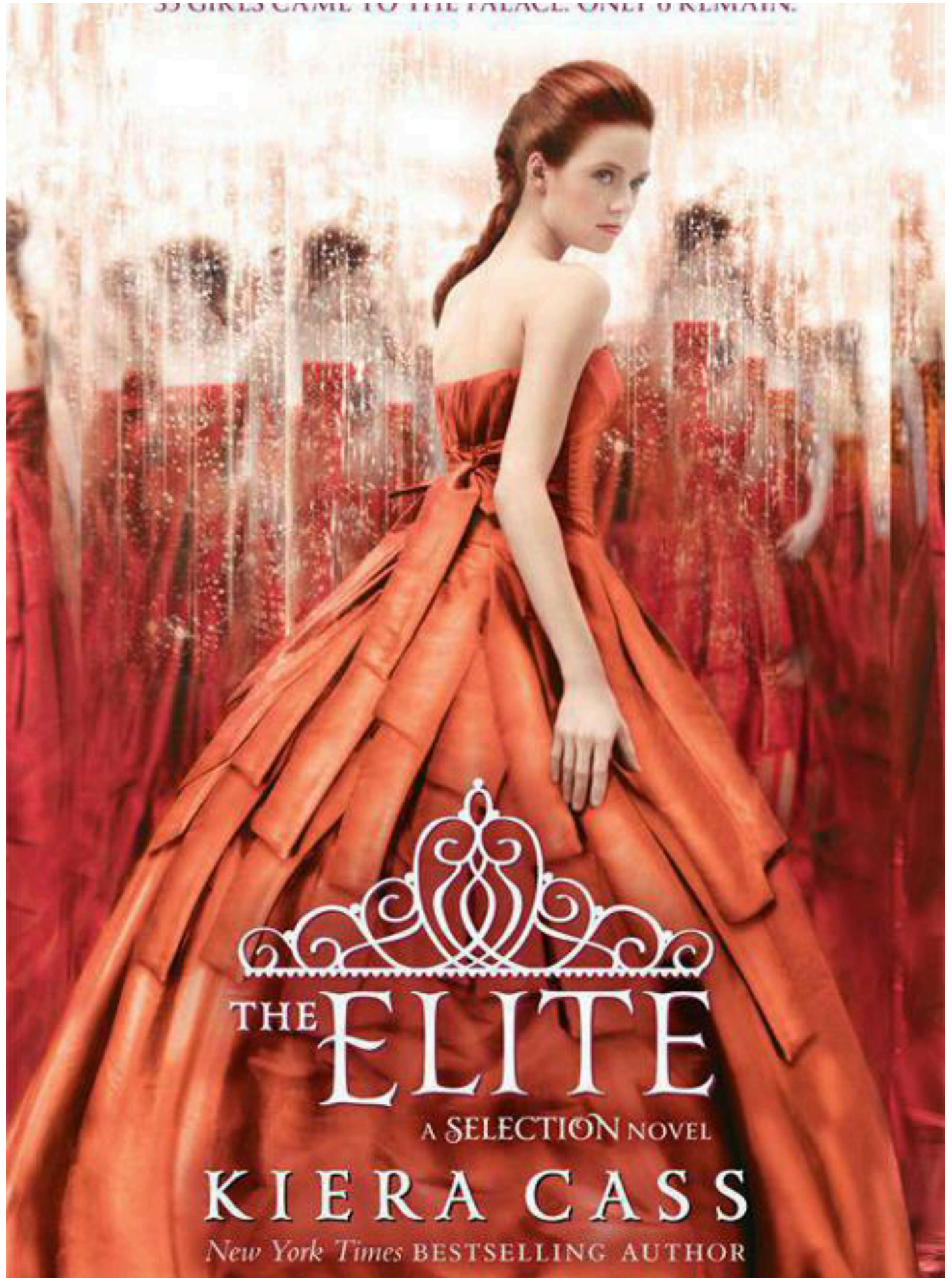


39 GIRLS CAME TO THE PALACE. ONLY 9 REMAIN.



THE **ELITE**

A SELECTION NOVEL

KIERA CASS

New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR



THE ELITE



KIERA CASS

HARPER TEEN

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Call out the servants! The queen is awake!
(For Mom)

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THE ANGELES AIR WAS QUIET, and for a while I lay still, listening to the sound of Maxon's breathing. It was getting harder and harder to catch him in a truly calm and happy moment, and I soaked up the time, grateful that he seemed to be at his best when he and I were alone.

Ever since the Selection had been narrowed down to six girls, he'd been more anxious than he was when the thirty-five of us arrived in the first place. I guessed he thought he'd have more time to make his choices. And though it made me feel guilty to admit it, I knew I was the reason why he wished he did.

Prince Maxon, heir to the Illéa throne, liked me. He'd told me a week ago that if I could simply say that I cared for him the way he did for me, without anything holding me back, this whole competition would be over. And sometimes I played with the idea, wondering how it would feel to be Maxon's alone.

But the thing was, Maxon wasn't really mine to begin with. There were five other girls here—girls he took on dates and whispered things to—and I didn't know what to make of that. And then there was the fact that if I accepted Maxon, it meant I had to accept a crown, a thought I tended to ignore if only because I wasn't sure what it would mean for me.

And, of course, there was Aspen.

He wasn't technically my boyfriend anymore—he'd broken up with me before my name was even drawn for the Selection—but when he showed up at the palace as one of the guards, all the feelings I'd been trying to let go of flooded my heart. Aspen was my first love; when I looked at him ... I was his.

Maxon didn't know that Aspen was in the palace, but he did know that there was someone at home that I was trying to get over, and he was graciously giving me time to move on while attempting to find someone else he'd be happy with in the event I couldn't ever love him.

As he moved his head, inhaling just above my hairline, I considered it. What would it be like to simply love Maxon?

"Do you know when the last time was that I really looked at the stars?" he asked.

I settled closer to him on our blanket, trying to keep warm in the cool Angeles night. "No idea."

"A tutor had me studying astronomy a few years ago. If you look closely, you can tell that the stars are actually different colors."

"Wait, the last time you looked at the stars was to *study* them? What about for fun?"

He chuckled. "Fun. I'll have to pencil in some between the budget consultations and infrastructure committee meetings. Oh, and war strategizing, which, by the way, I am terrible at."

"What else are you terrible at?" I asked, running my hand across his starched shirt. Encouraged by the touch, Maxon drew circles on my shoulder with the hand he had wrapped behind my back.

He propped himself up on an elbow, focusing on my face. “You *know* I’m not.”

“Pretty close,” I countered. Little flickers of touch ran between us. Knees, arms, fingers.

He shook his head, a small smile on his face. “Okay, then. I can’t plan wars. I’m rotten at it. And I’m guessing I’d be a terrible cook. I’ve never tried, so—”

“Never?”

“You might have noticed the teams of people keeping you up to your neck in pastries? They happen to feed me as well.”

I giggled. I helped cook practically every meal at home. “More,” I demanded. “What else are you bad at?”

He held me close, his brown eyes bright with a secret. “Recently I’ve discovered this one thing”

“Tell.”

“It turns out I’m absolutely terrible at staying away from you. It’s a very serious problem.”

I smiled. “Have you really tried?”

He pretended to think about it. “Well, no. And don’t expect me to start.”

We laughed quietly, holding on to each other. In these moments, it was so easy to picture this being the rest of my life.

The rustle of leaves and grass announced that someone was coming. Even though our date was completely acceptable, I felt a little embarrassed and sat up quickly. Maxon followed suit as a guard made his way around the hedge to us.

“Your Majesty,” he said with a bow. “Sorry to intrude, sir, but it’s really unwise to stay out this late for so long. The rebels could—”

“Understood,” Maxon said with a sigh. “We’ll be right in.”

The guard left us alone, and Maxon turned back to me. “Another fault of mine: I’m losing patience with the rebels. I’m tired of dealing with them.”

He stood and offered me his hand. I took it, watching the sad frustration in his eyes. We’d been attacked twice by the rebels since the start of the Selection—once by the simply disruptive Northerners and once by the deadly Southerners—and even with my brief experience, I could understand his exhaustion.

Maxon was picking up the blanket and shaking it out, clearly not happy that our night had been cut short.

“Hey,” I said, urging him to face me. “I had fun.”

He nodded.

“No, really,” I said, walking over to him. He moved the blanket to one hand to wrap his free arm around me. “We should do it again sometime. You can tell me which stars are which colors, because I seriously can’t tell.”

Maxon gave me a sad smile. “I wish things were easier sometimes, normal.”

I moved so I could wrap my arms around him, and as I did so, Maxon dropped the blanket to return the gesture. “I hate to break it to you, Your Majesty, but even without the

more—”

“Time. I know. And I’m prepared to give you that. I only wish I knew that you’d actually want to be with me when that time was over.”

I looked away. That wasn’t something I could promise. I weighed Maxon and Aspen in my heart over and over, and neither of them ever had a true edge. Except, maybe, when I was alone with one of them. Because, at that moment, I was tempted to promise Maxon that I would be there for him in the end.

But I couldn’t.

“Maxon,” I whispered, seeing how dejected he looked at my lack of an answer. “I can’t tell you that. But what I can tell you is that I *want* to be here. I *want* to know if there’s a possibility for ... for ...” I stammered, not sure how to put it.

“Us?” Maxon guessed.

I smiled, happy at how easily he understood me. “Yes. I want to know if there’s a possibility for us to be an us.”

He moved a lock of hair behind my shoulder. “I think the odds are very high,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I think so, too. Just ... time, okay?”

He nodded, looking happier. This was how I wanted to end our night, with hope. Well, and maybe one more thing. I bit my lip and leaned into Maxon, asking with my eyes.

Without a second of hesitation, he bent to kiss me. It was warm and gentle, and it left me feeling adored and somehow aching for more. I could have stayed there for hours, just to see if I could get enough of that feeling; but too soon, Maxon backed away.

“Let’s go,” he said in a playful tone, pulling me toward the palace. “Better get inside before the guards come for us on horseback with spears drawn.”

As Maxon left me at the stairs, the tiredness hit me like a wall. I was practically dragging myself up to the second floor and around the corner to my room when, suddenly, I was quite awake again.

“Oh!” Aspen said, surprised to see me, too. “I think it makes me the worst guard ever that I assumed you were in your room this whole time.”

I giggled. The Elite were supposed to sleep with at least one of their maids on watch in the night. I really didn’t like that, so Maxon insisted on stationing a guard by my room in case there was an emergency. The thing was, most of the time that guard was Aspen. It was a strange mix of exhilaration and terror knowing that nearly every night he was right outside my door.

The lightness of the moment faded quickly as Aspen grasped what it meant that I hadn’t been safely tucked in my bed. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Did you have a good time?”

“Aspen,” I whispered, looking to make sure no one was around. “Don’t be upset. I’m part of the Selection, and this is just how it is.”

“How am I supposed to stand a chance, Mer? How can I compete when you only ever

He didn't dare say the words aloud, but he mouthed them. *I love you.*

I melted.

"I know," I said, placing a hand on his chest, letting myself forget for a moment all that we were risking. "But that doesn't change where we are or that I'm an Elite now. I need time, Aspen."

He reached up to hold my hand in his and nodded. "I can give you that. Just ... try to find some time for me, too."

I didn't want to bring up how complicated that would be, so I gave him a tiny smile before gently pulling my hand away. "I need to go."

He watched me as I walked into my room and shut the door behind me.

Time. I was asking for a lot of it these days. I hoped that if I had enough, everything would somehow fall into place.

“NO, NO,” QUEEN AMBERLY ANSWERED with a laugh. “I only had three bridesmaids, though Clarkson’s mother suggested I have more. I just wanted my sisters and my best friend, who, coincidentally, I’d met during my Selection.”

I peeked over at Marlee and was happy to find she was looking at me, too. Before I arrived at the palace, I had assumed that with this being such a high-stakes competition, there’d be no way any of the girls would be friendly. Marlee had embraced me the first time we met, and we’d been there for each other from that moment on. With a single almost-exception, we’d never even had an argument.

A few weeks ago, Marlee had mentioned that she didn’t think she wanted to be with Maxon. When I’d pushed her to explain, she clammed up. She wasn’t mad at me, I knew that, but those days of silence before we’d let it go were lonely.

“I want seven bridesmaids,” Kriss said. “I mean, if Maxon chooses me and I get to have a big wedding.”

“Well, I won’t have bridesmaids,” Celeste said, countering Kriss. “They’re just distracting. And since it would be televised, I want all eyes on me.”

I fumed. It was rare that we all got to sit and talk with Queen Amberly, and here Celeste was, being a brat and ruining it.

“I’d want to incorporate some of my culture’s traditions into my wedding,” Elise added quietly. “Girls back in New Asia use a lot of red in their ceremonies, and the groom has to bring gifts to the bride’s friends to reward them for letting her marry him.”

Kriss piped up. “Remind me to be in your wedding party. I love presents!”

“Me, too!” Marlee exclaimed.

“Lady America, you’ve been awfully quiet,” Queen Amberly said. “What do you want at your wedding?”

I blushed because I was completely unprepared to comment.

There was only one wedding I’d ever imagined, and it was going to take place at the Province of Carolina Services Office after an exhausting amount of paperwork.

