

*HEY KITTEN,*

*I'M SO SORRY WE DIDN'T GET TO SAY GOOD-BYE. THE KING SEEMED TO THINK IT WOULD BE SAFEST FOR THE FAMILIES TO LEAVE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. I TRIED TO GET TO YOU, I PROMISE. IT JUST DIDN'T HAPPEN.*

*I WANTED TO LET YOU KNOW WE GOT HOME SAFELY. THE KING LET US KEEP OUR CLOTHES, AND MAY IS SPENDING EVERY SPARE MOMENT IN THOSE DRESSES. I SUSPECT SHE'S SECRETLY HOPING SHE NEVER GROWS ANOTHER INCH SO SHE CAN USE HER BALL GOWN AT HER WEDDING. IT REALLY LIFTS HER SPIRITS. I'M NOT SURE I'LL EVER FORGIVE THE ROYAL FAMILY FOR MAKING TWO OF MY CHILDREN WATCH THAT FIRSTHAND, BUT YOU KNOW HOW RESILIENT MAY IS. IT'S YOU I'M WORRIED ABOUT. WRITE US SOON.*

*MAYBE THIS ISN'T THE RIGHT THING TO SAY, BUT I WANT YOU TO KNOW: WHEN YOU RAN FOR THE STAGE, I'VE NEVER BEEN SO PROUD OF YOU IN ALL MY LIFE. YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN BEAUTIFUL; YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN TALENTED. AND NOW I KNOW THAT YOUR MORAL COMPASS IS PERFECTLY ALIGNED, THAT YOU SEE CLEARLY WHEN THINGS ARE WRONG, AND YOU DO EVERYTHING YOU CAN TO STOP IT. AS A FATHER, I CAN'T ASK FOR MORE.*

*I LOVE YOU, AMERICA. AND I'M SO, SO PROUD.*

*DAD*

How was it that Dad always knew what to say? I kind of wanted someone to rearrange the stars so they spelled out his words. I needed them big and bright, and somewhere I could see them when things felt dark. *I love you. And I'm so, so proud.*

The Elite were given the option of breakfast in their rooms, and I took it. I wasn't ready to see Maxon yet. By the afternoon I was a bit more put together and decided to go down to the Women's Room for a while. If nothing else, there was at least a television, and I could stand to be distracted.

The girls seemed surprised when I walked in, which I guessed was to be expected. I did tend to hide from time to time, and if there was ever a moment to do that, it was now. Celeste was lounging on a couch, flipping through a magazine. Illéa didn't have newspapers like I'd heard other countries did. We had the *Report*. Magazines were the closest things we had to printed news, and people like me could never afford them. Celeste always seemed to have one on hand, and, for some reason, that irritated me today.

Kriss and Elise were at a table drinking tea and talking as Natalie stood in the back, looking out a window.

"Oh, look," Celeste said to no one in particular. "Here's another one of my ads."

Celeste was a model. The idea of her flipping through pictures of herself drove my irritation deeper.

yesterday. I'd never intended to offend her and was suddenly afraid I'd done just that. I felt the eyes of the other girls on me. The queen usually spoke to us as a group, rarely one-on-one.

I gave another curtsy as I approached. "Majesty."

"Please sit, Lady America," she said kindly, motioning to an empty chair across from her.

I obliged, still very nervous.

"You put up quite a fight yesterday," she commented.

I swallowed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"You were very close to her?"

I choked back my sadness. "Yes, Your Majesty."

She sighed. "A lady ought not to behave in such a way. The cameras were so focused on the action at hand that they missed your conduct. Still, it doesn't behoove you to lash out like that."

It wasn't the order of a queen. It was the reprimand of a mother. That made it a thousand times worse. It was like she felt responsible for me, and I'd let her down.

I bowed my head. For the first time, I truly felt bad about how I reacted.

She reached over and rested her hand on my knee. I looked up to her face, shocked by the casual touch.

"All the same," she whispered, "I'm glad you did it." And she smiled at me.

"She was my best friend."

"That doesn't stop because she's gone, sweetheart." Queen Amberly patted my leg kindly.

It was exactly what I needed: motherly affection.

Tears bit at the corners of my eyes. "I don't know what to do," I whispered. I nearly let everything spill out right there about how I was feeling, but I was conscious of the eyes of the other girls on me.

"I told myself I wouldn't get involved," she stated, and sighed. "Even if I wanted to, I'm not sure there's much to say."

She was right. What words could undo all that had happened?

The queen leaned in to me and spoke sweetly. "Still, go easy on him."

I knew she meant well, but I really didn't want to discuss her son. I nodded and rose. She smiled at me kindly and gestured that I was free to go. I wandered over to sit with Elise and Kriss.

"How are you doing?" Elise asked sympathetically.

"I'm fine. It's Marlee I'm worried about."

"At least they're together. They'll make it as long as they have each other," Kriss commented.

"How do you know Marlee and Carter are together?"

"Maxon told me," she replied, as if it was common knowledge.

"Oh," I said, disappointed.

"I can't believe he didn't tell you, of all people. You and Marlee were so close. Besides

Celeste laughed. “She’s obviously not anymore,” she muttered, not bothering to look up from her magazine. Clearly, my fall was to be expected.

I changed the subject back to Marlee. “I still can’t believe Maxon put them through that. It was disturbing how calm he was about it.”

“But what she did was wrong,” Natalie remarked. There wasn’t anything judgmental about her tone, only a quiet acceptance, like she was following instructions.

Elise spoke up. “He could have had them killed. The law is on his side in that one. He showed them mercy.”

“Mercy?” I scoffed. “You call having your skin torn apart in public merciful?”

“Yes, all things considered,” she continued. “I bet if we could ask Marlee, she’d choose caning over *dying*.”

“Elise is right,” Kriss said. “I agree that it was absolutely terrible, but I would rather have that than death.”

“Please,” I sneered, my anger coming to the surface. “You’re a Three. Everyone knows your dad’s a famous professor, and you’ve lived your whole life in libraries, completely comfortable. You’d never survive the beating, let alone a life as an Eight afterward. You’d be begging to die.”

Kriss glared at me. “Don’t pretend that you know anything about what I can and cannot tolerate. Just because you’re a Five, you think you’re the only one who’s ever suffered?”

“No, but I’m sure I’ve experienced far worse than you,” I said, my voice rising in anger, “and I couldn’t take what Marlee went through. I’m saying I doubt you’d fare any better.”

“I’m braver than you think, America. You have no idea the things I’ve sacrificed over the years. And if I make a mistake, I own up to the consequences.”

“Why should there be any consequences at all?” I posed. “Maxon keeps saying how difficult the Selection is for him, how hard it is to make the choice, and then one of us falls for someone else. Shouldn’t he be thanking her for making his decision easier?”

Natalie, seeming distressed, tried to interject. “I heard the funniest thing yesterday!”

“But the law—” Kriss called over her.

“America has a point,” Elise countered quickly, and the ordered conversation crumbled.

We were speaking over one another, trying to make our opinions heard, justifying why we thought what happened was wrong or right. This was a first, but something I’d been expecting from the start. With this many girls together, competing against one another, there was no way we wouldn’t fight eventually.

Then, in a disconnected voice, Celeste mumbled to her magazine as we continued to argue, “Got what she deserved. Whore.”

The following silence was as charged as our quarrel.

Celeste looked over her shoulder just in time to see me lunge at her. She screamed as I landed on her, knocking us both into a coffee table. I heard something, probably a cup of tea, smash onto the floor.

I’d closed my eyes midlunge, and when I opened them, Celeste was underneath me.

Celeste immediately let out a shriek and started clawing at me. For the first time I regretted not keeping my nails long like the other girls did. She made a few cuts on my arm, which only angered me more, and I struck her again. This time I cut her lip. In response to the pain, she reached for something—the saucer from her cup of tea—and slammed it against the side of my head.

Thrown off, I tried to grab at her again, but people were pulling us apart. I was so consumed, I hadn't noticed someone calling for the guards. I took a swing at one of them, too. I was tired of being manhandled.

“Did you see what she did to me?” Celeste cried.

“You keep your mouth shut!” I screamed. “Don't you ever talk about Marlee again!”

“She's crazy! Don't you hear her? Did you see what she did?”

“Let me go!” I said, struggling against the guard.

“You're psychotic! I'm going to tell Maxon right now. You can kiss the palace good-bye!” she threatened.

“No one's seeing Maxon right now,” the queen said sternly. She looked into Celeste's eyes and then into mine. Her disappointment was clear. I hung my head. “You're both going to the hospital wing.”

The hospital wing was a long, pristine corridor with beds against the walls. Pinned by the head of each bed was a curtain to wrap around for privacy. Cabinets of medical supplies were scattered throughout.

Wisely, Celeste and I were placed at opposite ends of the wing, with Celeste being closer to the entrance and me near a window in the back. She'd pulled her curtain partially around her bed almost immediately so she wouldn't have to see me. I couldn't blame her. I did have a rather smug look on my face. Even while the nurse tended to the sore spot behind my hairline where Celeste had hit me, I couldn't bring myself to grimace.

“Now, hold this ice here, and that will help keep the swelling down,” she offered.

“Thanks,” I replied.

The nurse looked up and down the wing quickly, seeming to check that no one could hear us. “Good for you,” she whispered. “Most everyone's been waiting for something like this to happen.”

“Really?” I asked, my voice as low as hers. I probably shouldn't have been smiling this much.

“I can't begin to count the horror stories I've heard about that one,” she said, nodding her head toward Celeste's curtained bed.

“Horror stories?”

“Well, she provoked that one girl who hit her.”

“Anna? How do you know?”

“Maxon's a good man,” she said simply. “He made sure she was checked out here before she went home. She told us what Celeste said about her parents. It was so filthy. I can't repeat

night. We can't prove it was Celeste, but who else would do something so mean?"

"I never heard about that." I gasped.

"She looked terrified that she might get worse. I suppose she chose to keep her mouth shut. And Celeste hits her maids. Not with anything more than her hands, but they come in for ice from time to time."

"No!" All the maids I'd encountered were sweet girls. I couldn't imagine any of them doing something that would provoke getting hit at all, let alone regularly.

"Suffice to say, your antics are making the rounds already. You're a hero around here," the nurse said with a wink.

I didn't feel like a hero.

"Wait," I said suddenly. "You said Maxon had Anna checked out before he sent her home?"

"Yes, miss. He's very concerned that you're all taken care of."

"What about Marlee? Did she come here? How was she when she left?"

Before the nurse could answer, I heard Celeste's pouty voice pierce the room.

"Maxon, sweetheart!" she called as he marched through the doorway.

We shared a brief moment of eye contact before he approached Celeste's bed. The nurse walked away, leaving me alone and aching to know if she'd actually seen Marlee.

The sound of Celeste's whiny voice was almost too irritating to bear. I heard Maxon murmur his condolences, comforting the poor thing before extricating himself. He made his way around her curtain and focused his eyes on me, seeming exhausted as he walked down the wing.

"You're lucky my father had the cameras barred from the palace, otherwise there'd be hell to pay for your actions." He ran his hand through his hair, exasperated. "How am I supposed to defend this, America?"

"Are you going to kick me out, then?" I played with a piece of my dress while I waited for his answer.

"Of course not."

"What about her?" I asked, nodding my head toward Celeste's bed.

"No. You're all stressed after yesterday, and I can't hold that against you. I'm not sure my father will accept that excuse, but that's what I'm going to say."

I paused. "Maybe you should tell him it was my fault. Maybe you should just send me home."

"America, you're overreacting."

"Look at me, Maxon," I urged. I felt the lump rising in my throat and fought to speak past it. "I've known from the beginning I don't have what it takes, and I thought that I could—I don't know—change, or somehow make it work; but I can't stay here. I can't."

Maxon moved to sit on the edge of my bed. "America, you might hate the Selection, and you might be mad about what happened to Marlee; but I know that you care about me enough not to just abandon me in this."

there and keep me from disappearing. Hesitantly, he leaned in and whispered, "It's not always so difficult. And I want to show that to you, but you have to give me time. I can prove that there are good things to this, but you have to wait."

