

CHAPTER 11

IN THE MORNING I WOKE not to the sound of the maids coming in—though they had—or my bath being drawn—though it was. I woke to the light coming through my window as Anne gently pulled back the rich, heavy curtains. She hummed a quiet song to herself, absolutely happy with her task.

I wasn't ready to move. It had taken me a long time to come down from getting so worked up, and even more time to relax after I'd realized exactly what that conversation in the garden would mean for me. If I got a chance, I would apologize to Maxon. It would be a miracle if he let me get that far.

“Miss? Are you awake?”

“Noooo,” I moaned into the pillow. I hadn't had nearly enough sleep, and the bed was far too comfortable. But Anne, Mary, and Lucy laughed at my groan, which was enough to make me smile and decide to start moving.

These girls would probably be the easiest for me to get along with in the palace. I wondered if they could become confidantes of some kind, or if training and protocol would render them completely unable to even share a cup of tea with me. Though I was a born Five, I was covered with Three-ness now. And if they were maids, that made them all Sixes. But that was fine with me. I did enjoy the company of Sixes.

I moved slowly into the monstrous bathroom, every step echoing against the vastness of tile and glass. In the long mirrors I saw Lucy eyeing the dirt stains on my nightgown. Then Anne's careful eyes caught them. Then Mary's. Thankfully, none of them asked any questions. Yesterday I thought they had been prying with all their inquiries, but I was wrong. They were obviously overly concerned with my comfort. Questions about what I was doing outside my room—let alone the palace—would only be awkward.

All they did was remove the gown with care and usher me toward the bath.

I wasn't used to being naked around other people—not even Mom or May—but there seemed to be no way around it. These three would be dressing me for as long as I was here, so I would have to bear it until I left. I wondered what would happen to them when I was gone. Would they get assigned to other girls who would need more attention as the competition drew on? Did they already have other jobs in the palace they were temporarily excused from? It seemed rude to ask what they used to do or imply that I was leaving soon, so I didn't.

After my bath, Anne dried my hair, pulling half up with ribbons I'd brought from home. They

were blue and just so happened to accent the flowers in one of the day dresses my maids had created for me, so that was what I wore. Mary did my makeup, which was just as light as the day before, and Lucy rubbed lotion into my arms and legs.

There was an array of jewelry to choose from, but I asked for my box instead. There was a tiny necklace with a songbird on it that my dad had given me, and it was silver so it matched my name pin. I did take a pair of earrings from the royal store, but they were probably the smallest ones in the collection.

Anne, Mary, and Lucy looked me over and smiled at the results. I took that as a sign I was decent enough to leave for breakfast. With bows and smiles, they wished me well as I went to leave. Lucy's hands were trembling again.

I went into the upstairs foyer where we had all met yesterday. I was the first one there, so I took to a small sofa to wait for the rest. Slowly, others started to trickle in. I quickly noticed a theme. Every one of the girls looked phenomenal. They had their hair pulled up in intricate braids or curls, away from their faces. The makeup was meticulously done, dresses pressed to perfection.

I had probably chosen my plainest dress for the first day, and everyone else's had something sparkly on it. I saw two girls walk into the foyer and realize they were wearing almost the exact same dress. They both turned back around to change. Everyone wanted to stand out, and they all did in their own ways. Even me.

Everyone here looked like a One. I looked like a Five in a nice dress.

I thought it had taken me a long time to get ready, but it took the other girls much, much longer. Even when Silvia came to escort us downstairs, we still had to wait for Celeste and Tiny, who, true to her name, had to have her dress taken in.

Once we were all assembled, everyone started to move toward the stairs. There was a gilded mirror on the wall, and we all turned to take one last peek as we descended. I caught a glimpse of myself next to Marlee and Tiny. I looked positively plain.

But at least I looked like me, and that was a minor consolation.

We went downstairs expecting to be taken into the dining room, where we had been told we would be eating. But instead we were taken into the Great Room, where individual tables and chairs had been set up in rows, all with plates, glasses, and silverware. There wasn't any food, though. Not even a hopeful smell. In the front corner, tucked away in a small nook, I noticed a small set of couches. A few cameramen, stationed around the room, filmed our arrival.

We filed in, sitting wherever we wanted as there were no place cards here. Marlee was in the row in front of me, and Ashley sat to my right. I didn't bother to take in anyone else. It seemed

like several people had made at least one ally, just as I had in Marlee. Ashley had chosen her seat beside me, so I assumed she wanted my company. Still, she didn't speak. Maybe she was upset over the news reports last night. Then again, she was quiet when we met. Maybe it was just her nature. I figured the worst she could do was not answer back, so I decided to at least acknowledge her.

"Ashley, you look lovely."

"Oh, thank you," she said quietly. We both checked to make sure the camera crews were far away. Not that this was private, but who wanted them around for everything? "Isn't it fun to wear all this jewelry? Where's yours?"

"Umm, it was too heavy for me. I decided to go light instead."

"It is heavy! I feel like I have twenty pounds on my head. Still, I couldn't pass it up. Who knows how long any of us will stay?"

That was funny. Ashley had seemed quietly confident from the very beginning. With the way she looked and carried herself, she was prime princess material. It seemed strange that she would doubt herself.

"But don't you think you'll win?" I asked.

"Of course," she whispered. "But it's rude to say so!" She winked at me, which made me giggle.

Yet another mistake on my part. That giggle caught the attention of Silvia, who was walking in the door.

"Tsk-tsk. A lady never raises her voice above a gentle whisper."

Every murmur hushed. I wondered if the cameras had caught my mistake, and my cheeks filled with warmth.

"Hello again, ladies. I hope you all had a restful first night in the palace, because now our work begins. Today I will begin to instruct you on conduct and protocol, a process that will continue for the duration of your stay. Please know that I will be reporting any missteps on your part to the royal family.

"I know it sounds harsh, but this isn't a game to be taken lightly. Someone in this room will be the next princess of Illéa. It is no small task. You must endeavor to elevate yourselves, no matter your previous station. You will become ladies from the ground up. And this very morning, you will receive your first lesson.

“Table manners are very important, and before you can eat in front of the royal family, you must be aware of certain etiquette. The faster we get through this little lesson, the sooner you get to have your breakfasts, so faces forward, please.”

She began explaining how we would be served from the right, which glass was for what beverage, and to never, ever reach for a pastry with our hands. Always use the tongs. Hands were to rest in our lap when not in use, napkin draped underneath. We weren't to speak unless spoken to. Of course, we could talk quietly to our neighbors, but always at a level befitting the palace. She eyed me seriously as she gave that last note.

Silvia went on and on in her elegant tone, taunting my stomach. Even if they were small, I was used to getting my three meals at home. I needed food. I was getting a bit grumpy when we heard a knock at the door. Two guards stepped away, and in came Prince Maxon.

“Good morning, ladies,” he called.

The lift in the room was tangible. Backs straightened, locks of hair were tossed over shoulders, and hems were rearranged. I looked not at Maxon, but Ashley, whose chest was moving fast. She stared in such a way that I felt embarrassed for noticing.

“Your Majesty,” Silvia said with a low curtsy.

“Hello, Silvia. If you don't mind, I would like to introduce myself to these young women.”

“Of course.” She bowed again.

Prince Maxon surveyed the room and found me. Our eyes met for a moment, and he smiled. I wasn't expecting that. I was thinking that he'd probably changed his opinion of how to act toward me in the night, and I'd be called out in front of everyone for my behavior. But maybe he wasn't mad at all. Maybe he found me entertaining. He had to get incredibly bored around here. Whatever the reason, that brief smile led me to believe that maybe this wasn't going to be such a terrible experience after all. I settled into the decision I couldn't make last night and hoped Prince Maxon would hear out my apology.

“Ladies, if you don't mind, one at a time I'll be calling you over to meet with me. I'm sure you're all eager to eat, as am I. So I won't take up too much of your time. Do forgive me if I'm slow with names; there are quite a few of you.”

There was a low rumble of giggles. Quickly, he went over to the girl in the front row on the far right and escorted her over to the couches. They spoke for a few minutes, then both rose. He bowed to her, she curtsied back. She went back to her table, spoke to the girl beside her, and it happened all over again. These conversations lasted only a few minutes and were spoken in hushed voices. He was trying to get a feel for each girl in less than five minutes.

“I wonder what he wants to know,” Marlee turned and asked.

“Maybe he wants to know which actors you think are the most handsome. Keep your mental list ready,” I whispered back. Marlee and Ashley both chuckled at that.

We weren't the only ones talking. Around the room voices lifted like gentle hums, as we tried to distract ourselves until it was our turn. Not to mention the cameramen were hopping around, asking girls about their first day in the palace, how they liked their maids, and things like that. When they stopped by Ashley and me, I let her do all the talking.

I kept looking over to the couches as each of the Selected were interviewed. Some were calm and ladylike, others fidgeted in excitement. Marlee blushed wildly as she walked over to Prince Maxon, and beamed when she walked back. Ashley straightened her dress several times, like a nervous little tic of her hands.

I was near sweating when she came back, meaning it was my turn to go. I took a deep breath and steadied myself. I was about to ask for a monumental favor.

He stood and went to read my pin as I approached. “America, is it?” he said, a smile playing on his lips.

“Yes, it is. And I know I've heard your name before, but could you remind me?” I wondered if opening with a joke was a bad idea, but Maxon laughed and motioned for me to sit.

He leaned in and whispered, “Did you sleep well, my dear?”

I didn't know what my face looked like in response to that name, but Maxon's eyes glittered with amusement.

“I am still not your dear,” I replied, but with a smile. “But yes. Once I calmed down, I slept very well. My maids had to pull me out of bed, I was so cozy.”

“I am glad you were comfortable, my... America,” he corrected himself.

“Thank you,” I said. I fidgeted with a piece of my dress for a moment, trying to think of how to say this right. “I'm very sorry I was mean to you. I realized as I was trying to fall asleep that even though this is a strange situation for me, I shouldn't blame you. You're not the reason I got swept up in all this, and the whole Selection thing isn't even your idea. And then, when I was feeling miserable, you were nothing but nice to me, and I was, well, awful. You could have thrown me out last night, and you didn't. Thank you.”

Maxon's eyes were tender. I bet every girl before me had already melted because he'd given them a look like this. I would have been bothered that he looked at me that way, but it was obviously just part of his nature. He ducked his head for a moment. When he looked at me

again, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as if he wanted me to understand the importance of what was coming next.

“America, you have been very up front with me so far. That is a quality that I deeply admire, and I’m going to ask you to be kind enough to answer one question for me.”

I nodded, a little afraid of what he wanted to know. He leaned in even closer to whisper. “You say you’re here by mistake, so I’m assuming you don’t want to be here. Is there any possibility of you having any sort of ... of loving feelings toward me?”

I couldn’t help but fidget a little. I genuinely didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but I couldn’t beat around the bush on this.

“You are very kind, Your Majesty, and attractive, and thoughtful.” He smiled at that. In a low voice I added, “But for very valid reasons, I don’t think I could.”

“Would you explain?” His face hid it well, but I could hear the disappointment caused by my immediate rejection. I guessed he wasn’t used to that.

It wasn’t something I wanted to share, but I didn’t think anything else would make him understand. In an even lower whisper than I’d used before, I told him the truth.

“I ... I’m afraid my heart is elsewhere.” I could feel my eyes getting wet.

“Oh, please don’t cry!” Maxon’s whisper was marked with a genuine worry. “I never know what to do when women cry!”

That made me laugh, and any threat of tears retreated for the moment. The relief on his face was unmistakable.

“Would you like me to let you go home to your love today?” he asked. It was obvious that my preference for someone else bothered him, but instead of choosing to be angry, he showed compassion. The gesture made me trust him.

“That’s the thing.... I don’t want to go home.”

“Really?” He ran his fingers through his hair, and I had to laugh again at how lost he seemed.

“Could I be perfectly honest with you?”

He nodded.

“I need to be here. My family needs me to be here. Even if you could let me stay for a week, that would be a blessing for them.”

“You mean you need the money?”

“Yes.” I felt bad admitting it. It must have seemed like I was using him. In truth, I guess I was. But there was more to it. “And there are ... certain people”—I looked up at him—“at home who I can’t bear to see right now.”

Maxon nodded his head in understanding but did not speak.

I hesitated. I guessed the worst that could happen now was being sent home anyway, so I continued. “If you would be willing to let me stay, even for a little while, I’d be willing to make a trade,” I offered.

His eyebrows shot up. “A trade?”

I bit my lip. “If you let me stay...” This was going to sound so stupid. “All right, well, look at you. You’re the prince. You’re busy all day, what with helping run a country and all, and you’re supposed to find time to narrow thirty-five, well, thirty-four girls, down to one? That’s a lot to ask, don’t you think?”

He nodded. I could see his genuine exhaustion at the thought.

“Wouldn’t it be much better for you if you had someone on the inside? Someone to help? Like, you know, a friend?”

“A friend?” he asked.

“Yes. Let me stay, and I’ll help you. I’ll be your friend.” He smiled at the words. “You don’t have to worry about pursuing me. You already know that I don’t have feelings for you. But you can talk to me anytime you like, and I’ll try and help. You said last night that you were looking for a confidante. Well, until you find one for good, I could be that person. If you want.”

His expression was affectionate but guarded. “I’ve met nearly every woman in this room, and I can’t think of one who would make a better friend. I’d be glad to have you stay.”

My relief was inexpressible.

“Do you think,” Maxon asked, “that I could still call you ‘my dear’?”

“Not a chance,” I whispered.

“I’ll keep trying. I don’t have it in me to give up.” And I believed him. It was annoying to think he’d press that issue.

“Did you call all of them that?” I nodded my head toward the rest of the room.

“Yes, and they all seemed to like it.”

“That is the exact reason why I don’t.” And I stood.

Maxon was chuckling as he rose with me. I would have scowled, but it actually was kind of funny. He bowed, I curtsied, and I went back to my seat.

I was so hungry that it felt like an eternity until he’d gone through the last rows. But finally the last girl was back in her seat, and I was eagerly anticipating my first breakfast at the palace.

Maxon walked to the center of the room. “If I have asked you to remain behind, please stay in your seats. If not, please proceed with Silvia here into the dining hall. I will join you shortly.”

Asked to stay? Was that a good thing?

I stood, as did most of the girls, and started walking. He must just want some special time with those girls. I saw that Ashley was one of them. No doubt she was special, a born princess by the looks of her. The rest were girls I hadn’t managed to meet. Not that they had wanted to meet me. The cameras lingered behind to capture whatever special moment was about to occur, and the rest of us moved on.

We walked into the banquet room and there, looking more majestic than even I could imagine, were King Clarkson and Queen Amberly. Also in the room, more camera crews swarmed to catch our first meeting. I hesitated, wondering if we should all go back to the door and be invited in. But most everyone else—if somewhat hesitantly—kept walking. I walked quickly to my chair, hoping I hadn’t drawn attention to myself.

Silvia walked in not two seconds later and took in the scene.

“Ladies,” she said, “I’m afraid we didn’t get this far. Whenever you enter a room where the king or queen is present, or if they should enter a room you are in, the proper thing to do is curtsy. Then when you are addressed, you may rise and take your seat. All together, shall we?” And we all curtsied in the direction of the head table.

“Welcome, girls,” the queen said. “Please take your seats, and welcome to the palace. We’re pleased to have you.” There was something pleasant about her voice. It was calm in the same way her expression was, but not lifeless by any means.

As Silvia had said, the servers came to our right to pour orange juice into our glasses. Our plates came covered on large trays, and the butlers lifted the covers off right in front of us. I was hit in the face with a fragrant blast of steam from my pancakes. Mercifully, the murmurs of awe across the room covered my growling stomach.

King Clarkson blessed our food, and we all began to eat. A few minutes later, Maxon walked in to take his seat, but before we could move, he called out.

“Please don’t rise, ladies. Enjoy your breakfasts.” He walked up to the head table, kissed his mother on the cheek, gave his father a firm pat on the back, and settled into his own chair just to the king’s left. He made a few comments to the closest butler, who laughed quietly, and then dug into his own plate.

Ashley didn’t come. Or any of the other girls. I looked around, confused, counting to see how many were missing. Eight. Eight girls were not here.

It was Kriss, sitting across from me, who answered the question in my eyes.

“They’re gone,” she said.

Gone? Oh. Gone...

I couldn’t imagine what they had done in less than five minutes to displease Maxon, but I was suddenly grateful I’d chosen to be honest.

Just like that, we were down to twenty-seven.

CHAPTER 12

THE CAMERAS DID A LAP around the room and left to let us enjoy our breakfast in peace, getting one last shot of the prince before they departed.

I was a little thrown off by the sudden elimination, but Maxon didn't seem too distressed. He ate his food without a care, and as I watched I realized I should eat my own breakfast before it got cold. Again, it was almost too delicious. The orange juice was so pure that I had to take smaller sips just to absorb it. The eggs and bacon were heaven, and the pancakes were perfectly done, not too thin like the ones I made at home.

I heard lots of little sighs all around me and knew I wasn't the only one enjoying the food. Remembering to use the tongs, I picked up a strawberry tart from the basket in the center of the table. As I did so, I looked around the room to see how the other Fives were enjoying their meals. That was when I noticed that I was the only Five left.

I didn't know if Maxon was aware of that information—he barely seemed to know our names—but it was strange they were both gone. If I had been another stranger to Maxon when I walked into that room, would I have been kicked out, too? I mulled this over as I bit into the strawberry tart. It was so sweet and the dough was so flaky, every millimeter of my mouth was engaged, taking over the rest of my senses entirely. I didn't mean to make the little moan, but it was by far the best thing I had ever tasted. I took another bite before I even swallowed the first.

“Lady America?” a voice called.

The other heads in the room turned to the voice, which belonged to Prince Maxon. I was shocked that he'd address me, or any of us, so casually and in front of the others.

What was worse than being called out so unexpectedly was that my mouth was full of food. I covered my mouth with my hand and chewed as quickly as I could manage. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but with so many eyes on me, it felt like an eternity. I noted Celeste's smug face as she watched me. I must have looked like an easy kill in her eyes.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” I replied as soon as I had most of it swallowed.

“How are you enjoying the food?” Maxon seemed on the verge of laughter, either from my bewildered expression or because he'd brought up a detail from our very first and highly unauthorized conversation.

I tried to stay calm myself. “It's excellent, Your Majesty. This strawberry tart ... well, I have a

sister who loves sweets more than I do. I think she'd cry if she tasted this. It's perfect."

Maxon swallowed a bite of his own breakfast and leaned back in his chair. "Do you really think she would cry?" He seemed exceedingly amused at the idea. He did have strange feelings toward women and crying.

I thought about it. "Yes, actually, I do. She doesn't have much of a filter when it comes to her emotions."

"Would you wager money on it?" he asked quickly. I noticed the heads of every girl turning back and forth between us like they were watching a game of tennis.

"If I had any to bet, I certainly would." I smiled at the idea of betting over someone else's tears of joy.

"What would you be willing to barter instead? You seem to be very good at striking deals." He was enjoying this little game. Fine. I'd play.

"Well, what do you want?" I posed. Then I wondered what in the world I could offer someone who had everything.

"What do you want?" he countered.

Now that was a fascinating question. Almost as interesting as thinking about what I could offer Maxon was what he could offer me. He had the world at his disposal. So what did I want?

I wasn't a One, but I was living like I was. I had more food than I could finish and the most comfortable bed I could imagine. People were waiting on me hand and foot, whether I liked it or not. And if I needed anything, all I had to do was ask.

The only thing I really wanted was something that made this place feel like less of a palace. If my family were running around somewhere, or if I wasn't so done up. I couldn't ask for my family to visit. I'd only been here a day.

"If she cries, I want to wear pants for a week," I offered.

Everyone laughed, but in a quiet, polite way. Even the king and queen seemed to find my request amusing. I liked the way the queen looked at me, like I was less of a foreigner to her now.

"Done," Maxon said. "And if she doesn't, you owe me a walk around the grounds tomorrow afternoon."

A walk on the grounds? That was it? It didn't seem like anything special to me. I remembered what Maxon had said last night, that he was guarded. Maybe he didn't know how to just ask a girl for time alone. Maybe this was his way of navigating something very alien to him.

Someone next to me made a disapproving sound. Oh. I realized that if I lost, I'd be the first person to officially get time one-on-one with the prince. Part of me wanted to renegotiate, but if I was going to be helpful—as I'd promised him—I couldn't brush off his first attempts at trying to date.

“You drive a hard bargain, sir, but I accept.”

“Justin?” The butler he had spoken to earlier stepped forward. “Go make a parcel of strawberry tarts and send it to the lady's family. Have someone wait while her sister tastes it, and let us know if she does, in fact, cry. I'm most curious about this.”

Justin nodded and was off.

“You should write a note to send with it, and tell your family you're safe. In fact, you all should. After breakfast, write a letter to your families, and we'll make sure they receive them today.”

Everyone smiled and sighed, happy to finally be included in the goings-on. We finished the rest of our breakfast and went to write our letters. Anne found me some stationery, and I wrote a quick letter to my family. Even though things had gotten off to a very awkward start, the last thing I wanted was for them to worry. I tried to sound breezy.

Dear Mom, Dad, May, and Gerad,

I miss you all so much already! The prince wanted us to write home and let our families know we were safe and well. I am both. The plane ride was a little scary, but it was fun in a way, too. The world looks so small from up so high!

They've given me lots of wonderful clothes and things, and I have three sweet maids who help me get dressed and clean for me and tell me where to go. So even if I get totally confused, they always know just where I'm supposed to be and help me get there on time.

The other girls are mostly shy, but I think I might have a friend. You remember Marlee from Kent? I met her on the way over to Angeles. She's very bright and friendly. If I have to come home anytime soon, I'm hoping she makes it to the end.

I have met the prince. The king and queen, too. They're even more regal in person. I haven't spoken to them yet, but I did talk to Prince Maxon. He's a surprisingly generous person... I

think.

I have to go, but I love you and miss you, and I'll write again as soon as I can.

Love,

America

I didn't think there was anything shocking in there, but I could have been wrong. I was imagining May reading it over and over again, finding hidden details about my life in the words. I wondered if she'd read this before she ate the pastries.

P.S. May, don't these strawberry tarts just make you want to cry?

There. That was the best I could do.

Apparently, it wasn't good enough. A butler knocked on my door that evening with an envelope from my family and an update.

"She didn't cry, miss. She said they were so good she could have—as you suggested—but she did not actually cry. His Majesty will come and get you from your room around five tomorrow. Please be ready."

I wasn't so upset about losing, but I seriously would have enjoyed the pants. At least, if I couldn't have that, I had letters. I realized that this was the first time I'd been parted from my family for more than a few hours. We weren't wealthy enough to go on trips, and since I didn't really have friends growing up, I'd never even spent the night away. If only there was a way I could get letters every day. I supposed it could be done, but it would have to be so expensive.

