



THE  
  
SELECTION  
KIERA CASS



THE  
SELECTION



KIERA CASS

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# DEDICATION

Hi, Dad!

★waves★

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# CHAPTER 1

WHEN WE GOT THE LETTER in the post, my mother was ecstatic. She had already decided that all our problems were solved, gone forever. The big hitch in her brilliant plan was me. I didn't think I was a particularly disobedient daughter, but this was where I drew the line.

I didn't want to be royalty. And I didn't want to be a One. I didn't even want to try.

I hid in my room, the only place to avoid the chattering of our full house, trying to come up with an argument that would sway her. So far, I had a solid collection of my honest opinions... I didn't think there was a single one she would listen to.

I couldn't avoid her much longer. It was approaching dinnertime, and as the oldest child left in the house, cooking duties fell on me. I pulled myself out of bed and walked into the snake pit.

I got a glare from Mom but no words.

We did a silent dance through the kitchen and dining room as we prepared chicken, pasta, and apple slices, and set the table for five. If I glanced up from a task, she'd fix me with a fierce look as if she could shame me into wanting the same things she did. She tried that every so often. Like if I didn't want to take on a particular job because I knew the family hosting us was unnecessarily rude. Or if she wanted me to do a massive cleaning when we couldn't afford to have a Six come and help.

Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. And this was one area where I was unswayable.

She couldn't stand it when I was stubborn. But I got that from her, so she shouldn't have been surprised. This wasn't just about me, though. Mom had been tense lately. The summer was ending, and soon we'd be faced with cold. And worry.

Mom set down the pitcher of tea in the center of the table with an angry thud. My mouth watered at the thought of tea with lemon. But I would have to wait; it would be such a waste to have my glass now and then have to drink water with my meal.

“Would it kill you to fill out the form?” she said, no longer able to contain herself. “The Selection could be a wonderful opportunity for you, for all of us.”

I sighed aloud, thinking that filling out that form might actually be something close to death.

It was no secret that the rebels—the underground colonies that hated Illéa, our large and comparatively young country—made their attacks on the palace both violent and frequent. We'd seen them in action in Carolina before. One of the magistrates' houses was burned to the

ground, and a handful of Twos had their cars vandalized. There was even a magnificent jailbreak once, but considering they only released a teenage girl who'd managed to get herself pregnant and a Seven who was a father to nine, I couldn't help thinking they were in the right that time.

But beyond the potential danger, I felt like it would hurt my heart to even consider the Selection. I couldn't help smiling as I thought about all the reasons I had to stay exactly where I was.

"These last few years have been very hard on your father," she hissed. "If you have any compassion at all, you might think of him."

Dad. Yeah. I really did want to help Dad. And May and Gerad. And, I supposed, even my mother. When she talked about it that way, there was nothing to smile about. Things had been strained around here for far too long. I wondered if Dad would see this as a way back to normal, if any amount of money could make things better.

It wasn't that our situation was so precarious that we were living in fear of survival or anything. We weren't destitute. But I guess we weren't that far off either.

Our caste was just three away from the bottom. We were artists. And artists and classical musicians were only three steps up from dirt. Literally. Our money was stretched as tight as a high wire, and our income was highly dependent on the changing seasons.

I remembered reading in a timeworn history book that all the major holidays used to be cramped into the winter months. Something called Halloween followed by Thanksgiving, then Christmas and New Year's. All back to back.

Christmas was still the same. It's not like you could change the birth date of a deity. But when Illéa made the massive peace treaty with China, the New Year came in January or February, depending on the moon. All the individual celebrations of thankfulness and independence from our part of the world were now simply the Grateful Feast. That came in the summer. It was a time to celebrate the forming of Illéa, to rejoice in the fact that we were still here.

I didn't know what Halloween was. It never resurfaced.

So at least three times a year, the whole family would be fully employed. Dad and May would make their art, and patrons would purchase them as gifts. Mom and I would perform at parties—me singing and her on piano—not turning down a single job if we could manage it. When I was younger, performing in front of an audience terrified me. But now I just tried to equate myself to background music. That's what we were in the eyes of our employers: meant to be heard and not seen.

Gerad hadn't found his talent yet. But he was only seven. He still had a little time.

Soon the leaves would change, and our tiny world would be unsteady again. Five mouths but only four workers. No guarantees of employment until Christmastime.

When I thought of it that way, the Selection seemed like a rope, something sure I could grab onto. That stupid letter could lift me out of the darkness, and I could pull my family along with me.

I looked over at my mother. For a Five, she was a little on the heavy side, which was odd. She wasn't a glutton, and it's not like we had anything to overeat anyway. Perhaps that's just the way a body looks after five children. Her hair was red, like mine, but full of brilliant white streaks. Those had appeared suddenly and in abundance about two years ago. Lines creased the corners of her eyes, though she was still pretty young, and I could see as she moved around the kitchen that she was hunched over as if an invisible weight rested on her shoulders.

I knew she had a lot to carry. And I knew that was why she had taken to being particularly manipulative with me. We fought enough without the extra strain, but as the empty fall quietly approached, she became much more irritable. I knew she thought I was being unreasonable now, to not even want to fill out a silly little form.

But there were things—important things—in this world that I loved. And that piece of paper seemed like a brick wall keeping me away from what I wanted. Maybe what I wanted was stupid. Maybe it wasn't even something I could have. But still, it was mine. I didn't think I could sacrifice my dreams, no matter how much my family meant to me. Besides, I had given them so much already.

I was the oldest one left now that Kenna was married and Kota was gone, and I did my best to contribute. We scheduled my homeschooling around my rehearsals, which took up most of the day since I was trying to master several instruments as well as singing.

But with the letter here, none of my work mattered anymore. In my mom's mind, I was already queen.

If I was smart, I would have hidden that stupid notice before Dad, May, and Gerad came in. But I didn't know Mom had it tucked away in her clothes, and mid-meal she pulled it out.

“To the House of Singer,” she sang out.

I tried to swipe it away, but she was too quick for me. They would find out sooner or later anyway, but if she did it like this, they'd all be on her side.

“Mom, please!” I pleaded.

“I want to hear!” May squealed. That was no surprise. My little sister looked just like me, only on a three-year delay. But where our looks were practically identical, our personalities were



anything but. Unlike me, she was outgoing and hopeful. And currently very boy crazy. This whole thing would seem incredibly romantic to her.

I felt myself blush. Dad listened intently, and May was practically bouncing with joy. Gerad, sweet little thing, he just kept eating. Mother cleared her throat and went on.

“The recent census has confirmed that a single woman between the ages of sixteen and twenty currently resides in your home. We would like to make you aware of an upcoming opportunity to honor the great nation of Illéa.”

May squealed again and grabbed my wrist. “That’s you!”

“I know, you little monkey. Stop before you break my arm.” But she just held my hand and bounced some more.

“Our beloved prince, Maxon Schreave,” Mom continued, “is coming of age this month. As he ventures into this new part of his life, he hopes to move forward with a partner, to marry a true Daughter of Illéa. If your eligible daughter, sister, or charge is interested in possibly becoming the bride of Prince Maxon and the adored princess of Illéa, please fill out the enclosed form and return it to your local Province Services Office. One woman from each province will be drawn at random to meet the prince.

“Participants will be housed at the lovely Illéa Palace in Angeles for the duration of their stay. The families of each participant will be generously compensated” —she drew out the words for effect—“for their service to the royal family.”

I rolled my eyes as she went on. This was the way they did it with sons. Princesses born into the royal family were sold off into marriage in an attempt to solidify our young relations with other countries. I understood why it was done—we needed allies. But I didn’t like it. I hadn’t had to see such a thing, and I hoped I never would. The royal family hadn’t produced a princess in three generations. Princes, however, married women of the people to keep up the morale of our sometimes volatile nation. I think the Selection was meant to draw us together and remind everyone that Illéa itself was born out of next to nothing.

The idea of being entered into a contest for the whole country to watch as this stuck-up little wimp picked the most gorgeous and shallow one of the bunch to be the silent, pretty face that stood beside him on TV ... it was enough to make me scream. Could anything be more humiliating?

Besides, I’d been in the homes of enough Twos and Threes to be sure I never wanted to live among them, let alone be a One. Except for the times when we were hungry, I was quite content to be a Five. Mom was the caste climber, not me.

“And of course he would love America! She’s so beautiful,” Mom swooned.

“Please, Mom. If anything, I’m average.”

“You are not!” May said. “Because I look just like you, and I’m pretty!” Her smile was so wide, I couldn’t contain my laughter. And it was a good point. Because May really was beautiful.

It was more than her face, though, more than her winning smile and bright eyes. May radiated an energy, an enthusiasm that made you want to be wherever she was. May was magnetic, and I, honestly, wasn’t.

“Gerad, what do you think? Do you think I’m pretty?” I asked.

All eyes fell on the youngest member of our family.

“No! Girls are gross!”

“Gerad, please.” Mom gave an exasperated sigh, but her heart wasn’t in it. He was hard to get upset with. “America, you must know you’re a very lovely girl.”

“If I’m so lovely, how come no one ever comes by to ask me out?”

“Oh, they come by, but I shoo them away. My girls are too pretty to marry Fives. Kenna got a Four, and I’m sure you can do even better.” Mom took a sip of her tea.

“His name is James. Stop calling him a number. And since when do boys come by?” I heard my voice getting higher and higher.

“A while,” Dad said, making his first comment on all of this. His voice had a hint of sorrow to it, and he was staring decidedly at his cup. I was trying to figure out what upset him so much. Boys coming by? Mom and me arguing again? The idea of me not entering the contest? How far away I’d be if I did?

His eyes came up for the briefest of moments, and I suddenly understood. He didn’t want to ask this of me. He wouldn’t want me to go. But he couldn’t deny the benefits if I managed to make it in, even for a day.

“America, be reasonable,” Mom said. “We have to be the only parents in the country trying to talk our daughter into this. Think of the opportunity! You could be queen one day!”

“Mom. Even if I wanted to be queen, which I thoroughly don’t, there are thousands of other girls in the province entering this thing. Thousands. And if I somehow was drawn, there would still be thirty-four other girls there, no doubt much better at seduction than I could ever pretend to be.”

Gerad's ears perked up. "What's seduction?"

"Nothing," we all chorused back.

"It's ridiculous to think that, with all of that, I'd somehow manage to win," I finished.

My mother pushed her chair out as she stood and leaned across the table toward me.

"Someone is going to, America. You have as good a chance as anyone else." She threw her napkin down and went to leave. "Gerad, when you finish, it's time for your bath."

He groaned.

May ate in silence. Gerad asked for seconds, but there weren't any. When they got up, I started clearing the table while Dad sat there sipping his tea. He had paint in his hair again, a smattering of yellow that made me smile. He stood, brushing crumbs off his shirt.

"Sorry, Dad," I murmured as I picked up plates.

"Don't be silly, kitten. I'm not mad." He smiled easily and put an arm around me.

"I just..."

"You don't have to explain it to me, honey. I know." He kissed me on my forehead. "I'm going back to work."

And with that I moved to the kitchen to start cleaning. I wrapped my mostly untouched plate under a napkin and hid it in the fridge. No one else left more than crumbs.

I sighed, heading to my room to get ready for bed. The whole thing was infuriating.

Why did Mom have to push me so much? Wasn't she happy? Didn't she love Dad? Why wasn't this good enough for her?

I lay on my lumpy mattress, trying to wrap my head around the Selection. I guess it had its advantages. It would be nice to eat well for a while at least. But there was no reason to bother. I wasn't going to fall in love with Prince Maxon. From what I'd seen on the Illéa Capital Report, I wouldn't even like the guy.

It seemed like forever until midnight rolled around. There was a mirror by my door, and I stopped to make sure my hair looked as good as it had this morning and put on a little lip gloss so there'd be some color on my face. Mom was pretty strict about saving makeup for when we had to perform or go out in public, but I usually snuck some on nights like tonight.

As quietly as I could, I crept into the kitchen. I grabbed my leftovers, some bread that was expiring, and an apple and bundled it all up. It was painful to walk back to my room so

slowly, now that it was late. But if I'd done it earlier, I would have just been antsy.

I opened my window and looked out into our little patch of backyard. There wasn't much of a moon out, so I had to let my eyes adjust before I moved. Across the lawn, the tree house stood barely silhouetted in the night. When we were younger, Kota would tie up sheets to the branches so it looked like a ship. He was the captain, and I was always his first mate. My duties mainly consisted of sweeping the floor and making food, which was dirt and twigs stuffed into Mom's baking pans. He'd take a spoonful of dirt and "eat" it by throwing it over his shoulder. This meant that I'd have to sweep again, but I didn't mind. I was just happy to be on the ship with Kota.

I looked around. All the neighboring houses were dark. No one was watching. I crawled out of the window carefully. I used to get bruises across my stomach from doing it the wrong way, but now it was easy, a talent I'd mastered over the years. And I didn't want to mess up any of the food.

I scurried across the lawn in my cutest pajamas. I could have left my day clothes on, but this felt better. I supposed it didn't matter what I wore, but I felt pretty in my little brown shorts and fitted white shirt.

It wasn't hard anymore to scale the slats nailed into the tree with only one hand. I'd developed that skill as well. Each step up was a relief. It wasn't much of a distance, but from here it felt like all the commotion from my house was miles away. Here I didn't have to be anyone's princess.

As I climbed into the tiny box that was my escape, I knew I wasn't alone. In the far corner, someone was hiding in the night. My breath sped; I couldn't help it. I set my food down and squinted. The person shifted, lighting an all but unusable candle. It wasn't much light—no one in the house would see it—but it was enough. Finally the intruder spoke, a sly grin spreading across his face.

"Hey there, gorgeous."

## CHAPTER 2

I CRAWLED DEEPER INTO THE tree house. It wasn't much more than a five-by-five-foot cube; even Gerad couldn't stand up straight in here. But I loved it. There was the one opening to crawl into and then a tiny window on the opposite wall. I'd placed an old step stool in the corner to act as a desk for the candle, and a little rug that was so old it was barely better than sitting on the slats. It wasn't much, but it was my haven. Our haven.

"Please don't call me gorgeous. First my mom, then May, now you. It's getting on my nerves." By the way Aspen was looking at me, I could tell I wasn't helping my "I'm not pretty" case. He smiled.

"I can't help it. You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. You can't hold it against me for saying it the only time I'm allowed to." He reached up and cupped my face, and I looked deep into his eyes.

That was all it took. His lips were on mine, and I couldn't think about anything anymore. There was no Selection, no miserable family, no Illéa itself. There were only Aspen's hands on my back pulling me closer, Aspen's breath on my cheeks. My fingers went to his black hair, still wet from his shower—he always took showers at night—and tangled themselves into a perfect little knot. He smelled like his mother's homemade soap. I dreamed about that smell. We broke apart, and I couldn't help but smile.

His legs were propped open wide, so I sat sideways between them, like a kid who needed cradling. "Sorry I'm not in a better mood. It's just that . . . we got this stupid notice in the post today."

"Ah, yes, the letter." Aspen sighed. "We got two."

Of course. The twins had just turned sixteen.

Aspen studied my face as he spoke. He did that when we were together, like he was recommitting my face to memory. It had been over a week, and we both got anxious when it was more than a few days.

And I looked him over, too. No caste excluded, Aspen was, by far, the most attractive guy in town. He had dark hair and green eyes, and this smile that made you think he had a secret. He was tall, but not too tall. Thin, but not too thin. I noticed in the dim light that there were tiny bags under his eyes; no doubt he'd been working late all week. His black T-shirt was worn to threads in several places, just like the shabby pair of jeans he wore almost every day.

If only I could sit and patch them up for him. That was my great ambition. Not to be Illéa's princess. To be Aspen's.

It hurt me to be away from him. Some days I went crazy wondering what he was doing. And when I couldn't handle it, I practiced music. I really had Aspen to thank for me being the musician that I was. He drove me to distraction.

And that was bad.

Aspen was a Six. Sixes were servants and only a step up from Sevens in that they were better educated and trained for indoor work. Aspen was smarter than anyone knew and devastatingly handsome, but it was atypical for a woman to marry down. A man from a lower caste could ask for your hand, but it was rare to get a yes. And when anyone married into a different caste, they had to fill out paperwork and wait for something like ninety days before any of the other legal things you needed could be done. I'd heard more than one person say it was to give people a chance to change their minds. So us being this personal and out well past Illéa's curfew ... we could both get in serious trouble. Not to mention the hell I'd get from my mother.