I inhaled to contradict him, but he cut me off. "For weeks, America, you've asked me for time, and I gave it to you without question because I had faith in you. Please, I need you to have a little bit of faith in me, too."

I didn't know what Maxon could possibly show me that might change my mind, but how could I not give him more time when he'd done that for me?

I sighed. "Fine."

"Thank you." The relief in his voice was obvious. "I have to get back, but I'll come see you soon."

I nodded. Maxon stood and left, stopping briefly to tell Celeste good-bye. I watched him go and wondered if trusting him was a bad idea.

BOTH CELESTE'S AND MY INJURIES were minimal, so we were sent back to our rooms within an hour. They staggered our release times so we didn't have to leave together, and thank goodness for that.

As I turned the corner at the top of the stairs, I saw a guard coming toward me. Aspen. Even though he was bigger after being bulked up from training, I knew his walk and his shadow and a thousand other things that were ingrained in my heart.

As he approached, he stopped to give me an unnecessary bow.

"Jar," he whispered, and rose again, continuing on his path.

I stood there for a split second, confused, and then realized what he meant. Fighting the urge to run, I moved down the hall eagerly.

I opened the door and was both surprised and relieved to find that all three of my maids were out.

I went over to the jar on my bedside table and found that the one little penny in there had company. I opened the lid and pulled out the folded sheet of paper. How clever of him. My maids probably wouldn't have noticed it; and if they had, they never would have intruded on my privacy.

I unfolded the note and read a very clear list of instructions. It seemed Aspen and I had a date tonight.

The directions Aspen gave me were complicated. I took a roundabout way to get to the first floor, where I was to look for the door next to the five-foot-high vase. I remembered that vase from walking around the palace before. What flower in the world needed a container that big?

I found the door and looked around to double-check that no one saw me. I'd never managed to find myself so free from the eyes of the guards. Not a one in sight. I opened the door slowly and crept inside. The moon shone through the window, giving the room sparse light and making me feel a little nervous.

"Aspen?" I whispered into the darkness, feeling silly and scared all at once.

"Just like old times, eh?" his voice called, though I couldn't see him.

"Where are you?" I squinted, trying to find his form. Then the shadow of the heavy drape by the window shifted in the moonlight, and Aspen appeared from behind it.

"You startled me," I complained jokingly.

"Wouldn't be the first time, won't be the last." I heard the smile in his voice.

I walked over to him, knocking into every obstacle along the way it seemed.

"Shhh!" he complained. "The entire palace is going to know we're in here if you keep pushing things over." But I could tell he was playing.

"Sorry," I said, laughing quietly. "Can't we turn on a light?"

"No. If someone sees it shining under the door, we might get caught. This corridor isn't checked a lot, but I want to be smart."

"How did you even know about this room?" I reached out, making contact with Aspen's

of the secret rooms. I also happen to know the rotations of the guards, which areas are usually the least checked, and the points in the day when the guards are at their fewest. If you ever want to sneak around the palace, I'm the guy to do it with."

"Unbelievable," I mumbled. We sat behind the broad back of a couch, the floor blanketed in a patch of moonlight. Finally I could make out Aspen's face.

I questioned him seriously. "Are you sure this is safe?" If he hesitated at all, I was planning to bolt that very second. For both our sakes.

"Trust me, Mer. An extraordinary number of things would have to happen for someone to find us here. We're safe."

I was still worried, but I needed to be comforted so badly, I went along.

He wrapped an arm around me and pulled me in close. "How are you doing?"

I sighed. "Okay, I guess. I've been sad a lot, and angry. Mostly I wish I could undo the last two days and get Marlee back. Carter, too, and I didn't even know him."

"I did." He sighed. "He's a great guy. I heard he was telling Marlee he loved her the whole time and trying to help her get through it."

"He was," I confirmed. "At least in the beginning anyway. I got hauled off before it was over."

Aspen kissed my head. "Yeah, I heard about that, too. I'm proud you went out with a fight. That's my girl."

"My dad was proud, too. The queen said I shouldn't act that way, but she was glad I did. It's been confusing. Like it was almost a good idea but not really, and then it didn't fix anything anyway."

Aspen held me closer. "It was good. It meant a lot to me."

"To you?"

"Yeah," he whispered, seeming reluctant to share. "Every once in a while I wonder if the Selection has changed you. You've been so taken care of, and everything is so fancy. I keep wondering if you're the same America. That let me know that you are, that they haven't gotten to you."

"Oh, they're getting to me all right, but not like that. Mostly this place reminds me that I wasn't born to do this."

I ducked my head into Aspen's chest, the safe place where I'd always hidden when things were bad.

"Listen, Mer, the thing about Maxon is that he's an actor. He's always putting on this perfect face, like he's so above everything. But he's just a person, and he's as messed up as anyone is. I know you care about him or you wouldn't have stayed here. But you have to know now that it's not real."

I nodded. Maxon with his talk about putting on a calm face. Was that what he was always doing? Was he acting when he was with me? How was I supposed to be able to tell?

Aspen continued. "It's better you know now. What if you got married and then found out it was like this?"



see how *unhappy* I was now?

“You’ve got a big heart, Mer. I know you can’t just get over things, but it’s okay to *want* to. That’s all.”

“I feel so stupid,” I whispered, wanting to cry.

“You’re not stupid.”

“I am, too.”

“Mer, do you think I’m smart?”

“Of course.”

“That’s because I am. And I’m way too smart to be in love with a stupid girl. So you can drop that right now.”

I gave a tiny laugh and let Aspen hold on to me.

“I feel like I’ve hurt you so much. I don’t understand how you can still possibly be in love with me,” I confessed.

He shrugged. “It’s just the way it is. The sky is blue, the sun is bright, and Aspen endlessly loves America. It’s how the world was designed to be. Seriously, Mer, you’re the only girl I ever wanted. I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. I’ve been trying to prepare myself for that, just in case, and ... I can’t.”

We sat there, holding each other for a moment. Every little tickle of Aspen’s fingers, the warmth of his breath in my hair felt like medicine for my heart.

“We shouldn’t stay much longer,” he said. “I’m pretty confident in my abilities, but I don’t want to push it.”

I sighed. It felt like we’d only just gotten here, but he was probably right. I moved to stand, and Aspen jumped up to help me. He pulled me in for one last hug.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m really sorry Maxon turned out to be such a bad guy. I wanted you back, but I didn’t want you to get hurt. Especially not like that.”

“Thanks.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do.” Aspen had his faults, but he didn’t have it in him to be a liar. “It’s not over though. Not if I’m still here.”

“Yeah, but I know you. You’ll ride it out so your family gets money and you can see me, but he’d have to reverse time to fix this.”

I let out a long breath. It felt like he might be right. Maxon’s hold on me was slipping away, shrugging off my skin like a coat.

“Don’t worry, Mer. I’ll take care of you.”

Aspen didn’t have any way to prove that at the moment, but I believed him. He’d do anything for the people he loved, and I knew without question that I was the person he loved the most.

The next morning I let my mind wander to Aspen all through getting ready, breakfast, and my hours in the Women’s Room I was blissfully detached until the slap of a pile of papers on the

Marlee's face, even though it was twisted with pain from the caning.

"Thought you should see this," Celeste said before she walked away.

I wasn't exactly sure what she meant, but I was so eager to know anything about Marlee, I dived in.

Of all our country's great traditions, perhaps none is looked upon with such excitement as the Selection. Created specifically to bring joy to a saddened nation, it seems everyone still gets a little giddy watching the great love story of a prince and his future princess unfold. When Gregory Illéa took the throne more than eighty years ago and his elder son, Spencer, died suddenly, the entire country mourned the loss of such an enigmatic and promising young man. When his younger son, Damon, was set to inherit the throne, many wondered if he was ready even to train for the task at nineteen. But Damon knew he was prepared to step into adulthood and set out to prove it via the greatest commitment in life: marriage. Within months the Selection was born, and the spirits of the country were lifted by the possibility of an average girl becoming the first princess of Illéa.

However, since then we have been forced to wonder at the effectiveness of the competition. While a romantic idea at heart, some say it's unfair to force princes to marry women beneath them, though no one can deny the absolute poise and beauty of our current queen, Amberly Station Schreave. Some of us still remember the rumors of Abby Tamblin Illéa, who allegedly poisoned her husband, Prince Justin Illéa, only a few years into their marriage before agreeing to marry his cousin, Porter Schreave, thus keeping the royal line intact.

While that rumor has never been confirmed, what we can say for sure is that the behavior of the women in the palace this time around is nothing short of scandalous. Marlee Tames, now an Eight, was caught with a guard undressing her in a closet Monday night after the Halloween Ball that was billed to be the highlight of the Selection programming. Its splendor was completely overshadowed by Miss Tames's reckless behavior, sending the palace into a frenzy the very next morning.

But beyond Miss Tames's inexcusable actions, the girls remaining at the palace might not be crown-worthy either. An unnamed source tells us that some of the Elite are constantly bickering, rarely making the effort to perform the duties they're required to. Everyone remembers Anna Farmer's dismissal in early September after deliberately attacking the lovely Celeste Newsome, a model from Clermont. And our source confirms that that isn't the only physical interaction to take place at the palace between the Elite, forcing this reporter to question the pool of girls chosen for Prince Maxon.

When asked for a comment on these rumors, King Clarkson only said, "Some of the girls come from less-refined castes and aren't used to the proper behavior expected at the palace. Clearly Miss Tames wasn't prepared for life as a One. My wife has a particular indefinable quality about her and is one of the rare exceptions to the rule of lower castes. She has always

While Natalie Luca and Elise Whisks are both Fours, they have always been the height of refinement when presented to the public, particularly Lady Elise, who is quite sophisticated. We are forced to assume our king is referring to America Singer, the only Five who made it past day one of the Selection. Miss Singer has had an average run at the Selection. She's pretty enough, but not quite what Illéa was expecting for its new princess. From time to time her interviews on the *Capital Report* are entertaining, but we need a new leader, not a comedienne.

In further disturbing news, we have heard reports that Miss Singer attempted to release Miss Tames during her caning, which in this reporter's eyes makes her an accessory to the treacherous activities in which Miss Tames was partaking by being unfaithful to our prince.

With all of these reports (and with Miss Tames no longer in the top spot) one question remains: Who should be the new princess?

A quick poll of readers has confirmed what we've suspected all along.

We congratulate Miss Celeste Newsome and Miss Kriss Ambers for their neck-and-neck places on the top of our public poll. Elise Whisks takes the third spot, with Natalie Luca not too far behind. In a wide gap between fourth and fifth places, America Singer comes (unsurprisingly) in last.

I think I speak for all of Illéa when I encourage Prince Maxon to take his time finding us a good princess. We narrowly avoided disaster by Miss Tames exposing her true nature before a crown was placed on her head. Whoever you love, Prince Maxon, make sure she's worthy. We want to love her, too!

I RAN FROM THE ROOM. Of course Celeste wasn't doing me a favor. She was showing me my place. Why was I even bothering with this? The king was expecting me to fail, the public didn't want me, and I was sure I couldn't be a princess.

I made my way upstairs quickly and quietly, trying not to draw attention to myself. There was no telling who that magazine's unnamed source was.

"My lady," Anne said when I walked through the doorway. "I thought you'd be downstairs until lunch for sure."

"Could you leave, please?"

"I'm sorry?"

I huffed, trying not to lose my patience. "I need to be alone. Please?"

Without a word, they curtsied and left me. I went to the piano. I would distract myself until I couldn't think about this anymore. I played a handful of songs that I knew by heart, but that was too easy. I needed to really focus.

I stood up and dug through the bench for something more challenging. I burrowed past pages of sheet music until the edge of a book peeked out at me. Illéa's diary! I'd completely forgotten it was down here. This would be a great distraction. I carried the book over to the bed and opened it, taking in the ancient pages as they flipped through my hands.

