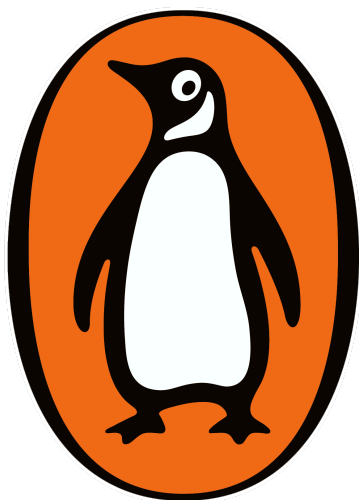


THE KING IS DEAD, BUT AM I FREE?



RAVEN KENNEDY



GLOW

RAVEN KENNEDY



Contents

CHAPTER 1
CHAPTER 2
CHAPTER 3
CHAPTER 4
CHAPTER 5
CHAPTER 6
CHAPTER 7
CHAPTER 8
CHAPTER 9
CHAPTER 10
CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER 12
CHAPTER 13
CHAPTER 14
CHAPTER 15
CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17
CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER 26

CHAPTER 27

CHAPTER 28

CHAPTER 29

CHAPTER 30

CHAPTER 31

CHAPTER 32

CHAPTER 33

CHAPTER 34

CHAPTER 35

CHAPTER 36

CHAPTER 37

CHAPTER 38

CHAPTER 39

CHAPTER 40

CHAPTER 41

CHAPTER 42

CHAPTER 43

CHAPTER 44

CHAPTER 45

CHAPTER 46

CHAPTER 47

CHAPTER 48

CHAPTER 49

CHAPTER 50

CHAPTER 51

CHAPTER 52

CHAPTER 53

CHAPTER 54

CHAPTER 55

CHAPTER 56

CHAPTER 57

CHAPTER 58

CHAPTER 59

CHAPTER 60

CHAPTER 61

CHAPTER 62

CHAPTER 63

CHAPTER 64

CHAPTER 65

EPILOGUE

THREE QUEENS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

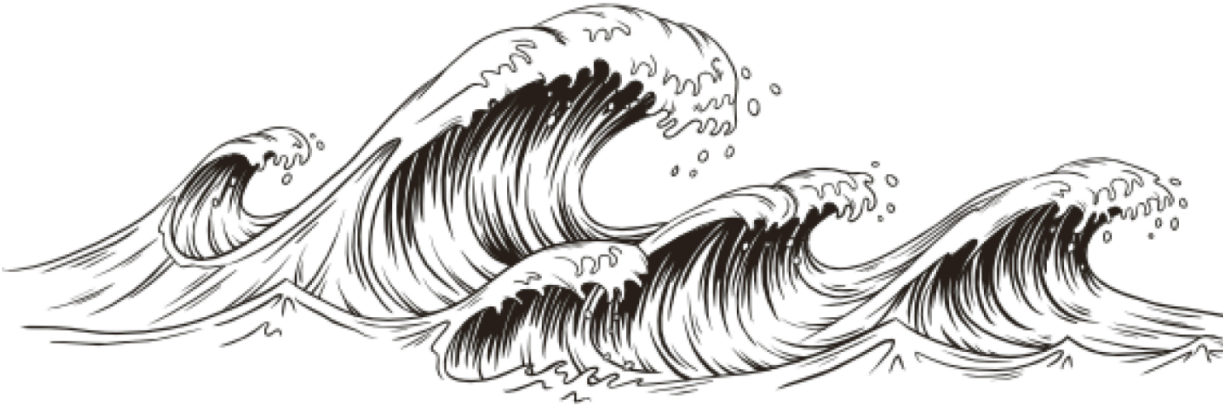
About the Author

Raven Kennedy is a California girl born and raised, whose love for books pushed her into creating her own worlds. The Plated Prisoner Series, a dark fantasy romance, has already sold in over a dozen countries and is a #1 international bestseller with over 1 million copies sold to date. It was inspired by the myth of King Midas and a woman's journey with finding her own strength. Her debut series was a romcom fantasy about a cupid looking for love of her own. She has since gone on to write in a range of genres. Whether she makes you laugh or cry, or whether the series is about a cupid or a gold-touched woman living in King Midas's gilded castle, she hopes to create characters that readers can root for. The Plated Prisoner series is being adapted for series by Peter Guber's Mandalay Television.

