

A woman with long, wavy red hair styled in a low bun, wearing a sparkling tiara. She is looking slightly to the left. The background is a soft-focus blue with bokeh light effects.

Exclusive
scenes and
art inside!

A decorative flourish consisting of a central diamond shape with symmetrical scrollwork on either side.

HAPPILY
EVER AFTER

COMPANION TO
THE SELECTION SERIES

KIERA CASS

#1 *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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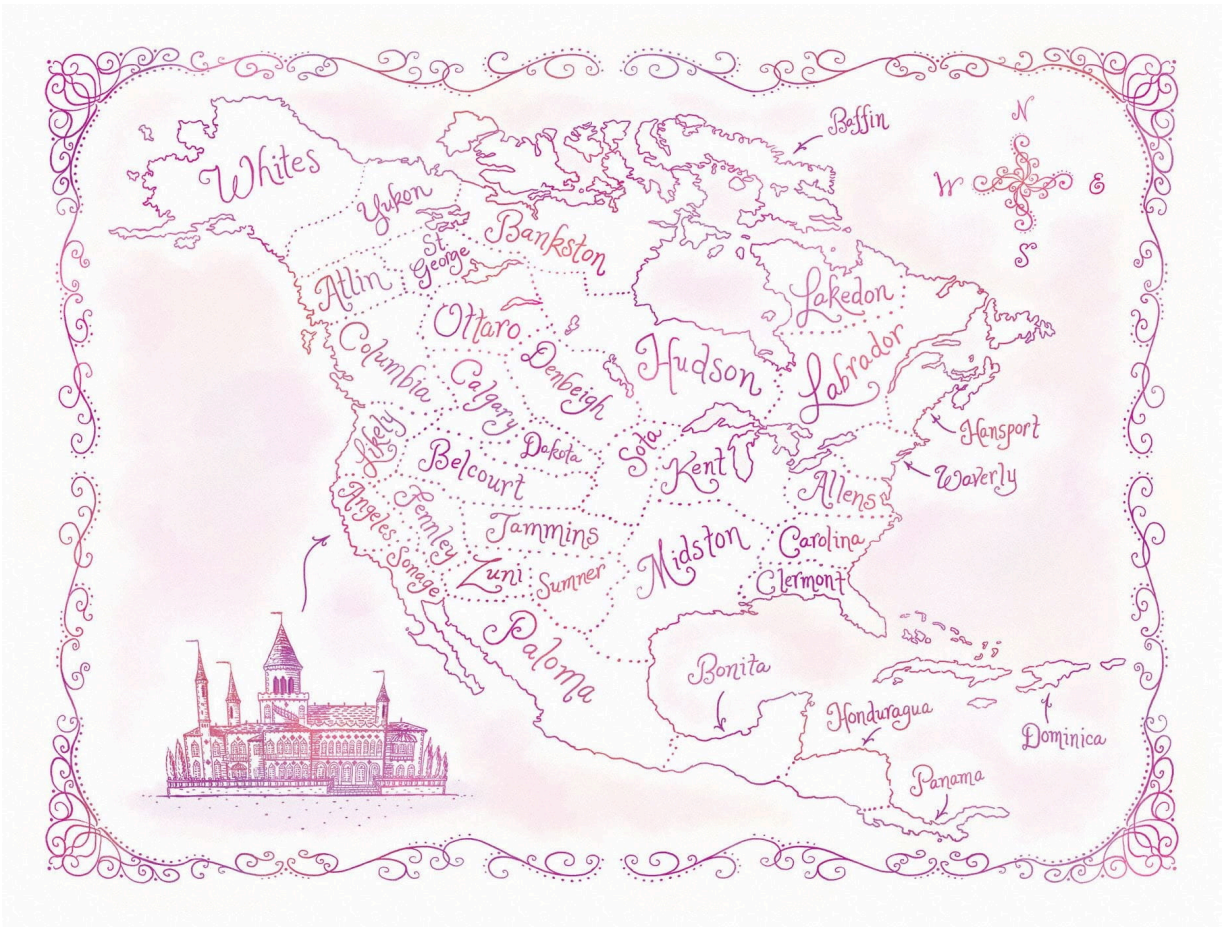
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MAP