I read Dad's first. He went on and on about how beautiful I looked on TV and how proud he was of me. He said I shouldn't have sent three boxes of tarts, because May was going to get spoiled. Three boxes! For goodness' sake.

He went on to say that Aspen had been at the house helping with paperwork, so he'd taken a box home to his family. I didn't know how to feel about that. On the one hand, I was glad they would have something so decadent to eat. On the other, I just imagined him sharing some with his new girlfriend. Someone he could spoil. I wondered if he was jealous of Maxon's

gift, or if he was glad to be rid of my attention.

I lingered on those lines much longer than I meant to.

Dad closed by saying he was pleased I'd made a friend. Said I always was slow in that department. I folded the letter up and ran my finger over his signature on the outside. I'd never noticed how funny he signed his name before.

Gerad's letter was short and to the point. He missed me, he loved me, and please send more food. I laughed out loud at that.

Mom was bossy. Even in print I could hear her tone, smugly congratulating me on already earning the prince's affections—she had been informed that I was the only one to get gifts to send home—and telling me firmly to keep up whatever I was doing.

Yeah, Mom, I'll just keep telling the prince that he has absolutely no shot with me and offend him as often as I can. Great plan.

I was glad I'd saved May's for last.

Her letter was absolutely giddy. She admitted how jealous she was that I was eating like that all the time. She also complained that Mom was bossing her around more. I knew how that felt. The rest was a barrage of questions. Was Maxon as cute in person as he was on TV? What was I wearing now? Could she come and visit the palace? Did Maxon have a secret brother who would be willing to marry her one day?

I giggled and embraced my collection of letters. I'd have to make the effort to write back soon. There had to be a telephone around here somewhere, but so far no one had made us aware of it. Even if I had one in my room, it would probably be overkill to call home daily. Besides, these letters would be fun to hold on to. Proof I'd really been here when this whole place would be a memory.

I went to bed with the comforting knowledge that my family was doing well, and that warmth lulled me into a sound sleep that was only hitched by a twinge of nerves at being alone with Maxon again. I couldn't quite pin down the reason, but I hoped it was all for nothing.

“For the sake of appearances, would you please take my arm?” Maxon asked as he escorted me from my room the next day. I was a little hesitant, but I did.

My maids had already put me in my evening dress: a little blue thing with an empire waist and capped sleeves. My arms were bare, and I could feel the starched fabric of Maxon's suit against my skin. Something about it all made me uncomfortable. He must have noticed, because he tried to distract me.

“I’m sorry she didn’t cry,” he said.

“No you’re not.” My joking tone made it clear I wasn’t too upset about losing.

“I’ve never gambled before. It was nice to win.” His tone was slightly apologetic.

“Beginner’s luck.”

He smiled. “Perhaps. Next time we’ll try to make her laugh.”

I instantly started running scenarios through my mind. What from the palace would make May just die with laughter?

Maxon could tell I was thinking about her. “What’s your family like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. Your family must be very different from mine.”

“I’d say so.” I laughed. “For one, no one wears their tiaras to breakfast.”

Maxon smiled. “More of a dinner thing at the Singer house?”

“Of course.”

He chuckled quietly. I was starting to think maybe Maxon wasn’t nearly the snob I’d suspected he was.

“Well, I’m the middle child of five.”

“Five!”

“Yeah, five. Most families out there have lots of kids. I’d have lots if I could.”

“Oh, really?” Maxon’s eyebrows were raised.

“Yes,” I answered. My voice was low. I couldn’t quite say why, but that seemed like a very intimate detail about my life. Only one other person had really known about it.

I felt a spasm of sadness but shoved it away.

“Anyway, my oldest sister, Kenna, is married to a Four. She works in a factory now. My mom wants me to marry at least a Four, but I don’t want to have to stop singing. I love it too much. But I guess I’m a Three now. That’s really weird. I think I’m going to try to stay in music if I can.

“Kota is next. He’s an artist. We don’t see much of him these days. He did come to see me off, but that’s about it.

“Then there’s me.”

Maxon smiled effortlessly. “America Singer,” he announced, “my closest friend.”

“That’s right.” I rolled my eyes. There was no way I could actually be his closest friend. At least not yet. But I had to admit, he was the only person I’d ever really confided in who wasn’t family or someone I was in love with. Well, Marlee, too. Could it be the same way for him?

Slowly we moved down the hallway and toward the stairs. He didn’t appear to be in any sort of rush.

“After me there’s May. She’s the one who sold me out and didn’t cry. Honestly, I was robbed; I can’t believe she didn’t cry! But yeah, she’s an artist. I . . . I adore her.”

Maxon examined my face. Talking about May softened me a bit. I liked Maxon well enough, but I didn’t know how far I wanted to let him in.

“And then Gerad. He’s the baby; he’s seven. He hasn’t quite figured out if he’s into music or art yet. Mostly he likes to play ball and study bugs, which is fine except that he can’t make a living that way. We’re trying to get him to experiment more. Anyway, that’s everyone.”

“What about your parents?” he pressed.

“What about your parents?” I replied.

“You know my parents.”

“No, I don’t. I know the public image of them. What are they really like?” I pulled on his arm, which was quite a feat. Maxon’s arms were huge. Even beneath the layers of his suit, I could feel the strong, steady muscles there. Maxon sighed, but I could tell I didn’t really exasperate him at all. He seemed to like having someone pester him. It must be sad to grow up in this place without any siblings.

He started thinking about what he was going to say as we stepped into the garden. The guards all wore sly smiles as we passed. Just past them a camera crew waited. Of course they would want to be present for the prince’s first date. Maxon shook his head at them, and they retreated indoors immediately. I heard someone curse. I wasn’t particularly looking forward to being followed around by cameras, but it seemed strange to dismiss them.

“Are you all right? You seem tense,” Maxon noted.

“You get confused by crying women, I get confused by walks with princes,” I said with a shrug.

Maxon laughed quietly at that but said no more. As we moved west, the sun was blocked by the massive forest on the grounds, though it was still early in the evening. The shade crept over us, creating a tent of darkness. When I’d sought isolation the other night, this was where I wanted to be. We truly seemed alone now. We walked on, away from the palace and out of earshot of the guards.

“What about me is so confusing?”

I hesitated but said what I felt. “Your character. Your intentions. I’m not sure what to expect out of this little stroll.”

“Ah.” He stopped walking and faced me. We were very close to each other, and in spite of the warm summer air, a chill ran down my spine. “I think you can tell by now that I’m not the type of man to beat around the bush. I’ll tell you exactly what I want from you.”

Maxon took a step closer.

My breath caught in my throat. I’d just walked into the very situation I feared. No guards, no cameras, no one to stop him from doing whatever he wanted.

Knee-jerk reaction. Literally. I kneed His Majesty in the thigh. Hard.

Maxon let out a yell and reached down, clutching himself as I backed away from him. “What was that for?”

“If you lay a single finger on me, I’ll do worse!” I promised.

“What?”

“I said, if you—”

“No, no, you crazy girl, I heard you the first time.” Maxon grimaced. “But just what in the world do you mean by it?”

I felt the heat run through my body. I’d jumped to the worst possible conclusion and set myself up to fight something that obviously wasn’t coming.

The guards ran up, alerted by our little squabble. Maxon waved them away from an awkward, half-bent position.

We were quiet for a while, and once Maxon was over the worst of his pain, he faced me.

“What did you think I wanted?” he asked.

I ducked my head and blushed.

“America, what did you think I wanted?” He sounded upset. More than upset. Offended. He had obviously guessed what I’d assumed, and he didn’t like that one bit. “In public? You thought ... for heaven’s sake. I’m a gentleman!”

He started to walk away but turned back.

“Why did you even offer to help if you think so little of me?”

I couldn’t even look him in the eye. I didn’t know how to explain I had been prepped to expect a dog, that the darkness and privacy made me feel strange, that I’d only ever been alone with one other boy and that was how we behaved.

“You’ll be taking dinner in your room tonight. I’ll deal with this in the morning.”

I waited in the garden until I knew all the others would be in the dining hall, and then I paced up and down the hallway before I went into my room. Anne, Mary, and Lucy were beside themselves when I came in. I didn’t have the heart to tell them I hadn’t spent the whole time with the prince.

My meal had been delivered and was waiting on the table by the balcony. I was hungry now that I wasn’t distracted by my own humiliation. But my long absence wasn’t the reason my maids were in a tizzy. There was a very large box on the bed, begging to be opened.

“Can we see?” Lucy asked.

“Lucy, that’s rude!” Anne chided.

“They dropped it off the moment you left! We’ve been wondering ever since!” Mary exclaimed.

“Mary! Manners!” Anne scolded.

“No, don’t worry, girls. I don’t have any secrets.” When they came to kick me out tomorrow, I’d tell my maids why.

I gave them a weak smile as I pulled at the big red bow on the box. Inside were three pairs of pants. A linen set, another that was more businesslike but soft to the touch, and a glorious pair made from denim. There was a card resting on top with the Illéa emblem on it.

You ask for such simple things, I can't deny you. But for my sake, only on Saturdays, please.
Thank you for your company.

Your friend,

Maxon

CHAPTER 13

I DIDN'T REALLY HAVE THAT much time to feel ashamed or worried, all things considered. When my maids dressed me the next morning without a hint of worry, I assumed my presence downstairs would be welcome. Even allowing me to come down to breakfast showed a hint of kindness in Maxon I hadn't been expecting: I got a last meal, a last moment as one of the beautiful Selected.

We were halfway through breakfast before Kriss worked up the courage to ask me about our date.

"How was it?" she asked quietly, the way we were meant to speak at mealtimes. But those three small words made ears all up and down the table perk up, and everyone within hearing distance was paying attention.

I took a breath. "Indescribable."

The girls looked at one another, clearly hoping for more.

"How did he act?" Tiny asked.

"Umm." I tried to choose my words carefully. "Not at all how I expected he would."

This time, little murmurs went down the table.

"Are you being like that on purpose?" Zoe interjected. "If you are, it's awfully mean."

I shook my head. How could I explain this? "No, it's just that—"

But I was spared trying to form an answer by the confusing noises coming down the hallway.

The shouts were strange. In my very short time at the palace, not a single sound had registered as anything close to loud. Beyond that, there was a kind of music to the click of the guards' shoes on the floor, the massive doors opening and closing, the forks touching the plates. This was complete and absolute mayhem.

The royal family seemed to understand it before the rest of us.

"To the back of the room, ladies!" King Clarkson yelled, and ran over to a window.

Girls, confused but not wanting to disobey, slowly moved toward the head table. The king was pulling down a shade, but it wasn't the typical light-filtering kind. It was metal and

squealed into place. Beside him Maxon came and drew down another. And beside Maxon the lovely and delicate queen was racing to pull down the next.

That was when the wave of guards made it into the dining hall. I saw a number of them lining up outside the room just before the monstrous doors were closed, bolted, and secured with bars.

“They’re inside the walls, Majesty, but we’re holding them back. The ladies should leave, but we’re so close to the door—”

“Understood, Markson,” the king replied, cutting off the sentence.

It didn’t take more than that for me to comprehend. There were rebels inside the grounds.

I’d figured it would come. This many guests in the palace, so many preparations going on. Surely someone would miss something somewhere and let our safety slip. And even if there were no easy way in, this would be an excellent time to mount a protest. At its barest of bones, the Selection was kind of disturbing. I was sure the rebels hated it along with everything else about Illéa.

But whatever their opinion, I wasn’t going down quietly.

I pushed my chair back so quickly it fell over, and I ran to the closest window to pull down the metal shade. A few other girls who understood how threatened we were did the same.

It took me only a moment to get the thing down, but locking it into place was a little more difficult. I had just managed to get the latch right when something crashed into the metal plate from outside the palace, sending me screaming backward until I tripped over my fallen chair and tumbled to the ground.

Maxon appeared immediately.

“Are you hurt?”

I did a quick evaluation. I’d probably have a bruise on my hip, and I was scared, but that was the worst of it.

“No, I’m fine.”

“To the back of the room. Now!” he ordered as he helped me off the ground. He raced down the hall, snatching up girls who had begun to freeze up in fear and ushering them to the back corner.

I obeyed, running to the back of the room, toward the clusters of girls huddled together. Some

of them were weeping; others were staring into space in shock. Tiny had fainted. The most reassuring sight was King Clarkson talking intently to a guard along the back wall, just far away enough that the girls wouldn't hear. He had one arm wrapped protectively around the queen, who stood quietly and proudly beside him.

How many times had she survived attacks now? We got reports that these happened several times a year. That had to be unnerving. The odds were getting slimmer and slimmer for her ... and her husband ... and her only child. Surely, eventually, the rebels would figure out the right alignment of circumstances to get what they wanted. Yet she stood there, her chin set, her still face wearing a quiet calm.

I surveyed the girls. Did any of them have the strength it would take to be the queen? Tiny was still unconscious in someone's arms. Celeste and Bariel were making conversation. I knew what Celeste looked like at ease, and this wasn't it. Still, compared to the others, she hid her emotions well. Others were near hysterics, whimpering on their knees. Some had mentally shut down, blocking out the entire ordeal. Their faces were blank, and they absently wrung their hands, waiting for it to end.

Marlee was crying a little, but not so much that she looked like a wreck. I grabbed her arm and pulled her upright.

"Dry your eyes and stand up straight," I barked into her ear.

"What?" she squeaked.

"Trust me, do it."

Marlee wiped her face on the side of her gown and stood up a little taller. She touched her face in several places, checking for smudged makeup, I guessed. Then she turned and looked at me for approval.

"Good job. Sorry to be so bossy, but trust me on this one, okay?" I felt bad ordering her around in the middle of something so distressing, but she had to look as calm as Queen Amberly. Surely Maxon would want that in his queen, and Marlee had to win.

Marlee nodded her head. "No, you're right. I mean, for the time being, everyone is safe. I shouldn't be so worried."

I nodded back to her, though she was most assuredly wrong. Everyone was not safe.

Guards waited on edge by the massive doors as heavy things were thrown against wall and windows again and again. There wasn't a clock in here. I had no idea how long this attack was lasting, and that only made me more anxious. How would we know if they got inside? Would it only be once they started banging on the doors? Were they already inside and we

just didn't know it?

I couldn't take the worry. I stared at a vase of ornate flowers—none of which I knew the names of—and bit away at one of my perfectly manicured nails. I pretended that those flowers were all that mattered in the world.

Eventually Maxon came by to check on me, as he had with the others. He stood beside me and stared at the flowers, too. Neither of us really knew what to say.

“Are you doing all right?” he finally asked.

“Yes,” I whispered.

He paused a moment. “You seem unwell.”

“What will happen to my maids?” I asked, voicing my greatest worry. I knew I was safe. Where were they? What if one of them had been walking down the hall as the rebels made their way in?

“Your maids?” he asked in a tone that implied I was an idiot.

“Yes, my maids.” I looked into his eyes, shaming him into acknowledging that only a choice minority of the throngs who lived in the palace were actually being protected. I was on the verge of tears. I didn't want them to come, and I was breathing rapidly trying to keep my emotions at bay.

He looked into my eyes and seemed to understand that I was only one step up from being a maid myself. That wasn't the reason for my worry, but it did seem strange that a lottery was the main difference between someone like Anne and me.

“They should be hiding by now. The help have their own places to wait. The guards are very good about getting around quickly and alerting everyone. They ought to be fine. We usually have an alarm system, but the last time they came through, the rebels thoroughly dismantled it. They've been working on fixing it, but...” Maxon sighed.

I looked at the floor, trying to quiet all the worries in my head.

“America,” he begged.

I turned to Maxon.

“They're fine. The rebels were slow, and everyone here knows what to do in an emergency.”

I nodded. We stood there quietly for a minute, and I could tell he was about to move on.

“Maxon,” I whispered.

He turned back, a little surprised to be addressed so casually.

“About last night. Let me explain. When they came to prep us, to get us ready to come here, there was a man who told me that I was never to turn you down. No matter what you asked for. Not ever.”

He was dumbfounded. “What?”

“He made it sound like you might ask for certain things. And you said yourself that you hadn’t been around many women. After eighteen years ... and then you sent the cameras away. I just got scared when you got that close to me.”

Maxon shook his head, trying to process all this. Humiliation, rage, and disbelief all played across his typically even-tempered face.

“Was everyone told this?” he asked, sounding appalled at the idea.

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine many girls would need such a warning. They’re probably waiting to pounce on you,” I noted, nodding my head toward the rest of the room.

He gave a dark chuckle. “But you’re not, so you had absolutely no qualms about kneeling me in the groin, right?”

“I hit your thigh!”

“Oh, please. A man doesn’t need that long to recover from a knee to the thigh,” he replied, his voice full of skepticism.

A laugh escaped me. Thankfully, Maxon joined in. Just then another mass hit the windows, and we stopped in unison. For a moment I had forgotten where I was.

“So how are you handling a roomful of crying women?” I asked.

There was a comical bewilderment in his expression. “Nothing in the world is more confusing!” he whispered urgently. “I haven’t the faintest clue how to stop it.”

This was the man who was going to lead our country: the guy rendered useless by tears. It was too funny.

“Try patting them on the back or shoulder and telling them everything is going to be fine. Lots of times when girls cry, they don’t want you to fix the problem, they just want to be consoled,” I advised.

“Really?”

“Pretty much.”

“It can’t possibly be that simple.” Intrigue and doubt played in his voice.

“I said most of the time, not all the time. But it would probably work for a lot of the girls here.”

He snorted. “I’m not so sure. Two have already asked if I’ll let them leave if this ever ends.”

“I thought we weren’t allowed to do that.” I shouldn’t have been surprised, though. If he had agreed to let me stay on as a friend, he couldn’t be too concerned with technicalities. “What are you going to do?”

“What else can I do? I won’t keep someone here against her will.”

“Maybe they’ll change their minds,” I offered hopefully.

“Maybe.” He paused. “What about you? Have you been scared off yet?” he asked almost playfully.

“Honestly? I was convinced you were sending me home after breakfast anyway,” I admitted.

“Honestly? I had considered that myself.”

There was a quiet smile between us. Our friendship—if I could even call it that—was obviously awkward and flawed, but at least it was honest.

“You didn’t answer me. Do you want to leave?”

Another something hit the wall, and the idea sounded appealing. The worst attack I’d gotten at home was Gerad trying to steal my food. The girls here didn’t care for me, the clothes were stifling, people were trying to hurt me, and the whole thing felt uncomfortable. But it was good for my family and nice to be full. Maxon did seem a bit lost, and I’d get to stay away from him for a little bit longer. And who knew, maybe I could help pick out the next princess.

I looked Maxon in the eye. “If you’re not kicking me out, I’m not leaving.”

He smiled. “Good. You’ll need to tell me more tricks like this shoulder-patting thing.”

I smiled back. Yes, it was all wrong, but some good would come out of this.

“America, could you do me a favor?”

I nodded.

“As far as anyone knows, we spent a lot of time together yesterday evening. If anyone asks, could you please tell them that I’m not ... that I wouldn’t...”

“Of course. And I really am sorry about everything.”

“I should have known that if any girl was going to disobey an order, it would be you.”

A collection of heavy objects hit the wall at once, making a handful of girls scream.

“Who are they? What do they want?” I asked.

“Who? The rebels?”

I nodded.

“Depends on who you ask. And which group you’re talking about,” he answered.

“You mean there’s more than one?” That made the entire experience much worse. If this was one group, what could two or more do together? As far as I knew, a rebel was a rebel was a rebel, but Maxon made it sound like some could be worse than others. “How many are there?”

“Two generally, the Northerners and the Southerners. The Northerners attack much more frequently. They’re closer. They live in the rainy patch of Likely near Bellingham, just north of here. No one really wants to live there—it’s practically all ruins—so they’ve made it a home of sorts, though I guess they travel. The traveling is one theory of mine—one no one listens to. But they’re far less likely to break in, and when they do the results are ... tame almost. I’d guess that this is a Northern job right now,” he said over the din.

“Why? What makes them so different from the Southerners?”

Maxon seemed to hesitate, unsure if this information was something I should know. He looked around to see if anyone could hear us. I looked around, too, and saw that several people were watching us. In particular, Celeste looked like she was trying to set me on fire with her eyes. I didn’t keep eye contact for long. Still, even with all the onlookers, no one was close enough to hear. When Maxon came to the same conclusion, he leaned in to whisper.

“Their attacks are much more ... lethal.”

I shivered. “Lethal?”

He nodded. “They only come about once or twice a year, as best I can tell from the aftermath. I think that everyone here is trying to protect me from the statistics, but I’m not stupid. People die when they come. The trouble is, both groups look alike to us—dingy, mostly men, lean

but strong, no sort of emblem as far as we can tell—so we don't know what we're getting until it's all over.”

I looked around the room. A lot of people were in danger if Maxon was wrong and they happened to be Southerners. I thought of my poor maids again.

“But I still don't understand. What do they want?”

Maxon shrugged. “The Southerners appear to want us demolished. I don't know why, but I'm guessing some dissatisfaction or another, tired of living on the fringes of society. I mean, they're not even Eights technically, since they have no part in the social network. But the Northerners are a bit of a mystery. Father says they just want to bother us, disrupt our governing, but I don't think so.” He looked rather proud for a moment. “I have another theory about that as well.”

“Do I get to know it?”

Maxon hesitated again. I guessed this time it wasn't so much out of fear of scaring me, but perhaps not being taken seriously.

He came close again and whispered, “I think they're looking for something.”

“What?” I wondered.

“That I don't know. But it's always the same around here after the Northerners come. Guards are knocked out, injured, or tied up, but never killed. It's like they just don't want to be followed around. Though some people get taken with them, and that's a bit disturbing. And then the rooms—well, all the ones they can get into—they're a mess. Every drawer pulled out, shelves searched, carpet upturned. Lots of things get broken. You wouldn't believe the number of cameras I've replaced over the years.”

“Cameras?”

“Oh,” he said bashfully. “I like photography. But despite all that, they don't end up taking much. Father thinks my idea is rubbish, of course. What could a bunch of illiterate barbarians be looking for? Still, I think there must be something.”

It was intriguing. If I was penniless and knew how to break into the palace, I think I'd take every piece of jewelry I could find, anything I could sell. These rebels must have something in mind beyond a mere political statement or their day-to-day survival in mind when they came here.

“Do you think it's silly?” Maxon asked, bringing me out of my wonderings.

“No, not silly. Confusing, but not silly.”

We shared a small smile. I realized that if Maxon had simply been Maxon Schreave and not Maxon, future king of Illéa, he would be the kind of person I would have wanted to be my next-door neighbor, someone to talk to.

He cleared his throat. “I suppose I should finish my rounds.”

“Yes, I imagine there are quite a few ladies wondering what’s taking you so long.”

“So, buddy, any suggestions as to whom I should speak with next?”

I smiled and looked behind me to make sure my candidate for princess was still holding it together. She was.

“See the blond girl over there in the pink? That’s Marlee. Sweetheart, very kind, loves movies. Go.”

Maxon chuckled and walked in her direction.

