

**YOUNG ADULT EXCERPTS  
VOLUME 1**



**FROM THE AUTHORS OF**  
*Marketing for Romance Writers*

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## Dangerous Temptation



**Buy Link:** <http://is.gd/Y462Qb>

Seventeen year old Kaitlin Sinclair's world crashes when her father dies, she's discovered by an uncle she never knew existed.

She encounters Cadmon Quinn, new leader of an ancient clan of tiger shifters, who fears failing his clan, but is drawn to the haunted young woman.

An adventure in the rainforest irrevocably intertwines their lives and they soon realize that keeping their hearts safe could prove as impossible as staying alive!

Excerpt:

The clearing fell silent as a man with shaggy, dirty blond hair which reached his shoulders, approached with a wide, purposeful stride. His shoulders were back, head held high and chest out. Piercing green eyes zeroed in on her.

Kaitlin inhaled a sharp breath and felt as if his eyes stared through to her soul. She shifted on the balls of her feet, and licked her bottom lip.

Ean's body went rigid. A look of caution crossed his face as the man approached them.

"Evening," the stranger greeted with a lazy drawl. His eyes never left her face. "Who is this exquisite young lady?"

His eyes settled on Ean's hands on her hips. To Kaitlin's chagrin her cheeks heated.

"Why are you here?" Ean moved Kaitlin closer to his body.

She braced her hands on his chest and gasped. "Who's this?" She pulled back.

"Cadmon Quinn, madam." He bowed. "It's a pleasure to meet you." He grabbed her hand and brushed a kiss on the back of it.

Her eyes widened. Butterflies brushed inside her stomach.

"Smooth." She slipped her hand free and rubbed it down the side of her dress to stop the tingles and shake off the electric jolt.

"She's charming." A corner of his mouth tilted. "Perhaps she will save me a dance?"

"She has a name." She removed Ean's hands from her hips and then turned to face Cadmon. "It's Kate. Use it." She raised her chin and planted her hands on her hips.

"Call me Cade." He flashed an amused smile.

"What do you want?" Ean stepped between them and squared his shoulders.

"Couldn't resist introducing myself to your lovely cousin." Cadmon sidestepped Ean with a smile, and then twirled his forefinger through one of her banana curls. "Interesting choice." he gave it a light tug. Her pulse quickened.

"I won't let you, or my father put her through anything else." Ean took Kaitlin by the elbow and stormed away.

She glanced back at Cadmon, who continued to watch her as he swaggered over to the elders, and picked up a tall glass of red wine. He saluted her with the drink, then sipped.

Kaitlin swallowed and turned around to break the eye contact. *Was he a natural charmer, or was it an act?* She hadn't seen him talk to anyone else, so maybe he was the silent type?

Ean pressed a cool glass against her hand.

“What did you mean?” Her gaze locked with his as she sipped the fruity drink.

His brow rose.

“Why would they want to hurt me?” She took another sip.

“He and Father are not on friendly terms.” Ean scowled and sipped his glass.

“Why so defensive?” She placed her glass on the table and rested her hands on her hips.

Ean placed his glass down and grabbed her by the arms. “He’s dangerous, and will only bring you trouble.”

Cadmon appeared harmless, but the sheer magnetism of the man told her otherwise. What interest would he have in a girl like her? Was he one of those rich playboys? She frowned.

“Hungry?” Ean’s fingers relaxed around her arms. “I’m going to take a walk.” The thought of food made her stomach queasy.

“Stay on the path, Katie.” He frowned. “Want some company?”

“I need to clear my head.” She walked along the small dirt path that led over to the river. Inhaling the damp air she sat, and tucked her dress beneath her.

She closed her eyes and allowed her fingers to glide through the cool liquid, wishing she could peel off her dress and swim.

Her eyes opened and she frowned at her reflection. Laneca would give her a serious earful if she saw how heavy the bags were under her eyes.

“You shouldn’t be here alone.” Cadmon held out a plate of food.

“I shouldn’t be here at all.” She stared at the food, then looked away.

“You need to eat.” He passed her the plate and a glass of wine.

“Why are you so interested in me?” She sat the drink and plate on the grass.

“Eat.” He sat beside her with one leg stretched out and the other knee bent, with an arm resting on his bent knee.

“I’m not—” her stomach rumbled. She closed her mouth, cheeks stained.

“When is the last time you let someone look after you?” He picked up his plate and bit into his meat.

She twirled the meat-kabob with her fingers.

“Why so quiet?” He raised a brow.

She bit into her meat and closed her eyes as the combined juices of the roasted boar, a hint of ginger and oregano danced over her tongue. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was until she stared at her empty plate.

He chuckled.

She stared at the trees and wondered how the eagle nest back home was. The eggs should hatch any day. One more thing to add to the growing list of things she'd miss.

"How about that dance?" He stood up, holding out his hand.

After a moment she placed her hand in his.

He pulled her to her feet and into his arms, then spun her around.

"Why so interested?"

"Are you always this suspicious?" He swayed their bodies to the music and kept one arm around her waist as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She'd never been held so close while dancing. It felt good to be held again, even by a stranger. She closed her eyes.

Something felt familiar about him, as if she'd met him before, despite that she'd never seen him till tonight. How odd...

Inhaling she tried to figure him out. Maybe he wanted a young debutante to hang off his arm? She scowled. It would explain why he'd chosen her to talk to out of all the more sophisticated women in attendance. Was it because she was Ean's cousin?

"You always this evasive? She gazed into his eyes. They were the most unusual green she'd ever seen, yet seemed to suit him.

He spun her away, then pulled her back, and dipped her as the song's tempo increased.

Her heart rate sped up. She clung to him. Definitely a first. She'd seen that move in some of the old movies, but had never experienced it until tonight.

"Kaitlin!" Her uncle's voice caused heat to crash on her face as Cadmon righted her.

"Hello, Nigel." Cadmon kept his arm around her waist, with her pressed tight against his side.