But I loved Aspen. I'd loved Aspen for nearly two years. And he loved me. As he sat there stroking my hair, I couldn't imagine entering the Selection.

"How do you feel about it? The Selection, I mean?" I asked.

"Okay, I guess. He's got to find a girl somehow, poor guy." I could hear the sarcasm. But I really wanted to know his opinion.

"Aspen."

"Okay, okay. Well, part of me thinks it's kind of sad. Doesn't the prince date? I mean, can he seriously not get anyone? If they try to wed the princesses to other princes, why don't they do the same for him? There's got to be some royal out there good enough for him. I don't get it. So there's that.

"But then..." He sighed. "Part of me thinks it's a good idea. It's exciting. He's going to fall in love in front of everyone. And I like that someone gets a happily ever after and all that. Anybody could be our next queen. It's kind of hopeful. Makes me think that I could have a happily ever after, too."

His fingers were tracing my lips. Those green eyes searched deep into my soul, and I felt that spark of connection that I'd only ever had with him. I wanted our happily ever after, too.

"So you're encouraging the twins to enter, then?" I asked.

“Yes. I mean, we’ve all seen the prince from time to time; he looks like a nice enough guy. A snot, no doubt, but friendly. And the girls are so eager; it’s funny to watch. They were dancing in the house when I came home today. And no one can deny that it’d be good for the family. Mom’s hopeful because we have two entries from the house instead of one.”

That was the first good news about this horrible competition. I couldn’t believe I’d been so self-absorbed that I hadn’t thought about Aspen’s sisters. If one of them went, if one of them won...

“Aspen, do you realize what that would mean? If Kamber or Celia won?”

He closed his hold tighter around me, his lips brushing my forehead. One hand moved up and down my back.

“It’s all I’ve thought about today,” he said. The gritty sound of his voice pushed out every other thought. All I wanted was for Aspen to touch me, kiss me. And that’s exactly where the night would have gone, but his stomach growled and snapped me out of it.

“Oh, hey, I brought us a snack,” I said lightly.

“Oh, yeah?” I could tell he was trying not to sound excited, but some of his eagerness came through.

“You’ll love this chicken; I made it.”

I found my little bundle and brought it to Aspen, who, to his merit, nibbled it all slowly. I took one bite of the apple so he would feel like it was for us, but then I set it down and let him have the rest.

Where meals were a worry at my house, they were a disaster at Aspen’s. He had much steadier work than we did but got paid significantly less. There was never enough food for his family. He was the oldest of seven, and in the same way I’d stepped up to help as soon as I could, Aspen had stepped aside. He passed his share of the little food they had down to his siblings and to his mom, who was always tired from working. His dad had died three years ago, and Aspen’s family depended on him for almost everything.

I watched with satisfaction as he licked the spices from the chicken off his fingers and tore into the bread. I couldn’t imagine when he’d eaten last.

“You’re such a good cook. You’re going to make someone very fat and happy one day,” he said, his mouth half full with a bite of apple.

“I’m going to make you fat and happy. You know that.”

“Ah, to be fat!”

We laughed, and he told me about life since the last time I’d seen him. He’d done some clerical work for one of the factories, and it was going to carry him through next week, too. His mom had finally gotten into a routine of house-cleaning for a few of the Twos in our area. The twins were both sad because their mom had made them drop their after-school drama club so they could work more.

“I’m going to see if I can pick up some work on Sundays, make a little more money. I hate for them to give up something they love so much.” He said this with hope, like he really could do it.

“Aspen Leger, don’t you dare! You work too hard as it is.”

“Aw, Mer,” he whispered into my ear. It gave me chill bumps. “You know how Kamber and Celia are. They need to be around people. They can’t be cooped up cleaning and writing all the time. It’s just not in their nature.”

“But it’s not fair for them to expect you to do it all, Aspen. I know exactly how you feel about your sisters, but you need to watch out for yourself. If you really love them, you’ll take better care of their caregiver.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing, Mer. I think there are some good things on the horizon. I wouldn’t be doing it forever.”

But he would. Because his family would always need money. “Aspen, I know you could do it. But you’re not a superhero. You can’t expect to be able to provide everything for everyone you love. You just ... you can’t do everything.”

We were quiet for a moment. I hoped he was taking my words to heart, realizing that if he didn’t slow down, he’d wear himself out. It wasn’t anything new for a Six, Seven, or Eight to just die of exhaustion. I couldn’t bear that. I pressed myself even closer to his chest, trying to get the image of it out of my head.

“America?”

“Yes?” I whispered.

“Are you going to enter the Selection?”

“No! Of course not! I don’t want anyone to think I’d even consider marrying some stranger. I love you,” I said earnestly.

“You want to be a Six? Always hungry? Always worried?” he asked. I could hear the pain in



his voice, but also the genuine question: If I had to choose between sleeping in a palace with people waiting on me or the three-room apartment with Aspen's family, which one did I really want?

"Aspen, we'll make it. We're smart. We'll be fine." I willed it to be true.

"You know that's not how it'll be, Mer. I'd still have to support my family; I'm not the abandoning type." I squirmed a little in his arms. "And if we had kids—"

"When we have kids. And we'll just be careful about it. Who says we have to have more than two?"

"You know that's not something we can control!" I could hear the anger building in his voice.

I couldn't blame him. If you were wealthy enough, you could regulate having a family. If you were a Four or worse, they left you to fend for yourselves. This had been the subject of many an argument for us over the last six months, when we seriously started trying to find a way to be together. Children were the wild card. The more you had, the more there were to work. But then again, so many hungry mouths...

We fell quiet again, both unsure of what to say. Aspen was a passionate person; he tended to get a little carried away in an argument. He had gotten better about catching himself before he got too angry, and I knew that's what he was doing now.

I didn't want him to worry or be upset; I really thought we could handle it. If we just planned for everything we could, we'd make it through everything we couldn't. Maybe I was too optimistic, maybe I was just too far in love, but I really believed that anything Aspen and I wanted badly enough, we could make happen.

"I think you should do it," he said suddenly.

"Do what?"

"Enter the Selection. I think you should do it."

I glared at him. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Mer, listen to me." His mouth was right to my ear. It wasn't fair; he knew this distracted me. When his voice came, it was breathy and slow, like he was saying something romantic, though what he was suggesting was anything but. "If you had a chance for something better than this, and you didn't take it because of me, I'd never forgive myself. I couldn't stand it."

I let out my breath in a quick huff. "It's so ridiculous. Think of the thousands of girls entering. I won't even get picked."

“If you won’t get picked, then why does it matter?” His hands were rubbing up and down my arms now. I couldn’t argue when he did that. “All I want is for you to enter. I just want you to try. And if you go, then you go. And if you don’t, then at least I won’t have to beat myself up for holding you back.”

“But I don’t love him, Aspen. I don’t even like him. I don’t even know him.”

“No one knows him. That’s the thing, though, maybe you would like him.”

“Aspen, stop. I love you.”

“And I love you.” He kissed me slowly to make his point. “And if you love me, you’ll do this so I won’t go crazy wondering what if.”

When he made it about him, I didn’t stand a chance. Because I couldn’t hurt him. I was doing everything I could to make his life easier. And I was right. There was absolutely no way I’d get chosen. So I should just go through the motions, appease everyone, and when I didn’t get picked, everyone would drop it.

“Please?” he breathed into my ear. The feeling sent chills down my body.

“Fine,” I whispered. “I’ll do it. But know now that I don’t want to be some princess. All I want is to be your wife.”

He stroked my hair.

“You will be.”

It must have been the light. Or the lack thereof. Because I swore his eyes welled up when he said that. Aspen had been through a lot, but I had seen him cry only once, when they whipped his brother in the square. Little Jemmy had stolen some fruit off a cart in the market. An adult would have had a brief trial and then, depending on the value of what was stolen, either been thrown in jail or sentenced to death. Jemmy was only nine, so he was beaten. Aspen’s mom didn’t have the money to take him to a proper doctor, so Jemmy had scars all up and down his back from the incident.

That night I waited by my window to see if Aspen would climb up into the tree house. When he did, I snuck out to him. He cried in my arms for an hour about how if he’d only worked harder, if he’d only done better, Jemmy wouldn’t have had to steal. How it was so unfair that Jemmy had to hurt because Aspen had failed.

It was agonizing, because it wasn’t true. But I couldn’t tell him that; he wouldn’t hear me. Aspen carried the needs of everyone he loved on his back. Somehow, miraculously, I became one of those people. So I made my load as light as I could.

“Would you sing for me? Give me something good to fall asleep to?”

I smiled. I loved giving him songs. So I settled in close and sang a quiet lullaby.

He let me sing for a few minutes before his fingers started moving absently below my ear. He pulled the neck of my shirt open wide and kissed along my neck and ears. Then he pulled up my short sleeve and kissed as far down my arm as he could reach. It made my breath hitch. Almost every time I sang, he did this. I think he enjoyed the sound of my raspy breathing more than the singing itself.

Before long we were tangled together on the dirty, thin rug. Aspen pulled me on top of him, and I brushed his scraggly hair with my fingers, hypnotized by the feel. He kissed me feverishly and hard. I felt his fingers dig into my waist, my back, my hips, my thighs. I was always surprised that he didn't leave little finger-shaped bruises all over me.

We were cautious, always stopping shy of the things we really wanted. As if breaking curfew wasn't bad enough. Still, whatever our limitations were, I couldn't imagine anyone in Illéa had more passion than we did.

“I love you, America Singer. As long as I live, I'll love you.” There was some deep emotion in his voice, and it caught me off guard.

“I love you, Aspen. You'll always be my prince.”

And he kissed me until the candle burned itself out.

It had to have been hours, and my eyes were heavy. Aspen never worried about his sleep, but he was always concerned about mine. So I wearily climbed down the ladder, taking my plate and my penny.

When I sang, Aspen ate it up, loved it. From time to time, when he had anything at all, he'd give me a penny to pay for my song. If he managed to scrounge up a penny, I wanted him to give it to his family. There was no doubt they needed every last one. But then, having these pennies—since I couldn't bear to spend them—was like having a reminder of everything Aspen was willing to do for me, of everything I meant to him.

Back in my room, I pulled my tiny jar of pennies out from its hiding spot and listened to the happy sound of the newest one hitting its neighbors. I waited for ten minutes, watching out the window, until I saw Aspen's shadow climb down and run down the back road.

I stayed awake a little while longer, thinking of Aspen and how much I loved him, and how it felt to be loved by him. I felt special, priceless, irreplaceable. No queen on any throne could possibly feel more important than I did.

I fell asleep with that thought securely etched in my heart.

## CHAPTER 3

ASPEN WAS DRESSED IN WHITE. He looked angelic. We were in Carolina still, but there was no one else around. We were alone, but we didn't miss anyone. Aspen wove twigs to make me a crown, and we were together.

"America," Mom crowed, jarring me from my dreams.

She flicked on the lights, burning my eyes, and I rubbed my hands into them, trying to adjust.

"Wake up, America, I have a proposal for you." I looked over at the alarm clock. Just past seven in the morning. So that was ... five hours in bed.

"Is it more sleep?" I mumbled.

"No, honey, sit up. I have something serious to discuss."

I worked myself into a sitting position, clothes ruffled and hair sticking out in strange directions. Mom clapped her hands over and over, as if it would speed up the process.

"Come on, America, I need you to wake up."

I yawned. Twice.

"What do you want?" I said.

"For you to submit your name for the Selection. I think you'd make an excellent princess."

It was way too early for this.

"Mom, really, I just..." I sighed as I remembered what I'd promised Aspen last night: that I would at least try. But now, in the light of day, I wasn't sure if I could make myself do it.

"I know you're opposed, but I figured I'd make a deal with you to see if you would change your mind."

My ears perked up. What could she possibly offer me?

"Your father and I spoke last night, and we decided that you're old enough to go on your jobs alone. You play the piano as well as I do, and if you'd try a little more, you'd be nearly flawless on the violin. And your voice, well, there's no one better in the province, if you ask me."

I smiled groggily. “Thanks, Mom. Really.” I didn’t particularly care to work alone, though. I didn’t see how that was supposed to entice me.

“Well, that’s not all. You can accept your own work now and go alone and ... and you can keep half of whatever you make.” She sort of grimaced as she said it.

My eyes popped open.

“But only if you sign up for the Selection.” She was starting to smile now. She knew this would win me over, though I think she was expecting more of a fight. But how could I fight? I was already going to sign up, and now I could earn some money of my own!

“You know I can only agree to sign up, right? I can’t make them pick me.”

“Yes, I know. But it’s worth a shot.”

“Wow, Mom.” I shook my head, still in shock. “Okay, I’ll fill out the form today. Are you serious about the money?”

“Of course. Sooner or later you’d go out on your own anyway. And being responsible for your own money will be good for you. Only, don’t forget your family, please. We still need you.”

“I won’t forget you, Mom. How could I, with all the nagging?” I winked, she laughed, and with that, the deal was done.

I took a shower as I processed everything that had happened in less than twenty-four hours. By simply filling out a form, I was winning the approval of my family, making Aspen happy, and earning the money that would help Aspen and me get married!

I wasn’t so concerned about the money, but Aspen insisted we needed to have some savings of our own first. It cost a bit to do the legal stuff, and we wanted to have a very small party with our family after our wedding. I figured it wouldn’t take very long for us to save for that once we decided we were ready, but Aspen wanted more. Maybe, finally, he’d trust that we wouldn’t always be strapped if I did some serious work.

After my shower, I did my hair and put on the tiniest bit of makeup to celebrate, then went to my closet and got dressed. There weren’t a whole lot of options. Most everything was beige, brown, or green. I had a few nicer dresses for when we worked, but they were hopelessly behind in the fashion department. It was like that, though. Sixes and Sevens were almost always in denim or something sturdy. Fives mostly wore bland clothes, as the artists covered everything with smocks and the singers and dancers only really needed to look special for performances. The upper castes would wear khaki and denim from time to time to change up their looks, but it was always in a way that took the material to a whole new level. As if it

wasn't enough that they could have pretty much whatever they wanted, they turned our necessities into luxuries.

I put on my khaki shorts and the green tunic top—by far the most exciting day clothes I owned—and looked myself over before going into the living room. I felt kind of pretty today. Maybe it was just the excitement behind my eyes.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen table with Dad, humming. They both looked up at me a couple of times, but even their stares couldn't bother me.

When I picked up the letter, I was a little surprised. Such high-quality paper. I'd never felt anything like it. Thick and slightly textured. For a moment the weight of the paper hit me, reminding me of the magnitude of what I was doing. Two words jumped into my head: What if?

But I shook the thought away and put pen to paper.

It was straightforward enough. I filled in my name, age, caste, and contact information. I had to put my height and weight, hair, eye, and skin color, too. I was pleased to write that I could speak three languages. Most could speak at least two, but my mother insisted we learn French and Spanish, since those languages were still used in parts of the country. It also helped with the singing. There were so many pretty songs in French. We had to list the highest grade level we'd completed, which could vary immensely, since only Sixes and Sevens went to the public schools and had actual grade levels. I was nearly done with my education. Under special skills, I listed singing and all my instruments.

“Do you think the ability to sleep in counts as a special skill?” I asked Dad, trying to sound torn over the decision.

“Yes, list that. And don't forget to write that you can eat an entire meal in under five minutes,” he replied. I laughed. It was true; I did tend to inhale my food.

“Oh, the both of you! Why don't you just write down that you're an absolute heathen!” My mother went storming from the room. I couldn't believe she was so frustrated—after all, she was getting exactly what she wanted.

I gave Dad a questioning look.

“She just wants the best for you, that's all.” He leaned back in his chair, relaxing a bit before he started on the commissioned piece that was due by the end of the month.

“So do you, but you're never so angry,” I noted.

“Yes. But your mother and I have different ideas of what's best for you.” He flashed me a

smile. I got my mouth from him—both the look and the tendency to say innocent things that got me into trouble. The temper was Mom’s doing, but she was better at holding her tongue if it really mattered. Not me. Like right now...