You can connect with Raven on her social media sites, and visit www.ravenkennedybooks.com

*To those who stand on their own two feet despite
their stumbles.*





CHAPTER 1

QUEEN KAILA

The air is full of screams.

The entire front of Ranhold Castle is an ocean shore of people washed up on the courtyard. They ebb and flow, frothy cries making waves as they undulate in a shallow mob.

Behind me, Ranhold guards are trying to push out the subjects through the gate, with frenzied command that barely cuts through the chaos. Half the people are trying to come back in to see what's going on, the other half fleeing for their lives.

Manu and my guards got us outside, but only just. My heartbeat is a hammer, and the breath that I'm sucking in is just as rushed as the adrenaline pumping through my veins. It's the sort of harried vulnerability that makes me feel no better than a cornered animal. One who's frozen in snow, unable to move. And yet, what's really keeping me still are the sounds coming from the castle. Sloshing. Dripping. Clanging. Smashing. *More screaming.*

Another sharp slap of shrieks erupts when liquid gold suddenly bursts through the front doors. Everyone flinches back, gasping bodies caught in

the swell of panic, shoving into the mass behind them as they try to get further away.

Manu and Keon stand in front of me, facing Ranhold Castle, and they both push me back protectively while our guards surround us. Not all of my guards made it out, yet I haven't wanted to look around to see just how many I lost.

The gold spews from the doorway and curls around the castle walls, gushing down the front steps. Like outstretched hands, it nearly grabs hold of a man, but he gets yanked out of the way by some guards at the very last second.

The liquid metal slams down from its unsuccessful reach like a petulant child smashing fists in a fit against the ground and sending splatters flying. Mottled gashes of gold streak across the snow-covered steps, marring the stone. More of it drips like blood from the window sills, staining the glass and peeking past the frames.

We're surrounded by the castle's lantern-lit outer walls, and even though it's supposed to make us feel protected, it's only keeping everyone trapped out here together. I'm about to suggest to my brother that we get away in case the gold keeps pouring out and we become trapped with the crowd, but another loud crash happens somewhere inside, cutting me off.

My eyes wildly veer between my brother's and Keon's forms, wondering what else inside has been destroyed, who else has been killed. But then, as if that last noise was a signal for the end, the gold that's gripping the front walls suddenly stops glinting, stops rippling.

It hardens in place as the castle goes suddenly quiet.

The screaming of the crowd cuts off too, everyone waiting with bated breath to see if it's actually over. I'm not sure how long we all stand there, watching and listening, but the splotches of gold along the grayed, frozen stone are no longer moving, and despite the torches casting off firelight, everything seems darker. Colder.

The movement and sounds may have ceased, yet those things instead spring to life inside of me. My body begins to tremble, my mind a funnel of noisy thoughts swirling around.

What in the Divine just happened?

My shoes are soaked through as I stand here in the snow, my skin pebbled from the awful frigid night air. I wasn't meant to be outside in this dress. I should be in the ballroom right now. I should be celebrating my

engagement announcement and making plans for my control to now spread to Sixth Kingdom.

At the very least, I should be warmer.

When I look down, I see blotches of gold splashed onto my deep blue dress in a motley of gleaming spots. I don't dare run my finger over it. Not after what I saw in that ballroom.

"Has it stopped?" I ask.

The question is overly simplified for what just happened in there. Has it stopped—*it*. The berserk gold that just rose up with furious motive. I already know my mind is going to be stuck with the memory of tonight for a long time, that I'm going to replay it over and over again.

I won't be able to erase the way the gold moved with violent precision. How it dripped down the walls. How it pooled on the ground. How it splashed, and stabbed, and *consumed*.

"Has it stopped?" I ask again, my voice shriller than I've ever heard it.