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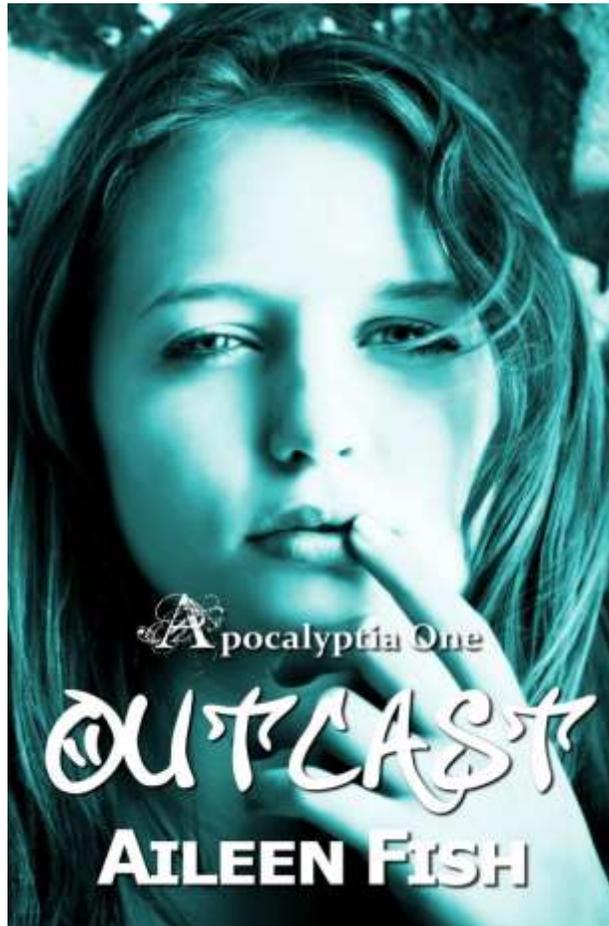
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## Apocalyptia One: Outcast



Buy Link: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00AFHI39I>

Everyone had heard the world was supposed to end on December 21, 2012. But no one believed it.

When the world collapses, the only person who comes looking for Niki Mathers is the loser who made fun of her in high school. JC Phillips saves her life, so she can't really tell him to get lost. And he is keeping her from being alone at the end of the world...

JC will never forgive himself for choices he made the night before the earthquake. Rescuing the girl he's been crushing on for the past year doesn't bring atonement. Maybe making the world safe for Niki will take away his guilt.

The world they know is dying. All they want is to find their place in it before it does.

Excerpt:

The people at the lake were getting organized as more people came with supplies. Many had to leave behind houses that were unsafe to live in, but standing. They'd been able to take pots and pans, silverware, bedding. Others waited in line at the big box stores in Bakersfield for whatever they could get, including canned goods.

An area was set up as a community kitchen, with a large bonfire off to one side where big pots of water continually boiled. Propane stoves and barbeque grills for cooking lined a folding banquet table. Washtubs sat on folding tables for washing up, alongside giant bottles of hand sanitizer. Hygiene became of major importance as reality set in. If help was coming, it was a long way off. They needed to do all they could to prevent illness.

As the days passed, Niki got to know more of the people at the lake. She sat with the women in between shifts in the kitchen, where she had taken to coordinating the schedules and organizing meals and supplies. As she listened to one young mother talk, she noticed a small boy standing behind the woman. Or rather, the ghost of a small boy.

The mother was talking about her son. "He was such an angel, all love and kisses, never a bad spell."

The boy looked at Niki. "Tell her I'm here."

She opened her mouth to speak before thinking. "Did he have curly brown hair like yours?"

His mother smiled. "Yes. It always needed brushing."

"Tell her," the child insisted.

*I can't*, she thought. Tell a mother she saw the ghost of her child? She couldn't upset the woman like that.

"Mom needs to know I'm okay."

*All right*. It took all her nerve to speak. "He's here. Behind you."

The woman jumped in her seat and twisted to look around. "What? How can he be?"

"He wants you to know he's all right."

Whispers snaked around their circle as the women spoke behind their hands, looking at Niki.

Tears ran down the mother's cheeks. "What are you saying?"

Niki fought her own tears, feeling the woman's pain. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to say anything but he insisted."

The boy moved beside his mom, put his hand on hers in her lap, and spoke to Niki. The woman glanced down at her leg as if she felt his presence.

“His hand is on yours. He says it was his time. That he had come here to learn love and be your child.” Niki knotted her own hands in her lap. This was crazy. She was talking to a ghost, and talking to the ghost’s mom.

“Did— was he in pain for long?”

The boy shook his head. Niki said, “He says he went fast. No pain.”

He began to fade.

“He says he has to go now. He only wanted you to know he loves you and he’s okay.”

The mother smiled through her tears. “Thank you, Niki, this was a wonderful gift. If you’ll excuse me, I need to go find my husband.”

The woman walked away. Niki sat for a moment, then went in search of JC. He was tinkering under the hood of her car, which he and Antwon had towed to the lake with the use of a truck and some rope. He’d taken out the radiator and was working on straightening the frame. The old Chevy needed some body work, and he said he’d have to drain the oil and fuel to get the water out, but he thought he could get it running.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked.

“Sure.” He leaned one hip against the grill. “What’s up?”

“I saw another ghost.”

“How do you know it was a ghost? Was it someone you know?”

She flung her arms around, searching for words to explain it all. “No, a little boy. He was standing by his mom when she was telling us about him. He died in the quake.”

“How did you know it was her kid?”

“I asked his mom.”

JC raised an eyebrow. “You told her you saw her son?”

He thought she was crazy, too. Cool—not. “I didn’t know what else to do. The boy told me to tell her he was okay.”

“So he talked to you, too.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Why had she thought he would? Maybe she had been building their friendship out of proportion in her head.

“I didn’t say that. I’ve just never known anyone who talked to the dead before.” He pulled off his beanie and scratched his head before putting it back on.

“I don’t talk to the dead. Do I? I mean, it was only this one kid, not a ton of dead people. But I had to tell you about it. I thought you’d help me understand it.”

After wiping the grease off his hands with an old t-shirt, JC took her hand. “I want to help you, but I don’t know anything about this kind of stuff. What do you think it means?”

She squeezed his fingers, enjoying the warmth, the connection. It seemed like only when she was close to him she remembered she was alive, not wandering in limbo. “I don’t know. I’ve seen Anne a few more times, too.”

“Does she talk to you?”

“No, she smiles and waves and then disappears.”

He shrugged. “So maybe she’s saying she’s okay, too.”

