

BURNING RAIN

THE RAIN CHRONICLES - BOOK ONE



MORAY NIAL BLACK

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For Therese Marie Black

Who held me together.

Who is the reason I am alive to write this book.

Who is the love of my life – Forever.

NOT YOUR TRADITIONAL HERO

Ryanne “Rain” Douglas never trained for greatness. She isn’t a chosen one, a prodigy, or a warrior raised for battle. She’s a suburban kid who worries about homework, birthday plans for her pool party, and teenage worries. Her life is ordinary in every way that matters — until the universe decides it isn’t.

The Empire rips it away.

Rain is dragged across the galaxy and forced into a brutal race designed to break children. She enters a nightmare built on lies. The Empire claims kids like her are from corrupted, dangerous planets, quarantined worlds unworthy of survival. The race is meant to prove it. Empire citizens tune in expecting slapstick failure, humiliating mistakes, and the kind of gruesome endings that prove kids like Rain are corrupted, inferior, and unworthy of survival.

But Rain refuses to be the punchline they expect.

She’s stubborn. She’s quick. She’s loyal to a fault. And when she meets Arthur — a silver dragon her age, she remembered seeing in her imagination as a kid, something astonishing sparks between them. Impossibly, growing up their fathers told them the same stories, starring them both. And when the Empire brings them together they are not prepared for the consequences. Together Rain and Arthur find out they can make things happen.

Rain isn’t supposed to survive. She isn’t supposed to matter. But the Empire made a mistake when they chose her. And an even bigger one when they chose him.

This is not a story about a perfect hero. It’s a story about a girl who refuses to stay small — even when the universe demands it.

CHAPTER 1



I wipe the sweat from my forehead, reach over my shoulder for my crossbow, hesitate, and stare at the two approaching specks, trying to weigh the risk they present. Black and sinister, they hang threateningly in stark contrast to the bright blue sky, but do I want to spend two precious crossbow bolts? There are twenty at hand on my shoulder strap and twenty-four more stashed in my pack. If I use two or more of them on flying adversaries, they're lost for sure, and there's nowhere around here I can get more.

My stomach, already in knots, tightens. My options aren't too good. Okay, to be honest, they're crappy. I'm on a narrow mountain path with nowhere to hide, a sheer rock face behind me, and a seven-mile drop in front of me. And that's no exaggeration. It's not exactly a brilliant spot to defend myself. My choices suck. Shoot, for me, right now, right here, everything sucks.

I keep watching the specks. Their approach has stopped. Circling and wheeling, they're not getting any closer. Too far away for me to be sure. They might be any of the half-a-dozen species of psychopathic flying predators out there. All savage, programmed to kill me in as gruesome a manner possible. Just how they will try to do that to me is the question.

If I can identify these two, I know how they'll attack.

I squint. Does that ever help you see any better? Who knows? The sound of falling rocks echoes up from somewhere below me, reminding me that the

mystery specks aren't my only worry. "Rain, you can't hang here; something else will come stomping up, looking to chomp you."

Yes, I know, I'm talking to myself. I've been doing that a lot lately. But I'm correct; I need to make the right call for this latest threat if I want to stay alive.

Because they're holding back and not attacking straight away, these two are likely carrion hawks, not the most dangerous aerial predators out there, dactyl birds.

Dactyl birds are like this sort of pterodactyl with a shorter jaw structure and a bite that can crush stone. They can easily tear an arm or leg off. And dactyls don't bother with any strategy or evaluation of prey; they go for it. Or, in this case, go for me.

It's hot, but a shiver passes through me. I'm frustrated as I stare at the specks, still hovering.

"Rain, you have to keep moving." I am so correct; whatever they are, I can't wait for them to decide to make their move. I need to get going. I have to force them to attack or take off. I jump around, shouting.

"Hey! You dumb scum-bucket, flying-freakazoids! Get your bird-butts here so I can kick them!"

Oh, if my talking to myself like I've been doing makes you think I'm crazy, I totally agree with you! You'd have to be crazy not to be crazy if you were me right now. But being kinda crazy and unpredictable might be playing a significant part in why I'm not dead yet. And with everything and everyone here trying hard to kill me, that's a pretty big deal!

Where is here? Here is an impossibly high mountain on Imperious, a planet on the other side of the universe from home, from Earth.

What is fourteen, sorry, fifteen-year-old RYANNE DOUGLAS, that's me, all my friends call me Rain, doing here?

Competing in what I am told is a race. But it's a race filled with a bunch of sweet little genetically engineered creatures, like dactyl birds, looking to kill and eat me. And I know all this because of what I think is the main reason I'm still alive: information... knowledge!

I got lucky. I got guidance... direction.

When being *officially* prepared for this race, all of us competitors got taken to a room full of tables and booths, with people waiting, supposedly there to help.

Weapons and training appeared to be the major offerings. People promoted their products with extraordinary claims about their amazingness.

But stuck in a corner were a few tables where the people offered knowledge. I was expected to ignore them. Figure they were a waste of precious time. And I would overlook the opportunity to learn and go for the weapons. However, I received discreet but clear instructions to check out the teachers. So I went for it!

And thank God I listened. Knowledge about all the dangers I am facing right now is a big part of how I have survived this far.

I shiver again. Okay, I'm not dead yet, but let's be honest, despite knowing what I know about everything I'm facing, all I'm doing is delaying the inevitable. Most likely, all I'm really doing is setting myself up for an extremely crazy, sadistic end.

I shake that thought off and make my decision.

"Okay, Rain, they're hawks. You don't need the crossbow." Leaving the crossbow on my back, I ignore my collection of knives and my samurai sword. Instead, I pull out the slingshot. It's all I need to take care of hawks. I roll a couple of the sharp-edged rocks I'd gathered for a moment like this between my fingers. Unconsciously, I squeeze hard. The pain is reassuring; it helps keep all the craziness surrounding me, reality. Believe me, everything is extremely crazy and horribly real here.

"Okay, bird-brains. Let's do this!"

On cue, the specks stop circling and head straight at me at incredible speed.

Psych! I might have made a bad decision by not using my crossbow. Because instead of carrion hawks, the specks just turned into two vicious dactyl birds. And all their attention is focused on one thing: me. It's clearly their lunchtime, and I'm on the menu.

With no time to swap weapons, I aim the slingshot.

"Now, don't miss!" I draw back hard.

"Wait, wait. You want to live through this Rain, you hang tight and fire at the last possible moment."

Now, that isn't crazy talking; this is good advice I'm giving myself!

A rush of wind from their six-foot wings, and they're on top of me, razor-sharp talons aiming straight for my heart.

Holding my breath, I wait, and a split-second before the first dactyl can rip into me, I fire. The jagged edge of the rock hits it right between the eyes. I watch as the flesh tears open and blood flows, blinding it. With a shriek of rage and pain, the creature twists away and spins into its companion. They tangle and start to fall. I let a second missile fly and catch the other dactyl in its left eye.

Reaching for more rocks, I reload, but I don't need to use them! Ripping and biting at each other, they drop out of sight. The smell of their blood got to them. For now, they've forgotten all about me.

"Put your ass in gear, Rain. Keep moving, and you just might get to stay alive a few more hours."

More great advice! I turn and run farther up the narrow mountain passage. Of course, that's my cue to stumble into a patch of loose gravel, and I'm fighting to keep my balance as the path starts to collapse beneath my feet, threatening to send me plummeting to certain death. For a moment, I'm desperately scrambling; then my gymnastics training kicks in, and I jump into a handspring front flip. I don't think any judges or my coach would approve of my style, but it works. I hit solid ground, roll, bounce up, take off running again, and don't stop to look back.

Speeding around a corner, I see a cluster of boulders. They could provide me some cover from a returning, pissed-off dactyl.

Cautiously, I cross over.

Yes! It will offer some protection.

Double-checking for any hidden threats, I sit, load my crossbow, and lean with my back against one of the rocks. A clattering sound comes from nearby. I look everywhere, trying to spot the clatterer, but nothing is stirring. I glance over my shoulder to see if anything is flying my way.

The coast is still clear, but I don't want to risk moving on yet. Out in the open, I am way too vulnerable to a sudden dactyl attack.

More clattering sounds, like something dislodging small rocks. Again, I try to determine the source. No threat is visible, but I catch a break; I'm near a group of lethe trees. Lethe trees are on the racecourse as a trap for us. Their leaves contain powerful knockout properties. We get too close, too long, we fall asleep

and wake up dead, well, we don't wake up that is, or if we do wake up, we're in the middle of being eaten. But I've been taught all about them and intend to use that knowledge.

I cross over to the grove, pull out my knife, slice two branches off one of the trees, and head back to my spot among the rocks. Sitting back down, I strip off leaves and rub them between my hands. I soon have a good-sized crushed heap in front of me.

As prepared as I think I can be, I try to get comfortable. But all I can do is fidget around, worrying about what's going on with the two dactyls. I listen for any clue as to what they are up to, but all's quiet.

I yawn, a wave of fatigue washes over me, and my eyes droop. A nap might be nice. I'm drifting pleasantly when adrenaline kicks in. I jolt back wide awake.

"Jerk face!"

Cursing myself, I grab handfuls of dirt and scrubgrass and hastily rub the leaf remnants from my palms and fingers.