The time in the dining hall felt like an eternity, but the attack had only lasted a little over an hour. We found out later that no one had actually gotten inside the palace, just inside the grounds. The guards didn’t shoot at the rebels until they tried for the main doors, which accounted for the bricks—bricks that had been gouged out of the palace walls—and rotten food being thrown at the windows for so long.

In the end, two men got too close to the doors, shots were fired, and they all fled. If Maxon’s labels were correct, I would assume these were Northerners.

They kept us tucked away for a little while longer, searching the perimeter of the palace. When everything was as it should be, we were released to our rooms. I walked arm in arm with Marlee. Despite holding it together downstairs, the strain of the attack had exhausted me, and I was glad to have someone to distract me from it.

“He let you have the pants anyway?” she asked. I had started talking about Maxon as soon as I could, eager to know how their conversation had gone.

“Yeah. He was very generous about it all.”

“I think it’s charming that he’s a good winner.”

“He is a good winner. He’s even gracious when he’s gotten the raw end of things.” Like a knee to the royal jewels, for example.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” I didn’t want to explain that one. “What did you two talk about today?”

“Well, he asked me if I’d like to see him this week.” She blushed.

“Marlee! That’s great!”

“Hush!” she said, looking around, though the rest of the girls had already ascended the stairs. “I’m trying not to get my hopes up.”

We were quiet for a minute before she burst.

“Who am I kidding? I’m so excited I can barely stand it! I hope he won’t take too long to call on me.”

“If he’s already asked, I’m sure he’ll follow through soon. I mean, after he finishes running the country for the day, that is.”

She laughed. “I can’t believe this! I mean, I knew he was handsome, but I wasn’t sure how he’d behave. I was worried he’d be... I don’t know, stuffy or something.”

“Me, too. But he’s actually...” What was Maxon actually? He was sort of stuffy, but not in a way that was as off-putting as I’d imagined. Undeniably a prince, but still so ... so...

“Normal.”

Marlee wasn’t looking at me anymore. She’d lost herself in a daydream as we walked. I hoped that this image of Maxon that she was building was one he could deliver. And that she would be the kind of girl he wanted. I left her at her door with a small wave and went on to my room.

My thoughts of Marlee and Maxon flew out of my head as soon as I opened the door. Anne and Mary were crouched around a very distressed Lucy. Her face was red with tears falling down her cheeks; her usual tiny trembles were full-on shakes, racking her entire body.

“Calm down now, Lucy, everything’s fine,” Anne was whispering as she stroked Lucy’s messy hair.

“Everything is over now. No one was hurt. You’re safe, dear,” Mary cooed, holding a twitching hand.

I was too shocked to speak. This moment was Lucy’s private struggle, not meant for my eyes. I went to back out of my room, but Lucy caught me before I could back away.

“S-s-sorry, Lady, Lady, Lady...,” she stammered. The others looked up with anxious expressions.

“Don’t trouble yourself. Are you all right?” I asked, closing the door so no one else would see.

Lucy tried to start again, but couldn’t form the words. Her tears and the shaking were overwhelming her little body.

“She’ll be fine, miss,” Anne interceded. “It takes a few hours, but she calms down once everything’s quiet. If it stays bad, we can take her to the hospital wing.” Anne dropped her voice. “Only Lucy doesn’t want that. If they think you’re unfit, they hide you down in the laundry rooms or the kitchen. Lucy likes being a maid.”

I didn’t know who Anne thought she was hiding her voice from. We were all surrounding Lucy, and she could hear those words clearly, even in her state.

“P-p-please, miss. I don’t—I don’t—I...,” she tried.

“Hush. No one’s turning you in,” I told her. I looked to Anne and Mary. “Help me get her on the bed.”

With the three of us it should have been easy, but Lucy was writhing so that her arms and legs would slip from our hands. It took quite a bit of effort to get her settled. Once we tucked her under the covers, the comfort of the bed seemed to do more than our words could. Lucy’s shudders became slower, and she stared vacantly at the canopy above the bed.

Mary sat on the edge of the bed and started humming a tune, reminding me all too much of the way I would baby May when she was sick. I pulled Anne into a corner, far away from Lucy’s ears.

“What happened? Did someone get through?” I asked. I would expect to be told if that were the case.

“No, no,” Anne assured me. “Lucy always gets like this when the rebels come. Just talking about them will send her into a crying fit. She...”

Anne looked down to her polished black shoes, trying to decide if she should tell me something. I didn’t want to pry into Lucy’s life, but I did want to understand. She took a deep breath and started.

“Some of us were born here. Mary was born in the castle, and her parents are still here. I was an orphan, taken in because the palace needed staff.” She straightened her dress, as if she could rub off this piece of her history that seemed to bother her. “Lucy was sold to the palace.”

“Sold? How can that be? There aren’t slaves here.”

“Not technically, no, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen. Lucy’s family needed money for an operation for her mother. They gave their services over to a family of Threes in exchange for the money. Her mother never got better, they never made their way out of the debt, so Lucy and her father had been living with this family for ages. From what I understand, it wasn’t much better than living in a barn with the way they were kept.

“The son had taken a liking to Lucy, and I know sometimes it doesn’t matter what caste you’re in, but Six to Three is quite a jump. When his mother discovered his intentions for Lucy, she sold her and her father to the palace. I remember when she came. Cried for days. They must have been terribly in love.”

I looked over at Lucy. At least in my case, one of us got to make the decision. She had no choice when it came to losing the man she loved.

“Lucy’s dad works in the stables. He’s not very fast or strong, but he’s incredibly dedicated. And Lucy is a maid. I know it might seem silly to you, but it’s an honor to be a maid in the palace. We are the front line. We are the ones deemed fit enough and smart enough and attractive enough to be seen by anyone who comes to call. We take our positions seriously, and with reason. If you screw up, you’re put in the kitchen, where your fingers are working all day, and the clothes are baggy. Or you chop firewood or rake the grounds. It’s no small thing to be a maid.”

I felt stupid. In my mind, they were all Sixes. But there were rankings even within that, statuses that I didn’t understand.

“Two years ago, there was an attack on the palace in the middle of the night. They got the guards’ uniforms, and everyone was confused. It was such disarray, no one knew who to attack or defend, and people slipped through holes in the lines ... it was terrifying.”

I shuddered just thinking about it. The dark, the confusion, the wide expanse of the palace. Compared to this morning, it sounded like the work of Southerners.

“One of the rebels got ahold of Lucy.” Anne ducked her eyes for a minute. She spoke her next lines quietly. “I’m not sure they have very many women with them, if you catch my meaning.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t see this myself, but Lucy told me that this man was covered in grime. She said he kept licking her face.”

Anne cringed away from the thought. My stomach heaved, threatening to bring up my breakfast. It was positively revolting, and I could see how someone who’d already been as scarred as Lucy would break under that kind of attack.

“He was dragging her off somewhere, and she was screaming as loud as she could. In the commotion, it was hard to hear her cries. But another guard came around the corner, a real one. He took aim and fired a bullet right through the man’s head. The rebel fell to the ground, pinning Lucy. She was covered in blood.”

I covered my mouth. I couldn’t imagine delicate little Lucy going through all that. No wonder she reacted this way.

“She was treated for some cuts, but no one ever really saw to her mind. She’s a little jittery now but tries to hide it as best she can. And it’s not just for her sake, but her father’s. He’s so proud that his daughter is good enough to be a maid. She doesn’t want to let him down. We try to keep her calm, but every time the rebels come, she thinks it’s going to be worse. Someone’s going to take her this time, hurt her, kill her.

“She’s trying, miss, but I’m not sure how much more of this she can stand.”

I nodded, looking over to Lucy in the bed. She had closed her eyes and fallen asleep, even though it was still quite early.

I spent the rest of the day reading. Anne and Mary cleaned things that weren’t dirty. We all stayed quiet while Lucy recovered.

I promised myself that, if I could help it, Lucy wouldn’t have to go through that again.

CHAPTER 14

AS I PREDICTED, THE GIRLS who had asked to go home changed their minds once everything had settled down. None of us knew exactly who had wanted out, but there were some—Celeste in particular—who were determined to find out. For the time being we remained at twenty-seven girls.

The attack was so inconsequential, according to the king, that it barely warranted notice. However, since camera crews had been making their way in that morning, some of it was aired live. Apparently the king wasn't pleased about that. It made me wonder just how many attacks the palace suffered through that we never heard about. Was it far less safe here than I'd thought?

Silvia explained that if the attack had been much worse, we would have all been able to call our families and tell them we were safe. As it was, we were instructed to write letters home instead.

I wrote that I was well and that the attack probably seemed worse than it was and that the king had us all kept safely tucked away. I urged them not to worry about me and told them that I missed them and handed the letter off to a helpful maid.

The day after the attack passed without incident. I had planned on going down to the Women's Room to talk up Maxon to the others, but after seeing Lucy so shaken, I chose to keep to my room.

I didn't know what my three maids busied themselves with while I was away, but when I was in the room, they played card games with me and let pieces of gossip slip into the conversation.

I learned that for every dozen people I saw in the palace, there were a hundred or more behind them. The cooks and laundresses I knew about, but there were also people whose sole job was to keep the windows clean. It took a solid week for the team to get them all done, by the end of which the dust would find its way past the palace walls and cling to the clean glass, and they'd have to be washed all over again. There were also jewelers hidden away, making pieces for the family and gifts for visitors, and teams of seamstresses and buyers keeping the royal family—and now us—immaculately clothed.

I learned other things, too. The guards they thought were the cutest and the horrid new design of a dress the head maid was making the staff wear for the holiday parties. How some in the palace were taking bets on which Selected girl might win and that I was in the top ten picks. A baby of one of the cooks was sick beyond hope, which made Anne tear up a bit. This girl

happened to be a close friend of hers, and the couple had been waiting so long for a child.

Listening to them and joining in when I had something worth saying, I couldn't imagine anything more entertaining happening downstairs and was glad to have such company. The mood in my room was a quiet and happy one.

The day had been so nice, I stayed up there the day after as well. This time, we kept the doors open to both the hallway and the balcony, and the warm air filtered in and wrapped itself around us. It seemed to do particularly wonderful things for Lucy, and I wondered how often she actually got to step outside.

Anne made a comment about how this was all inappropriate—me sitting with them, playing games with the doors open—but let it drop almost immediately. She was quickly getting over trying to make me the lady it seemed I ought to be.

We were in the middle of a game of cards when I noticed a figure out of the corner of my eye. It was Maxon, standing at the open door, looking amused. As our eyes met, I could see that his expression was clearly asking what in the world I was doing. I stood, smiling, and walked over to him.

“Oh, sweet Lord,” Anne muttered as she realized the prince was at the door. She immediately swept the cards into a sewing basket and stood, Mary and Lucy following suit.

“Ladies,” Maxon said.

“Your Majesty,” she said with a curtsy. “Such an honor, sir.”

“For me as well,” he answered with a smile.

The maids looked back and forth to one another, flattered. We were all silent for a moment, not quite sure what to do.

Mary suddenly piped up. “We were just leaving.”

“Yes! That's right,” Lucy added. “We were—uh—just...” She looked to Anne for help.

“Going to finish Lady America's dress for Friday,” Anne concluded.

“That's right,” Mary said. “Only two days left.”

They slowly circled us to get out of the room, huge smiles plastered on their faces.

“Wouldn't want to keep you from your work,” Maxon said, following them with his eyes, completely fascinated with their behavior.

Once in the hall, they gave awkwardly mistimed curtsies and walked away at a feverish pace. Immediately after they rounded the corner, Lucy's giggles echoed down the corridor, followed by Anne's intense hushing.

"Quite a group you have," Maxon said, walking into my room, surveying the space.

"They keep me on my toes," I answered with a smile.

"It's clear they have affection for you. That's hard to find." He stopped looking at my room and faced me. "This isn't what I imagined your room would look like."

I raised an arm and let it fall. "It's not really my room, is it? It belongs to you, and I just happen to be borrowing it."

He made a face. "Surely they told you that changes could be made? A new bed, different paint."

I shrugged. "A coat of paint wouldn't make this mine. Girls like me don't live in houses with marble floors," I joked.

Maxon smiled. "What does your room at home look like?"

"Um, what did you come for exactly?" I hedged.

"Oh! I had an idea."

"About?"

"Well," he started, continuing to walk around the room, "I thought that since you and I don't have the typical relationship that I have with the other girls, maybe we should have ... alternative means of communication." He stopped in front of my mirror and looked at the pictures of my family. "Your little sister looks just like you," he said, amused by this observation.

I walked deeper into my room. "We get that a lot. What was that about alternative communication?"

Maxon finished up with the pictures and moved toward the piano in the back. "Since you are supposed to be helping me, being my friend and all," he continued with a pointed look at me, "perhaps we shouldn't be relying on the traditional notes sent through maids and formal invitations for dates. I was thinking something a little less ceremonial."

He picked up the sheet music on top of the piano. "Did you bring these?"

"No, those were here. Anything I really want to play, I can do from memory."

His eyebrows rose. “Impressive.” He moved back in my direction without finishing his explanation.

“Could you please stop poking around and complete an entire thought?”

Maxon sighed. “Fine. What I was thinking was that you and I could have a sign or something, some way of communicating that we need to speak to each other that no one else would catch onto. Perhaps rubbing our noses?” Maxon ran a finger back and forth just above his lips.

“That looks like your nose is stopped up. Not attractive.”

He gave me a slightly perplexed look and nodded. “Very well. Perhaps we could simply run our fingers through our hair?”

I shook my head almost immediately. “My hair is almost always pulled up with pins. It’s nearly impossible to get my fingers through it. Besides, what if you happen to be wearing your crown? You’d knock it off your head.”

He shook a thoughtful finger at me. “Excellent point. Hmmm.” He passed me, continuing to think, and stopped near the table by my bed. “What about tugging your ear?”

I considered. “I like it. Simple enough to hide, but not so common we could mistake it for something else. Ear tugging it is.”

Maxon’s attention was fixated on something, but he turned to smile at me. “I’m glad you approve. The next time you want to see me, simply tug your ear, and I’ll come as soon as I’m able. Probably after dinner,” he concluded with a shrug.

Before I could ask about me coming to him, Maxon strolled across the room with my jar in his hand. “What in the world is this about?”

I sighed. “That, I’m afraid, is beyond explanation.”

Friday arrived, and with that came our debut on the Illéa Capital Report. It was something that was required of us, but at least this week all we had to do was sit there. With the time difference, we’d go on at five, sit through the hour, and then go off to dinner.

Anne, Mary, and Lucy took extra care in dressing me. The gown was a deep blue, hovering near purple. It was fitted through my hips, and fanned out in satiny smooth waves behind me. I couldn’t believe I was touching something so beautiful. Button after button was fastened up my back, and my maids put pins bedecked with pearls in my hair. They added tiny pearl earrings and a necklace made of wire so thin and pearls so far apart they looked like they floated on my skin, and I was done.

I looked in the mirror. I still looked like me. It was the prettiest version of myself I'd seen so far, but I knew that face. Ever since my name had been drawn, I'd feared I would become something unrecognizable—covered in layers of makeup and so hung down with jewelry that I'd have to dig out of it for weeks to find myself again. So far, I was still America.

And, exactly like myself, I found that I was covered in a sheen of sweat as I walked down to the room where they recorded messages at the palace. They'd told us to be there ten minutes early. Ten minutes meant fifteen to me. It meant more like three to someone like Celeste. So the arrival of the girls was staggered.

Hordes of people were swarming around, putting the last touches on the set—which now held rows of tiered seating for the Selected. The council members who I recognized from years of watching the Report were there, reading over their scripts and adjusting their ties. The Selected crowd were checking themselves in mirrors and tugging at their extravagant dresses. It was a flurry of activity.

I turned and caught the briefest of moments in Maxon's life. His mother, the beautiful Queen Amberly, pushed some stray hairs back into place. He straightened his jacket and said something to her. She gave a reassuring nod, and Maxon smiled. I would have watched a little longer, but Silvia, in all her glory, came to escort me into place.

"Just head over to the risers, Lady America," she said. "You may sit anywhere you like. So you know, most of the girls have already claimed the front row." She looked sorry for me, as if she were delivering bad news.

"Oh, thank you," I said, and went happily to take a seat in the back.

I didn't like climbing the little steps with a snug dress and such strappy shoes. (Were the shoes really necessary? No one was even going to see my feet.) But I managed. When I saw Marlee come in, she smiled and waved and came to sit right next to me. It meant a great deal to me that she chose a place beside me as opposed to a spot in the second row. She was faithful. She'd make a great queen.

Her dress was a brilliant yellow. With her blond hair and sun-kissed skin, she looked like she was radiating light into the room.

"Marlee, I love that dress. You look fantastic!"

"Oh, thank you." She blushed. "I thought it might be a bit too much."

"Not at all! Trust me, it's perfect on you."

"I've wanted to speak to you, but you've been missing. Do you think we could talk tomorrow?" she asked in a whisper.

“Of course. In the Women’s Room, right? It’s Saturday,” I said in a matched tone.

“Okay,” she answered excitedly.

Just in front of us, Amy turned around. “I feel like my pins are falling out. Can you guys check them?”

Without a word, Marlee put her slim fingers in the curls of Amy’s hair and checked for loose pins. “That feel better?”

Amy sighed. “Yes, thank you.”

“America, is there lipstick on my teeth?” Zoe asked. I turned to my left and found her smiling maniacally, exposing all her pearly whites.

“No, you’re good,” I answered, seeing out of the corner of my eye that Marlee was nodding in confirmation.

“Thanks. How is he so calm?” Zoe asked, pointing over at Maxon, who was talking to a member of the crew. She then bent down and put her head between her legs and started doing controlled breathing.

Marlee and I looked at each other, eyes wide with amusement, and tried not to laugh. It was hard if we looked at Zoe, so we surveyed the room and chatted about what others were wearing. There were several girls in seductive reds and lively greens, but no one else in blue. Olivia had gone so far as to wear orange. I’d admit that I didn’t know that much about fashion, but Marlee and I both agreed that someone should have intervened on her behalf. The color made her skin look kind of green.

Two minutes before the cameras turned on, we realized it wasn’t the dress making her look green. Olivia vomited into the closest trash can very loudly and collapsed on the floor. Silvia swooped in, and a fuss was made to wipe the sweat off her and get her into a seat. She was placed in the back row with a small receptacle at her feet, just in case.

Bariel was in the seat in front of her. I couldn’t hear what she muttered to the poor girl from where I was, but it looked like Bariel was prepared to injure Olivia should she have another episode near her.

I guessed that Maxon had seen or heard some of the commotion, and I looked over to see if he was having any sort of reaction to it all. But he wasn’t looking toward the disturbance; he was looking at me. Quickly—so quickly it would look like nothing but scratching an itch to anyone else—Maxon reached up and tugged on his ear. I repeated the action back, and we both turned away.

I was excited to know that tonight, after dinner, Maxon would be stopping by my room.

Suddenly the anthem music was playing, and I could see the national emblem on tiny screens around the room. I shifted to sit up straighter. All I could think was that my family was going to see me tonight, and I wanted them to be proud.

King Clarkson was at the podium speaking about the brief and unsuccessful attack on the palace. I wouldn't have called it unsuccessful. It managed to scare the daylights out of most of us. Announcement after announcement came, and I tried to be aware of everything they said, but it was hard. I was used to watching this on a comfy couch with bowls of popcorn and family commentary.

Many of the announcements tied into the rebels, placing blame for certain things on their shoulders. The roads being built in Sumner were behind schedule because of the rebels, and the number of local officers in Atlin was down because they'd been sent to help with a rebel-caused disturbance in St. George. I had no idea either of those things had happened. Between everything I'd heard and seen growing up and what I'd learned since coming to the palace, I began to wonder just how much we knew about the rebels. Maybe I just didn't understand, but I didn't think they could be blamed for everything that was wrong with Illéa.

And then, as if he had appeared out of thin air, Gavril was walking on set after being introduced by the Master of Events.

“Good evening, everyone. Tonight I have a special announcement. The Selection has been going for a week now and eight ladies have already gone home, leaving twenty-seven beautiful women for Prince Maxon to choose from. Next week, by hook or by crook, the majority of the Illéa Capital Report will be dedicated to getting to know these amazing young women.”

I felt the little beads of sweat pooling on my temple. Sit here and look nice... I could do that. But answer questions? I knew I wasn't going to win this little game; that wasn't the issue. I just really, really didn't want to look like a moron in front of the entire country.

“Before we get to the ladies, tonight let's take a moment with the man of the hour. How are you tonight, Prince Maxon?” Gavril said, walking across the stage. Maxon had been ambushed. He didn't have a microphone or prepared answers.

Just before Gavril's microphone reached Maxon's face, I caught his eye and gave him a wink. That tiny action was enough to make him smile.

“I'm very well, Gavril, thank you.”

“Are you enjoying your company so far?”

“Yes! It’s been a pleasure getting to know these ladies.”

“Are they all the sweet, gentle ladies they appear to be?” Gavril asked. Before Maxon replied, the answer brought a smile to my face. Because I knew that it was yes ... sort of.

“Umm...” Maxon looked past Gavril at me. “Almost.”

“Almost?” Gavril asked, surprised. He turned to us. “Is someone over there being naughty?”

Mercifully, all the girls let out light giggles, so I blended in. The little traitor!

“What exactly did these girls do that isn’t so sweet?” Gavril asked Maxon.

“Oh, well, let me tell you.” Maxon crossed his legs and got very comfortable in his chair. It was probably the most relaxed I’d ever seen him, sitting there poking fun at me. I liked this side of him. I wished it would come out more often. “One of them had the nerve to yell at me rather forcefully the first time we met. I was given a very severe scolding.”

Above Maxon’s head, the king and queen exchanged a glance. It seemed they were hearing this story for the first time, too. Beside me the girls were looking at one another, confused. I didn’t get it until Marlee said something.

“I don’t remember anyone yelling at him in the Great Room. Do you?”

Maxon seemed to have forgotten that our first meeting was meant to be a secret. “I think he’s talking it up to make it funnier. I did say some serious things to him. I think he might mean me.”

“A scolding, you say? Whatever for?” Gavril continued.

“Honestly, I wasn’t really sure. I think it was a bout of homesickness. Which is why I forgave her, of course.” Maxon was loose and easy now, talking to Gavril as if he were the only person in the room. I’d have to tell him later how wonderful he did.

“So she’s still with us, then?” Gavril looked over at the collection of girls, grinning widely, and then returned to face his prince.

“Oh, yes. She’s still here,” Maxon said, not letting his eyes wander from Gavril’s face. “And I plan on keeping her here for quite a while.”

CHAPTER 15

DINNER WAS DISAPPOINTING. NEXT WEEK I'd have to tell my maids to leave some room in the dress for me to eat.

In my room, Anne, Mary, and Lucy waited to help me out of my gown, but I explained that I'd need to stay in it a little bit longer. Anne figured it out first—that Maxon was coming to see me—because I was always eager to get out of the binding clothes.