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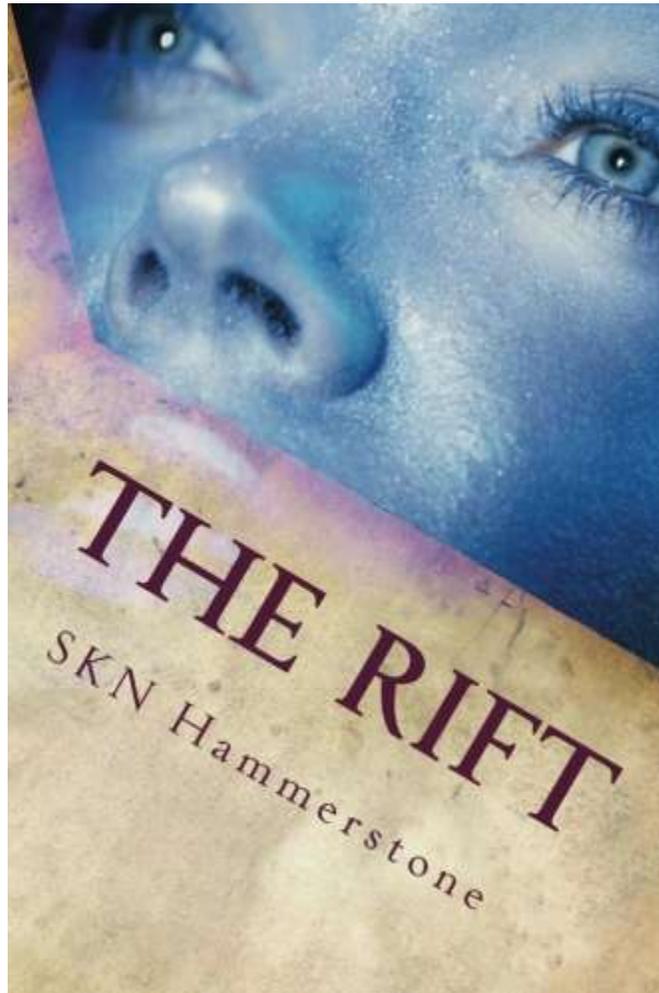
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## The Rift



Buy Link: <http://is.gd/3UGGIU>

Rachael Taylor has returned from the grave with no memory of who she is or which of the two worlds she exists in is real. In one world she is a teenager living what is considered the normal life. In the other she is tormented night and day in a burning city. When strange creatures start to invade both worlds, she must discover what she is before everything collapses.

Excerpt:

She was small with black hair and slightly pale skin as well as deep brown eyes. The moon shone silently above her where she stood on the edge of an old stone bridge, staring into the rushing current below. Why? Because everyone reaches that point in their life when they can no longer take the pain and the guilt and the fear. They have nothing left to live for so they do not see the difference they will make by living. When this point is reached there are three options. One: forget about it and keep living your life. Two: go to a therapist and keep living your life. Then there is the third and final option.

The girl closed her eyes and fell. The water swallowed her as she didn't even attempt to struggle. It swept her through the current and threw her in all directions under the surface. Suicide. Many say this is the coward's way out but they do not know how much courage is needed to take your own life. She had reached the point, gathered the courage, and taken the third option. It was just a part of life and her's was over.

The current lost strength farther down the river and her body slowly drifted onto the sandy bottom of the river. You don't know her story. She had a good reason for making this choice and she didn't regret it. But she was not the only one in control of her life. She just didn't know it yet.

She was only dead for several seconds when the dark water around her began to seethe and ripple like it was boiling, dislodging her body from the sand. Did she know how afraid she should have been? No. How could she? She was dead.

Then he came. Just a dark form in the water moving quickly towards her. An almost human hand gripped her arm and pulled her towards the surface of the water. Above the liquid chaos, all was calm. There was barely a sound in the lonely night. It seemed that every other living creature knew that they should not be near this place when he was. It didn't last long though. He emerged from the river, water streaming from his hair and covering his face, distorting any features that could have told who he was.

Steam rose in a thick haze from his clothes and skin as he moved towards the shore. In his arms he carried the girl, her limp body hanging lifeless and dripping water. Her skin had lost all color, glowing eerily in the moonlight. Even the water avoided him, retreating further away as he moved onto the river bank.

Several feet from the water he laid the girl on the soft ground, her head falling to one side. He knelt beside her, staring intently at her face for several minutes. The healthy plants that flourished by the river withered under and around him, ceasing to have the will to live. Then he stood and walked away, disappearing like he had never been there. The only indication was the death surrounding the girl.

She remained, unmoving, as clouds passed in front of the moon and then away from it. The glowing sphere made its trek across the sky over her, its gentle light convincing the plants to grow again. The water from the river carefully returned back to its outer reaches with the absence of the man it feared. A reddish glow began to form on the horizon as the moon set on the other side of the sky. The sun came and with it came life.

The instant its rays touched her, her entire body rose as air rushed into her lungs, her eyes flying open. They remained open for several seconds before everything around her went black. As humans we cannot explain everything. Returning life to a dead body is one of those things. She wouldn't be able to explain it either.

One minute she was dead and the next she was alive. She had gone through the veil and returned to Earth. But the veil only opens one way.

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## Dark Before Dawn



Buy Link: <http://is.gd/iVDZUV>

When teen psychic Dawn Christian gets involved with a fortuneteller mentor and two girls who share her mysterious talents, she finally belongs after years of being a misfit. When she learns her new friends may be tied to freak "accidents" in town, Dawn has an important choice to make - continue developing the talent that makes her special or challenge the only people who have ever accepted her.

Excerpt:

Dawn Christian curled under the covers, shivering in her nightshirt. Goosebumps popped up on her bare arms. She breathed in and out, trying to calm herself. Even the safety of darkness couldn't hide it.

Something was wrong.

She knew it the same way she had known it would rain despite the weather report. Now gray clouds blistered outside the window.

I can't go, I can't go, I can't go, something bad's going to happen. Dawn rubbed between her eyebrows, the message flying around inside her brain like a loose pinball.

The red numbers of her alarm clock flickered to 6:29. Dawn rolled onto her other side and faced the wall. In an hour, she'd be starting her junior year at a lame new high school. She missed Boston and taking the T, the city's subway system, wherever she wanted to go. Dawn used to hang out at museums, watch the college kids in Harvard Square and read books at the Common. Sometimes, she and her mother caught Saturday matinees in the theater district.

Not anymore. Ever since the wedding in July, Dawn had been stuck in Covington, Maine, a beach town overflowing with rinky dink carnival rides, cheesy souvenir stores and bad vibrations.

"Dawn?" She turned to find her mother framed in the dimly lit doorway, fully dressed. "Are you coming down for breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Nervous about school?"

Gulping, Dawn huddled under the blankets. No way could she discuss her feeling with her mom. Her mother wanted a normal daughter who was on the basketball team or school newspaper, had friends and didn't live in fear. "Kind of."

Her mother lowered herself onto the bed and squeezed Dawn's hand. Her manicured pink nails shone against Dawn's pale skin. Since meeting Jeff eight months ago, Dawn's mother had been letting her curly hair hang loose and wearing makeup.

She smoothed back a tangle of Dawn's chestnut waves. "You don't look like yourself. Do you feel all right?"

"I'm fine." Dawn shoved her stuffed monkey, Buddy, further under the blankets. Her father gave her Buddy shortly before he died, and holding it was like hugging a piece of her dad. Still, sleeping with a toy monkey was kiddish and Dawn didn't do it often. Her mother would get suspicious if she noticed.

Darn it. Her mother drew out Buddy by his slender tail and patted his furry brown head. "Calling in the reinforcements, huh? What's on your mind, honey? Maybe I can help."

