

CHAPTER 22

“I’M TELLING YOU, MAXON, IT wasn’t an accident.” We were in the garden again, passing time until the Report. It had taken me a whole day to get a chance to speak with him.

“But she looked mortified, and she was so apologetic,” he countered. “How could it not have been an accident?”

I sighed. “I’m telling you. I see Celeste every day, and that was her sneaky way of ruining Kriss’s moment in the spotlight. She’s so competitive.”

“Well, if she was trying to take my attention from Kriss, she failed. I spent nearly an hour with the girl. Rather pleasant time I had, too.”

I didn’t want to hear about that. I knew that there was something small and tenuous between us, and I didn’t want to deal with anything that might change it. Not until I knew how I felt about it myself.

“Then what about Anna?” I asked.

“Who?”

“Anna Farmer? She hit Celeste, and you kicked her out, remember? I know Anna had to have been provoked.”

“Did you hear Celeste say something?” He sounded skeptical.

“Well ... no. But I knew Anna, and I know Celeste. I’m telling you, Anna was not the type of person to head straight to violence. Celeste must have said something heartless to her for her to have reacted that way.”

“America, I’m aware that you spend more time with the girls than I do, but how well can you really know them? You like to hide in your room or the libraries. I daresay you’re more familiar with your maids’ personalities than any of the Selected.”

He was probably right, but I wouldn’t back down. “That’s not fair. I was right about Marlee, wasn’t I? Don’t you think she’s nice?”

He made a face. “Yes ... she is nice, I suppose.”

“Then why won’t you believe me when I say that what Celeste did was a calculated move?”

“America, it’s not that I think you’re lying. I’m sure, to you, it seemed that way. But Celeste was sorry. And she’s been nothing but gracious with me.”

“I’ll bet she has,” I muttered under my breath.

“That’s enough,” Maxon said with a sigh. “I don’t want to talk about the others right now.”

“She tried to take my dress, Maxon,” I complained.

“I said I don’t want to talk about her,” he said fiercely.

That was all I was going to take. I huffed and lifted my arms in the air just to drop them with a thud against my legs. I was so frustrated I wanted to scream.

“If you’re going to act this way, I’m going to find someone who does want my company.” He walked off.

“Hey!” I called.

“No!” He turned back on me and spoke more forcefully than I’d ever imagined he could.

“You forget yourself, Lady America. It would do you well to remember that I am the crown prince of Illéa. For all intents and purposes, I am lord and master of this country, and I’ll be damned if you think you can treat me like this in my own home. You don’t have to agree with my decisions, but you will abide by them.”

He turned and left, either not seeing or caring that I had tears in my eyes.

I didn’t look his way through dinner, but it was difficult to do during the Report. I caught him looking at me twice, and both times he tugged his ear. I didn’t return the action. I didn’t want to talk to him right now. I could only assume I’d be scolded more anyway, and I didn’t need that.

I walked up to my room afterward so upset with Maxon I couldn’t think clearly. Why wouldn’t he listen to me? Did he think I was a liar? Even worse, did he think Celeste was above lying?

Maybe Maxon was just a typical guy, and Celeste was a beautiful girl, and in the end that would be what won out. For all his talk about wanting a soul mate, maybe all he wanted was a bedmate.

And if that was the kind of person he was, why was I even bothering with this? Stupid, stupid, stupid! I kissed him! I told him I’d be patient! And for what? I just—

I turned the corner to my room, and there was Aspen, waiting outside my door. All my rage

melted away into a strange uncertainty. Guards, as a rule, kept their eyes forward and stayed at attention, but he was looking at me with an unreadable expression.

“Lady America,” he whispered.

“Officer Leger.”

Though it wasn't his job, he leaned over to open my door for me. I walked past slowly, almost afraid to turn my back on him, almost afraid he wasn't real. As much as I'd tried to keep him out of my head and my heart, I just wanted him to be with me in that moment. As I passed, I heard him inhale just next to my hair. It gave me a chill.

He fixed me with another stare and slowly closed the door.

Sleep was pointless. I tossed for hours as thoughts of Maxon's stupidity and Aspen's closeness battled in my head. I didn't know what to do about anything. My reflections were so consuming, I didn't even realize that I'd been mulling them over until well past two in the morning.

I sighed. My maids were going to have to work extra hard to make me look good tomorrow.

Suddenly I saw a light from the hallway. So quietly it felt like I was dreaming it, Aspen cracked open the door, walked in, and shut it behind him.

“Aspen, what are you doing?” I whispered as he crossed the room. “You'll be in so much trouble if you're caught in here!”

He continued to walk silently.

“Aspen?”

He stopped in front of my bed and quietly laid the staff he was holding on the ground. “Do you love him?”

I looked into Aspen's deep eyes, barely visible in the dark. For a split second, I didn't know what to say.

“No.”

He ripped back my blankets in a move both graceful and violent. I should have protested, but I didn't. His hand was behind my head, pushing my face to his. He kissed me feverishly, and every good thing in the world fell into place. He didn't smell like his homemade soap anymore, and he was stronger than he used to be, but every move, every touch was familiar.

“They'll kill you for doing this,” I breathed in a brief moment when his lips traveled to my

neck.

“If I don’t, I’ll die anyway.”

I tried to work up the will to tell him to stop, but I knew any attempts would be halfhearted. A thousand things about this moment felt wrong—that we were breaking so many rules, that as far as I knew Aspen had another girlfriend, that Maxon and I had some sort of feelings for each other—but I couldn’t care. I was so angry with Maxon, and Aspen felt so comforting, I just let his hands travel up and down my legs.