“Dad, if I wanted to marry a Six or even a Seven, and he was someone I really loved, would you let me?”

Dad set his mug down, and his eyes focused on me. I tried not to give anything away with my expression. His sigh was heavy, full of grief.

“America, if you loved an Eight, I’d want you to marry him. But you should know that love can wear away under the stress of being married. Someone you think you love now, you might start to hate when he couldn’t provide for you. And if you couldn’t take care of your children, it’d be even worse. Love doesn’t always survive under those types of circumstances.”

Dad rested his hand on top of mine, drawing my eyes up to his. I tried to hide my worry.

“But no matter what, I want you to be loved. You deserve to be loved. And I hope you get to marry for love and not a number.”

He couldn’t say what I wanted to know—that I would get to marry for love and not a number—but it was the best I could hope for.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Go easy on your mother. She’s trying to do the right thing.” He kissed my head and went off to work.

I sighed and went back to filling out the application. The whole thing made me feel like my family didn’t think I had any right to want something of my own. It bothered me, but I knew I couldn’t hold it against them in the long run. We couldn’t afford the luxury of wants. We had needs.

I took my finished application and went to find Mom in the backyard. She sat there, stitching up a hem as May did her schoolwork in the shade of the tree house. Aspen used to complain about the strict teachers in the public schools. I seriously doubted any of them could keep up with Mom. It was summer, for goodness’ sake.

“Did you really do it?” May asked, bouncing on her knees.

“I sure did.”

“What made you change your mind?”



“Mom can be very compelling,” I said pointedly, though Mom was obviously not ashamed at all of her bribery. “We can go to the Services Office as soon as you’re ready, Mom.”

She smiled a little. “That’s my girl. Go get your things, and we’ll head out. I want to get yours in as soon as possible.”

I went to grab my shoes and bag as I’d been instructed, but I stopped short at Gerad’s room. He was staring at a blank canvas, looking frustrated. We kept rotating through options with Gerad, but none of them were sticking. One look at the battered soccer ball in the corner or the secondhand microscope we’d inherited as payment one Christmas, and it was obvious his heart just wasn’t in the arts.

“Not feeling inspired today, huh?” I asked, stepping into his room.

He looked up at me and shook his head.

“Maybe you could try sculpting, like Kota. You have great hands. I bet you’d be good at it.”

“I don’t want to sculpt things. Or paint or sing or play the piano. I want to play ball.” He kicked his foot into the aging carpet.

“I know. And you can for fun, but you need to find a craft you’re good at to make a living. You can do both.”

“But why?” he whined.

“You know why. It’s the law.”

“But that’s not fair!” Gerad pushed the canvas to the floor, where it stirred up dust in the light from his window. “It’s not our fault our great-grandfather or whoever was poor.”

“I know.” It really seemed unreasonable to limit everyone’s life choices based on your ancestors’ ability to help the government, but that was how it all worked out. And I suppose I should just be grateful we were safe. “I guess it was the only way to make things work at the time.”

He didn’t speak. I breathed a sigh and picked up the canvas, setting it back into place. This was his life, and he couldn’t just wipe it away.

“You don’t have to give up your hobbies, buddy. But you want to be able to help Mom and Dad and grow up and get married, right?” I poked his side.

He stuck his tongue out in playful disgust, and we both giggled.

“America!” Mom called down the hall. “What’s taking you so long?”

“Coming,” I yelled back, and then turned to Gerad. “I know it’s hard. It’s just the way it is, okay?”

But I knew it wasn’t okay. It wasn’t okay at all.

Mom and I walked all the way to the local office. Sometimes we took the public buses if we were going too far or if we were working. It looked bad to show up sweaty at the house of a Two. They already looked at us funny anyway. But it was a nice day out, and the trip was just shy of being too long.

We obviously weren’t the only ones trying to get our submission in right away. By the time we got there, the street in front of the Province of Carolina Services Office was packed with women.

Standing in line, I could see a number of girls from my neighborhood in front of me, waiting to go inside. The trail was nearly four people wide and wrapped halfway around the block. Every girl in the province was signing up. I didn’t know whether to feel terrified or relieved.

“Magda!” someone called. My mother and I both turned at the sound of her name.

Celia and Kamber were walking up behind us with Aspen’s mother. She must have taken the day off to do this. Her daughters were dressed up as neatly as they could afford, looking very tidy. It wasn’t much, but they looked good no matter what they wore, just like Aspen. Kamber and Celia had his same dark hair and beautiful smiles.

Aspen’s mother smiled at me, and I returned her grin. I adored her. I only got to talk to her every once in a while, but she was always nice to me. And I knew it wasn’t because I was a step up from her; I’d seen her give clothes that didn’t fit her kids anymore to families who had next to nothing. She was just kind.

“Hello, Lena. Kamber, Celia, how are you?” Mother greeted them.

“Good!” they sang in unison.

“You guys look beautiful,” I said, placing one of Celia’s curls behind her shoulder.

“We wanted to look pretty for our picture,” Kamber announced.

“Picture?” I asked.

“Yes.” Aspen’s mom spoke in a hushed voice. “I was cleaning at one of the magistrates’ houses yesterday. This lottery isn’t much of a lottery at all. That’s why they’re taking pictures and getting lots of information. Why would it matter how many languages you spoke if it were

random?”

That had struck me as funny, but I thought that was all information for after the fact.

“It appears to have leaked a little; look around. Lots of girls are way overdone.”

I scanned the line. Aspen’s mother was right, and there was a clear line between those who knew and those who didn’t. Just behind us was a girl, obviously a Seven, still in her work clothes. Her muddy boots might not make the picture, but the dust on her overalls probably would. A few yards back another Seven was sporting a tool belt. The best I could say about her was that her face was clean.

On the other end of the spectrum, a girl in front of me had her hair up in a twist with little tendrils framing her face. The girl beside her, clearly a Two based on her clothes, looked like she was trying to drown the world in her cleavage. Several had on so much makeup, they looked kind of like clowns to me. But at least they were trying.

I looked decent, but I hadn’t gone to any such lengths. Like the Sevens, I hadn’t known to bother. I felt a sudden flutter of worry.

But why? I stopped myself and rearranged my thoughts.

I didn’t want this. If I wasn’t pretty enough, surely that was a good thing. I would at least be a notch below Aspen’s sisters. They were naturally beautiful, and looked even lovelier with the little hints of makeup. If Kamber or Celia won, Aspen’s whole family would be elevated. Surely my mother couldn’t disapprove of me marrying a One just because he wasn’t the prince himself. My lack of information was a blessing.

“I think you’re right,” Mom said. “That girl looks like she’s getting ready for a Christmas party.” She laughed, but I could tell she hated that I was at a disadvantage.

“I don’t know why some girls go so over the top. Look at America. She’s so pretty. I’m so glad you didn’t go that route,” Mrs. Leger said.

“I’m nothing special. Who could pick me next to Kamber or Celia?” I winked at them, and they smiled. Mom did, too, but it was forced. She must have been debating staying in the line or forcing me to run home and change.

“Don’t be silly! Every time Aspen comes home from helping your brother, he always says the Singers inherited more than their fair share of talent and beauty,” Aspen’s mother said.

“Does he really? What a nice boy!” my mother cooed.

“Yes. A mother couldn’t ask for a better son. He’s supportive, and he works so hard.”

“He’s going to make some girl very happy one day,” my mother said. She was only half into the conversation as she continued to size up the competition.

Mrs. Leger took a quick look around. “Between you and me, I think he might already have someone in mind.”

I froze. I didn’t know if I should comment or not, unsure if either response would give me away.

“What’s she like?” my mother asked. Even when she was planning my marriage to a complete stranger, she still had time for gossip.

“I’m not sure! I haven’t actually met her. And I’m only guessing that he’s seeing someone, but he seems happier lately,” she replied, beaming.

Lately? We’d been meeting for nearly two years. Why only lately?

“He hums,” Celia offered.

“Yeah, he sings, too,” Kamber agreed.

“He sings?” I exclaimed.

“Oh, yeah,” they chorused.

“Then he’s definitely seeing someone!” my mother chimed in. “I wonder who she is.”

“You’ve got me. But I’m guessing she must be a wonderful girl. These last few months he’s been working hard—harder than usual. And he’s been putting money away. I think he must be trying to save up to get married.”

I couldn’t help the little gasp that escaped. Lucky me, they all attributed it to the general excitement of the news.

“And I couldn’t be more pleased,” she continued. “Even if he’s not ready to tell us who she is, I love her already. He’s smiling, and he just seems satisfied. It’s been hard since we lost Herrick, and Aspen’s taken so much on himself. Any girl who makes him this happy is already a daughter to me.”

“She’d be a lucky girl! Your Aspen is a wonderful boy,” Mom replied.

I couldn’t believe it. Here his family was, trying to make ends meet, and he was putting away money for me! I didn’t know whether to scold him or kiss him. I just... I had no words.

He really was going to ask me to marry him!

It was all I could think about. Aspen, Aspen, Aspen. I went through the line, signed at the window to confirm that everything on my form was true, and took my picture. I sat in the chair, flipped my hair once or twice to give it some life, and turned to face the photographer.

I don't think any girl in all of Illéa could have been smiling more than me.

## CHAPTER 4

IT WAS FRIDAY, SO THE Illéa Capital Report would be on at eight. We weren't exactly obligated to watch, but it was unwise to miss it. Even Eights—the homeless, the wandering—would find a store or a church where they could see the Report. And with the Selection coming up, the Report was more than a semi-requirement. Everyone wanted to know what was happening in that department.

“Do you think they'll announce the winners tonight?” May asked, stuffing mashed potatoes into her mouth.

“No, dear. Everyone who's eligible still has nine days to submit their applications. It'll probably be two more weeks until we know.” Mom's voice was the calmest it had been in years. She was completely at ease, pleased to have gotten something she really wanted.

“Aw! I can't stand the wait,” May complained.

She couldn't stand the wait? It was my name in the pot!

“Your mother tells me you had quite a long wait in line.” I was surprised Dad wanted in on this conversation.

“Yeah,” I said. “I wasn't expecting that many girls. I don't know why they're giving people nine more days; I swear everyone in the province has already gone in.”

Dad chuckled. “Did you have fun gauging the competition?”

“Didn't bother,” I said honestly. “I left that to Mom.”

She nodded in agreement. “I did, I did. I couldn't help it. But I think America looked good. Polished but natural. You are so beautiful, honey. If they really are looking through instead of picking at random, you have an even better chance than I thought.”

“I don't know,” I hedged. “There was that girl who had on so much red lipstick she looked like she was bleeding. Maybe the prince likes that kind of thing.”

Everyone laughed, and Mom and I continued to regale them with commentary on the outfits we'd noticed. May drank it all in, and Gerad just sat smiling between bites of dinner. Sometimes it was easy to forget that as long as Gerad had been able to really understand the world around him, things had been stressful in our house.

At eight we all piled into the living room—Dad in his chair, May next to Mom on the couch

with Gerad on her lap, and me on the floor all stretched out—and turned the TV to the public access channel. It was the one channel you didn't have to pay to have, so even the Eights could get it if they had a TV.

The anthem played. Maybe it's silly, but I always loved our national anthem. It was one of my favorite songs to sing.

The picture of the royal family came into view. Standing at a podium was King Clarkson. His advisers, who had updates on infrastructure and some environmental concerns, were seated to one side, and the camera cut to show them. It looked like there would be several announcements tonight. On the left of the screen, the queen and Prince Maxon sat in their typical cluster of thronelike seats and elegant clothes, looking regal and important.

“There's your boyfriend, Ames,” May announced, and everyone laughed.

I looked closely at Maxon. I guess he was handsome in his own way. Not at all like Aspen, though. His hair was a honey color, and his eyes were brown. He kind of looked like summertime, which I guess was attractive to some people. His hair was cropped short and neatly done, and his gray suit was perfectly fitted to him.

But he sat way too rigidly in his chair. He looked so uptight. His clean hair was too perfect, his tailored suit too crisp. He seemed more like a painting than a person. I almost felt bad for the girl who ended up with him. That would probably be the most boring life imaginable.

I focused on his mother. She looked serene. She sat up in her chair, too, but not in an icy way. I realized that, unlike the king and Prince Maxon, she hadn't grown up in the palace. She was a celebrated Daughter of Illéa. She might have been someone like me.

The king was already talking, but I had to know.

“Mom?” I whispered, trying not to distract Dad.

“Yes?”

“The queen ... what was she? Her caste, I mean.”

Mom smiled at my interest. “A Four.”

A Four. She'd spent her formative years working in a factory or a shop, or maybe on a farm. I wondered about her life. Did she have a large family? She probably hadn't had to worry about food growing up. Were her friends jealous of her when she was chosen? If I had any really close friends, would they be jealous of me?

That was stupid. I wasn't going to be picked.

Instead I focused on the king's words.

“Just this morning, another attack in New Asia rocked our bases. It has left our troops slightly outnumbered, but we are confident that with the fresh draft next month will come lifted morale, not to mention a swelling of fresh forces.”

I hated war. Unfortunately, we were a young country that had to protect itself against everyone. It wasn't likely this land would survive another invasion.

After the king gave us an update on a recent raid on a rebel camp, the Financial Team updated us on the status of the debt, and the head of the Infrastructure Committee announced that in two years they were planning to start work on rebuilding several highways, some of which hadn't been touched since the Fourth World War. Finally the last person, the Master of Events, came to the podium.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of Illéa. As you all know, notices to participate in the Selection were recently distributed in the mail. We have received the first count of submitted applications, and I am pleased to say that thousands of the beautiful women in Illéa have already placed their names in the lottery for the Selection!”

In the back corner Maxon shifted a little in his seat. Was he sweating?

“On behalf of the royal family, I would like to thank you for your enthusiasm and patriotism. With any luck, by the New Year we will be celebrating the engagement of our beloved Prince Maxon to an enchanting, talented, and intelligent Daughter of Illéa!”

The few advisers sitting there applauded. Maxon smiled but looked uncomfortable. When the applause died down, the Master of Events started up again.

“Of course, we will be having lots of programming dedicated to meeting the young women of the Selection, not to mention specials on their lives at the palace. We could not think of anyone more qualified to guide us through this exciting time than our very own Mr. Gavril Fadaye!”

There was another smattering of applause, but it came from my mom and May this time. Gavril Fadaye was a legend. For something like twenty years he'd done running commentary on Grateful Feast parades and Christmas shows and anything they celebrated at the palace. I'd never seen an interview with members of the royal family or their closest friends and family done by anyone but him.

“Oh, America, you could meet Gavril!” Mom crooned.

“He's coming!” May said, flailing her little arms.



Sure enough, there was Gavril, sauntering onto the set in his crisp blue suit. He was maybe in his late forties, and he always looked sharp. As he walked across the stage, the light caught on the pin on his lapel, a flash of gold that was similar to the forte signs in my piano music.

“Gooooood evening, Illéa!” he sang. “I have to say that I am so honored to be a part of the Selection. Lucky me, I get to meet thirty-five beautiful women! What idiot wouldn’t want my job?” He winked at us through the camera. “But before I get to meet these lovely ladies, one of which will be our new princess, I have the pleasure of speaking with the man of the hour, our Prince Maxon.”

With that Maxon walked across the carpeted stage to a pair of chairs set up for him and Gavril. He straightened his tie and adjusted his suit, as if he needed to look more polished. He shook Gavril’s hand and sat across from him, picking up a microphone. The chair was high enough that Maxon propped his feet on a bar in the middle of the legs. He looked much more casual that way.

“Nice to see you again, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Gavril. The pleasure is all mine.” Maxon’s voice was as poised as the rest of him. He radiated waves of formality. I wrinkled my nose at the idea of just being in the same room with him.

“In less than a month, thirty-five women will be moving into your house. How do you feel about that?”

Maxon laughed. “Honestly, it is a bit nerve-racking. I’m imagining there will be much more noise with so many guests. I’m looking forward to it all the same.”

“Have you asked dear old dad for any advice on how he managed to get ahold of such a beautiful wife when it was his turn?”

