



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HOLLY RENEE

THE VEILED KINGDOM

THE VEILED KINGDOM SERIES

HOLLY RENEE



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Cover Design: Forensics and Flowers

Character Illustrations: Eliziannatheone

Map Design: Virginia Allyn

Editing: Cynthia Rodriguez of The Beta Bruja, Ellie McLove of My Brother's Editor, Rebecca Fairest Reviews, and Rumi Khan.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Marmoris: MAR-moris
Enveilarian: ON-veil-air-ian
Dacre: DAY-ker
Nyra: near-ah
Wren: ren
Verena: Vuh-rehn-ah
Kai: K ai h
Eiran: AIR-in

CONTENT WARNING

This book contains depictions of sexually explicit scenes, violence, and assault. It contains mature language, themes, and content that may not be suitable for all readers. Reader discretion is advised.

*For Amber Palmer—
Thank you for your endless support and friendship.*

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CHAPTER 1

NYRA

Sweat ran down my spine beneath my thin cloak.

There was still a slight chill clinging to the air, but the guard who stood near the end of the bridge with his meaty hand resting on the hilt of his sword made my heart race at the thought of my next move.

I took a deep breath and looked out over the bustling market alley. The smell of smoke and salty fish stung my nose, but it couldn't mask the scents of the slums or the sweaty bodies that pushed past me.

I let my dark hair fall over my shoulder as I moved through the crowd of people and as far away from the guard as I could get.

My eyes flicked up to the palace and the large iron gate that separated it from the busy bridge that was almost a city block wide.

The great bridge of the Marmoris Kingdom was a place of legend.

At least that was what the king would have liked for everyone to believe.

My traitorous gaze swept up the palace to where I knew my former room lay. The window was so high that I caught one of my father's flags flapping in the wind just above it.

It was high enough that no one could see in, that my safety could never be breached.

Or so I thought.

In reality, it was just high enough for no one to see the king's shame of a powerless heir.

I had spent far too many years mistaking his disgrace for vigilance. My parents lost hope that the heir to their throne would have power when I reached the age of ten without a spark. I could still remember the fear and

concern in their eyes when they told me that we must keep the secret between us, but that concern died long before my mother. My father had become void of his care for me, and it was resentment that stared back.

It was hard to hear the muffled conversations around me with the sound of the rushing water from the massive falls as it fell from beneath the bridge. I strained to listen, but all I could make out was the exchange of coins and whispered deals that weren't meant to be overheard.

A breeze off the ocean had my hair whipping around my shoulders, and I inhaled until my lungs begged me to release it. Every time the gust of wind carried that familiar scent, it flooded me with bittersweet memories. I was torn between the nostalgia and resentment.

I looked out over the water at the dozen boats that were being boarded. My stomach ached with longing as I remembered how I used to watch them and daydream about taking sail until the wind carried me away from this place.

But my stomach always ached these days.

I forced myself to move and weaved through the worn carts until I passed by the merchant whose gaze always lingered on my body a little too long for my liking, but I smiled at him as he leered at me.

That was all I needed.

His gaze dropped to the swell of my breasts, and I let my hands fall behind me.

If he was watching the curves of my body, then he had no time to watch my hands.

“Good afternoon, you,” he said before he ran his tongue over his bottom lip that was barely visible through his overgrown graying beard.

“Afternoon,” I called back gently, ducking my head to make him see how shy I was, how flattered I was by his attention. All the while my hands wrapped around a single apple and a stale piece of bread.

I tucked the bread into the back of my trousers, keeping my hands hidden beneath my thin cloak.

With a practiced smile, I fluttered my eyelashes as the man ogled me with no concern about the worn ring on his hand.

“It’s supposed to get cold tonight.” As his gaze remained fixated on my body, I focused on maintaining the steady rhythm of my breathing, concealing the pounding of my heart.

I looked up at the sky, making a show of studying the clouds as I nodded. "Thank you for letting me know."

As if those of us who slept on the street weren't more than aware of the changes the pressure in the air would bring.

"You know where to find me if that cloak of yours doesn't provide enough warmth."