The diary opened to the page with the Halloween picture, the stiff photo acting as a natural bookmark, and I reread the entry.

*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 ALL FEELS FRIVOLOUS. WE'RE ONE OF THE FEW FAMILIES REMAINING WHO HAS ENOUGH MONEY TO DO SOMETHING FESTIVE, BUT THIS CHILD'S PLAY SEEMS WASTEFUL.*

I looked at the picture again, wondering about the girl in particular. How old was she? What was her job? Did she like being Gregory Illéa's daughter? Did it make her very popular?

I turned the page and realized that it wasn't a new entry but a continuation of the Halloween post.

*I GUESS I THOUGHT THAT AFTER CHINA INVADED WE'D SEE THE ERROR OF OUR WAYS. IT'S BEEN OBVIOUS TO ME, PARTICULARLY RECENTLY, JUST HOW LAZY WE'VE BECOME. REALLY, IT'S NO WONDER CHINA CAME IN SO EASILY, AND IT'S NO WONDER IT TOOK SO LONG FOR US TO GET IN A POSITION TO FIGHT BACK. WE'VE LOST THAT SPIRIT THAT DROVE PEOPLE ACROSS OCEANS AND THROUGH DEVASTATING WINTERS AND CIVIL WAR. WE GOT LAZY*

*AND PERHAPS SINCE I'VE DONATED SO GENEROUSLY, NOW IS THE TIME TO OFFER THEM UP. WHAT WE NEED IS CHANGE. I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER IF I MIGHT BE THE ONLY PERSON WHO CAN PROVIDE IT.*

I got chills. I couldn't help but compare Maxon to his predecessor. Gregory seemed inspired. He was trying to take something broken and make it whole. I wondered what he'd say about the monarchy if he was here today.

When Aspen slid my door open that night, I was nearly bursting at the seams to tell him what I'd read. But I remembered that I'd already mentioned to my dad that the diary existed, and even that was going past what I'd sworn to do.

"How have you been?" he asked, kneeling by my bed.

"All right, I suppose. Celeste showed me this article today." I shook my head. "I'm not sure I want to get into it. I'm so tired of her."

"I guess with Marlee gone, he won't be sending anyone home for a while, huh?"

I shrugged. I knew the public had been looking forward to an elimination, and what happened with Marlee was more dramatic than anything anyone expected.

"Hey," he said, risking a touch in the light of the wide-open door. "It's going to be all right."

"I know. I just miss her. And I'm confused."

"Confused about what?"

"Everything. What I'm doing here, who I am. I thought I knew .... I don't even know how to explain it right." That seemed to be the problem lately. Every thought that passed through my head was sloppy. I couldn't line up anything.

"You know who you are, Mer. Don't let them try to change you." His voice was so sincere, and for a minute I did feel sure. Not because I had any answers, but because I had Aspen. If I ever lost sight of who I really was, I knew he'd be there to guide me back.

"Aspen, can I ask you something?" He nodded. "This is kind of strange, but if being the princess didn't mean I had to marry someone, if it was just a job someone could pick me for, do you think I could do it?"

Aspen's green eyes grew wide for a second, taking in the enormity of that question. To his credit, I could see him considering the possibility.

"Sorry, Mer. I don't. You don't have it in you to be as calculating as they are." There was an apology in his expression, but I wasn't offended that he thought I couldn't do it. I was a bit surprised at his reasoning though.

"Calculating? How so?"

He sighed. "I'm everywhere, Mer. I hear things. There's a lot of turmoil down South, in the areas with a heavy concentration of lower castes. From what the older guards say, those people never particularly agreed with Gregory Illéa's methods, and there's been unrest down

I thought again about bringing up the diary, but I didn't. "That doesn't explain what you meant by calculating."

He hesitated. "I was in one of the offices the other day, before all the Halloween stuff. They were mentioning rebel sympathizers in the South. I was told to see these letters to the postal wing safely. It was over three hundred letters, America. Three hundred families who were getting knocked down a caste for not reporting things or for helping someone the palace saw as a threat."

I sucked in a breath.

"I know. Can you imagine? What if it was you, and all you knew how to do was play the piano? Suddenly you're supposed to know how to do clerical work, how to find those jobs even? It's a pretty clear message."

I nodded. "Do you ... Does Maxon know?"

"I think he has to. He's not that far off from running the country himself."

In my heart, I didn't want to believe that he'd *agreed* with this, but it seemed likely he was aware of what was going on. He was expected to fall in line.

Could I do that?

"Don't tell anyone, okay? A slip like that could cost me my job," Aspen warned.

"Of course. It's already forgotten."

Aspen smiled at me. "I miss being with you, away from all this. I miss our old problems."

I laughed. "I know what you mean. Sneaking out of my window was so much better than sneaking around a palace."

"And scrounging to find a penny for you was better than having nothing to give you at all." He tapped on the glass jar by my bed, the one that used to hold hundreds of pennies that he'd given me for singing to him in the tree house back home, payment that he thought I deserved. "I had no idea you'd saved them all until the day before you left."

"Of course I did! When you were away, they were all I had to hold on to. Sometimes I used to pour them over my hand on the bed, just to scoop them up again. It was nice to have something you touched." Our eyes met, and everything else felt distant for the moment. It was comforting finding myself in that bubble again, the place that Aspen and I had created for ourselves years ago. "What did you do with all of them?"

I had been so mad at him when I left, I'd given them back. All except for the one that stuck to the bottom of the jar.

He smiled. "They're at home, waiting."

"For what?"

His eyes glittered. "That, I cannot say."

I sighed through my smile. "Fine, keep your secrets. And don't worry about not giving me anything. I'm just happy you're here, that you and I can at least fix things, even if it's not what it used to be."

But clearly, for Aspen, that wasn't enough. He reached down to the bottom of his sleeve and tore off one of his golden buttons. "I literally have nothing else to give you, but you can

Aspen to Maxon. Even now, when thinking of choosing one or the other felt like something very distant, I measured them side by side.

It seemed very easy for Maxon to give me things—to resurrect a holiday for my sake, to make sure I had the best of everything—because he had the entire world at his disposal. Here Aspen was, giving me precious stolen moments and the tiniest trinket to connect us to each other, and it felt like he'd given me so much more.

I remembered suddenly that Aspen had always been this way. He sacrificed sleep for me, he risked getting caught out after curfew for me, he scrounged together pennies for me. Aspen's generosity was harder to see because it wasn't as grand as Maxon's, but the heart behind what he gave was so much bigger.

I sniffed back the lingering urge to cry. "I don't know how to do this right now. I feel like I don't know how to do anything. I ... I haven't forgotten you, okay? It's still here."

I put my hand to my chest, partly to show Aspen what I meant and partly to soothe the strange longing there. He understood.

"That's enough for me."

I SURREPTITIOUSLY WATCHED MAXON THE next morning at breakfast. I wondered how much he knew about the people losing their castes in the South. Only once did he glance my way, but he didn't seem to be looking at me so much as at something near me.

Anytime I felt uncomfortable, I'd reach down and touch Aspen's button, which I'd laced on a tiny ribbon and made into a bracelet. He would get me through my time here.

Toward the end of the meal, the king stood and we all turned to him. "As there are so few of you now, I thought it would be nice for us to have tea tomorrow night before the *Report*. Since one of you will be our new daughter-in-law, the queen and I would like to make more opportunities to speak with you, learn your interests and such."

I felt a little nervous. Relating to the queen was one thing, but I wasn't sure how I felt about the king. While the other girls watched him eagerly, I sipped my juice.

"Please come an hour before the *Report* to the lounge on the first floor. If you're not familiar, don't worry. The doors will be open, and there will be some music playing. You'll hear us before you see us," he said with a chuckle. The others giggled lightly in return.

Soon after, girls started making their way to the Women's Room. I sighed. Sometimes that room, huge as it was, made me feel claustrophobic. I usually tried to interact with people or use the time to read. This would be a Celeste day. I was going to park myself in front of the television and zone out.

It was easier said than done. The girls seemed particularly chatty today.

"I wonder what the king wants to know about us," Kriss gabbed.

"We just have to remember everything Silvia taught us about poise," Elise commented.

"I hope my maids have a good dress for tomorrow night. I don't want to have to go through what I did for Halloween. They're so scatterbrained sometimes." Celeste sounded put out.

"I wish the king would grow a beard," Natalie said wistfully. I peeked over my shoulder to see her stroking an imaginary beard on her own chin. "I think he'd look good."

"Yes, I can see that," Kriss said graciously before moving on.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the ridiculous show in front of me, but no matter how I tried, I couldn't tune out the words of the other girls.

By lunch I was a ball of nerves. What would he want to say to me—the girl from the lowest caste left in the competition? What would he want to discuss with the girl he expected so little from?

King Clarkson was right. I heard the floating melody from the piano long before I found the lounge. The musician was good. Better than me, that was for sure.

I hesitated before walking in. I decided to pause before I spoke, really think about my words. I realized I wanted to prove him wrong. I wanted to prove that reporter wrong, too. Even if I lost, I didn't want to go home a loser. I was surprised by how much this suddenly meant to me.



sworn his lips made the shape of a *Wow*.

I turned my head and blushed, walking away. I took the risk of glancing at him again and saw that he was watching me move. It was hard to think rationally when he looked at me that way.

King Clarkson was talking to Natalie in one corner, and Queen Amberly was with Celeste in another. Elise was sipping her tea, and Kriss was walking around the room. I watched as she passed Maxon and Gavril, giving Gavril a warm smile. She said something, which they both chuckled at, and kept walking, peeking over her shoulder at Maxon once as she did so.

After that she made her way to me. "You're late," she jokingly scolded.

"I was feeling a little nervous."

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about. It was actually kind of fun."

"You're already done?" If the king was finished speaking with at least two girls, I'd have less time to compose myself than I thought.

"Yes. Sit with me. We can have some tea while you wait."

Kriss pulled me over to a table, and a maid approached us immediately, setting tea, milk, and sugar in front of us.

"What did he ask you?" I pressed.

"Actually, it was very conversational. I don't think he's trying to get any information exactly, more like he's trying to get a feeling for our personalities. I made him laugh once!" she gushed. "It went really well. And you're naturally funny, so if you just talk like you would to anyone else, you'll be fine."

I nodded before picking up my tea. She made it sound all right. Maybe the king had to compartmentalize himself. When it came to dealing with threats to the country, he had to be decisive, cold. He had to act quickly and deliberately. This was just tea with a bunch of girls. There was no need for him to be that way with us.

The queen had moved away from Celeste and was now speaking softly to Natalie. The look on Natalie's face was adoring. For a while I'd been irritated by her dreamy disposition, but she was simple, and it was refreshing.

I sipped my tea again. King Clarkson drifted over to Celeste, and she gave him a seductive smile. It was a little disturbing. Where were her boundaries?

Kriss leaned over to touch my dress. "That fabric is amazing. With your hair, you look like a sunset."

"Thank you," I said, blinking my eyes. The light had caught on her necklace, an explosion of silver on her throat, and it blinded me for a moment. "My maids are very talented."

"Absolutely. I like mine, but if I become princess, I'm stealing yours!"

She laughed, maybe meaning her words as a joke, maybe not. Either way, something about my maids hemming her clothes bothered me. I forced a smile though.

"What's so funny?" Maxon asked, walking over

“You don’t have a thing to worry about. Be natural. You already look fantastic.” Maxon gave me an easy smile. He was clearly trying to open up our lines of communication again.

“That’s what I said!” Kriss exclaimed. They shared a quick look, and there was this feeling of them being on a team. It was strange.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your girl talk. Good-bye for now.” Maxon gave us both a short bow and went over to join his mother.

Kriss sighed and watched Maxon go. “He’s really something.” She gave me a quick smile and went to talk to Gavril.

I watched the elaborate dance of the room, couples coming together to speak, separating to find new partners. I was even happy to have Elise join me in my corner, though she didn’t say much.

“Oh, ladies, the time has gotten away from us,” the king called. “We need to make our way downstairs.”

