

CHAPTER 21

WE WERE SPARED THE HUMILIATION of dealing with the aftermath of our receptions on the *Report*. The visits from our foreign friends were mentioned in passing, but the actual events were kept from the public. It wasn't until the next morning that Silvia and the queen came to speak to us about our performances.

"It was a very daunting task we gave you, and it absolutely could have gone horribly wrong. I'm pleased to say, however, that both teams did very well." Silvia looked at each of us appraisingly.

We all sighed, and I reached for Kriss's hand as she did the same. As confused as I was about her and Maxon, I knew there was no way I could have made it through that without her.

"If I'm honest, one event was slightly better than the other, but you should all be proud of your accomplishments. We received thank-you letters from our longtime friends in the German Federation for your gracious hosting," Silvia said, looking at Celeste, Natalie, and Elise. "There were a few minor hiccups, and I don't think any of us truly enjoy such serious affairs, but they certainly did.

"And as for you two," Silvia turned toward Kriss and me. "The ladies from Italy enjoyed themselves immensely. They were quite impressed with your style, and the food; and they made a special point to ask for the wine you served, so, bravo! I wouldn't be surprised if Illéa gained a wonderful new ally based on that welcome. You're to be commended."

Kriss squeaked, and I let out a nervous laugh, happy enough that it was over, let alone that we'd beat the others.

Silvia went on to talk about how she would be writing up an official report to hand over to the king and Maxon but said that none of us had a thing to worry about. As she spoke, a maid scurried into the room and ran over to the queen, whispering in her ear.

"Absolutely, they may," the queen said, suddenly standing and walking forward.

The maid rushed back and opened the door for the king and Maxon. I knew men weren't supposed to come into this room without the queen's permission, but it was comical to see it in action.

As they entered, we stood to curtsy, but they didn't seem to care about formalities.

"Dear ladies, we are sorry to intrude, but we have urgent news," the king informed us.

"I'm afraid we've had a development with the war in New Asia," Maxon said firmly. "The situation is so dire that Father and I are leaving this very moment to see if we can do any good."

"What's wrong?" the queen asked, clutching her chest.

"It's nothing to worry about, my love," the king said confidently. But that couldn't be a completely honest statement if they had to rush out of here so suddenly.

Maxon walked over to his mother. They had a brief, whispered conversation before she kissed his forehead. He hugged her and stepped away. The king then began rattling off a list of instructions to the queen while Maxon came to say good-bye to each of us.

His good-bye to Natalie was so short it almost didn't happen. Natalie didn't seem too bothered, and I didn't know what to make of that. Was she actually not worried by Maxon's

lack of affection, or was she so bothered that she was forcing herself to be calm?

Celeste draped herself across Maxon and exploded into the worst display of fake crying that I'd ever seen. It reminded me of May when she was younger, thinking tears would magically bring money for us to have what we wanted. When he went to untangle himself, she planted a kiss on his lips that he promptly—and in as polite a manner as possible—wiped away after his back was turned.

Elise and Kriss were so close that I heard his good-byes to them.

“Call ahead and tell them to go easy on us,” he said to Elise. I'd almost forgotten that the main reason she was still here was that she had family ties to leaders in New Asia. I wondered if this war going downhill would cost her her spot.

Then I suddenly realized that I had no clue what Illéa stood to lose if we lost this war.

“If you get me a phone, I will talk to my parents,” she promised.

Maxon nodded and kissed Elise's hand, then walked over to Kriss.

She immediately laced her fingers in his.

“Will you be in danger?” she asked quietly, her voice beginning to shake.

“I don't know. During our last trip to New Asia, the situation wasn't nearly so tense. I can't be sure this time.” His voice was so tender, I felt they should have been having this conversation in private. Kriss lifted her gaze to the ceiling and sighed, and in that quick second Maxon looked over to me. I averted my eyes.

“Please be careful,” she whispered. A tear fell onto her cheek.

“Of course, my dear.” Maxon gave her a silly little salute, which made her laugh a bit. He then kissed her cheek and put his lips to her ear. “Please try to keep my mother entertained. She worries.”

He pulled back to look into her eyes, and Kriss nodded once and let his hands go. The second they were no longer touching, a tremor went through her body. Maxon's hands twitched for a second, like he was going to embrace her, but then he stepped away and started to walk toward me.

As if Maxon's words of last week weren't enough, here was physical proof of their relationship. By the look of it, they had something very sweet and real. One glimpse of Kriss with her face in her hands was proof of how much she cared for him. Either that, or she was an incredible actress.

I tried to gauge his expression when he looked at me versus the way he had looked at Kriss. Was it the same? Was there less warmth there?

“Try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone, all right?” he said teasingly.

He didn't joke with Kriss. Did *that* mean something?

I raised my right hand. “I promise to be on my best behavior.”

He chuckled. “Excellent. One less thing to worry about.”

“What about us? Should we worry?”

Maxon shook his head. “We should be able to smooth over whatever's going on. Father can be very diplomatic and—”

“You are such an idiot sometimes,” I said as Maxon's brow furrowed. “I mean about you. Should we worry about you?”

His face was very serious then and did nothing to help my fears.

“Flying in and flying out. If we can make it to the ground ...” Maxon swallowed once, and I saw how frightened he was.

I wanted to ask something else, but I didn’t know what to say.

He cleared his throat. “America, before I go ...”

I looked up to Maxon’s face and felt the tears rising.

“I need you to know that everything—”

“Maxon,” the king barked. Maxon lifted his head and waited for his father’s instructions. “We need to go.”

Maxon nodded. “Good-bye, America,” he said quietly, and lifted my hand to his lips. As he did so, he noted the little homemade bracelet I wore. He studied it, seeming confused, then kissed my hand tenderly.

That little feather of a kiss sent me back to a memory that felt years old. He had kissed my hand like that my first night in the palace when I’d yelled at him, when he’d let me stay anyway.

The other girls’ eyes were glued to the king and Maxon as they left, but I was watching the queen. Her entire body seemed weak. How many times would her husband and only child be put in danger before she cracked?

The moment the door shut behind her family, Queen Amberly blinked a few times, inhaled deeply, and pulled herself up to her full height.

“Forgive me, ladies, but this sudden news will require a lot of work from me. I think it’s best if I go to my room so I can focus.” She was fighting so hard. “How about I have lunch delivered here so you can eat at your leisure, and I will join you all for dinner tonight?”

We nodded. “Excellent,” she said, and turned to leave. I knew she was strong. She’d grown up in a poor neighborhood in a poor province, working in a factory until she was chosen for the Selection. Then, once she was queen, she suffered miscarriage after miscarriage before she finally had a child. She would make it to her room looking like a lady, as her position demanded. But she would cry once she was alone.

After the queen left, Celeste went, too. Then I decided I didn’t have to stay either. I went to my room, wanting to be alone and to think.

I kept wondering about Kriss. How had she and Maxon suddenly connected? Not too long ago, he was making me promises about our future. He couldn’t have been that interested in her if he was saying such intimate things to me. It must have happened after that.

The day passed quickly. After dinner, as my maids quietly helped me prepare for bed, a single sentence lifted me from my reflections.

“Do you know who I found in here this morning, miss?” Anne asked as she gently pulled a brush through my hair.

“Who?”

“Officer Leger.”

I froze, but only for a fraction of a second. “Oh?” I said. I kept my eyes on my reflection as they continued.

“Yes,” Lucy said. “He said he was doing a sweep of your room. Something about security.” She looked a little confused.

“It was strange though,” Anne said, echoing Lucy’s expression. “He was in his plain

clothes, not his uniform. He shouldn't be doing security work on his time off."

"He must be very dedicated," I commented in a disconnected tone.

"I think he is," Lucy said with awe. "Whenever I see him around the palace, he's always noticing things. He's a very good soldier."

"True," Mary said matter-of-factly. "Some of the men who come through here really aren't fit for the job."

"And he looks good in his plain clothes. Most of them look terrible once you get them out of their uniforms," Lucy commented.

Mary giggled and blushed, and even Anne cracked a smile. It had been a long time since they'd seemed so relaxed. On another day, in another moment, it might be fun to gossip about the guards. Not today though. All I could think about was that there was a letter in my room from Aspen. I wanted to peek over my shoulder at my jar, but I didn't dare.

It felt like an eternity before they left me alone. I forced myself to be patient and wait a few minutes to make sure they didn't come back. Finally I darted over to my bed and clutched my jar. Sure enough, a tiny slip of paper was waiting for me.

Maxon is gone. This changes everything.

CHAPTER 22

“HELLO?” I WHISPERED, FOLLOWING THE instructions Aspen had left for me the day before. I cautiously walked into a room lit only by the fading daylight spilling in through the gossamer curtains, but it was enough for me to see the excitement on Aspen’s face.

I closed the door behind me, and he immediately ran over and scooped me up.

“I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you, too. I was so busy with that reception, I barely had time to breathe.”

“Glad it’s over. Did you have a hard time getting here?” he joked.

I giggled. “Seriously, Aspen, you’re way too good at your job.” It was almost comical how simple his idea was. The queen was a little more relaxed when it came to running the palace. Or maybe she was distracted. Either way, she’d made dinner an option: in your room or downstairs. My maids prepped me for the meal, but instead of heading to the dining room, I walked across the hall to Bariel’s old room. It was too easy.

He smiled as he took in my praise and sat me down in the back corner of the room on some pillows he’d already piled there. “Are you comfortable?”

I nodded and expected him to sit too, but he didn’t. Instead he pushed over a large couch, which blocked the door from sight, and then pulled in a table that brushed the top of our heads as we sat on the floor. Finally he grabbed a bundle he’d left on top of the table—it smelled like food—and settled next to me.

“Almost like home, huh?” He moved behind me so I was between his legs. The position was so familiar and the space was so small that it did feel a little like our old tree house. It was like he’d taken a piece of something I thought was gone forever and placed it neatly in my hands.

“It’s even better.” I sighed, leaning into him. After a minute I felt his fingers combing down my hair. It gave me shivers.

For a while we sat there in silence, and I closed my eyes and focused on the sound of Aspen’s breathing. Not so long ago, I’d done the same thing with Maxon. But this was different. If I had to, I thought I could pick Aspen’s breathing out of a crowd. I knew him so well. And, clearly, he knew me. This tiny bit of peace was everything I’d been aching for, and Aspen made it real.

“What are you thinking about, Mer?”

“Lots of things.” I sighed. “Home, you, Maxon, the Selection, everything.”

“What are you thinking about all of that?”

“Mostly how confused I get about them. Like how I’ll think I understand what’s happening to me, and then something shifts, and my feelings change.”

Aspen was quiet for a moment, and his voice sounded pained when he asked, “Do your feelings about me change a lot?”

“No!” I said, pushing myself closer to him. “If anything, you’re the one constant. I know that if everything turns upside down, you’ll still be here, in the exact same place. Everything gets so crazy that my love for you gets pushed to the background, but I know it’s always there. Does that make sense?”

“It does. I know I make this whole thing more complicated than it already is. I’m glad to know I’m not completely out of the running though.”

Aspen wrapped his arms around me, like he could hold me there forever.

“I haven’t forgotten us,” I promised.

“Sometimes I feel like Maxon and I are in our own version of the Selection. It’s just him and me, and one of us will get you in the end; and I can’t decide who’s worse off. Maxon doesn’t exactly know we’re competing, so he might not be able to try as hard. But then, I have to hide, so it’s not like I can give you everything he can. It’s not really a fair fight either way.”

“You shouldn’t think about it that way.”

“I don’t know how else to see it, Mer.”

I exhaled. “Let’s not talk about that.”

“All right. I don’t like talking about him anyway. What about all the other stuff you’re confused about? What’s going on?”

“Do you like being a soldier?” I asked, turning toward him.

He nodded enthusiastically as he reached down and opened the food. “I love it, Mer. I thought I’d hate every minute, but it’s fantastic.” He popped a chunk of bread into his mouth and kept talking. “I mean, there’s the obvious stuff, like I’m always being fed. They want us to be big, so there’s plenty of food. And the injections, too,” he said, amending his thoughts. “But they’re not so bad. And I get an allowance. Even though I have everything I need, I get money.”

He stopped for a moment, toying with an orange slice. “I know you know how good it feels to send money home.”

I could tell he was thinking about his mom and his six siblings. He had been the father figure at his home; I wondered whether that made him even more homesick than I was.

He cleared his throat and went on. “But there are other things that I wasn’t expecting to like, too. I really enjoy the discipline of it and the routine. I like knowing that I’m doing something necessary. I feel so ... content. I’ve been restless for years, counting stock or cleaning houses. Now I feel like I’m doing what I was meant to do.”

“So that’s a big yes? You love it?”

“Completely.”

“But you don’t like Maxon. And I know you don’t like the way Illéa is run. We used to talk about it back home, and then that whole thing with the people in the South losing their castes. I know that bothers you, too.”

He nodded. “I think it’s cruel.”

“Then how are you okay with protecting it? You fight against rebels to keep the king and Maxon safe. They’re the ones who make everything happen, and you don’t like any of what they do. So how do you love your job?”

He chewed as he thought. “I don’t know. I guess it doesn’t make sense, but ... okay, like I said, there’s the sense of purpose. And feeling challenged and engaged, the ability to do something more with my life. Maybe Illéa isn’t perfect. In fact, it’s far from it. But I have ... I have hope,” he said simply.

We were both quiet for a moment while the word washed over us.

“I have this feeling that things have gotten better than they were, though I honestly don’t

know enough about our history to prove that. And I have this feeling that things will get even better in the future. I think that there are possibilities.

“And maybe this is silly, but it’s *my* country. I get that it’s broken, but that doesn’t mean these anarchists can just come and take it. It’s still mine. Does that sound crazy?”

I nibbled my bread and reflected on Aspen’s words. They took me back to our tree house and all the times I would ask him questions about things. Even if I disagreed, it helped me understand them better. But I didn’t disagree on this point. In fact, it helped me see what was probably hiding in my heart all this time.

“It doesn’t sound crazy at all. It sounds completely reasonable.”

“Does that help with whatever you’ve been thinking about?”

“It does.”

“Are you going to explain any of it?”

I smiled up at him. “Not yet.” Though Aspen was smart, and he might have already guessed. The wistful look in his eyes suggested that he probably had.

He looked away for a moment, running his hand down my arm, finishing by playing with the button bracelet around my wrist. “We’re a mess, aren’t we?”

“A big one.”

“Sometimes I feel like we’re a knot, too tangled to be taken apart.”

I nodded. “It’s true. So much of me is tied up in you. I feel kind of lost without you.”

Aspen pulled me close, running a hand over my temple and down my cheek. “We’ll just have to stay tangled then.”

He kissed me gently, like, if he pushed too hard, the moment might shatter and we’d lose everything. Maybe he was right. Slowly, he lowered me to the mattress of pillows, holding on to me, tracing curves as he kissed me on and on. It was all so familiar, so safe.

I ran my fingers through Aspen’s cropped hair, remembering the way it used to fall and tickle my face when he kissed me. I noted his arms around me, so much fuller than they used to be, so much sturdier. Even the way he held me had changed. There was a newfound confidence there, something instilled in him through becoming a Two, becoming a soldier.

Too soon it was time to leave, and Aspen walked me to the door. He gave me a lingering kiss, making me a little light-headed. “I’ll try to get another note to you soon,” he promised.

“I’ll be waiting.” I leaned into him, holding on to him for one long moment. Then, to keep us safe, I left.

My maids prepped me for bed, and I went through it in a daze. It used to feel like the Selection was one choice: Maxon or Aspen. And as if that was some decision my heart could make simply, it grew into so many more things. Was I a Five or a Three? When this was over, would I be a Two or a One? Would I live out my days as an officer’s wife or a king’s? Would I slide quietly into the background in which I’d always been so comfortable or force myself into the spotlight I’d always feared? Could I happily do either? Could I not hate whoever Maxon ended up with if I chose Aspen? Could I not hate whoever Aspen chose if I stayed with Maxon?

As I got into bed and turned out the light, I reminded myself that it was my decision to be here. Aspen may have asked, and my mother may have pushed, but no one forced me to fill out the form for the Selection.

Whatever was coming, I'd just face it. I'd have to.

