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THE HEIR

BOOK FOUR OF
THE SELECTION SERIES

KIERA CASS

#1 *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



THE
HEIR



KIERA CASS

HARPER **TEEN**
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DEDICATION

To Jim and Jennie Cass.
For lots of reasons, but mostly for making Callaway.

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CHAPTER 1

I COULD NOT HOLD MY breath for seven minutes. I couldn't even make it to one. I once tried to run a mile in seven minutes after hearing some athletes could do it in four but failed spectacularly when a side stitch crippled me about halfway in.

However, there was one thing I managed to do in seven minutes that most would say is quite impressive: I became queen.

By seven tiny minutes I beat my brother Ahren into the world, so the throne that ought to have been his was mine. Had I been born a generation earlier, it wouldn't have mattered. Ahren was the male, so Ahren would have been the heir.

Alas, Mom and Dad couldn't stand to watch their firstborn be stripped of a title by an unfortunate but rather lovely set of breasts. So they changed the law, and the people rejoiced, and I was trained day by day to become the next ruler of Illéa.

What they didn't understand was that their attempts to make my life fair seemed rather *unfair* to me.

I tried not to complain. After all, I knew how fortunate I was. But there were days, or sometimes months, when it felt like far too much was piled on me, too much for any one person, really.

I flipped through the newspaper and saw that there had been yet another riot, this time in Zuni. Twenty years ago, Dad's first act as king was to dissolve the castes, and the old system had been phased out slowly over my lifetime. I still thought it was completely bizarre that once upon a time people lived with these limiting but arbitrary labels on their backs. Mom was a Five; Dad was a One. It made no sense, especially since there was no outward sign of the divisions. How was I supposed to know if I was walking next to a Six or a Three? And why did that even matter?

When Dad had first decreed that the castes were no more, people all over the country had been delighted. Dad had expected the changes he was making in Illéa to be comfortably in place over the course of a generation, meaning any day now everything should click.

That wasn't happening—and this new riot was just the most recent in a string of unrest.

"Coffee, Your Highness," Neena said, setting the drink on my table.

"Thank you. You can take the plates."

I scanned the article. This time a restaurant was burned to the ground because its owner refused to promote a waiter to a position as a chef. The waiter claimed that a promotion had been promised but was never delivered, and he was sure it was because of his family's past.

Looking at the charred remains of the building, I honestly didn't know whose side I was on. The owner had the right to promote or fire anyone he wanted, and the waiter had the right not to be seen as something that, technically, didn't exist anymore.

I pushed the paper away and picked up my drink. Dad was going to be upset. I was

sure he was already running the scenario over and over in his head, trying to figure out how to set it right. The problem was, even if we could fix one issue, we couldn't stop every instance of post-caste discrimination. It was too hard to monitor and happening far too often.

I set down my coffee and headed to my closet. It was time to start the day.

"Neena," I called. "Do you know where that plum-colored dress is? The one with the sash?"

She squinted in concentration as she came over to help.

In the grand scheme of things, Neena was new to the palace. She'd only been working with me for six months, after my last maid fell ill for two weeks. Neena was acutely attuned to my needs and much more agreeable to be around, so I kept her on. I also admired her eye for fashion.

Neena stared into the massive space. "Maybe we should reorganize."

"You can if you have the time. That's not a project I'm interested in."

"Not when I can hunt down your clothes for you," she teased.

"Exactly!"

She took my humor in stride, laughing as she quickly sorted through gowns and pants.

"I like your hair today," I commented.

"Thank you." All the maids wore caps, but Neena was still creative with her hairdos. Sometimes a few thick, black curls would frame her face, and other times she twisted back strands until they were all tucked away. At the moment there were wide braids encircling her head, with the rest of her hair under her cap. I really enjoyed that she found ways to work with her uniform, to make it her own each day.

"Ah! It's back here." Neena pulled down the knee-length dress, fanning it out across the dark skin of her arm.

"Perfect! And do you know where my gray blazer is? The one with the three-quarter sleeves?"

She stared at me, her face deadpan. "I'm definitely rearranging."

I giggled. "You search; I'll dress."

I pulled on my outfit and brushed out my hair, preparing for another day as the future face of the monarchy. The outfit was feminine enough to soften me but strong enough that I'd be taken seriously. It was a fine line to walk, but I did it every day.