Dawn sat up and clasped her knees. Her mother never understood about Dawn's hunches. "I don't think you really want to know, Mom."

"Of course I do."

Yeah, right. But Dawn didn't have the stamina for lying today. "I'm getting one of my premonitions. Something's wrong. I think it has to do with school."

She waited and sure enough, her mother got the frightened look she'd worn too many times before. Dawn remembered the look that terrible night with Mrs. Frazier ... but she didn't want to think about that.

Her mother dropped Buddy onto the mattress and squirmed as if fighting off a chill. "I'm sure it's just regular old nerves," she said in an overly cheerful voice. "It's hard enough adjusting to a new home and a new family without throwing a new school into the picture. Who wouldn't feel edgy?"

"That's not it, Mom."

"Just be normal. Don't worry about your premonitions. You shouldn't have to live your life afraid."

"Get real, Mom. I'll never be normal and fit in."

"If you paid more attention to talking with the other kids, and less to these visions and feelings, things would be so much easier for you."

How many times had she heard her mother say that? Dawn rolled her eyes. "This is why I didn't want to talk about it. I can't help that I 'know' things, Mom. The only way I can keep that stuff secret is by never opening my mouth. Then the other kids think I'm a snob."

"Being different is no reason to separate yourself. You've been through a lot already, honey, and I want you to be happy here. We have a fresh start. If you pushed your feelings to the back of your mind and stopped working yourself up over them, maybe they'll stop coming." Her mother offered a brittle smile.

That was like asking Dawn to walk around blindfolded, or to stuff earplugs in her ears, giving up one of her senses. She couldn't just shut off her feelings. They were too overpowering, demanding attention.

"You made me promise to hide my abilities around Ken and Jeff," Dawn said. "Okay, I want them to like me, but I shouldn't have to hide things around you. Why can't you just help me?"

Her mother slipped an arm around her shoulders. "I'm trying to help you, honey. You need to tell yourself that your imagination is running wild and you've got normal jitters. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Dawn's jaw tensed. Her mother deserved an Oscar. She had an amazing knack for pretending Dawn suffered normal teenage angst, acting as if they were on some TV drama when the truth was closer to the Stephen King movie *Carrie*.

"Whenever I'm in a new situation, I say hi to the person sitting next to me and do my best to start a conversation," her mother went on. "Maybe that would work for you."

Dawn took a few breaths to contain herself, then muttered, "I'll try."

Her mother's face lit up with relief. Dawn accepted her hug, inhaling the scents of Dove soap and raspberry body spray, but rather than make her feel better, the embrace ticked off Dawn even more. Did her mom really believe everything was solved? Dawn clamped her lips shut to keep back the harsh words brimming on her tongue.

"You're smart, you're pretty, you're sweet," her mother said. "The kids at Covington High will love you. Ken's willing to give you a ride. Isn't that great? I'd drive you myself, but I think it would be better if you're not seen with your uncool old mother."

"Yeah. Great."

Her mother retreated downstairs to make breakfast. Dawn pushed back the covers. She knew her mom meant well. Since her dad's death when Dawn was in first grade, life had sucked for both of them. They'd had lonely dinners, lonely holidays, lonely vacations. Having each other made it bearable. Now they had a chance to start over.

Unfortunately, it wasn't as easy as her mother believed.

Dawn left Buddy on the disheveled bed and rested her bare feet on her pink throw rug. She flipped the wall switch and winced as harsh light glared down on her bone white bedroom set. Everything looked orderly, the way she liked it. Young adult romance novels and the latest issues of *Seventeen* filled a pair of baskets, while trays on her dresser organized accessories.

She had enough clutter in her own head. Dawn couldn't stand seeing it reflected in her surroundings.

A sudden wave of music blared down the hall, "I'm a rock-and-roller, that's what I ammmmm ..." Dawn cringed, pressing her temples against the beginnings of a headache.

She wanted to storm in and tell Ken to shut off his music, but he wasn't her real brother. Then he'd hate her, for sure.

Dawn snagged her new jeans and shirt out of the closet and covered her ears as she crossed the hallway into the bathroom. She hung her clothes on a hook, shaking her head at the beach junk adorning the walls. Dawn had gotten used to the twig wreath overflowing with glued dolphins and starfish, but the foam life ring above the toilet reminded her of the Titanic.

A shower was what she needed. A steady stream of water sprayed into the tub as she undressed, the whooshing sound drowning out Ken's music, but not her internal voice.

Be very careful. Something is wrong.

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## The Grave Winner



Buy Link: <http://is.gd/w4dMJJa>

Leigh Baxton is terrified her mom will come back from the dead -- just like the prom queen did.

While the town goes beehive over the news, Leigh bikes to the local cemetery and buries some of her mom's things in her grave to keep her there. When the hot and mysterious caretaker warns her not to give gifts to the dead, Leigh cranks up her punk music and keeps digging.

She should have listened.

Two dead sorceresses evicted the prom queen from her grave to bury someone who offered certain gifts. Bury them alive, that is, then resurrect them to create a trio of undead powerful enough to free the darkest sorceress ever from her prison inside the earth.

With help from the caretaker and the dead prom queen, Leigh must find out what's so special about the gifts she gave, and why the sorceresses are stalking her *and* her little sister. If she doesn't, she'll either lose another loved one or have to give the ultimate gift to the dead – herself.

Excerpt:

Dad, Darby, and I stood rooted in place at Mom's burial. The weight in my chest threatened to suffocate me if I looked at the lid of her gleaming casket any longer. Instead, I focused on the black birds cutting across the sky in a sharp V formation. They pressed on until the tops of the trees took them from me.

The preacher had stopped talking a long time ago. People still crowded around us, heads bent, smothering their sniffles with tissues. Someone patted my back. I wished they'd stop. No attempt to comfort would help.

The white-haired old man hovering back by the fence hacked loudly then puffed on a cigarette with a dirt-spattered hand. When we arrived at Heartland Cemetery, I'd seen him preparing another grave for a casket. He bounced on the balls of his feet, probably anxious to get the body in the ground.

Mom's body. Once the ground swallowed her, her death would be final, and that guy wanted to speed things up. He probably wanted to get to his coffee break or something. Heat flashed through my gut. I took a step towards him.

Dad grabbed the collar of my dress and yanked me back. I opened my mouth to say something, but the words died in my throat when I saw the tears slipping down his cheeks.

Darby had her head buried in his side. She looped her small fingers around my plaid belt, the one Mom got me for my fifteenth birthday. I grasped Darby's warm hand and closed my eyes against the pricks of hurt inside them.

The people closing us in shifted and began to wander away. The old man inched closer to Mom's casket. Dad tightened his hold on my collar. I gripped Darby's fingers and glared at the man.