THE QUEEN



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE QUEEN

This story was one I was kind of aching to discover myself. I adore Amberly. As a mother, I look at her with a sort of awe. She's charming, smart, gracious, beautiful; and though she's seen her share of sadness, she tries to be joyful. So how did this magical woman fall for someone the likes of Clarkson Schreave?

It was interesting, to say the least, to see not only Amberly as a teenager but also Clarkson. Watching the abuse and worry he dealt with firsthand made me see how time and fear could shape a person into someone who is, by most accounts, evil. It was also amazing to see Amberly trying so hard to find the positive in him, and in his mother, despite her less-than-kind experiences. I think she genuinely believes that no one is bad on purpose, that every soul has some good in it, and she looks for it constantly. It would explain so many moments in her own Selection process and also make it easier to understand why she would be so keen to accept her son's choice for a wife, even if her husband (and the country at large) had written her off.

One of my worries about this novella is that it takes away something from Amberly. I worry that it makes her seem foolish, to disregard Clarkson's words and actions, and want him anyway. I feel like this might be my one chance to say this: I never meant for this novella to condone abusive relationships. I hoped, like everything I make, that it would simply

be honest. We know Clarkson has his flaws. Amberly does, too. This is a peek behind the curtain at two broken people.

—Kiera

CHAPTER 1

TWO WEEKS IN, AND THIS was my fourth headache. How would I explain something like that to the prince? As if it wasn't bad enough that nearly every girl left was a Two. As if my maids weren't already slaving away to fix my weathered hands. At some point I would have to tell him about the waves of sickness that crashed without warning. Well, if he ever noticed me.

Queen Abby sat at the opposite end of the Women's Room, almost as if she was purposefully separating herself from the girls. By the slight chill that seemed to roll off her shoulders, I got the feeling that we weren't exactly welcome as far as she was concerned.

She extended her hand to a maid, who in turn filed her nails to perfection. But even in the middle of being pampered, the queen seemed irritated. I didn't understand, but I tried not to judge. Maybe a corner of my heart would be hardened, too, if I'd lost a husband so young. It was lucky that Porter Schreave, her late husband's cousin, took her as his own, allowing her to keep the crown.

I surveyed the room, looking at the other girls. Gillian was a Four like me, but a proper one. Her parents were both chefs, and, based on her descriptions of our meals, I sensed she'd take the same path. Leigh and Madison were studying to be veterinarians and visited the stables as often as they were permitted.

I knew that Nova was an actress and had throngs of adoring fans willing her onto the throne. Uma was a gymnast, and her petite frame was graceful, even in stillness. Several of the Twos here hadn't even chosen a profession yet. I guessed if someone paid my bills, fed me, and kept a roof over my head, I wouldn't worry about it either.

I rubbed my aching temple and felt the cracked skin and calluses drag across my forehead. I stopped and stared down at my battered hands.

He would never want me.

Closing my eyes, I pictured the first time I'd met Prince Clarkson. I could remember the feeling of his strong hand as he shook mine. Thank goodness my maids had found lace gloves for me to wear, or I might have been sent home on the spot. He was composed, polite, and intelligent. All the things a prince should be.

I had realized over the past two weeks that he didn't smile too much. It seemed as if he was afraid of being judged for finding humor in things. But, my goodness, how his eyes lit up when he did. The dirty-blond hair, the faded blue eyes, the way he carried himself with such strength . . . he was perfect.

Sadly, I was not. But there had to be a way to get Prince Clarkson to notice me.

Dear Adele

I held the pen in the air for a minute, knowing this was pointless. Still.