I looked up at the clock, and he was right. We had about ten minutes to get down to the set and prepare ourselves.

It didn’t seem to matter how I felt about being a princess, or how I felt about Maxon, or how I felt about anything. The king clearly thought I was so unlikely a candidate that he didn’t even want to bother speaking with me. I was excluded, perhaps on purpose, and no one even noticed.

I held it together through the *Report*. I even made it through dismissing my maids. But once I was alone, I broke down.

I wasn’t sure how I’d explain myself when Maxon came knocking, but that ended up not mattering. He never showed. And I couldn’t help but wonder whose company he was enjoying instead.

MY MAIDS WERE GIFTS. THEY didn't ask about the puffy eyes or the tear-stained pillows. They merely helped me pull myself together. I allowed myself to be pampered, grateful for the attention. They were wonderful to me. Would they be this nice to Kriss if she managed to win and took them away?

I watched them as I debated, and I was surprised to notice a tension among them. Mary seemed mostly fine, maybe a little worried. But Anne and Lucy looked like they were deliberately avoiding eye contact with each other and not speaking unless they absolutely had to.

I couldn't begin to guess at what was happening, and I didn't know if it was my place to ask. They never intruded on my sadness or anger. I supposed it was only right that I do the same for them.

I tried not to let the silence bother me as they did my hair and dressed me for a long day in the Women's Room. I ached to put on one of the luxurious pants that Maxon had given me for Saturday use, but this seemed like a bad time for that. If I was heading down, I wanted to be a lady about it. Points to me for effort.

As I settled in for another day of tea and books, the others chatted about the night before. Well, all of them except for Celeste, who had more gossip magazines waiting to be read. I wondered if the one in her hands said anything about me.

I was debating trying to take it when Silvia came in with a thick pile of paper in her arms. Great. More work.

"Good morning, ladies!" Silvia crooned. "I know you usually wait for guests on Saturdays, but today the queen and I have a special assignment for you."

"Yes," the queen said, walking over to us. "I know this is short notice, but we have visitors coming next week. They will be touring the country and stopping by the palace to meet all of you."

"As you know, the queen is usually in charge of receiving such important guests. You all saw how she graciously hosted our friends from Swendway." Silvia gestured over to Queen Amberly, who smiled demurely.

"However, the visitors we have coming from the German Federation and Italy are even more important than the Swendish royal family. And we thought this visit would be an excellent exercise for you all, especially since we've been so focused on diplomacy lately. You will work in teams to prepare a reception for your respective guests, including a meal, entertainment, and gifts," Silvia explained.

I gulped as she continued.

"It is very important for us to maintain the relationships we have as well as to forge new ones with other countries. We have outlines of proper etiquette for interacting with these guests, as well as guides for what's typically frowned on when hosting events for them. However, the actual execution is in your hands."

"We wanted to make it as fair as possible." the queen said. "I think we've done a good

on Wednesday, and we'll be receiving guests from Italy on Thursday."

There was a short moment of silence as we took that in.

"You mean we have four days?" Celeste screeched.

"Yes," Silvia said. "But a queen has to do this work alone and sometimes on far less notice."

The panic was palpable.

"Can we have our papers, please?" Kriss asked, holding out her hand. Instinctively, I put mine out as well. Within seconds we were devouring the pages.

"This is going to be tough," Kriss said. "Even with the extra day."

"Don't worry," I assured her. "We're going to win."

She laughed nervously. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because," I said decisively, "there's no way I'm letting Celeste do better than me."

It took two hours to read through the packet and one more to digest everything it said. There were so many different things to consider, so many details to plan. Silvia claimed she would be at our disposal, but I had a feeling asking for help would make her think we couldn't do a good enough job on our own, so that was out.

The setup was going to be challenging. We weren't allowed to use red flowers because they were associated with secrecy. We weren't allowed to use yellow flowers because they were associated with jealousy. And we weren't allowed to use purple *anything* because that color was associated with bad luck.

The wine, food, everything had to be opulent. Luxury wasn't seen as showing off; it was meant to make a statement about the palace. If it wasn't good enough, our guests might leave unimpressed and completely unwilling to meet with us again. On top of all that, the regular things we were supposed to have learned—speaking clearly, proper table manners, and the like—had to be adapted to a culture of which neither Kriss nor I had any knowledge besides what was printed in our packets.

It was incredibly intimidating.

Kriss and I spent the day taking notes and brainstorming while the others did the same thing at a nearby table. As the afternoon wore on, our groups started complaining back and forth about who had the worse situation, and after a while it was actually kind of funny.

"You two at least get another day to work," Elise said.

"But Illéa and the German Federation are already allies. The Italians might hate everything we do!" Kriss worried.

"Do you know we're supposed to wear dark colors for ours?" Celeste complained. "It's going to be a very ... rigid event."

"We probably don't want it to be floppy anyway," Natalie said, doing a little shimmy. She laughed at her own joke, and I smiled before moving on.

"Well, ours is supposed to be superfestive. And you all have to wear your best jewelry," I instructed. "You need to make a great first impression and appearances are very important."

Marlee and then being somewhat dismissed by the king, I felt strangely comforted to know we were miserable together. But it would be a lie to say that paranoia didn't take over before the end of the day. I was convinced that one of the other girls—Celeste in particular—might try to sabotage our reception.

“How loyal are your maids?” I asked Kriss at dinner.

“Very. Why?”

“I wonder whether we should store some things in our rooms instead of in the parlor. You know, so the other girls don't try to take our ideas.” It was only a tiny lie.

She nodded. “That's a good idea. Especially since we go second, and it would look like we copied them.”

“Exactly.”

“You're so smart, America. It's no wonder Maxon liked you so much.” And she went back to eating.

I didn't miss her casual use of the past tense. Maybe while I'd been worrying about being good enough to be a princess and feeling completely unsure I wanted to be one at the same time, Maxon was forgetting all about me.

I convinced myself that she was just trying to make herself feel more confident about her standing with Maxon. Besides, it had only been a few days since Marlee was caned. How much could she possibly know?

The piercing scream of a siren jerked me from my sleep. The sound was so foreign, I couldn't even begin to process what it was. All I knew was that my heart was pounding in my chest from the sudden rush of adrenaline.

Before a second had passed, the door to my room flew open and a guard ran in.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it,” he repeated.

“Huh?” I said groggily as he raced over to me.

“Get up, Mer!” he urged, and I did as he said. “Where are your damn shoes?”

Shoes. So I was going somewhere. Only then did the sound make sense to me. Maxon had told me once before that there was an alarm for when the rebels came, but it had been thoroughly dismantled in a recent attack. It finally must have been repaired.

“Here,” I said, finding and slipping my feet into them. “I need my robe.” I pointed to the end of the bed, and Aspen grabbed it, trying to open it for me. “Don't bother, I'll carry it.”

“You need to hurry,” he said. “I don't know how close they are.”

I nodded, heading for the door, Aspen's hand on my back. Before I hit the hallway, he jerked me toward him. I found myself in a deep, rough kiss. Aspen's hand was behind my head, holding my lips to his for one long moment. Then, as if he forgot the danger, his other hand pulled my waist to his, and the kiss deepened. It had been a long time since he'd kissed me this way—between my fickle heart and the fear of being caught, there was no reason to. But I could feel an urgency tonight. Something might go wrong, and this could be our last  
kiss

I dashed for the secret passage hidden at the end of the hall. Before I pushed the wall, I looked behind me and caught sight of Aspen's back as he ran around the corner.

There was nothing I could do but run myself, so I did. As quickly as I could manage, I made my way down the steep, dark stairs to the safe room reserved for the royal family.

Maxon had told me once that there were two kinds of rebels: Northern and Southern. The Northern ones were pesky, but the Southern ones were deadly. I hoped whatever I was running from was more interested in disturbing us than in killing.

As I descended the stairs, the cold set in. I wanted to throw on my robe, but I worried I might trip. I felt steadier as the light of the safe room came into view. I leaped from the last step, and I could see a figure standing out among the shapes of the guards. Maxon. Though it was late, he was still in his suit pants and his shirt, slightly rumpled but presentable.

"Am I the last?" I asked, pulling on my robe as I approached.

"No," he answered. "Kriss is still out there. So is Elise."

I looked behind me at the darkened corridor that seemed to go on forever. In either direction, I could make out the skeletons of three or four stairways stemming from their secret origins in the palace above. They were empty.

If anything Maxon had told me was true, his feelings for Kriss and Elise were limited. But there was no mistaking the concern for them in his eyes. He rubbed his temple and craned his neck, as if that would really help in the dark. We looked past each other, watching the stairs as guards milled around the door, clearly anxious to close it.

Suddenly he sighed and put his hands on his hips. Then, with no warning at all, he embraced me. I couldn't help but clutch him to my chest.

"I know you're still probably upset, and that's fine. But I'm happy you're safe."

Maxon hadn't touched me since Halloween. It hadn't even been a week, but for some reason, it felt like an eternity. Maybe because so much had happened that night, and even more had happened since.

"I'm glad you're safe, too."

He held me tighter. Suddenly he gasped. "Elise."

I turned to see her thin figure coming down the stairs. Where was Kriss?

"You should go inside," Maxon gently urged. "Silvia is waiting."

"We'll talk soon."

He gave me a small, hopeful smile and nodded. I headed into the room, with Elise following right behind. As she walked in, I saw she was crying. I put an arm around her shoulder, and she did the same to me, happy to have the company.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"I think my maid is sick. She was a little slow to help me. And then I was so frightened by the alarm, I got confused for a moment and couldn't remember where to go. I pushed on four different walls before I found the right one." Elise shook her head at her forgetfulness.

"Don't worry," I said, hugging her. "You're safe now."

She nodded her head to herself, trying to slow her breathing. Of the five of us, she was

down here to work. The queen had a maid massaging one of her hands, and they both wore serious expressions.

“What, no company this time?” Silvia joked, drawing our attention to her.

“They weren’t with me,” I said, suddenly worried about the safety of my maids.

She smiled gently. “I’m sure they’re fine. This way.”

We followed her to a row of cots set up against an uneven wall. The last time I was in this place, it was clear that the people who maintained the room weren’t prepared for the chaos of all the Selected girls down here. They’d made progress since then, but it wasn’t completely up-to-date. There were six beds.

Celeste was curled up on the one closest to the king and queen, though we were still quite a ways from them. Natalie had settled in next to her and was braiding thin pieces of her own hair.

“I expect you to sleep. You all have a serious week ahead of you, and I can’t have you planning if you’re deliriously tired.” Silvia went away, probably to look for Kriss.

Elise and I both sighed. I couldn’t believe they were going to make us go through with the whole reception thing. Wasn’t this stressful enough? We let go of each other and made our way to neighboring cots. Elise was quick to tuck herself into the blankets, obviously worn out.

“Elise?” I said quietly. She peeked up at me. “If you need anything, let me know, okay?”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Sure thing.”

She rolled back over, and it looked like she was asleep within seconds. I knew it was true when she didn’t turn over at the bustle of noise coming from the door. I glanced back and saw Maxon carrying Kriss into the safe room, with Silvia close by. Immediately after she was through, the door was sealed shut.

“I tripped,” she explained to Silvia, who was fretting over her. “I don’t think I broke my ankle, but it really hurts.”

“There are bandages in the back. We can at least wrap it,” Maxon instructed. Silvia walked away quickly, passing us as she went hunting for bandages.

“Sleep! Now!” she ordered.

I sighed, and I wasn’t the only one. Natalie took it in stride, but Celeste seemed very irritated. I checked myself then. If my behavior was anything like hers, it needed to change. Though I didn’t want to, I crawled into my cot and faced the wall.

I tried not to think about Aspen fighting upstairs, or my maids maybe not making it to their hiding place fast enough. I tried not to worry about the upcoming week, or the possibility of the rebels being Southern and trying to slaughter people above us as we rested.

But I did think about all of that. And it was so exhausting, I eventually found sleep on my cold, hard cot.