“Well, the one thing I’ve thought about is having my dad give me away. You know when he takes your hand and puts it in the hand of the person you marry? That’s the only part I’ve ever really wanted.” Embarrassingly enough, it was true.

“But everyone does that,” Celeste complained. “That’s not even original.”

I should have been mad that she called me out, but I merely shrugged. “I want to know that my dad completely approves of my choice on the day it really matters.”

“That’s nice,” Natalie said, sipping her tea and looking out the window.

Queen Amberly laughed lightly. “I certainly hope he approves. No matter who it is.” She added the last words quickly, catching herself in the middle of implying that Maxon would be my choice.

I wondered if she thought that, if Maxon had told her about us.

Shortly after, the wedding talk died down, and the queen left to go work in her room.

heard the queen talk so much.”

“She’s getting excited, I think.” I hadn’t mentioned to anyone what Maxon’s aunt had told me about how Queen Amberly tried many times for another child and failed. Adele had predicted that her sister would warm up to us once the group was smaller, and she was right.

“Okay, you have to tell me: Do you honestly not have any other plans for your wedding or did you just not want to share?”

“I really don’t,” I promised. “I have a hard time picturing a big wedding, you know? I’m a Five.”

Marlee shook her head. “You *were* a Five. You’re a Three now.”

“Right,” I said, remembering my new label.

I was born into a family of Fives—artists and musicians who were generally poorly paid—and though I hated the caste system in general, I liked what I did for a living. It was strange to think of myself as a Three, to consider embracing teaching or writing as a profession.

“Stop stressing,” Marlee said, reading my face. “You don’t have anything to worry about yet.”

I was about to protest but was interrupted by a cry from Celeste.

“Come on!” she yelled, slamming the remote against the couch before pointing it at the television again. “Ugh!”

“Is it just me or is she getting worse?” I whispered to Marlee. We watched as Celeste hit the remote over and over before giving up and going to change the channel manually. I guessed if I had grown up as a Two, that would be something worth getting worked up over.

“It’s the stress, I think,” Marlee commented. “Have you noticed that Natalie’s getting, I don’t know ... more aloof?”

I nodded, and we both looked over to the trio of girls playing their card game. Kriss was smiling as she shuffled, but Natalie was examining the ends of her hair, occasionally pulling out a strand she didn’t seem to like. Her expression was distracted.

“I think we’re all starting to feel it,” I confessed. “It’s harder to sit back and enjoy the palace now that the group is so small.”

Celeste grunted, and we peeked over at her but quickly averted our eyes when she caught us looking.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Marlee said, shifting in her seat. “I think I’m going to go to the bathroom.”

“I was just thinking the same thing. Do you want to go together?” I offered.

Smiling, she shook her head. “You go ahead. I’ll finish my tea first.”

“Okay. I’ll be back.”

I left the Women’s Room, taking my time walking down the gorgeous hallway. I wasn’t sure I would ever get over how spectacular it was here. I was so distracted that I ran smack into a guard as I turned the corner.

“Oh!” I said.

“Pardon me, miss. Hope I didn’t startle you.” He held me by my elbows, helping me

“Woodwork,” he answered, giving me a quick bow.

“I’m America.”

“I know.”

I smiled and rolled my eyes. Of course he knew.

“Well, I hope the next time I run into you, it won’t be quite so literal,” I joked.

He chuckled. “Agreed. Have a nice day, miss.”

“You, too.”

I told Marlee about my embarrassing run-in with Officer Woodwork when I got back and warned her to watch her step. She laughed at me and shook her head.

We spent the rest of the afternoon sitting by the windows, chatting about home and the other girls as we drank in the sunshine.

It was sad to think about the future just then. Eventually the Selection would be over, and while I knew Marlee and I would still be close, I would miss talking to her every day. She was the first real friend I’d ever made, and I wished I could keep her beside me all the time.

As I tried to stay in the moment, Marlee gazed dreamily out the window. I wondered what she was thinking about; but everything was so peaceful, I didn’t ask.

THE WIDE DOORS OF MY balcony were open, as well as the one to the hallway, and my room was filled with the warm, sweet air blowing in from the gardens. I had hoped the soft breezes would be a consolation for the fact that I had so much work to do. Instead they distracted me, making me ache to be anywhere but stuck at my desk.

I sighed and reclined in my seat, letting my head drape over the back of the chair. “Anne,” I called.

“Yes, miss?” my head maid answered from the corner where she was sewing. Without looking, I knew that Mary and Lucy, my other two maids, had perked up, waiting to see if they could serve me as well.

“I command you to figure out what this report means,” I said, pointing a lazy arm at the detailed account on military statistics that sat in front of me. It was a task that all the Elite would be tested on, but I couldn’t bring myself to focus on it.

My three maids laughed, probably from both the ridiculousness of my demand and the fact that I’d issued one at all. I wouldn’t have called leadership one of my strong suits.

“I’m sorry, my lady, but I think that might be overstepping my boundaries,” Anne answered. Even though my request was a joke and her answer was, too, I could hear the genuine apology in her voice for not being able to help me.

“Fine.” I moaned, heaving myself into an upright position. “I’ll simply have to do it myself. The whole lot of you are worthless. I’m getting new maids tomorrow. This time I mean it.”

They all chuckled again, and I focused on the numbers one more time. I was getting the impression that this was a bad report, but I couldn’t be sure. I reread paragraphs and charts, furrowing my brow and biting the back of my pen as I tried to concentrate.

I heard Lucy laugh quietly, and I looked up to see what she was so amused by, following her eyes to the door. There, leaning against the frame, was Maxon.

“You gave me away!” he complained to Lucy, who continued to snicker.

I pushed back my chair in a rush and ran into his arms. “You read my mind!”

“Did I?”

“Please tell me we can go outside. Just for a little while?”

He smiled. “I have twenty minutes before I have to be back.”

I pulled him down the hall, the excited chatter of my maids fading behind us.

There was no denying the gardens had become *our* place. Almost every chance we got to be alone, we came out here. It was such a stark contrast to how I used to spend my time with Aspen: holed up in the tiny tree house in my backyard, the only place we could be together safely.

Suddenly I wondered if Aspen was around somewhere, indistinguishable from the numerous guards in the palace, watching as Maxon held my hand.

“What are these?” Maxon asked, brushing across the tips of my fingers as we walked.

“Calluses. They’re from pressing down on violin strings four hours a day.”

Maxon stopped moving and lifted my fingers to his lips, kissing the tiny, worn tips.

“On the contrary. I find them rather beautiful.” I felt myself blush. “I’ve seen the world—admittedly mostly through bulletproof glass or from the tower of some ancient castle—but I’ve seen it. And I have access to the answers of a thousand questions at my disposal. But this small hand here?” He looked deeply into my eyes. “This hand makes sounds incomparable to anything I’ve ever heard. Sometimes I think I only dreamed that I heard you play the violin, it was so beautiful. These calluses are proof that it was real.”

At times the way he spoke to me was overwhelming, too romantic to believe. But though I cherished the words in my heart, I was never completely sure I could trust them. How did I know he wasn’t saying such sweet things to the other girls? I had to change the subject.

“Do you really have the answers to a thousand questions?”

“Absolutely. Ask me anything; and if I don’t know the answer, I know where we can find it.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

It was tough to come up with a question on the spot, much less one that would stump him, which was what I wanted. I took a moment to think of the things I’d been most curious about when I was growing up. How planes flew. What the United States used to be like. How the tiny music players that the upper castes had worked.

And then it hit me.

“What’s Halloween?” I asked.

“Halloween?” Clearly, he’d never heard of it. I wasn’t surprised. I’d only seen the word once myself in an old history book my parents had. Some parts of that book were tattered beyond recognition, with pages missing or mostly destroyed. Still, I was always fascinated by the mention of a holiday we knew nothing about.

“Not so certain now, Your Royal Smartness?” I teased.

He made a face at me though it was clear he was only playing at being annoyed. He checked his watch and sucked in a breath.

“Come with me. We have to hurry,” he said, grabbing my hand and launching himself into a run.

I stumbled a bit in my little heels, but I kept up pretty well as he led me back to the palace with a huge grin on his face. I loved when Maxon’s carefree side came through; too often he was so serious.

“Gentlemen,” he said as we raced past the guards by the door.

I made it halfway down the hall before my shoes got the better of me. “Maxon, stop!” I gasped. “I can’t keep up!”

“Come on, come on, you’re going to love this,” he complained, tugging my arm as I slowed. He finally eased back to my pace but was obviously itching to move faster.

We headed toward the north corridor, near the area where the *Reports* were filmed, but ducked into a stairwell before we got that far. We went up and up, and I couldn’t contain my

little chamber. Only a few members of the family and a handful of the guards even know it exists.”

I was beyond intrigued. “Absolutely.”

We reached the top of the stairs, and Maxon held open the door for me. He took my hand again and pulled me down the hallway, finally stopping in front of a wall that was mostly covered by a magnificent painting. Maxon looked behind us to make sure no one was there, then reached behind the frame on the far side. I heard a faint click, and the painting swung toward us.

I gasped. Maxon grinned.

Behind the painting was a door that didn’t go all the way to the ground and had a small keypad on it, like the kind on a telephone. Maxon punched in a few numbers and then a tiny beep sounded. He turned the handle as he looked back to me.

“Let me help you. It’s quite a high step.” He gave me his hand and gestured for me to walk in first.

I was shocked.

The windowless room was covered with shelves full of what appeared to be ancient books. Two of the shelves contained books that had curious red slashes on the bindings, and I saw a massive atlas against one wall, opened to a page that held the shape of some country I couldn’t name. In the middle was a table with a handful of books on it, looking as if they’d been handled recently and left out for quick recovery. And finally, embedded in one wall was a wide screen that looked like a TV.

“What do the red slashes mean?” I asked in wonder.

“Those are banned books. As far as we know, they may be the only copies that still exist in all of Illéa.”

I turned to him, asking with my eyes what I didn’t dare say out loud.

“Yes, you can look at them,” he said in a manner that implied I was putting him out but with an expression that said he had been hoping I’d ask.

I lifted one of the books carefully, terrified that I might accidentally destroy a one-of-a-kind treasure. I flipped through the pages but ended up setting it back down almost immediately. I was simply too awestruck.

I turned around to find Maxon typing on something that looked like a flat typewriter attached to the TV screen.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“A computer. Have you never seen one?” I shook my head, and Maxon didn’t seem too surprised. “Not many people have them anymore. This one is specifically for the information held in this room. If anything about your Halloween exists, this will tell us where it is.”

I wasn’t fully sure of what he was saying, but I didn’t ask him to clarify. In a few seconds his hunt produced a three-bullet list on the screen.

“Oh, excellent!” he exclaimed. “Wait right there.”

I stood by the table as Maxon found the three books that would reveal what Halloween

wanting to slow us, I didn't bother mentioning I had no idea what a Celtic was. It said they believed that spirits passed in and out of the world on Halloween, and people would put on masks to ward off the evil ones. Later, it evolved into a secular holiday, mainly for children. They dressed up in costumes and went around their towns singing songs and were rewarded with candy, creating the saying "trick or treat," as they did a trick to get a treat.

The second book defined it as something similar, only it mentioned pumpkins and Christianity.

"This will be the interesting one," Maxon claimed, flipping through a book that was much thinner than the others and handwritten.

"How so?" I asked, coming around to get a better look.

"This, Lady America, is one of the volumes of Gregory Illéa's personal diaries."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Can I touch it?"

"Let me find the page we're searching for first. Look, it even has a picture!"

And there, like an apparition, an image from an unknown past showed Gregory Illéa with a tight expression on his face, his suit crisp and his stance tall. It was bizarre how much of the king and Maxon I could see in the way he stood. Beside him, a woman was giving the camera a halfhearted smile. There was something to her face that hinted she was once very lovely, but the luster had gone out of her eyes. She seemed tired.

Surrounding the couple were three figures. The first was a teenage girl, beautiful and vibrant, grinning widely and wearing a crown and a frilly gown. How funny! She was dressed as a princess. And then there were two boys, one slightly taller than the other and both dressed as characters I didn't recognize. They looked like they were on the verge of mischief. Below the image was an entry, amazingly enough, in Gregory Illéa's own hand.

THE CHILDREN CELEBRATED HALLOWEEN THIS YEAR WITH A PARTY. I SUPPOSE IT'S ONE WAY TO FORGET WHAT'S GOING ON AROUND THEM, BUT TO ME IT FEELS FRIVOLOUS. WE'RE ONE OF THE FEW FAMILIES REMAINING WHO HAVE ENOUGH MONEY TO DO SOMETHING FESTIVE, BUT THIS CHILD'S PLAY SEEMS WASTEFUL.

"Do you think that's why we don't celebrate anymore? Because it's wasteful?" I asked.

"Could be. If the date's any indication, this was right after the American State of China started fighting back, just before the Fourth World War. At that point, most people had nothing—picture an entire nation of Sevens with a handful of Twos."

"Wow." I tried to imagine the landscape of our country like that, blown apart by war, then fighting to pull itself back together. It was amazing.

"How many of these diaries are there?" I asked.

Maxon pointed to a shelf with a row of journals similar to the one we held. "About a

can't believe all this exists."

He was beaming. "Would you like to read the rest of it?" He motioned to the diary.