“Would you like us to stay later tonight? It's no problem,” Mary said just a little too hopefully. After the calamity of Maxon visiting earlier this week, I decided sending them out as early as possible was the best way to go. Besides, I couldn't bear to have them watching me until he showed up.

“No, no. I'm fine. If I have a problem with the dress later, I'll ring.”

They reluctantly backed out the door and left me to wait for Maxon. I didn't know how long he'd be, and I didn't want to start a book and have to stop, or sit down at the piano only to hop right back up. I ended up just lounging on the bed, waiting. I let my mind wander. I thought of Marlee and her kindness. I realized that, besides a few small details, I knew very little about her. Still, I trusted that her actions toward me were in no way fake. And then I thought of the girls who were all too fake. I wondered if Maxon could tell the difference.

It seemed like Maxon's experience with women was so great and so small at once. He was gentlemanly enough, but when he got too close, he came undone. It was like he knew how to treat a lady, he just didn't know how to treat a date.

It was quite a contrast to Aspen.

Aspen.

His name, his face, his memory hit me so quickly it was hard to process. Aspen. What was he doing now? It was getting close to curfew in Carolina. He'd still be at work, if he had a job today. Or maybe out with Brenna, or whoever else he'd decided to start spending his time with since we broke up. Part of me ached to know ... part of me wanted to crumble just thinking about it.

I looked over to my jar. I picked it up and felt the penny slide around, so lonely.

“Me, too,” I whispered. “Me, too.”

Was it stupid of me to keep this? I'd given back everything else, so why save one little penny?

Would this be all I had left? A penny in a jar to show my daughter one day, to tell her about my first boyfriend—the one no one knew about?

I didn't have time to dwell on my worries. Maxon's firm knock came only minutes later. I found myself running to the door.

I drew it open in a big sweep, and Maxon looked surprised to see me.

"Where in the world are your maids?" he asked, surveying my room.

"Gone. I send them off when I come back from dinner."

"Every day?"

"Yes, of course. I can take my clothes off by myself, thank you."

Maxon raised his eyebrows and smiled. I blushed. I hadn't meant it to come out like that.

"Grab a wrap. It's chilly out."

We walked down the hall. I was still a little distracted by my thoughts, and I knew by now that Maxon wasn't great with starting conversations. I had looped my hand around his arm almost immediately, though. I was glad that there was a sort of familiarity there.

"If you insist on not keeping your maids around, I'm going to have to post a guard outside your door," he said.

"No! I don't like being babysat."

He chuckled. "He'd be outside. You wouldn't even know he was there."

"I would too," I complained. "I'd sense his presence."

Maxon made a playfully exhausted sigh. I was so busy arguing, I didn't hear the whispers until they were practically in front of us. Celeste, Emmica, and Tiny were heading past us toward their rooms.

"Ladies," Maxon said, and gave a small head nod.

I supposed it was foolish to think no one would see us together. I felt my face heat up, but I wasn't sure why.

The girls all curtsied and carried on their way. I looked over my shoulder at them as we went toward the stairs. Emmica and Tiny looked curious. Within minutes, they would be telling others about this. I would be cornered tomorrow for sure. Celeste was staring daggers at me. I

was sure she thought I had personally wronged her.

I turned away and said the first thing that came to mind.

“I told you the girls who got nervous about the attack would end up staying.” I didn’t know exactly who had asked to leave, but rumors pointed to Tiny as being one. She had fainted. Someone else had said Bariel, but I knew that was a lie. You’d have to pry the crown out of her cold dead hands first.

“You can’t imagine what a relief that was.” He sounded sincere.

It took me a moment to think of how to respond, as that wasn’t quite what I was expecting, and I was very focused on not falling. I didn’t know how to take steps down very well while holding on to someone else. The heels didn’t help. At least if I slipped, he would grab me.

“I would have thought it would be helpful in a way,” I said as we made it to the first floor and I found my footing again. “I mean, it has to be complicated to pick one person out of all these girls. If the circumstances weeded some out for you, shouldn’t that make it easier?”

Maxon shrugged. “I suppose it should. But it didn’t feel that way at all, I assure you.” He looked hurt. “Good evening, sirs,” he greeted the guards, who opened the doors to the garden without the slightest hesitation. Maybe I would have to take Maxon up on that offer to have them know I liked to go outside. The idea of being able to escape so easily was appealing.

“I don’t understand,” I said as he led me to a bench—our bench—and let me sit facing the lights of the palace. He took a seat with his body facing the opposite direction, so that we were sort of turned in toward each other. It was an easy way to talk.

He looked hesitant about sharing, but he took a breath and spoke. “Maybe I was just flattering myself, thinking I’d be worth some sort of risk. Not that I’d wish that on anyone!” he clarified. “I don’t mean that. It just... I don’t know. Don’t you all see everything I’m risking?”

“Umm, no. You’re here with your family to give you advice, and we all live around your schedule. Everything about your life stays the same, and ours changed overnight. What in the world could you possibly be risking?”

Maxon looked shocked.

“America, I might have my family, but imagine how embarrassing it is to have your parents watch as you attempt to date for the first time. And not just your parents—the whole country! Worse than that, it’s not even a normal style of dating.

“And living around my schedule? When I’m not with you all, I’m organizing troops, making laws, perfecting budgets ... and all on my own these days, while my father watches me

stumble in my own stupidity because I have none of his experience. And then, when I inevitably do things in a way he wouldn't, he goes and corrects my mistakes. And while I'm trying to do all this work, you—the girls, I mean—are all I can think about. I'm excited and terrified by the lot of you!"

He was using his hands more than I'd ever seen, whipping them in the air and running them through his hair.

"And you think my life isn't changing? What do you think my chances might be of finding a soul mate in the group of you? I'll be lucky if I can just find someone who'll be able to stand me for the rest of our lives. What if I've already sent her home because I was relying on some sort of spark I didn't feel? What if she's waiting to leave me at the first sign of adversity? What if I don't find anyone at all? What do I do then, America?"

His speech had started out angered and impassioned, but by the end his questions weren't rhetorical anymore. He really wanted to know: What was he going to do if no one here was even close to being someone he could love? Though that didn't even seem to be his main concern; he was more worried that no one would love him.

"Actually, Maxon, I think you will find your soul mate here. Honestly."

"Really?" His voice charged with hope at my prediction.

"Absolutely." I put a hand on his shoulder. He seemed to be comforted by that touch alone. I wondered how often people simply touched him. "If your life is as upside down as you say it is, then she has to be here somewhere. In my experience, true love is usually the most inconvenient kind." I smiled weakly.

He seemed happy to hear those words, and they consoled me as well. Because I believed them. And if I couldn't have love of my own, the best I could do was help Maxon find it himself.

"I hope you and Marlee hit it off. She's incredibly sweet."

Maxon made a strange face. "She seems so."

"What? Is something wrong with sweet?"

"No, no. Sweet is good."

He didn't elaborate.

"What do you keep looking for?" he asked suddenly.

“What?”

“You can’t seem to keep your eyes in one place. I can tell that you’re paying attention, but you seem to be looking for something.”

I realized he was right. All through his little speech, I’d scanned the garden and the windows and even the towers along the walls. I was getting paranoid.

“People ... cameras...” I shook my head as I looked into the night.

“We’re alone. There’s just the guard by the door.” Maxon pointed to the lone figure in the palace lamplight. He was right, no one had followed us out, and the windows were all lit up but vacant. I’d seen that already through my scanning, but it helped to have it confirmed.

I felt my posture relax a little.

“You don’t like people watching you, do you?” he asked.

“Not really. I prefer being below the radar. That’s what I’m used to, you know?” I traced the patterns carved into the perfect block of stone beneath me, not meeting his eyes.

“You’ll have to adjust to that. When you leave here, eyes will be on you for the rest of your life. My mom still talks to some of the women she was with when she went through the Selection. They’re all viewed as important women. Still.”

“Great,” I moaned. “Just one more thing I can’t wait to go home to.”

Maxon’s face was apologetic, but I had to look away. I was freshly reminded of how much this stupid competition was costing me, how my idea of normal was never coming back. It didn’t seem fair....

But I checked myself again. I shouldn’t take it out on Maxon. He was as much a victim in this as the rest of us, though in a very different way. I sighed and looked back to him. I saw his face set as he decided something.

“America, could I ask you something personal?”

“Maybe,” I hedged. He gave me a humorless smile.

“It’s just ... well, I can tell that you really don’t like it here. You hate the rules and the competition and the attention and the clothes and the ... well, no, you like the food.” He smiled. I did, too. “You miss your home and your family ... and I suspect other people very, very much. Your feelings are incredibly close to the surface.”

“Yeah.” I rolled my eyes. “I know.”

“But you’re willing to be homesick and miserable here instead of going home. Why?”

I felt the lump rise in my throat, and I pushed it back down.

“I’m not miserable ... and you know why.”

“Well, sometimes you seem okay. I see you smiling when you talk to some of the other girls, and you seem very content at meals, I’ll give you that. But other times you just look so sad. Would you tell me why? The whole story?”

“It’s just another failed love story. It’s nothing big or exciting. Trust me.” Please don’t push me. I don’t want to cry.

“For better or for worse, I’d like to know one true love story besides my parents’, one that was outside these walls and the rules and the structure.... Please?”

The truth was I’d carried the secret for so long, I couldn’t imagine putting it into words. And it hurt so much to think of Aspen. Could I even say his name out loud? I took a deep breath. Maxon was my friend now. He tried so hard to be nice to me. And he’d been so honest with me....

“In the world out there”—I pointed past the vast walls—“the castes take care of one another. Sometimes. Like my father has three families who buy at least one painting every year, and I have families that always pick me to sing at their Christmas parties. They’re our patrons, see?”

“Well, we were sort of patrons to his family. They’re Sixes. When we could afford to have someone help clean or if we needed help with the inventory, we always called his mother. I knew him when we were kids, but he was older than me, closer to my brother’s age. They always played rough, so I avoided them.

“My older brother, Kota, he’s an artist like my dad. A few years back this one metal sculpture piece that he’d been working on for years sold for a massive amount of money. You may have heard of him.”

Maxon mouthed the words Kota Singer. The seconds passed, and I saw the connection click in his brain.

I brushed my hair off my shoulders and braced myself.

“We were really excited for Kota; he’d worked really hard on that piece. And we needed that money so badly at the time, the whole family was elated. But Kota kept almost all the money for himself. That one sculpture catapulted him; people started calling for his work every day. Now he has a waiting list a mile long and charges through the roof because he can. I think he

might be a little addicted to the fame. Fives rarely get that kind of notice.”

Our eyes met in a very significant moment, and I thought again of how I was past ever going unnoticed again, whether I wanted to be or not.

“Anyway, after the calls started coming, Kota decided to detach himself from the family. My older sister had just gotten married, so we lost her income. Then Kota starts making real money, and he up and leaves us.” I put my hands on Maxon’s chest to emphasize my point. “You don’t do that. You don’t just leave your family. Sticking together ... it’s the only way to survive.”

I saw the understanding in Maxon’s eyes. “He kept it all for himself. Trying to buy his way up?”

I nodded. “He’s got his heart set on being a Two. If he was happy being a Three or Four, he could have bought that title and helped us, but he’s obsessed. It’s stupid, really. He lives more than comfortably, but it’s that damn label he wants. He won’t stop until he gets it.”

Maxon shook his head. “That could take a lifetime.”

“As long as he dies with a Two on his gravestone, I guess he doesn’t care.”

“I take it you’re not close anymore?”

I sighed. “Not now. But at first I thought that I’d just misunderstood something. I thought that Kota was moving out to be independent, not to separate himself from us. In the beginning, I was on his side. When Kota got his apartment and studio set up, I went to help him. And he called the same family of Sixes we always did and their eldest son was available and eager and worked with Kota a few days helping set things up.”

I paused, remembering.

“So there I was, just pulling things out of boxes ... and there he was. Our eyes met, and he didn’t seem so old or rough anymore. It had been awhile since we’d seen each other, you know? We weren’t kids anymore.

“The whole day I was there, we would accidentally touch each other as we moved things around. He would look at me or smile, and I felt like I was really alive for the first time. I just... I was crazy about him.”

My voice finally broke, and some of the tears I’d been longing to shed came out.

“We lived pretty close to each other, so I’d take walks during the day just in case I might get to see him. Whenever his mother came by to help, sometimes he’d show up too. And we’d

just watch each other—that’s all we could do.” I let out a tiny sob. “He’s a Six and I’m a Five, and there are laws ... and my mother! Oh, she would have been furious. No one could know.”

I was moving my hands a little spastically, the stress of all the secret-keeping coming to the surface.

“Soon, there were little anonymous notes left taped to my window telling me I was beautiful or that I sang like an angel. And I knew they were from him.

“The night of my fifteenth birthday, my mom threw a party and his family was invited. He cornered me and gave me my birthday card and told me to read it when I was alone. When I finally got to it, it didn’t have his name or even a ‘Happy Birthday’ on the inside. It just said, ‘Tree house. Midnight.’”

Maxon’s eyes widened. “Midnight? But—”

“You should know that I break Illéa curfew regularly.”

“You could have landed yourself in jail, America.” He shook his head.

I shrugged. “Back then, it seemed inconsequential. That first time, I felt like I was flying. Here he was, figuring out a way for us to be alone together. I just couldn’t believe he wanted to be alone with me.

“That night I waited up in my room and watched the tree house in my backyard. Near midnight, I saw someone climb up. I remember I actually went to brush my teeth again, just in case. I crept out my window and up the tree. And he was there. I just... I couldn’t believe it.

“I don’t remember how it started, but soon we were confessing how we felt about each other, and we couldn’t stop laughing because we were so happy the other one felt the same way. And I just couldn’t be bothered to worry about breaking curfew or lying to my parents. And I didn’t care that I was a Five and he was a Six. I didn’t worry about the future. Because nothing could matter as much as him loving me...”

“And he did, Maxon, he did....”

More tears. I clutched my chest, feeling Aspen’s absence like I never had. Saying it out loud only made it more real. There was nothing to do but finish the story.

“We dated in secret for two years. We were happy, but he was always worried about us sneaking around and how he couldn’t give me what he thought I deserved. When we got the notice about the Selection, he insisted that I sign up.”

Maxon's mouth dropped open.

"I know. It was so stupid. But it would have hung over him forever if I didn't try. And I honestly, honestly thought that I would never get chosen. How could I?"

I raised my hands in the air and let them fall. I was still baffled by it all.

"I found out from his mom that he'd been saving up to marry some mystery girl. I was so excited. I made him a little surprise dinner, thinking I could coax the proposal out of him. I was so ready.

"But when he saw all the money that I'd spent on him, it upset him. He's very proud. He wanted to spoil me, not the other way around, and I guess he saw then that he'd never be able to. So he broke up with me instead....

"One week later, my name got called."

I heard Maxon whisper something unintelligible.

"The last time I saw him was at my send-off," I choked. "He was with another girl."

"WHAT?" Maxon shouted.

I buried my head in my hands.

"The thing is, it drives me crazy because I know other girls are after him, they always were, and now he has no reason to turn them down. Maybe he's even with the girl from my send-off. I don't know. And I can't do anything about it. But the thought of going home and watching it... I just can't, Maxon...."

I wept and wept, and Maxon didn't rush me. When the tears finally started to slow, I spoke.

"Maxon, I hope you find someone you can't live without. I really do. And I hope you never have to know what it's like to have to try and live without them."

Maxon's face was a shallow echo of my own pain. He looked absolutely brokenhearted for me. More than that, he looked angry.

"I'm sorry, America. I don't..." His face shifted a little. "Is this a good time to pat your shoulder?"

His uncertainty made me smile. "Yes. Now would be a great time."

He seemed as skeptical as he'd been the other day, but instead of just patting my shoulder, he leaned in and tentatively wrapped his arms around me.

“I only really ever hug my mother. Is this okay?” he asked.

I laughed. “It’s hard to get a hug wrong.”

After a minute, I spoke again. “I know what you mean, though. I don’t really hug anyone besides my family.”

I felt so drained after the long day of dressing and the Report and dinner and talking. It was nice to have Maxon just hold me, sometimes even patting my hair. He wasn’t as lost as he seemed. He patiently waited for my breathing to slow, and when it did, he pulled back to look at me.

“America, I promise you I’ll keep you here until the last possible moment. I understand that they want me to narrow the Elite down to three and then choose. But I swear to you, I’ll make it to two and keep you here until then. I won’t make you leave a moment before I have to. Or the moment you’re ready. Whichever comes first.”

I nodded.

“I know we just met, but I think you’re wonderful. And it bothers me to see you hurt. If he were here, I’d... I’d...” Maxon shook with frustration, then sighed. “I’m so sorry, America.”

He pulled me back in, and I rested my head on his broad shoulder. I knew Maxon would keep his promises. So I settled into perhaps the last place I ever thought I’d find genuine comfort.

CHAPTER 16

WHEN I WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, my eyelids felt heavy. As I rubbed the tiny ache out of them, I felt glad that I'd told Maxon everything. It seemed so funny that the palace—the beautiful cage—was the one place I could actually let myself be open about everything I'd been feeling.

Maxon's promise settled in during the night, and I felt sure that I'd be safe here. This whole process of Maxon whittling down thirty-five women to one was going to take weeks, maybe months. Time and space were just what I needed. I couldn't be sure I'd ever get over Aspen. I'd heard my mom talk about your first love being the one that sticks with you. But maybe I'd be able to just feel normal sooner rather than later with this time in between us.

My maids didn't ask about my puffy eyes, they just made them less swollen. They didn't question my mess of hair, they just smoothed it. And I appreciated that. It wasn't like home, where everyone saw that I was sad and didn't do anything about it. Here I could feel that they were all worried about me and whatever it was I was going through. In response they handled me with extreme care.

By midmorning I was ready to start my day. It was Saturday, so there was no routine or schedule, but it was the one day a week we were all required to stay in the Women's Room. The palace saw guests on Saturdays, and we had been warned that people might want to meet us. I wasn't too excited about it, but at least I got to wear my new jeans for the first time. Of course, they were the best-fitting pair of pants I'd ever owned. I hoped that since Maxon and I were on such good terms, he'd let me keep them after I left.

I went downstairs slowly, a little tired from a late night. Before I even got to the Women's Room, I heard the buzz of talking girls, and when I walked in, Marlee grabbed me and pulled me toward two chairs in the back of the room.

"There you are! I've been waiting for you," she said.

"Sorry, Marlee. I had a long night and slept in."

She turned to look at me, probably noting the leftover sadness in my voice, but sweetly decided to focus on my jeans. "Those look fantastic."

"I know. I've never felt anything like them." My voice lifted a bit. I decided to go back to my old rule: Aspen wasn't allowed here. I pushed him away and focused on my second-favorite person in the palace. "Sorry to keep you waiting. What did you want to talk about?"

Marlee hesitated. She bit her lip as we sat down. There was no one else around. She must have a secret.

“Actually, now that I think of it, maybe I shouldn’t tell you. Sometimes I forget that we’re competing against each other.”

Oh. She had secrets of the Maxon variety. This I had to hear.

“I know just how you feel, Marlee. I think we could become really close friends. I can’t bring myself to think of you as an enemy, you know?”

“Yeah. I think you’re so sweet. And the people love you. I mean, you’re probably going to win....” She seemed a little defeated at the idea.

I had to will myself not to wince or laugh at those words.

“Marlee, can I tell you a secret?” My voice was full of gentle truth. I hoped she would believe my words.

“Of course, America. Anything.”

“I don’t know who will win this whole thing. Really, it could be anyone in this room. I guess everyone thinks that it’ll be them, but I already know that if it can’t be me, I’d want it to be you. You seem generous and fair. I think you’d be a great princess. Honestly.” It was almost all the truth.

“I think you’re smart and personable,” she whispered. “You’d be great, too.”

I bowed my head. It was sweet of her to think so highly of me. I felt a bit uncomfortable when people talked about me that way, though... May, Kenna, my maids ... it was hard to believe how many people thought I’d be a good princess. Was I the only one who saw how flawed I was? I was unrefined. I didn’t have it in me to be bossy or overly organized. I was selfish and had a horrible temper, and I didn’t like being in front of people. And I wasn’t brave. You had to be brave to take this job. And that’s what this was. Not just a marriage, but a position.

“I feel that way about a lot of the girls,” she confessed. “Like everyone has some quality that I don’t that would make them better than me.”

“That’s the thing, Marlee. You could probably find something special about everyone in this room. But who knows exactly what Maxon is looking for?”

She shook her head.

“So let’s not worry about that. You can tell me anything you want to. I’ll keep your secrets if

you keep mine. I'll pull for you, and if you want to, you can pull for me. It's nice to have friends here."

She smiled, then looked around the room, checking to make sure no one could hear us.

"Maxon and I had our date," she whispered.

"Yeah?" I asked. I knew I seemed overly eager, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to know if he'd managed to be any less stiff around her. And I wanted to know if he liked her.

"He sent a letter to my maids and asked if he could see me on Thursday." I smiled as Marlee spoke and thought of how the day before he'd done that, Maxon and I had decided to eliminate those formalities. "I sent one back saying yes, of course, like I'd ever turn him down! He came to get me, and we walked around the palace. We got to talking about movies, and it turns out we like a bunch of the same ones. So we went downstairs to the basement. Have you seen the movie theater down there?"

"No." I'd never actually been in a movie theater, and I couldn't wait for her to describe it.

"Oh, it's perfect! The seats are wide and they recline and you can even pop some popcorn—they have a popper. Maxon stood there and made a batch just for us! It was so cute, America. He measured the oil wrong and the first batch burned. He had to call someone to come and clean it up and try again."

I rolled my eyes. Smooth, Maxon, real smooth. At least Marlee seemed to think it was endearing.

"So we watched the movie, and when we got to the romantic part at the end, he held my hand! I thought I'd faint. I mean, I'd taken his arm when we walked, but that's just what you're supposed to do. Here he was taking my hand...." She sighed and fell back into her chair.

I giggled out loud. She looked completely smitten. Yes, yes, yes!

"I can't wait for him to visit me again. He's just so handsome, don't you think?" she asked.

I paused. "Yeah, he's cute."

"Come on, America! You have to have noticed those eyes and his voice...."

"Except when he laughs!" Just remembering Maxon's laugh had me grinning. It was cute but awkward. He pushed his breaths out, and then made a jagged noise when he inhaled, almost like another laugh in itself.

“Yes, okay, he does have a funny laugh, but it’s cute.”

“Sure, if you like the lovable sound of an asthma attack in your ear every time you tell a joke.”

Marlee lost it and doubled over in laughter.

“All right, all right,” she said, coming up for air. “You have to think there’s something attractive about him.”

I opened my mouth and shut it two or three times. I was tempted to take another jab at Maxon, but I didn’t want Marlee to see him in a negative light. So I thought about it.

What was attractive about Maxon?