CHAPTER 23

I CURTSIED TO THE QUEEN as I walked into the dining room, but she didn't notice. I looked over to Elise, who was the only one already there, and she merely shrugged. I sat down as Natalie and Celeste entered and were equally ignored; and finally Kriss arrived, sitting next to me but keeping her eyes on Queen Amberly. The queen seemed to be in her own world, staring at the floor or occasionally glancing at Maxon's and the king's chairs as if something was wrong.

The butlers began serving food, and most of the girls started eating; but Kriss kept watch on the head table.

"Do you know what's going on?" I whispered.

Kriss sighed and turned to me. "Elise called her family to get some insight into what was happening and to have her relatives meet Maxon and the king once they got to New Asia. But Elise's family says they never arrived."

"They never came?"

Kriss nodded. "The weird thing is, the king called when they landed, and he and Maxon both spoke with Queen Amberly. They're fine, and they told her they were in New Asia; but Elise's family kept saying they never showed."

I scrunched my forehead, trying to understand. "What does that all mean?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "They say they're there, so how could they not be? It doesn't make sense."

"Huh," I said, not sure of what else to add. Why would Elise's family not know they were there? What if, maybe, they weren't actually in New Asia? Where could they be?

Kriss leaned closer to me. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about," she whispered. "Could we go for a walk in the gardens after breakfast?"

"Of course," I answered, eager to hear what she knew.

We both ate quickly. I wasn't sure what she'd found out, but if she wanted to talk outside, there was clearly a need for secrecy. The queen was so distracted, she barely even noticed as we left.

Stepping into the sunlit gardens felt wonderful. "It's been awhile since I've been out here," I said, closing my eyes and lifting my face to the sun.

"You usually come with Maxon, right?"

"Mm-hmm." A second later, I wondered how she knew that. Was it common knowledge?

I cleared my throat. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

She stopped under the shade of a tree and turned to face me. "I think you and I should talk about Maxon."

"What about him?"

She fidgeted. "Well, I had prepared myself to lose. I think we all had, except for maybe Celeste. It was obvious, America. He wanted you. And then everything with Marlee happened, and it changed."

I wasn't quite sure what to say. "So, are you just telling me you're sorry for moving to

the top or something?”

“No!” she said emphatically. “I can see he still cares about you. I’m not blind. I’m only saying, I think you and I might be neck and neck at this point. I like you. I think you’re a really great person, and I don’t want for things to get ugly, however it turns out.”

“So this is ...?”

She clasped her hands in front of her, trying to think of the right words. “This is me offering to be completely honest about my relationship with Maxon. And I’m hoping you’ll do the same.”

I crossed my arms and went for the one question I’d been dying to ask. “When did you two get so close?”

Her eyes got a little dreamy, and she toyed with a piece of her light-brown hair. “I guess right after everything with Marlee. It probably sounds stupid, but I made him a card. That’s what I always did back home when my friends were sad. Anyway, he loved it. He said no one had given him a present yet.”

What? Oh. Wow. After everything he’d done for me, had I really never done anything for him in return?

“He was so happy, he asked me to sit with him awhile in his room and—”

“You’ve seen his room?” I asked, shocked.

“Yes, haven’t you?”

My silence was all the answer she needed.

“Oh,” she said awkwardly. “Well, you’re not missing anything. It’s dark, and there’s a gun rack, and then he has this mess of pictures on the wall. It’s nothing special,” she promised, waving it away. “Anyway, after that he started visiting me during pretty much every free moment he had.” She shook her head. “It happened kind of fast.”

I sighed. “He basically told me,” I confessed. “He made a little comment about needing us both here.”

“So ...” She bit her lip. “You’re pretty sure he still likes you?”

Hadn’t she already suspected that? Did she simply need me to confirm it? “Kriss, do you really want to hear all this?”

“Yes! I want to know where I stand. And I’ll tell you anything you want to know, too. We aren’t running this thing, but that doesn’t mean we have to be lost in it.”

I walked in a short circle, trying to make sense of everything. I wasn’t sure I was brave enough to ask Maxon about Kriss. I could barely talk honestly with him about me. But I kept feeling like I was missing pieces of the truth about where I stood. Maybe this was my only hope of really knowing.

“I’m pretty sure he wants me to stay around for a while. But I think he wants you here, too.”

She nodded. “I figured.”

“Has he kissed you?” I blurted out.

She smiled bashfully. “No, but I think that he would have if I hadn’t asked him not to. In my family, we sort of have this tradition where we don’t kiss until we’re engaged. Sometimes we have a party when people announce their wedding date, and everyone gets to see the first kiss. I want that for me.”

“But he tried to?”

“No, I explained before we got that far. He kisses my hands a lot, though, or sometimes my cheek. I think it’s kind of sweet,” she gushed.

I nodded, looking at the grass.

“Wait,” she said, hesitating. “Did he kiss you?”

Part of me wanted to brag that I was his first kiss ever. That when we kissed, it felt like time stopped.

“Sort of. It’s kind of hard to explain,” I hedged.

She made a face. “No, it’s not. Has he or hasn’t he?”

“It’s complicated.”

“America, if you’re not going to be honest, then this is a waste of time. I came here wanting to be open with you. I thought it would benefit us both to be friendly.”

I stood there, wringing my hands, trying to think of a way to explain myself. It wasn’t that I disliked Kriss. If I went home, I’d want her to win.

“I do want to be friends with you, Kriss. I kind of thought we already were.”

“Me, too,” she said gently.

“It’s just hard for me to share private things. And I appreciate your honesty, but I’m not sure I want to know everything. Even though I asked,” I said quickly, seeing the words coming to her lips. “I already knew he had feelings for you. I could see it. I think I need things to be vague for the time being.”

She smiled. “I can respect that. Would you do me a favor though?”

“Sure, if I can.”

She bit her lip and turned her eyes away for a minute. When she looked back, I could see the hint of tears in her eyes. “If you’re certain that he doesn’t want me, could you maybe warn me? I don’t know how you feel, but I love him. And I’d appreciate being told. If you know for sure anyway.”

She loved him. She said it out loud, fearlessly. Kriss loved Maxon.

“If he ever told me for sure, I would tell you.”

She nodded. “And maybe we could make another promise? Not to purposely get in each other’s way? I don’t want to win that way, and I don’t think you do either.”

“I’m no Celeste,” I said with disgust, and she laughed. “I promise to be fair.”

“Okay then.” She dabbed at her eyes and straightened her dress. I could see it so easily, how elegant she would look with the crown on her head.

“I need to go,” I lied. “Thanks for talking to me.”

“Thanks for coming. I’m sorry if I was too intrusive.”

“It’s fine.” I stepped away. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.”

I turned as quickly as I could without being rude and made my way to the palace. Once inside, I quickened my pace and bolted up the stairs, aching to hide.

I made my way to the second floor and headed toward my room. I noticed a piece of paper on the floor, which was unusual for the typically immaculate palace. It was by the corner leading to my door, so I guessed it might be for me. To be sure, I flipped it over and read.

Another rebel attack this morning, this time in Paloma. Current count is over three hundred dead, at least one hundred more wounded. Again, the main demand appears to be terminating the Selection, calling for an end to the royal line. Please advise on best response.

My body went cold. I scanned both sides of the paper, looking for a date. Another attack this morning? Even if this was a few days old, it was at least the second one. And the demand was *again* ending the Selection. Was this what all the recent attacks had been about? Were they trying to get rid of us? If so, were both the Northern and Southern rebels pursuing that end?

I didn't know what to do. I wasn't supposed to have seen this message, so it wasn't like I could talk to anyone. But did the people who were supposed to know already have this information? I decided to put the paper back on the ground. Hopefully, a guard would come around soon and get it to the right place.

For now I would just be optimistic that someone was responding.

CHAPTER 24

I TOOK ALL MY MEALS in my room for the next two days, managing to avoid Kriss until dinner on Wednesday. I thought I wouldn't feel so awkward by then. I was sadly mistaken. We gave each other quiet smiles, but I couldn't bring myself to speak. I almost wished I was across the room sitting between Celeste and Elise. Almost.

Just before dessert was served, Silvia came sprinting in as fast as her heeled shoes could carry her. Her curtsy was particularly brief before she made her way to the queen and whispered something to her.

The queen gasped and ran with Silvia out of the room, leaving us alone.

We'd been taught never to raise our voices, but in the moment we couldn't help ourselves.

"Does anyone know what's going on?" Celeste called, abnormally concerned.

"You don't think they're hurt, do you?" Elise said.

"Oh, no," Kriss breathed, and put her head down on the table.

"It's okay, Kriss. Have some pie," Natalie offered.

I found myself speechless, afraid even to think about what this could mean.

"What if they were captured?" Kriss worried aloud.

"I don't think the New Asians would do that," Elise said, though I could see she was worried. I wasn't sure if her concern was strictly for Maxon's safety or because any aggression on the part of the people she had a connection with would ruin her chances.

"What if their plane went down?" Celeste said quietly.

She looked up, and I was surprised to see genuine fear on her face. It was enough to silence us all.

What if Maxon was dead?

Queen Amberly returned with Silvia in tow, and we all watched her eagerly. To our intense relief, she was beaming.

"Good news, ladies. The king and prince will be home tonight!" she sang.

Natalie clapped as Kriss and I simultaneously fell back into our chairs. I hadn't realized how tense my body was for those few minutes.

Silvia chimed in. "Since they've had such an intense few days, we've decided to forgo any big celebration. Depending on when they leave New Asia, we might not even see them before bedtime."

"Thank you, Silvia," the queen said patiently. Really, who cared? "Forgive me, ladies, but I have some work to do. Please enjoy your desserts and have a lovely night," she said, then turned and flew out the door.

Kriss left seconds later. Maybe she was making a welcome home card.

After that I ate quickly and made my way back upstairs. As I was walking down the hall toward my room, I saw a little flash of blond hair under a white cap and the fluttering black skirt of a maid's uniform running toward the far-side stairs. It was Lucy, and it sounded like she was crying. She seemed so determined to get away unnoticed that I decided not to call out after her. Rounding the corner to my room, I saw that my door was wide-open. Without it to

block their voices, Anne and Mary's argument spilled into the hallway, where I overheard everything.

"—why you always have to be so hard on her," Mary complained.

"What was I supposed to tell her? That she can have whatever she wants?" Anne shot back.

"Yes! What would the harm be in simply saying you had faith in her?"

What was going on? Was this why they had all seemed so distant lately?

"She aims too high!" Anne accused. "It would be unkind of me to give her false hope."

Mary's voice bled with sarcasm. "Oh, and everything you told her was *so* kind. You're just bitter!" she accused.

"What?" Anne lashed back.

"You're bitter. You can't stand that she might be closer to something you want than you are," Mary yelled. "You've always looked down on Lucy because she wasn't raised at the palace as long as you were, and you've been jealous of me because I was born here. Why can't you be happy with who you are instead of stepping on her to make yourself feel better?"

"That's not what I was trying to do!" Anne said, her voice breaking.

The tight sobs were enough to silence Mary. It would have stopped me, too. Anne crying seemed like an impossibility.

"Is it so bad that I want more than this?" she asked, her voice thick with tears. "I understand that my position is an honor, and I'm glad to do my job; but I don't want to do this for the *rest of my life*. I want more. I want a husband. I want ..." She was finally overcome by her sadness.

My heart broke into a thousand pieces. The only way for Anne to get out of this job was to marry her way out. And it wasn't like a slew of Threes or Fours were going to parade down the palace halls looking for a maid to take as a wife. She really was stuck.

I sighed, steadied myself, and entered the room.

"Lady America," Mary said with a curtsy, and Anne followed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her feverishly mopping the tears off her face.

Given her pride, I didn't think acknowledging them was a good thing, so I strode past the both of them to the mirror.

"How are you?" Mary continued.

"Really tired. I think I'll be going to bed right away," I said, focusing on the pins in my hair. "You know what? Why don't you both go relax? I can take care of myself."

"Are you sure, miss?" Anne asked, trying so hard to keep her voice composed.

"Very. I'll see you all tomorrow."

They didn't need any more encouragement than that, and thank goodness. I didn't want them to take care of me right now any more than they probably felt like it. Once I managed to get out of my dress, I lay in bed for a long time thinking of Maxon.

I wasn't even sure exactly what I was thinking about him. It was all slightly vague and unfixed, but I kept flashing back to my overwhelming happiness when I found out he was safe and on his way back. And there was a corner of my mind that wondered if he'd thought about me at all while he was gone.

I tossed for hours, completely unsettled. At about one in the morning, I figured that if I couldn't sleep, I might as well read. I turned on the lamp and pulled out Gregory's diary. I skipped past the fall entries and picked one from February.

SOMETIMES I ALMOST HAVE TO LAUGH AT HOW SIMPLE THIS HAS BEEN. IF THERE WAS EVER A TEXTBOOK WRITTEN ON THE TOPIC OF OVERTHROWING COUNTRIES, I WOULD BE THE STAR OF IT. OR I COULD PROBABLY WRITE IT MYSELF. I'M NOT SURE WHAT I'D SAY STEP ONE WAS, AS YOU CAN'T REALLY FORCE ANOTHER COUNTRY TO TRY AND INVADE OR PUT IDIOTS IN CHARGE OF WHAT ALREADY EXISTS; BUT I CERTAINLY WOULD ENCOURAGE ANY OTHER WOULD-BE LEADERS TO ACQUIRE UNGODLY AMOUNTS OF MONEY BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY.

A FASCINATION WITH MONEY WOULDN'T BE ENOUGH, HOWEVER. YOU MUST POSSESS IT AND BE IN A POSITION TO LORD IT OVER OTHERS. MY LACK OF BACKGROUND IN POLITICS HASN'T BEEN AN ISSUE IN GAINING ALLEGIANCE. IN FACT, I WOULD SAY AVOIDING THAT SECTOR ALTOGETHER MAY BE ONE OF MY GREATEST STRENGTHS. NO ONE TRUSTS POLITICIANS, AND WHY WOULD THEY? WALLIS HAS BEEN MAKING EMPTY PROMISES FOR YEARS IN THE HOPES THAT ONE OF THEM MIGHT COME THROUGH, AND THERE ISN'T A CHANCE IN HELL ANY OF THEM COULD. I, ON THE OTHER HAND, OFFER THE IDEA OF MORE. NO GUARANTEES, MERELY THAT FAINT GLIMMER OF OPTIMISM THAT CHANGE MIGHT COME. IT DOESN'T EVEN MATTER AT THIS POINT WHAT THE CHANGE MIGHT BE. THEY'RE SO DESPERATE, THEY DON'T CARE. THEY DON'T EVEN THINK TO ASK.

PERHAPS THE KEY IS STAYING CALM WHILE OTHERS PANIC. WALLIS IS SO HATED NOW, HE'S ALL BUT HANDED THE PRESIDENCY OVER TO ME, AND NOT A SOUL IS COMPLAINING. I SAY NOTHING, DO NOTHING, AND WEAR A PLEASANT SMILE AS EVERYONE AROUND ME SINKS INTO HYSTERICIS. ONE GLANCE AT THAT COWARD NEXT TO ME, AND THERE'S NO DENYING I LOOK BETTER AT A PODIUM OR SHAKING A PRIME MINISTER'S HAND. AND WALLIS IS SO DESPERATE TO HAVE SOMEONE THE PEOPLE LOVE ON HIS SIDE, I'M PRETTY SURE IT WILL ONLY TAKE TWO OR THREE INCONSPICUOUSLY WORDED DEALS TO HAVE ME RUNNING EVERYTHING.

THIS COUNTRY IS MINE. I FEEL LIKE A BOY WITH A CHESS SET PLAYING A GAME HE KNOWS HE WILL WIN. I'M SMARTER, RICHER, AND FAR MORE QUALIFIED IN THE EYES OF A COUNTRY THAT ADORES ME FOR REASONS NO ONE CAN SEEM TO NAME. BY THE TIME SOMEONE THINKS TO CONSIDER IT, IT WON'T MATTER ANYMORE. I CAN DO WHAT I LIKE, AND THERE'S NO ONE LEFT TO STOP ME. SO WHAT'S NEXT?

I FEEL IT'S TIME TO COLLAPSE THE SYSTEM. THIS PITIFUL REPUBLIC IS ALREADY IN SHAMBLES AND BARELY WORKS. THE REAL QUESTION IS, WHO DO I ALIGN MYSELF WITH? HOW DO I MAKE THIS SOMETHING THE PUBLIC BEGS

FOR?