I didn’t know what time it was when I woke up, but it must have been hours since we’d come to the safe room. I rolled over, looking at Elise. She was sleeping peacefully. The king was

Natalie was still asleep, or at least she looked that way. But Celeste was awake, propped up on one arm and looking across the room. Her eyes held a fire that she usually reserved for me. I followed her gaze over to the opposite wall, where she was watching Kriss and Maxon.

They sat side by side, his arm wrapped around her shoulder. Kriss had her legs curled to her chest, looking as if she was trying to keep warm, even though she was wearing a robe. Her left ankle was wrapped in gauze and didn't appear to be bothering her at the moment. They spoke quietly with smiles on their faces.

I didn't want to watch, so I rolled back over.

By the time Silvia tapped me on my shoulder to wake me, Maxon was already gone. So was Kriss.



AS I EMERGED FROM THE stairwell that had ushered me to safety the night before, it was all too apparent that the Southerners had been here. In the short hallway that led to my room, there was a pile of debris that I had to climb over to get to my door.

Typically, the worst of the mess was gone by the time we were released from the safe room. This time, however, it looked like there had been too much for the staff to get to, and we would have been down there all day. Still, I wished they'd tried a little harder. I spied a group of maids working to scrub away giant letters on a far wall.

### ***WE'RE COMING***

The line was repeated down the hall, sometimes written in mud, other times in paint; and one appeared to be done in blood. Chills ran through me, and I wondered what that meant.

As I stood there, my maids dashed up to me. "Miss, are you all right?" Anne asked.

I was startled by their sudden appearance. "Um, yes. Fine." I looked back to the words on the wall.

"Come away, miss. We'll get you ready," Mary insisted.

I followed obediently, slightly stunned from everything I saw and too confused to do anything else. They worked deliberately, the way they did when they tried to soothe me with the routine of getting dressed. Something about their steady hands—even Lucy's—was calming.

By the time I was ready, a maid came to escort me outside, where we would apparently be working this morning. The smashed glass and chilling graffiti were easy to forget about in the Angeles sun. Even Maxon and the king were standing at a table with advisers, reviewing piles of documents and making decisions.

Under a tent, the queen read over papers, pointing out details to a nearby maid. Near her, Elise, Celeste, and Natalie sat at a table discussing plans for their reception. They were so engrossed, it looked like they'd completely forgotten the rough night.

Kriss and I sat on the opposite side of the lawn, under a similar tent, but our work was going slowly. I was having a hard time talking to her as I fought to get the image of her sharing a moment with Maxon out of my head. I watched as she underlined sections in the papers Silvia gave us and scribbled notes in the margin.

"I think I might have figured out how to do our flowers," she commented without looking up.

"Oh. Good."

I let my eyes wander over to Maxon. He was trying to look busier than he was. Anyone really watching could see how the king pretended not to hear his comments. I didn't understand that. If the king was worried about Maxon being a good leader, the thing to do was to truly instruct him, not keep him from doing anything because he worried his son would make a mistake.

Maxon shuffled some papers and looked up. He caught my eye and waved. As I went to raise my hand, I saw Kriss enthusiastically wave back from the corner of my eye. I focused on

“I keep imagining how children would look with his hair and my eyes.”

“How’s your ankle?”

“Oh,” she said with a sigh. “It hurts a little, but Doctor Ashlar says I’ll be fine by the reception.”

“That’s good,” I said, finally looking up at her. “Wouldn’t want you hobbling around when the Italians come.” I was trying to sound friendly, but I could tell she was questioning my tone.

She opened her mouth to speak but then quickly looked away. I followed her gaze and saw that Maxon was heading over to the refreshment table the butlers had set up for us.

“I’ll be right back,” she said quickly, and limped toward Maxon faster than I would have thought possible.

I couldn’t help but watch. Celeste had walked over, too, and they were all talking quietly as they poured water or grabbed finger sandwiches. Celeste said something, and Maxon laughed. It looked like Kriss was smiling, but she was clearly too bothered by Celeste interrupting her time to be genuinely amused.

I was almost grateful for Celeste at that moment. She might have been a hundred things that irritated me, but she was also impossible to intimidate. I could use some of that.

The king bellowed something to one of his advisers, and my head snapped in his direction. I missed exactly what he’d said, but he sounded irritated. Over his shoulder, I caught a glimpse of Aspen, walking his rounds.

He looked my way briefly, risking a fast wink. I knew that was meant to ease my worries, and it did a little. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder what he went through last night that led to the slight limp in his step and the bandaged gash by his eye.

As I was debating whether there was a way to inconspicuously ask him to come see me tonight, a call rang out from just inside the palace doors.

“Rebels!” a guard yelled. “Run!”

“What?” another guard called back, confused.

“Rebels! Inside the palace! They’re coming!”

The guard’s words made the threat on the walls this morning flash through my mind: WE’RE COMING.

Things started moving very quickly. The maids ushered the queen toward the far side of the palace, some pulling her hands to make her move faster while others dutifully raced behind her, blocking her from an attack.

Celeste’s red dress blazed as she followed the queen, rightly assuming that was probably the safest way to go. Maxon scooped up Kriss and her injured foot, turning to place her in the arms of the nearest guard, who happened to be Aspen.

“Run!” he screamed at Aspen. “Run!”

Aspen, faithful to a fault, bolted, carrying Kriss like she weighed nothing at all.

“Maxon, no!” she cried over Aspen’s shoulder.

I heard a loud pop from inside the opened doors to the palace and screamed. As several

out of the way as a swarm of people in rugged pants and sturdy jackets raced outside, running with backpacks or satchels packed to the brim. Another shot came.

Finally realizing that I needed to move, I turned and ran without thinking.

With the rebels flooding out of the palace, the logical thing to do seemed to be to run away from them. But that put me heading toward the great forest with a pack of vicious people chasing me. I ran and slipped a few times in the flats I was wearing, and I considered taking them off. In the end, I decided slippery shoes were better than none.

“America,” Maxon called. “No! Come back!”

I risked peeking back and saw the king grabbing Maxon by the neck of his suit jacket, pulling him away. I could see the terror in Maxon’s eyes as he stared after me. Another shot was fired.

“Stand down!” Maxon shrieked. “You’ll hit her! Cease fire!”

There were some more shots, and Maxon continued to scream his orders until I was too far away to make them out. I ran through the open field and realized then that I was alone in this. Maxon was being held back by his father, and Aspen was doing his duty. Any guard coming for me would be behind the rebels. All I could do was run for my life.

Fear made me fast, and I was surprised by how well I avoided the undergrowth once I hit the woods. The ground was dry, parched from months with no rain, and it was solid. I vaguely felt my legs getting scratched, but I didn’t slow down to see how bad it was.

I was sweating, and my dress was sticking to my chest as I moved. It was cooler in the woods, and steadily getting darker, but I was hot. At home I sometimes ran for fun, to play with Gerad or just to feel the ache of exertion. But I’d been sitting in the palace for months, eating real food for the first time, and I could feel it now. My lungs burned, and my legs were throbbing. Still, I ran.

After I got far enough in the woods, I looked over my shoulder to check how close the rebels were. I couldn’t hear them with the blood pounding in my ears, and when I checked, I couldn’t see them either. I decided this was my best chance to hide, before they caught sight of the bright dress in the dim woods.

I didn’t stop until I saw a tree that looked wide enough to conceal me. Once I was behind it, I noticed that there was a branch low enough to grab and climb, too. I took off my shoes, tossing them away, hoping they wouldn’t lead the rebels right to me. I climbed, though not very high, and turned my back to the tree, making myself as small as I could.

I focused hard on slowing my breath, fearing the sound would give me away. But even after I did that, for a moment it was quiet. I figured I’d lost them. I didn’t move, waiting to be sure. Seconds later, I heard a loud rustling.

“We should have come at night,” someone—a girl—huffed. I flattened myself against the tree, praying nothing would snap.

“They wouldn’t have been outside at night,” a man replied.

They were still running, or trying to, and it sounded like they were having a rough go of

might be safe, the girl's bag ripped, and a pile of books fell to the forest floor. What was she doing with so many books?

"Damn it," she cursed, getting down on her knees. She was wearing a denim jacket with some kind of flower embroidered on it over and over again. She had to be burning in that.

"Told you to let me help."

"Shut up!" The girl pushed at the boy's legs. In that playful gesture, I could see how much affection there was between them.

In the distance, someone whistled.

"Is that Jeremy?" she asked.

"Sounds like him." He bent and picked up a few books.

"Go get him. I'll be right behind you."

He looked unsure but agreed, kissing her forehead before jogging off.

The girl gathered the rest of her books, using a knife to cut the strap off her bag and bind them together.

I felt a sense of relief as she rose, assuming she would start moving. But she flipped her hair back out of her face, raising her eyes to the sky.

And she saw me.

No amount of quiet or stillness would help me now. If I screamed, would the guards come? Or were the rest of the rebels too close for that to matter?

We stared at each other. I waited for her to call the others, hoping that whatever they had planned for me wasn't too painful.

But she didn't make a sound except to let out a single quiet laugh, amused at our situation.

Another whistle sounded, slightly different from the last, and we both glanced in the direction it came from before looking at each other again.

And then, in the least expected of all possible gestures, she swung one leg behind the other, lowering herself in a graceful curtsy. I looked on, completely stunned. She rose, smiling, and ran off toward the whistle. I watched her back as a hundred tiny sewn flowers disappeared into the brush.

When it felt like more than an hour had passed, I decided I could get down. I stood at the foot of the tree, realizing I didn't know where my shoes were. I walked around the base of the trunk, trying to locate the little white slippers to no avail. Giving up, I decided I should make my way back to the palace.

Looking around, it became clear that that wasn't going to happen. I was lost.

I SAT AT THE BASE of the tree, legs folded up to my chest, waiting. Mom always said that was what we were supposed to do when we were lost. It gave me time to think about what had happened.

How was it possible that rebels had gotten into the palace two days in a row? *Two days in a row!* Had things gotten so much worse on the outside since the Selection had begun? Based on what I'd seen back in Carolina and had experienced at the palace, this was unprecedented.

My legs had a bunch of scratches on them, and now that I wasn't hiding, I could finally feel the sting. There was also a small bruise halfway up my thigh that I wasn't sure how I'd acquired. I was thirsty; and as I settled down, I felt worn-out from the emotional, mental, and physical strain of the day. I let my head rest against the tree, closing my eyes. I didn't intend to fall asleep. But I did.

Sometime later, I heard the distinct sound of footsteps. My eyes flashed open, and the forest was darker than I remembered. How long had I been asleep?

My first instinct was to climb back up the tree, and I ran around to the other side, stepping on the torn remnants of the rebel girl's bag. But then I heard people calling my name.

"Lady America!" someone said. "Where are you?"

"Lady America?" another voice called. Then, after a while, in a loud voice, a command came. "Be sure to look everywhere. If they've killed her, they might have hung her or tried to bury her. Pay attention."

"Yes, sir," men chorused back.

I peeked around the tree, focusing on the sound. I squinted, trying to make out the figures moving through the shadows, unsure they could really be here to save me. But one guard, his slight limp not slowing him at all, made me finally sure that I was safe.

A small patch of fading sunlight fell across Aspen's face, and I ran. "I'm here!" I yelled. "I'm over here!"

I ran straight into Aspen's arms, for once not caring about who saw. "Thank goodness," he breathed into my hair. Then, turning toward the other figures, "I've got her! She's alive!"

Aspen bent down and picked me up, cradling me. "I was terrified we were going to find your body somewhere. Are you hurt?"

"My legs a little."

A second later, several guards were surrounding us, congratulating Aspen on a job well done.

"Lady America," the one in charge said, "are you injured at all?"

I shook my head. "Just some scratches on my legs."

"Did they try to hurt you?"

"No. They never caught up to me."

He looked a bit shocked. "None of the other girls could have outrun them, I don't think."

I smiled, finally at ease. "None of the other girls is a Five."

As we moved, Aspen talked to me quietly. “I know you’re fast and smart, but I was terrified.”