The few people who were left gave us consoling looks and said empty words before they drifted off. One was the woman who'd seen my funeral attire earlier and clucked her tongue in disapproval. Mom had loved my black eyeliner and these combat boots, though. She'd said I reminded her of herself when she was young.

"It's time," Dad said.

A choked cry forced its way out of my mouth. No, it wasn't. If we left, the old man would lower Mom into the ground. It would be final, and I couldn't stand it.

"Why?" I asked, my voice cracking.

Dad just shook his head, hugged us both to him, and turned to leave Mom with the old man.

I wriggled free and ran.

"Leigh?" Dad called.

I didn't know where I was going or what I was doing. But I needed to be away—away from that stupid man who wanted to put the final punctuation mark on Mom's life. Away from the unfairness of her death.

My breath came in quick, sharp gasps as I wound around crumbling headstones. The sun threw bright rays on the maze of white, rocky paths and made my eyes tear up. I pumped my legs harder until I became nothing but movement. The untied laces of my left boot whipped my bare legs. Grass and mud around the graves muffled my steps until my boot flew off my foot and landed with a thwack in the middle of a cluster of trees.

I leaned over to catch my breath, unsure if I wanted to laugh or cry. Several yards behind me, Dad and Darby stood and waited. I waved them on to the gates and went to retrieve my boot. There seemed to be no one around except the trees and me. The leaves murmured to each other while the wind swayed the branches. Heartland Cemetery had more trees than the rest of Krupper, Kansas, and they all whispered and danced for the amusement of the dead.

A sudden breeze brushed over my arms and sent a faint smell of rotten hamburger past my nose. My stomach rolled. What was that? That didn't smell like the usual slaughtered cow stink that came from the other side of town. I shoved my foot into my boot and hobbled away.

The breeze and stink faded to nothing as quickly as they had come. I bent to tie my boot, but a crackling behind me made me pause. A cloud cast long, dark shadows over the headstones and chilled my skin. The hairs along my arms prickled.

The crackling came closer. I turned my head slightly. In the corner of my eye, inky black darkness crawled up the bark of a nearby tree.

I gasped and shot to my feet. The black ink crept to the tips of the branches and ripped away its leaves, leaving it empty and naked. More darkness pooled at the bottom of the trunk and inched along the grass towards me. Every green blade curled in on itself with that awful crackling sound, dying. The darkness reached straight for me.

A shudder raced across my shoulders. I stumbled backwards. My gaze caught on blackened footprints that led to the tree. Someone was doing this? But how? This wasn't possible.

I glanced back at Dad and Darby, but they'd gone on without me. This couldn't be real. None of it. I shook my head hard, trying to wake myself. Nothing changed.

Something dark fluttered from behind the dead tree. Whoever was doing this stood behind the trunk.

I dug my nails into my palms, pressed my lips together, and took a step back. A branch snapped under my boot, louder than the crackling. I froze. My heart jumped.

Scraps of muddy fabric flapped around the trunk, followed by a girl.

My flesh crept up and down my bones. Sweat trickled down the back of my dress. That rotten meat stink kicked my stomach, forcing me to clap a hand over my nose and mouth.

The torn fabric that hung from the girl's scrawny frame looked like a prom dress. Mud and grime covered her entire body. Her mouth sagged open in a silent scream.

I couldn't move. The darkness pooled underneath the dangling hem of the girl's dress and spread dangerously close to the toes of my boots, but I couldn't move.

The girl raised her tucked chin and looked at me. The whites of her eyes blazed behind the mud caking her face. Her open mouth held the same black gloom that dripped at her feet. A grimy tiara perched on the side of her head.

My muscles stiffened. I gasped as recognition hit me.

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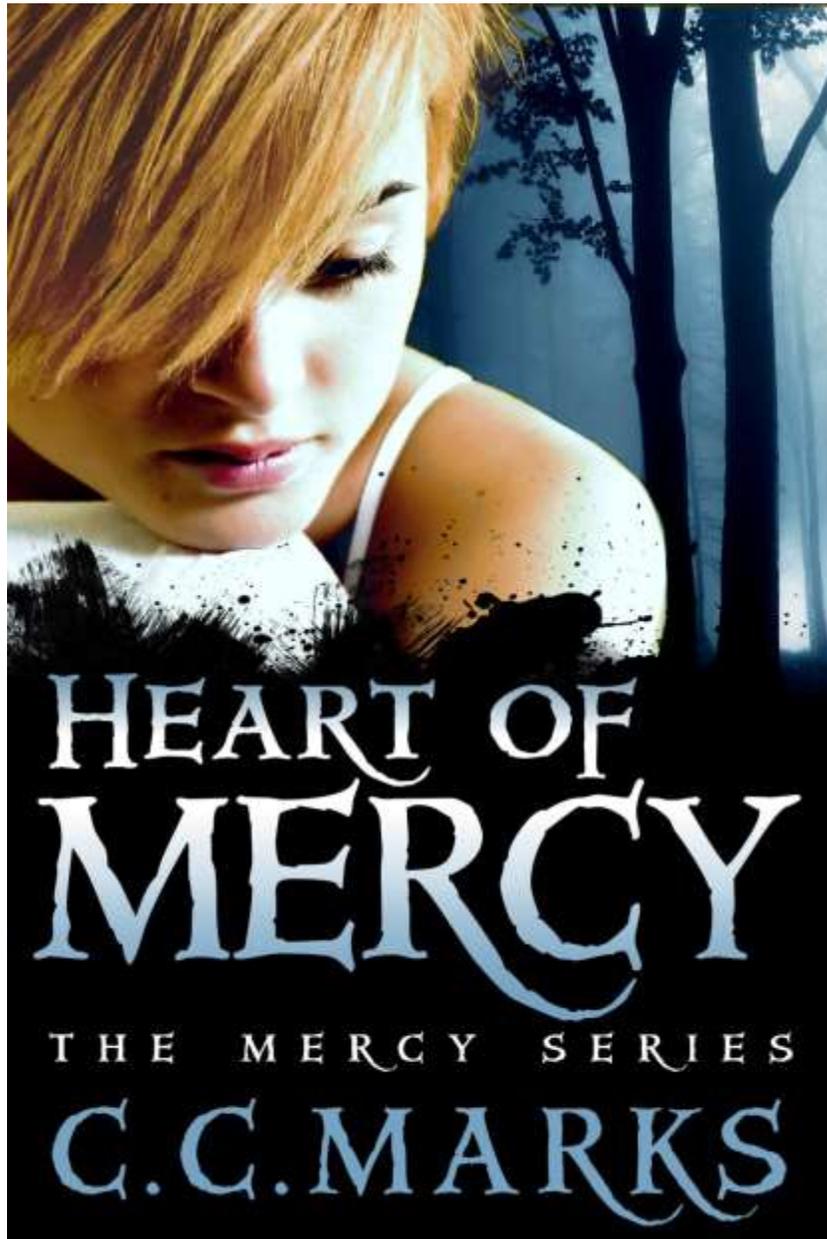
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## Heart of Mercy



Buy Link: <http://is.gd/iXEFKS>

Charlie Little exists in a dangerous world. Her best chance of survival is to disguise herself as a boy and guard her secrets well. Yet just when it seems things can't possibly get worse, they spin completely out of control.