"The anesthetic properties of lethe leaves best work when inhaled over a period of time, or ingested. But will ultimately have the same effect if absorbed through the external membrane, whether scales, exoskeleton or, of course, most easily through humanoid skin!"

I can hear the instructor's voice repeating this information in my head as I finish removing the last of the leaf residue from my hands. The voice sounds somewhat sarcastic!

"Blah, blah, blah!" I mutter back.

I'm pissed off, but only at myself. "I remembered in time, didn't I?"

I take the voice's refusal to continue any internal dialogue with me as a "*yes, yes you did.*"

Satisfied I had avoided the fatal effects of the anesthetic leaves, I rechecked the pile. I can't risk crushing more, but if I can catch a little bit of luck, I should have enough for what I plan to do. I lean against the wall of rock again.

Everything is dead still. Nothing is happening. I try to focus and prepare for what's coming. No way I got lucky, and the dactyls took each other out. After all, where would the fun be in that? I'm sure arrangements are being made to send

the survivor back my way. I'm as ready for that as I can be. I start fidgeting again, this time impatiently.

"Don't over-prepare, Rain," I tell myself and settle back into the shallow protection the boulders offer. My nerves are jangling like crazy. All I can do is wait for the next attack; I want it to happen already.

"Come on..."

A slight coughing noise cuts me off. I almost pee my pants. Jerking back, I'm looking straight into a pair of deep purple eyes belonging to a cat-like animal, but larger. It arches its back languidly, seemingly contemplating me. I guess I just found out the source of that clattering sound. I reach for my bow, but instinct makes me stop.

This is the first creature I've met on the mountain that doesn't appear savagely insane.

Then it hits me; it's had plenty of opportunities to take me out with a major surprise attack if it wanted to. My stomach flips. I made at least two potentially lethal mistakes in the last few minutes.

"You're getting sloppy, Rain. You're so lucky you're not dead."

I agree with me. That needed to be said. Now focus. There'll be lots of time to beat myself up later... I hope.

But the mystery cat has me shaken up. What should I do about this?

The cat licks a paw and starts the cat-cleaning thing. That does it. If it isn't inclined to start a fight, I don't need to force the issue.

Yes, I know, I'm probably signing my death warrant, but I can't bring myself to attack this creature without reason. Still, I leave my bow at my side and slide my sword free so that if it tries to tear my throat out, I can protect myself.

I stare at it, trying to read its intentions.

It finishes grooming and then notices me staring; I'm given an indifferent once-over back.

"Oh, aren't you the innocent thing..."

I'm trying to sound unconcerned. I want to show that I'm in control of this situation.

"You think because of those big soulful eyes of yours, I'm not going to go ahead and kill you right now."

The cat seems to take note of my defenses and gives me what I swear is a questioning look.

“Just precautions,” I tell it. “I’m trusting you, you sharp-clawed, savage-fanged creature. You remember that!”

“Prfrrrt!”

Did the cat blow a raspberry at me? I think it did!

“Nice talk, kitty.” I sigh.

Wow, I think the crazy cat just smiled at me. I have this sudden urge to ask if it actually understands me. Then, me even considering that as a possibility freaks me out.

“Now that’s one terrific thought... you’re totally flipping out, Rain.”

I agree with me about my mental state. Any animal in this death race is here to kill me.

But I know about all the creatures the people behind this race created or imported in order to murder me, and this cat is not one of them.

I try to compare it to wild cats back home. It looks to me like it’s bigger than a bobcat, yet not as big as a mountain lion.

What’s different is that it’s as fluffy as a long-haired house cat. Kinda cute, really. At that dumb thought, I sigh. Part of me insists it has to be lethal, yet there’s a larger part of me that’s saying no. Either way, I can’t bring myself to hurt it without provocation.

I know, I know, I keep acting like a crazy person here, but I’m not being totally stupid. I don’t want to fight a battle on two fronts, and I can’t turn off the voice inside me, insisting I am looking at something completely different from everything else I’ve encountered so far.

Instead of a savage beast whose sole intent is to kill and eat me, it feels like I’m dealing with sharp intelligence.

Something that somehow, impossibly, isn’t a threat to me.

“Now that’s a very interesting theory, Rain. But you are still staring at a big furry problem.”

At that, the cat snorts as though dismissing my concerns. Dumb, dumb, dumb! I shake my head at my stupidity.

Whatever this creature is, threat or no threat, I'm not exactly thrilled by being stuck between such an unknown quantity and the probability of an angry, ravenous dactyl.

My mind races, but no solution comes to me. Come on Rain; you got to make this cat go away.

I try making nice. "Hey, kitty cat, you don't seem hungry right now, and I appreciate you not regarding me as a tasty treat, but you may want to move on. I've upset a couple of dactyls, and the survivor is sure to head back this way at any moment."

I swear the expression on the cat's face is saying, "*And that should worry me because?*"

Okay. I'm not coming up with any more ideas. I can only stare as the cat gets up, stretches lazily, and moves to peer out of our rock cluster.

"Don't believe me? Are you looking to see if a dactyl is heading back our way? Watch yourself kitty."

I'm treated to a snort and a look that can only mean, "*Bring it on. I can take care of a dactyl.*"

Stop anthropomorphizing, Rain. Good word, I know. I got it from my Dad. Still, what is the deal with this animal? I rack my brain, and still absolutely nothing is coming to me.

Oh, boy! Problem solved! I'm face-to-face with a shrieking dactyl.

The creature just appears, rising up behind the cat, who's smack-dab in between us. The cat reacts. Its fur bristles, but the dactyl's tiny brain's attention is fixed only on me. I'm free from wondering what to do. It's kill-or-be-killed time! It sounds nuts, but I'm not scared. I can handle this. I throw and blow the crushed-up leaves straight at the screeching bird.

I watch as the dactyl breathes in at precisely the right moment, inhaling almost all the powdered leaves. I hold my breath and pray my plan works.

My crossbow is ready in case, but the dactyl starts wobbling, moving back and forth woozily, then drops out of sight.

With a triumphant shout, I lurch forward and stare over the edge of the sheer drop, wanting confirmation that the bird is finished.

It is! The dactyl is spinning, plummeting straight down. I listen for an impact, but it isn't loud enough to echo back to me. I curse. All the same, I'm exhilarated. I turn to deal with my next issue, the cat.

"Okay, pussycat, what's it going to be? You play nice kitty, and I'll move along. No worries, no need for grief. That all right with y...?"

I start to laugh. The cat caught some of the crushed leaves. Kitty is fast asleep.

I lean over and scratch behind its ears. "Enjoy a catnap. I'll be on my way. No harm to either of us, although you might experience a bit of a headache when you wake. Still, that's a small price for me saving both our lives, yes?"

Leaving the question unanswered, I check that I have everything with me and step out, but a scrunching, clicking sound brings me to a hard stop.

Ice forms in my stomach. It isn't a good sound. I look all around, trying to spot where the noise is coming from, and notice a little something I missed during the craziness of the dactyl attack. Staring back down the path I raced up while running away from the dactyls, I see there's a split in the rock with tendrils of silken thread hanging down.

Nearly recent fatal mistake number three, Rain! I had just scrambled blindly up a long stretch thick with lethal webs.

"Jeez, rockspiders! What am I doing still alive?" is the first thought swirling in my re-adrenalized mind.

The obvious hits me; they don't want to face dactyls either. Now, with the two dactyls taken care of, I guess the spiders consider the sleeping cat and me to be a different matter entirely.

"But I'm the one who beat the dactyls,"

I complain to the still unseen clattering insects. I'm trying to push away paralyzing fear.

"Doesn't that count for anything?"

The spiders don't answer, and the clattering continues, so apparently, it doesn't.

CHAPTER 2



Rockspiders, damn! Let me tell you about rockspiders. They spin narcotic-laced silk strands that only need slight contact to trap their prey, and once secured, they eat their victim alive, literally. Kept awake and paralyzed while they take their time feasting. And I'm right by a nest of the things.

Wonderful. Of all the ways I could be killed here, this is close to being the cruelest. I've got to move on.

I draw a deep breath and reappraise my situation. I have all my gear; I'm all set to head out. I stare at the knocked-out cat. The smart part of me is saying, come on, this is perfect!

Leave the unconscious cat for the spiders and get the hell clear, but I'm not that smart. I'm not about to give any damn rockspiders an easy lunch.

As I run through my options, I glare at the cat.

"Damn, pain in the ass."

I pick up and hoist the animal over my shoulder; it's lighter than I expected. Maybe forty, fifty pounds.

"Must be all the fur," I mumble inanely to myself.

Crossbow loaded, ready to fire in my free hand, I slowly back away from the shelter of the boulders and out to the center of the path. I make it okay, but I'm sweating. Sweat drenches my hands and my back. I have to be sure my next move will be the right one.

I glance back at all the webs that, thanks to the dactyls, I had dumb-luckily avoided getting caught by, then turn my focus to my way forward. Only three thin strands dangle from the rock face along my way up the mountain.

That doesn't comfort me. I'm almost clear of spider territory, so I know I'm supposed to walk straight into one last gotcha. I study the path, trying to spot the place where the ground is going to give way and deliver kitty cat and Rain into a nest of waiting rockspiders. I can't see it.

