ONLY 1 GIRL CAN WIN THE CROWN.

THE ONE
A SELECTION NOVEL
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DEDICATION

For Callaway,
the boy who climbed into the tree house in my heart
and let me be the crown on his.

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CHAPTER 1

THIS TIME WE WERE IN the Great Room enduring another etiquette lesson when bricks came flying through the window. Elise immediately hit the ground and started crawling for the side door, whimpering as she went. Celeste let out a high-pitched scream and bolted toward the back of the room, barely escaping a shower of glass. Kriss grabbed my arm, pulling me, and I broke into a run alongside her as we made our way to the exit.

“How do we get downstairs from here?” Elise asked.
“What about Maxon?” Kriss huffed.
Silvia didn’t answer. We followed her through a maze of hallways, looking for a path to the basement, watching as guard after guard ran in the opposite direction. I found myself admiring them, wondering at the courage it took to run toward danger for the sake of other people.
The guards passing us were completely indistinguishable from one another until a set of green eyes locked with mine. Aspen didn’t look afraid or even startled. There was a problem, and he was on his way to fix it. That was simply who he was.
Our gaze was brief, but it was enough. It was like that with Aspen. In a split second, without a word, I could tell him Be careful and stay safe. And saying nothing, he’d answer I know, just take care of yourself.
While I could easily be at peace with the things we didn’t need to say, I had no such luck with the things we’d said out loud. Our last conversation wasn’t exactly a happy one. I had been about to leave the palace and had asked him to give me some space to get over the Selection. And then I’d ended up staying and had given him no explanation as to why.
Maybe his patience with me was falling short, his ability to see only the best in me running dry. Somehow I would have to fix that. I couldn’t see a life for me that didn’t include Aspen. Even now, as I hoped Maxon would choose me, a world without Aspen felt unimaginable.

“Here it is!” Silvia called, pushing a mysterious panel in a wall.
We started down the stairs, Elise and Silvia heading the charge.
“Damn it, Elise, pick up the pace!” Celeste yelled. I wanted to be irritated that she said it, but I knew we were all thinking the same thing.
As we descended into the darkness, I tried to reconcile myself to the hours that would be wasted, hiding like mice. We continued on, the sound of our escape covering the shouts until one man’s voice rang out right on top of us.
“Stop!” he yelled.
Kriss and I turned together, watching as the uniform became clear. “Wait,” she called to the girls below. “It’s a guard.”
We stood on the steps, breathing heavily. He finally reached us, gasping himself.
“Sorry, ladies. The rebels ran as soon as the shots were fired. Weren’t in the mood for a fight today, I guess.”
Silvia, running her hands over her clothes to smooth them, spoke for us. “Has the king deemed it safe? If not, you’re putting these girls in a very dangerous position.”
“The head of the guard cleared it. I’m sure His Majesty—”
“You don’t speak for the king. Come on, ladies, keep moving.”
“You serious?!” I asked. “We’re going down there for nothing.”
She fixed me with a stare that might have stopped a rebel in his tracks, and I shut my mouth. Silvia and I had built a friendship of sorts as she unknowingly helped me distract myself from Maxon and Aspen with her extra lessons. After my little stunt on the Report a few days ago, it seemed that had dissolved into nothing. Turning to the guard, she continued. “Get an official order from the king, and we’ll return. Keep walking, ladies.”
The guard and I shared an exasperated look and parted ways.
Silvia showed absolutely no remorse when, twenty minutes later, a different guard came, telling us we were free to go upstairs.
I was so irritated by the whole situation, I didn’t wait for Silvia or the other girls. I climbed the stairs, exiting somewhere on the first floor, and continued to my room with my shoes still hooked on my fingers. My maids were missing, but a small silver platter holding an envelope was waiting on the bed.
I recognized May’s handwriting instantly and tore open the envelope, devouring her words.
Ames,
We’re aunts! Astra is perfect. I wish you were here to meet her in person, but we all understand you need to be at the palace right now. Do you think we’ll be together for Christmas? Not that far away! I’ve got to get back to helping Kenna and James. I can’t believe how pretty she is! Here’s a picture for you. We love you!
May

I slipped the glossy photo from behind the note. Everyone was there except for Kota and me. James, Kenna’s husband, was beaming, standing over his wife and daughter with puffy eyes. Kenna sat upright in the bed, holding a tiny pink bundle, looking equal parts thrilled and exhausted. Mom and Dad were glowing with pride, while May’s and Geral’s enthusiasm jumped from the image. Of course Kota wouldn’t have gone; there was nothing for him to gain from being present. But I should have been there.
I wasn’t though.
I was here. And sometimes I didn’t understand why. Maxon was still spending time with Kriss, even after all he’d done to get me to stay. The rebels unrelentingly attacked our safety from the outside, and inside, the king’s icy words did just as much damage to my confidence. All the while, Aspen orbited me, a secret I had to keep. And the cameras came and went, stealing pieces of our lives to entertain the people. I was being pushed into a corner from every angle, and I was missing out on all the things that had always mattered to me.