I marveled at how different it felt. We’d never had so much space before.

Even with the distraction, I could feel everything else swarming in my head. I was angry with Maxon, angry with Celeste, even angry with Aspen. Hell, I was angry with Illéa. As we kissed on and on, I started crying.

Aspen kissed me through it, and soon some of the tears were his, too.

“I hate you, you know?” I said.

“I know, Mer. I know.”

Mer. When he touched me like that, called me that name, I felt like I was a world away. Upset as I was, Aspen felt like home.

We went on for nearly fifteen minutes before he remembered himself.

“I have to get back, the guard doing rounds will be expecting me.”

“What?”

“There are guards who do rounds at random. I might have twenty minutes, I might have an hour. If it’s a short round, I have less than five minutes.”

“Hurry!” I urged, hopping up with him to help him straighten his hair.

He grabbed his staff, and we ran across the floor together. Before he opened the door, he pulled me in to kiss me again. It felt like pure sunlight was traveling down my veins.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I said. “How did you end up on the palace guard?”

He shrugged. “Turns out I’m a natural. They fly everyone to this training place in Whites. America, it was covered in snow! Nothing like the flurries we get back home. All the new guards are fed and trained and tested. There are shots, too. Don’t know what’s in them, but I grew really fast. I’m a solid fighter, and I’m smart. I tested the highest in our class.”

I smiled with pride. “Not surprised by that at all.” I kissed him again. Aspen had always been too good to lead the life of a Six.

He opened the door and checked the hallway. It looked empty.

“I have so much to tell you. We need to talk,” I whispered.

“I know. And we will. It’s going to take some time, but I’ll be back. Not tonight. I don’t know when, but soon.” He kissed me again, so hard it almost hurt.

“I missed you,” he whispered into my mouth, and went back to his post.

I walked back to my bed in a daze. I couldn’t believe what I’d just done. Part of me—a very upset part—felt like Maxon deserved this. If he wanted to spare Celeste and humiliate me, then I certainly wouldn’t be a part of the Selection much longer. If she could find a way around the rules, there was nothing to stop me anymore. Problem solved.

Suddenly worn out, I fell asleep in moments.

CHAPTER 23

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE feeling a little guilty. Frightened even. Just because I didn't return Maxon's ear tug didn't mean he couldn't come to my room any time he wanted. We so easily could have been caught. If anyone had any idea what I'd done...

It was treason. And there was only one way the palace dealt with treason.

But another part of me didn't care. In the hazy moments of waking, I relived every look in Aspen's eyes, every touch, every kiss. I missed that so badly.

I wished we'd had more time to talk. I really needed to know what Aspen was thinking, though last night had given me some clues. It was just so unbelievable—after trying so hard to not want him—that he might still want me.

It was Saturday, and I was supposed to go to the Women's Room, but I just couldn't stand it. I needed to think, and I knew that wouldn't happen in the endless chatter floating downstairs. When my maids came, I told them I had a headache and would be staying in bed.

They were so helpful, bringing me food and cleaning the room as quietly as possible, that I almost felt bad for lying to them. I had to, though. I couldn't face the queen and the girls and possibly Maxon while my mind was so solidly fixated on Aspen.

I closed my eyes but did not sleep. I tried to clear up just how I felt. Before I got very far, though, there was a knock at the door. I rolled over, catching Anne's face as she silently asked if she should answer it. I sat up quickly, straightened my hair, and gave her a nod.

I prayed that it wouldn't be Maxon—I was afraid he'd be able to read my crimes on my face—but I wasn't prepared to see Aspen's face walking through my door. I felt myself sit up taller and hoped my maids didn't notice.

"Pardon me, miss," he said to Anne. "I'm Officer Leger. I'm here to speak to Lady America about some security measures."

"Of course," she said, smiling brighter than usual and gesturing for Aspen to enter. In the corner I saw Mary nudge Lucy, who let out a tiny giggle.

When he heard the sound, Aspen turned toward them and tipped his hat. "Ladies."

Lucy ducked her head and Mary's cheeks looked redder than my hair, but they didn't answer. Anne, though she also seemed taken by Aspen's good looks, was put together enough to speak at least.

“Shall we leave, miss?”

I considered this. I didn't want to seem too obvious, but some privacy would be nice.

“Only for a moment. I'm sure Officer Leger won't need me for long,” I decided, and they whisked right out of the room.

Once they had disappeared behind the door, Aspen spoke. “You're wrong, I'm afraid. I'm going to be needing you for a very long time.” He winked at me.

I shook my head. “I still can't believe you're here.”

Wasting no time, Aspen took off his hat and sat on the edge of my bed, setting his hands so our fingers just barely touched. “I never thought I'd count the draft as a blessing, but if it gives me the chance to apologize to you, I'll be forever grateful.”

I was stunned into silence.

Aspen looked deep into my eyes. “Please forgive me, Mer. I was so, so stupid, and I've regretted that night in the tree house since the second I climbed down the ladder. I was too stubborn to say anything and then your name got called... I didn't know what to do.” He stopped for a second. It looked like he had tears in his eyes. Was it possible that Aspen had been crying for me the way I'd been crying for him? “I'm still so in love with you.”

I bit my lip, holding back my tears. I needed to be sure of one thing before I could even think about this.

“What about Brenna?”

His face fell. “What?”

I gave an unsteady breath. “I saw you two together in the square when I was leaving. Is that over?”

Aspen squinted his face in concentration then burst into laughter. He covered his mouth with his hands and fell backward on the bed before popping up and asking, “Is that what you think? Oh, Mer, she fell. She tripped and I caught her.”

