

PRAISE FOR ERIN R. HOWARD

Filled with twists and turns to keep you on the edge of your seat, *Beyond the Gates* is evocative of *Divergent* and *The Giver* while maintaining a uniqueness that draws you in. Readers will devour the book while seeking a path back to the safety of the Outpost with Renna, Miles, and the rest of the likeable cast of characters. Packed with surprises, chills, and plenty of heart-wrenching moments, this story of deception within and without the walls of humanity's last enclosures is well-worth reading for any fan of dystopian stories. Particularly those who thoroughly enjoy a thread of young love skillfully woven into its fabric.

— BRETT ARMSTRONG, AWARD-WINNING
AUTHOR OF THE QUEST OF FIRE SERIES

A riveting tale of finding truth and family against overwhelming odds. You'll be swept away and captivated by this world where thinking for yourself could get you killed.

— TABITHA BOULDIN AUTHOR OF
MADNESS IN WONDERLAND

BEYOND THE GATES

Gates of Deceit • Book One

ERIN R. HOWARD



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

*I am a strong woman because a strong woman raised me.
Thanks, Mom. I love you.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Here we are, a brand new book and a new series! I've wanted to write a dystopian series even before I wrote *The Kalila Chronicles*, and I'm so excited that you've taken this journey with me. I hope you fell in love with Renna, Miles, and Gabbi as much as I did.

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Last but certainly not least, a huge thank you to all of my

readers! Your kind words and messages are why I keep writing. So please make sure you go to my website and join my writing community. I pray that God will use this new series to remind you just how strong you are and that He has a purpose for you. One that only you can do.

PROLOGUE



The sun beat down on her, warming her skin to an unbearable temperature. Her knees shook and she did the best she could to keep her nerves under control. No one uttered a single word this morning as she prepared to leave her house for the Monitors building.

She passed her family, avoiding their expressions as she followed the Guardian Officials. They escorted her down the dirt paths, walking past each residential home and business, while the people stared at her through closed windows.

Fourteenth birthdays were meant for celebrating at home, eating sweets, and opening a few handmade presents from her family. Instead, she paraded through the streets of the Outpost, her first day in her new role as Speaker.

Speaker!

The title weighed on her as if an invisible, gold-laden crown sat precariously on her head. It wasn't a role she wanted. Who was she to inherit such an honorable position?

The Guardian paused at the door and faced her. "Renna James, welcome to the Monitors."

He pulled back a heavy wooden door that creaked as it

opened. He gestured for her to go first. In the center of the old, outdated room were a desk, chair, and the intercom system. Her gaze swept around the room, but nothing else stood out as interesting. Just chairs, cables, and other technology that Renna had only read about in the Books of the Past.

“Take a seat.”

Renna did as instructed, too nervous to ask what she had to do next. The Guardian bowed his head to her and left, shutting the door behind him.

Within seconds, it opened again, and a boy — perhaps a few years older than her — emerged, carrying a thick envelope. He stopped in front of the desk and handed it to her. “Welcome to the Monitors.”

“Thank you.” Renna raised a shaky hand and accepted the package, turned it over, and broke the wax seal of the Officials.

At least the march to the building wasn’t an everyday occurrence. It was a special day—the first day—of a new Speaker’s reign.

The Runner walked to the front door and waited, watching her. She averted her eyes and pulled the parchment from the envelope.

You can do this, Renna.

She pushed the intercom button and spoke, praying her voice wouldn’t falter. “Citizens of the Outpost, my name is Renna James, and I am your new Speaker. I do not know what happened to your previous Speaker, but I’m honored to take over this prestigious role.”

Renna paused, panic threatening to take over. Something happened to Jovi? She forced her mind to focus on the paper and not on the sweet girl she grew up with. “Two Runners entered the forest last night, and both returned, with a new set of rules, effective immediately.”

Clearing her throat, she continued. “You can no longer go into the meadow each morning after the Reading. The Gates

will open for a brief period and then close and lock for seventy-two hours.”

The Runner’s gasp momentarily threw her off guard, but she continued. “You were provided a week’s worth of essentials—and will only be given a week’s supply at a time until your production quality improves.”

Dread filled her stomach at the news. This wasn’t how she wanted to begin her new position. “Medicine will need to be rationed until another shipment is available. Curfew is at 8:30 p.m. You may now leave your homes.”

Renna waited for a few seconds, taking in a deep breath before she switched off the intercom. She rose from the desk and walked over to the Runner. “Do you know what happened to Jovi?”

“No. Do us all a favor and don’t repeat that question. To anyone.” He gave her a slight nod before opening the door and leaving.

The Guardian Officials who had escorted her before waited at the bottom of the stairs, and they repeated the same route back to her house. She was grateful for the escort this time because people stared at her from every doorway and sidewalk. Curiosity and shock lined their faces—their eyes asking the same question she wanted to know but couldn’t voice.