I HAVE ONE IDEA. MY DAUGHTER WON'T LIKE IT, BUT I'M NOT REALLY CONCERNED WITH THAT. IT'S ABOUT TIME SHE MADE HERSELF USEFUL.

I slammed the book shut, confused and frustrated. Was I missing something? Collapsing what system? Lording over people? Was the structure of our country not a necessity but a convenience?

I considered hunting through the book for what happened to his daughter, but I was already so disoriented, I decided against it. Instead I went to the balcony, hoping some fresh air would help me wrap my mind around the words I'd just read.

I looked to the sky, trying to process all this, but I didn't even know where to start. I sighed, and my eyes wandered the gardens, stopping on a flicker of white. Maxon was walking alone on the grounds. He was finally home. His shirt was untucked, and he wasn't wearing a coat or tie. What was he doing out so late? I saw that he was holding one of his cameras. He must have been having a rough night himself.

I hesitated a moment, but who else could I talk to about this?

"Pssst!"

He jerked his head around, looking for the source. I did it again, waving my arms until he saw me. A surprised smile flashed across his face as he waved back. Hoping he'd be able to see it, I pulled on my ear. He did the same. I pointed to him, then to my room. He nodded, holding up a finger to tell me it'd be a minute. I nodded back and went inside as he did the same.

I put on my robe and ran my fingers through my hair, wanting to look half as put together as he did. I wasn't sure exactly how to talk about this, because I was essentially about to ask Maxon if he knew he was sitting on top of something that was much less altruistic than the public had been led to believe. Just as I was starting to wonder what was taking him so long, he knocked on the door.

I rushed over to open it and was greeted by the lens of his camera. It clicked a still of my shocked smile. My expression dissolved into something that expressed how unamused I was by this little stunt, and he captured that, too, laughing.

"You're ridiculous. Get in here," I ordered, grabbing him by the arm.

He followed. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

"You took your time," I accused, settling on the edge of the bed. He came to sit beside me, far enough away that we could face each other.

"I had to stop by my room." He placed his camera safely on my bedside table, flicking at my jar with the penny in it. He made a sound that was almost a laugh and turned back to me, not explaining his detour.

"Oh. So how was your trip?"

"Odd," he confessed. "We ended up going to the rural part of New Asia. Father said it was some local dispute; but by the time we got there, everything was fine." He shook his head. "Honestly, it made no sense. We spent a few days walking through old cities and trying to speak to the natives. Father is quite disappointed with my grasp of the language and is

insisting I study more. As if I'm not doing enough these days," he said with a sigh.

"That is kind of strange."

"I'm guessing it was some sort of test. He's been throwing them at me randomly lately, and I don't always know they're happening. Maybe this was about decision making or dealing with the unexpected. I'm not sure." He shrugged his shoulders. "Either way, I'm sure I failed."

He fidgeted with his hands for a minute. "He also really wanted to talk about the Selection. I think he felt like distance would do me good, give me perspective or something. Honestly, I'm tired of everyone else talking about a decision that *I'm* supposed to make."

I was sure the king's idea of perspective meant getting me out of Maxon's head. I'd seen the way he smiled at the other girls at meals or nodded to them in the hallways. He never did that to me. I felt instantly uncomfortable and didn't know what to say.

It appeared Maxon didn't either.

I decided I couldn't ask him about the diary yet. He seemed so humble about these things—the way he led, the kind of king he wanted to be—that I couldn't demand answers from him that I wasn't anywhere close to sure he had. A tiny corner of my brain couldn't shake the worry that he knew more than he'd ever shared, but I needed to know more myself before I spoke.

Maxon cleared his throat and pulled a little string of beads out of his pocket.

"As I said, we were walking through a bunch of towns, and I saw this in an old woman's street shop. It's blue," he added, pointing out the obvious. "You seem to like blue."

"I love blue," I whispered.

I looked at the little bracelet. A few days ago, Maxon was walking on the other side of the world, and he saw this in a shop ... and it made him think of me.

"I didn't find anything for anyone else, so maybe you could keep this between us?" I nodded my head in agreement. "You never were the type to brag," he mumbled.

I couldn't stop staring at the bracelet. It was so understated, with polished stones that weren't quite gems. I reached out and ran a finger over one of the oval-shaped beads, and Maxon wiggled the bracelet in his hand, which made me laugh.

"Do you want me to put it on?" he offered.

I nodded and stretched out the wrist that didn't have Aspen's button on it. Maxon placed the cool stones against my skin and tied the little ribbon that held them together.

"Lovely," he said.

And there it was, pushing up through all the worries: hope.

It lifted the heavy parts of my heart and made me miss him. I wanted to erase everything since Halloween, go back to that night, and hold on to those two people on the dance floor. And then, at the same time, it made my heart plummet. If we were back at Halloween, I wouldn't have a reason to doubt this gift.

Even if I let myself be everything my father said I was, everything Aspen said I wasn't ... I couldn't be Kriss. Kriss was better.

I was so tired and stressed and confused, I started crying.

"America?" he asked hesitantly. "What's wrong?"

"I don't understand."

“What don’t you understand?” he asked quietly. I mentally noted that he was doing much better around crying girls these days.

“You,” I admitted. “I’m just really confused about you right now.” I wiped away a tear on one side of my face, and, so gently, Maxon’s hand moved to wipe the tears on the other.

In a way, it was strange to have him touch me like that again. At the same time, it was so familiar that it would have seemed wrong if he hadn’t. Once the tears were gone, he left his hand there, cupping my face.

“America,” he said earnestly, “if you ever want to know anything about me—what matters to me or who I am—all you need to do is ask.”

He looked so sincere that I nearly did ask. I almost begged him to tell me everything: if he’d always considered Kriss, if he knew about the diaries, what it was about this perfect little bracelet that made him think of me.

But how did I know it would be the truth? And—because I was slowly realizing he was the steadier choice—what about Aspen?

“I don’t know if I’m ready to do that yet.”

After a moment of thought, Maxon looked at me. “I understand. I think I do anyway. But we should talk about some serious things very soon. And when you’re ready, I’m here.”

He didn’t press me; instead he stood, giving me a small bow before grabbing his camera and making his way to the door. He looked back at me one last time before disappearing into the hall, and I was surprised by how much I ached to see him go.

CHAPTER 25

“PRIVATE LESSONS?” SILVIA ASKED. “As in, several a week?”

“Absolutely,” I replied.

For the first time since I arrived, I was truly grateful for Silvia. I knew that there was no way she’d be able to resist having someone willing to hang on her every word; and if she was making me do extra work, it meant I could keep myself busy.

Thinking about Maxon and Aspen and the diary and the girls was too much right now. Protocol was black-and-white. The steps for proposing a law were orderly. These were things I could master.

Silvia looked at me, still slightly stunned, before she broke into a huge smile. Embracing me, she cried out, “Oh, this will be wonderful. Finally one of you understands how important this is!” She held me at arm’s length. “When do you want to start?”

“Now?”

She was bursting with delight. “Let me go get some books.”

I dove into her studies, so grateful for the words and facts and statistics she crammed into my head. If I wasn’t with Silvia, I was reading up on something she’d assigned me as I spent countless hours in the Women’s Room, all but tuning out the other girls.

I worked, and I was excited about the next time the five of us had a joint class.

When that time came, Silvia started by asking us what we were passionate about. I scribbled down my family, music, and then, as if the word demanded to be written, justice.

“The reason I ask is because the queen is typically in charge of a committee of some kind, something that benefits the country. Queen Amberly, for example, began a program for training families to take care of their mentally and physically infirmed members. So many get deposited in the streets once the families can no longer deal with them, and the amount of Eights grows to an unmanageable number. The statistics over the last ten years have proven that her program has helped keep the numbers lower, thus keeping the general population safer.”

“Are we supposed to come up with a program like that?” Elise asked, sounding nervous.

“Yes, that will be your new project,” Silvia said. “On the *Capital Report* in two weeks’ time, you’ll be asked to present your idea and propose how you might start it.”

Natalie made a little squeak of a sound, and Celeste rolled her eyes. Kriss looked like she was already dreaming something up. Her instant enthusiasm made me nervous.

I remembered Maxon talking about an upcoming elimination. I felt like Kriss and I were at a slight advantage, but still.

“Is this really helpful?” Celeste asked. “I’d rather learn about something we’ll actually use.”

I could tell that beneath her concerned tone, she was either bored with this idea already or intimidated by it.

Silvia looked appalled. “You will use this! Whoever becomes the new princess will be in charge of a philanthropy project.”

Celeste muttered something under her breath and started fiddling with a pen. I hated that

she wanted the position with none of the responsibility.

I'd make a better princess than she would, I thought. And in that moment I realized there was some truth to that. I didn't have her connections or Kriss's poise, but at least I cared. And wasn't that worth something?

For the first time in a while, I felt a true shot of enthusiasm course through me. Here was a project that would allow me to show off the one thing that separated me from the others. I was determined to pour myself into this and hopefully produce something that might genuinely make a difference. Maybe I'd still lose in the long run; maybe I wouldn't even want to win. But I would be as close to a princess as I possibly could, and I would make my peace with the Selection.

It was hopeless. Try as I might, I couldn't come up with a single idea for my philanthropy project. I thought and read and thought some more. I asked my maids, but they had no ideas. I would have sought out Aspen, but I hadn't heard from him in days. I guessed he was being extracautious with Maxon home.

What was worse was that Kriss was clearly deep into her presentation. She skipped hours of time in the Women's Room to go read; and when she was present, she had her nose in a book or was scribbling notes furiously.

Damn.

When Friday came, I felt like dying as I suddenly realized I only had a week left and no prospects on the horizon. During the *Report*, Gavril set up the structure for the next show, explaining that there would be a few brief announcements and then the rest of the evening would be dedicated to our presentations.

A light sweat broke out on my forehead.

I caught Maxon looking at me. He reached up and tugged his ear, and I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't quite want to say yes, but I didn't want to just brush him off. I pulled on my ear, and he looked relieved.

I fidgeted while I waited for him to show up, twiddling the ends of my hair and pacing around my room.

Maxon's knock was brief before he let himself in the way he used to. I stood, feeling I needed to be a bit more formal than usual. I could tell that I was being ridiculous, but I felt completely unable to stop it at the same time.

"How are you?" he asked, crossing the room.

"Honestly? Nervous."

"It's because I'm so good-looking, isn't it?"

I laughed at the sympathetic face he made. "I should avert my eyes," I said, playing along. "Actually, it's mostly about that philanthropy project."

"Oh," he said, sitting at my table. "You could run your presentation by me if you like. Kriss did."

I felt deflated. Of course she was done. "I don't even have an idea yet," I confessed, sitting across from him.

"Ah. Yes, I can see how that would be stressful."

I gave him a look as if to say he had no idea.

“What’s important to you? There has to be something that really touches you that the others might miss.” Maxon leaned back in the chair comfortably, one hand on the table.

How was he so at ease? Couldn’t he see how on edge I was?

“I’ve been thinking all week, and nothing’s come to mind.”

He laughed quietly. “I would have thought that you’d have the easiest time. You’ve seen more hardships in your life than the other four combined.”

“Exactly, but I’ve never known how to change any of it. That’s the problem.” I stared at the table, remembering Carolina with perfect clarity. “I can see it all ... the Sevens who get injured doing their labor-heavy jobs and are suddenly downgraded to Eights because they can’t work anymore. The girls who walk the streets on the edge of curfew, wandering into the beds of lonely men for practically anything. The kids who never have enough—enough food, enough heat, enough love—because their parents are working themselves to death. I can remember my worst days like they’re nothing. But coming up with a feasible way to do anything about it?” I shook my head. “What could I possibly say?”

I looked at him, hoping there was an answer in his eyes. There wasn’t.

“You make an excellent point.” Then he was quiet.

I thought over everything I said as well as his response. Did it mean that he knew more about Gregory’s plans than I thought? Or did it mean he felt guilty because he had so much when others had so little?

He sighed. “This really wasn’t what I was hoping we’d talk about tonight.”

“What did you have on your mind?”

Maxon looked up at me as if I must be crazy. “You, of course.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear. “What about me exactly?”

He changed positions, angling his chair so we were a bit closer and leaning in as if this was a secret. “I thought that after you saw that Marlee was fine, things would change. I was sure you’d find a way to care about me again. But that hasn’t happened. Even tonight, you agreed to see me, but everything about you is standoffish.”

So he did notice.

I ran my fingers across the table, not looking him in the eyes. “It’s not exactly you I have a problem with. It’s the position.” I shrugged. “I thought you knew that.”

“But after Marlee—”

My head popped up. “After Marlee, things kept happening. I’ll have a grasp on what being a princess will mean one minute and lose it the next. I’m not like the other girls. I’m the lowest caste here; and Elise might have been a Four, but her family is way different from most Fours. They own so much, I’m surprised they haven’t bought their way up yet. And you were raised in this. It’s a serious change for me.”

He nodded, his endless patience still there. “I do understand that, America. That’s part of why I wanted you to have time. But you need to consider me in this, too.”

“I am.”

“No, not like that. Not like I’m part of the equation. Consider my predicament. I don’t have much time left. This philanthropy project will be the springboard for another elimination. Surely, you’ve guessed that.”

I lowered my head. Of course I had.

“So what am I to do once it’s down to four? Give you more time? When it gets to three, I’m supposed to choose. If there are only three of you and you’re still debating if you want the responsibility, if you want the workload, if you want *me* ... what am I supposed to do then?”

I bit my lip. “I don’t know.”

Maxon shook his head. “That’s not acceptable. I need an answer. Because I can’t send someone who really wants this—who wants me—home if you’re going to bail out in the end.”

My breathing picked up. “So I have to give you an answer now? I don’t even know what I’m giving an answer to. Does saying I want to stay mean saying I want to be the one? Because I don’t know that.” I felt my muscles tensing, like they were preparing to run.

“You don’t have to say anything now; but by the *Report* you need to know if you want this or not. I don’t like giving you an ultimatum, but you’re being a bit careless with my one shot.”

He sighed before continuing. “That wasn’t where I wanted this conversation to go either. Maybe I should leave.” I could hear in his voice that he wanted me to ask him to stay, to tell him this was all going to work itself out.

“I think you should,” I whispered.

He shook his head, irritated, and stood. “Fine.” He walked across the room in quick, angry strides. “I’ll just go see what Kriss is doing.”

CHAPTER 26

I WENT DOWN FOR BREAKFAST on the late side. I didn't want to risk running into Maxon or any of the girls alone. Before I made it to the stairs, Aspen came walking up the hall. I made an exasperated sound, and he looked around before approaching me.

"Where have you been?" I quietly demanded.

"Working, Mer. I'm a guard. I can't control when and where they schedule me. I've stopped being placed on the round for your room."

I wanted to ask why, but this wasn't the time. "I need to talk to you."

He thought for a moment. "At two, go to the end of the first-floor hallway, down past the hospital wing. I can be there, but not for long." I nodded. He gave me a quick bow and went on his way before anyone noticed our conversation, and I continued downstairs, not feeling satisfied at all.

I wanted to scream. Saturday being a day-long sentence to the Women's Room was really unfair. When people came to visit, they wanted to see the queen, not us. When one of us was princess, that would probably change, but for now I was stuck watching Kriss pour over her presentation again. The others were reading things, too, notes or reports, and I felt sick to my stomach. I needed an idea and fast. I was sure Aspen would help me figure this out, and I had to start something tonight no matter what.

As if she could read my thoughts, Silvia, who had been visiting with the queen, stopped by to see me.

"How's my star pupil?" she asked, keeping her voice low enough that the others wouldn't notice.

"Great."

"How is your project going? Do you need any help fine-tuning?" she offered.

Fine-tuning? How was I supposed to tweak *nothing*?

"It's going great. You're going to love it, I'm sure," I lied.

She cocked her head to the side. "Being a bit secretive are we?"

"A bit." I smiled.

"That's fine. You've been doing wonderful work lately. I'm sure it'll be fantastic." Silvia patted my shoulder as she headed out of the room.

I was in so much trouble.

The minutes passed so slowly that it was like a special kind of torture. Just before two I excused myself and went down the hallway. At the very end, there was a burgundy upholstered couch underneath a massive window. I sat to wait. I didn't see a clock, but the minutes passed too slowly for comfort. Finally Aspen came around a corner.

"About time." I sighed.

"What's wrong?" he asked, standing by the couch, looking official.