I've never been so close to mortal danger before, and my body knows it. Which is why my pulse is still racing, why the tempo of it is pounding in my ears.

Why I can't stop shaking.

"I think so," Manu finally answers as he turns around.

His husband still watches the castle, as if he doesn't trust taking his eyes off it. As if he expects the violence of the liquid metal to lash back to life.

"Damned Divine," I hear him say beneath his breath.

Perhaps his murmured curse has pulled the stopper from the bottled-up crowd, because a flurry of voices starts to pour through the courtyard. Automatically, my power sweeps out, pulling their words to me. My magic sweeps down, catching what they're saying and stringing them up in my mind.

"What's happened?"

"This is King Midas's gold-touch."

"Where's King Midas? Where's King Rot?"

"Our prince is dead."

"Did Midas do this on purpose?"

"But what happened?"

The words flow from their mouths to my ears, where they gather like threads in a web for me to spin. Yet soon, I don't even need my power to

hear them, because the crowd begins to shout, demanding answers in frenzied cries loud enough for all.

“Shit,” Manu hisses, turning toward me. “Maybe you should—”

Someone suddenly shouts, “I know what happened!”

All eyes slam onto the woman, who staggers to the front. She points a shaky finger toward the doors, gold bleeding from their depths like a gaping wound.

“This wasn’t King Midas’s doing!” she spits out, a long curtain of black hair hanging down her back, her dress looking like part of it melted off. “It was his gold-touched pet! She stole his magic!”

I rear back in surprise, her words tangling up in my head.

“Who is that?” Manu murmurs.

A man from the crowd shoves forward. “What are you talking about, woman?”

She straightens up, sweeping a proud look over the crowd. “I am one of King Midas’s royal saddles, and I can tell you all right now that this was all because of Auren. She did this! The gilded whore stole his magic when he gold-touched her, and she figured out she could use it for herself. She lied to him, and now she’s attacked him. I saw it with my own eyes when I was running out!”

Shock cuts like an oar through a surf.

“What the fuck?” Manu hisses beneath his breath as he turns to me.

When the woman places a hand on her stomach, it occurs to me who exactly this is.

Mist. The saddle Midas impregnated.

As her words sink in, I start to shake my head in denial at first, and yet, it *must* be true, because what I saw in that room ... It was like the gold wasn’t in Midas’s control at all, like someone else was doing it ...

How did I not discover this secret sooner?

“Look!” someone shouts. “Timberwings! Someone’s fleeing on timberwings!”

“It’s her! The gilded murderer!”

My head angles in the direction of the man who spoke, my gaze following where he’s pointing. I only get a split second before the view is swallowed by the darkness of night, a flash of feathers and talons disappearing into the clouds.

Was that King Rot with Lady Auren?

“I told you!” Mist cries out. “She’s a deceiver. A cheat. She seduced Midas and took his power, and now she’s going to do the same to King Rot!”

A crescendo of voices surges, and within moments, the rumor is caught up in a current too forceful to stop.

How in the Divine-damned could I have missed something like this? How could I not have known?

“You’re trembling,” my brother says, yanking me out of my flooding thoughts. His gaze casts over my shoulder. “Your queen is cold. Find something for her.”

There’s shuffling behind me and then the weight of a cloak being draped over my shoulders. “Here you are, Queen Kaila.”

My fingers grip the front of the cloak, pulling it tight around my chest, though it does nothing to ward off the chill, because it’s seeped all the way through to my bones. I need to be back in Third, walking along the beach at the height of day in order to feel any sort of warmth again after being stuck here for so long.

However, I can’t go home yet. Not when everything I’ve worked so hard for is falling through my fingers. I can feel the eyes of the crowd glancing at me, waiting to see what I’ll do.

“Manu, have someone confirm that Ravinger just fled with Lady Auren.”

My brother nods at my command before moving out of my line of sight, where I hear him issuing orders to someone. I glance around the courtyard, noting that only Ranhold’s guards are gathered outside. Not a single guard of Midas’s. Not a bit of gold-plated armor in sight.