Staring into the mirror, I talked to my reflection.

"You are Eadlyn Schreave. You are the next person in line to run this country, and you will be the first girl to do it on your own. No one," I said, "is as powerful as you."

Dad was already in his office, brow furrowed as he took in the news. Other than my eyes, I didn't look much like him. Or Mom, for that matter.

With my dark hair, oval-shaped face, and a hint of a tan that lingered year round, I looked more like my grandmother than anyone else. A painting of her on her coronation day hung in the fourth-floor hallway, and I used to study it when I was younger, trying to guess at how I would look as I grew. Her age in the portrait was near to mine now, and though we weren't identical, I sometimes felt like her echo.

I walked across the room and kissed Dad's cheek. "Morning."

"Morning. Did you see the papers?" he asked.

“Yes. At least no one died this time.”

“Thank goodness for that.” Those were the worst, the ones where people were left dead in the street or went missing. It was terrible, reading the names of young men who’d been beaten simply for moving their families into a nicer neighborhood or women who were attacked for trying to get a job that in the past would not have been open to them.

Sometimes it took no time at all to find the motive and the person behind these crimes, but more often than not we were faced with a lot of finger-pointing and no real answers. It was exhausting for me to watch, and I knew it was worse for Dad.

“I don’t understand it.” He took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. “They didn’t want the castes anymore. We took our time, eliminated them slowly so everyone could adjust. Now they’re burning down buildings.”

“Is there a way to regulate this? Could we create a board to oversee grievances?” I looked at the photo again. In the corner, the young son of the restaurant owner wept over losing everything. In my heart I knew complaints would come in faster than anyone could address them, but I also knew Dad couldn’t bear doing nothing.

Dad looked at me. “Is that what you would do?”

I smiled. “No, I’d ask my father what he would do.”

He sighed. “That won’t always be an option for you, Eadlyn. You need to be strong, decisive. How would you fix this one particular incident?”

I considered. “I don’t think we can. There’s no way to prove the old castes were why the waiter was denied the promotion. The only thing we can do is launch an investigation into who set the fire. That family lost their livelihood today, and someone needs to be held responsible. Arson is not how you exact justice.”

He shook his head at the paper. “I think you’re right. I’d like to be able to help them. But, more than that, we need to figure out how to prevent this from happening again. It’s become rampant, Eadlyn, and it’s frightening.”

Dad tossed the paper into the trash, then stood and walked to the window. I could read the stress in his posture. Sometimes his role brought him so much joy, like visiting the schools he’d worked tirelessly to improve or seeing communities flourish in the war-free era he’d ushered in. But those instances were becoming few and far between. Most days he was anxious about the state of the country, and he had to fake his smiles when reporters came by, hoping that his sense of calm would somehow spread to everyone else. Mom helped shoulder the burden, but at the end of the day the fate of the country was placed squarely on his back. One day it would be on mine.

Vain as it was, I worried I would go gray prematurely.

“Make a note for me, Eadlyn. Remind me to write Governor Harpen in Zuni. Oh, and put to write it to Joshua Harpen, not his father. I keep forgetting he was the one who ran in the last election.”

I wrote his instructions in my elegant cursive, thinking how pleased Dad would be when he looked at it later. He used to give me the worst time over my penmanship.

I was grinning to myself when I looked back at him, but my face fell almost immediately when I saw him rubbing his forehead, trying so desperately to think of a solution to these problems.

“Dad?”

He turned and instinctively squared his shoulders, like he needed to act strong even

in front of me.

“Why do you think this is happening? It wasn’t always like this.”

He raised his eyebrows. “It certainly wasn’t,” he said, almost to himself. “At first everyone seemed pleased. Every time we removed a new caste, people held parties. It’s only been in the last few years, since all the labels have officially been erased, that it’s gone downhill.”

He stared back out the window. “The only thing I can think is that those who grew up with the castes are aware of how much better this is. Comparatively, it’s easier to marry or work. A family’s finances aren’t capped by a single profession. There are more choices when it comes to education. But those who are growing up without the castes and are still running into opposition . . . I guess they don’t know what else to do.”