“Tripped?”

“Yeah, the square was so full, people were standing on top of one another. She fell into me and made a joke about being a klutz, which you know is true for Brenna even on a good day.” I thought about the time she seemed to just fall off the sidewalk for no apparent reason. Why hadn't this occurred to me before? “As soon as I could get free, I was rushing to the stage.”

I remembered those moments, Aspen's desperate attempt to get close to me. He hadn't been faking at all. I smiled. "And just what were you planning on doing once you got there?"

He shrugged. "I didn't actually think it out that far. I was considering begging you to stay. I was prepared to make an idiot out of myself if it meant you wouldn't get in that car. But then you looked so mad ... and I get why you were." He let out a sigh. "I just couldn't do it. Besides, maybe you'd be happy here." He looked around the room at all the beautiful things that were temporarily considered mine. I could see how he would think that.

"Then," he continued, "I thought that I could win you over once you came home." His voice seemed suddenly tinged with worry. "I was sure you'd want out and come home as soon as you could. But ... you didn't."

He paused to look at me, but mercifully, didn't ask just how close Maxon and I were. He'd seen some of it already, but he didn't know that we kissed or had secret signals, and I didn't want to have to explain that.

"Then there was the draft, and I figured it would be unfair to even think about writing. I could die out here. I didn't want to try to make you love me again and then..."

"Love you again?" I asked incredulously. "Aspen, I never stopped."

In a swift but gentle move, Aspen leaned in and kissed me. He put his hand to my cheek, holding me to him, and every minute of the last two years flooded my body. I was so grateful they weren't lost.

"I'm so sorry," he mumbled between kisses. "I'm so sorry, Mer."

He pulled away to look at me, a small smile on his perfect face, his eyes asking exactly what I was thinking: What do we do now?

Just then, the door opened, and I was horror-struck as my maids took in Aspen's closeness.

"Thank goodness you're back!" he said to them as he pushed his hand more firmly against my cheek before moving it to my forehead. "I don't think you have a temperature, miss."

"What's wrong?" Anne asked, worry falling over her face as she raced to my bedside.

Aspen stood. "She started saying that she felt funny, something about her head."

"Is your headache worse, miss?" Mary asked. "You look so pale!"

I bet I did. No doubt every drop of blood had dashed away from my face the moment they saw us together. But Aspen, so cool under pressure, had fixed it in a split second.

“I’ll get the medicine,” Lucy piped in, scurrying to the bathroom.

“Forgive me, miss,” Aspen said as my maids went to work. “I don’t wish to disturb you any more. I’ll come back when you’re feeling better.”

In his eyes I could see the same face I’d kissed a thousand times in the tree house. The world around us was completely new, but our connection was the same as ever.

“Thank you, officer,” I said weakly.

He went to leave, giving me a small bow.

Soon my maids were all stirring around me, trying to heal a sickness that wasn’t even there.

My head didn’t ache, but my heart did. The longing for Aspen’s arms was so familiar, it was like it never left.

I woke to a hard shake on my shoulders from Anne in the middle of the night.

“Wha—?”

“Please, miss, you have to get up!” Her voice was frantic, worn with terror.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“We’re under attack. We have to get you to the basement.”

My mind was groggy; I couldn’t be sure I was hearing her right. But I noticed behind her that Lucy was already crying.

“They’re inside?” I asked in disbelief.

Lucy’s fearful wail was all the confirmation I needed.

“What do we do?” I asked. A sudden adrenaline spike woke me up, and I jumped out of bed. As soon as I was standing, Mary was pushing my feet into shoes and Anne was putting a robe on me. All I could think was North or South? North or South?

“There’s a passage here in the corner. It’ll take you straight to the safe room in the basement. The guards are there waiting. The royal family should already be there and most of the girls, too. Hurry, miss.” Anne pulled me out into the hallway and pushed on a section of wall. It turned, like a hidden passage from some mystery novel. Sure enough, behind the wall, a stairwell awaited me. As I stood there, Tiny bolted from her room and scurried down the passage.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said. Anne and Mary gaped at me. Lucy was shaking to the point she could barely stand. “Let’s go,” I repeated.

“No, miss. We go somewhere else. You have to hurry before they get here. Please!”

I knew at best they’d be injured if they were found; at worst they’d die. I couldn’t bear them being hurt. Maybe I was a little cocky, but if Maxon had gone out of his way to do everything he’d done thus far, maybe they would matter to him if they mattered to me. Even if we were fighting. Perhaps it was too much generosity to bank on, but I wasn’t leaving them here. The fear made me move faster. I grabbed Anne’s arm and pushed her in. She stumbled and couldn’t stop me as I grabbed Mary and Lucy.

“Move!” I told them.

They started walking, but Anne was protesting the whole way. “They won’t let us in, miss! This place is just for the family.... They’ll just make us leave!” But I didn’t care what she said. Whatever their hiding place was, there was no way it would be as safe as wherever the royal family was staying.

The stairwell was lit every few yards, but even so I nearly fell a few times in my haste to move. My mind was blinded with worry. How far had the rebels penetrated before? Did they know these pathways to safety existed? Lucy was half-paralyzed, and I tugged her down to keep us together.

I couldn’t tell how long it took for us to reach the bottom, but finally the tiny pathway opened up to a man-made cavern. I could see other stairways and other girls, everyone running behind what looked to be a two-foot-thick door. We ran up to our safe place.

“Thank you for delivering this girl. You can leave,” a guard said to my maids.

“No! They’re with me. They’re staying,” I said with authority.

“Miss, they have their own places to be,” he countered.