Scared stupid, I can't even take a single step. I'm frozen, listening to the increasing number of clattering noises.

I try to determine the location of my latest batch of adversaries, but the sound bounces around, echoing, making it too confusing.

Petrified, I am, like, paralyzed.

"This is so dumb! You want to die, Rain? Come on; you can do this. Get your act together, your ass in gear, and us the hell out of here!"

Forcing myself to take my advice, I shuffle cautiously to the outside edge of the path, and, testing to make sure the ground is solid, I start walking, keeping as much distance from the remaining spider webs as possible. I have a worst-case no-brainer. If it comes down to it, the cat and I are going over the side rather than letting the spiders catch us.

I plead with myself as I creep forward. "Come on girl. Walk like on the balance beam, okay?"

Every nerve in my body is screaming. Keeping my eyes focused on the three deadly silken strands, I slowly inch my way onward, anticipating that any next step will spring a trap. Then, the rock face ahead of me is clear. I'm past the last of the webs.

Before I can breathe a sigh of relief, a sound behind me makes me look back. A medium-sized spider is scuttling toward me. Of course, I'm not off the hook yet! Still, I'm okay, finally being face-to-face with one of the ugly things. I aim my crossbow, and it retreats.

With that incentive to keep going, still staying at the edge of the path, I risk moving a little faster. I want to be well clear of the spider's territory as quickly as possible. I let the tension ease from my neck and shoulders and lower my guard slightly as I round the next corner.

Sucker!

That last spider was a decoy, setting me up. Like an idiot, I almost fell into their real trap. Smack in front of me, an absolute mother of a monster of a spider, is lying in wait.

But this spider is focused on where it expects me to appear, in the middle of the path. It's only because I hugged the outside edge I have a very slight advantage. I spot the spider a fraction of a second before it sees me.

This is all going to be down to speed and reflexes. I kick into high gear and sprint past the creature, firing two bolts from my crossbow. Both hit the spider dead-center before it has a chance to spin out any web. It howls in pain and does that curling-up-into-a-ball thing. I don't break my stride or hesitate, tightening my hold on the cat, I race right past it, sprinting straight on up the hill.

I think I hear a second angry screech from the spider and the sound of some type of fight, but I don't care. Trust me; I'm not looking back.

I just run full tilt, when bam, the path opens up. I've reached the first plateau, alive!

Letting the cat slide off my shoulder, I spin around, checking for any sign of pursuit. Nothing is moving; no spiders are coming after me. I relax slightly. They won't risk following me over this flat and widening terrain. I could pick them off from a distance. And they would be way too vulnerable, easily ending up as some other creature's kill.

It cost me two bolts to beat them, but they were well spent! Six inches into the center of the path, the cat and I are spider chow.

My stomach decides it's had enough of all the stress. I turn around and, even though my stomach is pretty much empty, I throw up, and up, and up. My guts stop churning long enough for me to stare back down the rockspider infested path, then I throw up all over again.

I finally stop. Wiped out, I slump down. I have to take some time to gather my wits and evaluate the flat, scrub, and tree-covered terrain in front of me. Rockspiders are no longer my main worry. Up here, I'm much more likely to end up as something else's meal.

Reality hits me. I've reached the first plateau and I'm still not dead yet.

"Wow Rain. Do you see where we are?"

I can't help myself; I start laughing.

I know you have to be thinking this is one utterly crazy girl.

But there is no way I was supposed to have made it this far in this race. The Empress Stakes! That's what this sick little snuff-flick of a competition I'm in is called throughout the universe: The Empress Stakes! And it's all televised.

Trillions of alien eyes are following all the action. I'm a star on an intergalactic reality TV show on steroids! All across the universe, people are betting on when and how little Rain will die.

Yep, I'm not considered what you'd call a contender. When I was selected, I was not expected to do well. Nope. I'm supposed to act all stupid and useless and die a hideous death, preferably looking like a total idiot when that happens. And that's because it's not just about entertainment. No, this race is supposed to show that people from Earth are defective and damaged. Provide proof that we'd be dangerous to other worlds if we ever developed space travel and escaped our solar system.

My dying hideously in the race is supposed to be evidence justifying their preventing us from leaving our planet. Venturing into outer space.

Yeah! Makes zero sense to me too. Hey! I'm a kid, an ordinary kid. Believe me, this is not what you would call a fair contest. There are things here out of your worst nightmares, sicker than any horror flick creature you've seen, and they're trying to kill me. Kill all of us.

Oh, this racing deal isn't all about me. I'm nobody, nothing special to the people behind this. Nope, I'm only intended to be this pawn, I guess you'd call me. Three hundred competitors have been, well, blackmailed is the only word for it, and forced to race.

We all come from a bunch of different planets, and we're all supposed to prove our home-worlds have to be quarantined. Segregated.

Some of us from other planets look human, but there are a whole lot more who look like movie aliens to me.

But we all got one thing big-time in common! We're all just kids. None of us had any idea there was some sadistic intergalactic empire until we were thrown into this nightmare!

Three hundred, that's how many kids started. I've no idea how many of us are still alive.

Alive! Jeez, I don't even know if Tara is still alive.

Tara? She's my amazing friend, another kid forced into this thing. She's like my age, she's green, she's an alien, and she's beautiful! I pray she's still okay. I pray all my friends and all the kids out here are still okay.

I shiver. I know too many kids are absolutely not okay. I know how insane the odds against all of us are.

A snorting sound brings me back to the problem at hand. I stare at the unconscious cat and mutter. "Rain, dragging this thing with you is the dumbest idea ever."

Yet something inside me insists my gut feelings are correct. Somehow, I'm looking at a wild card. I sigh. Wild card or not, I can't stay here, and I can't bring myself to leave the cat behind.

An anguished scream echoes up from somewhere below me. I wince. Another one of the kids just lost. I feel a pang of guilt because part of me is glad it's a male cry. It isn't Tara.

I glance all around, cross my fingers, and hold out the faint hope that, after being the center of a ton of action today and quite possibly the focus of attention for trillions of viewers, my time in the spotlight is over for now.

Spotlight? Me in the spotlight? Damn! Nothing in my life prepared me for any of this.

CHAPTER 3



My life?

My life has been taken from me; I might still be breathing, but I think that is dumb luck. A mistake likely to be corrected any time now. The nightmare I am in today isn't my life. That is back home, on Earth.

I miss my old life. I lived with my Scottish father, and I was loved and safe. I liked my school, and I had plenty of friends. And I like my name; I think it's cool. Ryanne Kiara Douglas. Ryanne is Celtic. I think it fits an African-American-Scottish-Latino kid really well.

Okay, I'm not Scottish or Mexican, but I swear by osmosis, I have absorbed some Scottish and Mexican qualities.

I gave myself my nickname, Rain. When asked my name as a little kid, I'd drop a couple of syllables, and, well, Rain stuck with me. My middle name, Kiara, is from my birth mother. Even though I don't really use it, I like the connection.

I always knew all about my birth mother. Mamá made sure of that. But the way I thought about her was that I was grateful she decided to have me and she made sure I got a good family to raise me.

One night, when I was six, Mamá and Dad let me know she had died. I didn't ask many questions. I suppose I didn't want to know too much at the time, but I cried that night and sent her a whole bunch of thank-you prayers.

My real Mom and Dad, Kamron and Antonia “Toni” Douglas, adopted me at birth, and they were, they are, Mamá and Dad. I’ve never known or wanted anything else.

Dad met Mamá when she was on vacation in London. She was walking across Abbey Road, the same place as that famous Beatles picture, if you know who they are, anyway, she wasn’t looking where she was going, and some guy bumped into her, knocking her down.

The guy didn’t stop or help. He rushed off, saying something about foreigners.

Dad had seen the whole thing and quickly went to help Mamá up, asking her if she was all right with his Scottish accent. And she said it was worth getting knocked down to be helped back up by Braveheart. Dad put a hand to his chin and appraised her for what Mamá said was like a full minute. She thought maybe she had insulted him.

But before she could start an apology, Dad said. “And here I was thinking, could I be helping up the reincarnation of Frida Kahlo?”

Mamá laughed but was also kinda impressed because he knew about a legendary, very cool, and beautiful Mexican artist.

Then, Dad asked if she’d like to go for a cup of coffee.

Mamá hesitated, and Dad said, “Come on, I only have to stop by the studio for a minute.”

He paused. “You want to take a quick look-see?”

Mamá said she didn’t understand at first, then realized he was asking if she wanted to go into Abbey Road Studios. I mean *the* Abbey Road. Where a ton of fantastic artists have recorded awesome music. Understanding Dad’s invitation, Mamá could only nod. Dad says that was the first and only time he saw Mamá lost for words.

Anyway, Mamá went with Dad, and that was that. They connected right away. After some long-distance dating, Dad ended up moving to the USA.

Dad’s a top Security Analyst. He has a business that analyzes and tests security for various high-tech companies and government departments.

He never really talked about it, but I am sure he has crazy high-level government clearances. He only smiled when I tried to get him to admit it, but I know he once got a call from the White House in the middle of dinner.

Anyway, he worked from home a whole lot. That was amazing!

So, I guess people would call the Douglas family multicultural.