“Well, when he lets his guard down, he’s okay. Like when he just talks without checking his words or you catch him just looking at something like ... like he’s really looking for the beauty in it.”

Marlee smiled, and I knew she’d seen that in him, too.

“And I like that he seems genuinely involved when he’s there, you know? Like even though he’s got a country to run and a thousand things to do, it’s like he forgets it all when he’s with you. He just dedicates himself to what’s right in front of him. I like that.

“And ... well, don’t tell anyone this, but his arms. I like his arms.”

I blushed at the end. Stupid ... why hadn’t I just stuck to the general good things about his personality? Luckily, Marlee was happy to pick up the conversation.

“Yes! You can really feel them under those thick suits, can’t you? He must be incredibly strong,” Marlee gushed.

“I wonder why. I mean, what’s the point of him being that strong? He does deskwork. It’s weird.”

“Maybe he likes to flex in front of the mirror,” Marlee said, making a face and flexing her own tiny arms.

“Ha, ha! I bet that’s it. I dare you to ask him!”

“No way!”

It sounded like Marlee had had a great time. I wondered why Maxon seemed so reluctant to mention that last night. Based on his reaction, it seemed like they hadn’t been together at all. Maybe he was shy?

I looked around the room and saw that more than half the girls seemed tense or unhappy. Janelle, Emmica, and Zoe were listening intently to something Kriss was saying. Kriss was smiling and animated, but Janelle's face was tight with worry, and Zoe was biting her nails. Emmica was absently kneading a spot just below her ear, as if she was in pain. Beside them the mismatched pair of Celeste and Anna sat having another intense discussion. True to her usual form, Celeste looked incredibly smug as she spoke. Marlee noted my staring and clarified what was happening.

"The grumpy ones are the girls he hasn't been out with yet. He told me I was his second date on Thursday alone. He's trying to spend time with everyone."

"Really? You think that's it?"

"Yeah. I mean, look at you and me. We're fine, and it's because he's seen us both one-on-one. We know he liked us enough to see us and not kick us out right afterward. It's getting around who he's spent time with and who he hasn't. They're worried he's waiting on them because he isn't interested, and that once he does see them, he'll just let them go."

Why hadn't he told me any of this? Weren't we friends? A friend would talk about this. He'd seen at least a dozen girls based on their smiles. We'd spent the better part of the evening together last night, and all he did was make me cry. What kind of friend held those kinds of secrets while making me spill all my own?

Tuesday, who had been listening to Camille with an anxious expression on her face, got up from her seat and looked around the room. She found Marlee and me in the corner and quickly walked over.

"What did you guys do on your date?" she asked abruptly.

"Hi, Tuesday," Marlee said cheerfully.

"Oh, hush!" she cried, and turned back to me. "Come on, America, spill."

"I told you."

"No. The one last night!" A maid came to the corner and offered us tea, which I was prepared to take, but Tuesday shooed her away.

"How...?"

"Tiny saw you together and told," Marlee said, trying to explain Tuesday's mood. "You're the only one he's been alone with twice. A lot of the girls who haven't seen him yet were complaining. They don't think it's right. But it's not your fault if he likes you."

“It’s completely unfair,” Tuesday whined. “I haven’t seen him outside of mealtimes, not even in passing. What in the world did you two do?”

“We ... uh ... we went back to the gardens. He knows I like it outside. And we just talked.” I felt nervous, like I was in trouble. Tuesday’s face was so intense, I looked away. When I did, I saw that a few girls at nearby tables were listening in.

“You just talked?” she asked skeptically.

I shrugged. “That’s it.”

Tuesday huffed and went to Kriss’s table, urging her to tell her story over again, quite energetically. I, however, was stunned.

“Are you okay, America?” Marlee asked, snapping me back into reality.

“Yes. Why?”

“You just look upset.” Marlee’s brow furrowed in concern.

“Nope. Not upset. Everything’s great.”

Suddenly, in a move so swift I would have missed it if they weren’t so close, Anna Farmer—a Four who worked land for a living—reached up and slapped Celeste across the face.

Several people gasped, including myself. Those who missed it turned around and asked what had happened, most notably Tiny, whose high voice pierced the quiet left in the room.

“Oh, Anna, no,” Emmica said with a sigh.

The moment after it happened, Anna slowly comprehended what she’d just done. She would probably be sent home; we weren’t supposed to physically assault another Selected. Emmica started tearing up while Anna sat in stunned silence. They were both farm girls and had bonded early on. I couldn’t imagine how I’d feel if it was Marlee suddenly leaving.

Anna, who I’d only met in passing, had always struck me as an effervescent creature. I knew there was nothing in her that would naturally seek to harm another person. During a large part of the rebel attack, she’d been on her knees in prayer.

Undoubtedly, she had been provoked, but no one was sitting within earshot to prove that. It would be Anna’s word against Celeste’s as far as any exchange of words went, but Celeste would have a roomful of people who could back up that she’d been hit. Maxon would presumably be urged to send Anna home as an example to the others.

Tears welled in Anna’s eyes as Celeste whispered something to her and swiftly left the room.

Anna was gone before dinner.

CHAPTER 17

“WHO WAS THE PRESIDENT OF the United States during the Third World War?” Silvia quizzed us.

This was one I didn't know, and I averted my eyes, hoping Silvia wouldn't call on me. Luckily, Amy raised her hand and answered. “President Wallis.”

We were in the Great Room again, starting the week with a history lesson. Well, more like a history test. This was one of those areas where it always seemed that what people knew was varied, both as far as what was fact and just how informed they were. Mom always taught us orally when it came to history. We had pages and worksheets to master for English and math, but when it came to the stories that made up our past, there was very little that I knew for sure was truth.

“Correct. President Wallis was the president before the Chinese assault and continued leading the United States throughout the war,” Silvia confirmed. I thought the name to myself. Wallis, Wallis, Wallis. I really wanted to remember this to tell May and Gerad when I went home, but we were learning so much, it was hard to keep it all straight. “What was their motivation for invading? Celeste?”

She smiled. “Money. The Americans owed them a lot of money and couldn't pay them back.”

“Excellent, Celeste.” Silvia gave her a dotting smile. How did Celeste wrap people around her finger like that? It was so irritating. “When the United States couldn't repay their massive debt, the Chinese invaded. Unfortunately for them, this didn't get them any money, as the United States was beyond bankruptcy. However, it did gain them American labor. And when the Chinese took over, what did they rename the United States?”

I raised my hand, along with a few others. “Jenna?” Silvia called.

“The American State of China.”

“Yes. The American State of China had the appearance of its original country, but was merely a facade. The Chinese were pulling strings behind the scenes, influencing any major political happenings, and steering legislation in their favor.” Silvia walked through the desks slowly. I felt like a mouse in the sights of a hawk that was circling ever closer.

I looked around the room. A few people seemed confused. I thought that part was common knowledge.

“Does anyone have anything they'd like to add?” Silvia asked.

Bariel piped up. “The Chinese invasion prompted several countries, particularly those in Europe, to align themselves with one another and make alliances.”

“Yes,” Silvia replied. “However, the American State of China had no such friends at the time. It took them five years to regroup, and they could barely handle that, let alone trying to forge alliances.” She tried to express the hardship through an exhausted look. “The ASC planned to fight back against China but was then faced with another invasion. What country attempted to occupy the ASC then?”

Lots of hands went up this time. “Russia,” someone said without waiting to be called on. Silvia looked around for the offender, but couldn’t pinpoint the source.

“Correct,” she said, slightly unhappily. “Russia tried to expand in both directions and failed miserably, but this failure on their part provided the ASC with an opportunity to fight back. How?”

Kriss raised her hand and answered. “The entirety of what was North America banded together to fight Russia, since it seemed clear they had their eyes on more than just the ASC. And fighting Russia was easier because China was attacking them as well for attempting to steal their territory.”

Silvia smiled proudly. “Yes. And who headed up the assault against Russia?”

The whole room shouted out the answer: “Gregory Illéa!” Some girls even clapped.

Silvia nodded. “And that led to the founding of the country. The alliances the ASC acquired had formed a united front, and the United States’s reputation was so damaged, no one wanted to readopt that name. So a new nation was formed under Gregory Illéa’s name and leadership. He saved this country.”

Emmica raised her hand, and Silvia acknowledged her. “In some ways, we’re kind of like him. I mean, we get to serve our country. He was just a private citizen who donated his money and knowledge. And he changed everything,” she said with wonder.

“That is a beautiful point,” Silvia said. “And exactly like him, one of you will be elevated to royalty. For Gregory Illéa, he became a king as his family married into a royal family, and for you, it will be marrying into this one.” Silvia had moved herself to awe, so when Tuesday raised her hand, it took her a moment to acknowledge it.

“Umm, why is it that we don’t have any of this in a book? So we could study?” There was a hint of irritation in her voice.

Silvia shook her head. “Dear girls, history isn’t something you study. It’s something you

should just know.”

Marlee turned to me and whispered, “But clearly we don’t.” She smiled at her own joke, and then focused again on Silvia.

I thought about that, how we all knew different things or had to guess at the truth. Why weren’t we given history books?

I remembered a few years ago when I went into Mom and Dad’s room, since Mom said I could choose what I wanted to read for English. As I went through my options, I spotted a thick, ratty book in the back corner and pulled it out. It was a U.S. history book. Dad came in a few minutes later, saw what I was reading, and said it was okay, so long as I never told anyone about it.

When Dad asked me to keep a secret, I did so without question, and I loved looking through all those pages. Well, the ones that were still legible. Lots had been torn out, and the edge of the book looked like it might have been burned, but that’s where I saw a picture of the old White House and learned about the way holidays used to be.

I never thought to question the lack of truth until it had been placed in front of me. Why did the king just let us guess?

The flashbulbs went off again, capturing Maxon and Natalie smiling brightly.

“Natalie, bring your chin down just a touch, please. That’s it.” The photographer snapped another picture, filling the room with light. “I think that will do. Who’s next?” he called.

Celeste came in from the side, a general group of maids still swarming around her before the photographer started up again. Natalie, still beside Maxon, said something and kicked up her foot flirtatiously behind her. He responded quietly, and she giggled as she walked away.

We’d been told after yesterday’s history lesson that this photo shoot was merely for the amusement of the public, but I couldn’t help thinking that there was some actual weight to it. Someone had written an editorial in a magazine about the look of a princess. I didn’t get to read the article myself, but Emmica and some of the others did. According to her, it was about Maxon needing to find someone who actually looked regal and photographed well with him, someone who would look nice on a stamp.

And now we were all lined up in identical cream-colored, cap-sleeved, drop-waist dresses with a heavy red sash across our shoulders, taking pictures with Maxon. The photos would be printed in the same magazine, and the magazine staff was going to make picks. I was kind of uncomfortable with it all. This was the thing I’d been bothered about since the beginning, that Maxon was looking for nothing more than a pretty face. Now that I’d met him, I was sure that wasn’t true, but it got to me that people thought that Maxon was like that.

I sighed. Some of the girls were walking around, munching on no-drip foods and chatting, but the majority, including myself, were standing around the perimeter of the set erected in the Great Room. A huge golden tapestry that reminded me of the drop cloths Dad used at home was hung up against a wall and spilled across the floor. A small couch was off to one side and a pillar was on the other. In the middle the Illéan emblem stood, giving the whole silly thing an air of being patriotic. We watched as each Selected paraded across the space to be photographed, and many who watched were whispering things they liked and didn't or what they were planning for themselves.

Celeste walked up to Maxon with a sparkle in her eyes, and he smiled as she approached. The moment she reached him, she put her lips to his ear and whispered something. Whatever it was, Maxon leaned his head back with laughter and nodded, agreeing with her little secret. It was strange to see them like that. How could someone who got along so well with me do the same with someone like her?

“All right, miss, just face the camera and smile, please,” the photographer called, and Celeste immediately complied.

She turned herself toward Maxon and placed a hand on his chest, tilted her head down, and gave an expert smile. She seemed to understand how to use the lighting and set to her best advantage and kept moving Maxon over a few inches or insisting on changing their pose. Where some of the girls took their time and made their turn with Maxon last—particularly those who still hadn't secured a date—Celeste appeared to want to show her efficiency instead.

In a bolt of speed, she was done, and the photographer called for the next girl. I was so busy watching Celeste run her fingers down Maxon's arm as she exited that a maid had to gently remind me it was my turn.

I gave my head a tiny shake and willed myself to focus. I gathered up my dress in my hands and walked toward Maxon. His eyes shifted from Celeste to me, and maybe I imagined it, but his face seemed to brighten a bit.

“Hello, my dear,” he sang.

“Don't even start,” I warned, but he merely chuckled and reached his hands out.

“Hold on a moment. Your sash is crooked.”

“Not surprised.” The darn thing was so heavy, I could feel it shifting every time I stepped.

“I suppose that'll do,” he said jokingly.

I fired back, “In the meantime, they ought to hang you up with the chandeliers.” I poked at the

glittering medals across his chest. His uniform, which looked almost like something the guards would wear, only far more elegant, also had golden things on his shoulders and a sword hanging off his hip. It was a bit much.

“Look at the camera, please,” the photographer called. I looked up and saw not just his eyes but the faces of all the other girls watching, and my nerves shot up.

I wiped my moist hands on my dress and exhaled.

“Don’t be nervous,” Maxon whispered.

“I don’t like everyone looking at me.”

He pulled me very close and put his hand on my waist. I went to step back, but Maxon’s arm held me securely to him. “Just look at me like you can’t stand me.” He squinted into a mock pout, which made me crack up.

The camera flashed at just that second, capturing us both laughing.

“See,” Maxon said. “It’s not so bad.”

“I guess.” I was still tense for a few minutes as the photographer shouted out instructions and Maxon shifted from a close embrace to a loose one, or turned me so my back was against his chest.

“Excellent,” the photographer said. “Could we get a few on the lounge?”

I was feeling better now that it was half over, and I sat next to Maxon with the best posture I could muster. Every once in a while, he’d poke or tickle me, making my smile grow bigger until it burst into laughter. I hoped the photographer was catching the moments just before my face scrunched together, otherwise this whole thing was going to be a disaster.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed a waving hand, and a moment later Maxon turned as well. A man in a suit was standing there, and he clearly needed to speak to the prince. Maxon nodded, but the man hesitated, looking to him and then to me, evidently questioning my presence.

“She’s fine,” Maxon said, and the man came over and knelt before him.

“Rebel attack in Midston, Your Majesty,” he said. Maxon sighed and dropped his head wearily. “They burned acres of crops and killed about a dozen people.”

“Where in Midston?”

“The west, sir, near the border.”

Maxon nodded slowly and looked as if he was adding this piece of information to others in his head. “What does my father say?”

“Actually, Your Majesty, he wanted your thoughts.”

Maxon seemed taken aback for a split second, then spoke. “Localize troops in the southeast of Sota and all along Tammins. Don’t go as far south as Midston, it’d be a waste. See if we can intercept them.”

The man stood and bowed. “Excellent, sir.” As swiftly as he’d come, he vanished.

I knew we were supposed to get back to the pictures, but Maxon didn’t seem nearly so interested in it all now.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He nodded somberly. “Just all those people.”

“Maybe we should stop,” I suggested.

He shook his head, straightened up, and smiled, placing my hand in his. “One thing you must master in this profession is the ability to appear calm when you feel anything but. Please smile, America.”

I raised myself up and gave a shy smile to the camera as the photographer clicked away. In the middle of those last few frames, Maxon squeezed my hand tight, and I did the same to his. In that moment, it felt like we had a connection, something true and deep.

“Thank you very much. Next, please,” the photographer sang.

As Maxon and I stood, he held on to my hand. “Please don’t say anything. It’s imperative you’re discreet.”

“Of course.”

The click of a pair of heels coming toward us reminded me that we weren’t alone, but I kind of wanted to stay. He gave my hand one last squeeze and released me, and as I walked away, I considered several things. How nice it felt that Maxon trusted me enough to let me know this secret, and how it had sort of felt like we were alone for a moment. Then I thought about the rebels, and how the king was usually quick to point out their sedition, but I was supposed to keep this news to myself. It didn’t quite make sense.

“Janelle, my dear,” Maxon said as the next girl approached. I smiled to myself at the tired

endearment. He lowered his voice, but I still heard. “Before I forget, are you free this afternoon?”

Something kind of knotted in my stomach. I guessed it was a late batch of nerves.

“She must have done something terrible,” Amy insisted.

“That’s not what she made it sound like,” Kriss countered.

Tuesday pulled on Kriss’s arm. “What did she say again?”

Janelle had been sent home.

This particular elimination was crucial for us to understand, because it was the first one that was isolated and not caused by rule breaking. She had done something wrong, and we all wanted to know what it was.

Kriss, whose room was across from Janelle’s, had seen her come in and was the only person she’d spoken to before she left. Kriss sighed and retold the story for the third time.

“She and Maxon had gone hunting, but you knew that,” she said, waving her hand around like she was trying to clear her thoughts. Janelle’s date really had been common knowledge. After the photo shoot yesterday, she gushed about their plans to anyone who would listen.

“That was her second date with Maxon. She’s the only one who got two,” Bariel said.

“No, she isn’t,” I mumbled. A few heads turned, acknowledging my statement. It was true, though. Janelle was the only girl to have two dates with Maxon besides me. Not that I was counting.

Kriss continued. “When she came back, she was crying. I asked her what was wrong, and she said she was leaving, that Maxon had told her to go. I gave her a hug because she was so upset and asked her what happened. She said she couldn’t tell me about it. I don’t understand that. Maybe we’re not allowed to talk about why we’re eliminated?”

“That wasn’t in the rules, was it?” Tuesday asked.

“No one said anything to me about it,” Amy replied, and several others shook their heads in confirmation.

“But what did she say then?” Celeste urged.

Kriss sighed again. “She said that I’d better be careful of what I say. Then she pulled away and slammed the door.”

The room went quiet a moment, considering. “She must have insulted him,” Elayna said.

“Well, if that’s why she left, then it isn’t fair, since Maxon said that someone in this room insulted him the first time they met,” Celeste complained.

People started looking around the room, trying to discover the guilty party, perhaps in an effort to get them—me—kicked out as well. I gave a nervous glance to Marlee, and she sprang into action.

“Maybe she said something about the country? Like the policies or something?”

Bariel sucked her teeth. “Please. How boring must that date have been for them to start talking policy? Has anyone in here actually talked to Maxon about anything related to running the country?”

No one answered.

“Of course you haven’t,” Bariel said. “Maxon’s not looking for a coworker, he’s looking for a wife.”

“Don’t you think you’re underestimating him?” Kriss objected. “Don’t you think Maxon wants someone with ideas and opinions?”

Celeste threw her head back and laughed. “Maxon can run the country just fine. He’s trained for it. Besides, he has teams of people to help him make decisions, so why would he want someone else trying to tell him what to do? If I were you, I’d start learning how to be quiet. At least until he marries you.”

Bariel sidled up beside Celeste. “Which he won’t.”

“Exactly,” Celeste said with a smile. “Why would Maxon bother with some brainiac Three when he could have a Two?”

“Hey!” Tuesday cried. “Maxon doesn’t care about numbers.”

“Of course he does,” Celeste replied in a tone someone would use with a child. “Why do you think everyone below a Four is gone?”

“Still here,” I said, raising my hand. “So if you think you’ve got him figured out, you’re wrong.”

“Oh, it’s the girl who doesn’t know when to shut up,” Celeste said in mock amusement.

I balled my fist, trying to decide if it would be worth hitting her. Was that part of her plan? But before I could move at all, Silvia burst through the door.

“Mail, ladies!” she called out, and the tension in the room flew away.

We all stopped, eager to get our hands on what Silvia was carrying. We’d been at the palace nearly two weeks now, and with the exception of hearing from our families on the second day, this was our first real contact from home.

“Let’s see,” Silvia said, looking through stacks of letters, completely oblivious to the almost-argument that had taken place not seconds ago. “Lady Tiny?” she called as she looked around the room.

Tiny raised her hand and walked forward. “Lady Elizabeth? Lady America?”

I practically ran forward and snatched the letter out of her hand. I was so hungry for words from my family. As soon as it was in my clutches, I retreated to a corner for a few moments to myself.

Dear America,

I can’t wait for Friday to come. I can’t believe you’re going to get to talk to Gavril Fadaye! You have all the luck.

I certainly didn’t feel lucky. Tomorrow night we were all getting grilled by Gavril, and I had no idea what he would ask us. I felt sure I’d make an idiot out of myself.

It’ll be nice to hear your voice again. I miss you singing around the house. Mom doesn’t do it, and it’s been so quiet since you left. Will you wave to me on the show?

How’s the competition going? Do you have lots of friends there? Have you talked to any of the girls who left? Mom is saying all the time now that it’s not a big deal if you lose anymore. Half those girls who went home are already engaged to the sons of mayors or celebrities. She says someone will take you if Maxon doesn’t. Gerad is hoping you marry a basketball player instead of a boring old prince. But I don’t care what anybody says. Maxon is so gorgeous!

Have you kissed him yet?

Kissed him? We’d only just met. And there’d be no reason for Maxon to kiss me anyway.

I bet he's the best kisser in the universe. I think if you're a prince, you have to be!

I have so much more to tell you, but Mom wants me to go paint. Write me a real letter soon. A long one! With lots and lots of details!

I love you! We all do.

May

So the eliminated girls were already getting snatched up by wealthy men. I didn't realize being the castoff of a future king made you a commodity. I walked around the perimeter of the room, thinking over May's words.

I wanted to know what was going on. I wondered what had really happened with Janelle and was curious if Maxon had another date tonight. I really wanted to see him.

My mind was racing, searching for a way to simply speak to him. As I thought, I stared at the paper in my hands.

The second page of May's letter was almost completely blank. I tore off a piece of it as I wandered. Some girls were still buried in pages of letters from their families, and others were sharing news. After a lap I stopped by the Women's Room guest book and picked up the pen.

I scribbled quickly on my scrap of paper.

Your Majesty—

Tugging my ear. Whenever.

I walked outside the room as if I were simply going to the bathroom and looked up and down the hall. It was empty. I stood there, waiting, until a maid rounded the corner with a tray of tea in her hands.

"Excuse me?" I called to her quietly. Voices carried in these great halls.

The girl curtsied in front of me. "Yes, miss?"

"Would you happen to be going to the prince with that?"

She smiled. "Yes, miss."

“Could you please take this to him for me?” I held out my little folded-up note.

“Of course, miss!”

She took it eagerly and walked away with a newfound energy. No doubt she would unfold it as soon as she was out of sight, but I felt secure in its odd phrasing.

These hallways were captivating, each one more ornate than my entire house. The wallpaper, the gilt mirrors, the giant vases of fresh flowers all so beautiful. The carpets were lavish and immaculate, the windows were sparkling, and the paintings on the walls were lovely.

There were some paintings by artists I knew—van Gogh, Picasso—and some I didn’t. There were photographs of buildings I had seen before. There was one of the legendary White House. Compared to the pictures and what I’d read in my old history book, the palace dwarfed it in size and luxury, but I still wished it was around to see.