So much, I thought. *So many things I can't talk to you about.*

"We have this assignment, and I don't know what to do. I can't think of anything, and I'm stressed, and I can't sleep," I said spastically.

He chuckled. "What's the assignment? Tiara designing?"

“No,” I said, shooting him a frustrated glare. “We have to come up with a project, something good for the country. Like Queen Amberly’s work with the disabled.”

“This is what you’ve been worked up about?” he asked, shaking his head. “How is that stressful? That sounds like fun.”

“I thought it would be, too. But I can’t come up with anything. What would you do?”

Aspen thought for a moment. “I know! You should do a caste exchange program,” he said, his eyes glittering with excitement.

“A what?”

“A caste exchange program. People from the upper castes switch places with people from the lower castes so they can know what it feels like to walk in our shoes.”

“I don’t think that would work, Aspen, at least not for this project.”

“It’s a great idea,” he insisted. “Can you imagine someone like Celeste breaking her nails stocking shelves? It’d serve them right.”

“What’s gotten into you? Aren’t some of the guards natural Twos? Aren’t they your friends now?”

“Nothing’s gotten into me,” he answered defensively. “I’m the same as ever. You’re the one who’s forgotten what it was like to live in a house with no heat.”

I straightened my back. “I haven’t forgotten. I’m trying to come up with a service project to stop things like that. Even if I go home, someone might use my idea, so I need it to be good. I want to help people.”

“Don’t forget, Mer,” Aspen implored me with a quiet passion in his eyes. “This government sat by while you went without food. They let my brother get beaten in the square. All the talk in the world won’t undo what we are. They put us in a corner we could never get out of on our own, and they’re not in a rush to pull us out. Mer, they just don’t get it.”

I huffed and stood.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Back to the Women’s Room,” I answered, starting to move.

Aspen followed. “Are we seriously fighting over some stupid project?”

I turned on him. “No. We’re fighting because you don’t get it either. I’m a Three now. And you’re a Two. Instead of being bitter about what we were handed, why can’t you see the chance you have? You can change your family’s life. You could probably change lots of lives. And all you want to do is settle the score. That’s not going to get anyone anywhere.”

Aspen didn’t say anything, and I left. I tried not to be upset with him for being passionate about what he wanted. If anything, wasn’t that an admirable quality? But it made me think so much about the castes and how they couldn’t be undone that I started getting angry about the situation.

Nothing was going to change it. So why bother?

I played my violin. I took a bath. I tried to nap. I spent part of the evening sitting in a quiet room. I sat on my balcony.

None of it mattered. It was getting dangerously late in the game, and I still had nothing for my project.

I lay in bed for hours, trying to sleep and not getting far with that either. I kept flashing

back to Aspen's angry words, his constant struggle with his lot in life. I thought about Maxon and his ultimatum, his demand for me to commit. And then I wondered if any of this mattered anyway, since I was certainly going home as soon as I showed up Friday night without anything to present.

I sighed and pulled back my blankets. I'd been avoiding looking at Gregory's diary again; I was worried that it would give me more questions than answers. But maybe something in there would give me direction, something I could talk about on the *Report*.

Besides, even if I couldn't help myself, I had to know what happened to his daughter. I was pretty sure her name was Katherine, so I flipped through the book looking for any mention of her, ignoring everything else, until I found a picture of a girl standing next to a man who appeared to be much older. Maybe it was just my imagination, but she looked like she'd been crying.

KATHERINE WAS FINALLY MARRIED TODAY TO EMIL DE MONPEZAT OF SWENDWAY. SHE SOBBED THE WHOLE WAY TO THE CHURCH UNTIL I MADE IT CLEAR THAT IF SHE DIDN'T STRAIGHTEN UP FOR THE CEREMONY, THERE'D BE HELL TO PAY AFTERWARD. HER MOTHER ISN'T HAPPY, AND I SUSPECT SPENCER IS UPSET NOW THAT HE'S AWARE OF HOW LITTLE HIS SISTER WANTED TO GO THROUGH WITH THIS. BUT SPENCER IS BRIGHT. I THINK HE'LL FALL INTO LINE QUICKLY ONCE HE SEES ALL THE POSSIBILITIES I'VE CREATED FOR HIM. AND DAMON IS SO SUPPORTIVE; I WISH I COULD TAKE WHATEVER IT IS IN HIS SYSTEM AND INJECT IT INTO THE REST OF THE POPULATION. THERE'S SOMETHING TO BE SAID FOR THE YOUNG. IT'S SPENCER AND DAMON'S GENERATION THAT HAS BEEN THE MOST HELPFUL IN GETTING ME WHERE I AM. THEIR ENTHUSIASM IS UNSWAYABLE, AND THEY ARE A FAR MORE POPULAR CROWD FOR OTHERS TO LISTEN TO THAN THE FEEBLE ELDERLY WHO INSIST WE'VE GONE DOWN THE WRONG PATH. I KEEP WONDERING IF THERE'S A WAY TO SILENCE THEM FOR GOOD THAT WOULDN'T MIRE MY NAME.

EITHER WAY, WE ARE SLATED TO HAVE THE CORONATION TOMORROW. NOW THAT SWENDWAY HAS GOTTEN THE POWERFUL ALLY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN UNION, I CAN HAVE WHAT I WANT: A CROWN. I THINK THIS IS A FAIR TRADE. WHY SETTLE FOR PRESIDENT ILLÉA WHEN I CAN BE KING ILLÉA INSTEAD? THROUGH MY DAUGHTER, I'VE BEEN DEEMED ROYAL.

EVERYTHING IS IN PLACE. AFTER TOMORROW THERE WILL BE NO TURNING BACK.

He sold her. The pig sold his daughter to a man she hated so he could have everything he wanted.

My instinct was to close the book again, to shut it all out. But I forced myself to flip through it, reading passages at random. In one place a rough diagram of the caste system was laid out, originally dreamed up with six tiers instead of eight. On another page he plotted to

change people's last names to separate them from their pasts. One line made it clear that he intended to punish his enemies by placing them lower on the scale and reward the loyal by placing them higher.

I wondered if my great-grandparents simply had nothing to offer or if they had resisted this. I hoped it was the latter.

What should my last name have been? Did Dad know?

My whole life I'd been led to believe that Gregory Illéa was a hero, the person who saved our country when we were on the edge of oblivion. Clearly, he was nothing more than a power-hungry monster. What kind of man manipulated people so willingly? What kind of man hawked his daughter for his own convenience?

I looked at the older entries I'd read in a new light. He never said he wanted to *be* a great family man; he just wanted to *look* like one. He would play by Wallis's rules *for now*. He was using his son's peers to gain support. He was playing a game from the very beginning.

I felt nauseated. I stood and paced the floor, trying to wrap my head around it all.

How had an entire history been forgotten? How was it that no one ever spoke of the old countries? Where was all this information? Why didn't anyone know?

I opened my eyes and looked to the sky. It seemed impossible. Surely, someone would have disapproved, would have told their children the truth. But then again, maybe they had. I'd often wondered why Dad never let me talk about the timeworn history book he had hidden in his room, why the history I did know about Illéa was never in print. Maybe it was because, if it was there in writing that Illéa was a hero, people would have rioted. But if it was always a point of speculation, where one person insisted it was a certain way and another denied it, how would anyone ever hold on to the truth?

I wondered if Maxon knew.

Suddenly a memory came to me. Not so long ago, Maxon and I had our first kiss. It was so unexpected that I had pulled away, leaving him embarrassed. Then when I realized that I wanted Maxon to kiss me, I suggested that we simply erase that memory and plant a new one.

America, he'd said, *I don't think you can change history*. To which I replied, *Sure we can. Besides, who'd ever know about it but you and me?*

I'd meant it as a joke. Surely, if he and I end up together, we'd remember what really happened no matter how silly it was. We'd never actually replace it with a more perfect-sounding story simply for the sake of show.

But the whole Selection *was* a show. If Maxon and I were ever asked about our first kiss, would we tell anyone the truth? Or would we keep that little detail a secret between the two of us? When we died, no one would know, and that fraction of a moment that was so important to who we were would be gone.

Could it be that simple? Tell one story to one generation and repeat it until it was accepted as fact? How often had I asked someone older than Mom or Dad what they knew or what their parents had seen? They were old. What did they know? It was so arrogant of me to discount them completely. I felt so stupid.

But the important issue wasn't how this all made me feel. The important issue was what I was going to do with it.

I'd lived my whole life stuck in a hole in our society; and because I loved music, I didn't

complain. But I had wanted to be with Aspen, and because he was a Six, it was harder than it had to be. If Gregory Illéa hadn't coldly designed the laws of our country, sitting comfortably at his desk all those years ago, then Aspen and I wouldn't have fought and I never would have cared about Maxon. Maxon wouldn't even be a prince. Marlee's hands would still be intact, and she and Carter wouldn't be living in a room barely big enough for their bed. Gerad, my sweet baby brother, could study all the science he wanted instead of pushing himself into the arts for which he had no passion.

By obtaining a comfy life in a beautiful house, Gregory Illéa had robbed most of the country of its ability to ever attempt to have the very same thing.

Maxon said if I wanted to know who he was, all I had to do was ask. I'd been afraid to face the possibility of him being this person, but I had to know. If I was meant to make a decision about being a part of the Selection or going home, I needed to know exactly what he was made of.

Donning my slippers and robe, I left my room, passing the nameless guard on my way.

"You all right, miss?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll be back soon."

He looked like he wanted to say more, but I left too quickly for him to speak. I headed up the stairs to the third floor. Unlike the other floors, guards stood at the landing, preventing me from simply walking to Maxon's door.

"I need to speak to the prince," I said, trying to sound firm.

"It's very late, miss," the one to the left said.

"Maxon won't mind," I promised.

The one to the right smirked a little. "I don't think he'd appreciate any company right now, miss."

My forehead creased in thought as I played that sentence in my head again.

He was with another girl.

I had to assume it was Kriss, sitting there in his room, talking, laughing, or maybe giving up on her no-kissing rule.

A maid came around the corner with a tray in her hands, passing me as she descended the stairs. I stepped to the side, trying to decide if I should push the guards to let me through anyway or give up. As I went to open my mouth again, the guard cut me off.

"You need to go back to bed, miss."

I wanted to yell at them or do something because I felt so powerless. It wouldn't help, though, so I left. I heard the one guard—the smirking one—mumble something as I walked away, and that made it worse. Was he making fun of me? Feeling sorry for me? I didn't need his pity. I was feeling bad enough on my own.

When I got back to the second floor, I was surprised to see that the maid who had passed me was there, kneeling as if she was adjusting her shoe but clearly doing nothing of the sort. She raised her head as I approached, picking up her tray and walking toward me.

"He's not in his room," she whispered.

"Who? Maxon?"

She nodded. "Try downstairs."

I smiled, shaking my head in surprise. "Thank you."

She shrugged. "He's not anywhere you couldn't find him if you looked anyway. Besides," she said, her eyes full of admiration, "we like you."

She moved away, heading down to the first floor very quickly. I wondered exactly who "we" was, but for now, her simple act of kindness was enough. I stood for a moment, leaving some space between the two of us, and headed downstairs.

The Great Room was open but empty, as was the dining room. I checked the Women's Room, thinking that would be a funny place to go on a date, but they weren't there either. I asked the guards by the door, and they assured me that Maxon hadn't gone into the gardens, so I checked a few of the libraries and parlors before guessing that he and Kriss must have either parted ways or gone back to his room.

Giving up, I turned a corner and headed for the back stairwell, which was closer than the main one. I didn't see anything; but as I approached, I heard the distinct hiss of a whisper. I slowed, not wanting to intrude and not completely sure where the sound was coming from.

Another whisper.

A flirtatious giggle.

A warm sigh.

The sounds focused, and I was certain where they were coming from. I took one more step forward, looked to my left, and saw a couple embracing in the shadows. After the image settled and my eyes adjusted to the light, a shock went through me.

Maxon's blond hair was unmistakable, even in the darkness. How many times had I seen it just so in the dim light of the gardens? But what I'd never seen before, never *imagined* before, was how that hair would look with Celeste's long fingers, nails painted red, digging into it.

Maxon was all but pinned to the wall by Celeste's body. Her free hand was pressed against his chest, and her leg was wrapped around his, the slit of her dress revealing her long leg, tinted slightly blue in the dark of the hall. She pulled back slightly, only to fall back into him slowly, teasing him it seemed.

I kept waiting for him to tell her to get off him, to tell her she wasn't what he wanted. But he didn't. Instead he kissed her. She lavished in it and giggled again at his affection. He whispered something in her ear, and Celeste leaned in and kissed him, deeper, harder than before. The strap of her dress fell off her shoulder, leaving what seemed like miles of exposed skin down her back. Neither of them bothered to fix it.

I was frozen. I wanted to scream or cry, but my throat felt constricted. Why, of everyone, did it have to be her?

Celeste's lips slid off Maxon's and settled onto his neck. She gave another obnoxious giggle and kissed him once more. Maxon closed his eyes and smiled. With Celeste no longer blocking him, I was in Maxon's line of sight.

I meant to run. I meant to disappear, to evaporate. Instead I stood there.

So when Maxon opened his eyes, he saw me.

As Celeste drew pictures in kisses up and down his neck, Maxon and I merely stared at each other. His smile now gone, Maxon had suddenly turned to stone. The shock in his eyes willed me finally to move. Celeste didn't notice, so I backed away quietly, not even stirring a breath.

Once I was out of earshot, I broke into a run, blazing past all the guards and butlers working late into the night. The tears started coming before I made it up the main stairway.

I pulled myself up and moved quickly to my room. I pushed past the concerned guard and through the doorway, sitting on my bed facing the balcony. In the quiet stillness of my room, I felt my heart ache. *So stupid, America. So stupid.*

I'd go home. I'd forget this ever happened. And I'd marry Aspen.

Aspen was the only person I could count on.

It wasn't long before there was a knock on my door, and Maxon came in without waiting for an answer. He stormed across the room, looking about as angry as I was.

Before he could say a word, I confronted him.

"You lied to me."

"What? When?"

"When haven't you been? How could the same person who talked about proposing to me want to be caught dead in a hallway with someone like her?"

"What I do with her has absolutely nothing to do with how I feel about you."

"You're joking, right? Or because you're the next king, I suppose it's acceptable for you to have half-naked girls draped across you whenever you like?"

Maxon looked stricken. "No. That's not what I think at all."

"Why her?" I asked, looking to the ceiling. "Why, of anyone on the planet, would you want her?"

When I looked to Maxon for an answer, he was shaking his head and looking around the room.

"Maxon, she's an actress, a fake. You have to be able to see that under all that makeup, and the push-up bra is nothing but a girl who wants to manipulate you to get what she wants."

Maxon huffed out a laugh. "Actually, I do."

I was taken aback by his calm. "Then why—"

But I already had my answer.

He knew. Of course he knew. He'd been raised here. Gregory's diaries were probably his bedtime stories. I didn't know why I'd expected otherwise.

How naive had I been? When I kept thinking that there was a better option than me for his princess, I'd been imagining Kriss. She was lovely and patient and a million things that I wasn't. But I'd been seeing her next to a different Maxon. For the man he would have to be to follow in Gregory Illéa's footsteps, the only girl here for him was Celeste. No one else would be so content to keep a country under her thumb.

"That's it," I said, wiping my hands in front of me. "You wanted a decision, and here it is: I am done with this. I'm done with the Selection, I'm done with all the lies, and I am especially done with you. God, I can't believe how stupid I was."

"You're not done, America," he contradicted me quickly, his stance saying as much as his words. "You're done when I say you are. You're upset right now, but you aren't done."

I gripped my hair, feeling like I was seconds away from pulling it all out by the roots. "What is wrong with you? Are you delusional? What makes you think that I will ever be okay with what I just saw? I *hate* that girl. And you were kissing her. I want nothing to do with you."

“Good God, woman, you never let me get a word in edgewise!”

“What could you possibly say that could explain that away? Just send me home. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Our conversation had been going back and forth so quickly that his silence was startling.

“No.”

I was enraged. Wasn’t this exactly what he’d been asking for? “Maxon Schreave, you are nothing but a child who has his hands on a toy that he doesn’t want but can’t stand for someone else to have.”

Quietly, Maxon spoke. “I understand that you’re angry, but—”

I shoved him. “I’m beyond angry!”