Why was she the Speaker?

*Day One*

A shudder swept down Renna's spine as slimy earth oozed between her toes. Placing one foot in front of the other, she ran. The crunch of brittle leaves echoed her steps throughout the forest.

Branches slapped across her chest as she clumsily sprinted toward the safety of the Monitors. Debris littering the forest floor sent sharp stabs and stings along the bottom of her heels.

What a stupid, impulsive decision.

If she squinted, she could barely make out an old, rectangular concrete building that had seen better days—the Monitors' roof. Renna had to push a little more, and she would be safely within the perimeter of the Gates. Once inside, she could get back to announcing today's Life Rules to the Outpost. Just like every day for the last three years.

A fluttering of wings to her right drew Renna's gaze. Brown and white spotted feathers flew beside her, landing in a nearby birch tree. Attention caught by the majestic creature, Renna tried to slow her speed, but her toes tangled in the damp grass

and vines and threw her off balance. Her knee protested the sudden restraint of the vines and buckled, sending her into a heap on the mucky ground.

Rocks nicked her palms as she slapped them down to break her fall, but it didn't stop her descent's momentum. Her face smacked the ground, sending the world into a flurry of circles. Clamping her eyes shut, she waited until the spinning ceased and her breathing steadied.

Already, the sting of the fall smarted around her eye. No doubt a beautiful array of colors would mar her face. The Outpost relied on her perfect vision. Any damage to her sight and, well—she shuddered at what could happen.

Slowly Renna opened her eyes, one at a time. Brilliant aqua skies filled her vision.

She could see!

She let out a high-pitched giggle and then clamped a hand over her mouth. Mud smacked her in the face, and she tried her best to wipe it off, but it smeared across her lips instead.

The owl *hooted* and flew over her in the opposite direction it had been heading. At least it was comforting to know that she was not seeing things after all. There really was an owl in the forest, and for her to see it, in the daytime—no one at the Outpost would believe her.

Although, she could never admit she had ventured into the forest beyond the meadow surrounding the Gates.

Reena's pulse skyrocketed. The Gates! She had to get back before the sirens blared. Scrambling to her feet, she broke out once more into a run, ignoring the aches and pains from falling. She wasn't a Runner, so there was never a need for Renna to be outside of the boundaries of the Outpost.

The grey Monitors building crept closer into view as the forest began to thin. She had no idea how she would explain her muddy appearance, but she'd have to worry about that

once she was securely behind her desk, waiting for the Runner to place today's rules in her hand.

Renna was about to break out into the clearing surrounding the Gates when something struck her from the side, knocking her flat on her stomach, forcing the breath from her lungs. For a few terrifying moments, Renna thought she would die. But as suddenly as the breath left, her lungs refilled. Renna brushed bits of dirt and grass from her lips as she tried to bolt up from the ground, unsure of what to do next.

"Wait just a minute!" Calloused hands reached out to stop her.

Renna tried to see who was behind her but only glimpsed clothing—no face. Judging from the voice, it was a man.

"Let go!" Renna wiggled and squirmed, attempting to strike her attacker, yet he overpowered her.

She kept kicking, hoping the man would get tired or give up. Finally. A curse filled the air as he removed his grip on her arm to block her persistent kicks.

"Be still," he huffed, "I'm trying to help you."

Help her? He had a strange way of showing help. She struck again, connecting with his body. It was the moment she needed to turn over.

She gasped. This was no man but a boy—one not much older than her seventeen years. She shook her head and stood before he could grab her again. Renna backed away from the teenager, but he threw his hands out, begging her to stay.

"Please, wait just a moment. You don't want to go back to the Outpost."

She raised her eyebrow. "I don't?" Was this guy insane? She took another step backward. How had she gotten herself into this situation? What was she thinking?

"You were out in the woods, right?" He gestured to the forest. "So you must have already been suspicious."

Renna paused. "Suspicious of what?"

The boy opened his mouth to respond, but the high-pitched wail of the siren cut off his words. Renna covered her ears to protect her eardrums from the sound. Dread filled her stomach at the signal. It was the start of a new day.

Who would read the day's rules to the Outpost?

Tears blurred Renna's vision as the long wail of the siren slowed and then finally stopped. Her hand instinctively touched the silver necklace dangling from her neck. The S pendant was cool against her fingers.

It was too late. The Gates were closed. She was too late.

"You're the Speaker." The boy gasped and Renna opened her eyes to see him backing away from her now.

"Where are you going?"

His face filled with regret. "I'm sorry, I can't ..."

She stomped forward, irritation welling up inside at the sight of him retreating. "Wait! You can't leave me!"

He shook his head in horror and took off for the forest.