“Fine. They don’t go in, I don’t go in. I’m sure Prince Maxon will appreciate knowing that my absence is your doing. Let’s go, ladies.” I pulled on Mary and Lucy’s hands. Anne was shocked into stillness.

“Wait! Wait! Fine, go inside. But if anyone has an issue with it, it’s on your hands.”

“Not a problem,” I said. I turned the girls and walked into the safe room with my head held high.

There was a clamor of activity inside. Some girls were huddled together crying, others were in

prayer. I saw the king and queen sitting alone, surrounded by more guards. Beside them, Maxon was holding Elayna's hand. She looked a little shaken but obviously felt calmer with him touching her. I looked at the royal family's position ... so close to the door. I wondered if it was like a captain going down with his ship. They'd do everything to keep this place afloat, but if it went down, they'd be the first ones to drown.

Their little group saw my entrance and noted the company I was keeping. I took in the confused expressions on their faces, nodded once, and continued to walk with my head high. I figured so long as I looked sure of myself, no one would question me.

I was wrong.

I took three more steps and Silvia walked up. She looked incredibly calm. This was all obviously old news for her.

"Good. Some help. Girls, you will immediately get to the water stores in the back and begin serving refreshments to the royal family and the ladies. Get going, now," she commanded.

"No." I turned to Anne and gave her my first real order. "Anne, please take some refreshments to the king, queen, and prince and then come join me." I faced Silvia. "The rest can fend for themselves. They chose to leave their maids alone, they can get their own damn water. Mine will be sitting with me. Come, ladies."

I knew we were close enough to the royals that they would have heard me. In my quest to have a level of authority, I'd spoken a little too loudly. But I didn't care if they thought I was rude. Lucy was more frightened than most of the people in this room. She was trembling head to foot, and there was no way I'd have her serving people half her equal in goodness in her state.

Perhaps it was all my years as a big sister, but I just had to keep these girls safe.

We found a little space in the back of the room. Whoever usually kept this place ready must not have been prepared for the influx the Selection would cause, because there weren't nearly enough chairs in here. But I saw the stores of food and water and could tell they would get us through months down here, if the need arose.

It was a funny little array of people. Obviously, several officials had been up working through the night, and they were in suits. Maxon himself was still dressed. But nearly all the girls were in their thin nightgowns that helped you sleep in the warmth of the rooms upstairs. Not all of them had been able to get a robe on in their haste to leave. I was even a little chilly under mine.

Many of the girls had piled themselves toward the front of the room. Obviously, they'd be the first to die if someone got through the door. But if they didn't, think of all the time spent right

in front of Maxon! A few were closer to where we were, and most of them were in a similar state as Lucy—shaking, tearful, and petrified with worry.

I pulled Lucy under an arm and Mary cuddled her from the other side. There wasn't anything to say about the situation that was pleasant, so we stayed quiet, listening to the clamor of the room. The jangle of voices reminded me of the first day here, when they were giving us makeovers. I closed my eyes and pictured that action with the sound in an attempt to make myself as calm as I appeared.

“Are you okay?”

I looked up and there was Aspen, glorious in his uniform. His tone was very official, and he didn't seem shaken by the situation at all. I sighed.

“Yes, thank you.”

We were quiet for a moment, watching people get settled in the room. Mary had obviously been exhausted—she was already asleep and leaning heavily on Lucy's side. Lucy was fairly calm, all things considered. She'd stopped crying and just sat there looking at Aspen with a kind of wonder in her eyes.

“It was good of you to bring your maids. Not everyone would be so kind to people considered beneath them,” he said.

“Castes never meant that much to me,” I said quietly. He gave me the smallest smile.

Lucy took in a breath like she was going to ask Aspen a question, but a loud yelling coursed through the chamber. A guard on the far end of the room was barking instructions for us to all silence ourselves.

Aspen walked away, which was good. I feared someone would be able to see something.

“That was the same guard from earlier, wasn't it?” Lucy asked.

“Yes, it was.”

“I've seen him guarding your door lately. He's awfully friendly,” she commented.

I was sure Aspen would speak to my maids as kindly as he spoke to me when they crossed his path. They were Sixes, after all.

“He's very handsome,” she added.

I smiled and contemplated saying something, but that same guard instructed us to be quiet. After a few jagged edges of conversation dulled away, an eerie hush fell over the room.

The silence was worse than any sound. Without a single sense to guide me, my imagination took over, producing horrific scenes in my head: rooms demolished, a string of bodies, a merciless army only feet from the door. I found myself clutching the girls nearer to me, as if we could protect one another from whatever would come.

The only stirring was Maxon walking around to check on each of the girls. When he got to our corner, only Lucy was awake with me, and every once in a while, we'd have a quick conversation in breathed words, reading each other's lips. As Maxon approached, he smiled at the pile of people leaning on me. In that moment, I could see no anger left from our argument, though I really wanted to resolve it. Instead, I saw his grateful smile, simply happy that I was okay. A wave of guilt went through me.... What had I gotten myself into?

"Are you well?" he asked.

I nodded. He looked at Lucy and leaned across me to speak to her. I inhaled. Maxon didn't smell like anything that could be bottled. Not like cinnamon or vanilla or even, I remembered quickly, like homemade soap. He had his own smell, a mix of chemicals that burned out from him.

"And you?" he asked Lucy.

She nodded, too.

"Are you surprised to find yourself down here?" He smiled at Lucy, making light of what was an unimaginable situation.

"No, Your Majesty. Not with her." Lucy nodded in my direction.