Both Maxon and Gavril looked over to the king and queen, and the camera panned over to show them looking at each other, smiling and holding hands. It seemed genuine, but how would we know any better?

“I haven’t actually. As you know, the situation in New Asia has been escalating, and I’ve been working with him more on the military side of things. Not much time to discuss girls in there.”

Mom and May laughed. I suppose it was kind of funny.

“We don’t have much time left, so I’d like to have one more question. What do you imagine your perfect girl would be like?”

Maxon looked taken aback. It was hard to tell, but he may have been blushing.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I think that’s the beauty of the Selection. No two women who enter will be exactly the same—not in looks or preferences or disposition. And through the process of meeting them and talking to them, I’m hoping to discover what I want, to find it along the way.” Maxon smiled.

“Thank you, Your Highness. That was very well said. And I think I speak for all of Illéa when I wish you the best of luck.” Gavril held out his hand for another shake.

“Thank you, sir,” Maxon said. The camera didn’t cut away quick enough, and you could see him looking over to his parents, wondering if he’d said the right thing. The next shot zoomed in on Gavril’s face, so there was no way to see what their response was.

“I’m afraid that’s all the time we have for this evening. Thank you for watching the Illéa Capital Report, and we’ll see you next week.”

With that, the music played and credits rolled.

“America and Maxon sitting in a tree,” sang May. I grabbed a pillow and chucked it at her, but I couldn’t help laughing at the thought. Maxon was so stiff and quiet. It was hard to imagine anyone being happy with such a wimp.

I spent the rest of the night trying to ignore May’s teasing, and finally went to my room to be alone. Even the thought of being near Maxon Schreave made me uncomfortable. May’s little jabs stayed in my head all night and made it difficult for me to sleep.

It was hard to pinpoint the sound that woke me, but once I was aware of it, I tried to survey my room in absolute stillness, just in case someone was there.

Tap, tap, tap.

I turned over slowly to face my window, and there was Aspen, grinning at me. I got out of bed and tiptoed to the door, shutting it all the way and locking it. I went back to the bed, unlocking and slowly opening my window.

A rush of heat that had nothing to do with summer swept over me as Aspen climbed through the window and onto my bed.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, smiling in the dark.

“I had to see you,” he breathed into my cheek as he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me down until we were lying side by side on the bed.

“I have so much to tell you, Aspen.”

“Shhh, don’t say a word. If anyone hears, there’ll be hell to pay. Just let me look at you.”

And so I obeyed. I stayed there, quiet and still, while Aspen stared into my eyes. When he had his fill of that, he went to nuzzling his nose into my neck and hair. And then his hands were moving up and down the curve of my waist to my hip over and over and over. I heard his breathing get heavy, and something about that drew me in.

His lips, hidden in my neck, started kissing me. I drew in sharp breaths. I couldn’t help it. Aspen’s lips traveled up my chin and covered my mouth, effectively silencing my gasps. I wrapped myself around him, our rushed grabbing and the humidity of the night covering us both in sweat.

It was a stolen moment.

Aspen’s lips finally slowed, though I was nowhere near ready to stop. But we had to be smart. If we went any further, and there was ever evidence of it, we’d both be thrown in jail.

Another reason everyone married young: Waiting is torture.

“I should go,” he whispered.

“But I want you to stay.” My lips were by his ears. I could smell his soap again.

“America Singer, one day you will fall asleep in my arms every night. And you’ll wake up to my kisses every morning. And then some.” I bit my lip at the thought. “But now I have to go. We’re pushing our luck.”

I sighed and loosened my grip. He was right.

“I love you, America.”

“I love you, Aspen.”

These secret moments would be enough to get me through everything coming: Mom’s disappointment when I wasn’t chosen, the work I’d have to do to help Aspen save, the eruption that was coming when he asked Dad for my hand, and whatever struggles we’d go through once we were married. None of it mattered. Not if I had Aspen.

## CHAPTER 5

A WEEK LATER, I BEAT Aspen to the tree house.

It took a bit of work to get the things I wanted up there in silence, but I managed. I rearranged the plates one last time as I heard someone climbing the tree.

“Boo.”

Aspen started and laughed. I lit the new candle I’d purchased just for us. He crossed the tree house to kiss me, and after a moment, I started talking about all that had happened during the week.

“I never got to tell you about the sign-ups,” I said, excited about the news.

“How’d it go? Mom said it was packed.”

“It was crazy, Aspen. You should have seen what people were wearing! And I’m sure you know that it’s less of a lottery than they’re claiming. So I was right all along. There are far more interesting people to choose in Carolina than me, so this was all a big nothing.”

“All the same, thank you for doing it. It means a lot to me.” His eyes were still focused on me. He hadn’t even bothered looking around the tree house. Drinking me in, like always.

“Well, the best part is that since my mother had no idea I’d already promised you, she bribed me to sign up.” I couldn’t contain my smile. This week families had already started throwing parties for their daughters, sure that they would be the one chosen for the Selection. I’d sung at no less than seven celebrations, packing two into a night for the sake of getting my own paychecks. And Mom was true to her word. It felt liberating to have money that was mine.

“Bribed you? With what?” His face was lit with excitement.

“Money, of course. Look, I made you a feast!” I pulled away from him and started grabbing plates. I’d made too much dinner on purpose to save him some, and I’d been baking pastries for days. May and I both had a terrible addiction to sweets anyway, and she was jubilant that this was how I was choosing to spend my money.

“What’s all this?”

“Food. I made it myself.” I was beaming with pride at my efforts. Finally, tonight, Aspen could be full. But his smile faded as he took in plate after plate.

“Aspen, is something wrong?”

“This isn’t right.” He shook his head and looked away from the treats.

“What do you mean?”

“America, I’m supposed to be providing for you. It’s humiliating for me to come here and have you do all this for me.”

“But I give you food all the time.”

“Your little leftovers. You think I don’t know better? I don’t feel bad about taking something you don’t want. But to have you—I’m supposed to—”

“Aspen, you give me things all the time. You provide for me. I have all my pen—”

“Pennies? You think bringing that up now is a good idea? Don’t you know how much I hate that? That I love to hear you sing but can’t really pay you when everyone else does?”

“You shouldn’t pay me at all! It’s a gift. Anything of mine you want you can have!” I knew we needed to be careful to keep our voices down. But at the moment I didn’t care.

“I’m not some charity case, America. I’m a man. I’m supposed to be a provider.”

Aspen put his hands in his hair. I could see his breaths coming fast. Just like always, he was thinking his way through the argument. But this time, there was something different in his eyes. Instead of his face growing focused, it fell into confusion one millimeter at a time. My anger faded quickly as I saw him there, looking so lost. I felt guilty instead. I had meant to spoil him, not humiliate him.

“I love you,” I whispered.

He shook his head.

“I love you, too, America.” But he still wouldn’t look at me. I picked up some of the bread I’d made and put it in his hand. He was too hungry not to take a bite.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I thought it would make you happy.”

“No, Mer, I love it. I can’t believe you did all this for me. It’s just . . . you don’t know how much it bothers me that I can’t do this for you. You deserve better.” Mercifully, he kept eating as he spoke.

“You’ve got to stop thinking of me that way. When it’s just you and me, I’m not a Five and you’re not a Six. We’re just Aspen and America. And I don’t want anything in the world but

you.”

“But I can’t stop thinking that way.” He looked at me. “That’s how I was raised. Since I was little, it was ‘Sixes are born to serve’ and ‘Sixes aren’t meant to be seen.’ My whole life, I’ve been taught to be invisible.” He grabbed my hand in a viselike grip. “If we’re together, Mer, you’re going to be invisible, too. And I don’t want that for you.”

“Aspen, we’ve talked about this. I know that things will be different, and I’m prepared. I don’t know how to make it any clearer.” I put my hand on his heart. “The moment you’re ready to ask, I’m ready to say yes.”

It was terrifying to put myself out there like that, to make it absolutely clear how deep my affections ran. He knew what I was saying. But if making myself vulnerable meant he’d be brave, I’d endure it. His eyes searched mine. If he was looking for doubt, he was wasting his time. Aspen was the one thing I was sure of.

“No.”

“What?”

“No.” The word felt like a slap across the face.

“Aspen?”

“I don’t know how I fooled myself into ever thinking this would work.” He ran his fingers through his hair again, like he was trying to get all the thoughts he’d ever had about me out of his head.

“But you just said you loved me.”

“I do, Mer. That’s the point. I can’t make you like me. I can’t stand the thought of you hungry or cold or scared. I can’t make you a Six.”

I felt the tears coming. He didn’t mean that. He couldn’t. But before I could tell him to take it back, Aspen was already moving to crawl out of the tree house.

“Where ... where are you going?”

“I’m leaving. I’m going home. I’m sorry I did this to you, America. It’s over now.”

“What?”

“It’s over. I won’t come around anymore. Not like this.”

I started crying. “Aspen, please. Let’s talk about this. You’re just upset.”

“I’m more upset than you know. But not at you. I just can’t do this, Mer. I can’t.”

“Aspen, please...”

He pulled me in tight and kissed me—really kissed me—one last time. Then he disappeared into the night. And because this country is the way it is, because of all the rules that had kept us in hiding, I couldn’t even call out after him. I couldn’t tell him I loved him one more time.

As the next few days passed, I knew my family could tell that something was wrong, but they must have assumed I was nervous about the Selection. I wanted to cry a thousand times, but held it back. I just pushed on to Friday, hoping that everything would go back to normal after the Capital Report broadcast the names.

I dreamed it up in my head. How they would announce Celia or Kamber, and my mother would be disappointed, but not as disappointed as she would have been if it was a stranger. Dad and May would be excited for them; our families were close. I knew Aspen had to be thinking about me like I’d been thinking about him. I bet he’d be over here before the program was over, begging me for forgiveness and asking for my hand. It would be a little premature, since there was nothing guaranteed for the girls, but he could capitalize on the general excitement of the day. It would probably smooth a lot of things over.

In my head, it worked out perfectly. In my head, everyone was happy...

It was ten minutes until the Report came on, and we were all in place early. I couldn’t imagine we were alone in not wanting to miss a second of this announcement.

“I remember when Queen Amberly was chosen! Oh, I knew from the beginning she would make it.” Mom was making popcorn, as if this were a movie.

“Did you go in the lottery, Mama?” Gerad asked.

“No, sweetie, Mama was two years too young for the cutoff. But lucky me, I got your father instead.” She smiled and winked.

Whoa. She must have been in a good mood. I couldn’t remember the last time she was that affectionate toward Dad.

“Queen Amberly is the best queen ever. She’s so beautiful and smart. Every time I see her on TV, I want to be just like her,” May said with a sigh.

“She is a good queen,” I added quietly.

Finally eight o’clock rolled around, and the national emblem rose on the screen along with the instrumental version of our anthem. Was I actually trembling? I was so ready for this to be

over.

The king appeared and gave a brief update on the war. The other announcements were also short. It seemed like everyone there was in a good mood. I guessed this must be exciting for them, too.

Finally the Master of Events came up and introduced Gavril, who walked straight over to the royal family.

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” he said to the king.

“Gavril, always good to see you.” The king was borderline giddy.

“Looking forward to the announcement?”

“Ah, yes. I was in the room yesterday as a few were drawn; all very lovely girls.”

“So you know who they are already?” Gavril exclaimed.

“Just a few, just a few.”

“Did he happen to share any of this information with you, sir?” Gavril turned to Maxon.

“Not at all. I’ll see them when everyone else does,” Maxon replied. You could see he was trying to hide his nerves.

I realized my palms were sweating.

“Your Majesty,” Gavril went over to the queen. “Any advice for the Selected?”

She smiled her serene smile. I didn’t know what the other women looked like when she went through the Selection, but I couldn’t imagine anyone being as graceful and lovely as her.

“Enjoy your last night as an average girl. Tomorrow, no matter what, your life will be different forever. And it’s old advice, but it’s good: Be yourself.”

“Wise words, my queen, wise words. And with that, let us reveal the thirty-five young ladies chosen for the Selection. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating the following Daughters of Illéa!”

The screen changed to the national emblem. In the upper right-hand corner, there was a small box with Maxon’s face, to see his reactions as the pictures went across the monitor. He would already be making decisions about them, the way we all would.

Gavril had a set of cards in his hands, ready to read out the names of the girls whose worlds,



according to the queen, were about to change forever.

“Miss Elayna Stoles of Hansport, Three.” A photo of a tiny girl with porcelain skin popped up. She looked like a lady. Maxon beamed.

“Miss Tuesday Keeper of Waverly, Four.” A girl with freckles appeared. She looked older, more mature. Maxon whispered something to the king.

“Miss Fiona Castley of Paloma, Three.” A brunette with smoldering eyes this time. Maybe my age, but she seemed more ... experienced.

I turned to Mom and May on the couch. “Doesn’t she seem awfully—”

“Miss America Singer of Carolina, Five.”

I whipped my head back around, and there it was. The picture of me just after I’d found out Aspen was saving up to marry me. I looked radiant, hopeful, beautiful. I looked like I was in love. And some idiot thought that love was for Prince Maxon.

Mom screamed by my ear, and May jumped up, sending popcorn everywhere. Gerad got excited too and started dancing. Dad ... it’s hard to say, but I think he was secretly smiling behind his book.

I missed what Maxon’s expression was.

The phone rang.

And it didn’t stop for days.

## CHAPTER 6

THE NEXT WEEK WAS FULL of officials swarming into our house to prepare me for the Selection. There was an obnoxious woman who seemed to think I'd lied about half my application, followed by an actual palace guard who came to go over security measures with the local soldiers and give our home a once-over. Apparently I didn't have to wait until getting to the palace to worry about potential rebel attacks. Wonderful.

We got two phone calls from a woman named Silvia—who sounded very perky and businesslike at the same time—wanting to know if we needed anything. My favorite visitor was a lean, goateed man who came to measure me for my new wardrobe. I wasn't sure how I felt about wearing dresses that were as formal as the queen's all the time, but I was looking forward to a change.

The last of these visitors came on Wednesday afternoon, two days before I was to leave. He was in charge of going over all the official rules with me. He was incredibly skinny with greasy black hair that was smoothed back, and he kept sweating. Upon entering the house, he asked if there was someplace private we could talk. That was my first clue that something was going on.

“Well, we can sit in the kitchen, if that's all right,” Mom suggested.

He dabbed his head with a handkerchief and looked over at May. “Actually, anyplace is fine. I just think you might want to ask your younger daughter to leave the room.”

What could he possibly say that May couldn't hear?

“Mama?” she asked, sad to be missing out.

“May, darling, go and work on your painting. You've been neglecting your work a bit this last week.”

“But—”

“Let me walk you out, May,” I offered, looking at the tears welling up in her eyes.

When we were down the hall and no one could hear, I pulled her in for a hug.

“Don't worry,” I whispered. “I'll tell you everything tonight. Promise.”

To her credit, she didn't blow our cover by jumping up and down as usual. She merely nodded somberly and went away to her little corner in Dad's studio.

Mom made tea for Skinny, and we sat at the kitchen table to talk. He had a stack of papers and a pen laid out next to another folder with my name on it. He arranged his information neatly and spoke.

“I’m sorry to be so secretive, but there are certain things I need to address that are unfit for young ears.”

Mom and I exchanged a quick glance.

“Miss Singer, this is going to sound harsh, but as of last Friday, you are now considered property of Illéa. You must take care of your body from here on out. I have several forms for you to sign as we go through this information. Any failure to comply on your part will result in your immediate removal from the Selection. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said warily.

“Very good. Let’s start with the easy stuff. These are vitamins. Since you are a Five, I’ll assume that you may not always have access to necessary nutrition. You must take one of these every day. You’re on your own now, but at the palace, you’ll have someone to help you.” He passed a large bottle across the table to me, along with a form I had to sign to say that I had received it.

I had to stop myself from laughing. Who needs help taking a pill?

“I have with me the physical from your doctor. Not much of a worry there. You seem to be in excellent health, although he said you haven’t been sleeping well?”

“Umm, I mean ... just with the excitement, it’s been a little hard to sleep.” It was almost the truth. The days were whirlwinds of palace preparation, but at night, when I was still, I thought of Aspen. It was the one time I couldn’t avoid him coming into my mind, and it appeared he wasn’t eager to leave.

