

35 SUITORS ENTERED THE SELECTION. WHO WILL WIN HER HEART?



THE 
CROWN

BOOK FIVE OF
THE SELECTION SERIES

KIERA CASS

No. 1 *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



THE
CROWN



KIERA CASS



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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First published in the USA by HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. in 2016

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins Children's Books,
a division of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd,
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

The Crown
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Source ISBN: 9780007580248
Ebook Edition © 2016 ISBN: 9780007580255

Version: 2016-04-07

For Guyden and Zuzu,
the best little characters I ever made up.

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CHAPTER 1

“I’M SORRY,” I SAID, BRACING myself for the inevitable backlash. When my Selection started, I’d pictured it ending this way—with dozens of my suitors leaving at a time, many of them unprepared for their moment in the spotlight to be over. But after the last few weeks, after learning how kind, how smart, how generous so many of them were, I found the mass elimination almost heartbreaking.

They’d been fair with me, and now I had to be very unfair to them. The live announcement would make the elimination official, and they all had to wait until then.

“I know it’s abrupt, but given my mother’s precarious condition, my father has asked me to take on more responsibilities, and I feel the only way to manage that is to scale down this competition.”

“How is the queen?” Hale asked, swallowing hard.

I sighed. “She looks ... she looks pretty bad.”

Dad had been hesitant to let me visit her, but I had finally worn him down. I understood his reluctance the instant I saw her, asleep, the metronome of her heartbeat keeping time on the monitor. She’d just come out of surgery, where the doctors had to harvest a vein from her leg to replace the one in her chest that had been worked to death.

One of the doctors said they had lost her for a minute but managed to get her back. I sat beside her, holding her hand. Silly as it sounded, I had slouched in my chair, certain that would make her come to and correct my posture. It didn’t.

“She’s alive though. And my father ... he’s ...”

Raoul placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay, Your Highness. We all understand.”

I let my eyes flit across the space, my gaze settling on each of my suitors for a breath as I committed their faces to memory.

“For the record, I was terrified of you,” I confessed. There were a few chuckles around the room. “Thank you so much for taking this chance, and for being so gracious with me.”

A guard entered, clearing his throat to announce his presence. “I’m sorry, my lady. It’s nearly time for the broadcast. The crew wanted to check, um”—he made a fumbling gesture with his hand—“hair and stuff.”

I nodded. “Thank you. I’ll be ready in a moment.”

After he left, I turned my attention back to the boys. “I hope you’ll forgive me for this group good-bye. I wish you all the best of luck in the future.”

There was a chorus of murmured good-byes as I left. Once I was outside the doors of the Men’s Parlor, I took a deep breath and prepared myself for what was coming. *You are Eadlyn Schreave and no one—literally, no one—is as powerful as you.*

The palace was eerily quiet without Mom and her ladies scuttling around and Ahren’s laughter filling the halls. Nothing makes you quite so aware of a person’s presence as the loss of it.

I held myself tall as I made my way down to the studio.

“Your Highness,” several people greeted me as I came through the doorway, curtsying and moving out of my way, all the while avoiding looking directly in my eyes. I couldn’t tell if it was out of sympathy or if they already knew.

“Oh,” I said, glancing in the mirror. “I am a bit shiny. Could you—?”

“Of course, Your Highness.” A girl expertly dabbed at my skin, covering me in powder.

I straightened the high lace collar of my gown. When I’d gotten dressed this morning, black seemed appropriate, considering the overall mood in the palace, but I was secondguessing myself.

“I look too serious,” I worried aloud. “Not respectable serious, but worried serious. This is all wrong.”

“You look beautiful, my lady.” The makeup girl swept a fresh splash of color across my lips. “Like your mother.”

“No, I don’t,” I lamented. “Not a stitch of her hair or skin or eyes.”

“That’s not what I mean.” The girl, warm and round, with wisps of curls falling across her forehead, stood beside me and gazed at my reflection. “See there,” she said, pointing to my eyes. “Not the same color, but the same determination. And your lips, they have the same hopeful smile. I know you have your grandmother’s coloring, but you’re your mother’s daughter, through and through.”

I stared at myself. I could almost see what she meant. At this most isolating moment, I felt a little less alone.

“Thank you. That means a great deal to me.”

“We’re all praying for her, my lady. She’s a tough one.”

I giggled in spite of my mood. “That she is.”

“Two minutes!” the floor director called. I walked onto the carpeted set, smoothing out my gown and touching my hair. The studio was colder than usual, even under the lights, and goose bumps prickled at my skin as I took my place behind the lone podium.

Gavril, slightly dressed down but still very polished, gave me a sympathetic smile as he approached. “Are you sure you want to do this? I’m happy to deliver the news for you.”

“Thank you, but I think I have to do it on my own.”

“All right then. How’s she holding up?”

“Okay as of an hour ago. The doctors are keeping her asleep so she can heal, but she looks so battered.” I closed my eyes for a moment, calming myself. “Sorry. This has me a bit on edge. But at least I’m managing better than Dad.”

He shook his head. “I can’t imagine anyone taking this worse than him. His whole world has hung on her since they met.”

I thought back to last night, to the wall of photos in their room, and I thumbed through all the details they’d only recently divulged about how they got together. I still couldn’t see any rhyme or reason to fighting through countless obstacles for love only to have it leave you so powerless in the end.

“You were there, Gavril. You saw their Selection.” I swallowed, still unsure. “Does it really work? How?”

He shrugged. “Yours is the third I’ve seen, and I can’t tell you how it works, how a lottery can bring in a soul mate. Let me say this: Your