“I lied to the officer,” I whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“They did catch up with me, eventually.”

Aspen looked at me in horror.

“They didn’t do anything, but this one girl saw me. She curtsied and ran off.”

“Curtsied?”

“I was surprised, too. She didn’t look angry or threatening at all. In fact, she just looked like a normal girl.”

I thought over Maxon’s comparison of the two rebel groups and knew this girl must be a Northerner. There was absolutely no aggression in her, only a drive to do her task. And there was no doubt that the attack last night was from the Southern rebels. Did that mean something, that the attacks weren’t only back-to-back, but by different groups? Were the Northerners watching us, waiting for us to be this drained? Thinking about them spying on the palace so intently was a little frightening.

At the same time, the attack was almost funny. Did they simply walk in the front doors? How many hours were they in the palace collecting their treasures? Which reminded me.

“She had books, lots of them,” I said.

Aspen nodded. “That seems to happen a lot. No clue what they’re doing with them. My guess is kindling. I think it’s cold where they stay.”

“Hmm,” I replied, not really answering. If I needed kindling, I could think of much easier places to get it than the palace. And the way the girl was so desperate to gather up the books made me sure it was something more than that.

It took nearly an hour of slow, steady trekking to get back to the palace. Even though he was injured, Aspen never let his hold on me slip. In fact, he looked to be enjoying the walk despite the extra labor. I liked it, too.

“The next few days might be busy for me, but I’ll try to come see you soon,” Aspen whispered as we crossed the wide, grassy lawn leading up to the palace.

“Okay,” I answered quietly.

He smiled a little as he looked forward, and I joined him, taking in the view. The palace was glittering in the evening sun, with windows lit up on every story. I’d never seen it like this. It was beautiful.

For some reason I thought Maxon would be there, waiting by the back doors for me. He wasn’t. No one was. Aspen was instructed to take me to the hospital wing so Dr. Ashlar could tend to my legs while another guard went off to tell the royal family I’d been found alive.

My homecoming was a nonevent. I was alone in a hospital bed with bandaged legs, and that was how I stayed until I fell asleep.

I heard someone sneeze

sleep.” He was propped up in a chair by my bed, so close he could rest his head by my elbow if he wanted to.

“What time is it?” I rubbed my eyes.

“Almost two.”

“In the morning?”

Maxon nodded. He watched me carefully, and I was suddenly very worried about how I looked. I had washed my face and pulled my hair up when I came back, but I was pretty sure I had a pillow imprinted on my cheek.

“Don’t you ever sleep?” I asked.

“I do. I’m just on edge a lot.”

“Occupational hazard?” I sat up a bit more.

He gave me a thin smile. “Something like that.”

There was a long pause as we sat there, unsure of what to say next.

“I thought of something today, when I was in the woods,” I said casually.

He smiled a bit more at how easily I brushed off the incident. “Oh, really?”

“It was about you.”

He inched closer, his brown eyes focused on mine. “Do tell.”

“Well,” I started, “I was thinking about how you were last night when Elise and Kriss weren’t in the hall, how worried you were. And then today I saw you try to run after me when the rebels came.”

“I tried. I’m so sorry.” He shook his head, ashamed that he hadn’t done more.

“I’m not upset,” I explained. “That’s the thing. When I was out there alone, I thought about how worried you probably were, how worried you are about the others. And I can’t pretend to know how you feel about all of us, but I know that you and I aren’t exactly a highlight right now.”

He chuckled. “We’ve seen better days.”

“But you still ran after me. You handed Kriss off to a guard because she couldn’t run. You’re trying to keep us all safe. So why would you ever hurt one of us?”

He sat silently, not sure where I was going.

“I understand now. If you’re that concerned with our safety, you couldn’t have wanted to do that to Marlee. I’m sure you would have stopped it if you could.”

He sighed. “In a heartbeat.”

“I know.”

Tentatively, Maxon reached across the bed for my hand. I let him take it. “Do you remember how I said I had something I wanted to show you?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t forget, okay? It’s coming. This position requires a lot of things, and they aren’t always pleasant. But sometimes ... sometimes you can do great things.”

I didn’t understand what he meant, but I nodded.

“I suppose it will have to wait until you’re done with this project though. You’re a bit

two rebel attacks, and I spent the majority of my day lost in the woods. We're going to mess it up."

Maxon's face was sympathetic. "You'll have to push through."

I let my head flop back on the pillow. "It's going to be a disaster."

He chuckled. "Don't worry. Even if you don't do as well as the others, I don't have it in me to kick you out."

Something in that sounded funny. I sat back up. "Are you saying that if the others do worse, one of *them* could be kicked out?"

Maxon hesitated a moment, clearly unsure how to respond.

"Maxon?"

He sighed. "I have about two weeks before they expect another cut. This is supposed to be a big part of it. You and Kriss have the harder setup. A new relationship, fewer people to do the work; and while the culture is very celebratory, the Italians are easy to offend. Add to that the fact that you've hardly been able to do any work at all ..."

I wondered if the blood was visibly draining from my face.

"I'm not supposed to help, but if you need something, please say so. I can't send either of you home."

When we'd had our first fight, a stupid spat over Celeste, I thought a piece of me shattered for Maxon. And then when Marlee left so abruptly, I thought it did again. I was sure that every time something blocked my way, bits of my heart were crumbling to nothing. But I was wrong.

There, lying in the hospital wing, my heart broke for the first time over Maxon Schreave. And the ache was unthinkable. Up until then I could convince myself that I'd imagined everything I'd seen between him and Kriss, but now I knew for sure.

He liked her. Maybe as much as he liked me.

I nodded at his offer for help, unable to say anything else.

I told myself to tug my heart back, that he couldn't have it. Maxon and I started all this as friends, and maybe that's all we were meant to be: close friends. But I was crushed.

"I should go," he said. "You need sleep. You had a very long day."

I rolled my eyes. That wasn't the half of it.

Maxon stood and straightened his suit. "I wanted to say so much more to you. I really thought I'd lost you today."

I shrugged. "I'm fine. Really."

"I can see that now, but there were several hours today when I was forced to brace myself for the worst." He paused, measuring his words. "Usually, of all the girls, you're the easiest to talk to about what we are. But I have a feeling that perhaps that's not the wisest thing to do right now."

Ducking my head, I gave a slight nod. I couldn't try to talk about my feelings for a person who obviously had a crush on someone else.

"Look at me, America," he asked gently.



for anything.”

I was stunned into silence, the way I always was when he touched the shy places of my heart. A corner of myself worried at how easily I trusted his words.

“Goodnight, America.”

IT WAS MONDAY NIGHT. OR Tuesday morning. It was so late, it was hard to tell.

Kriss and I had worked all day finding appropriate swaths of fabric, having butlers hang them, choosing our clothes and jewelry, picking china, creating a rough draft of the menu, and listening to a language coach speak lines in Italian to us in the hope that some of it would stick. At least I had the advantage of knowing Spanish, which helped me pick it up faster; they were so similar. Kriss was just doing all she could to keep up.

I ought to have been exhausted, but all I could think about were Maxon's words.

What had happened with Kriss? Why was she all of the sudden so close to him? Should I even care this much?

But this was Maxon.

And try as I might to pull away, I still cared about him. I wasn't ready to give up completely.

There had to be a way to figure this out. As I debated everything that was happening, attempting to separate my issues from one another, it looked like all the pieces fell into one of four categories.

My feelings about Maxon. Maxon's feelings about me. Whatever was going on between Aspen and me. And my feelings about actually becoming a princess.

Of all the things swimming in my head right now, it actually felt like the princess thing might be the easiest to tackle. At least in that area, I had something the other girls didn't. I had Gregory.

I went over to my piano stool, drew out his diary, and hoped with all my heart that he would have some wisdom for me. He hadn't been born into royalty; he must have had to adjust. Based on what he'd said in his Halloween entry, he was already preparing for a big change in his future.

I pulled up the covers, protecting the words from the world, and dove in.

*I WANT TO EMBODY THE OLD-FASHIONED AMERICAN IDEAL. I HAVE A BEAUTIFUL FAMILY, AND I'M VERY WEALTHY; AND BOTH OF THOSE THINGS SUIT THIS IMAGE BECAUSE THEY WEREN'T HANDED TO ME. ANYONE WHO SEES ME NOW KNOWS HOW HARD I WORKED FOR WHAT I HAVE.*

*BUT THE FACT THAT I'VE BEEN ABLE TO USE MY POSITION, TO GIVE SO MUCH WHERE OTHERS EITHER HAVE NOT OR COULD NOT, HAS CHANGED ME FROM SOME FACELESS BILLIONAIRE INTO A PHILANTHROPIST. STILL, I CANNOT REST ON THIS. I NEED TO DO MORE, TO BE MORE. WALLIS IS IN CHARGE, NOT ME, AND I NEED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO PROPERLY GIVE THE PUBLIC WHAT THEY NEED WITHOUT BEING SEEN AS A USURPER. A TIME MAY COME WHEN I WILL LEAD AND CAN DO WHAT I SEE FIT. FOR NOW I WILL PLAY BY THE RULES AND GO AS FAR AS I CAN WITH THAT.*

Maybe that should have been enough, but it wasn't. It didn't even feel close to helpful. Since Gregory failed me, there was only one other man I could count on. I went over to my desk, pulled out a pen and paper, and scribbled a brief letter to my father.

THE NEXT DAY FLEW BY, and suddenly Kriss and I were arriving at the other girls' reception in conservative gray dresses.

"What's the plan?" Kriss asked as we walked down the hall.

I considered for a moment. I disliked Celeste and wouldn't mind seeing her fail, but I wasn't sure I wanted her to do it on this grand a scale. "Be polite, but not helpful. Watch Silvia and the queen for cues. Absorb everything we can ... and work all night to make ours better."

"All right." She sighed. "Let's go."

We were on time, as was crucial to the culture, and the girls were already a mess. It was like Celeste was sabotaging herself. Where Elise and Natalie were in respectable deep blues, Celeste's dress was practically white. Put a veil on her, and this was a wedding. Not to mention how revealing it was, especially when she stood next to any of the German women. Most of them were wearing sleeves to their wrists despite the warm weather.

Natalie had been put in charge of the flowers and missed the detail that lilies were traditionally used at funerals. All the flower arrangements had to be removed hastily.

Elise, though clearly more agitated than she usually was, appeared to be the image of calm. To our guests, she would look like the star.

It was intimidating, trying so hard to communicate with the women from the German Federation—who spoke very broken English—particularly when I had so much Italian in my brain. I tried to be hospitable; and despite their severe appearance, the ladies were actually quite friendly.

It became clear pretty quickly that the true threat of disaster was Silvia and her clipboard. While the queen graciously aided the girls in hosting the German guests, Silvia walked the perimeter of the room, her sharp eyes missing nothing. It seemed she had pages of notes before the event had ended. Kriss and I quickly realized that our only hope was to have Silvia fall in love with our reception.

The next morning, Kriss came to my room with her maids, and we got ready together. We wanted to make an effort to look similar enough so it was clear we were in charge but not so much alike we looked silly. It was kind of fun having so many girls in my room. The maids all knew one another, and they talked animatedly behind us as they worked. It reminded me of how things had felt when May was here.

Hours before our guests were supposed to arrive, Kriss and I made our way to the parlor to double-check everything one last time. Unlike the other reception, we were forgoing place cards and letting our guests sit wherever they liked. The band came to practice in the space, and as a lucky bonus, it seemed our choice of fabrics to cover the bland walls made for great acoustics.

I straightened Kriss's necklace as we quizzed each other on the conversational phrases one last time. She sounded very natural speaking Italian.

"Thank you." she said.

doing this alone, but you've worked so hard. You've done great."

"Thanks. You have, too. I don't know if I would have survived if I had to work with Celeste. You made it almost easy." Kriss smiled. I meant it, too. She was tireless. "And you're right; it's been hard without Marlee, but I wouldn't quit. This is going to be great."