With Zeke and her sister Star by her side and the fresh memory of Thomas's kiss still on her lips, she narrowly escapes the horrid plans of Jonas Bannon, a monster of a human being. Forfeiting the safety of the community, they leave and begin the search for the city of Mercy, the one secure place Charlie knows. However, as she struggles to

reach her sanctuary, doubts creep in that anywhere is truly safe. If the Draghoul don't get them, the human scavengers just might, and the assumption they'll find protection in Mercy could be the most dangerous risk of all.

Excerpt:

He shook his head once, and I watched the muscles in his jaw undulate. Was he holding back to protect me or himself? I didn't care. I needed to hear directly from him just how much he regretted bringing me. "Just say it! If Star and I weren't here to slow you down, you'd be in Mercy right now."

"What the...Charlie, I never said that."

"You didn't have to. I know it's true. We're just something else in your way."

He snarled and hit the back of his head against the headrest twice before stopping the car and shifting the gear until he could take his foot off the pedals and turn to face me. At that moment, the car sputtered and died. We were on a hill in the middle of the road, but Zeke didn't seem to be worried about the vulnerable position we were in. I glanced around nervously, taking note of the tree line bordering the crest of the rise in the road where we'd stopped, visible to creatures currently stalking us as prey.

"Could we just keep moving?"

"No, not until I say this. Thomas should be the one here with you. I know you have feelings for him, and he has feelings for you, too. But, like it or not, I'm the one here."

My heart squeezed in my chest. "I don't have a problem with that, Zeke."

"Let me finish. Charlie, you've been a good friend, probably my best friend. I have to admit, the fact you're a girl makes things a little awkward now, but that's all getting jumbled in my head until I feel this sense of obligation to keep you safe, but at the same time, I know the realities of this world. I've lost my mother and my little sister. No one is safe here. Yet, the thought of letting those...those things anywhere near you fills me with a fury I can't handle. I have a driving need to protect you, but I feel so helpless to do it."

I laid my hand on top of his until he met my gaze. "Neither you nor Thomas could protect me in the community any better than here, Zeke. There, it just would've been a different kind of monster that attacked."

He pushed his breath out noisily through his nose as my words sunk in. We sat in silence, and I watched his lips part to release the thought swirling in his eyes, but it never hit the air. At that moment, a grotesque figure, with yellowed, needle-like teeth, dropped onto the hood of the car. I screamed as another gray hand clawed at the passenger-side window. The cracks in the window from our close encounter with human scavengers tensed and released with each swipe of the creature's hands, and each claw made a piercing scrape as it slid over the surface of the glass again and again.

A quick glance at Zeke's window showed bloodshot, wolf-blue eyes there too, and as I swung my gaze to peer out the back window, it was blocked by two more rotting, scowling faces. We were surrounded.

"What do we do?" My voice lifted above the clamor of the Draghoul's desperate attempts to get at us, but it was clear we really didn't have any viable options for escape. Even as I watched, more monsters began to squeeze into the fray until it seemed the entire car was surrounded by a writhing horde. My window bowed with the

weight of the bodies pressed against it, and I watched in terror as a piece crumbled away from the middle. Any minute, a claw would reach through and end all my hope with one infectious scratch.

Zeke reached for the keys in the ignition and turned, but the engine didn't catch. He tried several more times. Yet there clearly wasn't enough gas to even start the car, let alone drive it out of this mass of tangled bodies. I pulled at the buttons on the door handle to be sure the window was completely up, but nothing responded. Either it was already up or the button didn't work when the car was off. My heartbeat raced with the panic settling into my brain.

"I don't know." The wild look in Zeke's eyes scared me even more. There was no way we would survive five more minutes.

But Zeke's eyes widened briefly, and he whipped toward the backseat. "Wait! Where's our bag?"

The car began to pitch forward and backward as the creatures became more frantic to get at us, and I soothed Star's cries as best I could. A warm liquid traced down my cheeks, but whether it was tears or sweat I didn't know or care. This wasn't a way to die.

Zeke jerked the bag through the space between our seats and held it on his lap. The car was rocking harder now, the squeak of the metal underneath us loud enough to be heard over the cacophonous moans and screeches of the monsters around us.

I leaned toward the bag as Zeke opened it and pulled two guns free, handing a small one to me. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Shoot them."

"How? There're way too many." As I glanced out the windows, the only place I could see any clear space was at the front of the car. Though figures covered the windshield from the sides, few actually stood in front. Maybe it was too far away from their target, or the hood's warmth repelled them. Regardless, it gave me an idea.

Long ago, I remembered my father moving a stalled car out of the road for a friend of ours. I glanced around the landscape and though I couldn't see much, recognized the car's position could help us. I glanced at the gearshift but needed Zeke to help me find the right gear.

One look in his direction showed the determination to survive evident in the clench in his jaw and the sharp movements of his hands as he loaded the shotgun.

"Zeke." He continued his actions as if he hadn't heard me at all. Maybe he couldn't hear me over Star's cries or the noise of the mob surrounding us. And the rocking of the car became violent. It was only a matter of time before the monsters ripped and smashed into the car. I needed to get his attention now. "Zeke!"

His head snapped in my direction, and his hand paused in mid-air. "Load your weapon, Charlie."

"No, listen. Which one of these gears will let the car move without the engine?"

“What are you talking about?”

“The car will move on its own, but I don’t know how.”

His gaze dropped to the gearshift, and he stared at it puzzled. “How can that help us?”

The window beside me groaned and bowed closer to my head. We had to act now or the Draghoul gnashing its pointed teeth at my face was going to break through and rip me apart. “If we put it into the right gear, they’ll push us down the hill. Once we are away, we can get out with our weapons and find some place to hide.”

He nodded slowly and reached for the gearshift. He pushed the button and tried to pull the shifter down. It wouldn’t budge. “It’s not working.”

“Try turning the key a little and putting your foot on one of the pedals, whichever one holds the car still.” I sounded like an idiot. I’d been surviving and hiding since I was fourteen, and I was sorely lacking in the knowledge most seventeen-year-olds learned in a world without Draghoul, but some vague memory of cars pushed me to suggest it.

Though doubt etched every corner of his face, he didn’t question me, just pushed his foot down and twisted the key until the red lights of the dashboard shone a dim light on the interior. As if sensing they were about to lose their prey, the crowd around us worked into a higher frenzy, slamming against the outside of the car. With a shaking hand, Zeke reached for the gearshift. He gripped the handle and pushed the button.

