

35 GIRLS CAME TO THE PALACE. ONLY 6 REMAIN.



THE ELITE

A SELECTION NOVEL

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## **Dedication**

Call out the servants! The queen is awake!  
(For Mom)

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## CHAPTER 1

THE ANGELES AIR WAS QUIET, and for a while I lay still, listening to the sound of Maxon's breathing. It was getting harder and harder to catch him in a truly calm and happy moment, and I soaked up the time, grateful that he seemed to be at his best when he and I were alone.

Ever since the Selection had been narrowed down to six girls, he'd been more anxious than he was when the thirty-five of us arrived in the first place. I guessed he thought he'd have more time to make his choices. And though it made me feel guilty to admit it, I knew I was the reason why he wished he did.

Prince Maxon, heir to the Illéa throne, liked me. He'd told me a week ago that if I could simply say that I cared for him the way he did for me, without anything holding me back, this whole competition would be over. And sometimes I played with the idea, wondering how it would feel to be Maxon's alone.

But the thing was, Maxon wasn't really mine to begin with. There were five other girls here—girls he took on dates and whispered things to—and I didn't know what to make of that. And then there was the fact that if I accepted Maxon, it meant I had to accept a crown, a thought I tended to ignore if only because I wasn't sure what it would mean for me.

And, of course, there was Aspen.

He wasn't technically my boyfriend anymore—he'd broken up with me before my name was even drawn for the Selection—but when he showed up at the palace as one of the guards, all the feelings I'd been trying to let go of flooded my heart. Aspen was my first love; when I looked at him ... I was his.

Maxon didn't know that Aspen was in the palace, but he did know that there was someone at home that I was trying to get over, and he was graciously giving me time to move on while attempting to find someone else he'd be happy with in the event I couldn't ever love him.

As he moved his head, inhaling just above my hairline, I considered it. What would it be like to simply love Maxon?

“Do you know when the last time was that I really looked at the stars?” he asked.

I settled closer to him on our blanket, trying to keep warm in the cool Angeles night. “No idea.”

“A tutor had me studying astronomy a few years ago. If you look closely, you can tell that the stars are actually different colors.”

“Wait, the last time you looked at the stars was to *study* them? What about for fun?”

He chuckled. “Fun. I’ll have to pencil in some between the budget consultations and infrastructure committee meetings. Oh, and war strategizing, which, by the way, I am terrible at.”

“What else are you terrible at?” I asked, running my hand across his starched shirt. Encouraged by the touch, Maxon drew circles on my shoulder with the hand he had wrapped behind my back.

“Why would you want to know that?” he asked in mock irritation.

“Because I still know so little about you. And you seem perfect all the time. It’s nice to have proof you’re not.”

He propped himself up on an elbow, focusing on my face. “You *know* I’m not.”

“Pretty close,” I countered. Little flickers of touch ran between us. Knees, arms, fingers.

He shook his head, a small smile on his face. “Okay, then. I can’t plan wars. I’m rotten at it. And I’m guessing I’d be a terrible cook. I’ve never tried, so—”

“Never?”

“You might have noticed the teams of people keeping you up to your neck in pastries? They happen to feed me as well.”

I giggled. I helped cook practically every meal at home. “More,” I demanded. “What else are you bad at?”

He held me close, his brown eyes bright with a secret. “Recently I’ve discovered this one thing ....”

“Tell.”

“It turns out I’m absolutely terrible at staying away from you. It’s a very serious problem.”

I smiled. “Have you really tried?”

He pretended to think about it. “Well, no. And don’t expect me to start.”

We laughed quietly, holding on to each other. In these moments, it was so easy to picture this being the rest of my life.

The rustle of leaves and grass announced that someone was coming. Even though our date was completely acceptable, I felt a little embarrassed and sat up quickly. Maxon followed suit as a guard made his way around the hedge to us.

“Your Majesty,” he said with a bow. “Sorry to intrude, sir, but it’s really unwise to stay out this late for so long. The rebels could—”

“Understood,” Maxon said with a sigh. “We’ll be right in.”

The guard left us alone, and Maxon turned back to me. “Another fault of mine: I’m losing patience with the rebels. I’m tired of dealing with them.”