I bit down on my tongue to stop the retort that was begging to slip past my lips. The apple was still nestled securely in my harsh grip, its weight providing a semblance of comfort amid his remarks even as the juice dripped down my fingers as my nails dug into its flesh.

"Thank you." I nodded once before I took a step back and got lost in the throng of patrons before he could get bored with my body and look elsewhere.

I couldn't afford for him to look elsewhere.

I had been living on these streets for almost a year, ever since the raid, and I had been careful to make sure that no one watched me too closely.

I didn't have enough money to buy my passage on one of the ships like I longed to and rumors of the danger beyond the coast had kept me rooted in place.

The rebellion had grown more ruthless, and I couldn't risk moving south until the tithe, until the rebellion was watching my father and the palace far too closely to notice me.

I moved swiftly through the people milling about the bridge and noticed a man wearing the finest fabrics as he walked up to one of the merchants whose eyes lit up at the sight of him. The man wore no cloak, his shirt more than thick enough to keep away the chill in the air, but that also meant that the pouch that was tied to the front of his belt was clearly visible.

And based on the way it hung just below his hip, I'd bet that there were at least ten coins inside.

I quickened my pace, my eyes fixated on the man as I moved. Desperation clawed at my insides, urging me forward. But greediness would only get me killed, or worse, caught.

And I had enough food to take the edge off my hunger for a couple days.

But the tithe was only a few days away, and I had to run before it happened.

Because everyone in the kingdom was expected to present themselves before the king and pay the tithe owed with whatever power they held.

And I couldn't.

Even if I did have the power to somehow pay what my father thought he was owed, the people who lived inside the palace would know me the moment they saw me. The guards who patrolled the bridge, the city streets, and the dungeons didn't have that privilege, but my father's closest guards did. And they would no doubt be there to protect their king when he stripped his people of what little he allowed them.

They murdered our people for not paying the tithe without a second thought, and it was the fear of what they would do to me that overpowered the fear of the rebellion.

I forced myself to move closer to the man as he ran his hands down his crisp shirt, completely oblivious to those around him.

It was a fool's move on this bridge.

The bridge had proven to be the easiest place to become a thief, but it was also the easiest place to get caught.

And if it weren't for the dread filling my gut at the lack of coins in my pockets and food to fill my belly, I probably would have turned away.

But I couldn't afford to.

Not this close to the tithe.

The man spoke to the merchant in front of him for only a few seconds before he passed over two gold coins.

It was two coins less than I would be able to take from him.

I swallowed the fear that threatened to paralyze me and continued to shadow the man as he moved away from the merchant.

His gait was confident, his steps purposeful, as he made his way down the bridge completely unaware of my presence.

The cloak I wore could easily blend into the sea of cloaks that adorned the market, offering me a small measure of anonymity.

I moved as quickly as I could, trying to get to the man before he got closer to the palace.

I picked up my pace, closing the distance between us, my heart pounding in my chest, matching the rhythm of my footsteps.

He paused, letting a small merchant cart wheel past him, the wooden wheels loud and rickety across the pavers, and I knew this was my only chance.

The cart barreled toward me, narrowly missing me, and I shot forward, clinging to the man as I used him to catch my fall.

I stumbled into him, my hands flailing as I desperately clung to his shirt, pretending to lose my footing and forcing him to lose his.

He slammed into the man standing behind him, and the three of us barely managed to stay upright as we were jostled among the crowd.

I wasted no time as I pulled on the leather strings that held his pouch to his belt and caught the force of it in my hand.

“I’m so sorry,” I stammered, my voice shaky as I steadied myself. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

His eyes scanned over me, assessing me. I could feel the weight of his scrutiny, and every nerve in my body screamed at me to run.

My right hand was buried in his shirt, clinging to him as I tried to straighten myself up, and my left hand held on to his coin pouch for dear life.

The man’s confusion turned into concern as he extended a hand toward me. “Are you alright?”

I forced a small smile, doing my best to appear vulnerable.

“Yes. I just... I lost my balance. I’ll be fine.”

I prayed that he had yet to notice the loss of weight at his hip.

His hands were on my upper arms, holding me steady against him, and he hesitated for a moment before he nodded.