“I see. Well, I can have some sleep aids here tonight if you need them. We want you well rested.”

“No, I don’t—”

“Yes,” Mom interrupted. “Sorry, honey, but you look exhausted. Please, get her the sleep aids.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Skinny made another note in my file. “Moving on. Now, I know this is personal, but I’ve had to discuss it with every contestant, so please don’t be shy.” He paused. “I need confirmation that you are, in fact, a virgin.”

Mom's eyes nearly popped out. So this was why May had to leave.

"Are you serious?" I couldn't believe they'd send someone out to do this. At least send a woman...

"I'm afraid so. If you're not, we need to know that immediately."

Eww. And with my mother in the room. "I know the law, sir. I'm not stupid. Of course I am."

"Consider, please. If you are found to be lying..."

"For goodness' sake, America's never even had a boyfriend!" Mom said.

"That's right." I grabbed that rope, hoping it would end this discussion.

"Very good. I'll just need you to sign this form to confirm your statement."

I rolled my eyes but obeyed. I was glad Illéa existed, considering that this very land had nearly been turned to rubble, but these regulations were starting to make me feel like I was suffocating, like there were invisible chains keeping me down. Laws about who you could love, forms about your virginity being intact; it was infuriating.

"I need to go over the rules with you. They are very straightforward, and you shouldn't have a hard time complying. If you have any questions, just speak up."

He looked up from his stack of forms and made eye contact with me.

"I will," I mumbled.

"You cannot leave the palace of your own accord. You have to be dismissed by the prince himself. Even the king and queen cannot force you out. They can tell the prince they do not approve of you, but he makes every decision on who stays and who leaves.

"There is no set timeline for the Selection. It can be over in a matter of days or stretch into years."

"Years?" I asked in horror. The thought of being gone that long set me on edge.

"Not to worry. The prince is unlikely to let it go for very long. This is a moment for him to show his decisiveness, and allowing the Selection to drag on doesn't look good. But should he choose to take it that way, you will be required to stay for as long as the prince needs to make his choice."

My fear must have shown on my face because Mom reached over and patted my hand. Skinny, however, was unfazed.

“You do not arrange your times with the prince. He will seek you out for one-on-one company if he wants it. If you are in a larger social setting and he is present, that is different. But you do not go to him without invitation.

“While no one expects you to get along with the other thirty-four contestants, you are not to fight with them or sabotage them. If you are found laying hands on another contestant, causing her stress, stealing from her, or doing anything that might diminish her personal relationship with the prince, it is in his hands whether or not to dismiss you on the spot.

“Your only romantic relationship will be with Prince Maxon. If you are found writing love notes to someone here or are caught in a relationship with another person in the palace, that is considered treason and is punishable by death.”

Mom rolled her eyes at that one, though that might be the only rule that worried me.

“If you are found breaking any of Illéa’s written laws, you will receive the punishment tied to that offense. Your status as one of the Selected does not put you above the law.

“You must not wear any clothes or eat any food that is not specifically provided for you by the palace. This is a security issue and will be strictly enforced.

“On Fridays you will be present for all Capital Report broadcasts. On occasion, but always with warning, there will be cameras or photographers in the palace, and you will be courteous and allow them to see your lifestyle with the prince.

“For each week you stay at the palace, your family will be compensated. I will give you your first check before I leave. Also, should you not stay at the palace, an aide will help you adjust to your life after the Selection. Your aide will assist you with final preparations before you leave for the palace, as well as help you seek new housing and employment afterward.

“Should you make it to the top ten, you will be considered an Elite. Once you reach that status, you will be required to learn about the particular inner workings of the life and obligations you would have as a princess. You are not permitted to seek out such details before that time.

“From this moment on, your status is a Three.”

“A Three?” Mom and I both exclaimed.

“Yes. After the Selection, it’s hard for girls to go back to their old lives. Twos and Threes do fine, but Fours and below tend to struggle. You are a Three now, but the rest of your family remain Fives. Should you win, you and your entire family become Ones as members of the royal family.”

“Ones.” The word was faint on Mom’s lips.

“And should you go to the end, you will marry Prince Maxon and become the crowned princess of Illéa and take on all the rights and responsibilities of that title. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” That part, as big as it sounded, was the easiest to bear.

“Very good. If you could just sign this form saying you’ve heard all the official rules, and Mrs. Singer, if you could just sign this form saying you received your check, please.”

I didn’t see the sum, but it made her eyes well. I was miserable at the idea of leaving, but I was sure if I went there only to be sent back the next day, this check alone would provide us with enough money for a very comfortable year. And when I got back, everyone would want me to sing. I’d have plenty of work. But would I be allowed to sing as a Three? If I had to pick one of the career paths of a Three, I think I’d teach. Maybe I could at least help others learn music.

Skinny collected his forms and stood to leave, thanking us for our time and for the tea. I would have to interact with only one more official before I left, and that would be my aide: the person who would guide me through getting from my house to the send-off to the airport. And then ... then I’d be on my own.

Our guest asked if I would show him to the door, and Mom consented, as she wanted to start dinner. I didn’t like being alone with him, but it was a short walk.

“One more thing,” Skinny said with his hand on the door. “This isn’t exactly a rule, but it would be unwise of you to ignore it. When you are invited to do something with Prince Maxon, you do not refuse. No matter what it is. Dinner, outings, kisses—more than kisses—anything. Do not turn him down.”

“Excuse me?” Was the same man who made me sign a form affirming my purity suggesting that I let Maxon have it if he wanted it?

“I know it sounds ... unbecoming. But it would not behoove you to reject the prince under any circumstances. Good evening, Miss Singer.”

I was disgusted, revolted. The law, Illéan law, was that you were to wait until marriage. It was an effective way of keeping diseases at bay, and it helped keep the castes intact. Illegitimates were thrown into the street to become Eights, and the penalty for being discovered, either by a person or through pregnancy, was jail time. If someone was even suspicious, you could spend a few nights in a cell. True, it restricted me from being intimate with the one person I loved, and that had bothered me. But now that Aspen and I were over, I was glad I’d been forced to save myself.

I was infuriated. Hadn’t I just signed a form saying I’d be punished if I broke Illéan law? I

wasn't above the rules; that was what he'd said. But apparently the prince was. And I felt dirty, lower than an Eight.

"America, honey, it's for you," Mom sang. I'd heard the doorbell myself but was in no rush to answer it. If this was another person asking for an autograph, I didn't think I'd be able to handle it.

I walked down the hall and turned the corner. There, with a handful of wildflowers, was Aspen.

"Hello, America." His voice was restrained, almost professional.

"Hello, Aspen." Mine was weak.

"These are from Kamber and Celia. They wanted to wish you luck." He closed the distance between us and gave me the flowers. Flowers from his sisters, not from him.

"That's awfully sweet!" Mom exclaimed. I had almost forgotten she was in the room.

"Aspen, I'm glad you're here." I tried to sound as removed as he had. "I've made a mess trying to pack. Could you help me clean?"

With my mom there, he had to accept. As a general rule, Sixes didn't turn down work. We were the same in that way.

He exhaled through his nose and nodded once.

Aspen followed me down the hall. I thought about how many times I'd wanted just this: for Aspen to walk in my house and come to my room. Could the circumstances have been any worse?

I pushed open the door to my room and Aspen laughed out loud.

"Did you let a dog do your packing?"

"Shut up! I had a little trouble finding what I was looking for." In spite of myself, I smiled.

He went to work, setting things upright and folding shirts. I helped, of course.

"Aren't you taking any of these clothes?" he whispered.

"No. They dress me from tomorrow on out."

"Oh. Wow."

“Were your sisters disappointed?”

“No, actually.” He shook his head in disbelief. “The moment they saw your face, the whole house erupted. They’re crazy about you. My mom in particular.”

“I love your mom. She’s always really nice to me.”

A few minutes passed in silence as my room went slowly back to normal.

“Your picture...,” he began, “was absolutely beautiful.”

It hurt to have him tell me I was beautiful. It wasn’t fair. Not after everything he’d done.

“It was for you,” I whispered.

“What?”

“It’s just... I thought you were going to be proposing soon.” My voice was thick.

Aspen was quiet for a moment, choosing his words.

“I’d been thinking about it, but it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It does. Why didn’t you tell me?”

He rubbed his neck, deciding.

“I was waiting.”

“For what?” What could possibly be worth waiting for?

“For the draft.”

That was an issue. It was hard to know whether to wish to be drafted or not. In Illéa, every nineteen-year-old male was eligible for it. Soldiers were chosen at random twice a year, to catch everyone within six months of their birthday. You served from the time you were nineteen until you were twenty-three. And it was coming soon.

We’d talked about it, of course, but not in a realistic way. I guess we both hoped that if we ignored the draft, it would ignore us, too.

It was a blessing in that being a soldier meant you were an automatic Two. The government trained you and paid you for the rest of your life. The drawback was you never knew where you would go. They sent you away from your province, for sure. They assumed you were more likely to be lenient with people you knew. You might end up at the palace or in some



other province's local police force. Or you might end up in the army, shipped off to war. Not very many men sent into battle made it home.

If a man wasn't married before the draft, he'd almost always wait. You'd be separated from your wife for four years, at the very best. At the worst, she'd be a young widow.

"I just... I didn't want to do that to you," he whispered.

"I understand."

He straightened up, trying to change the subject. "So what are you taking to the palace?"

"A change of clothes to wear whenever they finally kick me out. Some pictures and books. I've been told I won't need my instruments. Anything I want will be there already. So that little bag there, that's it."

The room was tidy now, and that backpack seemed huge for some reason. The flowers he'd brought looked so bright on my desk compared to the drab things I owned. Or maybe it was just that everything seemed paler now ... now that it was over.

"That's not much," he noted.

"I've never needed very much to be happy. I thought you knew that."

He closed his eyes. "Stop it, America. I did the right thing."

"The right thing? Aspen, you made me believe we could do it. You made me love you. And then you talked me into this damn contest. Do you know they're practically shipping me off to be one of Maxon's playthings?"

He whipped his head around to face me. "What?"

"I'm not allowed to turn him down. Not for anything."

Aspen looked sick, angry. His hands clenched up into fists. "Even ... even if he doesn't want to marry you ... he could...?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." He took a few deep breaths. "But if he does pick you ... that'll be good. You deserve to be happy."

That was it. I slapped him. "You idiot!" I whisper-yelled at him. "I hate him! I loved you! I wanted you; all I ever wanted was you!"

His eyes welled up, but I couldn't care. He'd hurt me enough, and now it was his turn.

"I should go," he said, and started heading to the door.

"Wait. I didn't pay you."

"America, you don't have to pay me." He went to leave again.

"Aspen Leger, don't you dare move!" My voice was fierce. And he stopped, finally paying attention to me.

"That'll be good practice for when you're a One." If it hadn't been for his eyes, I would have thought it was a joke, not an insult.

I just shook my head and went to my desk, pulling out all the money I'd earned by myself. I put every last bit of it in his hands.

"America, I'm not taking this."

"The hell you aren't. I don't need it and you do. If you ever loved me at all, you'll take it. Hasn't your pride done enough for us?" I could feel a part of him shut down. He stopped fighting.

"Fine."

"And here." I dug behind my bed, pulled out my tiny jar of pennies, and poured them into his hand. One rebellious penny that must have been sticky stayed glued to the bottom. "Those were always yours. You should use them."

Now I didn't have anything of his. And once he spent those pennies out of desperation, he wouldn't have anything of mine. I felt the hurt coming up. My eyes got wet, and I breathed hard to keep the sobs back.

"I'm sorry, Mer. Good luck." He shoved the money and the pennies into his pockets and ran out.

This wasn't how I thought I'd cry. I was expecting huge, jarring sobs, not slow, tiny tears.

I started to put the jar on a shelf, but I noticed that little penny again. I put my finger in the jar and got it unstuck. It rattled around in the glass all by itself. It was a hollow sound, and I could feel it echo in my chest. I knew, for better or for worse, I wasn't really free of Aspen, not yet. Maybe not ever. I opened the backpack, put in my jar, and sealed it all away.

May snuck into my room, and I took one of those stupid pills. I fell asleep holding her, finally feeling numb.



## CHAPTER 7

THE NEXT MORNING, I DRESSED myself in the uniform of the Selected: black pants, white shirt, and my province flower—a lily—in my hair. My shoes I got to pick. I chose worn-out red flats. I figured I should make it clear from the start that I wasn't princess material.

We were set to leave for the square shortly. Each of the Selected was getting a send-off in her home province today, and I wasn't looking forward to mine. All those people staring while I did nothing more than stand there. The whole thing already felt ridiculous, as I had to be driven the two short miles for security reasons.

The day began uncomfortably. Kenna came with James to send me off, which was kind of her, considering she was pregnant and tired. Kota came by, too, though his presence added more tension than ease. As we walked from our house to the car we'd been provided, Kota was by far the slowest, letting the few photographers and well-wishers who were there get a good look at him. Dad just shook his head.

May was my only solace. She held my hand and tried to inject some of her enthusiasm into me. We were still linked when I stepped into the crowded square. It seemed like everyone in the province of Carolina came out to see me off. Or just see what the big deal was.

Standing on the raised stage, I could see the boundaries between the castes. Margareta Stines was a Three, and she and her parents were staring daggers at me. Tenile Digger was a Seven, and she was blowing kisses. The upper castes looked at me like I'd stolen something that was theirs. The Fours on down were cheering for me—an average girl who'd been elevated. I became aware of what I meant to everyone here, as if I represented something for all of them.

I tried to focus in on those faces, holding my head high. I was determined to do this well. I would be the best of us, the Highest of the Lows. It gave me a sense of purpose. America Singer: the champion of the lower castes.

The mayor spoke with a flourish.

“And Carolina will be cheering on the beautiful daughter of Magda and Shalom Singer, the new Lady America Singer!”

The crowd clapped and cheered. Some threw flowers.

I took in the sound for a moment, smiling and waving, and then went back to surveying the crowd, but this time for a different purpose.

I wanted to see his face one more time if I could. I didn't know if he would come. He told me

I looked beautiful yesterday but was even more distant and guarded than he had been in the tree house. It was over, and I knew that. But you don't love someone for almost two years and then turn it off overnight.

It took a few passes of the crowd before I found him. I immediately wished I hadn't. Aspen was standing there with Brenna Butler in front of him, casually holding her around the waist and smiling.

Maybe some people could turn it off overnight.

Brenna was a Six and about my age. Pretty enough, I supposed, though she didn't look a bit like me. I guessed she'd get the wedding and life he'd been saving for with me. And apparently the draft didn't bother him so much anymore. She smiled at him and walked away to her family.

Had he liked her all along? Was she the girl he saw every day and was I the girl who fed him and showered him with kisses once a week? It occurred to me that maybe all the time he omitted in our stolen conversations wasn't simply long, boring hours of inventory.

I was too angry to cry.

Besides, I had admirers here who wanted my attention. So, without Aspen even knowing that I'd seen him, I went back to those adoring faces. I put my smile back on, bigger than ever, and started waving. Aspen would not have the satisfaction of breaking my heart anymore. He'd put me here, and I would just have to take advantage of it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in sending off America Singer, our favorite Daughter of Illéa!" the mayor called. Behind me, a small band played the national anthem.

More cheers, more flowers. Suddenly the mayor was at my ear.

"Would you like to say something, dear?"

I didn't know how to say no without being rude. "Thank you, but I'm so overwhelmed, I don't think I could."

He cupped my hands in his. "Of course, dear girl. Don't you worry, I'll take care of everything. They'll train you for this kind of thing at the palace. You'll need it."

The mayor then told the gathered crowd of my attributes, slyly mentioning that I was very intelligent and attractive for a Five. He didn't seem too bad a guy, but sometimes even the nicer members of the upper castes were condescending.

I caught Aspen's face once more as my eyes swept the crowd. He looked pained. It was the

polar opposite of the face he'd worn with Brenna a few minutes ago. Another game? I broke my gaze.

The mayor finished speaking, and I smiled and everyone cheered, as if he'd just given the most inspiring speech known to man.

And suddenly it was time to say good-bye. Mitsy, my aide, told me to say my farewells quietly and briefly, and then she'd escort me back to the car that would take me to the airport.