Kriss bit her lip and considered for a moment. Quickly, as if she might lose her nerve, she spoke. "So you're still competing then? You still want Maxon?"

It wasn't like I didn't know what we were all doing here, but none of the other girls had spoken about it like that. I was caught off guard for a moment, wondering if I should answer her. And, if I did, what would I say?

"Girls!" Silvia trilled, rushing in through the doorway. I'd never been so grateful to see that woman. "It's nearly time. Are you ready?"

Behind her, the queen came in, a soothing calm to balance Silvia's energy. She studied the room, admiring our work. It was a huge relief to see her smile.

"Almost ready," Kriss said. "We just have a few details to take care of. One we specifically need you and the queen for."

"Oh?" Silvia said curiously.

The queen approached us then, her dark eyes warm with pride. "It's beautiful. And you both look stunning."

"Thank you," we chorused. The pale-blue dresses with large gold accents had been my idea. Festive and lovely, but not too over the top.

"Well, you might notice our necklaces," Kriss said. "We thought that if they were similar, it would help people identify us as hosts."

"Excellent idea," Silvia said, scribbling on her clipboard.

Kriss and I smiled at each other. "Since you are both hosts here, too, we thought you should have ones as well," I said as Kriss pulled the boxes off the table.

"You didn't!" The queen gasped.

"For ... for me?" Silvia asked.

"Of course," Kriss said sweetly, handing over the jewelry.

"You've both been so helpful. This is your project, too," I added.

I could see how touched the queen was by our gesture, but Silvia was completely speechless. I suddenly wondered if anyone at the palace ever gave her any kind of attention. Yes, we'd thought up the idea yesterday as a way to get Silvia on our side, but I was glad we'd done it for more than just that now.

Silvia might be overwhelming, but she did try to do all this instruction for our benefit. I vowed to do a better job of thanking her.

A butler told us our guests were arriving, and Kriss and I stood on either side of the double doors to welcome people as they came. The band started playing softly in the background, maids began circulating with hors d'oeuvres, and we were ready.

Elise, Celeste, and Natalie were walking toward us, surprisingly on time. Once they caught sight of our setup, the billowing fabric covering the drab walls, the sparkling

“A bit too much like it,” Celeste added. “You’re going to give people a headache.” Leave it to her to find fault with something beautiful.

“Try to sit at different tables,” Kriss suggested as they poured past. “The Italians are here to make friends.”

Celeste sucked her teeth, acting as if this was putting her out. I wanted to tell her to pull it together: We had been on our best behavior for her reception. But then I heard the warm buzzing conversation of the Italian women as they came down the hall and forgot all about her.

The best way to describe the Italian ladies was statuesque. They were tall, golden skinned, and absolutely beautiful. As if that wasn’t enough, they were all so good-natured. It was like they carried the sun inside their souls and let it shine out on everything around them.

The Italian monarchy was even younger than Illéa’s. They had been closed off to our attempts at friendship for decades, according to the packet I’d read, and this was the only time they’d ever reached out to us. This meeting was the first step toward a closer relationship with a growing government. It had been frightening to think about until the moment they walked through the doorway, and their kindness melted my worries. They kissed Kriss and me on both cheeks and yelled “*Salve!*” I happily tried to match their level of enthusiasm.

I botched some of my Italian phrases, but our visitors were gracious, laughing off my mistakes and helping to correct me. Their English was impressive, and we doted on one another’s hairstyles and dresses. It seemed we’d made a good first impression appearance-wise, and that helped me relax.

I ended up settling in for most of the party next to Orabella and Noemi, two of the princess’s cousins.

“This is delicious!” Orabella cried, raising her glass of wine.

“We’re glad you like it,” I replied, worrying that I was coming across as too shy. They were so loud when they talked.

“You must have some!” she insisted. I hadn’t had anything to drink since Halloween, and I wasn’t very fond of alcohol in the first place. I didn’t want to be rude, though, so I took the glass she handed me and sipped.

It was incredible. Champagne was all bubbles; but the deep, red wine had several flavors overlapping, each coming to the forefront in its own time.

“Mmmm.” I sighed.

“Now, now,” Noemi said, drawing my attention to her. “This Maxon, he is handsome. How can I get into the Selection?”

“A heap of paperwork,” I joked.

“That’s all? Where’s my pen?”

Orabella cut in. “I will take some of this paper, too. I would love to take Maxon home with me.”

I laughed. “Trust me, it’s a bit of a mess in here.”

“You need more wine.” Noemi insisted.

“You must come!” Orabella insisted. “You can stay with me anytime.”

“You always hog the company,” Noemi complained. “She stays with me.”

I felt the wine warming me all over, and their excitement was making me almost too happy.

“So, is he a good kisser?” Noemi asked.

I choked a little on the sip I was taking, pulling the glass away to laugh. I was trying not to give too much away, but they knew.

“How good?” Orabella demanded. When I didn’t answer, she waved her hand. “Have some more wine!” she exclaimed.

I pointed an accusing finger at them, realizing what they were doing. “You two are nothing but trouble!”

They threw back their heads laughing, and I couldn’t help but join them. Admittedly, girl talk was much more tempting when we weren’t all competing for the same boy, but I couldn’t get too drawn into this.

I stood to leave before I ended up passed out under the table. “He’s very romantic. When he wants to be,” I said. They clapped and laughed as I walked away, smiling at how playful they were.

After I got some water and food in me, I played some of the folk songs I’d learned on my violin, and most of the room sang along. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Silvia taking notes and tapping her foot to the beat at the same time.

When Kriss got up and proposed a toast to the queen and Silvia for their help, the room applauded them. When I raised my glass to our guests, they shrieked with delight, downing their glasses and then throwing them against the walls. Kriss and I weren’t expecting that and shrugged before tossing ours as well.

The poor maids scuttled around to clean the shattered pieces as the band started up again and the whole room began to dance. Perhaps the highlight was Natalie on top of the table, doing some kind of dance that made her look like an octopus.

Queen Amberly sat in a corner, speaking jovially with the Italian queen. I felt a rush of accomplishment at the sight and was so engrossed, I nearly jumped when Elise addressed me.

“Yours is better,” she said reluctantly but genuinely. “You two really pulled together an incredible reception.”

“Thanks. I was worried for a while—we got off to such a bad start.”

“I know. That makes it even more impressive. It looks like you two have been working for weeks.” She looked around the room, staring longingly at the bright decor.

I put a hand on her shoulder. “You know, Elise, anyone could see yesterday that you worked the hardest on your team. I’m sure Silvia will make sure Maxon knows that.”

“You think?”

“Of course. And I promise, if this is some sort of a competition and you lose, I’ll tell Maxon myself what a good job you did.”

She squinted her already thin eyes. “You would do that?”

anything bad about you, but I wouldn't go out of my way to tell Maxon you did something good. I can't."

"It doesn't have to be that way," I said quietly.

She shook her head. "Yes, it does. This isn't just some prize. This is a husband, a crown, a future. And you probably have the most to gain or lose by it."

I stood there, completely stunned. I thought we were friends. Except for Celeste, I really trusted these girls. Was I too blind to see how hard they were fighting?

"That doesn't mean I don't like you," she went on. "I like you a lot. But I can't cheer for you to win."

I nodded, still taking in her words. It was obvious I wasn't as mentally in this as she was. One more thing that made me doubt my ability to do this job.

Elise smiled over my shoulder, and I turned to see the Italian princess coming toward us.

"Pardon me. Can I have the hostess, please?" she asked in her lovely accent.

Elise gave her a curtsy before heading back to the dancing. I tried to shake off that conversation and focus on the person I was meant to impress.

"Princess Nicoletta, I'm sorry we haven't gotten to speak much today," I said, giving her a curtsy myself.

"Oh, no! You've been very busy. My cousins, they love you!"

I laughed. "They're very funny."

Nicoletta pulled me into a corner of the room. "We've been hesitant to make bonds with Illéa. Our people are much ... freer than yours."

"I can see that."

"No, no," she said seriously. "I mean, in *personal* freedoms. They enjoy more than you. You have the castes still, yes?"

Suddenly understanding that this was more than a friendly conversation, I nodded.

"We watch, of course. We see what happens here. The riots, the rebels. It seems people are not happy?"

I wasn't sure what to say. "Your Majesty, I don't know if I'm the best person to talk to about this. I don't really control anything."

Nicoletta took my hands. "But you could."

A shiver ran through me. Was she saying what I thought?

"We saw what happened to the girl. The blonde?" she whispered.

"Marlee." I nodded. "She was my best friend."

She smiled. "And we saw you. There's not much footage, but we saw you run. We saw you fight."

The look in her eyes mirrored the way Queen Amberly had looked at me this morning. There was unmistakable pride there.

"We are very much interested in forming a bond with a powerful nation, if that nation can change. Unofficially, if there is anything we can do to help you acquire the crown, let us know. You have our full support."



Our reception went on much longer than the first, and I suspected it was because our guests were too happy to actually leave. Still, for as lengthy as it was, the whole thing passed in a blur.

Hours later, I headed back to my room completely worn out. I was much too full to even think about dinner, and though it was early in the evening, the idea of going straight to bed was very appealing.

Before I could even look at my bed, however, Anne walked up to me with a surprise. I gasped and took the letter from her hand immediately. I had to give the postal workers at the palace credit; they were very fast.

I tore open the envelope and went to the balcony, soaking up my father's words and the last few rays of sunshine at the same time.

*DEAR AMERICA,*

*YOU'LL NEED TO WRITE A LETTER TO MAY SOON. WHEN SHE SAW THIS WAS INTENDED FOR MY EYES ONLY, SHE WAS VERY DISAPPOINTED. I HAVE TO SAY, I WAS A LITTLE CAUGHT OFF GUARD MYSELF. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WAS EXPECTING, BUT CERTAINLY NOT WHAT YOU ASKED.*

*FIRST, IT'S TRUE. WHEN WE CAME TO VISIT, I SPOKE WITH MAXON, AND HE WAS VERY CLEAR ABOUT HIS INTENTIONS TOWARD YOU. I DON'T THINK HE HAS IT IN HIM TO BE LESS THAN GENUINE, AND I BELIEVED (AND STILL DO) THAT HE CARES ABOUT YOU VERY MUCH. I THINK IF THE WHOLE PROCESS WAS SIMPLER, HE'D HAVE CHOSEN YOU ALREADY. PART OF ME THINKS THE SLOWNESS IS ON YOUR SIDE. AM I WRONG?*

*THE SIMPLE ANSWER IS YES. I APPROVE OF MAXON, AND IF YOU WANT TO BE WITH HIM, I SUPPORT THAT. IF YOU DON'T, I SUPPORT THAT, TOO. I LOVE YOU, AND I WANT YOU TO BE HAPPY. MAYBE THAT MEANS YOU LIVE IN OUR SCRUBBY LITTLE HOUSE INSTEAD OF A PALACE. I'M FINE WITH THAT.*

*AS FOR YOUR OTHER QUESTION, I HAVE TO SAY YES TO THAT, TOO.*

*AMERICA, I KNOW YOU DON'T SEE MUCH IN YOURSELF, BUT YOU NEED TO START. WE TOLD YOU FOR YEARS YOU WERE TALENTED, BUT YOU DIDN'T BELIEVE IT UNTIL YOUR BOOKINGS WENT UP. I REMEMBER THE DAY YOU SAW THE FULL WEEK AND KNEW IT WAS BECAUSE OF YOUR VOICE AND THE WAY YOU PLAY, AND YOU WERE SO PROUD. IT WAS LIKE YOU WERE SUDDENLY AWARE OF EVERYTHING YOU COULD DO. AND WE'VE SAID FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL, BUT I'M NOT SURE YOU EVER TRULY SAW YOURSELF THAT WAY UNTIL YOU WERE PICKED FOR THE SELECTION.*

*YOU HAVE IT IN YOU TO LEAD, AMERICA. YOU HAVE A GOOD HEAD ON YOUR SHOULDERS: YOU ARE WILLING TO LEARN: AND. PERHAPS MOST*

*SHOULD BE YOURS.*

*AND YET ... IF YOU DON'T WANT THAT BURDEN, I COULD NEVER BLAME YOU. I WOULD WELCOME YOU HOME WITH OPEN ARMS. I LOVE YOU.*

*DAD*

The tears spilled out quietly. He genuinely thought I could do it. He was the only one. Well, he and Nicoletta.

