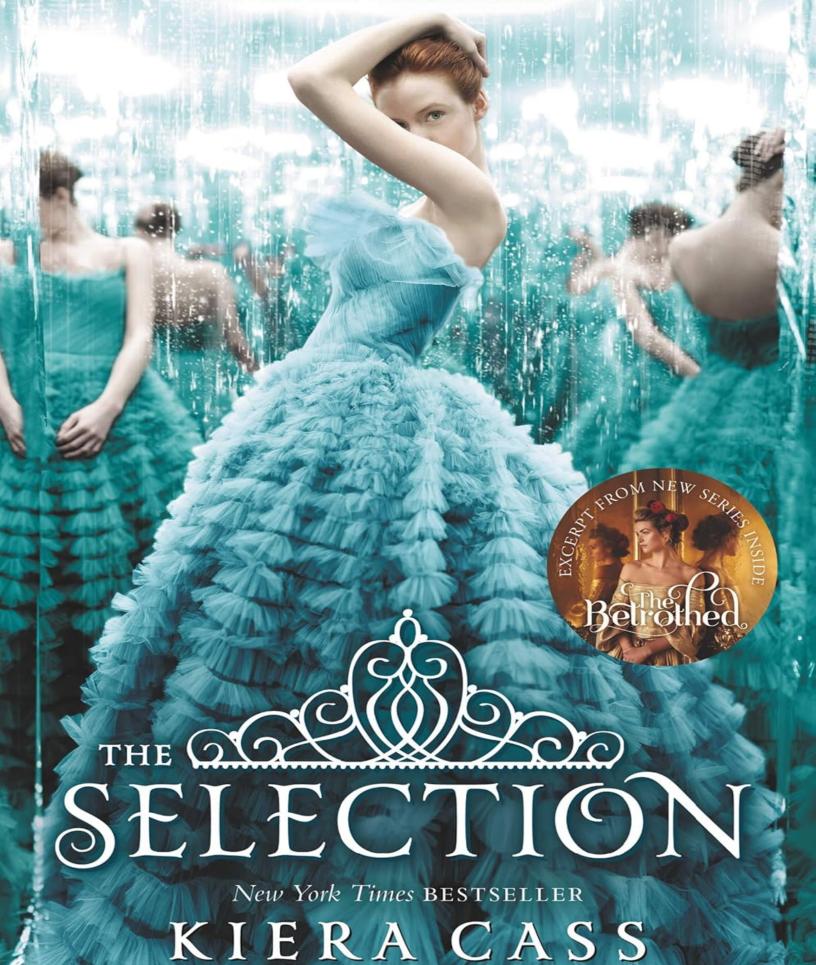
35 GIRLS. 1 CROWN. THE COMPETITION OF A LIFETIME.





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KIERA CASS



DEDICATION



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CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

I got a glare from Mom but no words.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was no secret that the rebels—the underground colonies that hated Illéa, our large and comparatively young country—made their attacks on the palace both violent and frequent. We'd seen them in action in Carolina before. One of the magistrates' houses was burned to the ground, and a handful of Twos had their cars vandalized. There was even a magnificent jailbreak once, but considering they only released a teenage girl who'd managed to get herself pregnant and a Seven who was a father to nine, I couldn't help thinking they were in the right that time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"To the House of Singer," she sang out.

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

"Mom, please!" I pleaded.

"I want to hear!" May squealed. That was no surprise. My little sister looked just like me, only on a three-year delay. But where our looks were practically identical, our personalities were anything but. Unlike me, she was outgoing and hopeful. And currently very boy crazy. This whole thing would seem incredibly romantic to her.

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

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

May squealed again and grabbed my wrist. "That's you!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And of course he would love America! She's so beautiful," Mom swooned.

"Please, Mom. If anything, I'm average."

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

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

"Gerad, what do you think? Do you think I'm pretty?" I asked.

All eyes fell on the youngest member of our family.

"No! Girls are gross!"

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

"If I'm so lovely, how come no one ever comes by to ask me out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing," we all chorused back.

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

My mother pushed her chair out as she stood and leaned across the table toward me. "Someone is going to, America. You have as good a chance as anyone else." She threw her napkin down and went to leave. "Gerad, when you finish, it's time for your bath."

He groaned.

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

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

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

"I just..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

As quietly as I could, I crept into the kitchen. I grabbed my leftovers, some bread that was expiring, and an apple and bundled it all up. It was painful to walk back to my room so slowly, now that it was late. But if I'd done it earlier, I would have just been antsy.

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey there, gorgeous."

CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of course. The twins had just turned sixteen.

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

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

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

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

And that was bad.

Aspen was a Six. Sixes were servants and only a step up from Sevens in that they were better educated and trained for indoor work. Aspen was smarter than anyone knew and devastatingly handsome, but it was atypical for a woman to marry down. A man from a lower

caste could ask for your hand, but it was rare to get a yes. And when anyone married into a different caste, they had to fill out paperwork and wait for something like ninety days before any of the other legal things you needed could be done. I'd heard more than one person say it was to give people a chance to change their minds. So us being this personal and out well past Illéa's curfew ... we could both get in serious trouble. Not to mention the hell I'd get from my mother.

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

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

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

"Aspen."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, hey, I brought us a snack," I said lightly.

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

"You'll love this chicken; I made it."

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

Where meals were a worry at my house, they were a disaster at Aspen's. He had much steadier work than we did but got paid significantly less. There was never enough food for his family. He was the oldest of seven, and in the same way I'd stepped up to help as soon as I could, Aspen had stepped aside. He passed his share of the little food they had down to his

siblings and to his mom, who was always tired from working. His dad had died three years ago, and Aspen's family depended on him for almost everything.

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

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

"I'm going to make you fat and happy. You know that."

"Ah, to be fat!"

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

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

"Aspen Leger, don't you dare! You work too hard as it is."

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

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

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

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

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

"America?"

"Yes?" I whispered.

"Are you going to enter the Selection?"

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

"You want to be a Six? Always hungry? Always worried?" he asked. I could hear the pain in his voice, but also the genuine question: If I had to choose between sleeping in a palace with people waiting on me or the three-room apartment with Aspen's family, which one did I really want?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do what?"

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

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

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

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

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

"But I don't love him, Aspen. I don't even like him. I don't even know him."

"No one knows him. That's the thing, though, maybe you would like him."

"Aspen, stop. I love *you*."

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

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

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

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

He stroked my hair.

"You will be."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And he kissed me until the candle burned itself out.

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

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

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

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

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