He looked at me and shrugged. “I need time,” he muttered. “I need a way to put things on pause, set them right, and press play again.”

I noted the deep furrow in his brow. “Dad, I don’t think that’s possible.”

He chuckled. “We’ve done it before. I can remember. . . .”

The focus in his eyes changed. He watched me for a moment, seeming to ask me a question without words.

“Dad?”

“Yes.”

“Are you all right?”

He blinked a few times. “Yes, dear, quite all right. Why don’t you get to work on those budget cuts. We can go over your ideas this afternoon. I need to speak with your mother.”

“Sure.” Math wasn’t a skill that came to me naturally, so I had to work twice as long on any proposals for budget cuts or financial plans. But I absolutely refused to have one of Dad’s advisers come behind me with a calculator to clean up my mess. Even if I had to stay up all night, I always made sure my work was accurate.

Of course, Ahren was naturally good at math, but he was never forced to sit through meetings about budgets or rezoning or health care. He got off scot-free by seven stupid minutes.

Dad patted me on the shoulder before dashing out of the room. It took me longer than usual to focus on the numbers. I couldn’t help but be distracted by the look on his face and the unmistakable certainty that it was tied to me.

CHAPTER 2

AFTER WORKING ON THE BUDGET report for a few hours, I decided I needed a break and retreated to my room to get a hand massage from Neena. I loved those little bits of luxury in my day. Dresses made to my exact measurements, exotic desserts flown in simply because it was Thursday, and an endless supply of beautiful things were all perks; and they were easily my favorite parts of the job.

My room overlooked the gardens. As the day shifted, the light changed to a warm, honey color, brightening the high walls. I focused on the heat and Neena's deliberate fingers.

"Anyway, his face got all funny. It was kind of like he disappeared for a minute."

I was trying to explain Dad's out-of-character departure this morning, but it was hard to get it across. I didn't even know if he found Mom or not, as he never came back to the office.

"Do you think he's sick? He does seem tired these days." Neena's hands worked her magic as she spoke.

"Does he?" I asked, thinking that Dad didn't seem tired exactly. "He's probably just stressed. How could he not be with all the decisions he has to make?"

"And someday that will be you," she commented, her tone a mix of genuine worry and playful amusement.

"Which means you will be giving me twice as many massages."

"I don't know," she said. "I think in a few years I might like to try something new."

I scrunched my face. "What else would you do? There aren't many positions better than working in the palace."

There was a knock on the door, and she didn't have a chance to answer the question.

I stood, throwing my blazer back on to look presentable, and gave a nod to Neena to let my guests in.

Mom came around the door, smiling, with Dad contentedly trailing her steps. I couldn't help but notice it was always this way. At state events or important dinners, Mom was beside Dad or situated right behind him. But when they were just husband and wife—not king and queen—he followed her everywhere.

"Hi, Mom." I walked over to hug her.

Mom tucked my hair behind my ear, smiling at me. "I like this look."

I stood back proudly and smoothed out my dress with my hands. "The bracelets really set it off, don't you think?"

She giggled. "Excellent attention to detail." Every once in a while Mom let me pick out jewelry or shoes for her, but it was rare. Mom didn't find it as much fun as I did, and she didn't rely on the extras for beauty. In her case, she really didn't need it. I liked that she was classic.

Mom turned and touched Neena's shoulder. "You're excused," she said quietly.

Neena instantly curtsied and left us alone.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, sweetheart. We simply want to speak in private.” Dad held out a hand and ushered us all to the table. “We have an opportunity to talk to you about.”

“Opportunity? Are we traveling?” I adored traveling. “Please tell me we’re finally going on a beach trip. Could it just be the six of us?”

“Not exactly. We wouldn’t be going somewhere so much as having visitors,” Mom explained.

“Oh! Company! Who’s coming?”

They exchanged glances, then Mom continued talking. “You know that things are precarious right now. The people are restless and unhappy, and we cannot figure out how to ease the tension.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“We’re seeking a way to boost morale,” Dad added.

I perked up. Morale boosting typically involved a celebration. And I was always up for a party.

“What did you have in mind?” I started designing a new dress in my head and dismissed it almost as quickly. That wasn’t what needed my attention at the moment.