I walked farther down the hall and came upon a portrait of the royal family. It looked old; Maxon was shorter than his mother in this picture. He towered over her now.

In the time I’d been at the palace, I had only ever seen them together at dinners and the Illéa Capital Report airing. Were they very private? Did they not like all these strange young girls in their house? Were they only all here because of blood and duty? I didn’t know what to make of this invisible family.

“America?”

I turned at the sound of my name. Maxon was jogging down the hall toward me.

I felt like I was seeing him for the first time.

He had his suit coat off, and the sleeves were rolled up on his white shirt. His blue tie was loosened at the neck, and his hair that was always slicked back was bouncing around a bit as he moved. In stark contrast to the person in uniform yesterday, he looked more boyish, more real.

I froze. Maxon came up to me and grabbed my wrists.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?” he pressed.

Wrong?

“Nothing. I’m fine,” I replied. Maxon let out a breath I didn’t realize he was holding.

“Thank goodness. When I got your note, I thought you were sick or something happened to your family.”

“Oh! Oh, no. Maxon, I’m so sorry. I knew that was a stupid idea. I just didn’t know if you’d be at dinner, and I wanted to see you.”

“Well, what for?” he asked. He was still looking me over with a furrowed brow, as if he was making sure nothing was broken.

“Just to see you.”

Maxon stopped moving. He looked into my eyes with a kind of wonder.

“You just wanted to see me?” He looked happily surprised.

“Don’t be so shocked. Friends usually spend time together.” My tone added the of course.

“Ah, you’re cross with me because I’ve been engaged all week, aren’t you? I didn’t mean to neglect our friendship, America.” Now he was back to the businesslike Maxon.

“No, I’m not mad. I was just explaining myself. You look busy. Go back to work, and I’ll see you when you’re free.” I noticed he was still holding on to my wrists.

“Actually, do you mind if I stay a few minutes? They’re having a budget meeting upstairs, and I detest those things.” Without waiting for an answer, Maxon pulled me over to a short, plush sofa halfway down the hall that rested underneath a window, and I giggled a little as we sat.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just you,” I said, smiling. “It’s cute to see that your job bugs you. What’s so bad about the meetings, anyway?”

“Oh, America!” he said, facing me again. “They go round and round in circles. Father does a good job at calming the advisers, but it’s so hard to push the committees in any given direction. Mom is always on Father to give more to the school systems—she thinks the more educated you are, the less likely you are to be a criminal, and I agree—but Father is never forceful enough to get them to take away from other areas that could manage perfectly with lower funds. It’s infuriating! And it’s not like I’m in command, so my opinion is easily overlooked.” Maxon propped his elbows on his knees and rested his head in his hands. He looked tired.

So now I could see a bit of Maxon’s world, but it was just as unimaginable as ever. How could you deny the voice of your future sovereign?

“I’m sorry. On the plus side, you’ll have more of a say in the future.” I rubbed his back, trying to encourage him.

“I know. I tell myself that. But it’s so frustrating when we could change things now if they’d only listen.” His voice was a little hard to hear when it was directed at the carpet.

“Well, don’t be too discouraged. Your mom is on the right path, but education alone won’t fix anything.”

Maxon raised his head. “What do you mean?” It almost sounded like an accusation. And rightly so. Here was an idea that he’d been championing, and I’d just squashed it. I tried to backpedal.

“Well, compared to the fancy-pants tutors someone like you has, the education system for Sixes and Sevens is terrible. I think getting better teachers or better facilities would do them a world of good. But then what about the Eights? Isn’t that caste responsible for most of the crimes? They don’t get any education. I think if they felt they had something, anything at all, it might encourage them.

“Besides...” I paused. I didn’t know if this was something a boy who’d grown up with everything handed to him could grasp. “Have you ever been hungry, Maxon? Not just ready for dinner, but starving? If there was absolutely no food here, nothing for your mother or father, and you knew that if you just took something from people who had more in a day than you’d have in your whole life, you could eat ... what would you do? If they were counting on you, what wouldn’t you do for someone you loved?”

He was quiet for a moment. Once before—when we’d talked about my maids during the attack—we’d kind of acknowledged the wide gap between us. This was a far more controversial topic of discussion, and I could see him wanting to avoid it.

“America, I’m not saying that some people don’t have it hard, but stealing is—”

“Close your eyes, Maxon.”

“What?”

“Close your eyes.”

He frowned at me but obeyed. I waited until his eyes were shut and his face looked relaxed before I started.

“Somewhere in this palace, there is a woman who will be your wife.”

I saw his mouth twitch, the beginnings of a hopeful smile.

“Maybe you don’t know which face it is yet, but think of the girls in that room. Imagine the one who loves you the most. Imagine your ‘dear.’”

His hand was resting next to mine on the seat, and his fingers grazed mine for a second. I shied away from the touch.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, looking my way.

“Keep ’em closed!”

He chuckled and went back to his original position.

“This girl? Imagine that she depends on you. She needs you to cherish her and make her feel like the Selection didn’t even happen. Like if you were dropped on your own out in the middle of the country to wander around door to door, she’s still the one you would have found. She was always the one you would have picked.”

The hopeful smile began to settle. More than settle, it started to sag.

“She needs you to provide for her and protect her. And if it came to a point where there was absolutely nothing to eat, and you couldn’t even fall asleep at night because the sound of her stomach growling kept you awake—”

“Stop it!” Maxon stood quickly. He walked across the hall and stayed there for a while, facing away from me.

I felt a little awkward. I hadn’t realized this would make him so upset.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

He nodded his head but continued to look at the wall. After a moment he turned around. His eyes were searching mine, sad and questioning.

“Is it really like that?” he asked.

“What?”

“Out there ... does that happen? Are people hungry like that a lot?”

“Maxon, I—”

“Tell me the truth.” His mouth settled into a firm line.

“Yes. That happens. I know of families where people give up their share for their children or siblings. I know of a boy who was whipped in the town square for stealing food. Sometimes you do crazy things when you’re desperate.”

“A boy? How old?”

“Nine,” I breathed with a shiver. I could still remember the scars on Jemmy’s tiny back, and Maxon stretched his own back as if he felt it all himself.

“Have you”—he cleared his throat—“have you ever been like that? Starving?”

I ducked my head, which was a giveaway. I really didn’t want to tell him about that.

“How bad?”

“Maxon, it will only upset you more.”

“Probably,” he said with a grave nod. “But I’m only starting to realize how much I don’t know about my own country. Please.”

I sighed.

“We’ve been pretty bad. Most times if it gets to where we have to choose, we keep the food and lose electricity. The worst was when it happened near Christmas one year. It was very cold, so we were all wearing tons of clothes and watching our breath inside the house. May didn’t understand why we couldn’t exchange gifts. As a general rule, there are never any leftovers at my house. Someone always wants more.”

I watched his face grow pale and realized I didn’t want to see him upset. I needed to turn this around, make it positive.

“I know the checks we’ve gotten over the last few weeks have really helped, and my family is very smart about money. I’m sure they’ve already tucked it away so it’ll stretch out for a long time. You’ve done so much for us, Maxon.” I tried to smile at him again, but his expression remained unchanged.

“Good God. When you said you were only here for the food, you weren’t kidding, were you?” he asked, shaking his head.

“Really, Maxon, we’ve been doing pretty well lately. I—” But I couldn’t finish my sentence.

Maxon came over and kissed my forehead.

“I’ll see you at dinner.”

As he walked away, he straightened his tie.

CHAPTER 18

MAXON HAD SAID HE WOULD see me at dinner, but he wasn't there. The queen entered alone. We made our delicate bows as she took her seat, and then settled in ourselves.

I looked around the room to find the empty chair, assuming he was on a date, but everyone was here.

I had spent the afternoon replaying what I'd said to Maxon. No wonder I'd never had any friends. I was shockingly bad at it.

Just then Maxon and the king walked in. Maxon had his suit coat back on, but his hair was still a handsome mess. He and the king had their heads together as they walked. We hurried to stand. Their conversation was animated. Maxon was using his hands to express things and the king was nodding, acknowledging his son's words but looking a little put out. When they reached the head table, King Clarkson gave Maxon a heavy pat on the back, his expression stern.

As the king turned to face us all, his face suddenly flooded with enthusiasm. "Oh, goodness, dear ladies, please sit." He kissed the queen on her head and sat himself.

But Maxon remained standing.

"Ladies, I have an announcement." Every eye focused in. What could he possibly have for us?

"I know you were all promised compensation for your participation in the Selection." His voice was full of a ringing authority that I had only really heard once—the night he let me into the garden. He was much more attractive when he was using his status for a purpose.

"However, there have been some new monetary allocations. If you are a natural Two or a Three, you will no longer be receiving financing. Fours and Fives will continue to receive compensation, but it will be slightly less than what it has been so far."

I could see some of the girls had their mouths open in shock. Money was part of the deal. Celeste, for example, was fuming. I guessed if you had a lot of money, you got used to the idea of collecting it. And the thought that someone like me would be getting anything she wasn't probably got under her skin.

"I do apologize for any inconvenience, but I will explain this all tomorrow night on the Capital Report. And this is a nonnegotiable situation. If anyone has a problem with this new arrangement and no longer wants to participate, you may leave after dinner."

He sat down and started talking again to the king, who seemed more interested in his dinner than Maxon's words. I was a little disheartened that my family would be receiving less money, but at least we were still getting some. I tried to focus on my dinner, but mostly I was wondering what this meant, and I wasn't alone. Murmurs went up around the room.

"What do you think that's about?" Tiny asked quietly.

"Maybe it's a test," Kriss offered. "I bet there are some people here who are only in it for the money."

As I listened to her, I saw Fiona nudge Olivia and nod her head toward me. I turned away so she wouldn't know I saw.

The girls offered up theories, and I kept watching Maxon. I tried to catch his attention so I could tug my ear, but he didn't look my way.

Mary and I were alone in my room. Tonight I'd face Gavril—and the rest of the nation—on the Illéa Capital Report. Not to mention the other girls would be right there the whole time, watching one another and mentally critiquing. Saying I was nervous was a gross understatement. I fidgeted while Mary listed some possible questions, things she thought the public would want to know.

How was I enjoying the palace? What was the most romantic thing Maxon had done for me? Did I miss my family? Had I kissed Maxon yet?

I eyed Mary when she asked me that one. I'd been throwing out answers to the questions, trying not to think too hard. But I could tell she'd asked that one out of genuine curiosity. The smile on her face proved it.

"No! For goodness' sake." I tried to sound mad, but it was too funny to be upset about. I ended up smirking. And that made Mary giggle. "Oh, just ... why don't you clean something!"

She laughed outright, and before I could tell her to stop, Anne and Lucy burst through the doors with a garment bag.

Lucy was looking more excited than I'd seen her since the moment I'd walked in the first day, and Anne seemed quietly devious.

"What's this about?" I asked as Lucy stopped in front of me to give a buoyant curtsy.

"We finished your dress for the Report, miss," she replied.

My brow wrinkled together. "A new one? Why not the blue one in the closet? Didn't you just

finish that one? I love it.”

The three of them exchanged looks.

“What did you do?” I asked, pointing at the bag Anne was hanging up on the hook near the mirror.

“We talk to all the other maids, miss. We hear a lot of things,” Anne began. “We know that you and Lady Janelle are the only two who got more than one date with His Majesty, and from what we understand, there might be a link between you two.”

“How so?” I asked.

“From what we’ve heard,” Anne continued, “the reason she was asked to leave is because she said some rather unkind things about you. The prince did not agree and dismissed her immediately.”

“What?” I put a hand to my mouth, trying to hide my shock.

“We’re sure you’re his favorite, miss. Most everyone says so.” Lucy sighed happily.

“I think you’ve been misinformed,” I told them. Anne shrugged with a smile on her face, not concerned at all with my opinion.

Then I remembered where this had started. “What does any of this have to do with my dress?”

Mary came over to Anne and began unzipping the long bag, revealing a stunning red dress that shimmered in the fading light falling through the window.

“Oh, Anne,” I said, absolutely awestruck. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

She acknowledged my praise with a nod of her head. “Thank you, miss. We all worked on it, though.”

“It’s beautiful. But I still don’t understand what this has to do with anything you said.”

Mary pulled the dress out of the bag, airing it out, while Anne continued. “As I said, many people around the palace think you’re the prince’s favorite. He says kind things about you and prefers your company above the others’. And it seems the other girls have noticed.”

“What do you mean?”

“We go down to a workroom to do most of the sewing on your dresses. There are stores of material and a place to make shoes, and the other maids are in there, too. Everyone requested a blue dress for tonight. All the maids think it’s because you wear that color almost daily, and

the others are trying to copy you.”

“It’s true,” Lucy chimed in. “Lady Tuesday and Lady Natalie didn’t put on any of their jewelry today. Just like you.”

“And most of the ladies are requesting simpler dresses, like the ones you prefer,” Mary stated.

“That still doesn’t explain why you made me a red dress.”

“To make you noticeable, of course,” Mary answered. “Oh, Lady America, if he really likes you, you have to keep standing out. You’ve been so generous with us, especially Lucy.” We all looked over to Lucy, who nodded in agreement and said, “You—you’re good enough to be the princess. You’d be amazing.”

I hunted for a way to get out of this. I hated being the center of attention.

“But what if everyone else is right? What if the reason Maxon likes me is because I’m not as over the top as everyone else, and then you go and put me in something like that and it ruins it all?”

“Every girl needs to shine once in a while. And we’ve known Maxon most of his life. He would love this.” Anne spoke with such assurance that I felt there was nothing I could do.

I didn’t know how to explain to them that the notes he sent me, the time he’d spent with me, meant nothing other than friendship between us. I couldn’t tell them. It would deflate their happiness, and besides, I needed to keep up appearances if I wanted to stay. And I did. I needed to stay.

“Okay, let’s try it on,” I conceded with a sigh.

Lucy jumped up and down with excitement until Anne reminded her that it wasn’t proper. I slid the silky dress over my head, and they stitched a handful of places they hadn’t quite finished. Mary’s skilled hands held my hair in various ways to see which looked best with the dress, and within half an hour, I was ready.

The set was arranged a little differently tonight for our special show. The thrones for the royal family were off to one side as always, and our seats were on the opposite side again. But the podium was off center, leaving the space focused on two tall chairs. A microphone was resting on one for us to take when we spoke to Gavril. I got queasy just thinking about it.

Sure enough, the room was full of dresses in every shade of blue. Some of them fell closer to green, others closer to purple, but it was clear there was a theme. I felt immediately uncomfortable. I caught Celeste’s eye right away and decided to just stay away from her until I absolutely had to go over to the seats.

Kriss and Natalie walked past, having just checked their makeup one last time. They both looked a little unhappy, though sometimes it was hard to tell with Natalie. Kriss at least looked somewhat different from the crowd as well. Her blue dress was melting into white, like delicate strands of ice were weaving their way to the floor.

“You look stunning, America,” she said in a way that was slightly more an accusation than praise.

“Thanks. That dress is gorgeous.”

She ran her hands down her torso, straightening imaginary wrinkles. “Yeah, I liked it, too.”

Natalie ran her hand across one of the capped sleeves on my dress. “What’s that material? It’s really going to shine under the lights.”

“I have no idea, actually. We don’t get a lot of the nice stuff as Fives,” I said with a shrug. I looked down at the fabric. I’d had at least one other dress made from the same type of cloth, but I hadn’t bothered learning the name.

“America!”

I looked up to see Celeste standing right beside me. Smiling.

“Celeste.”

“Could you come with me for just one moment? I need some help.”

Without waiting for an answer, she pulled me away from Kriss and Natalie and around the heavy blue curtain that was the backdrop of the Report studio.

“Take off your dress,” she ordered as she started unzipping her own.

“What?”

“I want your dress. Take it off. Ugh! Damn hook,” she said, still trying to get out of her clothes.

“I’m not taking off my dress,” I said, and went to leave. I didn’t get very far, though, as Celeste buried her nails into my arm and jerked me back.

“Ouch!” I cried, grabbing my arm. It looked like there would be marks but hopefully no blood.

“Shut up. Take off the dress. Now.”

I stood there, my face set, refusing to budge. Celeste was just going to have to get over not being the center of Illéa.

“I could take it off for you,” she offered coldly.

“I’m not afraid of you, Celeste,” I said as I crossed my arms. “This dress was made for me, and I’m going to wear it. Next time you pick out your clothes, maybe you should try being yourself instead of me. Oh, wait, but maybe then Maxon would see what a brat you are and send you home, huh?”

Without a second of hesitation, she reached up and ripped one of my sleeves off and walked away. I gasped in outrage but was too stunned to do anything more. I looked down and saw a tattered scrap of fabric dangling pathetically in front of me. I heard Silvia calling for everyone to come to their seats, so I walked around the side of the curtain as bravely as I could manage.

Marlee had saved me a seat beside her, and I saw the shocked look on her face as I came into view.

“What happened to your dress?” she whispered.

“Celeste,” I explained in disgust.

Emmica and Samantha, who were sitting in front of us, turned around.

“She tore your dress?” Emmica asked.

“Yes.”

“Go to Maxon and turn her in,” she pleaded. “That girl’s a nightmare.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “I’ll tell him next time I see him.”

Samantha looked sad. “Who knows when that will be? I thought we’d get to spend more time with him.”

“America, lift your arm,” Marlee instructed. She expertly tucked my tattered sleeve into the side of my dress as Emmica plucked away a few stray threads. You couldn’t even tell anything had happened to it. As for the nail marks, well, at least they were on my left arm and away from the camera.

It was almost time to start. Gavril was flipping through notes as the royal family came in at last. Maxon had on a dark blue suit with a pin of the national emblem on his lapel. He looked sharp and calm.

“Good evening, ladies,” he sang with a smile.

A chorus of “Majesty” and “Highness” fell over him.

“Just so you know, I’ll be giving one brief announcement and then introducing Gavril. It’ll be a nice change; he’s always introducing me!” He chuckled, and we all followed. “I know some of you are probably a little nervous, but you have no need to be. Please, just be yourselves. The people want to know you.” Our eyes met a few times while he was talking, but nothing long enough for me to read him. He didn’t seem to notice the dress. My maids would be disappointed.

He walked over to the podium, calling out “Good luck” over his shoulder.

I could tell something was going on. I assumed this announcement of his would be related to what he’d told us yesterday, but I still couldn’t guess at what it all meant. Maxon’s little mystery distracted me, and I wasn’t so nervous anymore. I felt all right as the anthem played and the camera settled squarely on Maxon’s face. I’d been watching the Report since I was a child. Maxon had never addressed the country before, not like this. I wished I could have told him good luck, too.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of Illéa. I know that tonight is an exciting night for us all as the country gets to finally hear from the twenty-five remaining women in the Selection. I can’t begin to express how excited I am for you to meet them. I’m sure you will all agree that any one of these amazing young ladies would be a wonderful leader and future princess.

“But before we get to that, I’d like to announce a new project I am working on that is of great importance to me. Having met these ladies, I’ve been exposed to the wide world outside our palace, a world that I rarely get to see. I’ve been told of its remarkable goodness and made aware of its unimaginable darkness. Through speaking to these women, I’ve embraced the importance of the masses outside these walls. I have been woken to the suffering of some of our lower castes, and I intend to do something about it.”

What?

“It will be at least three months before we can set this up properly, but around the new year, there will be public assistance for food in every Province Services Office. Any Five, Six, Seven, or Eight may go there any evening for a free, nutritious meal. Please know that these women before you have all sacrificed some or all of their compensation to help fund this important program. And while this assistance may not be able to last forever, we will keep it running as long as we can.”

I kept trying to swallow up the gratitude, the awe, but a few tears leaked out. I was still aware enough of what was coming next to worry about my makeup but so appreciative that it was no longer the top priority.

“I feel that no good leader can let the masses go unfed. Most of Illéa is comprised of these lower castes, and we have overlooked these people far too long. That is why I am moving forward and why I am asking others to join me. Twos, Threes, Fours . . . the roads you drive on don’t pave themselves. Your houses aren’t cleaned by magic. Here is your opportunity to acknowledge that truth by donating at your local Province Services Office.”

He paused. “By birth you have been blessed, and it is time to acknowledge that blessing. I will have further updates as this project progresses, and I thank you all for your attention. But now, let’s get to the real reason you all tuned in tonight. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Gavril Fadaye!”

There was a smattering of applause from everyone in the room, though it was obvious not everyone was enthusiastic about Maxon’s announcement. The king, for instance, was clapping but without excitement, though the queen was radiant with pride. The advisers also seemed torn about whether or not this was a good idea.

“Thank you so much for that introduction, Your Majesty!” Gavril announced as he ran onto the set. “Very well done! If this whole prince thing doesn’t work out, you should consider a job in entertainment.”

Maxon laughed out loud as he walked to his seat. The cameras were focused on Gavril now, but I watched Maxon and his parents. I didn’t understand why their reactions were mixed.

“People of Illéa, do we have a treat for you! This evening we’ll be getting the inside scoop from each of these young women. We know you’ve been dying to meet them and hear how things are coming along with our Prince Maxon, so tonight . . . we’re just going to ask! Let’s get started with”—Gavril looked at his note cards—“Miss Celeste Newsome of Clermont!”

Celeste moved sinuously from her seat in the top row and down the steps. She actually kissed Gavril on both cheeks before she sat down. Her interview was predictable, and so was Bariel’s. They tried to be sexy, bending forward a lot to get clear shots down their dresses. It looked fake. I watched their faces in the monitors as they kept glancing at Maxon and winking. Every once in a while, like when Bariel tried to smoothly lick her lips, Marlee and I made brief eye contact and then had to look away so we wouldn’t laugh.

Others were more composed. Tiny’s voice matched her name, and she seemed to fold in on herself as the interview progressed. But I knew she was sweet and hoped that Maxon wouldn’t count her out just because she wasn’t a great public speaker. Emmica was poised, as was Marlee, the main difference being that Marlee’s voice was so full of excitement and enthusiasm it flew higher and higher as she talked.

Gavril asked a variety of questions, but there were two that seemed to pop up with everyone: “What do you think of Prince Maxon?” and “Are you the girl who yelled at him?” I wasn’t looking forward to telling the country that I had chided the future king. Thank goodness that, as far as anyone knew, I’d behaved that way only once.

Everyone was proud to say they weren't the girl who'd yelled at him. Then every single girl thought that Maxon was nice. That was almost always the word: nice. Celeste said that he was handsome. Bariel said he was quietly powerful, which I thought sounded creepy. A few girls were asked if Maxon had kissed them yet. They all blushed and said no. After the third or fourth no, Gavril turned on Maxon.

"Haven't you kissed any of them yet?" he asked, shocked.

"They've only been here two weeks! What kind of man do you think I am?" Maxon replied. He said it lightheartedly but seemed to squirm in his seat a little. I wondered if he'd ever kissed anyone.