I'm Black, Mamá is Hispanic, and Dad is sooo Scottish, Haggis and all... that's about the only thing we don't agree about...

I was brought up to embrace my, well, everything. In our house, we have the works of Langston Hughes next to Robert Burns and Maya Angelou, along with Steinbeck, Carlos Fuentes, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

As a kid, my favorite book was *Cali y Mona*, about a young blind girl and her pony.

Mamá and Dad always made sure I connected to my culture. I had African American friends and was part of the Black Student Council, yet I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood with mostly white friends. My friends and I never really talked or thought about race. I suppose some of their parents might have been unsettled because of my color, but my friends just saw me.

So, growing up, my awareness of societal inequality came from a suburban, protected perspective. I guess it would be fair to say I'd been living a sheltered life.

When it came to my everyday life, lessons, sports, gymnastics and clubs, stuff like that, Mamá was there for me. She took me everywhere. Mamá taught me to work hard, challenge myself, and enjoy it.

"Echale ganas!" She'd tell me. "Give it all you got!" is what she meant.

She was so smart about it. Even when I was little, I had a say in stuff, but I wasn't allowed to quit. I had to finish the course and the season for every activity I signed up for. She would talk to me and say I had to pick and commit.

Like, she let me give up dance at the end of the semester but made me stick with gymnastics when I picked that. I got to choose one activity. Then I had to stay with it.

She taught me to hang in.

Mamá was so enthusiastic, in a good way, for me. So whether it was soccer, basketball, or whatever, I always tried my best. But she wasn't a proponent of every kid gets a trophy just for trying at sports.

All the unearned participation trophies got dumped in a box in the garage. I was mad at first, but when I was the for-real third-place finisher in the eight-year-olds group at a regional gymnastics event, and that trophy got a place of honor, I got it.

Mamá made a lot of things make sense. I loved her.



Everything changed when I was nine. Mamá and I were heading back home from a Young Adventurer meeting. I remember laughing a whole lot about some dumb thing. Mamá had the greatest laugh, kind and infectious. If my Mamá was laughing, everyone around her was laughing too, and it was never ever mean or cruel.

Well, that night we were driving along, having fun and minding our own business when a car on the other side of the road spins out of control and flies across the median straight at us. It completely smashed in the driver's side. I had been buckled in the back on the passenger's side, and somehow, I was unharmed. I tore off my seatbelt and leaned over, trying to reach Mamá through all the twisted metal and broken glass.

All I remember is saying, "Hold on Mamá, the ambulance is coming."

I said it repeatedly. I knew right away. Mamá was in bad shape, but despite her pain, her only concern was for me. Mamá got her hand free enough to touch my face. "Bebe nina, my baby, you're okay. Thank you God. Oh baby I love you so much!"

I cried out. "I know. Please don't die Mamá."

I can still see her amazing smile as she told me, "Baby, no matter what, I'll always be with you."

I cried and said. "Mommy, Mommy." Over and over, like a little kid.

Mamá stared right into my eyes and said. "You and your Daddy need to take care of each other, promise?"

"I promise, Mamá, but please wait for the ambulance. I hear it coming."

I heard siren sounds getting closer and closer.

I looked around for the ambulance and saw the drunk driver stagger out of his car. Wouldn't you know, apart from being shaken up, he was fine, just drunk, stumbling over, going, "Oh God, oh God, I'm so sorry. Oh, God, please be all right."

I was hysterical, screaming at him to stay away, and he stopped, shivering like it was cold and not over eighty degrees outside. Suddenly, this bolt of electricity arcs out from his car and hits him. His body bursts into flames, and he cries out in agony and collapses. Only a few seconds later, he's silent.

Dead.

Thinking back, I know I should have been freaked out, but I was so worried for Mamá that it didn't register how freaky scary that was.

Instead, all I cared about was Mamá's moaning, and all I could do was rub her hand. Despite the pain she had to be in, Mamá managed to smile at me.

"You and your Papá are the best things to ever happen to me, Princesa."

As she said that, the car got so weirdly bright inside that I couldn't see. "What's happening, Mamá?"

Mamá answered me, but it made no sense. Well, no sense until maybe now. She said. "It's okay, nena. This isn't about you... yet."

Then Mamá and the light were both gone.

I was in shock. Mamá was dead. And somehow, she no longer looked like my Mamá. Just a lifeless shell. More like a mannequin. And I was all alone, sitting motionless behind Mamá, who was no longer Mamá.

I was numb, barely breathing, when the passenger's side door was torn open, and the powerful arms of a police officer pulled me out. He was trying to tell me I was going to be alright as he rushed me away from the wreck.

I didn't know why he was moving so fast at first. Mamá was dead, and it was all over, right?

Wrong! As soon as we got clear, both cars exploded. In seconds, they caught fire with this crazy heat, and in minutes, nothing was left, but car frames burned beyond recognition.

He didn't say anything at the time, but shortly after my tenth birthday, Dad and I were talking about Mamá when out of nowhere, he turned to me and said,

“That fire took sheet metal down to cinders, all while leaving the road surface almost unscathed. How was that possible?”

I had no good answer at the time. I think perhaps I have an idea now. I mean, I can’t help but think that somehow the strange light at the crash and Mamá saying *it wasn’t about me ...yet*, has something to do with what’s happening to me right now.

One other weird thing that happened when I was growing up makes me think my being here is more than random bad luck. I was eleven.

It was Christmas time, and Dad and I were volunteering to feed the hungry with the Young Adventurers. My job was putting rolls on the trays as people came through to get their food when this girl, only like eight, I guessed, stopped in front of me. She had this strange, sad expression. I glanced around; everyone else was busy, and nobody seemed to notice us.

Then she leaned in and said the weirdest thing. “I’m so sorry. I see you coming. I can’t keep you free of the future, Rain, but remember this. You can bring forth good from immense wickedness.”

I had this uncomfortable *deja-vu* sensation. It kind of made sense, like I knew exactly what the girl was talking about. She grabbed my hand, but I wasn’t frightened. I was spellbound.

“You can burn everything down, Rain.”

I looked to see if Dad or anyone noticed us, but it was as though the rest of the room was separate. Like there was only the girl and me.

“You can.” And she walked away. No one had been aware of her being there or leaving except me. I never saw her again, and I never said anything to Dad. I don’t know why.

After Mamá died, Dad and I got closer and closer. He made an awesome mom/dad combo. When I turned twelve, I thought about how his life was all about me and his work. So I said it would be okay with me if he dated and stuff. Dad smiled at me and said, “When you’ve been in love and married to the most wonderful woman in the world, you don’t mess with second-stringers. Anyway, I have my hands full with a certain wee lass I have to raise to be President one day.”

I loved that.

Dad made sure I had a good life full of amazing, ordinary days. I stayed with the Young Adventurers, and he kept me going with gymnastics. Dad came to my classes and always encouraged me, telling me I was terrific. I thought I was only okay at it. But you know something? With some of the stuff I've done to stay alive so far, maybe he was right! I mean, I placed okay in a bunch of competitions, and Attila-the-Coach kept telling me I had the greatest raw talent and skills she'd ever seen. I just needed to work on polishing my technique.

Technique has had no part in why I'm still alive in this nightmare, but maybe raw talent and skills have.

Anyway, the last normal day I had before this whole Rain must die horror story began was Sunday.

Dad and I spent the morning at a rally for *Freedom, Truth and Equality*. Things have been a little, what you might call bumpy in the USA and, actually, pretty much everywhere around the world.

Everyone everywhere just seemed angry!

Unrest was growing in America, and a Nationalist White Power movement felt empowered to crawl out from under the rocks where they had been hiding.

That shock opened my eyes and shifted my focus! And Dad was angry. And Dad was real. He didn't hide behind me if that makes sense.

He told me, "Not just because of you, Rain, but rather because of every privileged white person's complicity. It is time for us to step out and acknowledge many sins! We all must push back on these evil people."

Becoming aware that so much wrong was happening all around us brought home how sheltered I had been.

But it also opened a whole lot of eyes.

All across the country, people were starting to wake up, and a diverse crowd of all ages and all colors called for their voices to be heard if America was going to hold on to its Dream.

Anyway, that Sunday, when Dad took me to the demonstration downtown, we bumped into Katy and Kev. They were with their dad. Katy and Kev are twins. They are white and are my best friends. We've been close since kindergarten.

As soon as they saw me, they ran up and hugged me. Then, in a solemn voice, Kev said, "It's up to our generation to save our country and planet."

Kev is already planning to run for Congress. He wants to reform education and create meaningful opportunities for inner-city kids. And Katy is super passionate about wanting to fix everything wrong with the environment.

We stood together, listening with hope as speakers addressed the importance of protecting all people, regardless of race, religion, or orientation.

One speaker gave an incredible speech about what actions we must take if we are going to save our ecosystem and our planet.

It was all peaceful, powerful, and uplifting.

The demonstration ended as scheduled. Dad and I got back to the house at lunchtime. While we ate sandwiches, we talked about our hopes for a better future and also family stuff.

My fifteenth birthday was coming up, and I was having a pool party. We had a swimming pool, and Dad is a maestro with the grill. I had already invited a bunch of friends, and he asked if I had invited Jeff Carmichael. My cheeks burned. I turned away and shook my head.