“Well,” Dad started, “the public responds best to something positive with our family. When your mother and I were married, it was one of the best seasons in our country. And do you remember how people threw parties in the street when they found out Osten was coming?”

I smiled. I was eight when Osten was born, and I’d never forget how excited everyone got just over the announcement. I heard music playing from my bedroom practically until dawn.

“That was marvelous.”

“It was. And now the people look to you. It won’t be long before you’re queen.” Dad paused. “We thought that perhaps you’d be willing to do something publicly, something that would be exciting for the people but also might be very beneficial to you.”

I narrowed my eyes, not sure where this was going. “I’m listening.”

Mom cleared her throat. “You know that in the past, princesses were married off to princes from other countries to solidify our international relations.”

“I did hear you use the past tense there, correct?”

She laughed, but I wasn’t amused. “Yes.”

“Good. Because Prince Nathaniel looks like a zombie, Prince Hector dances like a zombie, and if the prince from the German Federation doesn’t learn to embrace personal hygiene by the Christmas party, he shouldn’t be invited.”

Mom rubbed the side of her head in frustration. “Eadlyn, you’ve always been so picky.”

Dad shrugged. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing,” he said, earning a glare from Mom.

I frowned. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“You know how your mother and I met,” Dad began.

I rolled my eyes. “Everyone does. You two are practically a fairy tale.”

At those words their eyes went soft, and smiles washed over their faces. Their bodies seemed to tilt slightly toward each other, and Dad bit his lip looking at Mom.

“Excuse me. Firstborn in the room, do you mind?”

Mom blushed as Dad cleared his throat and continued. “The Selection process was very successful for us. And though my parents had their problems, it worked well for them, too. So . . . we were hoping. . . .” He hesitated and met my eyes.

I was slow to pick up on their hints. I knew what the Selection was, but never, not even once, had it been suggested as an option for any of us, let alone me.

“No.”

Mom put up her hands, cautioning me. “Just listen—”

“A Selection?” I burst out. “That’s insane!”

“Eadlyn, you’re being irrational.”

I glared at her. “You promised—you *promised*—you’d never force me into marrying someone for an alliance. How is this any better?”

“Hear us out,” she urged.

“No!” I shouted. “I won’t do it.”

“Calm down, love.”

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’m not a child!”

Mom sighed. “You’re certainly acting like one.”

“You’re ruining my life!” I ran my fingers through my hair and took several deep breaths, hoping it would help me think. This couldn’t happen. Not to me.

“It’s a huge opportunity,” Dad insisted.

“You’re trying to shackle me to a stranger!”

“I told you she’d be stubborn,” Mom muttered to Dad.

“Wonder where she gets that from,” he shot back with a smile.

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not in the room!”

“I’m sorry,” Dad said. “We just need you to consider this.”

“What about Ahren? Can’t he do it?”

“Ahren isn’t going to be the future king. Besides, he has Camille.”

Princess Camille was the heir to the French throne, and a few years ago she’d managed to bat her lashes all the way into Ahren’s heart.

“Then make them get married!” I pleaded.

“Camille will be queen when her time comes, and she, like you, will have to ask her partner to marry her. If it was Ahren’s choice, we’d consider it; but it’s not.”

“What about Kaden? Can’t you have him do it?”

Mom laughed humorlessly. “He’s fourteen! We don’t have that kind of time. The people need something to be excited about now.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “And, honestly, isn’t it time you look for someone to rule beside you?”

Dad nodded. “It’s true. It’s not a role that should be shouldered alone.”

“But I don’t want to get married,” I pleaded. “Please don’t make me do this. I’m only eighteen.”

“Which is how old I was when I married your father,” Mom stated.

“I’m not ready,” I urged. “I don’t want a husband. Please don’t do this to me.”

Mom reached across the table and put her hand on mine. “No one would be doing anything to you. You would be doing something for your people. You’d be giving them a gift.”

“You mean faking a smile when I’d rather cry?”

She gave me a fleeting frown. “That has always been part of our job.”

I stared at her, silently demanding a better answer.

“Eadlyn, why don’t you take some time to think this over?” Dad said calmly. “I know this is a big thing we’re asking of you.”

“Does that mean I have a choice?”

Dad inhaled deeply, considering. “Well, love, you’ll really have thirty-five choices.”

