You can watch from here." Alyssa danced down the spongy wooden steps and began to work. She started close to the pavilion, around and around in bigger and bigger squares. Grass mostly, but there were a few oak and maple trees in the park that she healed too. She stopped at the sidewalks that surrounded the park and washed her hands in the stream as it dropped into a culvert and flowed out of the park.

"There," she said, her face full of smiles as she reached the pavilion. "An oasis in a toxic desert."

Kyra handed her a bottle of water. "I like it. Do you think your paths and these patches will help?"

"I know they will." She wiped her mouth and handed the bottle back to Kyra. "The toxins are breaking down, I can feel it."

Kyra's face lit up. "They are?"

"Yeah, but it's going to be a long time yet. In the meantime, my little paths are a break. A spot for wildlife to get a toe-hold. Bugs, then birds, then

bigger prey and predators." She looked thoughtful. "To be honest I was completely surprised that dogs had survived. They must be finding something to eat. Maybe something we can eat too."

Kyra refilled the bottle. "If it's going to be a long time we'd better get going. You up for more paths? I want to check more stores and if that fails, houses."

"Sure." Alyssa turned and walked to Main Street and made a path to the store side of the street.

That night they stayed in a house near the edge of town. As expected, pickings had been slim in the stores but for some reason the Children had left most houses alone. The two raided closets for suitable hiking clothes, dry goods, or anything else they thought would be useful. Just outside of town they explored a farm house with a large but mouse-eaten pantry. Fortunately a bag of beans was found and cooked, mashed into a paste and dried into patties as road food. They had enough to eat for nine days so they moved on.

It was the height of summer. The sun beat down, making it too hot for Alyssa to heal in the middle of the day. They eased into the habit of rising early, traveling for five or six hours, then napping in the shade until a couple of hours before sunset. Then they'd move on until it was too dark to see. Thunderstorms were a chance to capture water in their bottles and pot. Just before one storm it occurred to Kyra to spread out her poncho to catch water. They filled the bottles quickly, drank their fill and bathed all in the same storm, escaping into the already set up tent to dry off and rest until the storm passed. It became their new routine for rainy days.

They went one hundred and seventy miles before spotting a column of smoke in the sky. "It's Millville." Kyra pointed at the map for Alyssa. "We're running short of food, I was hoping to get supplies here but the survivors will have it picked clean by now."

Alyssa stared at the map. "What about this place?" She pointed at a small town to the north. "They might not have bothered with that one. We can search the houses again."

Kyra chewed her lower lip. "Yeah, let's go there first. I still don't have a bow and I'd like to approach the next group with a weapon in hand."

It took them two days to reach the small village and once there they hit a bonanza. One of the houses was packed to the rafters with stored food and weapons. Alyssa could only stare. "Why would someone have this much?"

"Malcolm told me about this," Kyra said as she picked a hunting bow off of the wall. "There were people called survivalists. They stockpiled supplies in case of the end of the world." She tightened the bowstring and gave it a

tentative pluck. "Since there aren't any bodies in the house, I suspect they were caught out and died before they could get back here. It's good luck for us that the Millville survivors didn't know about this place or it would have been cleaned out."

Alyssa made them a meal while Kyra experimented with the bow. She had to dig around to find the instruction manual but in the end she was happy with how it pulled. Kyra tried the bow in the longest hallway of the house. The arrow stuck into the wall halfway up the shaft. She carefully dug it out. "These are much better than the ones I had to leave with the Children," Kyra said with a grin. "The arrowheads are sharp steel specifically for hunting. This bow is going to be fantastic."

They gathered up enough freeze-dried and boxed food to last ten days and stayed the night. The next day they left for Millville. This time they watched the high school, where the survivors were housed, from a nearby hill. It was built at the south edge of town. Like their own school, large open fields surrounded it edged by woods. A courtyard was in the center of the school. "There must be wells under the school, feeding inside." Kyra studied the place through binoculars she'd picked up at the survivalist's house. "There are people inside, I can sort of see through the windows."

"They haven't washed the windows?" Alyssa asked.

"Doesn't look like it." Kyra adjusted the binoculars. "Covered with the brown rain residue."

"They're losing growing light."

"No one outside," Kyra noted, "but we didn't go out either, except to the pavilion. It doesn't look as though they have anything like that."

"What if they're like the Children?"