Maxon turned to look at me, and his face was incredibly close. I felt uncomfortable. Too many people could see us; Aspen included. But the moment passed quickly, and he turned back to Lucy.

"I know what you mean." Maxon smiled again. He looked like he might say more, but then changed his mind and moved to stand.

I quickly grabbed his arm and whispered, "North or South?"

"Do you remember the photo shoot?" he breathed.

Shocked, I nodded. These rebels were making their way northwest, burning crops and slaughtering people along the way. Intercept them, he'd said. These rebels, these murderers, had been slowly coming for us all this time, and we couldn't stop them. They were killers. They were Southerners.

“Tell no one.” He left, moving on to Fiona, who was holding herself and crying quietly.

I practiced breathing slowly, trying to imagine ways I could escape if they got to us, but I was fooling myself. If the rebels managed to get down here, it was all over. There was nothing to do but wait.

The hours crept on. I had no idea what time it was, but people who had dozed off had woken up, and those of us who had powered through the time were starting to wilt.

Finally, the door opened as some guards left to investigate. More time passed as the palace was swept, and eventually they returned.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” one of the guards called, “the rebels have been subdued. We are asking that everyone please return to their rooms via the back stairs. There’s quite a mess and scores of injured guards. It’s better if you all bypass the main rooms and halls until they can be cleared. If you are a member of the Selection, please proceed to your room and stay there until further notice. I’ve spoken with the cooks, and food will be brought to you within the hour. I’m going to need all medical personnel to report with me to the hospital wing.”

With that, people stood and started moving like nothing had happened. Some people even looked bored. Except for the faces of people like Lucy, it seemed everyone took the attack in stride, as if it were to be expected.

My room had been ransacked. Mattress on the floor, dresses pulled out of the closet, the pictures of my family torn up on the ground. I looked around for my jar, and it was still intact with its penny inside, just hidden under the bed. I tried not to cry, but my eyes kept welling up. It wasn’t that I was afraid, though I was. I just didn’t like that an enemy had put their hands all over my things, had ruined them.

It took quite a while to set things right, since we were all so tired. We managed, though. Anne even found some tape so I could put my pictures back together. I sent my maids to bed the moment I got my tape. Anne protested, but I wouldn’t have any of it. Now that I’d found my ability to command, I wasn’t afraid to use it.

Once I was alone, I let myself cry. The fear, even though it had mostly passed, still had a hold on me.

I pulled out the jeans that Maxon had given me and my one shirt from home and put them on. I felt a little more normal this way. My hair was messy from the events of the night and most of the morning, so I pulled it up into a casual little bun on the top of my head, pieces falling down around my face.

I set the fragments of pictures on the bed, trying to figure out which ones went together. It was like having four puzzles’ worth of pieces all in the same box. I had managed to put only one

together when there was a knock at the door.

Maxon, I thought. Please be Maxon. I threw the door open hopefully.

“Hello, dearie.” It was Silvia. She had a little pout on her face that I supposed was meant to be a consolation. She scuttled right past me into my room, then turned and took in what I was wearing.

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re leaving, too,” she whined. “Honestly, it was nothing.” She wiped the whole incident away with her hand.

I wouldn’t call it nothing. Couldn’t she tell I’d been crying?

“I’m not leaving,” I said, tucking a hair behind my ear. “Are others going home?”

She sighed. “Yes, three so far. And Maxon, dear boy, told me to let anyone who wants to leave go home. Arrangements are being made as we speak. It’s so funny. It was as if he knew girls would be leaving. If I were in your position, I’d think twice before leaving over all this nonsense.”

Silvia started walking around my room, taking in the decor. Nonsense? What was wrong with this woman?

“Did they take anything?” she asked casually.

“No, ma’am. They made a mess, but nothing’s missing as far as I can tell.”

“Very good.” She walked over to me and handed me a tiny portable phone. “This is the safest line in the palace. You need to call your family and tell them you’re fine. Don’t take too long, now. I still have a few girls to see.”

I marveled at the tiny object. I’d never actually held a portable phone. I’d seen them before in the hands of Twos and Threes, but I never thought I’d get to use one. My hands trembled with excitement. I was going to hear their voices!

I dialed the number eagerly. After everything that had happened, it actually brought a smile to my face. Mom picked up after two rings.

“Hello?”

“Mom?”

“America! Is that you? Are you okay? Some guard called to tell us we might not be able to get ahold of you for a few days, and we knew those damn rebels had gotten through. We’ve been so scared.” She started crying.

“Oh, don’t cry, Mom. I’m safe.” I looked over at Silvia. She looked bored.

“Hold on.” There was a bit of movement.

“America?” May’s voice was thick with tears. She must have had the worst day.

“May! Oh, May, I miss you so much!” I felt the tears rising again.

“I thought you were dead! America, I love you. Promise me you won’t die,” she wailed.

“I promise.” I had to smile at such a vow.

“Will you come home? Can’t you? I don’t want you there anymore.” May was practically begging.

“Come home?” I asked.

I felt so many things. I missed my family, and I was tired of hiding from rebels. I was getting more and more confused over my feelings for Aspen and Maxon, and I didn’t know how to handle them. The easiest thing to do would be to leave. But still.

“No, May, I can’t come home. I have to stay here.”

“Why?” May moaned.

“Because,” I said simply.

“Because why?”

“Just ... because.”

May was quiet for a moment, thinking. “Are you in love with Maxon?” For a minute I heard the boy-crazy May that I was used to. She’d be fine.

“Umm, I don’t know about that, but—”

“America! You’re in love with Maxon! Oh my gosh!” I heard Dad yelling, “What?” in the background and then Mom’s “Yes, yes, yes!”