I leaped up from my chair, pointing toward the door.

“Get out!” I demanded. “Get! Out!”

Without another word they left my room.

Didn’t they know who I was, what they’d trained me for? I was Eadlyn Schreave. No one was more powerful than me.

So if they thought I was going down without a fight, they were sadly mistaken.

CHAPTER 3

I DECIDED TO TAKE DINNER in my room. I didn't feel like seeing my family at the moment. I was irate with all of them. At my parents for being happy, at Ahren for not picking up the pace eighteen years ago, at Kaden and Osten for being so young.

Neena circled me, filling my cup as she spoke. "Do you think you'll go through with it, miss?" she asked.

"I'm still trying to figure a way out."

"What if you said you were already in love with somebody?"

I shook my head as I poked at my food. "I insulted my three most likely candidates right in front of them."

She set a small plate of chocolates in the middle of the table, guessing correctly that I'd probably want those more than the caviar-garnished salmon.

"Perhaps a guard then? Happens to the maids often enough," she suggested with a giggle.

I scoffed. "That's fine for them, but I'm not that desperate."

Her laughter faded.

I saw immediately that I had offended her, but that was the truth. I couldn't settle for any old person, let alone a guard. Even considering it was a waste of time. I needed a way out of this whole situation.

"I don't mean it like that, Neena. It's just that people expect certain things from me."

"Of course."

"I'm done. You can go for the night; I'll leave the cart in the hallway."

She nodded and left without another word.

I grazed on the chocolates before completely giving up on the food and slipped into my nightgown. I couldn't reason with Mom and Dad right now, and Neena didn't understand. I needed to talk to the only person who might see my side, the person who sometimes felt like he was half of me. I needed Ahren.

"Are you busy?" I asked, cracking open his door.

Ahren was sitting at his desk, writing. His blond hair was end-of-the-day messy, but his eyes were far from tired, and he looked so much like the pictures of Dad when he was younger it was eerie. He was still dressed from dinner but had taken off his coat and tie, settling in for the evening. "Knock, for goodness' sake."

"I know, I know; but it's an emergency."

"Then get a guard," he snapped back, returning to his papers.

"That's already been suggested," I muttered to myself. "I'm serious, Ahren; I need your help."

Ahren peeked over his shoulder at me, and I could see he was already planning to give in. He used his foot to push out the seat next to him casually. "Step into my office."

Sitting, I sighed. “What are you writing?”

He quickly piled papers on top of the one he’d been working on. “A letter to Camille.”

“You know you could simply phone her.”

He grinned. “Oh, I will. But then I’ll send her this, too.”

“That makes no sense. What could you possibly have to talk about that would fill an entire phone call and a letter?”

He tilted his head. “For your information, they serve different purposes. The calls are for updates and to see how her day went. The letters are for the things I can’t always say out loud.”

“Oh, really?” I leaned over, reaching for the paper.

Before I could even get close, Ahren’s hand gripped my wrist. “I will murder you,” he vowed.

“Good,” I shot. “Then you can be the heir, and you can go through a Selection and kiss your precious Camille good-bye.”

He scrunched his forehead. “What?”

I slumped back into my chair. “Mom and Dad need to boost morale. They’ve decided that, for the sake of Illéa,” I said in mock patriotism, “I need to go through a Selection.”

I was expecting abject horror. Perhaps a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. But Ahren threw back his head and laughed.

“Ahren!”

He continued to howl, pitching himself forward and hitting his knee.

“You’re going to wrinkle your suit,” I warned, which only made him laugh harder. “For goodness’ sake, stop it! What am I supposed to do?”

“As if I know! I can’t believe they think this would even work,” he added, his smile still not fading.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I thought, if you ever did get married, it’d be down the line. I think everyone assumed that.”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

The warm touch I’d been hoping for finally came as he reached for my hand. “Come on, Eady. You’ve always been independent. It’s the queen in you. You like to be in charge, do things on your own. I didn’t think you’d partner up with anyone until you at least got to reign for a while.”

“Not like I really had a choice in the first place,” I mumbled, tilting my head to the floor but still looking to my brother.

He gave me a little pout. “Poor little princess. Don’t want to rule the world?”