Samantha had just finished saying she was having a wonderful time, and then Gavril called me. The other girls applauded as I stood, like we had for everyone. I gave Marlee a nervous smile. I focused on my feet as I walked over, but once I got into the chair, I found it was easy to look right past Gavril's shoulder at Maxon. He gave me a little wink as I picked up the microphone. I felt instantly calmer. I didn't have to win anyone over.

I shook Gavril's hand and sat down across from him. Up close, I could finally see the pin on his lapel. It obviously lost its detail through the camera, but now I saw that it wasn't just the lines and curls of a forte sign, but a small X was engraved in the middle, making the whole thing look almost like a star. It was beautiful.

"America Singer. That's an interesting name you have there. Is there a story behind it?" Gavril asked.

I sighed in relief. This was an easy one.

"Yes, actually. While my mom was pregnant with me, I kicked a lot. She said she had a fighter on her hands, so she named me after the country that fought so hard to keep this land together. It's odd, but to her credit, she was right—we've been fighting ever since."

Gavril laughed. "She sounds like a feisty woman herself."

"She is. I get a lot of my stubbornness from her."

"So you're stubborn, then? Have a bit of a temper?"

I saw Maxon covering his mouth with his hands, laughing.

"Sometimes."

"If you have a temper, would you happen to be the one who yelled at our prince?"

I sighed. “Yes, it was me. And right now, my mother is having a heart attack.”

Maxon called out to Gavril, “Get her to tell the whole story!”

Gavril whipped his head back and forth quickly. “Oh! What’s the whole story?”

I tried to glare at Maxon, but the whole situation was so silly, it didn’t quite work.

“I got a little ... claustrophobic the first night, and I was desperate to get outside. The guards wouldn’t let me through the doors. I was actually about to faint in this one guard’s arms, but Prince Maxon was walking by and made them open the doors for me.”

“Aw,” Gavril said, tilting his head to one side.

“Yes, and then he followed to make sure I was all right.... But I was stressed out, so when he spoke to me, I basically ended up accusing him of being stuck-up and shallow.”

Gavril chuckled deeply at this. I looked past him to Maxon, who was shaking with laughter. But the more embarrassing thing was that the king and queen were laughing along with him. I didn’t turn to look at the girls, but I heard some of them giggling, too. Well, good. Maybe now they would finally stop seeing me as any sort of threat. I was just someone Maxon found entertaining.

“And he forgave you?” Gavril asked in a slightly more sober tone.

“Oddly enough.” I shrugged.

“Well, since the two of you are on good terms again, what sort of activities have you been doing together?” Gavril was back to business.

“We usually just go for walks around the garden. He knows I like it outside. And we talk.” It sounded pathetic after what some of the other girls had said. Trips to the theater, going hunting, horseback riding—those were impressive next to my story.

But I suddenly understood why he had been speed dating over the last week. The girls needed something to tell Gavril, so he had to provide it. It still seemed weird that he hadn’t mentioned any of it to me, but at least I knew why he had been away.

“That sounds very relaxing. Would you say the garden is your favorite thing about the palace?”

I smiled. “Maybe. But the food is exquisite, so...”

Gavril laughed again.

“You are the last Five left in the competition, yes? Do you think that hurts your chances of becoming the princess?”

The word sprang from my lips without thought. “No!”

“Oh, my! You do have a spirit there!” Gavril seemed pleased to have gotten such an enthusiastic response. “So you think you’ll beat out all the others, then? Make it to the end?”

I thought better of myself. “No, no. It’s not like that. I don’t think I’m better than any of the other girls; they’re all amazing. It’s just... I don’t think Maxon would do that, just discount someone because of their caste.”

I heard a collective gasp. I ran over the sentence in my head. It took me a minute to catch my mistake: I’d called him Maxon. Saying that to another girl behind closed doors was one thing, but to say his name without the word “Prince” in front of it was incredibly informal in public. And I’d said it on live television.

I looked to see if Maxon was angry. He had a calm smile on his face. So he wasn’t mad ... but I was embarrassed. I blushed fiercely.

“Ah, so it seems you really have gotten to know our prince. Tell me, what do you think of Maxon?”

I had thought of several answers while I was waiting for my turn. I was going to make fun of his laugh or talk about the pet name he wanted his wife to call him. It seemed like the only way to save the situation was to get back the comedy. But as I lifted my eyes to make one of my comments, I saw Maxon’s face.

He really wanted to know.

And I couldn’t poke fun at him, not when I had a chance to say what I’d really started to think now that he was my friend. I couldn’t joke about the person who’d saved me from facing absolute heartbreak at home, who fed my family boxes of sweets, who ran to me worried that I was hurt if I asked for him.

A month ago, I had looked at the TV and seen a stiff, distant, boring person—someone I couldn’t imagine anyone loving. And while he wasn’t anything close to the person I did love, he was worthy of having someone to love in his life.

“Maxon Schreave is the epitome of all things good. He is going to be a phenomenal king. He lets girls who are supposed to be wearing dresses wear jeans and doesn’t get mad when someone who doesn’t know him clearly mislabels him.” I gave Gavril a keen look, and he smiled. And behind him, Maxon looked intrigued. “Whoever he marries will be a lucky girl. And whatever happens to me, I will be honored to be his subject.”

I saw Maxon swallow, and I lowered my eyes.

“America Singer, thank you so much.” Gavril went to shake my hand. “Up next is Miss Tallulah Bell.”

I didn’t hear what any of the girls said after me, though I stared at the two seats. That interview had become way more personal than I’d intended it to be. I couldn’t bring myself to look at Maxon. Instead I sat there replaying my words again and again in my head.

The knock on my door came around ten. I flung it open, and Maxon rolled his eyes.

“You really ought to have a maid in here at night.”

“Maxon! Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to call you that in front of everyone. It was so stupid.”

“Do you think I’m mad at you?” he asked as he walked in and shut the door. “America, you call me by my name so often, it was bound to slip out. I wish it had been in a slightly more private setting,” he said with a sly smile, “but I don’t hold that against you at all.”

“Really?”

“Of course, really.”

“Ugh! I felt like such an idiot tonight. I can’t believe you made me tell that story!” I slapped him on the side gently.

“That was the best part of the whole night! Mom was really amused. In her day the girls were more reserved than even Tiny, and here you are calling me shallow ... she couldn’t get over it.”

Great. Now the queen thought I was a misfit, too. We walked across my room and ended up on the balcony. There was a small, warm breeze blowing the scent of the thousands of flowers in the garden toward us. A full moon shone down on us, adding to the lights around the palace, and it gave Maxon’s face a mysterious glow.

“Well, I’m glad you’re so amused,” I said, running my fingers across the railing.

Maxon hopped up to sit on the railing, looking very relaxed. “You’re always amusing. Get used to it.”

Hmm. He was almost being funny.

“So ... about what you said...,” he started tentatively.

“Which part? The part about me calling you names or fighting with my mom or saying food was my motivation?” I rolled my eyes.

He laughed once. “The part about me being good...”

“Oh. What about it?” Those few sentences suddenly seemed more embarrassing than anything else I’d said. I ducked my head down and twisted a piece of my dress.

“I appreciate you making things look authentic, but you didn’t need to go that far.”

My head snapped up. How could he think that?

“Maxon, that wasn’t for the sake of the show. If you had asked me a month ago what my honest opinion of you was, it would have been very different. But now I know you, and I know the truth, and you are everything I said you were. And more.”

He was quiet, but there was a small smile on his face.

“Thank you,” he finally said.

“Anytime.”

Maxon cleared his throat. “He’ll be lucky, too.” He got down from his makeshift seat and walked to my side of the balcony.

“Huh?”

“Your boyfriend. When he comes to his senses and begs you to take him back,” Maxon said matter-of-factly.

I had to laugh. No such thing would happen in my world.

“He’s not my boyfriend anymore. And he made it pretty clear he was done with me.” Even I could hear the tiny bit of hope in my voice.

“Not possible. He’ll have seen you on TV by now and fallen for you all over again. Though, in my opinion, you’re still much too good for the dog.” Maxon spoke almost as if he was bored, like he’d seen this happen a million times.

“Speaking of which!” he said a bit louder. “If you don’t want me to be in love with you, you’re going to have to stop looking so lovely. First thing tomorrow I’m having your maids sew some potato sacks together for you.”

I hit his arm. “Shut up, Maxon.”

“I’m not kidding. You’re too beautiful for your own good. Once you leave, we’ll have to send some of the guards with you. You’ll never survive on your own, poor thing.” He said all this with mock pity.

“I can’t help it.” I sighed. “One can never help being born into perfection.” I fanned my face as if being so pretty was exhausting.

“No, I don’t suppose you can help it.”

I giggled. I didn’t notice for a moment that Maxon didn’t seem to think it was funny.

I stared out at the garden and saw out of the corner of my eye that Maxon was looking at me. His face was incredibly close to mine. When I turned to ask just what he was looking at, I was surprised to see that he was close enough to kiss me.

I was even more surprised when he did.

I pulled away quickly, taking a step. Maxon stepped back as well.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, blushing.

“What are you doing?” I asked in a shocked whisper.

“Sorry.” He was slightly turned away, obviously embarrassed.

“Why did you do that?” I put my hand to my mouth.

“It’s just ... with what you said earlier, and then seeking me out yesterday ... just the way you acted... I thought maybe your feelings had changed. And I like you, I thought you could tell.” He turned to face me. “And... Oh, was it terrible? You don’t look happy at all.”

I tried to wipe whatever expression I had off my face. Maxon looked mortified.

“I’m so sorry. I’ve never kissed anyone before. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m just... I’m sorry, America.” He breathed a heavy sigh and ran his hand through his hair a few times, leaning against the railing.

I didn’t expect it, but a warmth filled me.

He’d wanted his first kiss to be with me.

I thought about the Maxon I knew now—the man full of compliments, the man prepared to give me the winnings of a bet I lost, the man who forgave me when I hurt him both physically and emotionally—and discovered that I didn’t mind that at all.

Yes, I still had feelings for Aspen. I couldn't undo that. But if I couldn't be with him, then what was holding me back from being with Maxon? Nothing more than my preconceived ideas of him, which were nothing close to who he was.

I stepped up to him and rubbed my hand across his forehead.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm erasing that memory. I think we can do better.” I pulled my hand down and propped myself up beside him, facing toward my room. Maxon didn't move ... but he did smile.

“America, I don't think you can change history.” All the same, his expression looked hopeful.

“Sure we can. Besides, who'd ever know about it but you and me?”

Maxon looked at me for a moment, clearly wondering if this was really okay. Slowly, I saw a cautious confidence creep into his face as he looked into my eyes. We stayed that way for a moment before I could remember just what I had said.

“One can never help being born into perfection,” I whispered.

He came close, wrapping an arm around my waist so that we faced each other. His nose tickled mine. He ran his fingers across my cheek so gently it seemed he was afraid I would break.

“No, I don't suppose you can,” he breathed.

With his hand holding my face toward his, Maxon lowered his lips to mine and gave me the faintest whisper of a kiss.

Something about the tentativeness of it made me feel beautiful. Without a word, I could understand how excited he was to have this moment, but then afraid at the same time. And deeper than any of that, I sensed that he adored me.

So this was what it felt like to be a lady.

After a moment, he pulled back and asked, “Was that better?”

I could only nod. Maxon looked like he was on the verge of doing a backflip. There was a similar feeling in my chest. That was so unexpected. This was all too quick, too strange. The confusion must have shown on my face, because Maxon got serious.

“May I say something?”

I nodded again.

“I’m not so stupid as to believe that you’ve completely forgotten about your former boyfriend. I know what you’ve gone through and that you’re not exactly here under the normal circumstances. I know you think there are others here more suited for me and this life, and I wouldn’t want you to rush into trying to be happy with any of this. I just... I just want to know if it’s possible...”

It was a hard question to answer. Would I be willing to live a life I’d never wanted? Would I be willing to watch as he kindly tried to date the others to be sure he wasn’t making a mistake? Would I be willing to take on the responsibility that he had as a prince? Would I be willing to love him?

“Yes, Maxon,” I whispered. “It’s possible.”

CHAPTER 19

I TOLD NO ONE WHAT had happened between Maxon and me, not even Marlee or my maids. It felt like a wonderful secret that I could revisit in the middle of one of Silvia's boring lessons or another long day in the Women's Room. And to be honest, I thought about our kisses—both the awkward and the sweet—more often than I expected I would.

I knew I wasn't just going to fall in love with Maxon overnight. I knew my heart wouldn't let me. But I suddenly found myself in a place where that was something I might want. So I thought about the possibility quietly in my head, though I was tempted to blurt out my secret more than once.

Particularly three days later when Olivia announced to the half-full Women's Room that Maxon had kissed her.

I couldn't believe how shattered I felt. I caught myself looking at Olivia and wondering what was so special about her.

“Tell us everything!” Marlee insisted.

Most of the other girls were curious as well, but Marlee was the most enthusiastic. In the short time since she and Maxon had their last date, her interest in everyone else's progress seemed to be growing. I couldn't tell what was behind the shift, and I wasn't quite brave enough to ask.

Olivia didn't need encouragement. She sat down on one of the couches and fanned out her dress. It looked like she was practicing to be the princess. I felt like telling her that one kiss didn't mean she was winning.

“I don't want to go into all the details, but it was quite romantic,” she gushed, tucking her chin into her chest. “He took me to the roof. There's this place that's kind of like a balcony, but it looks like it's used for the guards. I couldn't tell. We could look out over the wall, and the whole city was just glittering as far as we could see. He didn't really say anything. He just pulled me in and kissed me.” Her whole body contracted with joy.

Marlee sighed. Celeste looked like she was ready to break something. I sat there.

I kept telling myself that I shouldn't care so much, that this was all part of the Selection. And who's to say that I'd really want to end up with Maxon anyway? Honestly, I ought to consider myself lucky. It was clear Celeste's malice had a new target, and after that whole episode with my dress—which I realized I'd forgotten to mention to Maxon—I was glad to see her move

on.

“Do you think she’s the only one he’s kissed?” Tuesday whispered in my ear. Kriss, who was standing beside me, heard her concerns and piped in.

“He wouldn’t just kiss anyone. She must be doing something right,” Kriss lamented.

“What if he’s kissed half the room and people are keeping quiet about it? Maybe it’s part of their strategy,” Tuesday wondered.

“I don’t think anyone who kept quiet would necessarily consider that a strategy,” I countered. “Maybe they’re just private.”

Kriss sucked in a breath. “What if Olivia telling us all this is just some game? Now we’re all worried, and it’s not as if any of us would actually ask Maxon if he’d kissed her. There’s no way to tell if she’s lying or not.”

“Do you think she would do that?” I asked.

“If she did, I wish I’d thought of it first,” Tuesday said longingly.

Kriss sighed. “This is much more complicated than I thought it would be.”

“Tell me about it,” I mumbled.

“I like almost everyone in this room, but when I hear about Maxon doing something with someone else, I just want to figure out how I can do one better than her,” she confessed. “I don’t like feeling competitive toward you all.”

“It’s kind of like what I was telling Tiny the other day,” Tuesday said. “I know she’s a little on the timid side, but she’s very ladylike and I think she’d make a great princess. I can’t be mad at her if she has more dates than me, even if I want the crown myself.”

Kriss and I met eyes for a second, and I could tell we were both thinking the same thing. She said crown, not him. But I let it drop, because the other part of her little speech struck on something familiar. “Marlee and I talk about that all the time. How we can see great qualities in each other.”

We all exchanged looks, and something felt different. Suddenly I didn’t feel so jealous of Olivia or even so at odds with Celeste. We were all going through this in a different way, and maybe even for different reasons, but we were at least going through it together.

“Maybe Queen Amberly was right,” I said. “The only thing to do is be yourself. I’d rather have Maxon send me home for being myself than keep me for being like someone else.”

“That’s true,” Kriss said. “And in the end, thirty-four people have to go. If I was the last one standing, I’d want to know I had everyone else’s support, so we should try to be supportive, too.”

I nodded, knowing she was right. I was confident that I could do that.

Just then Elise burst into the room, followed by Zoe and Emmica. She was usually very slow and calm, and never raised her voice. Today, however, she turned her head and squealed at us.

“Look at these combs!” she cried, pointing to two beautiful hair ornaments that were covered in what looked like thousands of dollars’ worth of precious stones. “Maxon gave them to me. Aren’t they beautiful?”

This set the room into a new flurry of excitement and disappointment, and my newborn confidence disappeared.

I tried not to be disappointed. After all, hadn’t I received gifts? Hadn’t I been kissed? But as the room filled with girls and the stories were retold, I found myself wanting to just go hide. Maybe today would be a good day to spend with my maids.

As I was considering leaving the room, Silvia came in, looking slightly frazzled and excited at the same time.

“Ladies!” she called out, attempting to quiet us. “Ladies, are you all here?”

We sang our yeses back to her.

“Thank goodness for that,” she said, settling down. “I know this is very late notice, but we’ve just learned the king and queen of Swendway are coming to visit in three days, and as you all know, we have relations in their royal family. Also, the queen’s extended family will be coming in to meet you at the same time, so we’re going to have quite a full house. We have very little time to get ready, so clear your afternoons. Lessons in the Great Room immediately after lunch,” she said, and turned to leave.

You would have thought the palace staff had months to plan. Giant tented pavilions were set up in the gardens, with food and wine stations scattered about the lawn. The number of guards out was higher than usual, and they were joined by several Swendish soldiers the king and queen had brought with them. I guess even they knew how at risk the palace was.

There was a tent with thrones set up for the king, queen, and Maxon as well as the king and queen of Swendway. The Swendish queen—whose name I couldn’t pronounce to save my life—was almost as beautiful as Queen Amberly and seemed to be a dear friend to her. They were all settled comfortably under that tent except for Maxon, who was busy making rounds

with all the girls and the extended members of his family.

Maxon looked thrilled to see his cousins, even the little ones who kept tugging on his suit coat and running away. He had one of his many cameras out and was chasing the children with it, snapping away. Nearly all the Selected girls were watching him in adoration.

“America,” someone called. I turned to my right to see Elayna and Leah talking to a woman who looked almost identical to the queen. “Come and meet the queen’s sister.” There was something in Elayna’s tone that I couldn’t quite name but made me nervous about joining them.

I walked over and curtsied to the lady, who cackled and said, “Stop that, honey. I’m not the queen here. I’m Adele, Amberly’s older sister.” She extended a hand, which I took, and she hiccuped as we shook. The woman had a slight accent, and something about her was comforting in the way that coming home feels. She was curvaceous and held a near-empty glass of wine that, based on the heavy look in her eyes, was not her first.

“Where are you from? I love your accent,” I said. Some of the other girls from the South sounded similar, and their voices seemed incredibly romantic to me.

“Honduragua. Right by the coast. We grew up in the tiniest house,” she said, making a space the size of an inch between her finger and thumb. “And look at her now. Look at me,” she said, motioning down to her dress. “Such a change.”

“I live in Carolina, and my parents took me to the coast once. I loved it,” I replied.

“Oh, no, no, no, child,” she said, waving her hand about. Elayna and Leah looked like they were holding in laughter. Clearly they didn’t think the queen’s sister should be quite so familiar. “The beaches in middle Illéa are trash compared to the ones down south. You have to go see one day.”

I smiled and nodded, thinking that I’d love to see more of the country, but it was doubtful I ever would. Shortly after, one of Adele’s many children came up to her and pulled her away, and Elayna and Leah burst into laughter.

“Isn’t she hilarious?” Leah said.

“I don’t know. She seems friendly,” I replied with a shrug.

“She’s vulgar,” Elayna replied. “You should have heard all the things she said before you came up.”

“What was so bad about her?”

“You’d think she’d have picked up a few lessons in decorum over the years. How did Silvia not get ahold of her?” Leah said with a sneer.

“Need I remind you, she was raised as a Four. Same as you,” I shot back.

Her smug expression faltered, and she seemed to remember that she and Adele weren’t so different. Elayna, however, was a natural Three and kept on talking.

“You can bet, if I win, my family will either be trained or deported. I wouldn’t let any of them embarrass me like that.”

“What was so embarrassing?” I asked.

Elayna sucked her teeth. “She’s drunk. The queen and king of Swendway are here. She ought to be caged.”

I decided that was enough and walked away to get some wine of my own. Once I had a glass, I looked around and honestly couldn’t find a single place I wanted to settle. The whole reception was beautiful and interesting and completely aggravating.

I thought about what Elayna had said. If I ended up living in the palace, would I expect my family to change? I looked at the children running around, the people huddled together catching up. Wouldn’t I want Kenna to be exactly who she was, want her children enjoying all this no matter how they behaved?

How much would living at the palace change me?

Would Maxon want me to change? Was that why he was off kissing other girls? Because there was something not quite right about me?

Was the rest of the Selection going to feel this irritating?

“Smile.”

I turned, and Maxon snapped a picture of me. I bounced back in surprise. That unexpected picture wore out the last of my patience, and I turned away.

“Something wrong?” Maxon asked, lowering the camera.

I shrugged.

“What’s going on?”

“I just don’t feel like being a part of the Selection today,” I answered curtly.

Unfazed, Maxon stepped closer and lowered his voice. “Need someone to talk to? I could tug my ear right now,” he offered.

I sighed and tried to put a polite smile on my face. “No, I just need to think.” I went to leave.

“America,” he said quietly. I stopped and turned. “Have I done something?”

I hesitated. Should I ask about him kissing Olivia? Should I tell him how tense I was feeling around the girls now that things had changed between us? Should I tell him how I didn’t want to change myself or my family to be a part of this? I was about to let everything spill out when a shrill voice called from behind us.

“Prince Maxon?”

We turned, and Celeste was standing there, talking to the queen of Swendway. It was clear she wanted to have this conversation with Maxon on her arm. She waved, inviting him over.

“Why don’t you run along?” I said, my annoyance leaking into my voice again.

Maxon looked at me. The expression on his face reminded me that this was part of the deal. I was expected to share.

“Careful with that one.” I gave Maxon a quick curtsy and walked away.

I made my way toward the palace, and along the way noticed Marlee sitting alone. I didn’t even want to be with her right now, but I noticed she was parked on a bench near the back wall of the palace in the brutally hot sun, her closest companion a young, silent guard stationed just a few yards away.

“Marlee, what are you doing? Get under a tent before you burn your skin.”

She gave me a polite smile. “I’m happy here.”

“No, really,” I said, putting a hand around her arm. “You’ll look like my hair. You should—”

Marlee jerked her hand out of my grip, but spoke gently. “I want to stay here, America. I prefer it.”

There was a tension in her face she was trying to mask. I was sure she wasn’t upset with me, but something was going on.

“Fine. Try to get some shade soon, though. Sunburns hurt,” I said, attempting to cover my frustration, and walked toward the palace.

Once inside, I decided to go to the Women’s Room. I couldn’t be gone for too long, and at

least that room would be empty. But when I went in, I found Adele sitting near the window and watching the scene unfold outside. She turned when I entered and gave me a small smile.

I walked over and sat next to her. “Hiding?”