"Yes, of course!" I practically shouted before my duties came back to me. "But I can't stay; I have to finish studying that terrible report. And you have to get back to work."

"True. Well, how about this? You can take the book and keep it for a few days."

"Am I allowed to do that?" I asked in awe.

"No." He smiled.

I hesitated, afraid of what I held. What if I lost it? What if I ruined it? Surely he had to be thinking the same thing. But I would never have an opportunity like this again. I could be careful enough for the sake of this gift.

"Okay. Just a night or two and then I'll give it straight back."

"Hide it well."

And I did. This was more than a book; it was Maxon's trust. I tucked it inside my piano stool under a pile of sheet music—a place my maids never cleaned. The only hands that would touch it would be mine.

“I’M HOPELESS!” MARLEE COMPLAINED.

“No, no, you’re doing great,” I lied.

I’d been giving Marlee piano lessons nearly every day for more than a week, and it genuinely sounded like she was getting worse. For goodness’ sake, we were still working on scales. She hit another sour note, and I couldn’t help but wince.

“Oh, look at your face!” she exclaimed. “I’m terrible. I might as well be playing with my elbows.”

“We should try that. Maybe your elbows are more accurate.”

She sighed. “I give up. Sorry, America, you’ve been so patient, but I hate hearing myself play. It sounds like the piano is sick.”

“More like it’s dying, actually.”

Marlee collapsed into laughter, and I joined her. Little did I know that when she’d asked for piano lessons, my ears would be in for such painful—but hilarious—torture.

“Maybe you’d be better at the violin? Violins make very beautiful music,” I offered.

“I don’t think so. With my luck, I’d destroy it.” Marlee rose and went over to my little table, where the papers we were supposed to be reading were pushed to one side and my sweet maids had left tea and cookies for us.

“Oh, well, that’s fine. The one here belongs to the palace anyway. You could throw it at Celeste’s head if you wanted.”

“Don’t tempt me,” she said, pouring us both some tea. “I’m so going to miss you, America. I don’t know what I’ll do when we don’t get to see each other every day.”

“Well, Maxon’s very indecisive, so you don’t have to worry about that just yet.”

“I don’t know,” she said, turning serious. “He hasn’t come right out and said it, but I know that I’m here because the public likes me. With the majority of the girls gone, it won’t be long before their opinions change and they have a new favorite, and then he’ll let me go.”

I was careful with my words, hoping she’d explain the reason for the distance she’d put between the two of them but not wanting her to shut down on me again. “Are you okay with that? With not getting Maxon, I mean?”

She gave a small shrug. “He’s just not the one. I’m fine with being out of the competition, but I really don’t want to leave,” she clarified. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to end up with a man who’s in love with someone else.”

I sat bolt upright. “Who is he—”

The look in Marlee’s eyes was triumphant, and the smile hiding behind her cup of tea said *Gotcha!*

She had.

In a split second, I realized that the thought of Maxon being in love with someone else made me so jealous I couldn’t stand it. And the moment after that—the understanding that she meant me—was infinitely reassuring.

I’d put up wall after wall, making iokes at Maxon’s expense and talking up the merits of

“Of course he hasn’t,” she said, as if this would be obvious. “He’s trying so hard to catch you, and every time he gets close you push him away. Why do you do that?”

Could I tell her? Could I confess that while my feelings for Maxon went deep—deeper than I knew, apparently—there was someone else I couldn’t let go of?

“I’m just ... not sure, I guess.” I trusted Marlee; I really did. But it was safer for us both if she didn’t know.

She nodded. It looked like she could tell there was more to it than that, but she didn’t press me. It was almost comforting, this mutual acceptance of our secrets.

“Find a way to be sure. Soon. Just because he’s not the one for me doesn’t mean Maxon’s not a great guy. I’d hate for you to lose him because you were afraid.”

She was right again. I was afraid. Afraid that Maxon’s feelings weren’t as genuine as they seemed, afraid of what being a princess might mean for me, afraid of losing Aspen.

“On a lighter note,” she said, setting down her cup of tea, “all that talk about weddings yesterday made me think of something.”

“Yes?”

“Would you want to, you know, be my maid of honor? If I get married someday?”

“Oh, Marlee, of course I would! Would you be mine?” I reached to grab her hands, and she took them happily.

“But you have sisters; won’t they mind?”

“They’ll understand. Please?”

“Absolutely! I wouldn’t miss *your* wedding for the world.” Her tone implied that my wedding would be the event of the century.

“Promise me that even if I get married to a nobody Eight in an alley somewhere, you’ll be there.”

She gave me a disbelieving look, positive that no such thing could ever happen. “Even if that’s the case. I promise.”

She didn’t ask me to make a similar vow for her, which made me wonder as I had in the past if there was another Four back home who she had her heart set on. I wouldn’t press her though. It was clear we both had secrets; but Marlee was my best friend, and I would do anything for her.

That night I was hoping to spend some time with Maxon. Marlee had me questioning a lot of my actions. And thoughts. And feelings.

After dinner, as we all stood to leave the Dining Room, I caught Maxon’s eye and tugged my ear. It was our secret sign to ask for time together, and it was rare to pass up an invitation. But tonight Maxon’s expression was disappointed as he mouthed the word “work” to me. I gave him a mock pout and a tiny wave before leaving for the night.

Perhaps it was for the best anyway. I really needed to think on some things where Maxon was concerned.

When I rounded the corner to my room Aspen was there again standing guard. He

It was slow but brief, and in those few seconds I felt that need, that sense of longing, that Aspen tended to inspire in me. One look at his emerald eyes, hungry and deep, and I felt my knees start to go shaky.

I moved into my room as quickly as I could, tortured by our connection. Thank goodness I barely had time to think about what Aspen made me feel, because the moment the door shut, my maids swarmed around me, preparing me for bed. As they chatted away and brushed my hair, I tried to let myself forget about everything for a moment.

It was impossible. I had to choose. Aspen or Maxon.

But how was I supposed to decide between two good possibilities? How could I make a choice that would leave some part of me devastated either way? I comforted myself with the thought that I still had time. I still had time.

“SO, LADY CELESTE, YOU’RE SAYING that the quantities aren’t sufficient, and you feel the number of men taken in the next draft should be raised?” Gavril Fadaye, the moderator of discussions on the *Illéa Capital Report* and the only person who ever interviewed the royals, asked.

Our debates on the *Report* were tests, and we knew it. Even though Maxon didn’t have a timeline, the public was aching for the field to narrow; and I sensed the king, queen, and their advisers were, too. If we wanted to stay, we had to perform, whenever and wherever they said. I was glad I’d made it through that awful report about the soldiers. I remembered some of the statistics, so I stood a decent chance of making a good impression tonight.

“Exactly, Gavril. The war in New Asia has been going on for years. I think one or two rounds of inflated drafts would give us the numbers we need to end it.”

I really couldn’t stand Celeste. She’d gotten one girl kicked out, ruined Kriss’s birthday party last month, and literally tried to rip a dress off my back. Her status as a Two made her consider herself a cut above the rest of us. To be honest, I didn’t have an opinion about the number of soldiers Illéa had, but now that I knew Celeste’s, I was unwaveringly opposed.

“I disagree,” I said in as ladylike a tone as I could manage. Celeste turned my way, her dark hair whipping over her shoulder in the process. With her back to the camera, she felt perfectly comfortable blatantly glaring at me.

“Ah, Lady America, you think increasing the numbers is a bad idea?” Gavril asked.

I felt the heat of a blush on my cheeks. “Twos can afford to pay their way out of the draft, so I’m sure Lady Celeste has never seen what it does when families lose their only sons. Taking more would be devastating, particularly for the lowest castes, who tend to have larger families and need every member to work in order to survive.”

Marlee, beside me, gave me a friendly nudge.

Celeste took over. “Well, then what should we do? Certainly you aren’t suggesting that we sit back and let these wars drag on?”

“No, no. Of course I want Illéa to be done with the war.” I paused to gather my thoughts and looked across at Maxon for some sort of support. Next to him, the king looked peeved.

I needed to switch directions, so I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “What if it was voluntary?”

“Voluntary?” Gavril asked.

Celeste and Natalie chuckled, which made it worse. But then I thought about it. Was it such a terrible idea?

“Yes. I’m sure there would need to be certain requirements, but perhaps we’d get more out of an army of men who wanted to be soldiers as opposed to boys who were only doing what it took to stay alive and get back to the life they left behind.”

A hush of consideration fell on the studio. Apparently, I’d made a point.

“That’s a good idea,” Elise chimed in. “Then we’d also be sending out new soldiers every month or two as people sign up. It might be invigorating to the men who’ve been

“Well, I know this might sound a little modern, but what if it was open to women?” Kriss commented.

Celeste laughed aloud. “Who do you think would sign up? Would you be heading into the battlefield?” Her voice dripped with an insulting disbelief.

Kriss kept her head together. “No, I’m not soldier material. But,” she continued, to Gavril, “if there’s one thing I’ve learned from being in the Selection, it’s that some girls have a frightening killer instinct. Don’t let the ball gowns fool you,” she finished with a smile.

Back in my room, I allowed my maids to stay a little later than usual to help me get the pile of pins out of my hair.

“I liked your idea of the army being voluntary,” Mary said, her nimble fingers hard at work.

“Me, too,” Lucy added. “I remember watching my neighbors struggle when their oldest sons were taken. It was almost unbearable when so many didn’t come home.” I could see a dozen memories flash before her eyes. I had some of my own.

Miriam Carrier was widowed young; but she and her son, Aiden, managed all right, just the two of them. When the soldiers had shown up at her door with a letter and a flag and their meaningless condolences, she’d caved in on herself. She couldn’t make it on her own. Even if she had the ability, she didn’t have the heart.

Sometimes I saw her begging as an Eight in the same square where I had said my good-byes to Carolina. But it wasn’t as if I had anything to give her.

“I know,” I said to Lucy’s reflection.

“I thought Kriss went a bit too far,” Anne commented. “Women in battle sounds like a terrible idea.”

I smiled at her prim face as she focused intently on my hair. “According to my dad, women used to—”

A short burst of knocks came at the door, startling all of us.

“I had a thought,” Maxon announced, walking in without waiting for an answer. It appeared we had a standing date Friday nights after the *Report*.

“Your Majesty,” they said together, Mary dropping pins as she sank into her curtsy.

“Let me help you,” Maxon offered, coming to Mary’s aid.

“It’s all right,” she insisted, blushing fiercely and backing out of the room. Far less subtly than I’m sure she intended, she made wide eyes at Lucy and Anne, begging them to leave with her.

“Oh, um, goodnight, miss,” Lucy said, tugging on the hem of Anne’s uniform to get her to follow.

Once they were gone, Maxon and I both broke down into laughter. I turned to the mirror and continued to work the pins out of my hair.

“They’re a funny lot,” Maxon commented.

“It’s just that they admire you so much.”

draped it over my shoulder. “Do I look okay?”

Maxon nodded, staring a little longer than necessary. He came to his senses and spoke. “Anyway, this idea ...”

“Do tell.”

“You remember that Halloween thing?”

“Yes. Oh, I still haven’t read the diary. It’s well hidden though,” I promised.

“It’s fine. No one’s looking for it. Anyway, I was thinking. All those books said it fell in October, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s October now. Why don’t we have a Halloween party?”

I spun around. “Really? Oh, Maxon, could we?”

“Would you like that?”

“I would love it!”

“I figure all the Selected girls could have costumes made. The off-duty guards could be spare dance partners since there’s only one of me and it would be unfair to make everyone stand around waiting for a turn. And we could do dancing lessons over the next week or two. You did say there wasn’t much to do during the days sometimes. And candy! We’ll have the best candies made and imported. You, my dear, will be stuffed by the end of the night. We’ll have to roll you off the floor.”

I was mesmerized.

“And we’ll make an announcement, tell the entire country to celebrate. Let the children dress up and go door-to-door doing tricks, like they used to. Your sister will love that, yes?”

“Of course she will! *Everyone* will!”

He deliberated a moment, pursing his lips. “How do you think she would like celebrating here, at the palace?”

I was stunned. “What?”

“At some point in the competition, I’m supposed to meet the parents of the Elite. Might as well have siblings come and do this around a festive time as opposed to waiting—”

His words were cut off by me barreling into his arms. I was so elated by the possibility of seeing May and my parents, I couldn’t contain my enthusiasm. He wrapped his arms around my waist and stared into my eyes, his own glittering with delight. How did this person—someone I’d imagined would be my polar opposite—always seem to find the things that would make me the happiest?

“Do you mean it? Can they really come?”

“Of course,” he answered. “I’ve been longing to meet them, and it’s part of the competition. Anyway, I think it would do all of you good to see your families.”

Once I was sure I wouldn’t cry, I whispered back, “Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome I know you love them.”

“I do.”

He chuckled. “And it’s clear you’d do practically anything for them. After all, you stayed

absolutely clear.

“Maxon, they were part of the reason I stayed in the beginning, but they’re not why I’m here now. You know that, right? I’m here because ...”

“Because?”

I looked at Maxon, his adoring face so hopeful. *Say it, America. Just tell him.*

“Because?” he asked again, this time with an impish smile coming to his lips, which made me soften even more.