Maxon remained calm. “America, do not call me a child. And do not push me.”

I shoved him again. “What are you going to do about it?”

Maxon grabbed my wrists, pinning my arms behind my back, and I saw the anger in his eyes. I was glad it was there. I wanted him to provoke me. I wanted a reason to hurt him. I could tear him to bits right now.

But there was no rage in him. Instead I felt the warm buzz of electricity that had been missing for a long time. Maxon’s face was inches from mine, his eyes searching my own, perhaps wondering how he’d be received, perhaps not caring at all. Though it was all wrong, I still wanted it. My lips parted before I realized what was happening.

I shook my head to clear it and stepped back, moving toward the balcony. He didn’t put up a fight as I pulled away. I took a few steady breaths before I turned to him.

“Are you going to send me home?” I asked quietly.

Maxon shook his head, either unable or unwilling to speak.

I ripped his bracelet off my wrist and threw it across the room. “Then go,” I whispered.

I turned back to look out my balcony and waited a few heavy moments to hear the click of the door. Once he left, I fell to the floor and sobbed.

He and Celeste were so much alike. Everything about them was a show. And I knew that he would spend the rest of his life sweet-talking the public into thinking he was wonderful, all the while keeping them trapped where they were. Just like Gregory.

I sat on my floor, legs crossed under my nightgown. As upset as I was with Maxon, I was even more upset with myself. I should have fought harder. I should have done more. I shouldn’t be sitting here so defeated.

I wiped the tears away and assessed the situation. I was done with Maxon, but I was still here. I was done with the competition, but I still had a presentation due. Aspen might not think I was tough enough to be a princess—and he was right—but he did have faith in me. I knew that. And so did my father. And so did Nicoletta.

I wasn’t here to win anymore. So how could I go out with a bang?

CHAPTER 27

WHEN SILVIA ASKED WHAT I would need for my presentation, I told her a small desk for some books and an easel for a poster I was designing. She was particularly excited about my poster. I was the only girl here with any true experience making art.

I spent hours writing my speech onto note cards so I wouldn't miss anything, flagging sections in books to be my resources midpresentation, and rehearsing it in the mirror to get through the parts that particularly worried me. I tried not to think too hard about what I was doing; otherwise my whole body started trembling.

I asked Anne to make me a dress that looked innocent, which made her eyebrows pucker.

"You make it sound like we've been sending you out in lingerie," she said mockingly.

I chuckled. "That's not what I mean at all. You know I love all the dresses you've made me. I just want to seem ... angelic."

She smiled to herself. "I think we can come up with something."

They must have been working like crazy, because I didn't see Anne, Mary, or Lucy the day of the *Report* until the hour before it started, when they came bustling in with the dress. It was white, gauzy, and light, adorned with one long stream of green and blue tulle running along the right side. The bottom fell in such a way that it looked like a cloud, and its empire waist added a level of virtue and grace to the gown. I felt lovely in that dress. It was by far my favorite of everything they'd designed for me, and I was glad it worked out that way. It would probably be the last dress of theirs I'd ever wear.

It had been hard to keep my plan a secret, but I did. When the girls asked what I was doing, I simply said it was a surprise. I got a few skeptical looks for that, but I didn't care. I asked my maids not to touch the things on my desk, not even to clean, and they obeyed, leaving my notes facedown.

No one knew.

The person I most wanted to tell was Aspen, but I refrained. Part of me feared he would talk me out of it, and I would cave. Another part feared he would be far too gung-ho.

As my maids worked to make me look beautiful, I stared into the mirror and knew I was walking into this alone. And that was for the best. I didn't want anyone—not my maids, not the other girls, and especially not Aspen—to get in trouble for my actions.

All that was left to do was to put things in order.

"Anne, Mary, would you please go get me some tea?"

They looked at each other. "Both of us?" Mary clarified.

"Yes, please."

They looked suspicious but curtsied and left all the same. Once they were gone, I turned to Lucy.

"Sit with me," I invited, pulling her down to the padded bench on which I was sitting. She complied, and I asked her simply, "Are you happy?"

"Miss?"

"You've seemed kind of sad lately. I was wondering if you were all right."

She dropped her head. “Is it that obvious?”

“A little,” I admitted, wrapping my arm around her and holding her close. She sighed and placed her head on my shoulder. I was so happy that she forgot the invisible boundaries between us for a moment.

“Have you ever wanted something you couldn’t have?”

I snorted. “Lucy, before I came here I was a Five. There were too many things I couldn’t have to bother counting.”

In a very un-Lucy-like manner, a single tear fell to her cheek. “I don’t know what to do. I’m stuck.”

I straightened up and made her face me. “Lucy, I want you to know I think you can do anything, be anything. I think you’re an amazing girl.”

She gave me a weak smile. “Thank you, miss.”

I knew we didn’t have much time. “Listen, I need you to do something for me. I wasn’t sure if I could count on the others, but I’m trusting you.”

Though she looked confused, I could tell she meant it when she said, “Anything.”

I reached over to one of the drawers and pulled out a letter. “Could you give this to Officer Leger?”

“Officer Leger?”

“I wanted to tell him thank-you for how kind he’s been, and I thought it might be inappropriate to give him a letter myself. You know.” It was a lame excuse, but it was the only way I could explain to Aspen why I did what I was going to do and to tell him good-bye. I assumed I wouldn’t have much time in the palace after tonight.

“I can get this to him within the hour,” she said eagerly.

“Thank you.” Tears threatened to come, but I pushed them down. I was scared, but there were so many reasons this needed to be done.

We all deserved better. My family, Marlee and Carter, Aspen, even my maids were all stuck because of Gregory’s plans. I would think of them.

When I walked into the studio for the *Report*, I was clutching an armful of marked books and a portfolio for my poster. The setup was the same as always—the king’s, queen’s, and Maxon’s seats to the right near the door, the Selected in seats on the left—but in the middle, where there was usually a podium for the king to speak at or a set of chairs for interviews, there was a space for our presentations instead. I saw a desk and my easel, but also a screen that I assumed someone was showing slides on. That was impressive. I wondered who had found the resources to go that far.

I went over to the last open chair—next to Celeste, unfortunately—and placed my portfolio beside me, keeping my books on my lap. Natalie had a few books, too; and Elise was reading through her notes over and over. Kriss was looking toward the sky and appeared to be reciting her presentation mentally. Celeste was checking her makeup.

Silvia was there, which sometimes happened when we had to discuss something she’d briefed us on, and today she was beside herself. This was probably the hardest we’d worked to date, and it would all reflect back on her.

I inhaled sharply. I’d forgotten about Silvia. Too late now.

“You look beautiful, ladies, fantastic!” she said as she approached. “Now that you’re all

here, I want to explain a few things. First, the king will get up and give a few announcements, and then Gavril will introduce the topic of the evening: your philanthropy presentations.”

Silvia, usually a level-headed, palace-hardened machine, was giddy. She was actually bouncing as she spoke. “Now, I know you’ve been practicing. You have eight minutes; and if anyone has a question for you afterward, Gavril will facilitate that. Remember to stay alert and poised. The country is watching you! If you get lost, take a breath and move on. You’re going to be wonderful. Oh, and you’ll be going in the order in which you’re seated, so Lady Natalie, you’re first; and Lady America will be last. Good luck, girls!”

Silvia skipped off to check and double-check things, and I tried to calm myself. Last. I guessed that was a good thing. I supposed Natalie had it worse by being first up. Looking over, I saw her breaking into a sweat. It must be torture for her to try and focus like this. I couldn’t help but stare at Celeste. She didn’t know I’d seen her and Maxon, and I kept wondering why she never told anyone about it. The fact that she kept it to herself led me to believe it wasn’t the first time.

That made it so much worse.

“Nervous?” I asked, watching her pick at something on her nail.

“No. This is a stupid idea, and no one really cares. I’ll be glad when it’s over. And I’m a model,” she said, finally looking at me. “I’m naturally good at being in front of an audience.”

“You do seem to have mastered how to pose,” I mumbled.

I could see the wheels turning as she tried to weed out the insult in there. She ended up rolling her eyes and looking away.

Just then the king walked in with the queen by his side. They were speaking in whispers, and it looked very important. A moment later, Maxon entered, adjusting his cuff links as he made his way to his seat. He came across so innocent, so clean in his suit; I had to remind myself that I knew better.

He looked over at me. I wasn’t going to be intimidated and turn away first, so I stared back. Then, tentatively, Maxon reached up and tugged at his ear. I slowly shook my head with an expression that conveyed we would never speak again if I had anything to do with it.

A cold sweat broke out on my entire body as the presentations started. Natalie’s proposal was short. And slightly misinformed.

She claimed that everything the rebels were doing was hateful and wrong, and their presence should be outlawed to keep Illéa’s provinces safer. We all stared at her quietly once she was done. How did she not know that everything they did was already considered illegal?

The queen’s face in particular seemed incredibly sad as Natalie sat back down.

Elise proposed a program that would involve members of the upper castes getting involved in a pen pal-type of relationship with people in New Asia. She suggested that it would help strengthen the bonds between our countries and aid in ending the war. I wasn’t sure that it would do any good, but it was a fresh reminder to Maxon and the public of the reason she was still here. The queen asked if she happened to know anyone in New Asia who would be open to being in the program, and Elise assured her that she did.

Kriss’s presentation was spectacular. She wanted to revamp the public school systems, which I already knew was an idea near and dear to both the queen’s and Maxon’s hearts. As the daughter of a professor, I was sure she’d been thinking about this her whole life. She used

the screen to show pictures from her home province's school that her parents had sent to her. It was plain to see the exhaustion on the teachers' faces, and in one picture it showed a room where four children were sitting on the floor since there weren't enough chairs. The queen piped up with dozens of questions, and Kriss was quick to answer. Using copies of old reports about financial issues we'd read, she'd even found a place where we could borrow the money to start the work and had ideas on how to continue the funding.

As she sat down, I saw Maxon give her a smile and a nod. She responded by blushing and studying the lace on her dress. It was really cruel of him to play with her like that, considering how intimate he was with Celeste. But I was done interfering. Let him do what he wanted.

Celeste's presentation was interesting, if slightly manipulative. She suggested that there be a minimum-payment wage for some of the lower castes. It would be a sliding scale, based on certifications. However, to get these certifications, the Fives, Sixes, and Sevens would have to go to school ... which they would have to pay for ... which would mostly benefit the Threes, as they were the authorized teachers. Since Celeste was a Two, she had no idea how we had to work around the clock to make ends meet. No one would have the time to get these certifications, meaning their pay would never change. On the surface it sounded nice, but there was no way it would work.

Celeste returned to her seat, and I trembled when I stood. For a brief second I considered pretending to pass out. But I wanted this to happen. I just didn't want to face what would come after.

I placed my poster—a diagram of the castes—on the easel, and set my books in order on the desk. I took a deep breath and gripped my cards, surprised to find that when I started, I didn't even need them.

“Good evening, Illéa. Tonight I come to you not as one of the Elite, not as a Three or a Five, but as a citizen, an equal. Based on your caste, your experience of our country is shaded a very specific way. I can say that for certain myself. But it wasn't until recently that I understood how deep my love for Illéa went.

“Despite growing up sometimes without food or electricity, despite watching people I love forced into the stations we are assigned at birth with little hope for change, despite seeing the gaps between myself and others because of this number even though we aren't very different”—I looked over to the girls—“I find myself in love with our country.”

I switched the card automatically, knowing the break. “What I propose wouldn't be simple. It might even be painful, but I genuinely believe it would benefit our entire kingdom.” I inhaled. “I think we should eliminate the castes.”

I heard more than one gasp. I chose to ignore them.

“I know there was a time, when our country was new, when the assignment of these numbers helped organize something that was on the brink of not existing. But we are no longer that country. We are so much more now. To allow the talentless to have exalted privileges and suppress what could be the greatest minds in the world for the sake of an archaic organization system is cruel, and it only stops us from becoming the best we can be.”

I noted a poll from one of Celeste's discarded magazines after we talked about having a volunteer army, and sixty-five percent of the people thought it was a good idea. Why eliminate

that career path completely for people? I also cited an old report we had studied about the standardized testing in the public schools. The article was slanted, stating that only three percent of Sixes and Sevens tested to elevated levels of intelligence; and since it was so low, it was clear they were intended to stay where they were. My argument was that we ought to be ashamed that those people are stuck digging ditches when they could be performing heart surgeries.

Finally the daunting task was nearly over. “Perhaps our country is flawed, but we cannot deny its strength. My fear is that, without change, that strength will become stagnate. And I love our country too much to let that happen. I *hope* too much to let that happen.”

I swallowed, grateful that at least it was over now. “Thank you for your time,” I said, and turned slightly toward the royal family.

It was bad. Maxon’s face was stony again, like the way he’d looked when Marlee was caned. The queen averted her eyes, looking disappointed. The king, however, stared me down.

Without so much as a blink, he focused in on me. “And how do you suggest we eliminate the castes?” he challenged. “Just suddenly take them all away?”

“Oh ... I don’t know.”

“And you don’t think that would cause riots? Complete mayhem? Allow for rebels to take advantage of public confusion?”

I hadn’t thought this part through. All I could process was how unfair it all was.

“I think the creation caused a decent amount of confusion, and we managed that. In fact”—I reached to my pile of books—“I have a description here.”

I started looking for the right page in Gregory’s diary.

“Are we off?” he bellowed.

“Yes, Majesty,” someone called.

I looked up and saw that all the lights that usually indicated that the cameras were on had gone dim. In some gesture I’d missed, the king had shut down the *Report*.

The king stood. “Point them to the ground.” Each camera was aimed to the floor.

He stormed over to me and ripped the diary from my hands.

“Where did you get this?” he yelled.

“Father, stop!” Maxon jogged up nervously.

“Where did she get this? Answer me!”

Maxon confessed. “From me. We were looking up what Halloween was. He wrote about it in the diaries, and I thought she’d like to read more.”

“You idiot,” the king spat. “I knew I should have made you read these sooner. You’re completely lost. You have no clue of the duty you have!”

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.

“She leaves tonight,” King Clarkson ordered. “I’ve had enough of her.”

I tried to shrink down, distance myself from the king as much as I could without being obvious. I tried not to even breathe too loudly. I turned my head toward the girls, for some reason focusing on Celeste. I’d expected her to be smiling, but she was nervous. The king had never been like this.

“You can’t send her home. That’s my choice, and I say she stays,” Maxon responded

calmly.

“Maxon Calix Schreave, I am the king of Illéa, and I say—”

“Could you stop being the king for five minutes and just be my father?” Maxon yelled. “This is my choice. You got to make yours, and I want to make mine. No one else is leaving without my say so!”

I saw Natalie lean in to Elise. They both looked like they were shaking.

“Amberly, take this back to where it belongs,” he said, shoving the book in her hand. She stood there, nodding her head but not moving. “Maxon, I need to see you in my office.”

I watched Maxon; and maybe I only imagined it, but it looked like panic flickered briefly behind his eyes.

“Or,” the king offered, “I could simply talk to her.” He gestured over to me.

“No,” Maxon said quickly, holding up a hand in protest. “That won’t be necessary. Ladies,” he added, turning to us, “why don’t you all head upstairs? We’ll have dinner sent to you tonight.” He paused. “America, maybe you should go ahead and collect your things. Just in case.”

The king smiled, an eerie action after his recent explosion. “Excellent idea. After you, *son*.”

I looked at Maxon, who seemed defeated. I felt ashamed. Maxon opened his mouth to say something, but in the end he shook his head and walked away.

Kriss was wringing her hands, looking after Maxon. I couldn’t blame her. Something about all of this seemed menacing.

“Clarkson?” Queen Amberly said quietly. “What about the other matter?”

“What?” he asked in irritation.

“The news?” she reminded him.

“Oh, yes.” He walked back toward us. I was close enough that I decided to retreat into my chair, afraid of being out there alone again. King Clarkson’s voice was steady and calm. “Natalie, we didn’t want to tell you before the *Report*, but we’ve received some bad news.”

“Bad news?” she asked, fiddling with her necklace, already too anxious.

The king came closer. “Yes. I’m very sorry for your loss, but it appears the rebels took your sister this morning.”

“What?” she whispered.

“Her remains were found this afternoon. We’re sorry.” To his credit, there was something close to sympathy in his voice, though it sounded more like training than genuine emotion.