She smiled. “Kind of. I wanted to meet you all and see my sister again, but I hate it when these things turn into state functions. They make me tense.”

“I’m not such a fan myself. I couldn’t imagine doing things like this all the time.”

“I bet,” she said lazily. “You’re the Five, right?”

The way she said it, it wasn’t an insult. More like she was asking if I was in the club. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“I remembered your face. You were sweet at the airport. It’s the kind of thing she would have done,” she said, nodding out the window toward the queen. She sighed. “I don’t know how she does it. She’s stronger than most people know.” I watched her pick up a wineglass and sip away.

“She does seem strong, but ladylike, too.”

Adele beamed. “Yes, but it’s more than that. Look at her now.”

I watched the queen. I noticed her eyes were trained across the lawn. I followed her gaze, and she was watching Maxon. He was speaking to the queen of Swendway next to Celeste while one of his cousins clung to his leg.

“He would have been a great brother,” she said. “Amberly had three miscarriages. Two before him, one after. She still thinks about it, she tells me so. And then I have six kids. I feel guilty every time I show up.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t think of it that way. I’ll bet she’s excited every time you visit,” I assured her.

She turned. “You know what makes her happy? You do. Do you know what she sees out there? A daughter. She knows that when this is all over, she’ll have two children.”

I turned from Adele to look at the queen again. “You think so? She seems a little distant. I haven’t even spoken to her yet.”

Adele nodded. “Just you wait. She’s terrified of becoming attached to all of you just to watch you leave. Once it’s a smaller group, you’ll see.”

I looked at the queen again. And then at Maxon. Back to the king. And then to Adele.

So much went through my head. How families are families, no matter their castes. How mothers all have their own worries to bear. How I really didn't hate any of the girls here, no matter how wrong they might be. How everyone out there must be putting on a brave face for some reason or another. And finally, how Maxon had made me a promise.

“Excuse me. I have someone I need to talk to.”

She sipped her wine and happily waved me away. I ran out of the room, and back into the blinding sun of the gardens. I searched around for a moment and found that Maxon's young cousin had begun chasing him around a shrub. I smiled and approached slowly.

Finally Maxon stopped, waving his hands in the air, admitting his defeat. As he laughed, he turned and saw me, his smile still wide on his face. When our eyes met, his smile faded. He searched my face, looking for a sign of my mood.

I bit my lip and looked down. It was clear that caring about what happened to me as a member of the Selection would mean processing a lot of other feelings that I hadn't been prepared for. However I took them in, I had to try not to force them out on other people, especially Maxon.

I thought about the queen—hosting visiting leaders, family members, a gaggle of girls all at once. She managed events and backed causes. She assisted her husband, her son, and the country. And underneath it all, she was a Four who held her own heartbreaks and never let her former rank or current aches keep her from doing it all.

I looked beneath my eyelashes at Maxon and smiled. He slowly smiled back, and whispered something to the little boy, who immediately turned and ran away. He reached up and tugged his ear. And I did the same.

CHAPTER 20

THE QUEEN'S FAMILY STAYED A few days, and the visitors from Swendway an entire week. They did a segment on the Report discussing international relations and movements toward more peace for both nations.

It was now a month into my stay at the palace, and I was completely at home. My body was comfortable in the new climate. The warmth of the palace was heavenly, like a holiday. September was almost over, and it got very cool in the evenings, but it was much warmer than home. The sights of this giant space were no longer a mystery. The sounds of heeled shoes on marble, crystal glasses clinking, guards marching—they were starting to become as normal as the refrigerator humming or Gerad kicking a soccer ball up against the house.

Meals with the royal family and times in the Women's Room were staples in my routine, but the middle moments of my days were always new. I spent a lot of time working on music; the instruments at the palace were far superior to the ones I had at home. I had to admit, they were making me spoiled. The quality of the sound was unimaginably better. And the Women's Room had gotten a little more exciting, as the queen had shown up at least twice now. She hadn't really spoken to anyone yet, but she sat in a comfortable chair with her maids at her side, watching as we read or conversed.

In general, the animosity had settled as well. We were getting used to one another. We finally found out the magazine's top picks for our photographs. I was shocked to see I was one of the front-runners. Marlee was in the top spot, with Kriss, Tallulah, and Bariel close behind. Celeste didn't talk to Bariel for days upon hearing this, but eventually everyone let it pass.

What still seemed to bring the most tension were the bits of information tossed around. Whoever had been with Maxon recently couldn't help but gush about their little interlude. The way everyone spoke, it seemed as if Maxon was going to be choosing six or seven wives. But not everyone was shining in this experience.

For instance, Marlee had more than a few dates with Maxon, which put everyone on edge. Still, she never came across as excited as she had after their very first one.

"America, if I tell you this, you have to swear not to tell a soul," she said as we walked in the garden. I knew it was something serious. She'd waited until we got away from the listening ears in the Women's Room and far beyond the eyes of the guards.

"Of course, Marlee. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I just... I need your opinion on something." Her face was heavy with worry.

“What’s wrong?”

She bit her lip. “It’s Maxon. I’m not sure it’s going to work out.” She looked down.

“What makes you think that?” I asked, concerned.

“Well, for starters, I don’t... I don’t feel anything, you know? No spark, no connection.”

“Maxon can be a little shy is all. You have to give him time.” This was true. I was surprised she didn’t know that about him.

“No, I mean, I don’t think I like him.”

“Oh.” That was something very different. “Have you tried?” What a stupid question.

“Yes! So hard! I keep waiting for a moment to come when he’ll say or do something to make me feel like we have something in common, but it never happens. I think he’s handsome, but that’s not enough to build a whole relationship on. I don’t even know if he’s attracted to me. Do you have any idea what kind of things he, you know, likes?”

I thought about it. “No, actually. We’ve never talked about what he’s looking for in the physical department.”

“And that’s another thing! We never talk. He talks on and on to you, but we never seem to have anything to say. We spend a lot of our time quietly watching something or playing cards.”

She looked more worried by the minute.

“Sometimes we’re quiet together, too. Sometimes we just sit and say nothing. Besides, feelings like that don’t always happen overnight. Maybe you’re both just taking it slow.” I tried to sound reassuring—Marlee looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“Honestly, America, I think the only reason I’m still here is because the people like me so much. I think their opinions matter to him.”

That thought hadn’t occurred to me, but it sounded plausible. Long ago, I’d dismissed their opinion, but Maxon loved his people. They’d have more of a hand in choosing the next princess than they would know.

“And besides,” she whispered, “everything between us feels so ... empty.”

Then the tears came.

I sighed and hugged her. Truthfully, I wanted her to stay, to be here with me, but if she didn’t

love Maxon...

“Marlee, if you don’t want to be with Maxon, I think you need to tell him.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think I can.”

“You have to. He doesn’t want to marry someone who doesn’t love him. If you don’t have any feelings for him, he needs to know.”

She shook her head. “I can’t just ask to leave! I need to stay. I couldn’t go home ... not now.”

“Why, Marlee? What’s keeping you here?”

For a moment, I wondered if Marlee and I shared the same dark secret. Maybe there was someone she needed distance from, too. The only difference in our situations was that Maxon knew about mine. I wanted her to say it! I wanted to know I wasn’t the only one who’d ended up here out of some ridiculous circumstances.

But Marlee’s tears stopped almost as quickly as they started. She sniffed a few times and straightened up. She smoothed out her day dress, squared her shoulders, and turned to face me. She pulled a strong, warm smile to her face and spoke.

“You know what? I bet you’re right.” She started to back away. “I’m sure if I just give it some time, it’ll all work out. I have to go. Tiny’s expecting me.”

Marlee half ran back to the palace. What in the world had come over her?

The next day, Marlee avoided me. The day after that, too. I made a point of sitting in the Women’s Room at a safe distance and making sure to acknowledge her whenever we crossed paths. I wanted her to know that she could trust me; I wouldn’t make her talk.

It took four days for her to give me a sad, knowing smile. I just nodded. It seemed that would be all there was to say about whatever was going on in Marlee’s heart.

That same day, while I was sitting in the Women’s Room, Maxon called for me. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t absolutely giddy when I ran out the door and into his arms.

“Maxon!” I breathed, falling into him. When I stepped back, he sort of fumbled a moment, and I knew why. The day we’d left the Swendway reception and went inside to talk, I confessed what a hard time I was having dealing with the way I felt. And I asked him not to kiss me until I was more certain. I could tell he was hurt, but he nodded and hadn’t broken his promise yet. It was just too hard to decipher those feelings when he acted like he was my boyfriend, but clearly wasn’t.

There were still twenty-two girls here after Camille, Mikaela, and Laila had been sent home. Camille and Laila were simply incompatible and left with very little fanfare. Mikaela got so homesick she burst into heaving sobs during breakfast two days later. Maxon escorted her from the room, patting her shoulder the whole way. He seemed fine with letting them go, and was happy to focus on his other prospects, myself included. But he and I both knew it would be foolish of him to invest his heart completely in me when even I wasn't sure where mine was.

“How are you today?” he asked, stepping back.

“Perfect, of course. What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be working?”

“The president of the Infrastructure Committee is sick, so the meeting was postponed. I'm free as a bird all afternoon.” His eyes were gleaming. “What do you want to do?” he asked, holding his arm out for me.

“Anything! There's so much of the palace I still haven't seen. There are horses here, right? And the movie theater. You still haven't taken me there.”

“Let's do that. I could use something relaxing. What kinds of movies do you like best?” he asked as we started walking toward where I guessed the stairwell to the basement was.

“Honestly, I don't know. I don't get to watch a lot of movies. But I like romantic books. And comedies, too!”

“Romance, you say?” He raised his eyebrows like he was up to no good. I had to laugh.

We turned a corner and continued to talk. As we approached, a mass of the palace guard pulled to the side of the hall and saluted. There had to be more than a dozen men standing in the hallway. I was used to them by now. Even the sight of a collection that big couldn't distract me from the fun time I was about to have with Maxon.

What did stop me was when I heard the gasp that escaped someone's mouth as we passed. Maxon and I both turned.

And there was Aspen.

I gasped, too.

A few weeks ago, I'd heard some administrator in the palace talk about the draft in passing. I had wondered about Aspen, but seeing as I was running late to one of Silvia's many lessons, I didn't really have a chance to speculate much.

So he'd been taken by the draft after all. Of all the places he could have gone...

Maxon caught on. “America, do you know this young man?”

It had been more than a month since I’d seen Aspen, but this was the person I’d spent years committing to memory, the person who still visited my dreams. I would know him anywhere. He looked a little bigger, like he’d been fed, really fed, and was working out a lot. His scraggly hair had been cut short, practically all gone. And I was used to seeing him in secondhand clothes that were barely being held together by threads, and here he was in one of the brilliant, fitted uniforms of the palace guard.

He was alien and familiar at once. So many of the things around him seemed wrong. But those eyes ... those were Aspen’s eyes.

My eyes fell to the name tag on his uniform: OFFICER LEGER.

I doubted a second had passed.

I kept myself composed enough that no one saw the storm raging inside—a miracle in and of itself. I wanted to touch him, kiss him, scream at him, demand he leave my sanctuary. I wanted to melt away and disappear, but I felt so very here.

None of it made sense.

I cleared my throat. “Yes. Officer Leger comes from Carolina. He’s actually from my hometown.” I smiled at Maxon.

No doubt Aspen would have heard us laughing as we rounded the corner, would have noted that my arm was still draped on the prince’s. Let him make of that what he would.

Maxon seemed excited for me. “Well, how about that! Welcome, Officer Leger. You must be happy to see your Champion Girl again.” Maxon held his hand out, and Aspen shook it.

Aspen’s face was like a stone. “Yes, Your Majesty. Very much so.”

What did that mean?

“I’m sure you’re pulling for her, too,” Maxon encouraged as he winked at me.

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Aspen bowed his head a bit.

And what did that mean?

“Excellent. Since America is from your home province, I can’t think of a better man in the palace to leave her with. I’ll make sure you’re put on her guard rotation. This girl of yours refuses to keep a maid in her room at night. I’ve tried to tell her....” Maxon shook his head at me.

Aspen finally seemed to relax a bit. “I’m not surprised by that, Your Majesty.”

Maxon smiled. “Well, I’m sure you all have a busy day ahead of you. We’ll just be off. Good day, officers.” Maxon gave a quick nod and pulled me away.

It took all the strength in my body not to look back.

In the dark of the theater, I tried to figure out what to do. Maxon had made it clear from the night I’d told him about Aspen that he hated anyone who would treat me with so little care. If I told Maxon that the man he’d just assigned to watch over me was that very person, would he punish him somehow? I wouldn’t put it past him. He’d invented an entire support system for the country based on my stories of being hungry.

So I couldn’t tell him. I wouldn’t tell him. Because as mad as I was, I loved Aspen. And I couldn’t bear him being hurt.

Then should I leave? The ambivalence pulled at my heart. I could escape Aspen, get away from his face—a face that would torture me every day when I saw it and knew it was no longer mine. But if I left, I’d have to leave Maxon, too. And Maxon was my closest friend, maybe even more. I couldn’t just go. Besides, how would I explain it without telling him Aspen was here?

And my family. Maybe the checks they got were smaller, but at least they were getting them. May had written saying that Dad was promising our best Christmas ever this year, but I was sure that came with the stipulation that another Christmas might never be as good. If I left, who could say how much money my past fame would bring for my family? We had to save up as much as we could now.

“You didn’t like that one, did you?” Maxon asked nearly two hours later.

“Huh?”

“The movie. You didn’t laugh or anything.”

“Oh.” I tried to remember one little piece of information, a single scene that I could say I’d enjoyed. Nothing registered. “I think I’m just a little out of it today. Sorry you wasted your afternoon.”

“Nonsense.” Maxon waved away my lackluster attitude. “I just enjoy your company. Though perhaps you should take a nap before dinner. You’re looking a little pale.”

I nodded. I was considering going to my room and never coming back out.

CHAPTER 21

IN THE END, I DECIDED against hiding in my room. Instead I chose the Women's Room. Usually I darted in and out all day, visiting libraries, taking walks with Marlee, or even heading back upstairs to visit my maids. But now I was using the Women's Room like a cave. No men, not even guards, were allowed inside without the queen's express permission. It was perfect.

Well, it was perfect for three days. With this many girls, it was only a matter of time until someone had a birthday. Kriss's was on Thursday. I guessed she'd mentioned it to Maxon—who seemed to never pass up an opportunity to give someone something—and the outcome was a mandatory party for all the Selected. As a result, Thursday was a mad rush of girls in and out of one another's rooms, asking what they were wearing or guessing at how grand it would be.

It didn't appear that gifts were required, but I figured I'd do something nice for her all the same.

On the day of the party, I donned one of my favorite day dresses and grabbed my violin. I crept down to the Great Room, looking around corners before I committed to walking on. Once I made it to the room, I did another sweep, surveying the guards who lined the walls. Mercifully, Aspen was nowhere to be seen, and I had to chuckle at the presence of so many men in uniform. Were they expecting a riot or something?

The Great Room was decorated beautifully. Special vases hung on the wall, displaying huge arrangements of yellow and white flowers, and similar bouquets sat in bowls around the room. Windows, stretches of wall, and pretty much anything that didn't move was draped in garlands. A few small tables had been set out, and they were covered with bright linens. Little bits of glittering confetti sparkled on the table-tops. Ornate bows adorned the backs of chairs.

In one corner, a massive cake that matched the colors of the room waited to be cut. Next to it, a small table held a few gifts for the birthday girl.

A string quartet was set up against the wall, effectively making my attempt at a gift meaningless, and a photographer wandered the room, capturing moments for the public eye.

The mood in the room was playful. Tiny—who had so far only managed to get close to Marlee—was talking to Emmica and Jenna and looking more animated than I'd ever seen her. Marlee hovered near a window, looking like one of the many guards dotting the wall. She made no effort to leave her chosen spot but stopped anyone who passed by to chat. A group of Threes—Kayleigh, Elizabeth, and Emily—all turned and waved and smiled. I returned the

gesture. Everyone seemed so friendly and happy today.

Except for Celeste and Bariel. Usually they were inseparable, but today they were on opposite ends of the room, with Bariel speaking to Samantha, and Celeste sitting alone at a table, clutching a crystal glass of deep red liquid. I'd obviously missed something between yesterday's dinner and this afternoon.

I gripped my violin case again and walked toward the back of the room to see Marlee.

"Hi, Marlee. This is something, isn't it?" I asked, setting down the violin.

"It sure is." She hugged me. "I hear Maxon's coming by later to wish Kriss a happy birthday in person. Isn't that sweet? I'll bet he has a present, too."

Marlee went on in her typical enthusiastic way. I still wondered what her secret was, but I trusted her enough to bring up the subject if she really needed to talk about it. We spoke of little nothings for a few minutes until we heard a general clamor at the front end of the room.

Marlee and I both turned, and while she remained calm, I was completely deflated.

Kriss's dress choice had been incredibly strategic. Here we all were in day dresses—short, girlish things—and she was in a floor-length gown. But the length meant little. It was that her dress was a creamy, almost white color. Her hair was done up with a row of yellow jewels pinned into a line across the front in a very subtle resemblance to a crown. She looked mature, regal, bridal.

Even though I wasn't entirely sure where my heart was, I felt a pang of jealousy. None of us would ever get a similar moment. No matter how many parties or dinners came and went, it would be rather pathetic to try to copy Kriss's look. I saw Celeste's hand—the one that wasn't clutching her drink—ball into a fist.

"She looks really pretty," Marlee commented wistfully.

"Better than pretty," I replied.

The party continued on, and Marlee and I mostly crowd-watched. Surprisingly—and suspiciously—Celeste clung to Kriss, talking up a storm as Kriss circled the room, thanking everyone for coming, even though we really had no choice.

Eventually she made it to the back corner where Marlee and I were standing, soaking up the warm sun from the windows. Marlee, true to form, threw her arms around Kriss.

"Happy birthday!" she squealed.

“Thank you!” Kriss replied, returning Marlee’s affection and enthusiasm.

“So you’re nineteen today, right?” Marlee asked.

“Yes. I couldn’t think of a better way to celebrate. I’m so glad they’re taking pictures. My mother will love this! Even though we do pretty well, we’ve never had money to have something like this. It’s so beautiful!” she gushed.

Kriss was a Three. There weren’t nearly as many limits to her life as mine, but I’d imagine anything close to this scale would be hard to justify.

“It is impressive,” Celeste commented. “For my birthday last year, I had a black and white party. Any trace of color, and you weren’t even allowed in the door.”

“Wow,” Marlee whispered, obvious envy in the tiny word.

“It was fantastic. Gourmet food, dramatic lighting, and the music! Well, we flew in Tessa Tamble. You’ve heard of her?”

It was impossible not to know Tessa Tamble. She had at least a dozen hit songs. Sometimes we saw videos of hers on TV, though that was frowned on by Mom. She thought we were infinitely more talented than anyone like Tessa, and it irked her to no end that she had fame and money when we didn’t for doing essentially the same thing.

“She’s my favorite!” Kriss exclaimed.

“Well, Tessa’s a dear friend of the family, so she came in and did a concert for my party. I mean, we couldn’t have a bunch of dreary Fives sucking all the life out of the room.”

Marlee gave me a quick sideways glance. I could tell she was feeling embarrassed for me.

“Oops,” Celeste added, looking at me. “I forgot. I meant no offense.”

The sticky sweetness of her voice was infuriating. Once again I was tempted to hit her.... Better not to push it.

“None taken,” I replied, as composed as I possibly could. “Exactly what do you do as a Two, Celeste? I mean, I’ve never heard your music on the radio.”

“I model,” she answered in a tone that implied I should have known that. “Haven’t you seen my ads?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Oh, well, you are a Five. I guess you can’t afford the magazines anyway.”

It hurt because it was true. May loved to sneak peeks at magazines when we managed to go by a store, but there was absolutely no reason for us to buy them.

Kriss, taking on the role of host again, switched directions.

“You know, America, I’ve been meaning to ask what your focus was as a Five.”

“Music.”

“You should play for us sometime!”

I sighed. “Actually, I brought my violin to play for you today. I thought it would make a nice gift, but you’ve already got a quartet, so I figured—”

“Oh, play for us!” Marlee begged.

“Please, America, it’s my birthday!” Kriss echoed.

“But they’ve already given you a—” It didn’t matter how I protested. Kriss and Marlee had already shushed the quartet and made everyone come to the back of the room. Some girls fanned their dresses out and sat on the floor, while others pulled a few chairs toward the corner. Kriss stood in the middle of the crowd, clutching her hands with excitement, as Celeste stood by, holding the crystal glass she had yet to take a sip from.

As the girls settled themselves, I prepped the violin. The quartet of young men who had been playing walked over to support me, and the few waitstaff who had been buzzing about the room became still.

I took a deep breath and brought the violin to my chin. “For you,” I said, looking at Kriss.

I let the bow hover above the strings for a moment, closed my eyes, and then let the music come.

For a while, there was no wicked Celeste, no Aspen lurking in the palace, no rebels trying to invade. There wasn’t anything but one perfect note stringing itself to the next in such a way they seemed afraid they might get lost in time without one another. But they did hold together, and as they floated on, this gift that was meant to be something for Kriss became something for me.

I might be a Five, but I wasn’t worthless.

I played the song—as familiar as my father’s voice or the smell of my room—for a few brief, beautiful moments, and then let it come to its unavoidable end. I gave the bow one last sweep across the strings and lifted it into the air.

I turned to find Kriss, hoping she'd enjoyed her gift, but I didn't even see her face. Behind the crowd of girls, Maxon had walked in. He was in a gray suit with a box under his arm for Kriss. The girls were kindly applauding, but I couldn't register the sound. All I saw was that Maxon wore a handsome, awestruck expression, which slowly turned into a smile, a smile for no one but me.

"Your Majesty," I said with a curtsy.

The other girls all clambered to their feet to greet Maxon. In the midst of this, I heard a shocked squeal.

"Oh, no! Kriss, I'm so sorry."

A few girls had gasped in the same direction, and as Kriss turned my way I saw why. Her beautiful dress was stained down the front from Celeste's punch. It looked like Kriss had been stabbed.

"I'm sorry, I just turned too fast. I didn't mean to, Kriss. Let me help you." To the average person, Celeste's tone probably sounded sincere, but I could see through it.

Kriss covered her mouth as she started to cry, then ran from the room, which ended the party. To his credit, Maxon went after her, though I really wished he had stayed.

Celeste was pleading her case to anyone who would listen, saying it was a complete accident. Tuesday was nodding, saying she saw the whole thing, but there were so many rolling eyes and sagging shoulders from the rest that her support was pointless. I quietly put my violin away and went to leave.

Marlee grabbed my arm. "Someone should do something about her."

If Celeste could move someone as lovely as Anna to violence, or think it was acceptable to try and take the dress off my back, or make someone as good as Marlee come close to anger, then she really was too much for the Selection.

I had to get that girl out of the palace.