I thought about my conversation with Marlee and the way I’d felt the other day when we talked about the Selection. It was hard to think of Maxon as my boyfriend when there were other girls dating him, but he wasn’t just my friend. That hopeful feeling hit me again, the wonder that we might be something special. Maxon was more to me than I’d let myself believe.

I gave him a flirtatious smile and started walking toward the door.

“America Singer, you get back here.” He ran in front of me, wrapping an arm around my waist as we stood, chest to chest. “Tell me,” he whispered.

I pinched my lips together.

“Fine, then I shall have to rely on other means of communication.”

Without any warning, he kissed me. I felt myself dip backward a bit, completely supported by his arms. I placed my hands on his neck, wanting to hold him to me ... and something shifted in my head.

Usually when we were alone together, I could block out the other girls. But tonight I thought about the possibility of someone else in my place. Just imagining it: someone else in Maxon’s arms, making him laugh, *marrying* him ... It broke my heart. I couldn’t help it; I started to cry.

“Darling, what’s wrong?”

Darling? The word, so tender and personal, enveloped me. In that moment, any desire I had to fight my feelings for Maxon disappeared. I wanted to be his dear, his darling. I wanted to be Maxon’s alone.

It might mean welcoming a future I never thought I would and saying good-bye to things I never intended to, but the thought of leaving him now wasn’t something I could handle.

It was true that I wasn’t the best candidate for the crown, but I didn’t deserve to be in the running at all if I couldn’t at least be brave enough to confess how I felt.

I sighed, trying to keep my voice steady. “I don’t want to leave all this.”

“If I remember correctly, the first time we met, you said it was like a cage.” He smiled. “It does grow on you, though, doesn’t it?”

I gave my head a small shake. “Sometimes you can be so stupid.” A weak laugh pushed through my choked-up throat.

Maxon let me pull away just enough so I could look into his brown eyes.

“Not the palace, Maxon. I could care less about the clothes or my bed or, believe it or not, the food.”

“Me?”

I nodded.

“You want me?”

I giggled at his bewildered expression. “That’s what I’m saying.”

He paused a moment. “How—But—What did I do?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “I just think that we’d be a good us.”

He smiled slowly. “We’d be a wonderful us.”

Maxon pulled me in, roughly by his standards, and kissed me again.

“Are you sure?” he asked, holding me at arm’s length, staring intently at me. “Are you absolutely positive?”

“If you’re sure, I’m sure.”

For a flicker of a second, something changed in his expression. But it passed so quickly, I wondered if it—whatever it was—was even real.

In the very next moment, he led me over to the bed, and we perched on the edge together, holding hands as my head rested on his shoulder. I was expecting him to say something. After all, wasn’t this what he had been waiting for? But there were no words. Every once in a while he’d let out a long sigh, and in that sound alone I could hear how happy he was. That helped me not to feel so anxious.

After a while—perhaps because neither of us knew what to say—Maxon sat up straighter. “I should probably go. If we’re going to add all the families to the celebration, I need to make extra plans.”

I pulled back and smiled, still giddy that I was going to get to hug my mom, dad, and May soon. “Thank you again.”

We stood together, walking toward the door. I held on to his hand tightly. For some reason, I dreaded letting it go. It felt like this whole moment was fragile somehow, and if it shifted too much it might break.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he promised in a whisper, his nose millimeters away from mine. He looked upon me with such adoration that I felt silly for worrying. “You’re astonishing.”

Once he was gone, I closed my eyes and pulled in everything from our short time together: the way he stared at me, the playful smiles, the sweet kisses. I thought about them over and over as I got ready for bed, wondering if Maxon was doing the same thing.

“LOVELY, MISS. KEEP POINTING AT the sketches, and the rest of you, try not to look at me,” the photographer asked.

It was Saturday, and all the Elite had been excused from our obligatory day of sitting in the Women’s Room. At breakfast, Maxon made his announcement about the Halloween party; and by the afternoon, our maids had started working on costume designs, and photographers had shown up to document the whole process.

Now I was attempting to look natural as I went over Anne’s drawings while my maids stood behind the table with pieces of fabric, containers of sequins, and an absurd amount of feathers.

The camera snapped and flashed as we tried to give several options. Just as I was about to pose with some gold fabric held up to my face, we had a visitor.

“Good morning, ladies,” Maxon said, strolling through the open doorway.

I couldn’t help but stand a little straighter, and it felt like my smile was taking over my face. The photographer caught that moment before addressing Maxon.

“Your Majesty, always an honor. Would you mind posing with the young lady?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

My maids stepped back, and Maxon picked up a few sketches and stood right behind me, the papers in front of us in one hand and his other settled low on my waist. That touch conveyed so much to me. *See, it said, soon I’ll get to touch you like this in front of the world. You don’t have to worry about anything.*

A few pictures were taken, and the photographer left for the next girl on his list. I realized my maids had inconspicuously dismissed themselves at some point as well.

“Your maids are quite talented,” Maxon said. “These are wonderful concepts.”

I tried to act like I always did with Maxon, but things felt different now, better and worse at the same time. “I know. I couldn’t be in better hands.”

“Have you settled on one yet?” he asked, fanning out the papers on my desk.

“We’re all fond of the bird idea. I think it’s meant to be a reference to my necklace,” I said, touching the thin string of silver. My songbird necklace was a gift from my dad, and I preferred it over the heavy jewelry the palace provided for us.

“I hate to say this, but I think Celeste has picked something avian as well. She seemed awfully determined,” he said.

“That’s all right,” I replied with a shrug. “I’m not crazy about feathers anyway.” My smile faltered. “Wait. You were with Celeste?”

He nodded. “Just a quick visit to chat. I’m afraid I can’t stay long here, either. Father’s not thrilled about all this, but with the Selection still going on, he understood that it would be nice to have some more festivities. And he agreed it would be a much better way to meet the families, all things considered.”

“Like what?”

“He’s eager for an elimination. and I’m supposed to do one after I meet with everyone’s

after our conversation last night. Of all the moments I'd shared with Maxon, nothing seemed quite so real as that one.

Still scanning the designs, he spoke absentmindedly. "I suppose I ought to finish my rounds."

"You're leaving already?"

"Not to worry, darling. I'll see you at dinner."

Yes, I thought, *but you'll see all of us at dinner.*

"Is everything all right?" I asked.

"Of course," he answered, offering me a quick kiss. On the cheek. "I have to run. We'll talk again soon."

And, just as suddenly as he appeared, he was gone.

As of Sunday, the Halloween party was eight days away, which meant the palace was a hurricane of activity.

On Monday the Elite spent the morning with Queen Amberly taste testing and approving a menu for the party. It was easily the best task we'd been given so far. That afternoon, however, Celeste was missing from the Women's Room for a few hours. When she returned around four, she announced to us all, "Maxon sends his love."

Tuesday afternoon we greeted extended members of the royal family who were coming to town for the festivities. But that morning we all watched out the window as Maxon gave Kriss an archery lesson in the gardens.

Meals were full of guests who had come to stay early, but Maxon was often missing, as well as Marlee and Natalie.

I felt more and more embarrassed. I'd made a mistake by confessing my feelings to Maxon. For all his talk, he couldn't really be interested in me if his first instinct was to spend time with everyone else.

I'd all but lost hope by Friday when I found myself sitting at the piano in my room after the *Report*, wishing that Maxon would come.

He didn't.

I tried to put it out of my mind on Saturday, as the Elite were obligated to entertain the influx of ladies at the palace in the Women's Room in the morning and have yet another dance rehearsal in the afternoon.

Thank goodness our family chose to focus on music and art as Fives, because I was a terrible dancer. The only person in the room worse than me was Natalie. Obnoxiously enough, Celeste was the epitome of gracefulness. More than once the instructors asked her to help others in the room, the result of which was Natalie nearly twisting her ankle because of Celeste's intentionally poor guidance.

Smooth as a snake, Celeste faulted Natalie's two left feet for her problems. The teachers believed her, and Natalie laughed it all off. I admired Natalie for not letting Celeste get to her.

Aspen had been there for all the lessons. The first few times I avoided him not really

since five of us would be eligible again soon and in very high demand.

But seeing as this was our last formal rehearsal, when Aspen was near enough to offer me a dance, I didn't turn him down.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "You've seemed down the last few times I've seen you."

"Just tired," I lied. I couldn't talk with him about boy problems.

"Really?" he asked doubtfully. "I was sure that it meant bad news was coming."

"What do you mean?" Did he know something I didn't?

He sighed. "If you're preparing to tell me that I need to stop fighting for you, that's not a conversation I want to have."

In truth, I hadn't even thought about Aspen in the last week or so. I was so consumed by my mistimed words and mistaken guesses, I couldn't consider anything else. And here, while I'd been worried about Maxon letting me go, Aspen had been worrying about me doing the same to him.

"That's not what it is," I answered vaguely, feeling guilty.

He nodded, satisfied with that response for now. "Ouch!"

"Oops!" I said. I genuinely hadn't meant to step on him. I worked to focus a little more on the dancing.

"I'm sorry, Mer, but you're terrible." He was chuckling even though the heel of my shoe had to have hurt him.

"I know, I know," I said breathlessly. "I'm trying, I swear!"

I pranced around the room like a blind moose, but what I lacked in grace I made up for in effort. Aspen, kindly, did his best to make me look good, attempting to be a little less on the beat to be in time with me. That was so typical of him, always trying to be my hero.

By the end of that last lesson, I at least knew all the steps. I couldn't promise I wouldn't accidentally take out a visiting diplomat with an energetic kick of my leg, but I'd do my best. As I considered that image, I realized it was no wonder Maxon was having second thoughts. I'd be an embarrassment to take to another country let alone receive anyone here. I just didn't have that princess air about me.

I sighed and went to get a cup of water. Aspen followed me while the rest of the girls left.

"So," he started. I did a sweep of the room to make sure no one was watching. "I have to assume that if you're not worried about me, you're worried about him."

I lowered my eyes and blushed. How well he knew me.

"Not that I'm cheering for him or anything, but if he can't see how amazing you are, he's an idiot."

I smiled, continuing to study the floor.

"And if you don't get to be princess then, so what? That doesn't make you any less incredible. And you know ... you know ..." He couldn't get out what he wanted to say, and I risked looking at his face.

In Aspen's eyes, I saw a thousand different endings to that sentence, all of them

“I know, Aspen. I do.”

I STOOD IN LINE WITH the other girls in the massive foyer of the palace, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

“Lady America,” Silvia whispered, and that was all it took to know I was behaving in an unacceptable way. As our main tutor for the Selection, she took our actions quite personally.

I tried to still myself. I envied Silvia and the staff and the handful of guards who were moving around the space if only for the fact that they were allowed to walk. If I could do the same, I knew I’d feel much calmer.

Maybe if Maxon was here already it wouldn’t be so bad. Then again, maybe it would make me more anxious. I still couldn’t figure out why, after everything, he hadn’t made any time for me lately.

“They’re here!” I heard through the palace doors. I wasn’t the only one who made sounds of delight.

“All right, ladies!” Silvia called. “Best behavior! Butlers and maids against the wall, please.”

We tried to be the lovely, regal young women Silvia wanted us to, but the second Kriss’s and Marlee’s parents made it through the doorway, it all fell apart. I knew that both girls were only children, and it was obvious their parents missed them too much to bother with decorum. They ran in screaming, and Marlee dashed out of the line without so much as a pause.

Celeste’s parents were more put together, though they clearly were thrilled to see their daughter. She broke rank as well, but in a much more civilized way than Marlee. I didn’t even register Natalie’s or Elise’s parents, because a short figure with wild red hair blazed around the open door, her eyes searching.

“May!”

She heard my call and saw my waving arm and rushed to me, Mom and Dad following her lead. I knelt on the floor, embracing her.

“Ames! I can’t believe it!” she crooned, admiration and jealousy in her voice. “You look so, so beautiful!”

I couldn’t speak. I could barely even see her, I was crying so much.

A moment later, I felt the steady arms of my father taking us both in. Then Mom, abandoning her usual propriety, joined us, and we all held one another in a heap on the palace floor.

I heard a sigh that I knew was Silvia’s, but I really didn’t care at the moment.

Once I could breathe again, I spoke. “I’m so happy you guys are here.”

“We are, too, kitten,” Dad said. “Can’t even tell you how much we missed you.” I felt his kiss on the back of my head.

I twisted so I could hug him better. I didn’t know until this very moment how badly I had needed to see them.

I reached for Mom last. I was shocked that she was so quiet. I couldn’t believe she hadn’t already demanded a detailed report of my progress with Maxon. But when I pulled back, I

in the moment, and that meant the world to me. Because I was, too.

I noticed May's eyes focus on something over my shoulder.

"That's him," she breathed.

"Hmm?" I asked, looking down at her. I turned to see Maxon watching us from behind the grand stairwell. His smile was amused as he made his way to where we were huddled on the floor. My father stood immediately.

"Your Highness," he said, his voice full of admiration.

Maxon walked up to him, hand outstretched. "Mr. Singer, it's an honor. I've heard so much about you. And you, too, Mrs. Singer." He moved to my mother, who had also risen and straightened her hair.

"Your Majesty," she squeaked, a little starstruck. "Sorry about all that." She motioned to the floor as May and I stood, still holding each other tightly.