I swatted his hand away. “Seven minutes. It should have been you. I’d much rather sit alone and scribble away instead of do all that stupid paperwork. And this ridiculous Selection nonsense! Can’t you see how dreadful this is?”

“How did you get roped into this anyway? I thought they’d done away with it.”

I rolled my eyes again. “It has absolutely nothing to do with me. That’s the worst part. Dad’s facing public opposition, so he’s trying to distract them.” I shook my head. “It’s getting really bad, Ahren. People are destroying homes and businesses. Some have died. Dad isn’t completely sure where it’s coming from, but he thinks it’s people

our age, the generation that grew up without castes, causing most of it.”

He made a face. “That doesn’t make sense. How could growing up without those restrictions make you upset?”

I paused, thinking. How could I explain what we could only really guess at? “Well, I grew up being told I was going to be queen one day. That was it. No choice. You grew up knowing you had options. You could go into the military, you could become an ambassador, you could do plenty of things. But what if that wasn’t really happening? What if you didn’t have all the opportunities you thought you would?”

“Huh,” he said, following. “So they’re being denied jobs?”

“Jobs, education, money. I’ve heard of people refusing to let their kids get married because of old castes. Nothing is happening the way Dad thought it would, and it’s nearly impossible to control. Can we force people to be fair?”

“And that’s what Dad’s trying to figure out now?” he asked, skeptical.

“Yes, and I’m the smoke-and-mirror act diverting their attention while he comes up with a plan.”

He chuckled. “That makes much more sense than you suddenly being romantically inclined.”

I cocked my head. “Let it go, Ahren. So I’m not interested in marriage. Why does that matter? Other women can stay single.”

“But other women aren’t expected to produce an heir.”

I hit him again. “Help me! What do I do?”

His eyes searched mine, and I knew, as easily as I could read any emotion in him, that he saw I was terrified. Not irritated or angry. Not outraged or repulsed.

I was scared.

It was one thing to be expected to rule, to hold the weight of millions of people in my hands. That was a job, a task. I could check things off lists, delegate. But this was much more personal, one more piece of my life that ought to be mine but wasn’t.

His playful smile disappeared, and he pulled his chair closer to mine. “If they’re looking to distract people, maybe you could suggest other . . . opportunities. A possible marriage isn’t the only choice. That said, if Mom and Dad came to this conclusion, they might have already exhausted every other option.”

I buried my head in my hands. I didn’t want to tell him I tried to offer up him as an alternative or that I thought Kaden might even be acceptable. I sensed he was right, that the Selection was their last hope.

“Here’s the thing, Eady. You’ll be the first girl to hold the throne fully in her own right. And people expect a lot from you.”

“Like I don’t already know that.”

“But,” he continued, “that also gives you a lot of bargaining power.”

I raised my head marginally. “What do you mean?”

“If they really need you to do this, then negotiate.”

I sat up straight, my mind running around in circles, trying to think of what I could ask for. There might be a way to get through this quickly, without it even ending in a proposal.

Without a proposal!

If I spoke fast enough, I could probably get Dad to agree to practically anything so long as he got his Selection out of it.

“Negotiate!” I whispered.

“Exactly.”

I stood up, grabbed Ahren by his ears, and planted a kiss on his forehead. “You are my absolute hero!”

He smiled. “Anything for you, my queen.”

I giggled, shoving him. “Thanks, Ahren.”

“Get to work.” He waved me toward the door, and I suspected he was actually more eager to get back to his letter than he was for me to come up with a plan.

I dashed from the room, heading to my own to fetch some paper. I needed to think.

As I rounded the corner, I ran smack into someone, falling backward onto the carpet.

“Ow!” I complained, looking up to see Kile Woodwork, Miss Marlee’s son.

Kile and the rest of the Woodworks had rooms on the same floor as our family, a singularly huge honor. Or irritation, depending on how one felt about the Woodworks.

“Do you mind?” I snapped.

“I wasn’t the one running,” he answered, picking up the books he’d dropped. “You ought to be looking where you’re going.”

“A gentleman would offer his hand right now,” I reminded him.

Kile’s hair flopped across his eyes as he looked over at me. He was in desperate need of a cut and a shave, and his shirt was too big for him. I didn’t know who I was more embarrassed for: him for looking so sloppy or my family for having to be seen with such a disaster.