Jeff and I had been close until he totally betrayed me. A few weeks earlier, on a Saturday afternoon, we were hanging out at his house watching TV, and he tried to kiss me. Well, he did kiss me. I let him and liked it. We kissed for a while, and that was pretty much all that happened.

He moved to put his hand up my shirt once, but I stopped him. I wasn't mad or anything. He was a boy, and I got why he tried, but he took no for no. I wasn't ready for that stuff with him. We kissed some more, then we heard his kid sister come in, and that was that.

I felt safe with Jeff, and I left his house, thinking I wouldn't mind kissing him again.

Three days later, I was hanging out with Katy, Kevin and Travis. Travis's family is from India, but he was born in America. We've hung out often. He has super cool parents who have fed me amazing meals many times.

Katy said Jeff had been talking trash about me.

I asked what he'd been saying, and Travis answered.

“Jeff is telling many; he has a secret to disclose but tells us not to pass it on. He said you showed him you have a nice perky pair of boobies. He is bragging you were eager to let him fondle you, and next time you are going to let him see more of you, naked....

I felt my cheeks burn. I was furious and told them the truth.

“We kissed a bit, and that was it. He made a move, but I said no way. Wow! Jeff Carmichael, you are toast!”

Kevin got red and angry, “Wait until I find him. I’ll kick his ass!”

Kev and Travis were all set to take off and fight Jeff, but I stopped them. I think Kevin might have been jealous, but even though I think he’s cute, he’s more like a brother.

The next day at school, I called Jeff out in front of everyone. “Jeff Carmichael, you are a liar and a creep. You think it makes you like some major dude to tell disgusting lies about me? You are pathetic.”

I called him a bunch of other stuff; I finished by saying, “I hope no girl ever goes near you again because you’ll lie about her too.”

He turned bright red and mumbled apologies. I spun away and stomped off.

So, I said no to Dad about inviting Jeff to the party.

Dad nodded and said, “You know, with me being dad and mom, it might not always be easy to talk about some things, but Rain, my love, I can, and will do nothing but listen anytime!”

That kind of made my eyes water, and I hugged him. My Dad could scare the crap out of the biggest jock in high school if they tried to pick on me, but right then, he wanted me to know he was ready to just listen and not try to fix stuff.

That was so awesome.

The rest of that Sunday, I did a bunch of homework, and that evening Dad and I went out for supper. Afterward, Dad said, “Vamos por helado.”

Mamá used to say that, and the three of us would go for a family walk and finish with a stop for ice cream.

I grabbed Dad's arm and said, "Por supuesto. You bet!" The ice cream place was a short drive from the restaurant.

When we arrived, we were in line behind a young couple and their little daughter, dancing excitedly from foot to foot.

She twirled around and crashed into me. Her mom and dad began admonishing her, but I said not to worry.

I gave her a grin and said, "Going out for ice cream's fun, isn't it?"

I got a big-eyed nod of agreement. Then she ran to hug her mom and dad, embarrassed. A wave of nostalgia swept over me, and I ordered a dinosaur sundae. As I ate, I watched the girl babbling away about everything to her mom and dad. I admit I felt some jealousy. This kid had her mom. I tried to shake it off.

"You still have your fantastic Dad, Rain."

But that triggered, from out of nowhere, the thought, What if I lost him too?

I told myself not to be stupid. But by the time Dad and I finished eating, my irrational insecurities had turned the ice cream in my stomach into heartburn fuel.

The drive home settled me down a bit, but I was still feeling kind of mixed up and vulnerable when we got to the house, so I snuggled next to Dad on the couch and asked him to tell me a story like he used to.

Oh, when I was a kid, Dad would make up the greatest stories, starring me! In them, I would have amazing magical friends. A talking cat called Mr. Mouse, and a whole bunch of other crazy characters, but the most spectacular was Arthur. Dad says it is a Scottish name meaning Hero. Arthur was a magic silver dragon. Together, we would face all kinds of bad guys, witches, evil wizards, dark lords, and defeat them.

It sounds goofy now, but for a little girl, they were wonderful. So, I asked for one of the old Rain and Arthur stories. Dad told me this funny adventure story. I loved it. It took me way back.

That night I drifted off to sleep feeling safe.

I even dreamed Mamá came in and brushed her hand through my hair, whispering, "Te quiero. Duerme. I love you, sleep tight."

I told her I loved her too. Dreams are crazy.

CHAPTER 4



When I woke the next morning, everything felt out of whack somehow. Nothing terrible, things just seemed off, weird. His alarm didn't go off, but Dad was only five minutes late getting up and he made my lunch.

I had trouble finding my school binder before seeing it was in plain sight on the kitchen table. I had to mix two kinds of cereal together for breakfast because we hadn't gone to the store. It was all small stuff, just kind of different from usual.

When it was time to catch the bus, I kissed Dad, grabbed my backpack, and walked to the bus stop. Annoying Rickie was already there, and he tried his best to irritate me, but I ignored him and just talked with Katy and Kevin. Kevin was trying to explain the plot of some old horror movie he'd watched last night and doing a really bad job of it when a hand grabbed my shoulder from behind.

"Bwah ha ha. You are obviously one of the first to go."

I turned around. Lozen had joined us.

Lozen is really cool and Mensa-smart. Native American, she is named after a woman who fought beside Geronimo, and she's breathtakingly beautiful; we've been good friends since pre-k. But I wasn't about to let her get away with what I thought she was implying.

"So, as the black girl, I'm the early victim of the campground slasher?" I tried to stare accusingly at her, but I didn't think it was working.

“No! Obviously, you are the first to go because the first scene in the movie is you in the shower with two boys!”

I roll my eyes at her. I punch her on the arm, and she giggles. We are partners on an art project, studying and contrasting early African art with early Apache art from a tribal collection. She wanted to show me what she’d found: two almost identical scenes, one from Africa and the other from a tribal museum’s early art collection. We were excitedly comparing notes when the bus pulled up, and everyone piled in.

Our stop was the last one before school, so the bus was nearly full. But the back row had four empty seats. Lozen, Katy, Kevin, and I went to sit, but as I was busy ignoring Jeff Carmichael, who was trying to appear nonchalant and failing, annoying Rickie tried to push past us to sit first. Miss Morgan, the bus driver, snapped at him to sit toward the front. He was a troublemaker, and she kept him where she could see him.

Miss Morgan was all right. She was firm with us, but not in a super bossy way, if you know what I mean.

As we sat down, annoying Rickie’s annoying mother ran up to talk to Miss Morgan about her precious boy. She fussed about him as though he was still in elementary school and not in ninth grade. I had taken the window seat and leaned against the glass, quietly looking out, when I fell fast asleep.

I couldn’t have been out longer than a couple of minutes when something jolted me awake.

“I wasn’t sleeping!” I started to protest to whoever had nudged me, embarrassed. But nobody was there, nobody. The bus was still at my stop, the engine was running, and I was the only person on board.

At first, I thought it was some type of trick. I stood up and began walking slowly to the front. I even checked under the seats in case the kids were hiding there. But when I reached the still open door, panic hit me. No one, and I mean no one, was around. No cars heading to work, nothing.

Backpack in hand, I stepped nervously off the bus. Something was wrong. No way would Miss Morgan or the school go along with something like this as a

gag. Not even for a TV show. You don't leave a kid, not even a sophomore, on an empty school bus with the engine running as a joke.

I freaked out. I had to get the hell out of there and flew back to my house, burst in, slamming the door shut behind me to lock out... what? I didn't know, but I wanted it locked out!

I startled Dad. I think the look on my face scared him. He asked me what was wrong. I could tell he thought someone tried to grab me, a pervert or something like that.

If only it had been that simple! I tried to explain about the bus and everything, but nothing was making any sense. I stuttered as I tried to tell it.

Dad headed toward the door. "Rain, this has to be some mix-up. I'll go see."

But I didn't want him to leave the house. I was almost crazy with fear. "No! Don't go out there, Dad! Something bad is happening."

Dad had never talked about his work in Britain before he started his own security business, but I think back then he got into situations that caused him to pay a lot of attention to his instincts, and right now, he had total trust in mine. Dad didn't brush my fear aside. Instead, he crossed to the front windows and looked out. My hair was still prickling at the back of my neck as I joined him.

We stood side by side, staring at the bus, just idling, with absolutely no sign of life. At that moment, Mrs. Walker, the lady who lives across from us, opened her door, and I began thinking everything had to be normal after all. The bus had broken down, and my imagination kicked in when I woke up alone. If they had to move everyone on to a replacement, a sleeping kid in the back row might get overlooked.

I began to calm down as Dad and I watched Mrs. Walker try to make her Chihuahua, Pepper, go out and do his business. They had one of those invisible fence things, and he often ran around and around the front lawn. An insane dog barking its head off. But that morning, Pepper was giving her a hard time, so she pushed him out onto the front porch, went back inside, and closed the door.

Pepper sat there for a minute or two, shaking. No big deal with that breed. They're always trembling up a storm. But this morning, it was like we sensed something different was happening.

My panic started flooding back, and Dad and I just stared. Transfixed.