Maxon chuckled. "Not at all. I'd expect no less enthusiasm from anyone related to Lady America." I was sure Mom would want an explanation for that later. "And you must be May."

May blushed as she extended her hand, expecting a shake but getting a kiss. "I never did get to thank you for not crying."

"What?" she asked, blushing even more in her confusion.

"No one told you?" Maxon said brightly. "You won me my first date with your lovely sister here. I'll be forever in your debt."

May giggled back. "Well, you're welcome, I guess."

Maxon put his hands behind his back, his education coming back to him. "I'm afraid I must meet the others, but please stay here for a moment. I'll be making a short announcement to the group. And I'm hoping to get to speak with you more very soon. So glad you could come."

"He's even cuter in person!" May whispered loudly, and I could tell by the slight shake of his head that Maxon had heard.

He went off to Elise's family, who were easily the most refined of the group. Her older brothers looked as rigid as the guards, and her parents bowed to Maxon as he approached. I wondered if Elise had told them to do that or if that was just who they were. They all looked so polished, with matching heads of jet-black hair topping their small, smartly dressed frames.

Beside them, Natalie and her very pretty younger sister were whispering to Kriss as their parents shook hands. The whole space was full of warm energy.

"What does he mean, he expected enthusiasm from us?" Mom demanded in a low whisper. "Is this because you yelled at him when you met? You haven't been doing that again, have you?"

I sighed. "Actually, Mom, we argue pretty regularly."

"What?" She gaped at me. "Well, stop it!"

"Oh, and I kneed him in the groin once."

There was a split second of silence before May barked a laugh. She covered her mouth and tried to stop, but it kept coming out in awkward, squeaky sounds. Dad's lips were pressed

I didn't know why, but the word *assault* pushed us all over the edge; and May, Dad, and I bent over laughing as Mom stared at us.

"Sorry, Mom," I managed.

"Oh, good lord." She suddenly seemed very excited to meet Marlee's parents, and I didn't stop her from going.

"So he enjoys a girl who stands up to him," Dad said once we all calmed down. "I like him more already."

Dad looked around the room, taking in the palace, and I stood there trying to absorb his words. How many times in the years Aspen and I had been dating in secret had he and my father been in the same room? A dozen at least. Maybe more. And I'd never really worried about him approving of Aspen. I knew getting him to consent to me marrying down a caste would be hard, but I had always assumed I'd get his permission in the end.

For some reason, this felt a thousand times more stressful. Even with Maxon being a One, with him being able to provide for the lot of us, I was suddenly aware that there was a chance my dad might not like him.

Dad wasn't a rebel, out burning houses or anything. But I knew he was unhappy with the way things were run. What if his issues with the government extended to Maxon? What if he said I shouldn't be with him?

Before I could go too far down that path of thought, Maxon bounded up a few of the steps so he could see all of us.

"I want to thank you again for coming. We're so pleased to have you at the palace, not only to celebrate the first Halloween in Illéa in decades, but so that we can get to know all of you. I'm sorry my parents weren't able to greet you as well. You will meet them very soon.

"The mothers, sisters, and Elite are invited to have tea with my mother this afternoon in the Women's Room. Your daughters will be able to escort you there. And the gentlemen will be having cigars with my father and myself. We'll have a butler come for you, so no worries about getting lost.

"Your maids will escort you to the rooms you'll use for the duration of your stay, and they will get you properly suited for your visit, as well as for the celebration tomorrow night."

He gave us all a quick wave and went on his way. Almost immediately, a maid was at our side.

"Mr. and Mrs. Singer? I'm here to escort you and your daughter to your quarters."

"But I want to stay with America!" May protested.

"Sweetie, I'm sure the king gave us a room every bit as nice as America's. Don't you want to see it?" my mother encouraged.

May turned to me. "I want to live exactly how you live. Just for a little while. Can't I stay with you?"

I sighed. So I'd have to forgo some privacy for a few days, so what? There was no way I could say no to that face.

"Fine. Maybe with two of us, my maids will actually have something to do."

sworn he was born to be a One. He looked so young and smart in the formal outfit. He even seemed taller.

“I think I told you everything we were taught about our history, how President Wallis was the last leader of what was the United States, and then he led the American State of China. I didn’t know about him at all, did you?”

Dad nodded. “Your grandpa told me about him. I heard he was a decent guy, but there wasn’t much he could do when things got as bad as they did.”

I’d only learned the solid truth of the history of Illéa since I’d been at the palace. For some reason, the story of our country’s origin was mostly passed on orally. I’d heard several different things, and none of them was as complete as the education I’d received in the last few months.

The United States was invaded at the beginning of the Third World War after they couldn’t repay their crippling debt to China. Instead of getting money, which the United States didn’t have, the Chinese set up a government here, creating the American State of China and using the Americans as labor. Eventually the United States rebelled—not only against China, but also against the Russians, who were trying to steal the labor force set up by the Chinese—joining with Canada, Mexico, and several other Latin countries to form one country. That was the Fourth World War, and—while we survived it, became a new country because of it—it was pretty economically devastating.

“Maxon told me that right before the Fourth World War people hardly had anything.”

“He’s right. It’s part of why the caste system is so unfair. No one had much to offer in the way of help in the first place, which is why so many people ended up in the lower castes.”

I didn’t really want to go down this path with Dad, because I knew he could get really worked up. He wasn’t wrong—the castes weren’t fair—but this was a happy visit, and I didn’t want to waste it talking about things we couldn’t change.

“Besides the little history, it’s mostly etiquette lessons. We’re getting a bit more into diplomacy now. I think we might have to do something with that soon, they’re pushing it so hard. The girls who stay will have to anyway.”

“Who stay?”

“It turns out one girl will be going home with her family. Maxon’s supposed to make an elimination after meeting you all.”

“You sound unhappy. Do you think he’ll send you home?”

I shrugged.

“Come on now. You must know if he likes you or not by this point. If he does, you have nothing to worry about. If he doesn’t, why would you even want to stay?”

“I guess you’re right.”

He stopped walking. “So which is it?”

This was kind of embarrassing to talk about with my dad, but I wouldn’t have talked about it with Mom either. And May would be worse at interpreting Maxon than I was.

“I think he likes me. He says he does.”

something like that.”

I didn't know how to explain that Maxon seemed to be making time for everyone else. It was too humiliating. “I guess.”

“Speaking of legislation, have you all learned anything about that yet? About how to write up proposals?”

I wasn't any more excited about this topic, but at least it was boy-free. “Not yet. We've been reading a lot of them though. They're hard to understand sometimes; but Silvia, the woman from downstairs, she's sort of a guide or tutor or whatever. She tries to explain things. And Maxon is helpful if I ask him questions.”

“Is he?” Dad seemed happy about this.

“Oh, yes. I think it's important to him that we all feel like we could be successful, you know? So he's really great about explaining things. He even ...” I deliberated. I wasn't supposed to mention the book room. But this was my dad. “Listen, you have to promise not to say anything about this.”

He chuckled. “The only person I ever talk to is your mother, and we all know she can't be trusted with a secret, so I promise I won't tell her.”

I giggled. Trying to imagine Mom keeping anything to herself was impossible.

“You can trust me, kitten,” he said, giving me a little side hug.

“There's a room, a secret room, and it's full of books, Dad!” I confessed quietly, double-checking to make sure no one was around. “There are books that are banned and these maps of the world, old ones with all the countries like they used to look. Dad, I didn't know there used to be that many! And there's a computer in there. Have you ever seen one in real life?”

He shook his head, stunned.

“It's amazing. You type what you're looking for, and it searches through all the books in the room and finds it.”

“How?”

“I don't know, but that's how Maxon found out what Halloween was. He even ...” I looked up and down the hall again. I decided there was no way Dad would tell about the library, but if I told him I had one of those secret books in my room, it might be too much.

“He even?”

“He let me borrow one once, just to see.”

“Oh, that's very interesting! What did you read? Can you tell me?”

I bit my lip. “It was one of Gregory Illéa's personal diaries.”

Dad's mouth dropped open before he composed himself. “America, that's incredible. What did it say?”

“Oh, I haven't finished. Mostly, it was to figure out what Halloween was.”

He considered my words for a moment and shook his head. “Why are you worried, America? Clearly, Maxon trusts you.”

I sighed, feeling foolish. “I guess you're right.”

“Amazing,” he breathed. “So there's a hidden room around here somewhere?” He

“Hmm,” he said, amused. “I’ll be very careful making my way back to my room then.”

“Which you should probably do soon. I need to get May ready for tea with the queen.”

“Ah, yes, you and your teas with the queen,” he joked. “All right, kitten. I’ll see you tonight for dinner. Now ... how best not to fall into a secret hatch?” he wondered aloud, spreading his arms out like a protective shield as he walked.

Once he got to the stairwell, he tentatively put his hand on the rail. “Just so you know, this is safe.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I shook my head and made my way back to my room.

It was difficult not to skip down the halls. I was so happy my family was here, I could hardly stand it. If Maxon didn’t send me home, it was going to be harder than ever to be separated from them.

I rounded the corner to my room and saw that the door was open.

“What did he look like?” I heard May ask as I approached.

“Handsome. To me anyway. His hair was kind of wavy, and it never stayed down.” May giggled, and so did Lucy as she spoke. “A few times, I actually got to run my fingers through it. I think of that sometimes. Not as much as I used to.”

I tiptoed closer, not wanting to disturb them.

“Do you still miss him?” May asked, curious about boys as always.

“Less and less,” Lucy admitted, a tiny lilt of hope in her voice. “When I got here, I thought I would die from the ache. I kept dreaming up ways to escape the palace and get back to him, but that would never really happen. I couldn’t leave my dad, and even if I got outside the walls, there’s no way I could have found my way back.”

I knew a little about Lucy’s past, how her family gave themselves as servants to a family of Threes in exchange for the money to pay for an operation for Lucy’s mother. Lucy’s mom eventually died, and when the mother found out her son was in love with Lucy, she sold Lucy and her father to the palace.

I peeked through the door to find May and Lucy on the bed. The balcony doors were open, and the delicious Angeles air wafted in. May fell into the palace look so naturally, her day dress hanging perfectly on her frame as she sat braiding parts of Lucy’s hair back and letting the rest fall free. I’d never seen Lucy without her hair pulled up tight into a bun. She looked lovely like this, young and carefree.

“What’s it like to be in love?” May asked.

Part of me ached. Why hadn’t she ever asked me? Then I remembered, as far as May knew, I’d never been in love.

Lucy’s smile was sad. “It’s the most wonderful and terrible thing that can ever happen to you,” she said simply. “You know that you’ve found something amazing, and you want to hold on to it forever; and every second after you have it, you fear the moment you might lose it.”

I sighed softly. She was absolutely right.

Love is beautiful fear

“It’s wonderful. May used to braid my hair all the time, too. She’s very talented.”

May shrugged. “What else was I supposed to do? We couldn’t afford to have dolls, so I used Ames instead.”

“Well,” Lucy said, turning to face her, “while you’re here, you will be our little doll. Anne, Mary, and I are going to make you look as pretty as the queen.”

May tilted her head. “No one’s as pretty as her.” Then she quickly turned to me. “Don’t tell Mom I said that.”

I chuckled. “I won’t. For now, though, we have to get ready. It’s almost time for tea.”

May clapped her hands together excitedly and went to settle in front of the mirror. Lucy pulled her hair up, managing to keep the braids together as she made her bun, putting her cap on to cover most of it. I couldn’t blame her for wanting it to stay as it was a little bit longer.

“Oh, a letter came for you, miss,” Lucy said, handing an envelope to me with great care.

“Thank you,” I replied, unable to keep the shock out of my voice. Most of the people I expected to hear from were currently with me. I tore it open and read the brief note, its deliberate scratch completely familiar.

America,

I have found out belatedly that the families of the Elite were recently invited to the palace, and that Father, Mother, and May have left to visit you. I know that Kenna is far too pregnant to travel, and Gerad is much too young. I’m trying to understand why this invitation wasn’t extended to me. I’m your brother, America.

My only guess is that Father chose to exclude me. I certainly hope it wasn’t you. We are on the edge of great things, you and I. Our positions can be very helpful to each other. If any other special privileges are ever offered to your family, you ought to remember me, America. We can help each other.

Did you happen to mention me to the prince? Just curious.

Write soon.

Kota

I debated crumpling it up and tossing it in the trash. I had hoped Kota might be getting over his caste climbing and learn to be content with the success he had. No such luck, it seemed. I threw the letter in the back of a drawer, choosing to forget about it entirely. His jealousy wasn’t going to spoil this visit.

Lucy rang for Anne and Mary, and we all had a wonderful time getting ready. May’s effervescent attitude kept us all in good spirits, and I found myself singing while we dressed. Not long after, Mom came by, asking all of us to double-check that she looked all right.

She did, of course. She was shorter and curvier than the queen, but she was every bit as regal in her dress. As we walked downstairs, May clutched my arm, looking sad.

She sighed. “How am I supposed to go back to khakis after all this?”

The girls were animated, and everyone was sparkling with energy. Natalie’s sister, Lacey, was about May’s age, and they sat in a corner, talking. I could see how Lacey resembled her sister. Physically, they were thin, blond, and lovely. But where May and I were opposites personality-wise, Natalie and Lacey were so similar. I would have described Lacey as a bit less whimsical, however. Not quite as clueless as her sister.