What was especially irritating was that he wasn’t always so scruffy, and he didn’t have to be now. How hard would it be to run a brush through his hair?

“Eadlyn, you’ve never thought I was a gentleman.”

“True.” I pulled myself up without help and brushed off my robe.

For the last six months I had been spared Kile’s less-than-thrilling company. He’d gone to Fennley to enroll in some accelerated course, and his mother had been lamenting his absence ever since the day he left. I didn’t know what he was studying, and I didn’t particularly care. But he was back now, and his presence was another stressor on an ever-growing list.

“And what would make such a lady run like that in the first place?”

“Matters you are far too dim to comprehend.”

He laughed. “Right, because I’m such a simpleton. It’s a miracle I manage to bathe myself.”

I was about to ask if he did bathe, because he looked like he’d been running away from anything that resembled a bar of soap.

“I hope one of those books is a primer on etiquette. You seriously need a refresher.”

“You’re not queen yet, Eadlyn. Take it down a notch.” He walked away, and I was furious with myself for not getting the last word.

I pressed on. There were bigger problems in my life right now than the state of Kile’s manners. I couldn’t waste my time quibbling with people or being distracted by anything that couldn’t put the Selection to death.

CHAPTER 4

“I WANT TO BE CLEAR,” I said, sitting down in Dad’s office. “I have no desire to get married.”

He nodded. “I understand that you don’t want to get married today, but it was always something you’d have to do, Eadlyn. You’re obligated to continue the royal line.”

I hated it when he talked about my future like that, like sex and love and babies weren’t happy things but duties performed to keep the country running. It took every speck of joy out of the prospect.

Of all the things in my life, shouldn’t those be the real pleasures, the best parts?

I shook the worry away and focused on the task at hand.

“I understand. And I agree that it’s important,” I replied diplomatically. “But weren’t you ever worried when you went through your Selection that no one in the pool was right for you? Or that maybe they were there for the wrong reason?”

His lips hitched up in a smile. “Every waking moment, and half the time I slept.”

He’d told me a handful of vague stories about one girl who’d been so pliable he could hardly stand her and another who had tried to manipulate the process at every turn. I didn’t know many names or details, and that was fine with me. I had never liked to imagine Dad possibly falling in love with anyone but Mom.

“And don’t you think that as the first woman to fully control the crown, there should be . . . some standards set for who might rule beside me?”

He tilted his head. “Go on.”

“I’m sure there’s some sort of vetting process in place to make sure an actual psychopath doesn’t make his way into the palace, yes?”

“Of course.” He grinned as if this wasn’t a valid concern.

“But I don’t trust just anyone to do this job with me. So”—I sighed deeply—“I will agree to go through with this ridiculous stunt if you make me a few tiny promises.”

“It’s not a stunt. It’s had an excellent track record. But please, dear girl, tell me what you want.”

“First, I want the contestants to have the freedom to leave of their own free will. I won’t have someone feeling obligated to stay if they don’t care for me or the life they’d have to lead in the palace.”

“I fully agree to that,” he said forcefully. Seemed like I had touched a nerve.

“Excellent. And I know you might be opposed to the idea, but if by the end of this I can’t find anyone suitable, then we call the whole thing off. No prince, no wedding.”

“Ah!” he said, leaning forward in his chair and pointing a calculating finger at me. “If I allow that, you’ll turn them all away the first day. You won’t even try!”

I paused, thinking. “What if I guaranteed you a timeline? I would keep the Selection running for, say, three months and weigh my options for at least that amount

of time. After then, if I haven't found a suitable match, all the contestants are released."

He ran his hand across his mouth and shifted in his chair a little before pressing his eyes into mine. "Eadlyn, you know how important this is, don't you?"

"Of course," I replied instantly, very aware of how serious this was. I sensed one wrong move would set my life on a course I could never correct.

"You need to do this and do it well. For everyone's sake. Our lives, all of them, are given over in service to our people."

I looked away. If anything, it felt like Mom, Dad, and I were the trinity of sacrifice here, with the others doing as they pleased.

"I won't let you down," I promised. "You do what you must. Make your plans, find a way to appease our public, and I will give you an acceptable window of time to pull it all together."