Kyra sighed and dropped the binoculars. "I don't know how we can tell from out here."

"I'm a little nervous." Alyssa rubbed her arms.

"Let's set up camp back among the trees. We'll watch for a day or so before we go down."

"Good." Alyssa turned, walked back to the edge of the woods and made them a camp clearing.

The next day they saw a group of men, covered in dingy yellow rain suits, leave the school.

"What are they doing?" Alyssa asked her friend.

"They're headed for the nearest trees. They must do what our people do: harvest the trees, get them inside and wash the sludge away and use them for the cooking fires." Kyra handed the binoculars to Alyssa. "Take a look."

The blond young woman took the binoculars and peered through them. "Nine men, as far as I can tell." She handed the binoculars back. "Nothing unusual."

"They came out of a door on the north side of the school, maybe a wood shop or garage shop. Let's watch all of today. We'll decide over supper whether to go down or not."

"Fair enough," Alyssa said as she sat down cross-legged on the grass.

Over the pot of chili cooking on the tiny fire that night the two discussed going down.

"It's what I came out here for," Alyssa sighed, chin in hand, her elbow on a knee.

"But, we don't want to end up slaves like we did at that last community," Kyra added. She stirred the chili, adding a little more water so it wouldn't scorch.

"Maybe they don't have a crazy leader," Alyssa said.

"Maybe." Kyra still had nightmares about being locked in a dark room for days. She stirred the pot to hide her fear.

"Not every community can be crazy. Ours wasn't crazy."

"True. These may be the best people we've ever met." Kyra picked up Alyssa's mug and scooped chili into it. She stuck a spoon in and handed it to Alyssa. She ate her share from the pot. After they had scraped all of the food they could from the cup and pot, Kyra sighed. "There's no way to tell unless we go down there and knock on the door."

"That didn't work out so well the first time."

"Like you said earlier, not every community can be crazy. If we don't go down, we'll never know."

Alyssa grabbed a handful of grass and scrubbed her enameled cup out.

"The point is to help these survivors. We have to go down."

Kyra nodded. "Tomorrow. Right to the front door."

"Again." Alyssa said.

Kyra noticed her friend's eyes weren't sparkling with joy at the prospect.

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 two stand alone novels, a complete four book series and has now started both this series and a cozy mystery series along with three collections of short stories, has been included in three different anthologies and published in the ezine, Every Day Fiction. 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 middle-grade novella, in Lost Rainbows, will be out near the end of January, 2015. See the excerpt below.

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Excerpt from Lost Rainbows

It was a normal evening in the court of the Leprechaun King, Mac Shadenan. The Throne room was full. Harpers, drummers, flautists and harpists were half way down the left wall from the King. The center of the hall's polished wood floor was filled with dancers. Shamus O'Malley was standing on the right side of the hall near the buffet table, a glass of Irish Whisky in his hand.

Dressed in his court best, he tugged at the collar of his lemon yellow shirt. Like most of the male leprechaun's present, he had on his cherry red wool weskit and frock coat with seven rows of seven buttons. It was annoying to button all forty-nine buttons but luck was luck. He didn't want to push any away. His pantaloons and stockings were white and brogans were black and as shiny as his polishing could make them.

He had his eye on Princess Lyeen. She was dancing in the middle of the floor with that half-wit Banar Donovan. Shamus sipped his drink. *Banar*, he snorted to himself. *More like banal, and boring to boot. Lyeen wouldn't be givin' him a second look if it wasn't for the five rainbows with their pots of gold at the end that he owns.* He put the glass he was holding down on the table and began to edge his way into the dancers. As soon as the music for this dance stopped, he was going to ask the Princess to dance.

She was a vision. Like most leprechauns, a smattering of freckles crossed the bridge of her nose accenting the creamy smooth skin of her complexion. Merry blue eyes flashed with her laughter. Best of all though, to Shamus, was her hair. His own could be best described as orange. But hers, left unbound, hung to her waist. The burnished gold highlights in her dark red hair set off the gold of the dainty, diamond encrusted crown around her forehead, holding her hair back from her face. She chose to wear green today, setting her apart from the traditionalists in the court. When she came into the room earlier in the evening, she set their tongues wagging. He overheard one old biddy.

"She's not wearing the traditional red!" she whispered loud enough for the people on the other side of the hall to hear.

Her neighbor nodded. "What are young people coming too," she lamented. "Defiance, that's what it is."