“Keon,” I call, and he immediately turns to me. “Have some of Ranhold’s guards go inside and confirm that the danger has passed. See if they can find Midas and if he needs help.”

He moves away with a nod, pointing at a couple of Fifth’s guards standing around a splatter of gold on the snow, kicking at the solidifying puddle warily.

As I continue to stare at the castle, the wind picks up, glazed slush starting to spit from the sky, as if it wasn’t miserable enough out here already.

Three of the Ranhold soldiers break away, walking forward with grim faces as they head for the broken doorway. The first one holds out his hands

to the others, then kneels at the first splash of the spilled gold that lies motionless on the steps.

He presses his finger against it, and when it does nothing, he stands again, nodding to the others. Together, they walk up to the doorway, boots clicking over the solidified gold before they disappear inside.

We wait.

The crowd still gathered in the courtyard has grown quiet again, the anxiousness of the wait seeming to clog up their throats.

Despite my own warring thoughts, I walk to the front of the castle, stopping to face everyone as I put on a calm yet strong demeanor. Their prince is dead, Rot has fled, and Midas isn't here, so I'm the one they need to look to, and it's important that I cultivate that. Right now, I need to be seen.

"Do not fear," I announce. "The danger is over, and I will find out if what has been claimed is true."

The people murmur, my powers gathering the whispered relief, the admiration, the respect they have for me.

"Well done, sister," Manu says beneath his breath.

When one of the guards reappears, I nod to Keon to go collect his report. My brother-in-law steps over, expression stoic before dismissing the man, but my eyes scan the crowd, magic picking up their mumblings.

I break off my magic when Keon comes over.

"Well?" Manu asks nervously.

"All the gold seems to have stopped its movement and is solidified," he says quietly, keeping his voice down.

"And Midas?" I press.

His brown eyes center on me. "They believe he's dead."

I suck in a shocked breath. It stays stuck to my throat, just as the words themselves weave in my head, wrapping around my skull in trapping strands.

Dead.

My lips press together, and I feel my eyes chiseling into the face of the castle. All my hard work ... all this time I've spent on my machinations, and now this.

King Midas does *nothing* for me if he's dead.

I came here to negotiate deals, to exert my own wants through an impressionable prince and a rich king. Things changed, but they were for

the better. I had a *plan*. I was going to be the first monarch in history to join two kingdoms together through marriage, while having a hand in a third.

Because power is everything, and though I may not have a physical magic like gold-touch or rot, I have words, and a queen can do a lot with a web full of people's secrets.

I have been working endlessly since I took my throne to ensure that my people see me as just as much of a power threat as any other monarch. That would've been solidified even further with these alliances. Now, all of that is crumbling.

All because of Lady Auren. *Lady*. As if a saddle pet warrants the term.

Anger and fear clash inside my head, though I don't let it show. Not when so many people are watching. As a woman in power, you can never let people see your true emotional reactions because they would only use them against you.

"I want to see."

Before either of them can stop me, I stride toward the castle, toes frozen as more snow saturates my silk slippers.

"Sister," Manu calls, but I don't stop. I hear rushing footsteps as he and Keon catch up with me just before I make it to the steps.

"At least let me go first," Keon says as he abruptly cuts in front so he can walk up before me.

"Be careful," Manu cautions.

With a brisk nod, Keon heads up the steps, and as soon as he does, I follow behind him. "Kaila," Manu hisses beside me. "Just because it's stable right now doesn't mean it's going to stay like that. We don't know how volatile it is."

"It's solidified," I say, shoes rasping against the slick gold just before we make it to the top step. The doors are hanging from their hinges like teeth knocked loose and crooked.

"It was solidified *before, too*," he retorts. "And look what happened with that."

"Looking to see what happened is exactly my intention."

I hear him sigh as I walk through the doorway, but my footsteps slow as soon as I'm inside. The flames from the wall sconces are flickering erratically, as if they too are jumpy, still recovering from the assault.

The entry hall echoes with our footsteps as Manu and I follow a few paces behind Keon until we reach the ballroom. All three of us stop in our

tracks when we make it through the doorway.