“May, I never said—”

“I knew it!” May just laughed and laughed. Just like that, all her fears of losing me vanished.

“May, I have to go. The others need the phone. But I just wanted you all to know that I’m

okay. I'll write you soon, I promise.”

“Okay, okay. Tell me about Maxon! And send more treats! I love you!” she yelled.

“I love you, too. Bye.”

I hung up the phone before she could ask for anything else. The moment her voice was gone, though, I missed her more than I had before.

Silvia was swift. She had the phone out of my hand in a matter of seconds and was walking to the door.

“There’s a good girl,” she said, and disappeared down the hall.

I certainly didn’t feel good. But I knew that once I figured out how to set things right with Aspen and Maxon, I would.

CHAPTER 24

AMY, FIONA, AND TALLULAH were gone within hours. I wasn't sure if the speed was due to the efficiency of Silvia or the nerves of the girls. We dropped to nineteen, and it suddenly felt like this was all moving quickly. Still, I couldn't have predicted how much faster it would become.

The Monday after the attacks, we returned to our routine. Breakfast was as delicious as ever, and I wondered if there would come a time when I wouldn't appreciate these amazing meals.

"Kriss, isn't this divine?" I asked as I bit into a piece of star-shaped fruit. I'd never seen it before I came to the palace. Kriss's mouth was full, but she nodded in agreement. I felt a warm sense of sisterhood this morning. Now that we had survived a major rebel attack together, it felt like these small bonds had sealed into something unbreakable. Beside Kriss, Emily was passing me honey. Next to me, Tiny was asking where my songbird necklace came from with admiration in her eyes. The atmosphere was that of my family dinners a few years ago, before Kota turned into a jerk and we lost Kenna to a husband: full, bright, chatty.

I suddenly knew, just as Maxon had said his mother had done, that I would contact these girls down the road. I would want to know who everyone married and send them Christmas cards. And in twenty-some-odd years, if Maxon had a son, I'd call to ask them about their favorite girls in the new Selection. And we'd remember everything we'd gone through and laugh about it as if it had been an adventure, not a competition.

Oddly enough, the only person in the room who appeared to be distressed was Maxon. He didn't touch his food but instead gazed up and down the rows of girls with a clear look of concentration on his face. Every once in a while, he paused midthought and seemed to debate with himself over something, and then moved on.

When he came to my row, he caught me looking at him and gave me a weak smile. Except for the quick interlude last night, we hadn't spoken since our argument, and there were things that needed to be said. This time, I needed to be the initiator. With an expression that said it was a request, not a demand, I tugged my ear. His expression remained strained, but he tugged his ear, too.

I sighed with relief and found my eyes moving toward the doors of the massive room. As I'd suspected, another pair of eyes was looking my way. I'd noticed Aspen when I entered, but I tried not to acknowledge him. I supposed it was impossible to ignore someone you've loved that much.

Maxon stood up. The sudden movement made his chair screech in a way that drew our

collective attention. As we all turned toward him, he looked like he wished he could sit back down unnoticed. Realizing that wasn't an option, he spoke instead.

"Ladies," he said with a bow of his head. He looked genuinely pained. "I'm afraid that after yesterday's attack, I've been forced to seriously reconsider the operation of the Selection. As you know, three ladies asked to leave yesterday, and I obliged. I wouldn't want anyone here against their will. Furthermore, I don't feel comfortable keeping anyone in the palace, facing this constant threat of danger, when I feel confident that we don't have any sort of future together."

Around the room, the confusion changed to a clear and unhappy understanding.

"He's not..." Tiny whispered.

"Yes, he is," I replied.

"Though it grieves me to do this, I have discussed the matter with my family and a few close advisers and have decided to go ahead and narrow the Selection down to the Elite. However, instead of ten, I've decided to send all but six of you home," Maxon stated in a businesslike tone.

"Six?" Kriss gasped.

"That's not fair," Tiny breathed, already starting to cry.

I looked around the room as the hum of complaints rose and fell. Celeste braced herself, as if she could fight for a spot. Bariel had closed her eyes and crossed her fingers, perhaps hoping that image would garner her some sympathy. Marlee, who had admitted that she didn't care for Maxon, looked incredibly tense. Why did she want to stay so badly?

"I don't wish to draw this out unnecessarily, so only the following ladies will be staying. Lady Marlee and Lady Kriss."

Marlee breathed out a sigh of relief and put a hand to her chest. Kriss did a happy, fidgety dance in her chair and looked at the girls around her, expecting us to be happy. And I was until I realized that two of the six spots were already gone. With a disagreement hanging between Maxon and me, would he send me home? Did he not see any future with me? Did I want him to? What would I do if I had to go?

This whole time, the power had been in my hands as to when I would leave. I was abruptly aware of how important it was to me to stay.

"Lady Natalie and Lady Celeste," he continued, looking at them both in turn. I cringed at Celeste's name. He couldn't keep her and not me. I could hardly believe he was keeping her

at all. But was that a sign I was going? We'd fought about her very presence here.

"Lady Elise," he said, and the room inhaled a breath, awaiting the final name. I realized Tiny and I were squeezing each other's hands.

"And Lady America." Maxon looked over at me, and I felt every muscle in my body relax. Tiny started bawling immediately, and she wasn't alone. Maxon let out a long sigh.

"To everyone else, I'm incredibly sorry, but I hope you all trust me when I say that I meant this to be a good thing for you. I don't want to raise anyone's hopes for no reason and risk your life in the process. If anyone who is leaving wants to speak to me, I'll be in the library down the hall, and you may visit me as soon as you've finished eating."