Kota hugged me, telling me he was proud of me. Then, not so subtly, he told me to mention his art to Prince Maxon. I wiggled out of that embrace as gracefully as I could.

Kenna was crying.

"I barely see you as it is. What will I do when you're gone?" she cried.

"Don't worry. I'll be home soon enough."

"Yeah, right! You're the most beautiful girl in Illéa. He'll love you!"

Why did everyone think it all came down to beauty? Maybe it did. Maybe Prince Maxon didn't need a wife to speak to, just someone to look pretty. I actually shivered, considering that as my future. But there were many girls much more attractive than me going.

Kenna was hard to hug over her pregnant belly, but we managed. James, who I really didn't know that well, hugged me, too. Then it was Gerad.

"Be a good boy, okay? Try the piano. I'll bet you're amazing. I expect to hear it all when I come home."

Gerad just nodded, abruptly sad. He threw his tiny arms around me.

"I love you, America."

"I love you, too. Don't be sad. I'll be home soon."

He nodded again, but crossed his arms to pout. I'd had no idea he'd take my leaving this way. It was the exact opposite of May. She was bouncing on her toes, absolutely giddy.

"Oh, America, you're going to be the princess! I know it!"

"Oh, hush! I'd rather be an Eight and stay with you any day. Just be good for me, and work hard."

She nodded and bounced some more, and then it was time for Dad, who was close to tears.

“Daddy! Don’t cry.” I fell into his arms.

“Listen to me, kitten. Win or lose, you’ll always be a princess to me.”

“Oh, Daddy.” I finally started to cry. That was all it took to unleash the fear, the sadness, the worry, the nerves—the one sentence that meant none of it mattered.

If I came back used and unwanted, he’d still be proud of me.

It was too much to bear, to be loved that much. I’d be surrounded by scores of guards at the palace, but I couldn’t imagine a place safer than my father’s arms. I pulled away and turned to hug Mom.

“Do whatever they tell you. Try to stop sulking and be happy. Behave. Smile. Keep us posted. Oh! I just knew you’d turn out to be special.”

It was meant to be sweet, but it wasn’t what I needed to hear. I wished she could have said that I was already something special to her, like I was to my father. But I guessed she would never stop wanting more for me, more from me. Maybe that’s what mothers did.

“Lady America, are you ready?” Mitsy asked. My face was away from the crowd, and I quickly wiped away my tears.

“Yes. All ready.”

My bag was waiting in the shiny white car. This was it. I started to walk to the edge of the stage to the stairs.

“Mer!”

I turned. I’d know that voice anywhere.

“America!”

I searched and found Aspen’s flailing arms. He was pushing the crowd aside, people protesting at his not-so-gentle shoves.

Our eyes met.

He stopped and stared. I couldn’t read his face. Worry? Regret? Whatever it was, it was too late. I shook my head. I was done with Aspen’s games.

“This way, Lady America,” Mitsy instructed from the bottom of the stairs. I gave myself a quick second to absorb my new name.

“Good-bye, sweetheart,” my mother called.

And I was led away.



## CHAPTER 8

I WAS THE FIRST ONE to the airport, and I was beyond terrified. The giddy excitement of the crowd had faded, and now I was faced with the horrific experience of flying. I would be traveling with three other Selected girls, and I tried to get control of my nerves. I really didn't want to have a panic attack in front of them.

I'd already memorized the names, faces, and castes of all the Selected. It started as a therapeutic exercise, something to calm me down. I did the same thing with memorizing scales and bits of trivia. Originally, I had been looking for friendly faces, girls I might want to spend time with while I was there. I'd never really had a friend. I'd spent most of my childhood playing with Kenna and Kota. Mom did all my schooling, and she was the only person I worked with. When the older siblings moved on, I dedicated myself to May and Gerad. And Aspen...

But Aspen and I were never just friends. From the moment I became truly aware of him, I was in love with him.

Now he was holding some other girl's hand.

Thank goodness I was alone. I couldn't have handled the tears in front of the other girls. It ached. I ached. And there was nothing I could do.

How in the hell did I get here? A month ago, I was sure of everything in my life, and now any little piece of familiarity was gone. New home, new caste, new life. All because of a stupid piece of paper and a picture. I wanted to sit and cry, to mourn for everything I'd lost.

I wondered if any of the others girls were sad today. I imagined that everyone except for me was celebrating. And I at least needed to look like I was too, because everyone would be watching.

I braced myself for all that was coming, and I made myself be brave. As for everything I was leaving behind, I decided I'd do just that: leave him behind. The palace would be my sanctuary. I'd never think or say his name again. He wasn't allowed to come with me there—my own rule for this little adventure.

No more.

Good-bye, Aspen.

About half an hour later, two girls in white shirts and black pants just like mine walked through the doors with their own aides hauling their bags. They were both smiling, confirming

my thought that I was the only one of the Selected who might be depressed today.

It was time to follow through on my promise. I put on a smile and stood to shake their hands.

“Hi,” I said brightly. “I’m America.”

“I know!” said the girl on the right. She was a blonde with brown eyes. I recognized her immediately as Marlee Tames of Kent. A Four. She didn’t bother with my extended hand; she moved in for an immediate hug.

“Oh!” I exhaled. I hadn’t expected that. Though Marlee was one of the girls whose faces seemed genuine and friendly, Mom had been telling me for the last week to look at these girls as enemies, and her offensive thinking had leaked into my own. So here I was expecting at the very best a cordial welcome from the girls who were prepared to fight me to the death for someone I didn’t want. Instead I was embraced.

“I’m Marlee and this is Ashley.” Yes, Ashley Brouillette of Allens, Three. She had blond hair, too, but much lighter than Marlee’s. And her eyes were very blue, which looked delicate in her peaceful face. She seemed fragile next to Marlee.

They were both from the North; I guessed that was why they came together. Ashley gave a neat little wave and smiled, but that was it. I wasn’t sure if she was shy or if she was already trying to figure us out. Maybe it was that she was a Three by birth and knew to behave better.

“I love your hair!” Marlee gushed. “I wish I’d been born with red hair. It makes you look so alive. I hear that people with red hair have bad tempers. Is that true?”

Despite my rotten day, Marlee’s manner was so vivacious that my smile grew wider. “I don’t think so. I mean, I can have a bad temper at times, but my sister is a redhead, and she’s as sweet as can be.”

With that we settled into an easy conversation about what got us mad and what always fixed our moods. Marlee liked movies, and so did I, though I rarely got to see them. We talked about actors who were unbearably attractive, which seemed strange since we were off to be Maxon’s pack of girlfriends. Ashley giggled every once in a while but never more than that. If she was asked a direct question, she’d give a brief answer and go back to her guarded smile.

Marlee and I got along easily, and it gave me hope that maybe I’d come out of this with a friend to show for it. Though we talked for probably half an hour, the time flew by. We wouldn’t have stopped talking except for the distinct sound of high heels clicking across the floor. Our heads all turned in unison, and I heard Marlee’s mouth open with a pop.

There, walking toward us, was a brunette with sunglasses on. She had a daisy in her hair, but it had been dyed red to match her lipstick. Her hips swayed as she walked, and each fall of her

three-inch heels accentuated her confident stride. Unlike Marlee and Ashley, she didn't smile.

But it wasn't because she was unhappy. No, she was focused. Her entrance was meant to inspire intimidation. And it worked on ladylike Ashley, who I heard breathe an "Oh, no" as the new girl walked closer.

This person, who I recognized as Celeste Newsome of Clermont, Two, didn't bother me. She assumed we were fighting for the same thing. But you can't be pushed if it's something you don't want.

Celeste finally reached us, and Marlee squeaked out a hello, trying to be friendly even in the midst of intimidation. Celeste merely looked her over and sighed.

"When do we leave?" she asked.

"We don't know," I answered without a hint of fear. "You've been holding up the show."

She didn't like that at all, and I got a once-over from her. She wasn't impressed.

"Sorry, quite a few people wanted to see me off. I couldn't help it." She smiled wide, as if it was obvious she was meant to be worshipped.

And I was about to surround myself with girls like this. Great.

As if on cue, a man appeared through the door to our left.

"I hear all four of our Selected girls are here?"

"We sure are," Celeste replied sweetly. The man sort of melted a little, you could see it in his eyes. Ah. So this was her game.

The captain paused a moment and then snapped to. "Well. Ladies, if you'll just follow me, we'll get you on the plane and off to your new home."

The flight, which was really only terrifying during the takeoff and landing, lasted a few short hours. We were offered movies and food, but all I wanted to do was look out the window. I watched the country from above, amazed at just how big it all was.

Celeste chose to sleep through the flight, which was a small mercy. Ashley had a foldout desk set up and was already writing letters about her adventure. That was smart of her to pack paper. I bet May would love to hear about this part of the journey, even though it didn't include the prince.

"She's so elegant," Marlee whispered to me, tilting her head toward Ashley. We were sitting across from each other in plush seats in the very front of the small plane. "From the moment

we met, she's been nothing but proper. She's going to be tough competition," she said with a sigh.

"You can't think about it that way," I answered. "Yes, you're trying to make it to the end, but not by beating someone else. You've just got to be you. Who knows? Maybe Maxon would prefer someone more relaxed."

Marlee thought that over. "I guess that's a good point. It's hard to not like her. She's awfully kind. And so beautiful." I nodded in agreement. Marlee's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Celeste, on the other hand..."

I widened my eyes and shook my head. "I know. It's only been an hour, and I'm already looking forward to her going home."

Marlee covered her mouth to hide a laugh. "I don't want to talk badly about anyone, but she's so aggressive. And Maxon's not even around yet. I'm a little nervous about her."

"Don't be," I assured her. "Girls like that? They'll take themselves out of the competition."

Marlee sighed. "I hope so. Sometimes I wish..."

"What?"

"Well, sometimes I wish that the Twos had an idea about what it felt like to be treated the way they treat us."

I nodded. I'd never really thought of myself being on the same level as a Four, but I guess we were in a similar place. If you weren't a Two or Three, it was just varying shades of bad.

"Thanks for talking to me," she said. "I was worried that everyone would just be out for themselves, but you and Ashley have been really nice. Maybe this will be fun." Her voice lifted with hope.

I wasn't so sure, but I smiled back. I had no reason to shun Marlee or be rude to Ashley. The other girls might not be so laid-back.

When we landed, the air was silent as we walked the distance from the plane to the terminal with guards at our side. But once the doors were opened, we were met with ear-shattering screams.

The terminal was full of people jumping and cheering. A path had been cleared for us with a golden carpet lined with coordinating rope barriers. At regular intervals along this channel were guards, looking around anxiously and poised to strike at the first hint of danger. Surely there were more important things they should be doing?

Luckily, Celeste was in front, and she started waving. I knew immediately that that was the right response, not the cowering I had been considering. And since the cameras were there to catch our every move, I was doubly glad I hadn't been leading the pack.

The crowd was wild with joy. These would be the people we lived the closest to, and they were all looking forward to catching the first glimpses of the girls coming to town. One of us would be their queen someday.

I turned my head a dozen times in a matter of seconds as people called my name from all over the packed terminal. There were signs with my name on them, too. I was amazed. Already there were people here—people not in my caste or from my province—who hoped it would be me. I felt a little roll of guilt in my stomach that I would let them all down.

I dropped my head for a moment and saw a little girl pressed up against the railing. She couldn't have been more than twelve years old. In her hands was a sign that said RED-HEADS RULE! with a little crown painted in the corner and tiny stars everywhere. I knew I was the only redhead in the competition, and I noticed that her hair and mine were very nearly the same shade.

The girl wanted an autograph. Beside her, someone wanted a photograph, and beside him someone wanted to shake my hand. So I went practically down the entire line, turning around once or twice to talk to people on the other side of the carpet, too.

I was the last one to leave, making the other girls wait at least twenty minutes for me. Quite honestly, I probably wouldn't have left as soon as I did except the next plane of Selected girls was coming in, and it seemed rude to overlap their time.

Getting into the car, I saw Celeste roll her eyes, but I didn't care. I was still sort of in awe of how I'd adjusted so quickly to something that had frightened me only moments before. I had made it through my good-byes, meeting the first girls, my flight, and interacting with our mob of fans. All without doing anything embarrassing.

I thought about the cameras following me in the terminal and pictured my family watching my entrance on TV. I hoped they'd be proud.

## CHAPTER 9

EVEN AFTER THE SUBSTANTIAL GREETING party at the airport, the roads leading up to the palace were lined with masses of people calling out their well-wishes. The sad thing was that we weren't allowed to roll down the windows to acknowledge them. The guard in the front said to think of ourselves as extensions of the royal family. Many adored us, but there were people out there who wouldn't be above hurting us to hurt the prince. Or the monarchy itself.

I was stuck next to Celeste in the car—a special one that had two rows of seats facing each other in the back and darkened windows—with Ashley and Marlee sitting together in front of us. Marlee beamed as she stared out the windows, and it was obvious why. Her name was on several of the signs. It would be impossible to count how many admirers she had.

Ashley's name was sprinkled in there, too, almost as much as Celeste's, and far more than mine. Ashley, ever the lady, took not being a runaway favorite in stride. Celeste, I could see, was irritated.

“What do you think she did?” Celeste whispered in my ear, as Marlee and Ashley spoke to each other of home.

“What do you mean?” I whispered back.

“To be so popular. You think she bribed someone?” Her cold eyes focused in on Marlee as if she was weighing her worth in her head.

“She's a Four,” I said doubtfully. “She wouldn't have the means to bribe someone.”

Celeste sucked her teeth. “Please. A girl has more than one way she can pay for what she wants,” she said, and pulled away to look out the window.

It took me a moment to understand what she was suggesting, and it didn't sit well with me. Not because it was obvious that someone as innocent as Marlee would never think about sleeping with someone to get ahead—or even consider breaking a law—but because it was becoming clear that life at the palace might be more vicious than I had imagined.

I didn't have a very good view coming up to the palace, but I noticed the walls. They were a pale yellow stucco and very, very high. Guards were placed on top at either side of the wide gate that swung open as we approached. Inside we were greeted with a long gravel drive that circled a fountain and led to the front doors, where officials waited to welcome us.

With barely more than a hello, two women took me by the arms and ushered me inside.

“So sorry to rush, miss, but your group is running late,” one said.

“Oh, I’m afraid that’s my fault. I got a little too chatty at the airport.”

“Talking to the crowds?” the other asked in surprise.

They exchanged a look I didn’t understand before they started calling out locations as we passed.

The dining room was to the right, they told me, and the Great Room was to the left. I caught a glimpse of sprawling gardens out the glass doors and wished I could stop. Before I could even process where we were going, they pulled me into a huge room full of bustling people.

A swarm parted, and I saw rows of mirrors with people working on girls’ hair and painting their nails. Clothes hung on racks, and people were shouting things like “I found the dye!” and “That makes her look pudgy.”

“Here they are!” I saw a woman coming up to us, clearly the person in charge. “I’m Silvia. We spoke on the phone,” she said as a means of introduction, then immediately went to work. “First things first. We need ‘before’ pictures. Come over here,” she commanded, pointing us to a chair in the corner in front of a backdrop. “Don’t mind the cameras, ladies. We’ll be doing a special on your makeovers, since every girl in Illéa’s going to want to look like you by the time we’re done today.”

Sure enough, teams of people with cameras were wandering around the room, zooming in on girls’ shoes, and interviewing them. Once the pictures were done, Silvia began shouting orders. “Take Lady Celeste to station four, Lady Ashley to five ... and it looks like they just finished up at ten. Take Lady Marlee there, and Lady America to six.”

“So here’s the thing,” a short, dark-haired man said, pulling me over to a seat with a six on the back. “We need to talk about your image.” He was all business.

“My image?” Wasn’t I just me? Wasn’t that what got me here?

“How do we want to make you look? With that red hair, we can make you quite the temptress, but if you want to play that kind of thing down, we can work that out, too,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I’m not changing everything about me to cater to some guy I don’t even know.” Or like, I added in my head.

“Oh, my. Do we have an individual here?” he sang, as if I were a child.

“Aren’t we all?”