He quickly returned to Maxon, escorting him forcefully out the door as Natalie broke into an ear-shattering scream. The queen rushed over to her, smoothing her hair and trying to calm her down. Celeste, never too sisterly, quietly left the room, with an overwhelmed Elise close behind. Kriss stayed and tried to comfort Natalie, but once it was clear that she couldn’t do much, she left as well. The queen told Natalie there would be guards with her parents for good measure and that she would be able to leave for the funeral if she wanted to, holding on to her the whole time.

Everything had gotten so dark so quickly, I found myself frozen in my seat.

When the hand appeared in front of my face, I was so startled, I shied away.

“I won’t hurt you,” Gavril said. “Just want to help you up.” His lapel pin shimmered, reflecting the light.

I gave him my hand, surprised by how shaky my legs were.

“He must love you very much,” Gavril said once I had my footing.

I couldn’t look at him. “What makes you say that?”

Gavril sighed. “I’ve known Maxon since he was a child. He’s never stood up to his father like that.”

Gavril walked away then, talking to the crew about keeping all that they had heard tonight quiet.

I went to Natalie. It wasn’t like I knew everything about her, but I was sure she loved her sister the way I loved May; and I couldn’t imagine the ache she must be feeling.

“Natalie, I’m so sorry,” I whispered. She nodded. That was the most she could manage.

The queen looked up at me sympathetically, not sure how to convey all her sadness.

“And ... I’m sorry to you, too. I wasn’t trying to ... I just ...”

“I know, dear.”

With how Natalie was doing, asking for more of a good-bye was too selfish, so I gave the queen a final, deep curtsy and slowly left the room, wallowing in the disaster I’d created.

CHAPTER 28

THE LAST THING I WAS expecting when I walked in my doorway was the smattering of applause from my maids.

I stood there for a moment, genuinely moved by their support and comforted by the shining pride in their faces. Once they were done making me blush, Anne took me by the hands.

“Well said, miss.” She gave a gentle squeeze, and I saw in her eyes so much joy over my words, for a second I didn’t feel so awful.

“I can’t believe you did that! No one ever stands up for us!” Mary added.

“Maxon has to pick you,” Lucy cried. “You’re the only one who gives me hope.”

Hope.

I needed to think, and the one place I could really do that was the gardens. Though my maids were insistent that I stay, I left, taking the long way, down a back stairwell on the other end of the hall. Besides the occasional guard, the first floor was empty and quiet. It felt like the palace should be bustling with activity, given how much had happened in the last half hour or so.

As I passed the hospital wing, the door flew open and I ran right into Maxon, who dropped a sealed metal box. He groaned after we collided, even though it really wasn’t that hard.

“What are you doing out of your room?” he asked, slowly bending to pick up the box. I noticed it had his name on the side. I wondered what he was storing in the hospital wing.

“I was going to the gardens. I’m trying to figure out if I did something stupid or not.”

Maxon appeared to be having a difficult time standing. “Oh, I can assure you it was stupid.”

“Do you need help?”

“No,” he answered quickly, avoiding my eyes. “Just heading to my room. And I suggest you do the same.”

“Maxon.” The quiet plea in my voice made him look at me. “I’m so sorry. I was mad, and I wanted to ... I don’t even know anymore. And you were the one who said there were perks to being a One, that you could change things.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re not a One.” There was a silence between us. “Even if you were, did you not pay attention at all to the way I’m doing things? It’s quiet and small. That’s how it has to be for now. You can’t go on television complaining about the way things are run and expect to have my father’s, or anyone’s, support.”

“I’m sorry!” I cried. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He paused for a moment. “I’m not sure that—”

We heard the shouting at the same time. Maxon turned and started walking, and I followed, trying to make sense of the sound. Was someone fighting? As we got closer to the intersection of the main hallway and the doors to the gardens, we saw guards come flooding toward the area.

“Sound the alarm!” someone called. “They’re through the gates!”

“Guns at the ready!” another guard yelled over the shouts.

“Alert the king!”

And then, like bees intent on landing, small, quick things buzzed into the hall. A guard was struck and fell back, his head hitting the marble with a disturbing crack. The blood pouring from his chest made me scream.

Maxon instinctively pulled me away, but not very quickly. Perhaps he was in shock as well.

“Your Majesty!” a guard called, racing over to us. “You have to get downstairs now!”

He gruffly turned Maxon around and shoved him away. Maxon cried out and dropped the metal box again. I looked over at the guard’s hand on Maxon, expecting to see that he’d driven a knife into his back based on the sound Maxon had made. All I saw was a thick, pewter ring around his thumb. I picked up the box by the handle on the side, hoping that didn’t mess up anything inside, and ran in the direction the guard was trying to move us.

“I won’t make it,” Maxon said.

I turned back to him and saw that he was sweating. Something was really wrong with him.

“Yes, sir,” the guard said grimly. “This way.”

He pulled Maxon around a corner to what appeared to be a dead end. I wondered if he was going to leave us there when he hit some invisible trigger on the wall and another one of the palace’s mysterious doors opened. It was so dark inside, I couldn’t see where it went; but Maxon walked in, hunched over, without a second thought.

“Tell my mother that America and I are safe. Do that before anything else,” he said.

“Absolutely, sir. I’ll come back for you myself when this is over.”

The siren sounded. I hoped that was fast enough to save everyone.

Maxon nodded and the door closed, leaving us in complete darkness. The seal was so secure, I couldn’t even make out the sound of the alarm. I heard Maxon’s hand rubbing against the wall, and he eventually came upon a switch that dimly lit the room. I looked around and surveyed the space.

There were some shelves that held a bunch of dark, plastic packages and a different shelf that held a few thin blankets. In the middle of the tiny space was one wooden bench big enough to seat maybe four people, and in the opposite corner was a small sink and what looked like a very crude toilet. Hooks lined one wall, but there was nothing on them; and the whole room smelled like the metal that appeared to make up the walls.

“At least this is one of the good ones,” Maxon said, and hobbled over to the bench to sit.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said quietly, and propped up his head on his arms.

I sat beside him, placing the metal box on the bench and looking around the room again.

“I’m guessing those were Southern rebels?”

Maxon nodded. I tried to slow my breathing and erase what I’d just seen from my mind. Would that guard survive? Could anyone survive something like that?

I wondered how far the rebels had gotten in the time it took us to hide. Was the alarm fast enough?

“Are we safe here?”

“Yes. This is one of the places for servants. If they happen to be down in the kitchen and storage area, they’re pretty safe as it is. But the ones running about doing chores might not be able to get there quickly enough. It’s not quite as safe as the big room for the royal family, and we have supplies to survive down there for quite some time; but these work in a pinch.”

“Do the rebels know?”

“They might,” he said, wincing as he sat up a bit straighter. “But they can’t get in once the rooms are in use. There are only three ways out. Someone with a key has to activate it from the outside, someone with a key can activate it from the inside”—Maxon patted his pocket, implying that he could get us out if he had to—“or you have to wait for two days. After forty-eight hours, the doors automatically open. The guards check every safe room once the danger has passed, but there’s always a chance they could miss one; and without the delayed-unlocking mechanism, someone could be stuck in here forever.”

It took him awhile to get all this out. He was clearly in pain, but it seemed that he was trying to distract himself with the words. He leaned forward and then hissed when the action added to whatever was hurting him.

“Maxon?”

“I can’t . . . I can’t take it anymore. America, help with my coat?”

He held out his arm, and I jumped up to help him slide his coat down his back. He let it drop behind him and moved to his buttons. I started helping him, but he stopped me, holding my hands in his.

“Your record for keeping secrets isn’t that impressive right now. But this is one that goes to your grave. And mine. Do you understand?”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure what he meant. Maxon released my hands, and I slowly unbuttoned his shirt. I wondered if he’d ever imagined me doing this. I could admit that I had. Halloween night, I had lain in bed and dreamed of this very second in our future. I thought it would be much different. Still, a thrill went through me.

I had been raised a musician, but I was surrounded by artists. I’d once seen a sculpture that was hundreds of years old of an athlete throwing a disk. I’d thought to myself at the time that only an artist could do that, make someone’s body look so beautiful. Maxon’s chest was as sculpted as any piece of art I’d ever seen.

But everything changed as I went to slide the shirt down his back. It stuck to him, making a slippery, sticky sound as I tried to get it to move.

“Slowly,” he said. I nodded and went behind him to try from there.

The back of Maxon’s shirt was soaked with blood.

I gasped, immobile for a moment. But then, sensing that my staring made things worse, I kept working. Once I got the shirt off, I threw it on one of the hooks, giving myself a moment to gain my composure.

I turned around and got a good look at Maxon’s back. A bleeding gash on his shoulder tore down to his waist and crossed over another one that was also dripping blood, which crossed over another one that had been healed for a while, which crossed over yet another one that was puckered from age. It looked like there were maybe six fresh slashes across Maxon’s back piled on top of too many more to count.

How could this have happened? Maxon was the prince. He was royal, sovereign, set

apart from everyone. He was above everything, sometimes including the law, so how had he come to be covered with scars?

Then I remembered the look in the king's eyes tonight. And Maxon's effort to hide his fear. How could any man do this to his son?

I turned away again, hunting until I found a small washcloth. I went to the sink, glad to find that it worked even though the water was ice-cold.

I steadied myself and walked over, trying to be calm for his sake. "This might sting a little," I warned.

"It's okay," he whispered. "I'm used to it."

I took the wet washcloth and dabbed at the long gouge in his shoulder, deciding that I'd work from the top down. He pulled away a bit but took it all silently. When I moved on to the second gash, Maxon started talking.

"I've been preparing for tonight for years, you know? I've been waiting for the day when I was strong enough to take him on."

Maxon was silent for a moment, and some things made sense: why a person who sat at a desk had such serious muscles, why he always seemed half dressed and ready to go, why a girl calling him a child and pushing him would make him angry.

I cleared my throat. "Why didn't you?"

He paused. "I was afraid that if he didn't have me, he'd want you."

I had to stop for a moment, too overcome even to speak. Tears threatened to spill over, but I tried to hold it together. I was sure it would only make things worse.

"Does anyone know?" I asked.

"No."

"Not the doctor? Or your mother?"

"The doctor must, but he's quiet. And I would never tell my mother or even give her a reason to suspect. She knows Father is stern with me, but I don't want her to worry. And I can take it."

I kept dabbing.

"He's not like this with her," he promised quickly. "She gets mistreated in her own ways, I suppose, but not like this."

"Hmm," I said, not sure of what else to say.

I wiped again, and Maxon hissed. "Damn, that stings."

I pulled away for a minute while he slowed down his breathing. After a moment, he made a small nod, so I started again.

"I have more sympathy for Carter and Marlee than you know," he said, trying to sound light. "These things take awhile to stop hurting, especially if you're determined to take care of them on your own."

I paused for a moment, shocked. Marlee got caned fifteen times at once. I think if I had to, I'd pick that over them coming at times you weren't prepared.

"What are the others for?" I asked, then shook my head. "Never mind. That's rude."

He shrugged his uninjured shoulder. "Things I said or did. Things I know."

"Things I know," I added. "Maxon, I'm so ..." My breathing hitched, threatening to send me over the edge. I might as well have caned him myself.

He didn't turn around, but his hand searched and found my knee. "How are you going to finish fixing me up if you're crying?"

I laughed weakly through the tears and wiped my face. I got everything cleaned, trying to stay gentle.

"Do you think there are any bandages in here?" I asked, looking around the room.

"The box," he said.

As he sat there, steadying his breathing, I opened the clasps on the box, looking at the abundance of supplies.

"Why don't you have bandages in your room?"

"Sheer pride. I was determined never to need them again."

I sighed quietly. I read the labels, finding a disinfectant solution, something that looked like it would help soothe the pain, and bandages.

I moved behind him, preparing to apply the medication. "This might hurt."

He nodded. When it made contact with his skin, he grunted once and then reverted to silence. I tried to be quick and thorough, ready to make him as comfortable as possible.

I started putting ointment on his wounds, and it was clear that whatever I was using helped. The tension in his shoulders eased as I worked, and I was glad; it felt in a way like I was making up for some of the trouble I'd caused.

He snorted out a light laugh. "I knew my secret would come out eventually. I've been trying to come up with a good story for years. I was hoping to find something believable before the wedding since I knew my wife would see them, but I'm still stumped. Any ideas?"

I thought a moment. "The truth works."

He nodded. "Not my favorite option. Not for this anyway."

"I think I'm done."

Maxon twisted and bent a little bit, moving gingerly. He turned to look at me, his expression thankful. "That's great, America. Better than any job I ever did."

"Anytime."

He looked at me a moment, and the silence grew. What was there to say now?

My eyes kept darting to his chest, and I needed to stop that.

"I'm going to wash your shirt." I buried myself in the corner, rubbing his shirt against itself, watching the water turn rust colored before it escaped down the drain. I knew all the blood wouldn't come out, but at least it gave me something to do.

When I finished, I wrung it out and placed it back on a hook. I turned around, and Maxon was staring at me.

"Why don't you ever ask questions I actually want to answer?"

I didn't think I could sit next to him on the bench without being tempted to touch him. Instead I settled on the floor across from him.

"I didn't know I did that."

"You do."

"Well, what am I not asking that you want me to?"

He let out a long breath and gently leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Don't you want me to explain Kriss and Celeste? Don't you think you deserve that?"

CHAPTER 29

I CROSSED MY ARMS. “I’VE heard Kriss’s version of what happened, and I don’t think she’s exaggerating anything. As for Celeste, I’d rather never talk about her ever again.”

He laughed. “So stubborn. I’ll miss that.”

I was quiet for a minute. “So it’s done then? I’m out?”

Maxon thought it over. “I’m not sure I could stop it now. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

I shook my head. “I was mad,” I whispered. “I was so mad.”

I looked away, not wanting to cry. Apparently Maxon decided that I needed to listen to what he had to say, whether I wanted to or not. Finally he had me trapped, and I would hear everything he’d been waiting to tell me.

“I thought you were mine,” he said. I peeked over and found him staring at the ceiling. “If I could have proposed to you at the Halloween party, I would have. I’m supposed to do something official with my parents and guests and cameras, but I got special permission to ask you privately when we were ready and have a reception afterward. I never told you about that, did I?”

Maxon looked over to me, and I gave a small shake of my head. He smiled bitterly, remembering.

“I had this speech prepared, all these promises I wanted to make. I probably would have forgotten it and made an idiot of myself. Though ... I can remember it now.” He sighed. “I’ll spare you.”

He paused briefly. “When you pushed me away, I panicked. I had thought that I was done with this insane contest, and I found myself feeling like it was the very first day of the Selection all over again, only this time my options were far more limited. And just the week before, I’d spent time with all those girls trying to find someone who outshone you, who I thought I could want more, and failed. I felt hopeless.

“And then Kriss came to me, so very humble, only wanting to see me happy, and I wondered how I’d missed that in her. I knew she was nice, and she’s very attractive; but there was something more to her this whole time.

“I think I simply wasn’t really looking. What reason did I have when there was you?”

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to hide from the ache. There was no me anymore. I’d ruined all that.

“Do you love her?” I asked meekly. I didn’t want to see his face, but the long pause let me know that there was something deep between the two of them.

“It’s different than what you and I had. It’s quieter, maybe friendlier. But it’s steady. I can depend on Kriss, and I know without question that she is devoted to me. As you can see, there is very little certainty in my world. She’s refreshing in that way.”

I nodded, still avoiding eye contact. All I could think about was how he spoke of him and me in the past tense and had nothing but praise for Kriss. I wished I had something bad to say about her, something that would bring her down a notch; but I didn’t. Kriss was a lady. From the beginning she’d done everything well, and I was surprised that he had ever favored me over her anyway. She was perfect for him.

“Then why Celeste?” I asked, finally facing him. “If Kriss is so wonderful ...”

Maxon nodded his head, seeming embarrassed about this subject. It was his idea to talk about this in the first place, though, so he must already have had something in mind to say. He stood, giving his back another tentative stretch, and started pacing the small space.

“As you now know, my life is full of stresses that I prefer not to share. I live in a constant state of tension. I’m always being watched, judged. My parents, our advisers ... there are always cameras in my life, and now you’re all here,” he said, motioning to me. “I’m sure you’ve felt trapped at least once because of your caste, but imagine how I feel. There are things I’ve seen, America, and things I know; and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to change them.