Maxon walked out of the room as quickly as he could without running. I watched him until he crossed in front of Aspen, and then my attention was diverted. Aspen's face was confused, and I knew why. I'd told him I didn't love Maxon, so he would have assumed I meant next to nothing to Maxon as well. So why would I be so tense about staying or going? And why would Maxon want to keep me around?

Before a second had passed, Emmica and Tuesday were running after Maxon, no doubt looking for an explanation. Some girls were in tears, obviously heartbroken, and it fell on those of us remaining to comfort them.

It was unbearably awkward. Tiny ended up swatting away my hands and running out of the room. I hoped she wouldn't hold any bitter feelings against me.

People left within minutes, no longer hungry. I didn't linger myself, unable to handle the outpouring of emotion. As I passed Aspen, he whispered "tonight." I gave a tiny nod and went on my way.

The rest of the morning was odd. I'd never really had friends that I would miss. All the occupied rooms on the second floor were open, and girls scurried in and out, passing notes and gathering addresses. We cried together and laughed together, and by the afternoon, the palace had turned into a far more serious place than it was when we came.

No one was left in my little wing of the hall, so there was no sound of maids rushing to and fro, or of doors closing. I sat at my table, reading a book as my maids dusted. I wondered if the palace always felt this lonely. The emptiness made me miss my family.

Suddenly a knock came at the door. Anne rushed to get it, looking at me to make sure I was prepared for a visitor. I gave her a small nod.

When Maxon came into the room, I jumped to my feet.

“Ladies,” he said, looking to my maids. “We meet again.”

They curtsied and giggled. He acknowledged them and turned his eyes to me. I hadn’t realized how eager I was to see him. I stood by the table in a daze.

“Do forgive me, but I need to speak with Lady America. Would you give us a moment?”

There was more curtsying and giggling, and Anne asked—with a tone that implied near worship of the prince—if she could bring him anything. Maxon declined, and they left us. He had his hands in his pockets. We were silent for a while.

“I thought you might not keep me,” I finally admitted.

“Why?” he asked, sounding honestly confused.

“Because we fought. Because everything between us is weird. Because…” Because even though you’re dating five other women, I think I’m cheating on you, I thought.

Maxon closed the distance between us slowly, choosing his words as he walked. When he finally reached me, he picked up my hands in his and explained everything.

“First, let me say I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.” His voice was completely sincere. “It’s just that some of the committees and my father are already pressuring me in this, and I truly want to be able to make the decision for myself. It was frustrating to run into another situation where my opinion wasn’t being taken seriously.”

“Another situation?” I asked.

“Well, you’ve seen my choices. Marlee is a favorite with the people, and that cannot be overlooked. Celeste is a very powerful young woman, and she comes from an excellent family to align ourselves with. Natalie and Kriss are charming girls, both very agreeable and favorites of some in my family. Elise happens to have relations in New Asia. Since we’re trying to end this damn war, that is something to take into consideration. I’ve been debated down and cornered from every side on this decision.”

There was no explanation for me, and I almost didn’t ask for it. I knew that we were friends first and that I had no political uses at all. But I needed to hear the words so I could make the decision for myself. I couldn’t look him in the eye.

“And why am I still here?” My voice was barely above a whisper. I was sure this was going to hurt. In the pit of my stomach I was sure I was only still here because he was too good to break his promise.

“America, I thought I’d made myself clear,” Maxon said calmly. He let out a patient sigh and

used his hand to nudge up my chin. When I was finally looking into his eyes, he confessed.

“If this were a simpler matter, I’d have eliminated everyone else by now. I know how I feel about you. Maybe it’s impulsive of me to think I could be so sure, but I’m certain I would be happy with you.”

I blushed. I could feel tears rising, but I blinked them away. The expression on his face was so adoring, I didn’t want to miss it.

“There are moments when I feel like you and I have broken down every last wall, and then others when I think you only want to stay for convenience. If I knew for sure that I, and I alone, was your motivation...”

He paused and shook his head, as if the end of his sentence was something he couldn’t let himself want.

“Would I be wrong in saying that you’re still unsure of me?”

I didn’t want to hurt him, but I had to be honest. “No.”

“Then I have to hedge my bets. You may decide to leave, and I will let you go if you do. In the meantime, I have to find a wife. I’m trying to make the best decision I can within the boundaries I’ve been given, but please, don’t doubt for a moment that I care for you. Deeply.”

I couldn’t hold back the tears anymore. I thought about Aspen and what I’d done, and I felt so ashamed.

“Maxon?” I sniffed. “Can you ... can you ever forgive—?” I didn’t get to finish my confession. He came even closer and started sweeping the tears off my face with his strong fingers.

“Forgive what? Our stupid little fight? It’s already forgotten. Your feelings being a little slower than mine? I’m prepared to wait,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t think there’s anything you could do that I couldn’t forgive. Need I remind you of the knee to my groin?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Maxon chuckled once, then became suddenly serious.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He shook his head. “They were so fast this time.” Maxon’s voice was full of an aggravated wonder at the talents of the rebels. I suddenly wondered how close to disaster I had come by trying to save my maids.

“I’m getting more and more worried, America. North or South, they’re getting exceptionally

determined. It seems they won't stop until they get what they want, and we haven't the faintest clue what it is." Maxon looked confused and sad. "I feel like it's only a matter of time until they destroy someone important to me."

He looked into my eyes.

"You know, you still have a choice in this. If you're afraid to stay, you should say so." He paused, thinking. "Or if you don't think you can love me at all, it would be kinder to tell me now. I'll let you go on your way, and we can part as friends."

