

ONLY 1 GIRL CAN WIN THE CROWN.



THE **ONE**  
A SELECTION NOVEL  
**KIERA CASS**

#1 *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



THE  
ONE



KIERA CASS

**HARPER TEEN**  
*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

## **DEDICATION**

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

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Back Ads](#)

[Books by Kiera Cass](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

## 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.

“Hurry, ladies!” Silvia cried.

Within seconds, the guards had lined up at the windows and were firing, and the bursts of sound echoed in my ears as we fled. Whether they came with guns or stones, anyone showing the smallest level of aggression within sight of the palace would die. There was no more patience left for these attacks.

“I hate running in these shoes,” Kriss muttered, a heap of dress draped over her arm, eyes focused on the end of the hall.

“One of us is going to have to get used to it,” Celeste said, her breath labored.

I rolled my eyes. “If it’s me, I’ll wear sneakers every day. I’m already over this.”

“Less talking, more moving!” Silvia yelled.

“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."

"Are 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 Gerad'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.