“Be careful out here. The bridge can be a dangerous place for a girl like you.”

A girl like me.

He had no idea that this bridge was more dangerous for a girl like me than anyone else. This entire kingdom was.

I nodded back and gripped the pouch in my fist before taking a small step back.

I inclined my head, keeping my eyes downcast. “Thank you, sir. I will be.” With that, I turned and effortlessly melted back into the crowd, my heart pounding with a mix of anxiety and guilt.

But neither were enough to make me regret what I had done.

As I made my way through the bustling market, I couldn’t help but steal a glance at the pouch clutched tightly in my hand. It was more than enough to sustain me for a few weeks, perhaps even months if I were wise with my

spending. The weight of the coins eased some of the urgency that had been gnawing at my insides as I tucked it away into my pocket.

The guards were still standing at the entrance of the bridge and I forced myself to move past them, even though my muscles ached with every step that drew me closer to them. Once I stepped over the threshold of the fine pavers and onto the dusty cobblestones that lined the streets, I allowed myself to glance over my shoulder only once to make sure that no one had noticed me.

That the man hadn't realized my thievery.

When the guards didn't spare me a glance, I picked up my pace and navigated through the narrow streets. The farther from the bridge I got, the less grand the homes and shops that lined the streets became.

And the people who lived in those houses? They became less and less important as well.

You only got to be that close to the king if you had something to offer him.

If your magic was something he might need.

The stench of garbage and decay filled the air, mingling with the distant scent of spices drifting from the run-down food stalls that were scattered along the streets.

It was a stark contrast to the opulence of the palace and its bridge, but the farther away I got from them both, the more I felt like I could breathe.

As I walked through the dilapidated streets, my eyes scanned the faces of those passing by. Many wore expressions of weariness and resignation, their spirits crushed by the weight of their daily struggles. The world outside the palace was a harsh reality, one that constantly reminded me of what I had left behind.

I mourned parts of the life I once lived while simultaneously praying to the gods that I never went back.

I kept my head down, blending seamlessly into the background of poverty and desperation. The ragged cloak that concealed my identity did its job well, lending me the illusion of obscurity among these forgotten streets. Survival has taught me to be invisible, to become a ghost drifting through the shadows.

And that has served me well.

I turned right down an old forgotten alleyway and passed the old house with vines creeping up along the crumbling red bricks. The old woman who

lived there rarely left or had visitors, and she checked the small alcove near the back of her gardens even less.

I took a seat there, in the spot that had become my home, and pulled the bread and apple out from beneath my cloak. It was moments like this that I wished I had a blade, but Micah would be here soon enough.

As I savored the first bite of the stolen bread, I heard footsteps growing louder from the end of the alley. I stowed the food away at my side, just in case, and remained quiet as the footsteps slowed. Micah emerged from the shadows, his lean frame blending seamlessly with the darkness around him.

“Any luck today?” he asked in a low voice, his eyes scanning our surroundings for any potential danger before he leaned down and took a seat beside me with a groan.

“I did pretty good,” I replied, pulling out the bread and tearing it in half. He took his piece greedily, and it would be impossible to miss the hunger in his eyes. “How about you?”

He nodded approvingly and handed me a small pouch that felt far too light to contain any coins. “I managed to snatch these from a nobleman’s carriage near the palace.”

I pulled the pouch open gently and saw several folded pieces of parchment all with the royal seal holding them closed.

“It’s correspondence for the king.”

My fingers trembled as I reached inside the leather pouch, but his words froze me in place. Fear pressed down on me, suffocating me as I dropped the pouch to the ground.

“We can’t keep these,” I said firmly, my voice barely above a whisper. “If they catch us with these letters, it’ll be more than just our lives on the line.”

I shook my head, my mind racing with the implications of what Micah had just said. Correspondence for the king meant that these were important documents, potentially containing information that could be used as leverage against those in power. It was a risk we couldn’t afford to take lightly.

It was a risk that put me in far more danger than the coins I had just stolen.

If the king and his guards weren’t already looking for me, they would come looking for this.

But that was the thing that unsettled me the most. If he had come looking for me, no one knew.

I was the lost princess who everyone still thought was locked away in her tower.