“You’re aware, I’m sure, that technically my father is supposed to retire in my twenties, when he feels I’m ready to lead; but do you think he’ll ever stop pulling the strings? That’s not going to happen so long as he lives; and I know he’s terrible, but I don’t want him to die ... He *is* my father.”

I nodded.

“Speaking of which, he’s had his hand in the Selection from very early on. If you look at who’s left, it’s pretty clear.” He started ticking off the girls on his fingers. “Natalie is extremely pliable, and that makes her my father’s favorite, as I am too willful in his opinion. The fact that he’s so fond of her makes me have to fight the urge to hate her.

“Elise has allies in New Asia, but I’m not sure if that’s of any use at all. That war ...” Maxon debated something and shook his head. There was some detail about this war that he didn’t want to share with me. “And she’s so ... I don’t even know the word for it. I knew from the beginning that I didn’t want some girl who would agree with everything I said or just roll over and adore me. I try to contradict her, and she concedes the point. Every time! It’s infuriating. It’s like she doesn’t have a spine.”

He took a steadying breath. I didn’t realize how much she got under his skin. He was always so patient with us. Finally he looked at me.

“You were my pick. My only pick. My father wasn’t enthusiastic; but at that point you hadn’t done anything to upset him. So long as you were quiet, he didn’t mind me keeping you. In fact, he was fine with me choosing you, if you were well behaved. He’s used your recent actions to point out the flaws in my judgment and is insisting that he have the final say now.”

He shook his head. “That’s beside the point. The others—Marlee, Kriss, and Celeste—were chosen by advisers. Marlee was a favorite, as is Kriss.” He sighed. “Kriss would be a fine choice. I wish she would let me closer, if only for the fact that I don’t know if we have ... chemistry. I’d like to at least have an idea.

“And Celeste. She is very influential, a celebrity in her own right. It looks good on TV. It sounds right for someone who is close to being on the same level as me to be the final choice. I like her if only for her tenacity. She at least has a backbone. But I can tell that she’s got a manipulative streak and that she’s working this whole situation for everything she can get out of it. I know when she holds me, it’s the crown she pulls close to her heart.”

He closed his eyes, as if what he was about to say was the worst of all. “She’s using me, so I don’t feel guilty using her. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d been encouraged to throw

herself at me. I can respect Kriss's boundaries. And I'd much prefer to be in your arms, but you've barely spoken to me

"Is it so awful of me to want fifteen minutes of my life not to matter? To feel good? To pretend for a little while that someone loves me? You can judge me if you want, but I can't apologize for needing something normal in my life."

He stared deep into my eyes, waiting for me to reproach him and hoping I wouldn't at the same time.

"I get that."

I thought of Aspen, holding me tight and making his promises. Hadn't I done the very same thing? I could see the wheels turning in Maxon's head, wondering how literally I meant that. This was one secret I couldn't share. Even if it was all over for me, I couldn't let Maxon think of me that way.

"Would you ever pick her? Celeste, I mean?"

He came to sit beside me, making his moves carefully. I couldn't imagine how much his back was hurting him.

"If I had to, I'd take her over Elise or Natalie. But that won't happen unless Kriss decides she wants to go."

I nodded. "Kriss is a good choice. She'd make a much better princess than I ever would have."

He chuckled. "She is less of an instigator. Lord knows what would happen to the country with you at the helm."

I laughed along because he was right. "I'd probably ruin it."

Maxon continued to smile when he spoke. "But maybe it needs ruining."

We sat there in silence for a little while. I wondered what our world would look like ruined. We couldn't get rid of the royal family—how could we possibly transition it out?—but maybe we could change the way some things were run. Offices could be elected instead of inherited. And the castes ... I really would love to see those dead and gone.

"Would you indulge me?" Maxon asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've shared a lot of things with you tonight that are very difficult for me to admit. I was wondering if you could answer one question for me."

His face was so sincere, I didn't want to deny him. I hoped I wouldn't regret whatever this was about, but he had been more honest than I deserved at this point.

"Yes. Anything."

He swallowed. "Did you ever love me?"

Maxon looked into my eyes, and I wondered if he could see it there. All the emotions I'd fought because I thought he was something he wasn't, all the feelings I never wanted to put a name on. I ducked my head.

"I know that when I thought you were responsible for hurting Marlee, it crushed me. Not just because it happened, but because I didn't want to think of you as that kind of person. I know that when you talk about Kriss or when I think about you kissing Celeste ... I'm so jealous I can hardly breathe. And I know that when we talked on Halloween, I was thinking about our future. And I was happy. I know if you had asked, I would have said yes." Those

last words were a whisper, almost too difficult to think about.

“I also know that I never knew how to feel about you dating other people or being a prince. Even with everything you told me tonight, I think there are pieces of yourself that you will always guard

“But, with all that ...” I nodded. I couldn’t say the words aloud. If I did, how would I be able to leave?

“Thank you,” he whispered. “At least I can know for certain that, for one brief moment of our time together, you and I felt the same thing.”

My eyes stung, threatening to spill over with more tears. He’d never actually told me he loved me, and he wasn’t exactly saying it now. But the words were so, so very close.

“I’ve been so foolish,” I said, my breath catching. I’d fought hard against the tears, but I couldn’t anymore. “I kept letting the crown scare me out of wanting you. I told myself that you didn’t really matter to me. I kept thinking that you had lied to me or tricked me, that you didn’t trust me or care about me enough. I let myself believe that I wasn’t important to you.”

I stared at his handsome face. “One look at your back says you’d do damn near anything for me. And I threw it away. I just threw it away”

He opened his arms, and I fell into them. Maxon held me silently, running his hands through my hair. I wished I could erase everything else and hold on to this moment, this brief second when he and I knew how much we meant to each other.

“Please don’t cry, darling. I’d spare you tears for the rest of your life if I could.”

My breathing was uneven as I spoke. “I’ll never see you again. It’s all my fault.”

He held me closer. “No, I should have been more open.”

“I should have been more patient.”

“I should have proposed that night in your room.”

“I should have let you.”

He chuckled. I looked up at his face, unsure of how many more of his smiles I’d have. Maxon’s fingers swept away the tears from my cheeks, and he sat there gazing into my eyes. I did the same to him, wanting to remember this so badly.

“America ... I don’t know how much time we have left together, but I don’t want to spend it regretting things we didn’t do.”

“Me either.” I turned my face into his palm, kissing it. Then I kissed the tips of each of his fingers. He slid that hand deep into my hair and pulled my lips to his.

I had missed these kisses, so quiet, so sure. I knew that, in my whole life, if I married Aspen or someone else, no one would ever make me feel this way. It wasn’t like I made his world better. It was like I *was* his world. It wasn’t some explosion; it wasn’t fireworks. It was a fire, burning slowly from the inside out.

We shifted, sliding so I was on the floor and Maxon was above me. He ran his nose along my jawline, down my neck, across my shoulder, and kissed the same path back to my lips. I kept running my fingers through his hair. It was so soft, it almost tickled my palms.

After a while we pulled out the blankets and built a makeshift bed. He held me for the longest time, looking into my eyes. We could have spent years doing this if not for me.

Once Maxon’s shirt was dry, he put it on, covering the dried stains with his coat, and curled up next to me again. When we both got tired, we started talking. I didn’t want to sleep

through a second of this, and I sensed he didn't either.

"Do you think you'll go back to him? Your ex?"

I didn't want to talk about Aspen right now, but I considered this. "He's a good choice. Smart, brave, maybe the only person on the planet more stubborn than me."

Maxon laughed lightly. My eyes were closed, but I kept talking. "It would be awhile before I could think about that though."

"Mmm."

The silence stretched. Maxon rubbed his thumb along the hand he was holding.

"Could I write you?" he asked.

I thought about that. "Maybe you should wait a few months. You might not even miss me."

He gave an almost-laugh.

"If you do write ... you have to tell Kriss."

"You're right."

He didn't clarify whether that meant he would tell her or simply not write me, but I didn't really want to know at the moment.

I couldn't believe that all this was happening because of a stupid book.

I gasped, and my eyes shot open. A book!

"Maxon, what if the Northern rebels are looking for the diaries?"

He shifted, still not quite alert. "What do you mean?"

"When I was chased that day in the gardens, I saw them as they passed me. A girl dropped a bag full of books. The guy with her had bunches, too. They're stealing books. What if they're looking for a specific one?"

Maxon opened his eyes, squinting in thought. "America ... what exactly was in that diary?"

"A lot. About how Gregory basically stole the country, how he forced the castes on people. It was awful, Maxon."

"But the *Report* was cut off," he insisted. "Even if that is what they're looking for, there's no way they could know that was it or what's inside it. Trust me, after that little display, my father is making sure those things are even more protected than usual."

"That's it." I covered my face, stifling a yawn. "I know it."

"Don't," he said. "Don't get worked up. For all we know, they just really, really like to read."

I moaned at his attempt at humor.

"I seriously thought I couldn't make this any worse."

"Shh," he said, coming closer. His strong arms grounded me to the earth. "Don't worry now. You should probably sleep."

"But I don't want to," I whispered, though I curled closer into him.

Maxon closed his eyes again, still holding on to me. "Me either. Even on a good day, sleeping makes me nervous."

It made my heart ache. I couldn't imagine his constant state of worry, especially considering that the person keeping him on edge was his own father.

He let go of my hand and reached into his pocket. My eyelids parted a bit, but he was

doing all this with his eyes closed. We were both so close to sleep. He found my hand again and started tying something on my wrist. I recognized the feeling of the bracelet he got me in New Asia as it slid into place.

“I’ve been carrying it in my pocket. I’m a pitiful romantic, right? I was going to keep it, but I want you to have something from me.”

He’d put the bracelet on over Aspen’s, and I felt the button pressing into my skin underneath it.

“Thank you. It makes me happy.”

“Then I’m happy, too.”

We didn’t say anything else.

CHAPTER 30

THE SOUND OF THE CREAKING door woke me, and the light streaming in was so bright, I had to block my eyes.

“Your Majesty?” someone asked. “Oh, God! I’ve found him,” he screamed. “He’s alive!”

There was a sudden flurry around us as guards and butlers stormed to our location.

“Were you not able to get downstairs, Your Majesty?” one of the guards asked. I looked at his name. Markson. I wasn’t sure, but he seemed to be one of the higher-ups in the guard.

“No. An officer was supposed to tell my parents. I told him to go there first,” Maxon explained, trying to straighten his hair. Only once did his face give away that the movement pained him.

“Which officer?”

Maxon sighed. “I didn’t get his name.” He looked to me for confirmation.

“Me either. But he was wearing a ring on his thumb. It was gray, like pewter or something.”

Officer Markson nodded. “That was Tanner. He didn’t make it. We lost about twenty-five of the guards and a dozen staff.”

“What?” I covered my mouth.

Aspen.

I prayed that he was safe. I’d been so consumed last night, it hadn’t occurred to me to worry.

“What about my parents? The other Elite?”

“All fine, sir. Your mother has been hysterical though.”

“Is she out yet?” We started moving, Maxon leading the way.

“Everyone is. We missed a few of the small safe rooms and were doing a second sweep, hoping to find you and Lady America.”

“Oh, God,” Maxon said. “I’ll go to her first.” But then he stopped dead in his tracks.

I followed his eyes and saw the destruction. That same line, the one from last time, was scrawled across the wall.

WE’RE COMING

Over and over, by any means they could find, the warning covered the halls. Beyond that, the level of destruction was elevated yet again. I’d never seen what the rebels managed to do to the first floor, only to the hallways near my room. Huge stains in the carpet announced where someone, perhaps a helpless maid or fearless guard, had died. Windows were shattered, leaving jagged teeth of glass in their place.

Lights were broken, some flickering as they refused to give up. Terrifyingly, there were massive gouges in the walls; and it made me wonder if they had seen people going into the safe rooms, if they had been hunting. How close were Maxon and I to death last night?

“Miss?” a guard said, bringing me back to the moment. “We’ve taken the liberty of contacting all the families. It appears the attack on Lady Natalie’s family was a direct attempt to end the Selection. They’re targeting your relatives to get you to leave.”

I covered my mouth. “No.”

“We’re already sending palace guards out to protect them. The king was adamant that none of the girls should go.”

“What if they want to?” Maxon challenged. “We can’t hold them here against their will.”

“Of course, sir. You’ll need to speak with the king.” The guard seemed embarrassed, not quite sure how to handle the difference of opinions.

“You won’t have to guard my family long,” I said, hoping to break some tension. “Let them know I’ll be home soon.”

The guard’s eyes flickered between Maxon and me, looking to confirm that I’d been eliminated. Maxon simply nodded once.

“Yes, miss,” the guard said with a bow.

Maxon interjected. “Is my mother in her room?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell her I’m coming. You’re dismissed.”

We were alone again.

Maxon took my hand in his. “Don’t rush away. Say good-bye to your maids and any of the girls if you want. And eat something. I know how you love the food.”

I smiled. “I will.”

Maxon wet his lips, almost fidgeting. This was it. This was good-bye.

“You’ve changed me forever. And I’ll never forget you.”

I ran my free hand down his chest, straightening his coat. “Don’t tug your ear with anyone else. That’s mine.” I gave him a tight smile.

“A lot of things are yours, America.”

I swallowed. “I need to go.”

He nodded.

Maxon kissed me once, quickly, on the lips, and ran down the hall. I watched until he was out of sight and then made my way back to my room.

Each step up the main stairwell was torture, both because of what I had left and what I feared was coming. What if I rang the bell and Lucy didn’t come? Or Mary? Or Anne? What if I looked at every face of every guard I passed and not a single one was Aspen’s?

I made my way to the second floor, passing destruction at every turn. It was still recognizable, the most beautiful place I’d ever seen, even in ruins. But the time and money it would take to restore this was beyond my imagination. The rebels were very thorough. As I got closer to my room, I heard the distinct sound of crying. Lucy.

I let out a breath, happy she was alive but terrified of what was making her cry. I braced myself and turned the corner into my room.

Working with red faces and swollen eyes, Mary and Anne were collecting the shattered glass from the doors to my balcony. I watched as Mary had to stop midsweep to exhale and calm herself. In a corner, Lucy was weeping into Aspen’s chest.

“Shh,” he said, comforting her. “They’ll find her, I know it.”

I was so relieved, I burst into tears. “You’re okay. You’re all okay.”

Aspen let out a huge sigh, his tight shoulders slumping as they relaxed.

“My lady?” Lucy said. A second later she was running for me. Not too far behind, Mary

and Anne came, enveloping me in hugs.

“Oh, this isn’t proper,” Anne said as she held me.

“For goodness’ sake, give it a rest,” Mary retorted.

And we were so happy to be alive and safe that we laughed about it all.

Behind them, Aspen stood, watching with a quiet smile, so clearly grateful to see me there.

“Where were you? They looked everywhere.” Mary pulled me over to the bed to sit, though it was a terrible mess, with the comforter shredded, the pillows stabbed and leaking feathers.

“In one of the safe rooms they missed. Maxon’s okay, too,” I said.

“Thank God,” Anne said.

“He saved my life. I was on my way to the gardens when they came. If I’d been outside ...”

“Oh, my lady,” Mary cried.

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” Anne said. “We’ll get this room fixed up in no time, and we have a fantastic new dress once you’re ready. And we can—”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m going home today. I’ll put on something simple and leave in a few hours.”

“What?” Mary gasped. “But why?”

I shrugged. “It didn’t work out.” I looked up at Aspen but was unable to read his face. All I could see was relief that I was alive.

“I really thought it would be you,” Lucy said. “From the start. And after everything you said last night ... I can’t believe you’re going home.”

“That’s very sweet, but it’ll be all right. From here on out, anything you can do to help Kriss, please do that. For me.”

“Of course,” Anne said.

“Anything for you,” Mary seconded.

Aspen cleared his throat. “Ladies, maybe you could give me a moment. If Lady America is leaving today, I need to go over some security measures. We didn’t get her this far only to let someone hurt her now.

“Anne, maybe you could go get some fresh towels and things. She should go home like a lady. Mary, some food?” They both nodded. “And Lucy, do you need to rest?”

“No!” she cried, standing tall. “I can work.”

Aspen smiled. “Very well.”

“Lucy, go to the workroom and finish that dress. We’ll come help soon. I don’t care what anyone says, Lady America. You’re leaving in style,” Anne said, addressing me at the end.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered. They left, closing the door behind them.