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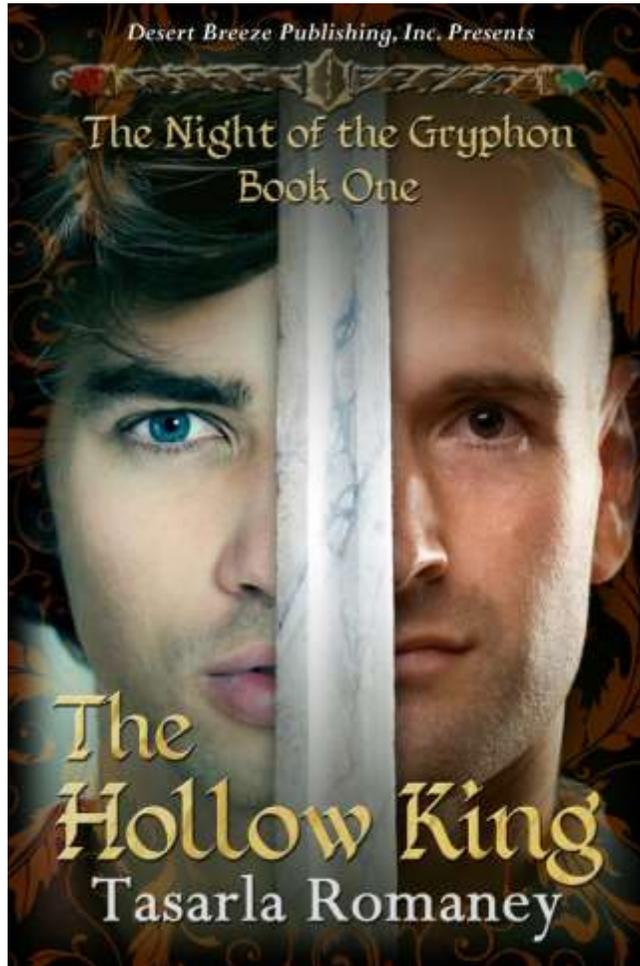
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## The Hollow King



Buy Link: <http://is.gd/Vq6wfw>

Thought by most to be a simple child's chant...

A king of no kingdom

Who walks among the living yet is void of all but breathe

He will be known as the Hollow King and will yield the Spector.

The Warrior Queen with compassion will fuel the Hope

The one who walks on two legs but has the soul of an animal will guide the Spector's magic.

Together they will use the Spector of Hope to rid the land of evil.

Until creatures most thought to be make-believe start to hunt at night... Freed by Ovezara, a sorceresses of what seems to be unlimited power.

Queen Taraly dying father's command is to visit Grandmother June and learn what must be done to stop them.

King Crenshaw has lost his kingdom to the Ovezara and vows to have revenge.

Sancha returns from a hunting trip to find his father's body torn to shreds by an evil so dark people refuse to acknowledge it.

The three unite to find the fabled Spector of Hope. As their quest starts to unfold, they realize that the line between good and evil is often blurred. What they believed to good is twisted. Can they locate the Spector of Hope in time to restore good and save all from the evil Ovezara unleashes?

Excerpt:

Princess Taraly sat outside her father, King Hichel's bedchambers. Usually, the king's private meeting area was her favorite room in the castle. Long wooden benches covered with silk pillows from her mother's native land lined the northern and eastern walls. As a child, she'd curled up on the pillows and nap while her father conducted private business.

Restless, she stood and walked over to the two tapestries hanging on the southern stone walls. One depicted a battle between a man with long red hair and a half bird, half loin beast - the mythical gryphon. The other was of rolling hills and orchards above them flew a blue dragon. Another creature died to her time, killed during the war between the humans and things of magic. Her favorite past time was to create fanciful tales of the pictures to tell her father.

The heavy wooden door slammed, drawing Taraly's attention away from the wall. A small round man hurried across the room. All night into the early hours of the morning, healers scurried in and out muttering about needing different herbs, potions, or charms. Each time they left her father's room it seemed their steps were slower, heavier as if carrying the burden of death with them. She kept her head high, meeting the eyes of any who sought hers. Forcing her face into a mask of hard indifference, as the only royal heir, weakness wasn't a luxury she could afford. Thankfully the healers, the soldiers, and the other vultures circling the waiting room, couldn't see her heart. There she wept. The raw emotions buried inside crept up her throat and threatened to spew out of her.

They kept staring at her, waiting for her to break down in fits of tears. She felt like a roasting boar on a spit surrounded by starving people. Occasional one of the leeches would approach offering a fake gesture of sympathy much like stabbing the meat to test if it was done. They needed to know if she was to the point they could carve up her kingdom without a fight? Mostly they sat in huddles and waited. Their eyes never leaving her. A few muttered, she shouldn't be allowed to wait in the king's outer chambers. This was a man's place.

Scoffing at the idea, she stood to stretch her cramping leg muscles. She'd spent countless hours here with her father listening as he told stories of battles, faraway lands, and of her mother. Princess Taraly toyed with her shree, a necklace, of leather holding her guiding stones. Citrine, amethyst, peridot, garnet, and sandalwood. Citrine was always worn by the oldest female in her mother's family. Whenever she rubbed the deep gold stone, warmth filled her body, contentment as if she was a small child being rocked by her mother. Not this morning, she felt empty and cold, as if the fire in soul had gone out leaving only ashes.

She remembered how her father's giant callous hands shook as he latched the necklace around her neck the day of her mother's death. Taraly hadn't removed the necklace, even when the ladies of the court refused to let their children play with the princess, claiming her shree held some barbaric magic. She'd inherited her mother's special gift. Tears fell inside her, threatening to drown her heart.

“The king has been wounded in battle before and healed. Your father is a strong man and powerful ruler.” Asteria tried to smile but her top lip quivered with uncertainty. Taraly *did* smile with pride. Her father was respected for his fairness as well as his bravery in the battlefield.

Taraly went and stood next to Asteria resting a hand on the woman’s shoulder for comfort. The elderly woman wore her long silver hair in the standard three braids of her class, personal assistant to the royal family. The princess knew many in the kingdom sneered at the relationship, Taraly was far too old to require a nursery maid, but her father lacked the cruelty to send Asteria away, leaving his daughter alone. Some said it was a sign of her father’s weakness, others claimed it was necessary because the princess was feeble minded a trait inherited from her outlander mother. King Hichel returned from raiding a far off land with a bride of exotic beauty, her mother, Evelyn.

Taraly struggled to choke down the tears. Asteria’s hand covered hers. A deep bone shaking fear shook through Taraly forcing her to close her eyes. If her father died, she would be alone. Nine years ago, her mother, died three months after giving birth to her brother. Orakid soon followed his mother into the land of the dead.