I was the flaw to the king's perfect reign, and he was still hiding me as much as I was hiding from him.

Micah looked at me, concern etched in the lines on his face. "You're right," he admitted, his voice tense. "I never would have taken them if you weren't leaving." He ran his calloused hands through his light hair that seemed to shimmer in the sunlight.

Micah was the only person I had confided in since leaving the palace, but he also only knew what I allowed him to. He had shown me kindness on the streets when no one else had, and I did not return the favor by keeping my identity from him. But my father would kill him if he ever found out he was helping me stay hidden.

To Micah, I was a girl with a past who was on the run, but to my father, I was a liability.

And anyone who knew about me and my lack of power fell into that same category.

"But look." He pulled open one of the parchments, one whose seal had already been broken, and he quickly unfolded it as his eyes scanned over the contents inside. He pointed down the page, and I looked over the edge of the paper to see what he was pointing at.

"We didn't get the rebellion mark just right." He took my left hand in his and pushed up the sleeve, revealing the simple black rebellion mark he had given me.

He ran his thumb across the sensitive skin of my wrist, where the mark had been carefully etched with his magic, and chill bumps broke out along my skin.

The mark was two simple arrows intersecting to form an X. We had both heard of it so many times before, but Micah was right, it was slightly off from the mark listed in the correspondence. The feathers on the fletching weren't the same, and anyone who was already a part of the rebellion would be able to spot the difference easily.

They would also be able to spot that I was nothing more than a traitor trying to impersonate one of them, and they would kill me as quickly as the king would.

But supporters of the king didn't leave the royal coast unless they were joining the rebellion. Not since the raid.

It was too dangerous otherwise.

If one of them were to find me when I ran from here, the only way I would be able to survive would be to make it clear that I was on their side.

They could never know the truth about who I was.

No one could.

"We need to fix this." His fingers moved gently over my mark, and my stomach clenched as I watched the movement. "They'll know you're a fake the moment they see it."

A fake.

Gods, I couldn't think of a better word to describe me.

"Do it." I nodded to the parchment still in front of him and swallowed. I could still remember the way his magic had burned into my skin the last time, and I knew it would be no less painful now. But pain was a small price to pay in the grand scheme of things. My fate would depend on it.

Micah's face contorted with concentration as he channeled his magic into his fingertips. The air crackled with energy, a tangible anticipation that filled the narrow alleyway. I took a deep breath, steadying myself for what was to come.

Gently, Micah pressed his thumb against the mark on my wrist, careful not to disrupt the existing lines. His magic flowed from him into me, mingling with my flesh. Heat radiated from his touch, searing my skin and etching new details onto the mark.

I bit my lip, enduring the agony as he meticulously adjusted the feathers on the fletching. Each stroke of his thumb felt like fire, branding me with a new identity. It was a reinvention born out of necessity, a desperate attempt to survive in a world that demanded loyalty and allegiance.

As the pain intensified, I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms. Micah's touch grew lighter, his focus unwavering as he studied the parchment.

Finally, Micah withdrew his touch, and a wave of relief washed over me. I examined the altered mark on my wrist, the lines now crisp and rimmed with my red, irritated skin. The feathers on the fletching were perfectly aligned, each delicate detail etched into my skin as a permanent testament to who I had to become.

“You have to be careful with this,” Micah warned, his voice laced with concern and the same disapproval he had the first time I asked him to give me the mark. “The rebellion is a dangerous game to play.”

I nodded solemnly, fully aware of the risks I faced. It was rumored that the rebellion had been gathering strength in secret, driven by the injustices committed by the king and those in power. They fought for freedom, for a world where everyone had an equal chance at life, regardless of their magic.

But they also operated in shadows, their tactics as merciless as those they opposed.

And I had seen the proof of that when they raided the palace that had previously been thought of as impenetrable.

“I know it is,” I replied, my voice steady. “But hopefully, I don’t have to use it.”

We both knew I would never be able to afford passage onto one of the ships in the kingdom’s harbor, but if I could travel far enough south, then I might have a chance.

The southern coast was a long journey, especially for a girl who hadn’t been more than a mile from the palace, but I didn’t have any other options.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you.” Micah lifted his hand toward my cheek and guilt flooded me.