Pepper took one nervous step off the porch and paused, sniffing, before taking another. Then, satisfied that everything was safe, he trotted out on the lawn, sniffing the ground, when a burst of energy crackled along the bus and arced out, hitting the dog. When it was over, poor Pepper had been turned inside-out. He was a bloody mess. Dad turned to look at me, his mind clearly racing, trying to process what we had just witnessed.

“Holy crap, Dad, that would’ve been you.”

We both backed away from the window. Dad pulled me in and held me tight. He held on to me as though he would never let me go.

That was when the TV in the living room turned itself on. We stared at it. On the screen was a strange landscape with a mountain that seemed to go up forever.

“Imperious, home of the legendary Empress Stakes.”

The sudden voice-over startled the heck out of me.

“Where once a Galactic Year, contestants, drawn from the Unrecognized Worlds, compete on Mount Olympus in the ultimate racing event in the entire Empire!” The picture on the TV changed. The camera pans up a path carved into the mountainside.

“Yes, trillions will tune in to watch the 169th running of this classic race, presented live on Vidnet. All from primitive backwater planets, every contestant in The Empress Stakes is a volunteer, entering of his or her own free will.”

The camera continued its upward climb, passing by waterfalls, traveling through a grove of trees, and coming to a halt at a peaceful, pastoral meadow surrounded by a bright blue sky.

“Of course, this race wouldn’t be complete without the contestants’ Guarantors. Their purpose is to encourage participation and provide a stimulus for the contestants’ best efforts. And it’s to be expected that, whether Humanoid, Insectoid, or Reptilian, their limited intellects are overloaded when they encounter civilization for the first time.”

I remember thinking, Humanoid, Insectoid, or Reptilian? What does that mean?

I quickly got my answer. We were shown a crowd shot, followed by close-ups of strange alien life forms, all huddled together.

Some were like people, some like evolved insects, and some like evolved reptiles, but they all had one thing in common, fear! They all looked lost and terrified.

The voice continued.

“Guarantors have an important role to play. Each participant has something to champion. So, not only does the contestant strive to achieve the best outcome for their own personal future...”

This was said with a chuckle, like it was a well-known joke. “The future of their Guarantors also rests on their performance.”

This was making no sense. Why was this weird science fiction show playing on our TV? What was going on?

“And now it’s time to present the latest, and hopefully...” The unseen voice takes on a conspiratorial tone, making a fake aside.

“Please, *please* let this be true! Hopefully, our final batch of Guarantors. They’re more than somewhat tardy, but, well, they are from Earth.”

Another chuckle. This time, there was laughter in the background, like from some unseen crew. I had no clue what the joke was.

“Now, they are anxiously waiting to find out if their selected Champion will rise to defend them.”

The narrator sighed before continuing.

“But Earth’s potential Champions have been, hmm, somewhat lacking of late. Much to the distress of their fellow beings, but perhaps to the benefit of the mines of Zocor!”

That triggered more laughing, but I didn’t really register it. The camera shot had changed. This was no TV show.

Dad and I were staring at the so-called Guarantors... the kids from my bus!

Miss Morgan and all the kids were huddled together in a group. The seniors were doing their best to act tough, but not too convincingly.

Armed guards surrounded them, and people dressed in lab coats were moving around, seeming to take notes.

The kids were in total shock, and a couple of them were whimpering.

It was clear Miss Morgan was frightened, but she stood protectively, trying to shelter her charges when someone broke away and tried to run. It was Rickie.

He didn't get far. He was struck hard on the side of his head by one of the guards and went sprawling. Two other guards grabbed him by his arms and started to drag him away, but Miss Morgan got right in their faces, pulled the stunned Rickie free, and took him back to the others.

She handed Rickie over to the twins, but as she did, one of the lab-coat people stepped up behind her and injected something into her neck. It wasn't a syringe; it was some type of needleless hypodermic injection device.

Miss Morgan was surprised at first; she wobbled a bit as though she was going to pass out. I thought they were putting her to sleep so there'd be no more trouble.

Wrong! It only took a few seconds before small boils and sores started appearing on her face. They grew and burst, letting pus run out. Miss Morgan touched a huge one on her cheek and stared at the lab-coat person, who just smirked. More and more sores were opening up, spewing foul pus and blood.

The camera cut to show the kids' horrified reactions. One thing was clear, whoever was behind this wanted everyone terrified.

It was working!

Miss Morgan collapsed, and Lozen stepped forward and took hold of her hand. Miss Morgan gave Lozen like this grateful smile, then pain twisted her face, and she was dead. Lozen was sobbing her heart out; Travis pulled her away.

The camera panned across the horrified kids, seeming to focus on my besties. Zooming in on Travis and Lozen and ending on Katy and Kevin.

Whoever was directing this was making sure I knew they knew who my best friends were.

Dad and I were frozen, unable to turn away. I don't think we were even breathing. The screen faded to black. I threw up right where I stood. Dad didn't let go of me for one second. He pulled me into his chest and wiped the puke off my face with his shirt.

"So, Ryanne." I looked back up at the TV. On the screen was the narrator. My stomach lurched again. He was talking directly to me!

"The Empire is offering you the opportunity to compete in the greatest race in the Universe, The Empress Stakes, and determine the fate of your friends."

He had a phony-friendly tone as he spoke. "This is a voluntary decision. Your free choice!"

I knew that was BS, but he kept talking.

"But we need to be clear. The rules require it. Accept this challenge and win the race, and all your friends will be returned to their homes, and there's a good chance you'll go home too. Decline? Well, we're required to inform you that your friends will have to pay the forfeit, and not getting to go home will be the least of their worries. They will work out their days in the mines of Zocor."

We're treated to images from the Mines. Yellow air, gas bursting from the ground, pale and weak children with vacant eyes were working. Two kids stumbled and were knocked around by guards. This was what everyone there thought was so funny earlier?

Our host repeated. "It's the rules."

He paused, letting that sink in before he continued. "But, not to worry! You have the power to become their Champion! Choose to compete and keep your friends safe!"

Ice formed in my stomach. I began trembling. Dad held me even closer.

We're shown my frightened fellow bus riders again. For all I knew, they were seeing me on some screen.

"I get the idea this race isn't too safe for people, Dad.

We got absolute proof we were in a two-way conversation!

"Oh! It's perfectly safe. Not one person has been hurt in the one hundred and sixty-eight times of running The Empress Stakes."

I think a lot of kids, if they were in my situation, would hear not one person hurt and think how bad could this race be? However, after witnessing what had just been done to poor Miss Morgan, I already had a good idea of my status as *a person*.

"That's nice," I said softly. "But what about the competitors?"

There was the briefest hesitation.

"Well, simply by your participation, your Guarantors, most of them anyway, will be safe. As for the actual Contestants? It varies by species, but considering your limited mental faculties combined with a lack of natural protection, Humanoids do quite well. The statistics from the last ten races have an average

survival rate of 30.95%. The Insectoid survival rate is closer to 39.35%, and the Reptilian's survival is quite remarkable at 46.15%."

He stopped talking, but 30.95% kept echoing in my head. I glanced at Dad. He looked grim. I knew he was thinking *call the authorities*.

Despite all the conspiracy stuff on the Internet, I didn't believe there was a government agency to deal with space aliens, no Men In Black coming to the rescue. It was scary, but like it or not, I was sure Dad and I were on our own in this.

The authorities couldn't do a thing.

We got rapid confirmation of that.

"Now, we understand you might have the urge to contact what passes for security forces on your world, but please save yourselves from the problems that would bring to you. We'd be required to neutralize any interference. And we don't wish to harm your father or any officials you attempt to involve, but we will. It would be such an unnecessary dampening of this exciting opportunity for you to shine and showcase the quality of humanoid advancement on Earth."

We're treated to a condescending smile.

"No, Rain, we strongly advise you to limit yourself to either choosing to embrace this incredible honor and participate, or decline and say farewell to your companions."

I ran through my options. If this was really happening, and it was, I could condemn everyone unlucky enough to ride the bus with me to a cruel fate... Make a choice that would haunt me forever. One where I end up crazy, unable to stop thinking about what my friends were going through, or I play their game, and more than likely, I'm killed, but the kids get to live. They live, but what happens to them? They'll only go home if I win.

Yeah, right!

Still, if I did win, they'd all get sent home, and maybe I'd get to come home too. I was sure even that promise held a catch somewhere.

Everything came flooding into focus. There were zero options. After what happened to poor Miss Morgan, one thing was for sure: These guys didn't take no for an answer. Dad and I would pay somehow!

My best hope was that I would get to be one of the 30.95% and live, and maybe my friends get to go home.

The bottom line? I couldn't abandon my friends.

I knew Dad was thinking like crazy about what to do, but no matter how I looked at it, we were royally screwed. I die billions of miles from home, and Dad beats himself up for the rest of his life. Obsessing over how he should have done more to keep me safe. I remember thinking, crap, this is too much for even Dad to handle.

"If only we could count on help from a certain dragon, Dad," I whispered. I think he almost smiled as he squeezed my hand.

Something about me saying *help from a certain dragon* appeared to catch the host off guard.

"Wha..." He sounded flustered for a second. "Well, okay, emm..."

He quickly recovered. "Well, the next time we chat, Ryanne, we'll need your answer."