The queen made her rounds, speaking to all the mothers, asking questions in her sweet way. I was in a small group listening to Elise’s mother talk about her family back in New Asia when May tugged on my dress, pulling me away.

“May!” I hissed. “What are you doing? You can’t act like that, especially when the queen’s present!”

“You have to see!” she insisted.

Thank goodness Silvia wasn’t here. I wouldn’t put it past her to admonish May for something like this, even though May didn’t know any better.

We made our way to the window, and May pointed outside. “Look!”

I peered past the shrubs and fountains and saw two figures. The first was my father, speaking with his hands as he either explained or asked something. The second was Maxon, pausing to think before responding. They walked slowly, and sometimes my dad would put his hands in his pockets or Maxon would tuck his behind his back. Whatever this conversation was, it seemed intense.

I glanced around. The women were all still engrossed with the experience, with the queen herself, and no one seemed to notice us.

Maxon stopped, stood in front of my father, and spoke deliberately. There was no aggression or anger, but he looked determined. After a pause, Dad held out his hand. Maxon smiled and shook it eagerly. A moment later, they both seemed lighter, and Dad slapped Maxon on the back. Maxon seemed to stiffen a bit at that. He wasn’t used to being touched. But then Dad put his arm around Maxon’s shoulder, the way he did with me and Kota, the way he did with all his kids. And Maxon seemed to like that very much.

“What was that about?” I asked aloud.

May shrugged. “It looked important though.”

“It did.”

We waited to see if Maxon had a conversation with anyone else’s father; but if he did, they didn’t go to the gardens.

THE HALLOWEEN PARTY WAS AS amazing as Maxon had promised. When I walked into the Great Room with May by my side, I was stunned by the sheer beauty before me. Everything was golden. Ornaments on the walls, glittering jewels in the chandeliers, cups, plates, even the food—everything had hints of gold in it. It was nothing short of magnificent.

Popular music was playing through a sound system, but in the corner a small band waited to play the songs for the traditional dances we'd learned. Cameras—both for photography and video—dotted the room. No doubt this would be the highlight of Illéa programming tomorrow. There couldn't be a celebration equal to this one. I briefly wondered what it would be like if I was still here at Christmastime.

Everyone's costumes were gorgeous. Marlee was dressed as an angel and dancing with that guard I ran into, Officer Woodwork. She even had wings that looked like they'd been made out of iridescent paper floating behind her. Celeste's dress was short and made of feathers, with a large plume behind her head announcing she was a peacock.

Kriss was standing with Natalie, and they seemed to have coordinated. Natalie's dress had flowers blossoming on the bodice, and her full skirt was fluttery blue tulle. Kriss's dress was as golden as the room and covered with cascading leaves. Guessing, I'd say they were spring and fall. It was a cute idea.

Elise's Asian heritage was being taken full advantage of. Her silken dress was an exaggeration of the demure ones she tended to favor. The draping sleeves were incredibly dramatic, and I was in awe of her ability to walk with the ornate headdress she was wearing. Elise didn't typically stand out, but tonight she looked lovely, almost regal.

Around the room, all the family and friends were in costume, too, and the guards were equally dashing. I saw a baseball player, a cowboy, someone in a suit with a name tag that said GAVRIL FADAYE, and one guard so bold as to put on a lady's dress. A few girls were near him, laughing up a storm. But many of the guards were in the dress version of their uniforms, which was simply pressed white pants and their blue jackets. They had on gloves but no hats, and these features helped distinguish them from the guards who were actually on duty, surrounding the perimeter of the room.

"So, what do you think?" I asked May, but when I turned, I saw she had disappeared into the crowd, already exploring. I laughed to myself as I surveyed the room, trying to find her puffy little dress. When she said she wanted to go to the party as a bride—"the kind we see on TV"—I had thought it was a joke. She looked absolutely adorable in her veil though.

"Hello, Lady America," someone whispered in my ear.

I started and turned to see Aspen in his dress uniform beside me.

"You scared me!" I put my hand over my heart as if that would slow it. Aspen only chuckled.

"I like your costume," he said jovially.

"Thank you. I do, too." Anne had made me into a butterfly. My dress was tapered from front to back in a fluttering material edged in black that floated around me. A tiny mask that

“Oh.” It seemed sad to waste a perfectly good reason to be extravagant. Aspen had even fewer opportunities than I did in that department. Why not live it up?

“I just wanted to say hello, see how you were.”

“Good,” I said quickly. I felt so awkward.

“Oh.” He sounded unsatisfied. “All right then.”

Maybe after his little speech the other day, he expected more of an answer, but I wasn't ready to say anything yet. He gave me a bow and went off to see another guard who embraced him like a brother. I wondered if being a guard gave him a sense of family the way the Selection had done for me.

Marlee and Elise found me moments later and dragged me onto the dance floor. As I swayed, trying not to hit anyone, I caught Aspen standing on the edge of the floor, talking with Mom and May. Mom ran her hand over Aspen's sleeve, like she was straightening it out, and May was beaming. I could imagine them telling him how handsome he looked in his uniform, how proud his mother must be. He smiled back, and I could see how pleased he was, too. Aspen and I were rarities, a Five and Six pulled out of our monotonous lives and placed in the palace. The Selection had been so life changing that I sometimes forgot to appreciate the experience.

I danced in a circle with some of the other girls and guards until the music quieted and the DJ spoke.

“Ladies of the Selection, gentlemen of the guard, and friends and relatives of the royal family, please welcome King Clarkson, Queen Amberly, and Prince Maxon Schreave!”

The band swelled with music, and we all curtsied and bowed as they came in together. The king was apparently dressed as a king, simply that of another country. I didn't catch the reference. The queen's dress was a blue so deep it almost appeared black, with glittering jewels across it. She looked like the night sky. And Maxon, comically, was a pirate. His pants were torn in places, and he wore a loose shirt with a vest and a bandanna over his hair. To add to the effect, he hadn't shaved in a day or two, and a shadow of dark blond fuzz covered the bottom half of his face like a smile.

The DJ asked us to clear the floor, and the king and queen had a first dance together. Maxon stood to one side beside Kriss and Natalie, whispering things to each in turn and making them laugh. Finally I saw that he was doing a sweep of the room. I didn't know if he was looking for me or not, but I didn't want to be caught staring at him. I fluffed out my dress and stared at his parents instead. They looked very happy.

I thought about the Selection and how crazy it seemed, but I couldn't argue with the outcome. King Clarkson and Queen Amberly were suited for each other. He seemed forceful, and she combated that with a calming nature. She was a quiet listener, and he always seemed to have something to say. Though the whole thing should be archaic and wrong, it worked.

Did they ever grow apart during their Selection the way I felt Maxon might be growing apart from me? Why had he not made a single attempt to see me in the midst of dating the rest of the girls? Maybe that was why he was speaking with Dad, to explain to him why he'd have

found her way to Marlee and was tucked right in front of her. Marlee held her arms across May's chest in a sisterly gesture, and their white dresses shone in the lights. It didn't surprise me at all that they got so close in less than a day. I sighed. Where was Aspen?

In a last effort, I peeked behind me. There he was, just over my shoulder, waiting by me as always. When our eyes met, he gave me a quick wink, and it lifted my entire mood.

After the king and queen finished, we all crowded onto the dance floor. Guards shuffled around, pairing up with girls easily. Maxon was still standing on the side of the room with Kriss and Natalie. I hoped maybe he'd come ask me to dance. I certainly didn't want to ask him.

Gathering my nerve, I smoothed my dress and walked in his direction. I decided that I would at least present him with an opportunity to ask me. I made my way across the floor, planning to jump into their conversation. When I got close enough to do that, Maxon turned to Natalie.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

She laughed and tilted her blond head to the side like it was the most obvious thing in the world, and I breezed past them, my eyes trained on a table of chocolates, as if that was my goal the entire time. I kept my back to the room as I ate the delicious treats, hoping no one could see how deeply I was blushing.

Perhaps a half-dozen songs in, Officer Woodwork appeared next to me. Like Aspen, he had opted to stay in his uniform.

"Lady America," he said with a bow. "May I have this dance?"

His voice was bright and warm, and his enthusiasm washed over me. I took his hand easily.

"Absolutely, sir," I replied. "I should warn you, though, I'm not very good."

"That's fine. We'll take it slow." His smile was so inviting that I couldn't be worried about my poor dancing skills, and I happily followed him to the floor.

The dance was an upbeat one, which suited his mood. He spoke through the entire thing, and it was hard to keep up. So much for taking it slow.

"It seems you've fully recovered from me nearly running you over," he joked.

"It's a shame you didn't do any damage," I shot back. "If I was in a splint, I wouldn't have to dance at least."

He laughed. "I'm glad you're as funny as everyone says you are. I hear you're a favorite of the prince, too." He made it sound as if it was common knowledge.

"I don't know about that." Part of me was sick of people saying that. Another part yearned for it still to be true.

Over Officer Woodwork's shoulder, I saw Aspen dancing with Celeste. Something knotted in my chest at the sight.

"Sounds like you get along well with most everyone. Someone even said that during the last attack you took your maids with you to the hiding place for the royal family. Is that true?" He sounded amazed. At the time, it seemed like a completely normal thing to protect the girls I

I blushed. "Thank you."

I was left gasping for breath after the song, so I took a seat at one of the many tables sprinkled around the room. I drank orange punch and fanned myself with a napkin, watching others dancing on the floor. I found Maxon with Elise. They looked happy as they spun around in circles. He'd danced with Elise twice now and still hadn't sought me out.

It took awhile to find Aspen on the floor since so many men were in uniform, but I finally spotted him in a corner, talking with Celeste. I watched as she winked at him, her lips turned up in a flirtatious smile.

Who does she think she is? I stood to go and tell her to stop but realized what that would mean for both Aspen and myself before I took a step forward. I sat back down and continued to sip my punch. By the time the song ended, though, I was on the move and had situated myself close enough to Aspen for it to be appropriate for him to ask me to dance.

And he did, which was good, because I didn't think I could have been patient.

"What in the world was that?" I asked quietly but with obvious outrage in my voice.

"What was what?"

"Celeste was running her hands all over you!"

"Somebody's jealous," he sang into my ear.

"Oh, stop it! She's not supposed to be acting like that; it's against the rules!" I looked around to make sure no one could see how intimately we were talking, particularly my parents. I noticed Mom sitting and talking with Natalie's mother. Dad had disappeared.

"This from you," he said, rolling his eyes playfully. "If we aren't together, you can't tell me who I'm not allowed to talk to."

I made a face. "You know it's not like that."

"So what is it like?" he whispered. "I don't know if I'm supposed to be holding on or letting go." He shook his head. "I don't want to give up, but if there's nothing for me to hope for, then tell me."

I could see the effort behind him keeping his face so calm, the lingering sadness in his voice. And I hurt, too. Thinking about letting this end brought a stabbing pain to my chest.

I sighed and confessed. "He's been avoiding me. He'll say hello, but he's been very devoted to dating the other girls recently. I think I must have imagined that he actually liked me."

He stopped dancing for a moment, shocked at what I was saying. He quickly picked back up, studying my face for a moment.

"I didn't realize that was what was going on," he said softly. "I mean, you know I want us to be together, but I didn't want you to get hurt."

"Thanks." I shrugged. "I feel stupid more than anything."

Aspen pulled me in a little closer, still keeping a respectful distance though I knew he didn't want to. "Trust me, Mer, any man who passes up the chance to be with you is the stupid one."

"You tried to pass me up." I reminded him.

Aspen leaned in. “You know what this dance reminds me of?”

“Tell me.”

“Fern Tally’s sixteenth birthday party.”

I gave him a look like he was crazy. I remembered Fern’s sixteenth birthday. Fern was a Six, and sometimes we got help from her when Aspen’s mom was too busy to fit us in. Her sixteenth birthday party came about seven months after Aspen and I had started dating. We were both invited, and it wasn’t much of a party. A cake and water, the radio turned on because she didn’t own any music discs, and the lights dimmed in her unfinished basement. The big thing was that it was the first party I’d been to that wasn’t a “family” party. It was just the local kids alone in a room, and that was exciting. However, it in no way compared to the splendor of what was happening around us now.

“How in the world is this party like that one?” I asked disbelievingly.

Aspen swallowed once and spoke. “We danced. Remember? I was so proud to have you there, in my arms, in front of other people. Even if you did look like you were having a seizure.” He winked at me.

The words stirred my heart. I did remember that. I lived off that moment for weeks.

In an instant a thousand secrets that Aspen and I had built and saved flooded my mind: the names we’d picked out for our imaginary children, our tree house, his ticklish spot on the back of his neck, the notes we’d written and hidden away, my failed efforts in making homemade soap, games of tic-tac-toe played with our fingers on his stomach ... games where we couldn’t remember our invisible moves ... games he always let me win.

“Tell me you’ll wait for me. If you’ll wait for me, Mer, I can handle anything else,” he breathed into my ear.

The music switched to a traditional song, and a nearby officer asked for a dance. I was swept away, leaving both Aspen and myself without any answers.

The night went on, and I found myself peeking over at Aspen more than once. Though I tried to seem casual about it, I bet anyone really paying attention might have noticed, particularly my dad, if he had been in the room. But he seemed more interested in touring the palace than in dancing.