I choked back angry tears. I was so tired of crying.

Instead I went into planning mode. The only way to set things right was to end the Selection.

Though I still occasionally questioned my desire to be the princess, there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to be Maxon’s. If that was going to happen, I couldn’t sit back and wait for it. Remembering my last conversation with the king, I paced as I waited for my maids.

I could hardly breathe, so I knew eating would be a waste. But it would be worth the sacrifice. I needed to make some progress, and I needed to do it fast. According to the king, the other girls were making advances toward Maxon—physical advances—and he’d said I was far too plain to have a chance of matching them in that department.

As if my relationship with Maxon wasn’t complicated enough, there was a whole new issue of rebuilding trust. And I wasn’t sure if that meant I wasn’t supposed to ask questions or not. While I felt pretty sure he hadn’t gone that far physically with the other girls, I couldn’t help but wonder. I’d never tried to be seductive before—pretty much every intimate moment I’d had with Maxon came about without intention—but I had to hope that if I was deliberate, I could make it clear that I was just as interested in him as the others.

I took a deep breath, raised my chin, and walked into the dining hall. I was purposely a minute or two late, hoping everyone would already be seated. I was right on that count. But the reaction was better than I’d hoped.

I curtsied, swinging my leg around so the slit in the dress fell open, leading nearly all the way up my thigh. The dress was a deep red, strapless and practically backless, and I was almost positive my maids had used magic to make it stay up at all. I rose, locking eyes with Maxon, who I noticed had stopped chewing. Someone dropped a fork.

Lowering my gaze, I walked to my seat, settling in next to Kriss.

“Seriously, America?” she whispered.

I tilted my head in her direction. “I’m sorry?” I replied, feigning confusion.

She put her silverware down, and we stared at each other. “You look trashy.”

“Well, you look jealous.”

I’d hit pretty close to the mark, because she flushed a bit before returning to her food. I took limited bites of my own, already miserably constricted. As dessert was being set in front of me, I chose to stop ignoring Maxon, and as I had hoped, his eyes were on me. He reached up and grabbed his ear immediately, and I demurely did the same.

My gaze flickered quickly toward King Clarkson, and I tried not to smile. He was irritated, another trick I’d managed to get away with.

I excused myself first, giving Maxon a chance to admire the back of the dress, and scurried to my room. I closed the door to my room behind me and unzipped the gown immediately, desperate for a breath.

“How’d it go?” Mary asked, rushing over.

“He seemed stunned. They all did.”

Lucy squealed, and Anne came to help Mary. “We’ll hold it up. Just walk,” she ordered. I did as I was told. “Is he coming tonight?”

“Yes. I’m not sure when, but he’ll definitely be here.” I perched on the edge of my bed, arms folded around my stomach to keep the open dress from falling down.

Anne gave me a sad face. “I’m sorry you’ll have to be uncomfortable for a few more hours. I’m sure it’ll be worth it though.”

I smiled, trying to look like I was fine dealing with the pain. I’d told my maids I wanted to get Maxon’s attention. I’d left out my hope that, with any luck, this dress would be on the floor pretty soon.

“Do you want us to stay until he arrives?” Lucy asked, her enthusiasm bubbling over.

“No, just help me zip this thing back up. I need to think some things through,” I answered, standing so they could help me.

Mary took hold of the zipper. “Suck it in, miss.” I obeyed, and as the dress cinched me in again, I thought of a soldier going to war. Different armor but the same idea.

Tonight I was taking down a man.
CHAPTER 2

I opened the balcony doors, letting the air sweeten my room. Even though it was December, the breeze was light and tickled my skin. We weren’t allowed to go outside at all anymore, not without guards by our sides, so this would have to do.

I scurried around the room, lighting candles, trying to make the space inviting. The knock came at the door, and I blew out the match, bolted over to the bed, picked up a book, and fanned out my dress. Why yes, Maxon, this is how I always look when I read.

“Come in,” I offered, barely loud enough to be heard.

Maxon entered, and I lifted my head delicately, catching the wonder in his eyes as he surveyed my dimly lit room. Finally he focused on me, his gaze traveling up my exposed leg.

“There you are,” I said, closing the book and standing to greet him.

He shut the door and came in, his eyes locked on my curves. “I wanted to tell you that you look fantastic tonight.”

I flicked my hair over my shoulder. “Oh, this thing? It was just sitting in the back of the closet.”

“I’m glad you pulled it out.”

I laced my fingers through his. “Come sit with me. I haven’t seen you much lately.”

He sighed and followed. “I’m sorry about that. Things have been a bit tense since we lost so many people in that rebel attack, and you know how my father is. We sent several guards to protect your families, and our forces are stretched thin, so he’s worse than usual. And he’s pressuring me to end the Selection, but I’m holding my ground. I want to have some time to think this through.”

We sat on the edge of the bed, and I settled close to him. “Of course. You should be in charge of this.”

He nodded. “Exactly. I know I’ve said it a thousand times, but when people push me, it makes me crazy.”

I gave him a little pout. “I know.”