His eyes darted toward the ceiling in thought. "Three months? And you swear you'll try?"

I held up my hand. "I give you my word. I'll even sign something if you like, but I can't promise you I'll fall in love."

"Wouldn't be so sure if I was you," he said knowingly. But I wasn't him, and I wasn't Mom. No matter how romantic he thought this was, all I could think of were the thirty-five loud, obnoxious, weird-smelling boys who were about to invade my home. Nothing about that sounded magical.

"It's a deal."

I stood, practically ready to dance. "Really?"

"Really."

I took his hand and sealed my future with a single shake. "Thank you, Dad."

I left the room before he could see how big my smile was. I had already been running through how I could get most of the boys to leave of their own volition. I could be intimidating when I needed to be or find ways to make the palace a very unwelcoming environment. I also had a secret weapon in Osten, who was the most mischievous of us all and would help me if I asked him to, probably with minimal persuasion.

I admired the thought of a common boy feeling brave enough to face the challenge of becoming a prince. But no one was going to tie me down before I was ready, and I was going to make sure those poor suckers knew what they were signing up for.

They kept the studio cold, but once the lights came on, we might as well have been in an oven for all the good it did. I'd learned years ago to keep my clothing choices for the *Report* airy, which was why my dress tonight fell off my shoulders. My look was classy, as always, but not something that would subject me to a heatstroke.

"That's the perfect dress," Mom commented, pulling at the little ruffles on the sleeves. "You look lovely."

"Thank you. So do you."

She smiled as she continued to straighten my dress. "Thank you, sweetheart. I know you're feeling a little overwhelmed, but I think a Selection will be good for everyone. You're alone a lot, and it's something we would have to think about eventually, and—"

“And it will make the people happy. I know.”

I tried to hide the misery in my voice. We had technically moved past selling off the royal daughters, but . . . this didn't feel that different. Didn't she get that?

Her eyes moved from the gown to my face. Something in them told me she was sorry.

“I know you feel like this is a sacrifice; and it's true that when you live a life of service, there are many things you do, not because you want to, but because you must.” She swallowed. “But through this I found your father, and I found my closest friends, and I learned that I was stronger than I ever thought I could be. I know about the agreement you made with your dad, and if this ends without you finding the right person, so be it. But please, let yourself experience something here. Sharpen yourself, learn something. And try not to hate us for asking you to do it.”

“I don't hate you.”

“You at least considered it when we proposed this,” she said with a grin. “Didn't you?”

“I'm eighteen. I'm genetically encoded to fight with my parents.”

“I don't mind a good fight so long as you still know how much I love you in the end.”

I reached to hug her. “And I love you. Promise.”

She held me for a moment, then pulled away, smoothing my dress to make sure I was still immaculate before she went to find Dad. I walked to take my seat next to Ahren, who wiggled his eyebrows at me teasingly. “Looking good, sis. Practically bridal.”

I swung my skirt and sat down gracefully. “One more word and I will shave your head in your sleep.”

“I love you, too.”

I tried not to smile but failed. He just always knew.

The room filled with the palace household. Miss Lucy sat alone, as General Leger was on rounds, and Mr. and Mrs. Woodwork sat behind the cameras with Kile and Josie. They were the Woodworks' only children, and I knew Miss Marlee meant the world to Mom, so I kept it to myself that I thought her kids were the absolute worst. Kile wasn't as obnoxious as Josie, but, in all the years I'd known him, he'd never made anything remotely close to an interesting conversation. So help me, if I ever got a bad case of insomnia, I'd hire him to sit in my room and talk. Problem solved. And Josie . . . I didn't have words for how wretched that girl was.

Dad's advisers filed in, bowing as they came. There was only one woman in Dad's cabinet, Lady Brice Mannor. She was lovely and petite, and I was never sure how someone so demure managed to stay afloat in the political arena. I'd never heard her raise her voice or get angry, but people listened to her. The men didn't listen to me unless I was stern.

Her presence made me curious though. What would happen if I, as queen, made my entire board of counselors women?

That might be an interesting experiment.

The chairmen and advisers delivered their announcements and updates, and finally, Gavril turned to me.

Gavril Fadaye had slicked-back silver hair but a very handsome face. He'd been