The man smiled at me. “Fine, then. We won’t change your image, we’ll just enhance it. I need to polish you up a bit, but your aversion to all things fake might just be your greatest asset here. Hold on to that, honey.” He patted me on the back and walked away, sending a group of women swarming my way.

I didn’t realize that when he said “polish,” he meant it literally. I had women scrub my body because I apparently couldn’t be trusted to do a good enough job on my own. Then every exposed bit of skin was covered with lotions and oils that left me smelling like vanilla, which according to the girl who applied them was one of Maxon’s favorite smells.

After they were done making me smooth and supple, attention was turned to my nails. They were trimmed and buffed and the tough little pieces of skin around them were miraculously smoothed away. I told them I’d prefer not to have my nails painted, but they looked so disappointed that I told them they could do my toes. The one girl picked a nice neutral shade, so it wasn’t too bad.

The team of people who worked on my nails left me for another girl, and I sat quietly in my chair, waiting for the next round of beautification. A camera crew came past, zooming in on my hands.

“Don’t move,” a woman ordered. She squinted at my hand. “Do you even have anything on your nails?”

“No.”

She sighed, got her shot, and moved on.

I heaved a heavy sigh myself. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a jerking motion just to my right. I looked and saw a girl staring into nowhere while her leg bounced up and down under a large cape they’d draped over her.

“You okay?” I asked.

My voice shocked her out of her trance. She sighed. “They want to dye my hair blond. They said it would look better with my skin tone. I’m just nervous, I guess.”

She gave me a tight smile, and I returned it. “You’re Sosie, right?”

“Yeah.” She smiled in earnest then. “And you’re America?” I nodded. “I heard you came in with that Celeste girl. She’s terrible!”

I rolled my eyes. Since we’d arrived, every few minutes the entire room could hear Celeste



yelling at some poor maid to bring her something or to get out of her way.

“You have no idea,” I muttered, and we both giggled. “Listen, I think your hair’s very pretty.” It was, too. Not too dark, not too light, and very full.

“Thanks.”

“If you don’t want to change it, you shouldn’t have to.”

Sosie smiled, but I could tell she wasn’t completely sure if I was trying to be friendly or hold her back. Before she could say anything, teams of people came to work on us, directing one another so loudly there was no way for us to finish talking.

My hair was washed, conditioned, hydrated, and smoothed. It was long and all one length when I came in—my mom usually cut it, and that was the best she could do—but by the time they were done, it was several inches shorter and had layers. I liked those; they made my hair catch the light in interesting ways. Some girls got things called highlights, and others, like Sosie, had the color changed completely. But my attendants and I all agreed that mine should go untouched in that department.

A very pretty-looking girl did my makeup. I instructed her to go light, and it was nice. Lots of the other girls looked a little older or younger or just nicer after the makeup. I still looked like me when I was done. Of course, so did Celeste, since she insisted upon piling it on.

I’d gone through most of this process in a robe, and once they were done fixing me up, I was led over to the racks of clothes. My name was hanging above a bar holding a week’s worth of dresses. I guessed princesses-in-training didn’t wear pants.

The one I ended up in was a cream color. It fell off my shoulders, fit snugly at my waist, and hit just at my knees. The girl helping me into it called it a day dress. She told me that my evening dresses were already in my room, and the rest of these would go up there as well. Then she placed a silver pin near the top of my dress. My name glittered across it. Finally she put me into shoes she called kitten heels and sent me back to the corner so I could take my “after” shot. From there I was ordered to one of four little stations lined up against the wall. Each had a chair with a backdrop and a camera sitting in front of it.

I sat down as instructed and waited. A woman came up with a clipboard of information in her hand and asked me to be patient while she found my papers.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“The makeover special. We’ll be airing one about your arrivals tonight, the makeovers are on Wednesday, and then Friday you’ll do your first Report. People have seen your pictures and know a little bit about what was on your applications,” she said as she located her papers and

placed them on the top of her clipboard. Then she laced her fingers together and continued. “But we want to make them really pull for you. And that won’t happen unless they can get to know you. So we’ll just do a little interview here, and you do your best on the Reports, and then don’t be shy when you see us around the palace. We aren’t here every day, but we’ll be around.”

“Okay,” I said meekly. I really didn’t want to talk to camera crews. It all felt so intrusive.

“So, America Singer, yes?” she asked just seconds after a red light lit up on the top of the camera.

“Yes.” I tried to push the nerves out of my voice.

“I have to be honest, you don’t look like you changed too much to me. Can you tell us what happened in your makeover today?”

I thought. “They put layers in my hair. I like that.” I ran my fingers through the red strands, feeling how soft my hair was after professional care. “And they covered me in vanilla lotion. I kind of smell like dessert,” I said, sniffing my arm.

She laughed. “It is lovely. And that dress really suits you.”

“Thanks,” I said, looking down at my new clothes. “I don’t typically wear a lot of dresses, so this is going to take a little getting used to.”

“That’s right,” my interviewer said. “You’re one of only three Fives in the Selection. How has this experience been so far?”

I searched my head for something that would describe how everything had felt today. From my disappointment in the square to the sensation of flying to the comfort of Marlee.

“Surprising,” I said.

“I imagine there will be more surprising days to come,” she commented.

“I hope they’re at least a little calmer than today,” I said with a sigh.

“How do you feel about your competition so far?”

I swallowed. “The girls are all really nice.” With one glaring exception.

“Mm-hmm,” she said, seeing through my answer. “So how do you feel about the way your makeover turned out? Worried about anyone else’s look?”

I considered that. To say no sounded snotty, to say yes sounded needy. “I think the staff has

done a great job bringing out each girl's individual beauty."

She smiled and said, "All right, I think that'll be enough."

"That's all?"

"We have to fit thirty-five of you into an hour and a half, so that will be plenty."

"Okay." That wasn't so bad.

"Thank you for your time. You can head over to that couch over there, and you'll be taken care of."

I stood and went to sit on the large circular couch in the corner. Two girls I had yet to meet were sitting there, talking quietly. I looked around the room and saw someone announcing that the last batch was heading in. A new flurry began around the stations. I was focused on it and almost didn't notice Marlee sit down beside me.

"Marlee! Look at your hair!"

"I know. They put extensions in it. Do you think Maxon will like it?" She looked genuinely worried.

"Of course! What guy doesn't like a gorgeous blonde?" I said with a playful smile.

"America, you're so nice. All those people at the airport loved you."

"Oh, I was just being friendly. You met people, too," I countered.

"Yeah, but not half as many as you."

I lowered my head, a little embarrassed for being complimented over something that seemed so obvious. When I looked up, I turned to the other two girls sitting with us. Emmica Brass and Samantha Lowell and I hadn't been introduced, but I knew who they were. I did a double take. They were looking at me funny. Before I had time to guess why, Silvia, the woman from earlier, approached us.

"All right, girls, are we all ready?" She checked her watch and looked at us expectantly. "I'm going to give you a quick tour and take you to your assigned rooms."

Marlee clapped her hands, and the four of us rose to leave. Silvia told us the space we were currently using to get pampered was the Women's Room. Usually the queen, her maids, and the handful of other female family members entertained themselves there.

"Get used to that room—you'll be spending a lot of time there. Now, on your way in you

passed the Great Room, which is generally used for parties and banquets. If there were too many more of you ladies here, that's where you'd be taking your meals. But the regular dining room is large enough to meet your needs. Let's take a quick step in there."

We were shown where the royal family ate, at a table alone. We would be seated at long tables to either side, so the setup looked like a very stiff U. Our places were currently assigned, set with elegant place markers. I would be sitting next to Ashley and Tiny Lee, who I'd seen go through the Women's Room earlier, and across from Kriss Ambers.

We left the dining hall and continued on down a set of stairs and saw the room used to broadcast the Illéa Capital Report. Back upstairs our guide pointed down a hall where the king and Maxon spent most of their time working. That area was off-limits to us.

"Another thing that is off-limits: the third floor. The royal family has their private rooms up there, and any sort of intrusion will not be tolerated. Your rooms are all located on the second floor. You will inhabit a large portion of the guest rooms. Not to worry, though; we still have room for any visitors coming through.

"These doors here go out to the back garden. Hello, Hector, Markson." The two guards at the doors gave her a quick nod. It took me a moment to recognize that the large archway to our right was the side door to the Great Room, meaning the Women's Room was just around the corner. I was proud of myself for figuring that out. The palace was kind of like an opulent maze.

"You are not to go outside under any circumstances," Silvia continued. "During the day, there will be times when you can go into the garden, but not without permission. This is merely a safety restriction. Try as we may, rebels have gotten within the grounds before."

A chill went down my body.

We rounded a corner and walked up the massive stairs to the second floor. The carpets felt so lush under my shoes, like I was sinking an inch every time I took a step. High windows let in light, and it smelled like flowers and sunshine. Large paintings hung on the walls, depicting the kings of the past and a few renderings of old American and Canadian leaders. At least, that's what I guessed they were. They didn't wear any crowns.

"Your things are already in your rooms. If the decor is unsuitable, just tell your maids. You each have three, and they are already in your rooms, too. They will help with any unpacking you might have and will help you get dressed for dinner.

"Before dinner tonight, you will meet in the Women's Room for a special screening of the Illéa Capital Report. Next week, you'll all be on the show yourselves! Tonight you'll get to see some of the footage they've taken of you leaving your homes and arriving here. It promises to be very special. You should know that Prince Maxon hasn't seen anything yet

today. He'll see what all of Illéa will see tonight, and then you will officially meet him tomorrow.

“You girls will all be having dinner as a group, so you will be able to meet one another, and then, tomorrow, the games begin!”

I gulped. Too many rules, too much structure, too many people. I just wanted to be alone with a violin.

We moved across the second floor, dropping off Selected girls at their rooms. Mine was tucked around a corner in a little hallway with Bariel, Tiny, and Jenna. I was glad it wasn't quite in the middle of things, like Marlee's room was. Maybe I'd have a little privacy like this.

Once Silvia left, I opened my door to the excited gasps of three women. One was sewing in a corner, and the others were cleaning an already perfect room. They scurried over and introduced themselves as Lucy, Anne, and Mary, but I forgot which was which almost immediately. It took quite a bit of convincing to get them to leave. I didn't want to be rude since they were so eager to serve, but I needed time alone.

“I just need a little nap. I'm sure you've had a long day, too, getting ready and all. The best thing you could do is let me rest, get some rest yourselves, and please come wake me up when it's time to go downstairs.”

There was a flurry of thanks and bows, which I tried to discourage, and then I was alone. It didn't help. I tried to stretch out on my bed, but every part of my body pulled tight, refusing to let me get comfortable in a place that was so obviously not meant for me.

There was a violin in the corner, as well as a guitar and a gorgeous piano, but I couldn't bring myself to bother with them. My backpack was securely fastened, waiting at the foot of my bed, but that felt like too much work, too. I knew they'd set special things for me in my closet and drawers and bathroom, but I didn't feel like exploring.

I just lay there, still. It felt like only a few moments before my maids quietly tapped on my door. I let them in and, as strange as it was, let them dress me. They were just so excited to be helpful, I couldn't ask them to leave again.

They pulled parts of my hair back with delicate pins and freshened my makeup. The dress—which, along with the rest of my wardrobe, had been created by their hands—was deep green and floor length. Without those tiny heels again I'd stumble all over it. Silvia knocked on my door promptly at six to take me and my three neighbors down the hall. We waited in the foyer by the stairway for everyone to come and then marched down to the Women's Room. Marlee spotted me, and we walked together.

The sound of thirty-five pairs of heels on the marble stairs was the music of some elegant

stampede. There were a few murmurs, but most girls were silent. I noticed as we passed the dining room that the doors were closed. Was the royal family in there now? Perhaps taking in one last meal as the three of them?

It seemed strange that we were their guests but hadn't met a single one of them yet.

The Women's Room had changed since we left. The mirrors and racks were all gone, and tables and chairs dotted the floor along with some very comfortable-looking couches. Marlee looked at me and inclined her head toward one of the couches, and we sat there together.

Once we were all settled the TV was turned on, and we watched the Report. There were the same announcements as ever—budget updates for projects, progress of the war, and another rebel attack in the East—and then the last half hour was Gavril making commentary over footage of our day.

“Here Miss Celeste Newsome says good-bye to her many admirers in Clermont. It took this lovely young lady more than an hour to break away from her fans.”

I saw Celeste smile smugly as she watched herself onscreen. She was sitting next to Bariel Pratt, who had hair straight as a bone and so pale blond it looked white as it fell to her waist. There was no mild way to put it: Her breasts were huge. They crept out of her strapless dress, tempting anyone to try and ignore them.

Bariel was beautiful, but in a typical way. It was similar to Celeste's style. I wasn't sure exactly how, but the image of them side by side prompted the thought, Keep your enemies closer. I think they'd singled each other out right away as the other's strongest competition.

“The others from the Mideast were just as popular. Ashley Brouillette's quiet, refined demeanor sets her apart immediately as a lady. As she carries herself through the crowd, she wears a humble, beautiful expression not too different from the face of the queen herself.”

“And Marlee Tames of Kent was all bubbles as she departed today, singing the national anthem with her send-off band.” Pictures of Marlee smiling and embracing people from her home province flashed across the screen. “She's an immediate favorite of several people we interviewed today.”

Marlee reached over and squeezed my hand. That settled it; I was pulling for Marlee.

“Also traveling with Miss Tames was America Singer, one of only three Fives who made it into the Selection.” They made me look better than I felt in the moment. All I remembered was searching the crowds, sad. But the footage they chose of me searching made me appear mature and caring. The image of me hugging my father was touching, beautiful.

Still, it was nothing compared to the images of me in the airport. “But we know castes mean

nothing in the Selection, and it seems Lady America is not to be overlooked. Upon landing in Angeles, Lady Singer was the crowd darling at the airport, stopping to take pictures, sign autographs, and simply speak to anyone there. Miss America Singer is not afraid to get her hands dirty, a quality that many believe our next princess needs.”

Nearly everyone turned to look at me. I could see it in their eyes, the same look I'd gotten from Emmica and Samantha. Suddenly those stares made sense. My intentions didn't matter. They didn't know I didn't want this. In their eyes, I was a threat. And I could see they wanted me gone.

## CHAPTER 10

I KEPT MY HEAD DOWN at dinner. In the Women's Room I could be brave because Marlee was beside me, and she just thought I was nice. But here, sandwiched between people whose hate I could feel radiating off in waves, I was a coward. I looked up from my plate once to see Kriss Ambers twirling her fork menacingly. And Ashley, who was so ladylike, had her lips pouted and didn't speak to me. I just wanted to escape to my room.

I didn't understand why it was all so important. So the people seemed to like me, so what? They were outranked in here; their little signs and cheers didn't matter.

After everything was said and done, I didn't know whether to feel honored or annoyed.

I focused my energies on the food. The last time I'd had steak was for Christmas a few years ago. I knew Mom did her best, but it was nothing like this. So juicy, so tender, so flavorful. I wanted to ask someone else if this wasn't the best steak they'd ever had. If Marlee had been nearby, I would have. I took a tentative peek around the room. Marlee was chattering quietly with the people around her.

How did she manage to do that? Hadn't that same clip declared her one of the immediate favorites? How did she get people to talk to her?

Dessert was an assortment of fruits in vanilla ice cream. It was like I'd never eaten before. If this was food, what had I been putting in my mouth up to this point? I thought of May and her equal love for all things sweet. She would have loved this. I bet she would have excelled here.

We weren't allowed to leave dinner until everyone had finished, and after that we were under strict orders to go straight to bed.

"You'll be meeting Prince Maxon in the morning, and you'll want to look your best," Silvia instructed. "He is someone in this room's future husband, after all."

A few girls sighed at the thought.

The click and clack of shoes up the stairs was quieter this time around. I couldn't wait to get out of mine. Out of the dress, too. I had one set of clothes from home in my backpack and was debating putting them on just to feel like myself for a moment.

We dispersed at the top of the stairs, each girl heading off to her own room. Marlee pulled me aside.

"Are you okay?" she asked.



“Yes. It’s just that some of the girls were looking at me funny during dinner.” I tried not to come across as whiny.

“They’re just a little nervous because everyone liked you so much,” she said, waving off their behavior.

“But the people liked you, too. I saw the signs. Why weren’t the girls being mean to you?”