Kevath, her father’s master guard and personal protector, entered the room from the small passage leading to the King’s personal chambers. This morning, Kevath wore a simple gray and turquoise tunic bearing her family crest. A shield divided in half by the royal sword. The left side was decorated by a head of one of the war pack dogs snarling and the right with a rearing stallion. Kevath’s large body filled the door, blocking the view. The faint morning light streaming in the window provided a harsh spotlight to the scars and wrinkles of age marring the man’s face. “Your father requested your presence, Princess.” The man’s deep brusque voice sent shivers of fear through most people in the kingdom, but long ago, Taraly learned the man would never harm her. A grim frown turned the corners of his mouth down as he moved slightly to allow Taraly entrance. When Asteria rose to accompany her, the guard held out his large calloused hand. “The Princess alone.”

“Be brave, dear,” Asteria whispered, tears glistening in her violet eyes.

“What is the news?” One of the intruders asked.

A soldier moved closer. “How is the King?”

“Should we send for the priest?” A short round man Taraly had never seen before inquired.

Kevath shut the door, ending the battery of questions. They walked silently down the short passage. The dampness from the stones soaking into Taraly’s soft sheep skin boots.

Once inside the bed chamber, flames snapped and popped in the large stone fireplace. The dark brown velvet curtains surrounding the king’s bed were drawn filling her with the sense she was approaching a coffin. Taraly’s breath caught in her throat and she stumbled. Kevath’s strong fingers bit into her arm, holding her upright. Somehow, she knew the only thing waiting in this room death. If she refused to go further, refused to open drapes, refused to look at her father’s body, then he would

remain alive. But once she saw his lifeless corpse with her own eyes, the truth would be revealed.

“I can’t.” She looked up at Kevath, pleading with her eyes. Hoping the gruff older man would understand.

“You must. His spirit can not rest until he finishes this.”

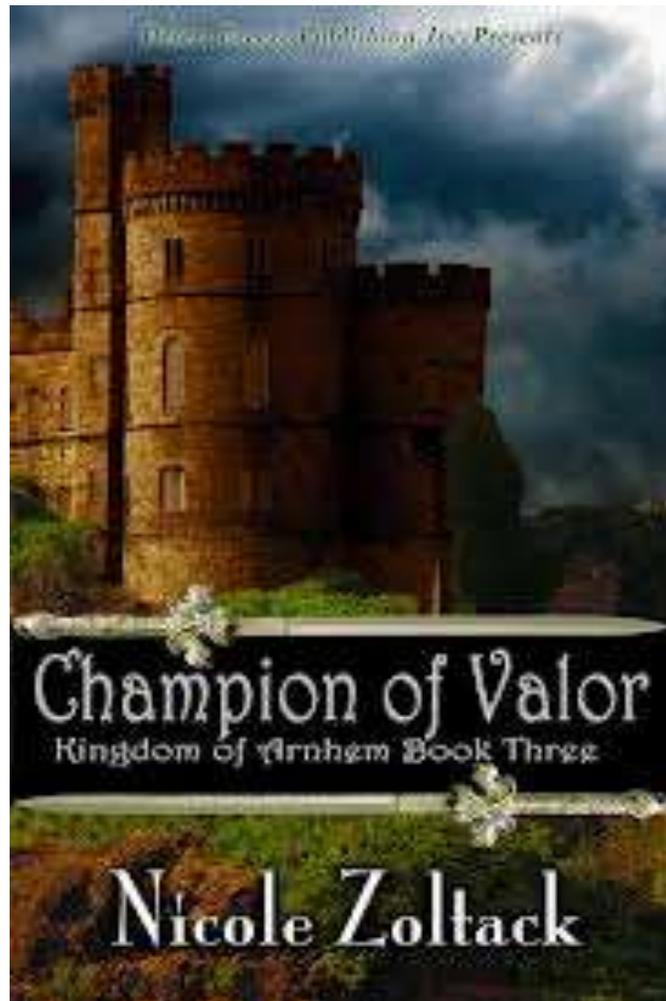
Tears welled up in Taraly’s eyes. Burning, eager to roll down her cheeks. Fear formed a chunk of hot coal smoldering in the pit of her stomach. She licked her dry lips. It wasn’t fair. She didn’t want to be alone.

“It is a shame your brother died. This is a job for a man, not a girl.” Kevath’s long braids, more gray than red brushed his shoulders as he shook his head. His blue eyes suddenly like a spring afternoon sky, dark and stormy.

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## Champion of Valor



Buy Link: <http://is.gd/ErDWOp>

Aislinn of Bairbhe dreams of becoming a lady knight to honor the death of her fallen brother. To her mother's horror, King Patrick grants Aislinn's wish and she begins her long years of training.

Despite the mockery of the other pages, and the disdain of Prince Caelan who also trains to be a knight, Aislinn commits herself to her dreams and embarks on a journey of self-discovery and bravery. Through the years, Aislinn and Caelan grow from sparring classmates to good friends. They both know that someday Caelan will marry for the sake of the kingdom, but even that cannot keep them from falling in love

Excerpt:

"Is there anyone else that you have feelings for, Aislinn? Is that why you don't want to be with Geoffrey?"

Aislinn blinked, thinking about his question. "I haven't thought about such things. I'm too focused on becoming a knight. That's all I'm worried about."

Caelan pushed back his chair and stood. With him on his feet, Aislinn had to tip back her chin to look him in the face, he had grown so much in the years since they'd first met. "There is no one else?"

She shook her head.

Caelan took a step closer to her, stepping so close he only had to whisper for her to hear him. "What if I told you that Geoffrey isn't the only one who favors your company?"

His closeness overwhelmed Aislinn and she tried to take a step back. Her shoulders bumped the bookshelf behind her and several books shifted, but none made enough noise to draw the attention of anyone else in the library. Caelan lay a hand against her cheek, his thumb beneath her chin, and with a gentle touch, forced her to look at him.

Her heart pounded hard in her chest like a caged bird and Aislinn caught her breath.

"Caelan," she whispered softly, but before she could say more, his lips covered hers.

Aislinn froze for a second as he held his mouth against hers, then heard herself sigh when he pressed closer and moved his lips. Aislinn's eyes fluttered closed and she raised her hands to lay them on his chest, feeling his heart pound as hard as her own. Then reality snapped at her and she shoved him away.

"Stop it!"

She pushed past the prince and rushed from the library, with several squires and younger pages turning at her escape. Aislinn ran to her room and slammed the door shut. She leaned against it and slid to the floor, her head in her hands.

How dare he kiss me!

But the worst realization was that she'd kissed him back. Even the memory now made her insides tremble and her hands shake.

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