He stood and offered me his hand. I took it, watching the sad frustration in his eyes. We’d been attacked twice by the rebels since the start of the Selection—once by the simply disruptive Northerners and once by the deadly Southerners—and even with my brief experience, I could understand his exhaustion.

Maxon was picking up the blanket and shaking it out, clearly not happy that our night had been cut short.

“Hey,” I said, urging him to face me. “I had fun.”

He nodded.

“No, really,” I said, walking over to him. He moved the blanket to one hand to wrap his free arm around me. “We should do it again sometime. You can tell me which stars are which colors, because I seriously can’t tell.”

Maxon gave me a sad smile. “I wish things were easier sometimes, normal.”

I moved so I could wrap my arms around him, and as I did so, Maxon dropped the blanket to return the gesture. “I hate to break it to you, Your Majesty, but even without the guards, you’re far from normal.”

His expression lightened a bit but was still serious. “You’d like me more if I was.”

“I know you find it hard to believe, but I really do like you the way you are. I just need more—”

“Time. I know. And I’m prepared to give you that. I only wish I knew that you’d actually want to be with me when that time was over.”

I looked away. That wasn’t something I could promise. I weighed Maxon and Aspen in my heart over and over, and neither of them ever had a

true edge. Except, maybe, when I was alone with one of them. Because, at that moment, I was tempted to promise Maxon that I would be there for him in the end.

But I couldn't.

"Maxon," I whispered, seeing how dejected he looked at my lack of an answer. "I can't tell you that. But what I can tell you is that I *want* to be here. I *want* to know if there's a possibility for ... for ..." I stammered, not sure how to put it.

"Us?" Maxon guessed.

I smiled, happy at how easily he understood me. "Yes. I want to know if there's a possibility for us to be an us."

He moved a lock of hair behind my shoulder. "I think the odds are very high," he said matter-of-factly.

"I think so, too. Just ... time, okay?"

He nodded, looking happier. This was how I wanted to end our night, with hope. Well, and maybe one more thing. I bit my lip and leaned into Maxon, asking with my eyes.

Without a second of hesitation, he bent to kiss me. It was warm and gentle, and it left me feeling adored and somehow aching for more. I could have stayed there for hours, just to see if I could get enough of that feeling; but too soon, Maxon backed away.

"Let's go," he said in a playful tone, pulling me toward the palace. "Better get inside before the guards come for us on horseback with spears drawn."

As Maxon left me at the stairs, the tiredness hit me like a wall. I was practically dragging myself up to the second floor and around the corner to my room when, suddenly, I was quite awake again.

"Oh!" Aspen said, surprised to see me, too. "I think it makes me the worst guard ever that I assumed you were in your room this whole time."

I giggled. The Elite were supposed to sleep with at least one of their maids on watch in the night. I really didn't like that, so Maxon insisted on stationing a guard by my room in case there was an emergency. The thing was, most of the time that guard was Aspen. It was a strange mix of exhilaration and terror knowing that nearly every night he was right outside my door.

The lightness of the moment faded quickly as Aspen grasped what it meant that I hadn't been safely tucked in my bed. He cleared his throat

uncomfortably.

“Did you have a good time?”

“Aspen,” I whispered, looking to make sure no one was around. “Don’t be upset. I’m part of the Selection, and this is just how it is.”

“How am I supposed to stand a chance, Mer? How can I compete when you only ever talk to one of us?” He made a good point, but what could I do?

“Please don’t be mad at me, Aspen. I’m trying to figure all this out.”

“No, Mer,” he said, gentleness returning to his voice. “I’m not mad at you. I *miss* you.” He didn’t dare say the words aloud, but he mouthed them. *I love you.*

I melted.

“I know,” I said, placing a hand on his chest, letting myself forget for a moment all that we were risking. “But that doesn’t change where we are or that I’m an Elite now. I need time, Aspen.”

He reached up to hold my hand in his and nodded. “I can give you that. Just ... try to find some time for me, too.”

I didn’t want to bring up how complicated that would be, so I gave him a tiny smile before gently pulling my hand away. “I need to go.”

He watched me as I walked into my room and shut the door behind me.

Time. I was asking for a lot of it these days. I hoped that if I had enough, everything would somehow fall into place.