Nicoletta!

I'd forgotten completely about the note. I fished inside my dress and pulled it out. It was a telephone number. She didn't even put her name on it.

I couldn't imagine how much she was risking to make that offer.

I held the tiny piece of paper and the letter from my dad in my hands. I thought of Aspen's certainty that I couldn't be a princess. I remembered the last-place spot in the public poll. I thought of Maxon's cryptic promise earlier this week ....

I closed my eyes and tried to search within myself.

Could I really do this? Could I be the next princess of Illéa?

THE DAY AFTER THE ITALIAN reception we gathered in the Women's Room after breakfast. The queen was absent, and none of us knew what that meant.

"I bet she's helping Silvia write up the final report," Elise guessed.

"I don't think she's supposed to have much of a say," Kriss countered.

"Maybe she's hung over," Natalie offered as she pressed her fingers to her temples.

"Just because you are doesn't mean she is," Celeste spat.

"She might not be feeling well," I said. "She tends to get sick a lot."

Kriss nodded. "I wonder why that is."

"Didn't she grow up in the South?" Elise asked. "I hear the air and water aren't very clean down there. Maybe it's because of how she was raised."

"I hear everything is bad below Sumner," Celeste added.

"She's probably just resting," I interjected. "There's a *Report* tonight, and she simply wants to be ready. She's smart. It's barely ten, and I need a nap."

"Yeah, we should all take naps," Natalie said wearily.

A maid entered with a small platter and walked quietly across the room, almost too nimble to be noticed.

"Wait," Kriss said. "You don't think they'll talk about the reception stuff on the *Report*, do you?"

Celeste groaned. "I hated that stupid thing. You and America lucked out."

"You're joking, right? Do you have any ..."

Kriss's words dropped off as the maid stopped just to my left, revealing a small, folded note on the platter.

I felt everyone's eyes on me as I tentatively picked up the letter and read it.

"Is that from Maxon?" Kriss asked, trying not to seem as interested as she was.

"Yes." I didn't look up.

"What's it say?" she probed.

"That he needs to see me for a moment."

Celeste laughed. "Sounds like you're in trouble."

I sighed and stood to follow the maid from the room. "Guess there's only one way to find out."

"Maybe he's finally kicking her out," Celeste whispered loudly enough for me to hear.

"You think?" Natalie asked a little too excitedly.

A chill went through me. Maybe he *was* kicking me out! If he wanted to talk to me or spend time with me, wouldn't he have said it differently?

Maxon was waiting in the hallway, and I walked up timidly. He didn't look upset, but he did seem tense.

I braced myself. "So?"

He took my arm. "We have fifteen minutes. What I'm about to show you, you can't share with anyone. Do you understand?"

me down the hallway to a set of white double doors. "Fifteen minutes," he reminded.

"Fifteen minutes."

He took a key out of his pocket and unlocked one of the doors, holding it open so I could go in before him. The room was wide and bright, with lots of windows and two doors opening onto a balcony along the wall. There was a bed, a massive armoire, and a table with chairs; but other than that the room was empty. No paintings on the walls, no pieces on the inlaid shelves. Even the paint was a little drab.

"This is the princess's suite," Maxon said quietly.

My eyes widened.

"I know it's not much to look at right now. The princess is supposed to choose the decor, so once my mother moved to the queen's suite, the room was stripped."

Queen Amberly had slept here. Something about the room felt magical.

Maxon came up behind me and started pointing. "Those doors go to the balcony. And over there"—he pointed to the other end of the room—"those doors go to the princess's personal study. Right here"—he noted a door to our right—"this goes to my room. Can't have the princess too far off."

I felt myself blush thinking of sleeping here with Maxon so close.

He stepped toward the armoire. "And this? Behind this piece of furniture is the escape to the safe room. You can get to other places in the palace this way, too, but that's its main purpose." He sighed. "This is a slight misuse, but I thought it would be worth it."

Maxon placed his hand on a hidden latch, and the armoire and the panel of wall behind it swung forward. I saw him smile at the space behind it. "Right on time."

"I wouldn't miss it," another voice said.

I sucked in a breath. There was no way that voice belonged to who I thought it did. I stepped to see around the hulking piece of furniture and Maxon's smiling face. There, dressed in very plain clothes and with her hair pulled into a bun, was Marlee.

"Marlee?" I whispered, sure I had to be dreaming. "What are you doing here?"

"I've missed you so much!" she cried, and ran to me with her arms open. With her hands out, I could see clearly the red, healing welts on her palms. It really was Marlee.

She wrapped me in a hug, and we crumpled to the ground, I was so overcome. I couldn't stop from crying and asking over and over what in the world she was doing here.

When I quieted down long enough, Maxon got my attention. "Ten minutes. I'll be waiting outside. Marlee, you can leave the way you came."

She gave him her word, and Maxon left us alone.

"I don't understand," I said. "You were supposed to go south. You were supposed to be an Eight. Where's Carter?"

She smiled through my misunderstanding. "We've been here the whole time. I just started working in the kitchens; and Carter's still on the mend, but I think he'll be in the stables soon."

"On the mend?" So many questions were racing through my mind. I wasn't sure why

me,” she said, holding out both hands. “We’ve been very well taken care of. They aren’t pretty, but at least they don’t hurt anymore.”

I carefully touched the swollen lines on her palms, sure they couldn’t actually be painless. But she didn’t flinch, and after a moment I slid my hand into hers. It felt funny, but at the same time completely natural. Marlee was here. And I was holding her hand.

“So Maxon’s had you in the palace the whole time?”

She nodded. “After the caning, he was afraid we would be hurt if we were left on our own, so he kept us here. Two other servants, a brother and sister who had family in Panama, were sent instead. We’re going by new names, and Carter is growing out his beard, so after a while we’ll blend in. Not a lot of people know we’re in the palace in the first place, just a few of the cooks I work with, one of the nurses, and Maxon. I don’t even think the guards know because they have to answer to the king, and he wouldn’t be pleased to find out.”

She shook her head before quickly moving on. “Our little apartment is small, basically just enough room for our bed and some shelves; but at least it’s clean. I’m trying to sew us a new bedspread, but I’m not—”

“Hold on. *Our* bed? As in, you share one?”

She smiled. “We got married two days ago. I told Maxon the morning we were caned that I loved Carter and that he was the one I wanted to marry, and I apologized for hurting him. He didn’t care, of course. He came to me two days ago saying there was some big event happening and that if we wanted to get married, this was the time.”

I counted back. Two days ago was when the German Federation had come. The entire palace staff was either helping serve them or preparing for the ladies from Italy.

“Maxon gave me away. I’m not sure I’ll ever see my parents again. The more distance they have from me, the better.”

I could tell she was pained to say so, but I understood why. If it had been me and I was suddenly an Eight, the kindest thing I could do for my family was disappear. It would take time, but people would forget. Eventually, my parents would recover.

To push away her sad thoughts, she fanned out her left hand, and I noticed the little band across her finger for the first time. It was twine tied in a simple knot, but it was a clear statement: I’m taken.

“I think I’m going to have to get him to give me a new one soon; I’m already fraying this one. I guess if he works in the stables, I’ll have to make him a new ring every day.” She playfully shrugged. “Not that I mind.”

My mind had jumped to another question that I worried might be rude to ask, but I knew I would never be able to have this kind of conversation with my mom or Kenna. “So, have you ... you know?”

It took her a moment to understand, but then she laughed. “Oh! Yes, we have.”

We both giggled. “How is it?”

“Honestly? A little uncomfortable at first. The second time was better.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say.

on her finger.

“I miss you, too. Maybe once you’re the princess, I can sneak up here all the time.”

I snorted. “I’m not so sure that’ll happen.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her face turning serious. “You’re still his favorite, right?”

I shrugged.

“What happened?” The question was laced with concern, and I didn’t want to admit that it had started with losing her. It wasn’t her fault.

“Just things.”

“America, what’s going on?”

I sighed. “After you got caned, I was upset with Maxon. It took me a while to realize that he wouldn’t have done something like that if he could have stopped it.”

Marlee nodded. “He tried so hard, America. And when he couldn’t, he did everything he could to make the situation better. So don’t be mad at him.”

“I’m not anymore, but I’m also not sure I want to be the princess. I don’t know if I could do what he did. And then there was this poll in a magazine Celeste showed me. The people don’t like me, Marlee. I’m at the bottom.

“I’m not sure I have what it takes. I was never a good choice, and it seems like I’m plummeting. And now ... now ... I think Maxon wants Kriss.”

“Kriss? When did that happen?”

“I have no idea, and I don’t know what to do. Part of me thinks it’s a good thing. She’d make a better princess; and if he really likes her, I want him to be happy. And he’s supposed to do another elimination really soon. When he called me out today, I thought I might be going home.”

Marlee laughed. “You’re so ridiculous. If Maxon didn’t have feelings for you, he’d have sent you home a long time ago. The reason you’re still here is because he refuses to lose hope.”

Something between a choke and a laugh came out of my mouth.

“I wish we could talk more, but I should go,” she said. “We’re taking advantage of guards changing to do this.”

“I don’t care that it’s short. I’m just glad to know you’re okay.”

She pulled me in for a hug. “Don’t give up yet, all right?”

“I won’t. Maybe you could send me a letter or something sometime?”

“That might work. We’ll see.” She let me go, and we stood together. “If they polled me, I would have voted for you. I’ve always thought it should be you.”

I blushed. “Go on, now. Say hello to your husband for me.”

She smiled. “I will.” Nimble, she went over to the armoire and found the latch. For some reason, I thought the caning would break her, but she was stronger now. She even carried herself differently. Marlee turned to blow me a kiss and disappeared.

I quickly exited the room and found that Maxon was waiting in the hallway. At the

knew it wouldn't endanger them, I had to keep it to myself. I'm hoping to arrange for you to see her more, but that will take time."

I felt my shoulders lighten, as if the bricks of worry I'd been carrying around were falling off all at once. The happiness at seeing Marlee, the assurance that Maxon was as kind as I thought he was, and the general relief that this meeting wasn't about him sending me home were overwhelming.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"Of course."

I wasn't sure what else to say. After a moment Maxon cleared his throat.

"I know that you are averse to doing the difficult parts of this job, but there are a lot of opportunities here. I think you could do great things. I can tell you see the prince in me now, but that had to come eventually if you were ever going to truly be mine."

My eyes held his. "I know."

"I can't read you anymore. I used to be able to see it in the beginning when you didn't really care for me; and when things changed between us, you looked at me differently. Now there are moments when I think it's there and others when it seems like you're already gone."

I nodded.

"I'm not asking you to say you love me. I'm not asking for you to suddenly decide you want to be a princess. I just need to know if you want to be here at all."

That was the question, wasn't it? I still didn't know if I could do the job, but I wasn't sure I wanted to give up on it. And seeing this kindness in Maxon shifted my heart. There was still so much to consider, but I couldn't give up. Not now.

Maxon's hand was resting on his leg, and I slid mine under his. He gave me a welcoming squeeze. "If you'll still have me, I want to stay."

Maxon let out a relieved sigh. "I'd like that very much."

I returned to the Women's Room after a quick stop in the bathroom. No one said anything until I sat down, and it was Kriss who was bold enough to ask.

"What was that all about?"

I looked not just to her, but to all the watching eyes. "I'd rather not say."

With my puffy face, a response like that was enough to make it seem like nothing good could have come from the meeting; but if that was what I had to say to protect Marlee, then I was fine with it.

What really stung was Celeste pressing her lips together to hide her smile, Natalie's raised eyebrows as she pretended to read her borrowed magazine, and the hopeful glance between Kriss and Elise.

The competition was deeper than I had guessed.