Aspen walked over, and I stood to face him.

“I thought you were dead. I thought I’d lost you.”

“Not today,” I said, smiling weakly. Now that I saw how bad it was, the only way to stay calm was to joke about it.

“I got your letter. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about the diary.”

“I couldn’t.”

He bridged the space between us and ran his hand down my hair. “Mer, if you couldn’t show it to me, you really shouldn’t have tried to show it to the country. And the caste thing . . . You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Oh, I know.” I looked at the ground, thinking over all the insanity of the last day.

“So Maxon kicked you out because of that?”

I sighed. “Not exactly. The king’s the one sending me home. If Maxon proposed to me this very second, it wouldn’t matter. The king says no, so I’m going.”

“Oh,” he said simply. “It’s going to be strange without you here.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh.

“I’ll write,” he promised quickly. “And I can send you money if you want. I’ve got plenty. We can get married right when I come home. I know it’s going to be awhile—”

“Aspen,” I said, cutting him off. I didn’t know how to explain that my heart had just been crushed. “When I leave, I want some peace, okay? I need to recover from all this.”

He stepped back, offended. “So, what, do you not want me to write or call?”

“Maybe not right away,” I said, trying to make it sound like it wasn’t a big deal. “I just want to spend some time with my family and get my bearings again. After everything I’ve felt here, I can’t—”

“Wait,” he said, holding up a hand. He was silent for a moment, reading my face. “You still want him,” he accused. “After everything he’s done—after Marlee—and even when there’s absolutely no hope, you’re still thinking about him.”

“He never did anything, Aspen. I wish I could explain about Marlee to you, but I gave my word. I have no hard feelings toward Maxon. And I know it’s over, but it’s the same way I felt when you broke up with me.”

He scoffed incredulously, rolling his head back like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I’m serious. When you ended it, the Selection became my lifeline because I knew I’d at least have some time to get past what I felt for you. And then you showed up here, and everything shifted. You were the one who changed us when you left me in the tree house; and you keep thinking that if you push hard enough, you can make everything go back to before that moment. It doesn’t work that way. Give me a chance to *choose* you.”

As the words came out of my mouth, I knew that this was so much of what was wrong. I’d loved Aspen for so long, we’d just assumed a lot of things. But everything was different now. It wasn’t like we were still two nobodies from Carolina. We’d seen too much to pretend we would ever happily be those people again.

“Why wouldn’t you choose me, Mer? Aren’t I your only choice?” he asked, sadness dripping into his voice.

“Yes. Doesn’t that bother you? I don’t want to be the girl you end up with because my only other option isn’t available and you never looked at anyone else. Do you really want to get me by default?”

He spoke intensely. “I don’t care how I get you, Mer.”

Suddenly he charged at me, taking my face in his hands. Aspen kissed me fiercely, willing me to remember what he was to me.

I couldn’t kiss him back.

When he finally gave up, he pulled back my head, trying to read my face.

“What’s happening here, America?”

“My heart is breaking! That’s what’s happening! How do you think this feels? I’m so confused right now, and you’re the only thing I have left, and you don’t love me enough to let me breathe.”

I started crying, and he finally calmed down.

“I’m sorry, Mer,” he whispered. “It’s just, I keep thinking I’ve lost you for some reason or another, and it’s my instinct to fight for you. It’s all I know to do.”

I looked at the floor, trying to pull myself together.

“I can wait,” he promised. “When you’re ready, write me. I do love you enough to let you breathe. After last night, that’s all I need you to do. Please breathe.”

I walked into him, letting him hold me, but it felt different. I’d thought I would always have Aspen in my life, and for the first time I wondered if that was completely true.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “Stay safe here. Don’t be a hero, Aspen. Take care of yourself.”

He stepped away, giving me a nod but no words. He kissed my forehead and made his way to the door.

I stood there for a long time, not sure what to do with myself, waiting for my maids to come and pull me together one last time.

CHAPTER 31

I TUGGED AT MY DRESS. “Isn’t this a bit grand for the occasion?”

“Not at all!” Mary insisted.

It was late afternoon, but they’d put me in an evening gown. It was purple, and very regal. The sleeves went to my elbows, as it was colder back in Carolina; and a sweeping hooded cape was draped over my arm for when I landed. A high collar would protect my neck from any wind that might come, and they’d pulled up my hair so elegantly, I was positive this was the prettiest I’d ever looked at the palace. I wished that I could go see Queen Amberly, sure that even she would be impressed.

“I don’t want to linger,” I insisted. “It’s hard enough to go as it is. I just want you all to know that I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for me. Not only for keeping me clean and dressed, but for spending time with me and caring about me. I’ll never forget you.”

“And we’ll always remember you, miss,” Anne promised.

I nodded and started fanning my face. “Okay, okay, I’ve had enough tears for one day. If you could tell the driver I’ll be right down, I’m going to take a moment.”

“Of course, miss.”

“Is it still improper for us to hug?” Mary asked, looking at me and then Anne.

“Who cares?” she said, and they crowded around me one last time.

“Take care of yourselves.”

“You, too, miss,” Mary said.

“You were always a lady,” Anne added.

They stepped away, but Lucy held on. “Thank you,” she breathed, and I could tell she was crying. “I’ll miss you.”

“Me, too.”

She let me go, and they walked to the door, standing together in a group. They gave me one last curtsy, and I waved as they left me alone.

So many times in the last few weeks I had wished I could leave. Now that it was here, seconds away, I was dreading it. I walked onto the balcony. I looked down at the gardens, gazing at the bench, the spot where Maxon and I had met. I didn’t know why, but I suspected he’d be there.

He wasn’t though. He had more important things to do than to sit around thinking about me. I touched the bracelet on my wrist. He *would* think about me, though, from time to time, and that comforted me. No matter what, this was real.

I backed away, closing the door and heading to the hallway. I moved slowly, taking in the beauty of the palace one last time, even though it was slightly marred by broken mirrors and chipped frames.

I remembered walking down this grand stairwell the first day, feeling confused and grateful at the same time. There were so many girls then.

When I reached the front doors, I paused for a moment. I’d gotten so used to being behind those massive blocks of wood that it almost felt wrong to go through them.

I took a deep breath and reached for the handle.

“America?”

I turned. Maxon was standing at the other end of the corridor.

“Hey,” I said lamely. I hadn’t thought I’d get to see him again.

He walked over to me quickly. “You look absolutely breathtaking.”

“Thank you.” I touched the fabric of my last dress.

There was a breath of silence as we stood there, watching each other. Maybe that’s all this was: a last chance to see.

Suddenly he cleared his throat, remembering his purpose. “I’ve spoken with my father.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. He was quite happy that I wasn’t killed last night. As you might have guessed, carrying on the royal line is very important to him. I explained to him that I nearly died because of his temper and attributed my finding a hiding place to you.”

“But I didn’t—”

“I know. But he needn’t.”

I smiled.

“I then told him that I set you straight on some behavioral things. Again, he needn’t know that’s untrue; but you could act like it happened, if you wanted.”

I didn’t know why I would need to act like anything happened when I would be on the other side of the country, but I nodded.

“Considering that I owe my life to you as far as he knows, he agreed that my desire to keep you here might be somewhat justified, so long as you were on your best behavior and could learn your place.”

I stared at him, not completely sure I was hearing this right.

“Really, the fair thing to do is let Natalie go. She’s not cut out for this; and with her family grieving right now, her home is the best place for her. We’ve already spoken.”

I was still dumbstruck.

“Shall I explain?”

“Please.”

Maxon reached for my hand. “You would stay here as a member of the Selection and still be a part of the competition, but things will be different. My father will probably be harsh toward you and do whatever he can to make you fail. I think there are some ways to fight that, but it will take time. You know how ruthless he is. You have to prepare yourself.”

I nodded. “I think I can do that.”

“There’s more.” Maxon looked to the carpet, trying to align his thoughts. “America, there’s no question that you’ve had my heart from the beginning. By now you have to know that.”

When he brought his eyes up to mine, I could see it in every part of him and feel it in every piece of me. “I do.”

“But what you do not have right now is my trust.”

I was stricken. “What?”

“I’ve shown you so many of my secrets, defended you in every way I can. But when you aren’t pleased with me, you act rashly. You shut me out, blame me, or, most impressively, try to change the entire country.”

Ouch. That was pretty rough.

“I need to know that I can depend on you. I need to know that you can keep my secrets, trust my judgment, and not hold things back from me. I need you to be completely honest with me and to stop questioning every decision I make. I need you to have faith in me, America.”

It hurt to hear all of that, but he was right. What had I done to prove to him that he could trust me? Everyone around him was pulling or pushing him into something. Could I just be there for him?

I fiddled with my hands. “I do have faith in you. And I hope you can see that I want to be with you. But you could have been more honest with me, too.”

He nodded. “Perhaps. And there are things I want to tell you, but many of the things I know are of such a nature that they cannot be shared if there’s even a minuscule chance that you can’t keep them to yourself. I need to know that you can do that. And I need you to be wholly open with me.”

I inhaled to respond, but it never came out.

“Maxon, there you are.” Kriss called, rounding the corner. “I didn’t get to ask you earlier if we were still on for dinner tonight.”

Maxon looked at me as he spoke. “Of course. We’ll eat in your room.”

“Wonderful!”

That hurt.

“America? Are you really leaving?” she asked, coming up to us. I could see the spark of hope in her eyes. I looked to Maxon, whose expression seemed to say *This is what I’m talking about. I need you to accept the consequences of your actions, to trust me to make my own choice.*

“No, Kriss, not today.”

“Good.” She sighed, coming to hug me. I wondered how much of this embrace was for Maxon’s sake; but, really, it didn’t matter. Kriss was my toughest competition, but she was also the closest friend I had here. “I was really worried about you last night. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks, it was lucky—” I almost said that it was lucky I had Maxon to keep me company, but bragging would have probably ruined what little bit of trust I’d built in the last ten seconds. I cleared my throat. “Lucky the guards got there so fast.”

“Thank goodness. Well, I’ll see you later.” She turned to Maxon. “And I’ll see you tonight.”

Kriss skipped down the hall, giddier than I’d ever seen her. I guess if I saw the guy I loved put me above his former favorite, I’d feel like skipping, too.

“I know you don’t like that, but I need her. If you let me down, she’s my best bet.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said with a shrug. “I won’t let you down.”

I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and headed upstairs without looking back. A few hours ago, I thought I’d lost Maxon for good; and now that I knew what he meant to me, I was going to fight for him. The other girls wouldn’t know what hit them.

As I made my way up the grand stairwell, I felt encouraged. I probably should have been more worried about the challenge that was ahead of me, but all I could think of was how I’d eventually overcome it.

Perhaps the king sensed my joy, or maybe he was just waiting; but as I stepped onto the second floor, he was there, halfway down the hall.

He approached me slowly, a clear display of control. When he stopped in front of me, I curtsied.

“Your Majesty,” I said.

“Lady America. It seems you’re still with us.”

“So it does.”

A pack of guards passed us, bowing as they did so. “Let’s talk business,” he said sternly. “What do you think of my wife?”

I pursed my forehead, surprised at the direction of the conversation. Still, I answered honestly. “I think the queen is amazing. I don’t know enough words to say how wonderful I think she is.”

He nodded. “She’s a rare woman. Beautiful, obviously, and also humble. Timid, but not to the point of being cowardly. Obedient, good-humored, an excellent conversationalist. It seems that even though she was born into poverty, she was meant to be a queen.”

He paused and looked at me, taking in the clear admiration on my face. “The same cannot be said of you.”

I tried to stay calm as he continued. “Your looks are average. Red hair, a bit pale, and I suppose a decent figure; but you’re nothing next to Celeste. As far as your temper ...” He inhaled sharply. “You’re rude, jocular; and the one time you do something serious, it tears at the fabric of our nation. Completely thoughtless. And that’s not even counting your poor posture and gait. Kriss is far lovelier and more agreeable.”

I pushed my lips together, willing myself not to cry. I reminded myself that I already knew all this.

“And, of course, there is absolutely no political advantage to having you in the family. Your caste isn’t low enough to be inspiring, and your connections are nonexistent. Elise, however, was very helpful with our trip to New Asia.”

I wondered how true that could be if they never actually made contact with her family. Maybe there was something going on that I simply didn’t know about. Or maybe all of this was being exaggerated to make me feel worthless. If that was the goal, he’d done an excellent job.

His cold eyes focused on mine. “What are you doing here?”

I swallowed. “I suppose you would have to ask Maxon.”

“I’m asking you.”

“He wants me here,” I said firmly. “And I want to be here. As long as both of those things are true, I’m staying.”

The king grinned. “You’re what, sixteen? Seventeen?”

“Seventeen.”

“I suspect you don’t know very much about men, which you shouldn’t if you’re here. Let me say, they can be very fickle. You might not want to hold on to your affection for him so tightly when a single moment could take his heart away for good.”

I squinted, unsure of what he meant.

“I have eyes all over this palace. I know there are girls offering him more than you’d

dream. Do you think someone as plain as you could stand a chance next to them?"

Girls? As in plural? Was he saying that more than what I'd seen in the hall between Maxon and Celeste was happening? Were our hours of kisses last night tame compared to everything else he was experiencing?

Maxon had said he wanted to be honest with me. Was he keeping this a secret?

I had to decide in my heart that I trusted Maxon.

"If that's true, then Maxon will let me go in his own time, and you have nothing to worry about."

"But I do!" he bellowed, then dropped his voice. "If by some act of stupidity, Maxon actually chooses you, your little stunts would cost us everything. Decades, generations of work gone because you thought you were being a hero!"

He got in my face to the point that I actually took a step back, but he came closer, leaving very little space between us. His voice was low and harsh, and far more frightening than when he was yelling.

"You're going to need to learn to hold your tongue. If not, you and I will be enemies. Trust me when I say that you do not want to be my enemy."

His angry finger was pointing into my cheek. He could rip me to shreds right now. Even if there was someone nearby, what would they do? No one was going to protect me from the king.

I tried to sound calm. "I understand."

"Excellent," he said, suddenly turning cheerful. "Then I'll leave you to settle back in. Good afternoon."

I stood there, only realizing once he left that I was shaking. When he said to keep my mouth shut, I assumed that meant not even *thinking* of mentioning this to Maxon. So, for now I wouldn't. I was betting this was a test to see how far he could push me. I willed myself to be unbreakable.

As I thought it, something in me changed. I was nervous, yes, but I was also angry.

Who was this man to order me around? Yes, he was king; but, really, he was just a tyrant. Somehow he'd convinced himself that by keeping everyone around him oppressed and quiet, he was doing us all a favor. How was it a blessing to be forced to live in a corner of society? How was it good that there were limits for everyone in Illéa but him?

I thought of Maxon sneaking Marlee into the depths of the kitchens. Even if I wasn't here for very long, I knew he would do a better job than his father. Maxon at least had the capacity for compassion.

I continued to breathe slowly, and once I felt composed, I carried on.

I walked into my room and scurried over to press the button that sent for my maids. Faster than I could have imagined, Anne, Mary, and Lucy came running breathlessly into my room.

"My lady?" Anne said. "Is something wrong?"

I smiled. "Not unless you think me staying is a bad thing."

Lucy squealed. "Really?"

"Absolutely."

"But how?" Anne asked. "I thought you said—"

“I know, I know. It’s hard to explain. All I can say is that I’ve been given a second chance. Maxon matters to me, and I’m going to fight for him.”

“That’s so romantic!” Mary cried, and Lucy started clapping her hands.

“Hush, hush!” Anne called out sternly. I thought she would be excited and didn’t understand her sudden seriousness.

“If she’s going to win, we need a plan.” Her smile was diabolical, and I grinned with her. I’d never met anyone as organized as these girls. If I had them, there was no way I could lose.

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WELL, HELLO THERE, SASSY READER. Thank you for reading my book! I hope it made you have unbearable feelings that you find yourself tweeting about at 3:00 a.m. That's what it does to me, so ...

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To naps ... which is where I'm going now. And to cake, just because.

About the Author

KIERA CASS is a graduate of Radford University and currently lives in Blacksburg, Virginia, with her family. She is also the author of the *New York Times* bestseller THE SELECTION and the self-published fantasy novel THE SIREN. Kiera has kissed approximately fourteen boys in her life. None of them were princes. You can learn more about Kiera's books, videos, and love of cake online at www.kieracass.com.

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