I blink at the darkness that's settled over the room. At the darkness and at the gold inside that glints in shadowed warning. Before, flames from the chandeliers and sconces lit up the entire space, making it rival the daylight. But now, everything's been cast in shadow. The only light comes from the iron furnaces still burning in the corners, their presence only now visible because the ballroom is empty. This room doesn't even look remotely the same. It's as if the entire space was made with wax, and someone held a burning candle to it.

The walls look half melted off, gold frozen in its drip. The ceiling, too, has strings of it cast down like icicles, ends pointed down at us with sharp purpose. The plated pillars are bare of their gilt, every bit of golden adornment melted away.

The floor is a rippled mess, clumpy in some areas, raised with motionless shapes that make me cringe. A visible hand reaching up, frozen in place. A gilt lump of a body curled beside the raised platform. A frozen wave caught below the mezzanine, as if the balcony melted clear off and splashed to the floor below where I can see someone's leg sticking out.

"Gods ..."

Manu's whispered declaration spurs me back into motion. My footsteps take me across the ballroom, gaze cautious, skipping from one spot of gold to the next. Yet as I get further in, a horrible groan comes from the walls. The floor. The ceiling. Like an old home settling with cracks and creaks, only this is far worse. It's eerie. Like the gold is a ghost, bemoaning our presence, threatening to haunt.

I go still, pulse spiking even more than before. Beside me, Manu grips my arm. "Kaila, we should get out of here."

The groan tapers off like a sigh, the room falling silent and still once more.

Shrugging off my brother's touch, I continue in my search. "I want to see."

Keon points forward and says, "There."

As soon as I lay eyes on what he's pointed out, my feet take me forward, all the way to the far end. To the bulbous spot now marring the space of the wall.

"Great Divine ..."

It's him.

His crown is missing from his head. Perhaps melted into the gold that now encases him. He looks like he's being melted into the wall itself, like it was trying to suck him into its depths and swallow him whole. His agonized face is on display. Wide eyes held with shock and fear.

King Midas is now nothing but a corpse encased in a gold tomb.

The gold groans again, as if staking its claim.

"No ..."

We whirl around at the woman's voice to find Mist stumbling forward, looking at Midas with horror. "My King ..." She falls to her knees, clutching her belly, the tinged, demolished room carrying the echo of her cries. "She did this. She did this to him."

"But *how*?" Keon murmurs as we watch her sob. "How is that possible?"

I think back to each interaction, to everything I've been told. I stare at Midas's face as I think. As I hear. Flicking past strands of old webs that I've collected, words swaying back and forth in my mind.

Monarchs are secretive about their magic. It's strategic. Knowing when to show your hand and knowing when to conceal it. In some cases, it's best to make people underestimate you. In others, monarchs are known to show enough power to make everyone either revere you or fear you. Sometimes both.

Midas gilded the dining table—it was the first time I saw it with my own eyes. He also gold-touched this entire ballroom for tonight's celebration. Two perfect spectacles.

Yet, tonight, his gold behaved as if he wasn't in control of it at all. Because he wasn't.

The gold-touch power was real, there's no doubt about that. And he's never gold-touched another living person, other than Auren.

This must be why.

I thought her greatest secret was that she was sleeping with an enemy army commander. I thought the gold-touched favored was just that—a favorite royal saddle for him to ride.

I was wrong on both counts.

I *detest* being wrong.

Midas made her into something ostentatious, a gaudy prize to flaunt. Men always have their fixations, especially when it comes to women. Their enthusiasm for their obsessions always straddles the line between

infatuation and hate. One simple move, and the master will turn on their pretty pet.

But perhaps in this case ... the pet was the one to turn on her master.

The fear in my mind digs down into my belly. If she can truly steal powers, then what if she tried to steal mine? What if she *succeeded*?

My teeth click and grind. Instead of falling into panic, I need to figure out how I can weave things to my own advantage. Because if Lady Auren tried to steal what is mine, I will *ruin* her.