He was back on script. "My dear child, we appreciate that this all must be exciting for you and a bit of a shock. Earth is a primitive planet populated by simple creatures like you, and this is a lot to take in. So please, take the time to think everything over.

We'll give you eight of your hours to make up your mind."

CHAPTER 5



The TV went dark. Dad and I didn't move. We stood paralyzed, not saying a word, staring at the blank screen. I think we were both trying hard to convince ourselves it hadn't happened. It wasn't real.

Dad let tension release from his body and loosened his hold on me. I untangled myself, got a bucket and mop, and cleaned up everything I had thrown up earlier. It was gross, I guess, but right then, it seemed insignificant.

When I finished, I washed the bucket, rinsed the mop, and stashed them away. I went back to join Dad. He had changed his shirt and was leaning against our table, reading a colored flyer.

Puzzled, I slid next to him, wondering what flyer had attracted his attention with this insanity happening. I got it as soon as I peered over his shoulder. I see the cheerful headline, *The Empress Stakes. What to bring, what not to bring.* I read on to some of the subtext. All written like it was for summer camp. *Here are some do's and don'ts before embarking on your exciting adventure.*

"Where?" I asked.

Dad indicated it had been lying on the kitchen table and kept reading. This time, out loud.

"You don't need to take any food or water. All that will be supplied. You can take some basic weapons..."

An edge of anger slipped into his voice as he continued.

“But no firearms. That would be cheating. Any attempts to smuggle guns or circumvent this rule will be considered a transgression and dealt with under the articles of the race.”

Dad crumpled the paper up and said, “This is psychotic. I don’t believe any of it. Come on, we’re going to the police, the FBI, and NSA. Let them deal with this. No way in hell are you going anywhere.”

Dad had contacts high up who would listen, even take him seriously. But I just knew that would doom my friends. And I was sure that people would be hurt or killed, including the two of us, if he contacted anyone.

I gave him a look. He could see I wasn’t going to go along with his, *no way*.

He protested. “Rain, it’s my job to protect you. I’m not about to let you...”

I put my hand up to stop him. We only had a few hours left, and I didn’t plan to spend them arguing. I guess he saw something in my eyes because he didn’t try to forbid me.

Instead, he tried to reason with me.

“Rain, this is not your responsibility. Some outer space lunatics grab kids at random and pick you to save them? I don’t think so.”

He stopped talking, and we stayed silent. I began to study the pattern on the living room carpet. It was deep green with motivos florals, a floral motif, well, that’s what Mamá called it. I wondered if I would ever see it again.

Dad broke the silence. “I can’t let you go, kid. You’re all I’ve got.”

“I’m all Katy and Kevin and the others have got,” was all I could think to say.

But then, something about this twisted mess became very clear to me.

“Dad.” I hesitated. “I am so scared because somehow this...” I waved my hands around. “Is really, really, real, and I know whoever, whatever, is behind this is going to make certain that for anyone who says no to them, there’s no happy ever after. You saw what they did to poor Miss Morgan. These people don’t do no, and that’s that.”

What Dad did next is what makes him so amazing. He doesn’t waste time on what if and if only.

“Let’s go, Rain.”

I followed him out of the house and climbed into the car beside him.

Outside, things had come back to life. Everything was oddly normal except the bus, which was still there, engine running, empty, and what remained of poor Pepper spread across the Walker's front grass, and nobody noticed any of it.

"So there goes your proof, Kamron," Dad muttered. "Damn, I don't believe I'm going along with this. What sort of lunatic father am I?"

"The best kind," I told him. "The very best."

Dad gave me the saddest look I've ever seen, sadder than when Mamá died. It seemed to be so deep it went forever. "You have to take care of yourself, Dad. We will be back together again!" I said it so fiercely I almost believed myself. Dad was fighting tears and only nodded at me as we drove off. I didn't ask questions. I put everything in his hands while I still could.

We zoomed around to a bunch of different places, strange little hidden shops that I didn't know how Dad knew about. I guess his security business and what he used to do in Britain had to have something to do with it. He was putting together stuff for some survivalist, which is what I suppose I was about to become.

The first place we stopped at looked like an ordinary clothes shop. As we walked in, Dad nodded to the young girl at the sales counter. She smiled at him and buzzed us into a back room. It was different! At first, I thought it was just a place for sports gear and martial arts, but I quickly discovered it was much more than that. Dad got me some skin-tight leather pants, a lightweight mesh shirt, a leather doublet and a sleeveless jacket. I tried everything on and could move easily. These clothes, clearly created for serious action, are durable and will provide some protection without restricting my movement at all.

At our next stop, Dad bought a set of razor-sharp hunting knives, the same kind used by special-ops forces. I had never seen anything like them before, but it was clear they were superior military grade. Dad asked for something he called a wrist sheath. The guy pulled out this thing that would hold one of the knives, spring-loaded, on my wrist. Dad nodded yes to buying it. We were shown a second wrist knife. More of an assassin's weapon, he told us. Dad waved it away. Calling it a toy. The man smiled in agreement.

He recognized he was dealing with someone who knew what he was doing.

The guy tried to sell us some guns; Dad sighed and said no before asking, “What about a slingshot? The man pulled out a box and handed it to Dad. For a slingshot, it was hi-tech, designed for maximum force.

“Kill a man with that.” The guy said, looking right at me. “Need to take care.”

I think he was worried that some dumb kid, me, might start playing with it, hurt somebody, and he could have trouble. “No worries,” Dad told him. “She won’t be playing any games with it. It’s not ending up as some kid’s toy.”

That satisfied the guy, and he grunted.

We were almost finished when something occurred to Dad. “I don’t suppose you have such a thing as crossbow bolts?” Bolts are crossbow arrows.

The guy didn’t say a word. He walked to the back of his shop and came back, blowing the dust off an old cardboard box. “Custom-order paid upfront, a lady never came back, over two, maybe three years now, I guess.”

He just gave us the box. It was full of crossbow bolts. Looking back, I don’t think it was chance those bolts were waiting for us!

After Dad was satisfied with the weapons, he bought some leather belts with pouches for holding stuff and a backpack, and we were out of there.

The eight hours were about up when we got back home. I’m so glad that I spent every second with Dad for the little time I’d been given to decide and prepare.

As soon as we walked into the house, Dad went to his office and came back with this antique double-shot crossbow he had bought years ago at some estate sale or auction. I remember thinking that having that was a small piece of luck, like the bolts. But now, I don’t think luck had anything to do with that, either.

I changed into the mesh-shirt, leather pants, and doublet. Dad hustled about packing the efficient survivalist backpack we’d purchased, with clothes. It was weird to be worrying about underwear and stuff, but I’m so glad he did.

As he was finishing putting it all together, a ruckus started outside, followed by sirens.

We peeked out.

Someone had finally noticed the empty school bus, and Mrs. Walker was in hysterics as her husband tried to steer her away from what was left of Pepper.

Dad said, “Makes sense. Stir up the neighborhood. Police and such everywhere, and I’m pulled away from being with you.” He went through the house, locking

all the doors and windows and closing the blinds. Sure enough, shortly after that, the bell rang several times. We heard footsteps as somebody walked around the house trying to check inside, but they went away. It was way too soon for anybody to be suspicious, and they had a bunch of houses to call on.

Once again, the TV came to life. This time, a different man was on the screen. An obviously self-important, slightly tanned white man. It clearly surprised him that Dad was standing next to me. Dad was right about the timing of the bus being discovered.

The man recovered and started talking. "Ryenne Douglas, welcome! My name is of no consequence to you, but I'm the Course Director. I'm responsible for the design and running of this contest, and now you're formally invited to participate in the most exclusive race in the universe, The Empress Stakes. What's your answer?"

I answered straight away. "Sir, I wish to volunteer to participate in The Empress Stakes."

It was obvious by his reaction he had expected me to hesitate. I would bet that the plan had been to cut away and show my terrified friends. Whoever was switching cameras and the Course Director had been surprised by the speed of my response. It was only a small victory, but it was something.

"You're better prepared to answer than one would expect from a denizen of Earth. Excellent, you're officially entered." The Course Director noticed my simple outfit and the small armory strapped to me.

"Extremely well-prepared indeed. So, what are you planning to bring with you?"

I showed him everything, giving simple, matter-of-fact information. I ended up showing off the crossbow. I sensed the Course Director had some hesitation as he looked at it. For an anxious moment, I worried he might ban my best weapon, but Dad spoke up first, surprising both the Course Director and me.

He spoke dryly. "It's an over three-hundred-year-old weapon from a primitive backwater planet. There are no explosives or the like. Surely something this crude is within your guidelines."

I counted it as small victory number two when the Course Director bristled, saying. “Obviously, it’s permissible.” Then to me, he said. “Ryanne, it’s time. Say farewell to your father.”

Looking at Dad, he added, “Mr. Douglas, don’t try to come with her or follow. We don’t offer you the protections we offer Ryanne, and you’ll die.”

A bright white light appeared in the room. Forming a tunnel. I could see figures standing at the other end of it. I wondered where it would take me. What I knew for sure, it led from the safe comfort of our living room to somewhere very far away. I turned and hugged Dad. I had started to cry like a little girl and didn’t want the creeps to have the satisfaction of seeing that. Dad held me tight in his arms and smoothed my hair.