There was so much weight to his concern and the reasons that compelled him to worry for me. Micah had become my anchor since leaving the palace, my confidant and closest friend.

But the way he was studying my face was...*more*.

A loud and piercing cry echoed in the distance. Micah’s hand, which was half an inch from my face, stopped abruptly in midair. We both stilled, our bodies tense as we listened, and suddenly the sound of boots hitting the cobblestones were far too close for either of us to feel safe.

Micah’s eyes widened with alarm as he turned his head toward the direction of the approaching footsteps. His hand dropped and his fingers brushed against the hilt of a concealed dagger at his belt. The desperation in his voice was palpable as he whispered urgently, “We have to go, now.”

My heart raced in my chest as panic coursed through my veins. I grabbed Micah’s arm, my grip tight and unyielding. “Here,” I said, my voice filled with both fear and determination as I reached into my pocket and pulled out half the coins from the pouch.

“Where the hell did you get these?” Micah grabbed my hand in his and closed my fingers around the coins as he looked back over his shoulder.

“I stole them,” I whispered urgently, my eyes flickering toward the approaching footsteps. “Take them and go. Find a safe place to hide, somewhere they won’t find you. We’ll meet back here tonight.”

“You need these.”

“We both do,” I urged, and we both knew it to be true.

Micah hesitated for a moment, torn between his concern for me and the need to escape. But we both knew that we were far harder to catch alone than when we were together. I dropped the coins into his hand, and he nodded, his grip tightening around them, before squeezing my hand one last time.

“Be safe,” he murmured, his voice filled with a mixture of worry and determination. And then he was gone, disappearing into the shadows as if he were never there.

Left alone in the dimly lit alley, my heart pounded in my chest like a war drum. The approaching footsteps grew louder, drawing closer with each passing second. Fear and adrenaline surged through my veins, fueling my instincts as I turned and sprinted in the opposite direction.

I darted through the narrow alleyway, jumping over a discarded crate and dodging a man who was scurrying in the opposite direction. My lungs burned with every breath, but I pushed through.

My mind raced, trying to formulate a plan as I ran. I needed to find a place to hide, blend in with the crowd, and disappear from the eyes of those who were moving through the streets. It didn’t matter who they were after, the King’s Guard didn’t discriminate against those who got in their way.

The streets were teeming with people, and everyone was on edge. My eyes darted around, as did everyone else’s, and there were dozens of guards moving through the crowds.

I slowed my pace, keeping my head down as I moved through the bodies.

“There!” I heard a man call out behind me, but I didn’t dare turn around to see who it was. “That’s her.”

My heart skipped a beat as the voice pierced through the bustling street. Panic surged within me, urging me to run, but I forced myself to remain calm. I weaved through the crowd, my body slipping effortlessly between bodies, desperate to get lost among them.

But fate was not kind to me.

Before I could react, strong hands closed around my arms, yanking me back with a force that sent a jolt of pain shooting up my shoulder. I stumbled, fighting to maintain my balance against the sudden onslaught.

A burly figure loomed over me, clad in the dark navy uniform that marked him as a sentry of the King's Guard. His eyes bore into mine, and my fear fought with my defiance as I forced myself to drop his gaze as I pretended to be someone I wasn't.

Someone who respected the king and his men.

"I've got her," he called over his shoulder, and I winced as I heard more loud footsteps approaching.

He reached forward, lifting my chin with one calloused finger as he studied my face.

"Is it her?" another guard asked from behind him, and I swallowed hard.

No. Please. Please. Please.

If they took me back to the palace, I wouldn't survive. My father wouldn't allow it. I had betrayed him and his kingdom when I ran during the raid, and he wouldn't let me forget it.

"It's her."

He lifted my wrist in his hand, tugging me closer to him as people scattered as far away from us as they could.

I was nothing to them, nobody that they would be willing to risk their own lives for, and Micah had disappeared just as I told him to.

The princess.

I was ready for his next words to escape his lips, prepared for the gasps when everyone heard, but I was shocked when he ran his thumb over my still sore rebellion mark.

"And it looks like the little thief is a traitor."