“You haven’t spent a whole lot of time with groups of girls, have you?” She was smiling slyly, like I should know what was happening.

“No. Just my sisters mostly,” I confessed.

“Homeschooled?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I get tutored with a bunch of other Fours back home, all girls, and they each have their ways of getting under other people’s skin. See, it’s all about knowing the person, figuring out what will bug them the most. Lots of girls give me backhanded compliments, or little remarks, things like that. I know I come across as bubbly, but I’m shy underneath that, and they think they can wear me down with words.”

I scrunched my forehead. They did that on purpose?

“For you, someone kind of quiet and mysterious—”

“I’m not mysterious,” I interrupted.

“You are a little. And sometimes people don’t know whether to interpret silence as confidence or fear. They’re looking at you like you’re a bug so maybe you’ll feel like you are one.”

“Huh.” That kind of made sense. I wondered what I was doing, if I was picking away at others’ insecurities somehow. “What do you do? When you want to get the best of them, I mean?”

She smiled. “I ignore it. I know one girl at home who gets so irritated when she can’t bother you, she just ends up sulking. So don’t worry,” she said. “All you have to do is not let them know they’re getting to you.”

“They’re not.”

“I almost believe you ... but not quite.” She laughed a little, a warm sound that evaporated in the quiet hallway. “Can you believe we meet him in the morning?” she asked, moving on to more important things in her eyes.

“No, actually, I can’t.” Maxon seemed like a ghost haunting the palace—implied but never really there.

“Well, good luck tomorrow.” And I could tell she meant it.

“Better luck to you, Marlee. I’m sure Prince Maxon will be more than pleased to meet you.” I squeezed her hand one time.

She smiled in a way that was both excited and timid and walked off to her room.

When I got to mine, Bariel’s door was still open, and I heard her muttering something to a maid. She caught sight of me and slammed the door in my face.

Thanks for that.

My maids were there, of course, waiting to help me wash and undress. My nightgown, a flimsy little green thing, had been laid out for me on the bed. Kindly, none of them had touched my bag.

They were efficient but purposeful. They obviously had this end-of-the-day routine down, but they didn’t rush through it. I suppose the effect was meant to be soothing, but I was ready to have them gone. I couldn’t speed them up as they washed my hands and unlaced my dress and pinned my silver name tag to my silken nightgown. And as they did all these things that made me incredibly self-conscious, they asked questions. I tried to answer them without being rude.

Yes, I’d finally seen all the other girls. No, they weren’t very talkative. Yes, dinner was fantastic. No, I wouldn’t meet the prince until tomorrow. Yes, I was very tired.

“And it would really help me wind down if I could have some time alone,” I added to the end of that last answer, hoping they would take the hint.

They looked disappointed. I tried to recover.

“You’re all very helpful. I’m just used to spending time alone. And I’ve been swarmed with people today.”

“But Lady Singer, we’re supposed to help you. It’s our job,” the head girl said. I’d figured out that she was Anne. Anne seemed to be on top of things, Mary was easygoing, and Lucy I guessed was just shy.

“I really do appreciate you all, and I’ll definitely want your help getting started tomorrow. But tonight, I just need to unwind. If you want to be helpful, some time to myself would be good

for me. And if you're all rested, I'm sure it will make things better in the morning, right?"

They looked at one another. "Well, I suppose so," Anne acquiesced.

"One of us is supposed to stay here while you sleep. In case you need something." Lucy looked nervous, like she was afraid of whatever decision I would make. She seemed to have little tremors now and then, which I guessed was her shyness coming to the surface.

"If I need anything, I'll ring the bell. It'll be fine. Besides, I won't be able to rest knowing someone's watching me."

They looked at one another again, still a little skeptical. I knew one way to stop this, but I hated using it.

"You're supposed to obey my every command, right?"

They nodded hopefully.

"Then I command you all to go to bed. And come help me in the morning. Please."

Anne smiled. I could tell she was starting to get me.

"Yes, Lady Singer. We'll see you in the morning." They curtsied and quietly left the room. Anne gave me one last look. I supposed I wasn't quite what she had been expecting. She didn't seem too upset about it, though.

Once they were gone, I stepped out of my fancy slippers and stretched my toes on the floor. It felt good, natural, to be barefoot. I went to unpack my things, which was quick. I kept my change of clothes tucked in the bag and stored it in my massive closet. I surveyed the dresses as I did so. There were only a few. Enough to get me through a week or so. I assumed this was the same for everyone. Why make a dozen dresses for a girl who might leave the next day?

I took the few photos I had of my family and stuck them in the edge of my mirror. It stretched so high and wide, I could look at the pictures without having anything interrupt my view of myself. I had a small box of personal trinkets—earrings and ribbons and headbands I loved. They'd probably look incredibly plain here, but they were all so personal that I'd had to have them with me. The few books I'd brought found their way to the helpful shelf near the doors that opened to my balcony.

I peeked out the entry to the balcony and saw the garden. There was a maze of paths with fountains and benches. Flowers blossomed everywhere, and each hedge was perfectly trimmed. Past this obviously manicured piece of land was a short, open field and then a massive forest. It stretched back so far that I couldn't tell if it was entirely closed in by palace

walls. I wondered for a moment why it existed and then debated the last article from home that I held in my hand.

My tiny jar with its rattling penny. I rolled it in my hands a few times, listening to the penny skate around the edges of the glass. Why had I even brought this? To remind myself of something I couldn't have?

That tiny thought—that this love I had been building in a quiet, secret place for years was really beyond my reach now—made my eyes well up. On top of all the tension and excitement of the day, it was just too much. I didn't know where the jar's permanent place here would be, but for the moment I set it on the table by my bed.

I dimmed the lights, crawled up on top of the luxurious blankets, and stared at my jar. I let myself be sad. I let myself think of him.

How had I lost so much in such a short period of time? It would seem like leaving your family, living in some foreign place, and being separated from the person you love should be events that take years to roll into place, not just a day.

I wondered what exactly he had wanted to tell me before I left. The only thing I could deduce was that he didn't feel comfortable saying it out loud. Was it about her?

I stared at the jar.

Maybe he was trying to say he was sorry? I had given him a sound scolding last night. So perhaps that was it.

That he'd moved on? Well, I could see that pretty clearly myself, thank you very much.

That he hadn't moved on? That he still loved me?

I shut the thought down. I couldn't let that hope build in me. I needed to hate him right now. That anger would keep me going. Staying as far away from him as I could for as long as possible was half my reason for being here.

But the hope ached. And with the hope came homesickness, wishing May was sneaking into my bed like she sometimes did. And then fear that the other girls wanted me gone, that they might keep trying to make me feel small. And then nervousness at being presented to the nation on television for as long as I was here. And terror that people might try to kill me just to make a political statement. It all came at me too fast for my dizzy head to compute after such a long day.

My vision got blurry. I didn't even register that I'd started crying. I couldn't breathe. I was shaking. I jumped up and ran to the balcony. I was so panicked, it took me a moment to open

the latch, but I did. I thought the fresh air would be enough, but it wasn't. My breaths were still shallow and cold.

There was no freedom in this. The bars of my balcony caged me in. And I could still see the walls around the palace, high with guards atop the points. I needed to be outside the palace, and no one was going to let that happen. Desperation made me feel even weaker. I looked at the forest. I'd bet I couldn't see anything but greenery from there.

I turned and bolted. I was a little unsteady with the tears in my eyes, but I managed to get out the door. I ran down the one hallway I knew, not seeing the art or the drapery or golden trim. I barely noticed the guards. I didn't know my way around the palace, but I knew if I got down the stairs and turned the right way, I'd see the massive glass doors that led to the garden. I just needed the doors.

I ran down the grand stairwell, my bare feet making slapping sounds on the marble. There were a few more guards along the way, but no one stopped me. That is, until I actually found the place I was looking for.

Just like earlier, two men were stationed at either side of the doors, and when I tried to run for them, one of them stepped in my way, the spearlike staff in his hand barring me from the exit.

"Excuse me, miss, you need to go back to your room," he said with authority. Even though he wasn't speaking loudly, his voice seemed thunderous in the still of the elegant hallway.

"No ... no. I need ... outside." The words were tangled; I couldn't breathe right.

"Miss, you need to get back to your room now." The second guard was taking steps toward me.

"Please." I started gasping. I thought I might faint.

"I'm sorry... Lady America, is it?" He found my pin. "You need to go back to your room."

"I ... I can't breathe," I stammered, falling into the guard's arms as he moved close enough to push me away. His staff fell to the ground. I feebly clawed at him, feeling woozy with the effort.

"Let her go!" This was a new voice, young but full of authority. My head half turned, half fell in its direction. There was Prince Maxon. He looked a little odd, thanks to the angle my head was hanging at, but I recognized the hair and the stiff way he stood.

"She collapsed, Your Majesty. She wanted to go outside." The first guard looked nervous as he explained. He would be in terrible danger if he damaged me. I was the property of Illéa now.

“Open the doors.”

“But—Your Majesty—”

“Open the doors and let her go. Now!”

“Right away, Your Highness.” The first guard went to work, pulling out a key. My head stayed in its strange position as I heard the sound of keys clanking against one another and then one sliding into the lock. The prince looked at me warily as I tried to stand. And then the sweet smell of fresh air pulsed through me, giving me all the motivation I needed. I pulled myself out of the guard’s arms and ran like a drunk into the garden.

I was staggering quite a bit, but I didn’t care if I looked less than graceful. I just needed to be outside. I let myself feel the warm air on my skin, the grass beneath my toes. Somehow even things in nature seemed to be bred into something extravagant here. I meant to go all the way into the trees, but my legs only carried me so far. I collapsed in front of a small stone bench and sat there, my fine green nightgown in the dirt, and my head resting in my arms on the seat.

My body didn’t have the energy to sob, so the tears that came were quiet. Still, they took all my focus. How did I get here? How had I let this happen? What would become of me here? Would I ever get back any piece of the life I’d had before this? I just didn’t know. And there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about any of it.

I was so consumed with my thoughts that I didn’t realize I wasn’t alone until Prince Maxon spoke.

“Are you all right, my dear?” he asked me.

“I am not your dear.” I looked up to glare at him. There would be no mistaking the disgust in my tone or eyes.

“What have I done to offend you? Did I not just give you the very thing you asked for?” He was genuinely confused by my response. I suppose he expected us to adore him and thank our lucky stars for his existence.

I stared him down without fear, though the effect was probably weakened by my tearstained cheeks.

“Excuse me, dear, are you going to keep crying?” he asked, sounding very put out by the thought.

“Don’t call me that! I am no more dear to you than the thirty-four other strangers you have here in your cage.”

He walked closer, not seeming at all offended by my loose speech. He just looked ... thoughtful. It was an interesting expression on his face.

His walk was graceful for a boy, and he looked incredibly comfortable as he paced around me. My bravery melted a little in the face of how awkward this was. He was fully dressed in his sharp suit, and I was cowering and half-naked. As if his rank didn't threaten me enough, his demeanor did. He must have had plenty of experience dealing with unhappy people; he was exceptionally calm as he answered.

“That is an unfair statement. You are all dear to me. It is simply a matter of discovering who shall be the dearest.”

“Did you really just use the word ‘shall’?”

He chuckled. “I’m afraid I did. Forgive me, it’s a product of my education.”

“Education,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “Ridiculous.”

“I’m sorry?” he asked.

“It’s ridiculous!” I yelled, regaining some of my courage.

“What is?”

“This contest! The whole thing! Haven’t you ever loved anyone at all? Is this how you want to pick a wife? Are you really so shallow?” I shifted on the ground a little. To make things easier for me, he sat on the bench so I wouldn’t have to twist. I was too upset to be thankful.

“I can see how I would appear that way, how this whole thing could seem like it’s nothing more than cheap entertainment. But in my world, I am very guarded. I don’t meet very many women. The ones I do are daughters of diplomats, and we usually have very little to discuss. And that’s when we manage to speak the same language.”

Maxon seemed to think that was a joke, and he laughed lightly. I wasn’t amused. He cleared his throat.

“Circumstances being what they are, I haven’t had the opportunity to fall in love. Have you?”

“Yes,” I said matter-of-factly. As soon as the word came out, I wished I could steal it back. That was a private thing, none of his business.

“Then you have been quite lucky.” He sounded jealous.

Imagine that. The one thing I could hold over the head of the Prince of Illéa, the very thing I was here to forget.

“My mother and father were married this way and are quite happy. I hope to find happiness, too. To find a woman that all of Illéa can love, someone to be my companion and to help entertain the leaders of other nations. Someone who will befriend my friends and be my confidante. I’m ready to find my wife.”

Something in his voice struck me. There wasn’t a trace of sarcasm. This thing that seemed like little more than a game show to me was his only chance for happiness. He couldn’t try with a second round of girls. Well, maybe he could, but how embarrassing. He was so desperate, so hopeful. I felt my distaste for him lessen. Marginally.

“Do you really feel like this is a cage?” His eyes were full of compassion.

“Yes, I do.” My voice came out quiet. I quickly added, “Your Majesty.”

“I’ve felt that way more than once myself. But you must admit, it is a very beautiful cage.”

“For you. Fill your beautiful cage with thirty-four other men all fighting over the same thing. See how nice it is then.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Have there really been arguments over me? Don’t you all realize I’m the one doing the choosing?”

“Actually, that was unfair. They’re fighting over two things. Some fight for you, others fight for the crown. And they all think they’ve already figured out what to say and do so your choice will be obvious.”

“Ah, yes. The man or the crown. I’m afraid some cannot tell the difference.” He shook his head.

“Good luck there,” I said dryly.

It was quiet for a moment in the wake of my sarcasm. I looked up at him out of the corner of my eye, waiting for him to speak. He gazed at an unfixed point in the grass, concern marking his face. It seemed this thought had been plaguing him. He took a breath and turned back to me.

“Which do you fight for?”

“Actually, I’m here by mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“Yes. Sort of. Well, it’s a long story. And now... I’m here. And I’m not fighting. My plan is



to enjoy the food until you kick me out.”

He laughed out loud at that, actually doubling over and slapping his knee. It was a bizarre mix of rigidity and calm.

“What are you?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“A Two? Three?”

Wasn’t he paying attention at all? “Five.”

“Ah, yes, then food would probably be good motivation to stay.” He laughed again. “I’m sorry, I can’t read your pin in the dark.”

“I’m America.”

“Well, that’s perfect.” Maxon looked off into the night and smiled at nothing in particular. Something in all this was amusing to him. “America, my dear, I do hope you find something in this cage worth fighting for. After all this, I can only imagine what it would be like to see you actually try.”

He came down from the bench to crouch beside me. He was too close. I couldn’t think right. Maybe I was a little star-struck or still feeling shaky from my crying episode. Either way I was too shocked to protest when he took my hand.

“If it would make you happy, I could let the staff know you prefer the garden. Then you can come out here at night without being manhandled by the guard. I would prefer if you had one nearby, though.”

I wanted that. Freedom of any kind sounded heavenly, but he needed to be absolutely sure of my feelings.

“I don’t... I don’t think I want anything from you.” I pulled my fingers from his loose grip.

He was a little taken aback, hurt. “As you wish.” I felt more regret. Just because I didn’t like the guy didn’t mean I wanted to hurt him. “Will you be heading inside soon?”

“Yes,” I breathed, looking at the ground.

“Then I’ll leave you with your thoughts. There will be a guard near the door waiting for you.”

“Thank you, um, Your Majesty.” I shook my head. How many times had I addressed him wrongly in this conversation?

“Dear America, will you do me a favor?” He took my hand again. He was persistent.

I squinted at him, not sure of what to say. “Maybe.”

His smile returned. “Don’t mention this to the others. Technically, I’m not supposed to meet you until tomorrow, and I don’t want anyone getting upset. Though I wouldn’t call you yelling at me anything close to a romantic tryst, would you?”

It was my turn to smile. “Not at all!” I took a deep breath. “I won’t tell.”

“Thank you.” He took the hand he was holding and lowered his lips to it. When he pulled away, he gently placed my hand in my lap. “Good night.”

I looked at the warm spot on my hand, stunned for a moment. Then I turned to watch Maxon as he walked away, giving me the privacy I’d wanted all day.