I tried to distract myself with the party and must have danced with everyone in the room except for Maxon. I was sitting down resting my tired feet when I heard his voice beside me.

“My lady?” I turned to see him. “May I have this dance?”

That feeling, that indefinable something, coursed through me. As dejected as I’d felt, as embarrassed as I’d been, when he offered me that moment, I had to take it.

“Of course.” He took my hand and walked me out to the floor, where the band was starting a slow song. I felt a rush of happiness. He didn’t seem upset or uncomfortable. On the contrary, Maxon held me so close I could smell his cologne and feel his stubble against my cheek.

“I was wondering if I was going to get a dance at all,” I commented, trying to sound

were like single lines of poetry. After the last week, I didn't think I'd ever hear him speak to me that way again. It made my pulse race.

"You look lovely, America. Much too beautiful to be on the arm of a scraggly pirate."

I giggled. "How could you have possibly dressed to match? Come as a tree?"

"At the very least, some kind of shrubbery."

I laughed again. "I would pay money to see you dressed as a shrubbery!"

"Next year," he promised.

I looked at him. *Next year?*

"Would you like that? For us to have another Halloween party next October?" he asked.

"Will I even be here next October?"

Maxon stopped dancing. "Why wouldn't you?"

I shrugged. "You've been avoiding me all week, dating the other girls. And ... I saw you talking to my dad. I thought you might be telling him why you had to kick out his daughter." I swallowed the lump in my throat. I was *not* going to cry here.

"America."

"I get it. Someone has to go, and I'm a Five, and Marlee's the people's favorite—"

"America, stop," he said gently. "I'm such an idiot. I had no idea you'd see it that way. I thought you felt secure in your standing."

I was missing something here.

Maxon sighed. "Honestly? I was trying to give the other girls a sporting chance. From the beginning, I've really only looked at you, wanted you." I ducked my head for a moment, overcome by his deep stare. "When you told me how you felt, I was so relieved that a part of me didn't believe it. I still have a hard time accepting that it was real. You'd be surprised how infrequently I get something I truly want." Maxon's eyes were hiding something, some sadness he wasn't prepared to share. But he shook it away and continued explaining, starting to sway to the music again.

"I was afraid I was wrong, that you would change your mind any second. I've been looking for a suitable alternative, but the truth is ..."—Maxon looked me in the eyes again, unwavering—"there's only you. Maybe I'm not really looking, maybe they aren't right for me. It doesn't matter. I just know I want you. And that terrifies me. I've been waiting for you to take back the words, to beg to leave."

It took me a moment to find my breath. Suddenly all that time away looked different. I could understand that feeling—that it was too good to be true, too good to trust. I felt like that every day with him.

"Maxon, that's not going to happen," I whispered into his neck. "If anything, you're going to realize I'm not good enough."

His lips were at my ear. "Darling, you're perfect."

My arm on his back drew him toward me, and he did the same, until we were closer to each other physically than we'd ever been. In the back of my mind, I realized we were in a crowded room, that somewhere my mother was probably fainting at the sight, but I didn't

Maxon explained everything. “I want us to take our time. After I announce the dismissal tomorrow, that will appease the public and my father, but I don’t want to rush you at all. I want you to see the princess’s suite. It adjoins mine, actually,” he said quietly. Something about being that close to him all the time made my bones feel weak.

“I think you should start deciding what you want in there. I want you to feel completely at home. You’ll have to pick a few more maids, too, and figure out if you want your family in the palace or just nearby. I’ll help you with everything.” A tiny beat of my heart whispered, *What about Aspen?* But I was so taken in by Maxon that I barely even heard it.

“Soon, when it’s proper for me to end the Selection, when I propose to you, I want it to be as easy as breathing for you to say yes. I promise to do everything in my power between now and that moment to make it that way. Anything you need, anything you want, say the words. I will do everything I can for you.”

I was overwhelmed. He understood me so well, how nervous I was about making this commitment, how frightening it was for me to become a princess. He was going to give me every last second he could and, in the meantime, lavish me with everything possible. I had another one of those moments when I couldn’t believe this was all happening.

“That’s not fair, Maxon,” I mumbled. “What in the world am I supposed to be able to give you?”

He smiled. “All I want is your promise to stay with me, to be mine. Sometimes it feels like you can’t possibly be real. Promise me you’ll stay.”

“Of course. I promise.”

With that I rested my head on his shoulder, and we slow danced through song after song. Once May caught my eye, and she looked like she was about to die with happiness watching us together. Mom and Dad stood looking on, and Dad shook his head as if to say *And you thought he was sending you home.*

Something occurred to me.

“Maxon?” I asked, turning my face toward him.

“Yes, darling?”

I smiled at the name. “Why were you talking with my dad?”

Maxon smiled. “He is aware of my intentions. And you should know that he approves wholeheartedly, so long as you’re happy. That seemed to be his only stipulation. I assured him that I’d do everything I could to see that you were, and I told him you seemed happy here already.”

“I am.”

I felt Maxon’s chest rise. “Then he and I both have everything we need.”

Maxon’s hand moved slightly and settled low on my back, encouraging me to stay close. In that touch I knew so many things. I knew that this was real, that it was happening, and that I could let myself believe it. I knew I’d let go of the friendships I’d made here if I had to, though I was sure Marlee wouldn’t mind losing in the slightest. And I knew I’d let the torch I held for Aspen burn out. It would be slow, and I would have to tell Maxon, but I would do it.

The party went on late into the night, when Maxon dragged the six of us to the balcony at the front of the palace for the best view of the fireworks. Celeste was stumbling up the marble steps, and Natalie had acquired some poor guard's hat. Champagne was being passed around, and Maxon was celebrating our engagement prematurely with a bottle he'd kept all to himself.

As the fireworks lit up the sky in the background, Maxon raised his bottle in the air.

"A toast!" he exclaimed.

We all raised our glasses and waited expectantly. I noticed Elise's glass was smeared with the dark lipstick she'd been wearing, and even Marlee held a glass quietly, choosing to sip rather than gulp.

"To all you beautiful ladies. And to my future wife!" Maxon called.

The girls hooted, thinking this toast might be especially for each of them, but I knew better. As everyone tipped their glasses back, I watched Maxon—my almost fiancé—who gave me a tiny wink before taking another swig of champagne. The glow and excitement of the entire evening was overwhelming, like a fire of happiness was swallowing me whole.

I couldn't imagine anything strong enough to take that happiness away.

I BARELY SLEPT. BETWEEN GETTING in so late and the excitement over what was coming, it was impossible. I curled closer to May, comforted by her warmth. I'd miss her so much once she left, but at least I had the prospect of her living here with me to look forward to.

I wondered who would be leaving today. It didn't seem polite to ask, so I didn't; but if pressed, I would guess it was Natalie. Marlee and Kriss were popular with the public—more popular than I was—and Celeste and Elise had connections. I had Maxon's heart, and that left Natalie without much to hold on to.

I felt bad because I really didn't have anything against Natalie. If anything, I wished Celeste would go. Maybe Maxon would send her home since he knew how much I disliked her, and he did say he wanted me to be comfortable here.

I sighed, thinking of everything he'd said last night. I'd never imagined this was possible. How did I, America Singer—a Five, a nobody—fall for Maxon Schreave—a One, *the* One? How did this happen when I'd spent the last two years bracing myself for life as a Six?

A tiny part of my heart throbbed. How would I explain this to Aspen? How would I tell him that Maxon had chosen me and that I wanted to be with him? Would he hate me? The thought made me want to cry. No matter what, I didn't want to lose Aspen's friendship. I couldn't.

My maids didn't knock when they came in, which was typical. They always tried to let me rest as long as I could, and after the party, I certainly needed it. But instead of going to prep things, Mary went around to May and gently rubbed her shoulder to wake her.

I rolled over to see Anne and Lucy with a garment bag. A new dress?

"Miss May," Mary whispered, "it's time to get up."

May slowly roused. "Can't I sleep?"

"No," Mary said sadly. "There's some important business this morning. You need to go to your parents right away."

"Important business?" I asked. "What's going on?"

Mary looked to Anne, and I followed her eyes. Anne shook her head, and that seemed to be the end of it.

Confused but hopeful, I got out of bed, encouraging May to do the same. I gave her a big hug before she went to Mom and Dad's room.

Once she left, I turned back to my maids. "Can you explain now that she's gone?" I asked Anne. She shook her head. Frustrated, I huffed. "Would it help if I commanded you to tell?"

She looked at me, a clear solemnity in her eyes. "Our orders come from much higher. You'll have to wait."

I stood at the door to my bathroom and watched them move. Lucy's hands were shaking as she pulled out fistfuls of rose petals for my bath, and Mary's eyebrows were knit together as she lined up my makeup and the pins for my hair. Lucy sometimes trembled for no reason at

today she looked as if her body was full of sand, her whole frame low with worry. She kept stopping and rubbing her forehead as if she could smooth away the anxiety in her face.

I looked on as she pulled my dress out of the garment bag. It was understated, simple ... and jet-black. I looked at that dress and knew it could only mean one thing. I started crying before I even knew who I was mourning.

“Miss?” Mary came to help me.

“Who died?” I asked. “Who died?”

Anne, steady as ever, pulled me upright and wiped the tears from under my eyes.

“No one has died,” she said. But her voice wasn’t comforting; it was commanding. “Be grateful for that when this is all over. No one died today.”

She gave me no further explanation and sent me straight to my bath. Lucy tried to keep herself under control; but when she finally broke into tears, Anne asked her to go get me something light to eat, and she jumped on the command obediently. She didn’t even curtsy as she left.

Lucy eventually returned with some croissants and apple slices. I wanted to sit and eat slowly, stretching out my time, but one bite was all it took for me to know that food was not my friend today.

Finally Anne placed my name pin on my chest, the silver shining beautifully against the black of my dress. There was nothing left for me to do but face this unimaginable fate.

I opened my door but found myself frozen. Turning back to my maids, I breathed out my fear. “I’m scared.”

Anne put her hands on my shoulders and spoke. “You are a lady now, miss. You must handle this like a lady.”

I gave a small nod as she released me, unclenched my hands from the door, and walked away. I wish I could have said my head was high; but honestly, lady or not, I was terrified.

To my immense surprise, when I reached the foyer, the rest of the girls were waiting, all wearing dresses and expressions similar to my own. A wave of relief hit me. I wasn’t in trouble. If anything, we all were, so at least I wouldn’t be going through whatever this was alone.

“There’s the fifth,” a guard said to his counterpart. “Follow us, ladies.”

Fifth? No, that wasn’t right. It was six. As we walked down the stairs, I quickly scanned the girls. The guard *was* right. Only five. Marlee wasn’t here.

My first thought was that Maxon had sent Marlee home, but wouldn’t she have come by my room to say good-bye? I tried to think of a relationship between all this secrecy and Marlee’s absence, and nothing I came up with made sense.

At the bottom of the stairs, an assembly of guards waited, along with our families. Mom, Dad, and May seemed anxious. Everyone did. I looked at them, hoping for some sort of clarity, but Mom shook her head while Dad gave me a shrug. I scanned the uniformed men for Aspen. He wasn’t there.

I saw a pair of guards escorting Marlee’s parents to the back of our line. Her mother was

I turned as a burst of light flooded the foyer. For the first time since I'd been at the palace, the front doors were both opened wide, and we were paraded outside. We crossed the short circular driveway and headed past the massive walls that fenced us into the grounds. As the gates creaked open, the deafening sound of a massive crowd greeted us.

A large platform had been set up in the street. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people were crowded together, children sitting on the shoulders of their parents. Cameras were positioned around the platform, and production people were running in front of the crowds, capturing the scene. We were led to a small section of stadium seats, and the crowd cheered for us as we walked out. I could see the shoulders of every girl in front of me relax as the people in the streets called out our names and threw flowers at our feet.

I lifted my hand in a wave as people called my name. I felt so silly for worrying. If the people were this happy, then nothing bad could be happening. The staff at the palace really needed to rethink the way they handled the Elite. All that anxiety for nothing.

May giggled, happy to be a part of the excitement, and I was relieved to see her back to herself. I tried to keep up with all the well-wishers, but I was distracted by the two odd structures waiting on the platform. The first was a ladder-like contraption in the shape of an A; the second was a large wooden block with loops on either end. With a guard at my side, I climbed into my seat in the middle of the front row and tried to figure out what was going on.

The crowd erupted again as the king, queen, and Maxon emerged. They too were dressed in dark clothes and wore sober expressions. I was close to Maxon, so I turned his way. Whatever was happening, if he looked at me and smiled, I knew it would be fine. I kept willing him to glance at me, to give me some sort of acknowledgment. But Maxon's face was hard.

A moment later the crowd's cheers turned into cries of disdain, and I turned to see what made them so unhappy.

My stomach twisted as I watched my world shatter.

Officer Woodwork was being dragged out in chains. His lip was bleeding, and his clothes were so dirty he looked like he'd spent the night rolling in mud. Behind him, Marlee—her beautiful angel costume lacking its wings and covered in grime—was also in chains. A suit coat covered her hunched shoulders, and she squinted into the light. She took in the massive crowd, finding my eyes for a split second before she was pulled forward again. She searched once more, and I knew who she was seeking out. To my left, I saw Marlee's parents watching, gripping each other tightly. They were visibly crushed, gone from this place, as if their very hearts had abandoned them.