He paused, and I couldn’t read his face. I was trying to figure out how to move this forward without being pushy, but I wasn’t sure how to manufacture a romantic moment.

“I know this is silly, but my maids put this new perfume on me today. Is it too strong?” I asked, tilting my neck so he could lean in and breathe.

He came near, his nose hitting a soft patch of skin. “No, dear, it’s lovely,” he said into the curve that led to my shoulder. Then he kissed me there. I swallowed, trying to focus. I needed to have some level of control.

“I’m glad you like it. I’ve really missed you.”

I felt his hand snake around my back, and I brought my face down. There he was, eyes looking into mine, our lips millimeters apart.

“How much have you missed me?” he breathed.

His stare, combined with his voice being so low, was doing funny things to my heartbeat. “So much,” I whispered back. “So, so much.”

I leaned forward, aching to be kissed. Maxon was confident, pulling me closer with one hand and stringing the other through my hair. My body wanted to melt into the kiss, but the dress stopped me. Then, suddenly nervous again, I remembered my plan.

Sliding my hands down Maxon’s arms, I guided his fingers to the zipper on the back of my dress, hoping that would be enough.

His hands lingered there for a moment, and I was seconds away from just asking him to unzip it when he burst out laughing.

The sound sobered me up pretty quickly.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, horrified, trying to think of an inconspicuous way to check my breath.

Of everything you’ve done, this is by far the most entertaining!” Maxon bent over, hitting his knee as he laughed.

“Excuse me?”

He kissed me hard on my forehead. “I always wondered what it would be like to see you try.” He started laughing again. “I’m sorry; I have to go.” Even the way he stood held a sense of amusement. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

And then he left. He just left!

I sat there, completely mortified. Why in the world did I think I could pull that off? Maxon may not know everything about me, but at the very least he knew my character—and this? It wasn’t me.
I looked down at the ridiculous dress. It was way too much. Even Celeste wouldn’t have gone this far. My hair was too perfect, my makeup too heavy. He knew what I was trying to do from the second he walked through the doorway. Sighing, I went around the room, blowing out candles and wondering how I was supposed to face him tomorrow.

CHAPTER 3

I debated claiming the stomach flu. Or an incapacitating headache. Panic attack. Really, anything to get out of going to breakfast.

Then I thought of Maxon and how he always talked about putting on a brave face. That wasn’t a particular strength of mine. But if I went downstairs at least, if I could just be present, maybe he’d give me some credit.

In hopes that I could erase some of what I’d done, I asked my maids to put me in the most demure dress I had. Based on that request alone, they knew not to ask about the night before. The neckline was a bit higher than the ones we typically wore in the warm Angeles weather, and it had sleeves that went nearly to my elbows. It was flowery and cheerful, the opposite of last night’s getup.

I could barely look at Maxon when I entered the dining hall, but I walked tall at least. When I finally peeked at him, he was watching me, grinning. As he chewed his food, he winked at me; and I ducked my head again, pretending to be very interested in my quiche.

“Glad to see you in actual clothes today,” Kriss spat.
“Glad to see you in such a good mood.”
“What in the world has gotten into you?” she hissed.

Dejected, I gave up. “I’m not up for this today, Kriss. Just leave me alone.”

For a moment, she looked as if she might fight back, but I guessed I wasn’t worth it. She sat up a little straighter and continued eating. If I’d had any level of success last night, then I could justify my actions; as it was, I couldn’t even fake being proud.

I risked another glance at Maxon, and even though he wasn’t watching me, he was still suppressing a smug expression as he cut his food. That was it. I wasn’t going to suffer through a day like this. I was about to swoon or clutch my stomach or do anything to get me out of the room when a butler came in. He carried an envelope on a silver platter, and he bowed before placing it in front of King Clarkson.

The king took the letter and read it quickly. “Damn French,” he muttered. “Sorry, Amberly, it looks like I’ll be leaving within the hour.”

“Another problem with the trade agreement?” she asked quietly.
“Yes. I thought we’d settled all this months ago. We need to be firm on this one.” He stood, throwing his napkin on his plate, and made his way to the door.

“Father,” Maxon called, standing. “Don’t you want me to come?”

It had struck me as odd that the king didn’t bark out a command for his son to follow when he exited, seeing as that was his usual method of instructing. Instead he turned to Maxon, his eyes cold and his voice sharp.

“When you’re ready to behave the way a king should, you’ll get to experience what a king does.” Without saying anything more, he left us.

Maxon stood for a moment, shocked and embarrassed by his father’s choice to call him out in front of everyone. As he sat down, he turned to his mother. “Wasn’t really looking forward to that flight, if I’m being honest,” he said, joking away the tension. The queen smiled, as of course she must, and the rest of us ignored it.

The other girls finished their breakfasts and excused themselves to the Women’s Room. When it was just Maxon, Elise, and me remaining at our tables, I looked up at him. We both tugged our ears at the same time, then smiled. Elise finally left, and we met in the middle of the room, not bothered by the maids and butlers cleaning up around us.