I wrapped my arms around him, resting my head against his chest. Maxon seemed both comforted and surprised by the gesture. It took only a second for him to wrap his arms securely around me.

"Maxon, I'm not completely sure what we are, but we're definitely more than friends."

He let out a sigh. With my head there against his chest, I could faintly make out the sound of his heart beating through his suit coat. It seemed to be rushing. His hand, gentle as ever, reached to cup my cheek. As I looked into his eyes, I felt that unnameable feeling that was growing between us.

With his eyes, Maxon asked for something we'd both agreed to wait on. I was glad he didn't want to wait anymore. I gave him a tiny nod, and he bridged the small gap between us, kissing me with unimaginable tenderness.

I felt a smile underneath his lips, and it lingered for a long time after.

CHAPTER 25

I FELT A NUDGE ON my arm. It was dark and either very late or very early. For a fraction of a second, I thought that there'd been yet another attack. Then I knew I was wrong because of the single word used to wake me.

“Mer?”

My back was to Aspen, and I took a moment to steady myself before I faced him. In my head, I knew that there were things that needed to be set right between us. I hoped my heart would let me say them.

I rolled over and caught Aspen's bright green eyes and knew this would be difficult. Then I noticed that he'd left the door to my room open.

“Aspen, are you crazy?” I whispered. “Close the door.”

“No, I've thought this out. With the door open, I can tell anyone who comes by that I heard a noise and was checking on you, which is my job. No one would suspect a thing.”

It was simple and brilliant. I nodded my head in understanding. “Okay.”

I turned on the small lamp on my bedside table to make it clear to any passersby that we weren't hiding anything. I noticed that the clock said it was past three in the morning.

Aspen was obviously pleased with himself. His smile, the same one that used to greet me in the tree house, was wide.

“You kept it,” he said.

“Huh?”

Aspen pointed down to my bedside table, where the jar sat with its lone penny.

“Yeah,” I said. “I just couldn't bring myself to get rid of it.”

His expression grew more and more hopeful. He turned to look at the door, as if checking quickly that no one was there. Then he bent down to kiss me.

“No,” I said quietly, pulling away. “You can't do that.”

The look in his eyes warred between confusion and sadness, and I feared that everything I

was about to say was only going to make things worse.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” I said adamantly. “You’ve been wonderful. I’ve been so happy to see you again and to know that you still love me. It’s changed everything.”

He smiled. “Good. Because I do love you, and I’m planning on making sure you never have a reason to doubt it.”

I squirmed. “Aspen, whatever we were, or are right now, we can’t be that here.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, shifting his weight.

“I’m part of the Selection right now. I’m here for Maxon, and I can’t date you or whatever this is while it’s still going on.” I started fidgeting with a bit of my comforter.

He thought a moment. “So were you lying to me? When you said you never stopped loving me?”

“No,” I assured him. “You’ve been in my heart the whole time. You’re the reason things have been going as slow as they are. Maxon likes me, but I can’t let myself really care about him because of you.”

“Well, great,” he said sarcastically. “Glad to know you’d be fine dating him if I wasn’t around.”

Underneath the anger, I could see he was heartbroken, but it wasn’t my fault it turned out this way.

“Aspen?” I asked quietly, getting him to look at me. “When you left me in the tree house, you crushed me.”

“Mer, I said I—”

“Let me finish.” He huffed, then was silent. “You took away my dreams, and the only reason I’m here is because you insisted I sign up.”

He shook his head, irritated at the truth.

“I’ve been trying to put myself back together, and Maxon really cares about me. You mean so much to me, you know you do. But I’m part of this now, and I’d be stupid to not let myself see what happens.”

“So you’re choosing him over me?” he asked miserably.

“No, I’m not choosing him or you. I’m choosing me.”

That was the truth at the core of everything. I didn’t know what I wanted yet, and I couldn’t let myself be swayed by what was easy or what someone else thought was right. I had to give myself time to decide what was best for me.

Aspen mulled this over for a moment, still not happy with what I was saying. Finally he smiled.

“You know I’m not giving up, right?” His tone was an obvious challenge, and I grinned in spite of myself. It was true that Aspen was not the type to admit defeat.

“This really isn’t a good place to try to fight for me. Your determination is a dangerous trait here.”

“I’m not afraid of that suit,” he scoffed.

I rolled my eyes, amused at being on this end of the relationship. I’d always been worried about someone stealing Aspen. I felt guilty about how refreshing it was to see him worried about someone stealing me for a change.

“Okay. You said you didn’t love him ... but you must like him a little to be willing to stay, right?”

I ducked my head. “I do,” I said with a tiny nod. “He’s more than I ever imagined he was.”

He considered that for a moment, soaking it in.

“I guess that means I’ll have to fight harder than I thought,” he said, heading for the hall. Then he turned and gave me another wink. “Goodnight, Lady America.”

“Goodnight, Officer Leger.”

The door clicked shut, and the sense of peace was overwhelming. Since the Selection had started, I’d been worrying that it was something that was going to ruin my life. But in this moment, I couldn’t think of a time that felt more right.

Too soon, my maids bustled in. Anne pulled back the curtains, and as the light fell on me, it felt like this was truly my first day at the palace.

The Selection was no longer something that was simply happening to me, but something I was actively a part of. I was an Elite. I pulled back the covers and leaped into the morning.

END OF BOOK ONE

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OKAY, JUST IN CASE YOU'RE really busy or tired because you stayed up late finishing, I want to thank you first for reading my book. For reals, I love you. Thanks.

Now, to the people who made this happen. Well, actually, let's go back a bit more.

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