I looked back to Marlee and Officer Woodwork. The anxiety in their faces was obvious, yet they walked with a certain pride. Only once, when Marlee tripped over the hem of her dress, did that veneer crack. Beneath it, terror awaited.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

As they were led up onto the platform, a man in a mask began speaking. The crowd

night in an intimate moment with this man, Carter Woodwork, a trusted member of the Royal Guard.”

The crier’s voice was full of an inappropriate amount of self-importance, as if he was reciting the cure for some deadly disease. The crowd booed again at his accusations.

“Miss Tames has broken her vow of loyalty to our prince Maxon! And Mr. Woodwork has essentially stolen property of the royal family through his relations with Miss Tames! These offenses are treason to the royal family!” He was shrieking out his statements, willing the crowd to agree. And they did.

But how could they? Didn’t they know this was Marlee? Sweet, beautiful, trusting, giving Marlee? She made a mistake, maybe, but nothing deserving of this much hatred.

Carter was being strapped up to the A-shaped frame by another masked man, his legs spread wide and his arms pulled into a position that mimicked the structure. Padded belts were wrapped around his waist and legs, tightened to a point that looked uncomfortable even from here. Marlee was forced to kneel in front of the large wooden block as a man ripped the coat from her back. Her wrists were bound down to the loops on either side, palms up.

She was crying.

“This is a crime punishable by death! But, in his mercy, Prince Maxon is going to spare these two traitors their lives. Long live Prince Maxon!”

The crowd chanted after the man. If I had been in my right mind, I would have known I was supposed to call out, too, or at least applaud. The girls around me did, and so did our parents, even if they were in shock. But I wasn’t paying attention. All I saw were Marlee’s and Carter’s faces.

We had been given front-row seats for a reason—to show us what would happen if we made such a stupid mistake—but from here, not more than twenty feet from the platform, I could see and hear everything that really mattered.

Marlee was staring at Carter, and he was looking right back at her, craning his neck to do so. The fear was unmistakable, but there was also this look on her face, as if she was trying to reassure him that he was worth all this.

“I love you, Marlee,” he called to her. It was barely audible over the crowd, but it was there. “We’re going to be okay. It’ll be okay, I promise.”

Marlee couldn’t speak in her fear, but she nodded back at him. In that moment, all I could think of was how beautiful she looked. Her golden hair was messy and her dress a disaster, and she’d lost her shoes at some point; but, my God, she looked radiant.

“Marlee Tames and Carter Woodwork, you are both hereby stripped of your castes. You are the lowest of the low. You are Eights!”

The crowd cheered, which seemed wrong. Weren’t there any Eights standing here who hated being referred to that way?

“And to inflict upon you the shame and pain you have brought on His Majesty, you will be publicly caned with fifteen strikes. May your scars remind you of your many sins!”

Caned? What did that even mean?

warm-up with the same frenzy and adoration they had just given the Selected.

In a few seconds, Carter's backside would be humiliatingly struck, and Marlee's precious hands ...

"No!" I cried. "No!"

"I think I'm going to be sick," Natalie whispered as Elise made a weak moan into her guard's shoulder. But nothing stopped.

I stood up and lunged toward Maxon's seat, falling over my father's lap.

"Maxon! Maxon, stop this!"

"You have to sit down, miss," my guard said, trying to wrangle me back into my chair.

"Maxon, I beg you, please!"

"It's not safe, miss!"

"Get off me!" I yelled at my guard, kicking him as hard as I could. Try as I may, he held on tight.

"America, please sit down!" my mother urged.

"One!" cried the man on the stage, and I saw the cane fall on Marlee's hands.

She let out the most pathetic whimper, like a dog that had been kicked. Carter made no sound.

"Maxon! Maxon!" I yelled. "Stop it! Stop it, please!"

He heard me; I knew he did. I saw him slowly close his eyes and swallow one time, as if he could push the sound out of his head.

"Two!"

Marlee's cry was pure anguish. I couldn't imagine her pain—and there were still thirteen more strikes to go.

"America, sit!" Mom insisted. May was between her and Dad, her face averted, her cries almost as pained as Marlee's.

"Three!"

I looked at Marlee's parents. Her mother buried her head in her hands, her father's arms wrapped around her, as if he could protect her from everything they were losing in that moment.

"Let me go!" I yelled at my guard to no avail. "MAXON!" I screamed. My tears were blurring my vision, but I could see him enough to know he'd heard me.

I looked at the other girls. Shouldn't we do something? Some appeared to be crying, too. Elise was bent over, a palm pressed to her forehead, looking as if she might pass out. No one seemed angry though. Shouldn't they be?

"Five!"

The sound of Marlee's shrieks would haunt me for the rest of my life. I'd never heard anything like it. Or the sickening echo of the crowd cheering it on, as if this was merely entertainment. Or Maxon's silence, allowing this to happen. Or the crying of the girls around me, accepting it.

The only thing that gave me any sort of hope was Carter. Even though he was sweating

“Love ... you,” he stammered.

I couldn't handle this. I tried to claw at my guard, but his thick sleeves protected him. I shrieked as he gripped me tighter.

“Get your hands off my daughter!” Dad yelled, pulling the guard's arms. With that space, I wiggled myself until I was facing him and thrust my knee up as hard as I could.

He let out a muffled cry and fell back, my dad catching him on the way down.

I hopped over the railing, clumsy in my dress and heeled shoes. “Marlee! Marlee!” I screamed, running as quickly as I could. I almost got to the steps; but two guards caught up with me, and that was a fight I couldn't win.

From the angle behind the stage, I saw that they'd exposed Carter's backside, and his skin was already torn, pieces hanging sickeningly. Blood was trickling down, ruining what used to be his dress pants. I couldn't imagine the state of Marlee's hands.

The thought sent me into an even deeper hysteria. I screamed and kicked at the guards, but all that accomplished was the loss of one of my shoes.

I was dragged inside as the man cried out for the next strike, and I didn't know whether to be grateful or ashamed. On the one hand, I didn't have to see it all; on the other, I felt like I'd abandoned Marlee in the worst possible moment of her life.

If I had been a true friend, wouldn't I have done better than that?

“Marlee!” I screamed. “Marlee, I'm sorry!” But the crowd was so frenzied, and she was crying so much, I didn't think she heard me.

I THRASHED AND SHRIEKED ALL the way back. The guards had to hold me so tightly that I knew I'd be covered in bruises later, but I didn't care. I had to fight.

"Where's her room?" I heard one ask, and twisted to see a maid walking down the hall. I didn't recognize her, but she clearly knew me. She escorted the guards to my door. I heard my maids shouting in protest at the way I was being handled.

"Calm down, miss; that's no way to behave," a guard said with a grunt as they threw me onto my bed.

"Get the hell out of my room!" I screamed.

My maids, all of them in tears, rushed over to me. Mary started trying to get the dirt from my fall off my dress, but I slapped her hands away. They knew. They knew, and they didn't warn me.

"You, too!" I yelled at them. "I want all of you out! NOW!"

They recoiled at my words, and the tremors running down Lucy's little body almost made me regret saying them. But I had to be alone.

"We're sorry, miss," Anne said, pulling the other two back. They knew how close I was to Marlee.

Marlee ...

"Just go," I whispered, turning to bury my face in my pillow.

Once the door clicked shut, I slipped off my remaining shoe and climbed deeper into bed, finally making sense of a hundred tiny details. So this was the secret she had been too afraid to share. She didn't want to stay because she wasn't in love with Maxon, but she didn't want to leave and be separated from Carter.

A dozen moments suddenly made sense: why she chose to stand in certain places or stared toward doors. It was Carter; he was there. The time the king and queen of Swendway came and she refused to get out of the sun ... Carter. It was Marlee he was waiting for when I ran into him outside the bathroom. It was always him, standing silently by, perhaps sneaking a kiss here and there, waiting for a time when they could truly be together.

How much must she have loved him to be so careless, to risk so much?

How could this even be real? It didn't seem possible. I knew that there would be a punishment for something like this, but that it happened to Marlee, that she was gone I couldn't understand it.

My stomach writhed. It so easily could have been me. If Aspen and I hadn't been so careful, if someone had overheard our conversation on the dance floor last night, that could have been us.

Would I ever see Marlee again? Where would she be sent? Would her parents have anything to do with her? I didn't know what Carter was before the draft made him a Two, though my guess was he was a Seven. Seven was low, but it was better than Eight by a long shot.

I couldn't believe she was an Eight. This *could not* be real.

That could have been me.

I felt so sick. I had a cruel sense of relief that it *wasn't* me, and the guilt of that relief was so heavy it was hard to breathe. I was a terrible person, a terrible friend. I was ashamed.

There was nothing left to do but cry.

I spent the morning and most of the afternoon curled in a ball on my bed. My maids brought me lunch, but I couldn't touch it. Mercifully, they didn't insist on staying and let me be alone in my sadness.

I couldn't pull myself together. The more I thought over what had happened, the sicker I felt. I couldn't get the sound of Marlee screaming out of my head. I wondered if a time would come when I'd forget.

A hesitant knock came at the door. My maids weren't here to open it, and I didn't feel like moving, so I didn't. After a brief pause the visitor came in anyway.

"America?" Maxon said quietly.

I didn't answer.

He shut the door and walked across the room to stand by my bed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't have a choice."

I stayed still, unable to speak.

"It was that or kill them. The cameras found them last night and circulated the footage without us knowing," he insisted.

He didn't talk for a while, maybe thinking that if he stood there long enough, I'd find something I wanted to say to him.

Finally he knelt beside me. "America? Look at me, darling?"

The endearment made my stomach turn. I did look at him though.

"I had to. I *had* to."

"How could you just stand there?" My voice sounded funny. "How could you not do anything?"

"I told you once before that part of this job is looking calm, even when you aren't. It's something I've had to master. You will, too."

My brow folded together. He couldn't still think I wanted that now? Apparently, he did. As he slowly took in my expression, his fell into absolute shock.

"America, I know you're upset, but please? I told you; you're the only one. Please don't do this."

"Maxon," I said slowly, "I'm sorry, but I don't think I can do this. I could never stand by and watch someone get hurt like that, knowing it was my judgment that sent them there. I can't be a princess."

He drew in a staggered breath, probably the closest thing to a truly sad emotion I'd ever seen from him.

"America, you're basing the rest of your life on five minutes of someone else's. Things like that rarely happen. You wouldn't have to do that."

upset.”

Somehow those words sounded like a trick.

“Please,” he whispered intensely, clutching my hands. The desperation in his voice made me look at him. “You promised you’d stay with me. Don’t give up, not like this. Please.”

I let out a breath and nodded.

His relief was palpable. “Thank you.”

Maxon sat there, holding on to my hand like a lifeline. It didn’t feel like it did yesterday.

“I know ...,” he started. “I know that you’re hesitant about the job. I always knew that would be hard for you to embrace. And I’m sure this makes it harder. But ... what about me? Do you still feel sure about me?”

I fidgeted, uncertain of what to say. “I told you I couldn’t think.”

“Oh. Right.” His absolute dejection was clear. “I’ll let you be for now. We’ll talk soon though.”

He leaned forward like he might kiss me. I looked down, and he cleared his throat. “Good-bye, America.”

Then he was gone.

And I broke down all over again.

Maybe minutes or hours later, my maids came in and found me bawling. I rolled over, and there was no way they could miss the pleading in my eyes.

“Oh, my lady,” Mary cried, coming to embrace me. “Let’s get you ready for bed.”

Lucy and Anne began working on the buttons of my dress while Mary cleaned my face and smoothed my hair.

My maids sat around me, comforting me as I cried. I wanted to explain that it was more than Marlee, that it was this sick ache over Maxon, too; but it was embarrassing to admit how deeply I cared, how wrong I’d been.

Then my heartbreak doubled when I asked for my parents, and Anne told me that all the families had been escorted away quickly. I didn’t even get to say good-bye.

Anne stroked my hair, gently shushing me. Mary was at my feet, rubbing my legs comfortingly. Lucy simply held her hands to her heart, as if she felt it all with me.

“Thank you,” I whispered between sniffles. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

They exchanged glances. “There’s nothing to apologize for, miss,” Anne insisted.

I wanted to correct her, because I’d certainly crossed the line with how I treated them, but another knock came at the door. I tried to think of how to politely say I didn’t want to see Maxon right now, but when Lucy hopped up to answer it, Aspen’s face was on the other side.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, ladies, but I heard the crying and wanted to make sure you were all right,” he said.

He crossed the floor toward my bed, a bold move considering the day we’d all had.

“Lady America, I’m very sorry about your friend. I heard she was something special. If you need anything, I’m here.” The look in Aspen’s eyes communicated so much: that he was willing to sacrifice any number of things to make this better if he could, that he wanted to take

destroyed it.

Aspen was home. Aspen was safe.

“Thank you,” I replied quietly. “Your kindness means a great deal to me.”

Aspen gave me an almost imperceptible smile. I could tell he wanted to stay, and I wanted that as well; but with my maids bustling around, it couldn't happen. I remembered thinking the other day that I would always have Aspen, and I was happy to find that it was absolutely true.