He held me so tight that, for a moment, I thought he was going to try to stop me from leaving. Instead, he tilted my head, wiped away my tears, and kissed me.

“Ryanne, my love, please hold on to this truth; all three of the Douglas family are joined at the heart forever.” Dad pressed something hard and round into my hand and let me go.

Clutching onto whatever Dad had just given me, I walked straight into the tunnel of light. It took only a few steps to be on the other side of the universe.

I turned, and the doorway slowly closed. I could tell Dad was already second-guessing himself.

What he had just allowed to happen was insanity! He should have stopped me.

I knew there would be no peace for Dad unless, by some impossible miracle, I won. But won what? I didn’t have the faintest idea what The Empress Stakes really was. Okay, it’s a race, but what kind of race?

All I knew for sure? There’s an excellent chance I’m going to die.

CHAPTER 6



I watched until the last speck of light had vanished, closing the connection to my home. Only then did I turn and found myself face to face with the Course Director himself. He had an unpleasant smile, but something else was showing, perhaps a hint he was mildly troubled?

“Ryanne Douglas, may I call you Rain? I think I am correct; that’s your more common nomenclature.”

He continued without pausing for a reply. “I must confess you strike me as being far more interesting than I had expected. The humanoids from your world, Earthlings, usually only provide comic relief. I don’t believe Earth ever had a contender of any significance.”

He stopped as if trying to come up with one person from Earth who had been anything more than a joke.

“No, I can’t think of one. Comic relief and some awful servants, that’s all we’ve found coming from Earth. But now you and your father are presenting a whole new face for your planet. I wonder what the bookmakers will make of you. I confess my only expectation was lots of betting on how soon you die. Imagine, you might even get some long-shot bets placed on you to live!”

He snorted. With that thought, he’d clearly amused himself. If I had any hopes that I had a chance to stay alive, that did an excellent job of crushing them.

Still, I wasn't going to show him how scared I was, so I shrugged. He snorted again, spun around, and waved over two guards who'd been waiting.

One of them stepped behind me, and I felt a sting like a mosquito on steroids had dined on me. My first reaction was fear. Was I going to die like Miss Morgan? My frightened expression earned me a patronizing explanation.

"It's a chemical translator, Rain."

He continued with a slight sneer. "It implants and awakens a part of the brain that, from this point on, will instantly translate any and every language."

He pauses. "I doubt it has occurred to your limited intellect, but we are speaking the language you call English. It is Empire Standard; its appearance on your planet is a result of a joke played on early Anglo-Saxons. No matter. Whatever language is spoken, little Rain will understand. Pity, it's so improbable you'll get to go home. Think of the fun you could've had!"

He snapped his fingers, and the two guards were at my sides. "These gentlemen will show you to your room in the Humanoid Contestant Quarters. Get rest, young Rain. Now that you're here, humanoid training can finally start tomorrow."

I'm treated to one more snarky smile. "Can't send you off unprepared now, can we?"

I was sure they could do just that.

My mind racing, I turned to follow, and froze. This hole in, well, in the air, suddenly opened, revealing an empty landscape. Only meadowland and trees. No signs of life. It was as though this random gate just opened right by me.

But it wasn't like the gate I walked through from home, the gate I'd stepped out of. That Gate was an arch-type deal with lights and crackling with energy. No, what I was staring at was a hole in space.

I glanced over at the Director and could tell immediately that this wasn't something he controlled. He was speaking urgently into some type of communicator.

"Quick! One opened by the Earth Gate."

So, the Empire wasn't in control of everything. I liked that. But I wondered what I was witnessing. As I stared at the gate, I got a second shock; a figure

appeared. It hurt to look at it. I couldn't explain why. It seems to be a mashup of a creature made up of spider webs and maggots.

My stomach churned. I had to turn away. I looked at my guards and the Director to see their reaction.

They were, like, well, like ignoring it. They all acted as though they hadn't seen it. I think they didn't want to.

I glanced back.

The thing was coming through; it wasn't anything good. Even though it was painful, I kept looking at it. I swear it did a double-take on me and froze.

For a few moments, we stared at each other. It hesitated, uncertain, and then the hole started to shut down. Twisting in fear, the creature tried to scramble back, but it was too slow and got crushed. I was sorta disoriented as I watched it disintegrate. I jerked around and looked at my captors. How did they not see that? What was wrong with these guys?

The Director was shouting, "I need you to start a trace..." But the gate and whatever that thing had been had faded away.

The Director cursed. He'd been aware of the gate but somehow didn't see, or maybe didn't want to see that creature. My head was aching. Everything began getting foggy in my mind. Like I was trying to hold on to a dream. Had I really seen that thing?

The director was angry. Ignoring me he made a dismissive gesture and left.

One of the guards nudged me to start moving. I started walking with my silent escorts, then glanced up and froze.

The sky, the stars, the moons, yes, two moons! And, oh God, and that impossible mountain! I stood, rooted, unable to move, in complete shock. Everything I had seen that day, all the horrors I'd been shown, whatever the heck that creature that nobody but me had seen, this challenge I had accepted, it all was now terrifyingly real. I was staring at a sky crammed full of more stars than I ever thought possible. And that mountain, an inexorable mountain that climbed into the sky and never stopped.

I stared at it; my heart filled with dread. Then, as though to top all the crazy off, I swear I heard the plaintive yowl of a cat.

Hands began propelling me forward again, steering me to one of three utilitarian buildings.

Some basic-looking wire fencing separated them all. The inconsistency of technology struck me as incongruous and bizarre.

We entered the first building into a bright, clean room with rows of tables and benches. Some type of mess hall, I guessed.

"Food." I jumped as one of my guards spoke for the first time.

"Here?" I questioned and gestured around, and I got a grunt and a nod, yes.

Seeming to have exhausted all their conversational skills, they guided me through the mess hall into a corridor lined with doors. To my surprise, I saw my name on one of them. "Room yours."

The same guard pointed to the door and reverted to silence after stringing two whole words together. Despite being far more talkative than his fellow guard, a sparkling conversationalist, he wasn't. He opened the door and ushered me in. I got the grand tour.

"Bed."

There is a wood-framed bed with a mattress and bedding in a neat pile on top. Next, he showed me a control panel. He presses a button, and a shower with red and blue buttons emerges out of the wall.

"Wash, hot and cold." He said as I got the obvious pointed out to me. "Right?"

I realized he wanted to know if I was staying up with the stream of information. I started pressing the buttons in sequence.

"Wash," I said.

He jumped back as the water began spraying out.

"Adjust temperature."

Using the red and blue buttons, I got the water to a reasonable heat.

I pressed a black button set underneath the controls

"Off? Ah, yes!" I said as the shower stopped.

I glanced over at my guard and saw a slight twinkle had crept into his eyes, and there was a subtle relaxing of posture.

I gave my escorts a more careful appraisal.

It was then I realized despite the armored uniform and stiff demeanor, they were only five or six years older than me. They both looked as though they could be Hawaiian.

The chatty one's partner hadn't said one word, zero hint of any emotion.

I was shown one last feature of my room. The guard pressed a button, and a toilet rose from the floor.

I glanced at it and stared at him to see what he would say.

"The errr..."

I gazed questioningly. I couldn't help myself. Despite everything, I felt a smile twitching at the corners of my mouth.

"You know!" He finished, and I swear he was blushing.

I glanced down, not wanting to embarrass him any further. It wouldn't hurt for the guards to at least not dislike me. I wasn't going to try to fool myself into thinking that I could make a friend, but not making enemies would be the next best thing.

"Thank you. You've been kind." I said softly, and from the corner of my eye, I watched as he accepted this with a slight smile.

"Sleep soon. Tomorrow long day."

With brisk military precision, they left.

The room was empty, and I felt terribly alone.

I realized, despite everything, I still had a tight grip on the round object Dad had given me. I unclenched my hand; it was a locket. One he had given to Mum years ago. I pressed the latch. It was a picture of Mum, Dad, and me. I'm holding my first gymnastics trophy. We are all so happy.

I tear up. Dad had made certain I had a piece of us! I put it in my backpack for safekeeping. And continued my inspection, pacing out the perimeter of my cell. I was sure I was locked in. I mean, guest quarters they weren't. As I moved about, I chewed one of my nails, trying to act like a frightened little girl for the camera I knew my captors had hidden somewhere.

Somebody had to be monitoring.

I settled down on the bed. I didn't undress. I could wait until tomorrow for that humiliation.

I had every intention of showering in the morning, but undressing while being monitored could be postponed.

I lay down, pulled one of the blankets over me, and stared at the plain wall facing me.

It struck me that I hadn't been shown any way of controlling the light. In fact, I had no idea what the source of light even was. Did they expect me to sleep with the lights on? Quite possible, I thought. Suicide watch was probably the most essential duty the guards had, certainly not any type of prisoner revolt!

The light filling the room wasn't going to make it easy to sleep. I wondered if I should bury my head under the pillow when it occurred to me that the controls might be voice-activated.

Nothing ventured, I called out, "Lights out." Out they went. Still, even with the room darkened, I was sure sleep wouldn't come soon, but the air in the room took on a faintly sweet, sickly smell, and my eyes grew leaden.

My hosts were making sure I would get some sleep by knocking me out. I tumbled into unconsciousness.