Seeing the hardened metal is what solidifies my own spinning thoughts. Midas is encased in gold like he's been cast in a mold, ready to be plucked out and sharpened by a blacksmith.

I thought he was useless to me dead, but perhaps not. Perhaps all I have to do is use what he's been forged into.

A weapon.

"When he gold-touched her, some of his power must've transferred to her," I say quietly. "He wouldn't have wanted anyone to ever know that."

Midas was secretive about *everything*, but this? This is an entirely different layer of dangerous secrets. Is that why he kept her around? Because he trained her to take on the powers of others to use to his advantage?

"This isn't good," Keon says.

"Kaila," my brother begins. "What if it wasn't a fluke? What if that's *her* magic? Being able to take on the magic of others if they use it on her? Did you ...?"

"I did," I say with a sharp nod, fresh anger budding through me.

"What if she steals *your* power?"

I don't like hearing my own worry spoken aloud. My knees lock together, tongue pressing against clenched teeth. My gaze on Midas shifts to my blotted reflection shining from his gilded chest.

This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. I wasn't supposed to be in danger of someone taking my power and using it against me.

"How are we going to use this?" Manu says, because like me, he's grown up learning how to always spin every instance to our own political advantage. Tonight is no different.

I glance around the ballroom, but we're still alone other than a blubbering Mist, who's sobbing into her hands. "We tell people the truth," I say. "That Midas's favored turned on him. That she had an affair with King

Rot to make him jealous. That she was jealous of my engagement with Midas.”

“Make sure everyone knows she’s the villain.”

I nod. “All of Orea will hate her.”

“But what about Sixth Kingdom?” Manu asks. “Now, there obviously won’t be a marriage.”

“But we publicly announced our engagement,” I reply. “It will be difficult, but if I play it right, I can still push for control.”

“The people there are still rioting,” Keon says. “Plus, they *murdered* their old queen. What makes you think they’ll accept you with Midas dead and no marriage ceremony?”

I shoot him a smile. “Because I’m not the Cold Queen. I’m the warm, charismatic, beautiful Kaila Ioana. I’ll make them love me as my own people in Third love me.”

“We know how beloved Kaila is to our people. She can sell it,” my brother says with a definitive nod.

“We will have to move fast,” Keon says. “As soon as we can, we will need to visit Sixth, do some sort of ceremony to honor Midas’s life, make you the grieving betrothed for them to sympathize over.”

If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s to make a kingdom love me.

“I can do that.”

More sharp, gasping wails behind us make me want to grit my teeth, and I spare Mist another look.

She will still have to be dealt with.

If I’m going to try and take Sixth, I certainly cannot have her bastard heir being born from her womb. But that will be a problem for another day.

“There will be a lot happening now,” I go on quietly. “Once the other monarchs find out about Lady Auren’s ability to steal power, they’ll want to get involved. Plus, there’s the issue of Fifth.”

“I actually have an idea about that,” Manu says, and my attention immediately sharpens.

My brother isn’t my advisor for nothing. He has a brilliant mind, knows how to play a room, knows how to read people, and above all, he will always be loyal to me.

“Since our focus now needs to be on how to secure Sixth, as well as how to take care of Lady Auren, the last thing we want is to lose all the work we’ve done to create a foothold here in Fifth. So, I propose that we

immediately put in the search for the closest kin of Fulke, because now that the prince is dead, Ranhold needs an heir. We will track down whichever ones have power, and sift through the best candidates. Then *we* will choose which heir gets the throne. *We* will determine who takes power. And in exchange for our support ... they will support us, and us alone.”

I smile. “You are perfect, brother.”

He gives me a matching grin.

“And if anyone tries to oppose us in claiming Sixth or with having our hand in naming a Fifth heir?” Keon questions worriedly.

My smile grows sharp, twisted with ruthlessness. “Any voice that speaks up against me, won’t have a voice to use after that.”

And if Lady Auren thinks she can take what I’ve worked for, she’s going to realize soon that she’s not the only one who knows how to steal what she wants.

I may not have gold-touch, and I may not have rot, but words are the most powerful weapon of all, and I will wield them.