That's what Shamus loved about Lyeen. She had spirit and flair. Too bad her father didn't consider his family worthy. True, he was tall for a leprechaun, four foot three inches, which worked in his favor. But, there was only one rainbow among his whole, large family. The gold was spread thin. Despite that, he was determined to get the Princess' attention, gold or no gold.

He had nearly reached his goal when the guardsmen at the door to the Throne room called out, "Courier for the King, the great Mac Shadenan! Make way for the Courier!"

The dancers split apart, moving to each side of the hall. He was separated from the Princess as she moved to the other side. Reluctantly he backed up to make way. The courier, dressed in woodland colors to better blend into the environment, entered the hall and staggered across the floor to the king. Dirty and road weary, it looked as though the man had been through every bramble in the kingdom.

Twenty feet from the throne, the courier dropped to his knees in exhaustion. King Mac Shadenan leaned forward on the carved, backless wooden seat. The red pillows could barely be seen under the red wool cloak the king wore, a gold harp pin holding it together at his shoulder. His advisors, two on each side of the throne, whispered to each other.

"What say you, Courier?" The King asked.

"My Lord," the man gasped. "The rainbows are gone!"

While one of the advisors hurried to the courier's side with a goblet to help revive him, the court burst into loud cries and lamentations. Shamus noticed that Banar grew quite pale. Princess Lyeen, though, he saw with a great deal of admiration, straightened her spine. Head up she strode to the front of the room to stand beside her father's chair.

There was so much confusion and consternation, the King had the guard near him pound on the floor with the butt of his spear. He stood up.

"What is this caterwauling? You all sound worse than the animals in the human's zoo at feeding time." He glared at the people in the hall. The horror of being compared to those poor creatures enclosed in unnatural habitats stunned them. They shut up. He nodded.

He stepped off of the throne's platform and pulled the Courier to his feet. "Come man," he clapped the courier on the shoulder. "You've had a bit of wine to refresh yourself. Tell us your news."

The Courier nodded. "I'm Draum, Son of Fitz."

The courtiers nodded. Fitz was a high ranking member of the Court. Draum was in service to the King, as every able bodied courtier's sons were at one time or another. Shamus had been a courier himself upon his eighteenth birthday.

"Sire, the treasury was robbed. All of the guards are dead. I don't know how I escaped the explosion but something large and ferocious chased me nearly all the way here." He looked down at his appearance. "My apologies Sire, for appearing before you in such a state."

The King clapped him on the shoulder. "No need to apologize, young Draum." He motioned for one of the guards, standing near the throne to come to him. "Take Draum to the baths. Get him food and drink and fresh clothing. We'll talk to him again in two hours."

The guard led Draum away through a side door of the hall near the throne. The courtiers refilled the hall and whispered to each other. Shamus began edging his way to the front of the room. The Advisors had surrounded the King. As he neared he could hear a furious discussion going on between them.

"Sire," the eldest Advisor said. "We need to send guards to assess the damage."

"Yes," said the youngest. "How do we know if Draum is telling the truth?"

"Majesty, we should send someone to bring back the rainbows."

The King stood still in the rain of comment and suggestion, nodding at each person as they spoke. Shamus moved up to stand directly behind the King. When the suggestions died down, the advisors waited for the King to speak.

"We will send an investigator," the King decided. "Someone from our court, trustworthy."

They all nodded.

"But who," the eldest advisor asked. "Perhaps the savage beast chasing Draum is still lurking about."

"I'll go," Shamus piped in.

The entire group turned to stare. Shamus began to blush under the inspection.

The King nodded. "It's dangerous, you know. The beast may still be outside the Sidh."

Shamus breathed a sigh of relief. As a courier, he'd always gotten along with King Mac. "I understand, Sire. But the kingdom's treasury has been stolen. If we wait too long, all evidence of the dastard will be gone and the trail cold. I'll leave immediately. The sooner I go, the sooner the rainbows may be recovered."

Lyeen had joined the circle of advisors. She smiled at Shamus. He nearly missed the King's words.

"Good idea, Shamus. You will be my representative in this. Leave at once. Draw whatever you need from the armory."

Shamus bowed. "Thank you, Sire. I'll depart as soon as I can."

He turned and hustled down the middle of the court, the courtiers parting in front of him. The murmurs began as soon as he passed them.

Lost Rainbows is due out the end of January 2015.