I'm settling in very well at the palace. It's pretty. It's bigger and better than pretty, but I don't know if I have the right words to describe it. It's a different kind of warm in Angeles than it is at home, too, but I don't know how to tell you about that either. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could come feel and see and smell everything for yourself? And, yes, there's plenty to smell.

As far as the actual competition goes, I haven't spent a single second alone with the prince.

My head throbbed. I closed my eyes, breathing slowly. I ordered myself to focus.

I'm sure you've seen on TV that Prince Clarkson has sent home eight girls, all of them Fours and Fives and that one Six. There are two other Fours left, and a handful of Threes. I wonder if he's expected to choose a Two. I think that would make sense, but it's heartbreaking for me.

Could you do me a favor? Will you ask Mama and Papa if there's maybe a cousin or someone else in the family who's in the upper castes? I should have asked before I left. I think information like that would be really helpful.

I was getting that nauseated feeling that sometimes came with the headaches.

*I have to run. Lots going on. I'll send another letter soon.
Love you forever,
Amberly*

I felt faint. I folded my letter and sealed it in the already-addressed envelope. I rubbed my temples again, hoping the slight pressure would give me some relief, though it never did.

"Everything all right, Amberly?" Danica asked.

"Oh, yes," I lied. "Probably just tired or something. I might take a little walk. Try to get my blood moving and all."

I smiled at Danica and Madeline and left the Women's Room, making my way toward the bathroom. A bit of cold water on my face would ruin my makeup, but it might help me feel better. Before I could get there, the dizzy feeling swept over me again. Perching on one of those little couches that ran along the hallways, I put my head back against the wall, trying to clear it.



This made no sense. Everyone knew the air and water in the southern parts of Illéa were bad. Even the Twos there sometimes had health problems. But shouldn't this—escaping into the clean air, good food, and impeccable care of the palace—be helping that?

I was going to miss every opportunity to make an impression on Prince Clarkson if this kept up. What if I didn't make it to the croquet game this afternoon? I could feel my dreams slipping through my fingers. I might as well embrace defeat now. It would hurt less later.

"What are you doing?"

I jerked away from the wall to see Prince Clarkson looking down at me.

"Nothing, Your Highness."

"Are you unwell?"

"No, of course not," I insisted, pushing myself to my feet. But that was a mistake. My legs buckled, and I fell to the floor.

"Miss?" he asked, coming to my side.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "This is humiliating."

He swept me up in his arms. "Close your eyes if you're dizzy. We're going to the hospital wing."

What a funny story this would be for my children: the king once carried me across the palace as if I weighed nothing at all. I liked it here, in his arms. I'd always wondered what they'd feel like.

"Oh, my goodness," someone cried. I opened my eyes to see a nurse.

"I think she's faint or something," Clarkson said. "She doesn't seem injured."

"Set her here, please, Your Highness."

Prince Clarkson placed me on one of the beds dotting the wing, carefully sliding his arms away. I hoped he could see the gratefulness in my eyes.

I assumed he would leave immediately, but he stood by as the nurse checked my pulse. "Have you eaten today, dear? Had plenty to drink?"

"We just finished breakfast," he answered for me.

“Do you feel sick at all?”

“No. Well, yes. What I mean is, this is really nothing.” I hoped if I made this seem inconsequential, I could still make it to the croquet game later.

She made a face both stern and sweet. “I beg to differ; you had to be carried in here.”

“This happens all the time,” I blurted in frustration.

“How do you mean?” the nurse pressed.

I hadn’t meant to confess that. I sighed, trying to think of how to explain. Now the prince would see how my life in Honduragua had damaged me.

“I get headaches a lot. And sometimes they make me dizzy.” I swallowed, worried what the prince would think. “At home I go to bed hours before my siblings, and that helps me get through the workday. It’s been harder to rest here.”

“Mmm hmm. Anything besides the headaches and tiredness?”

“No, ma’am.”

Clarkson shifted next to me. I hoped he couldn’t hear my heart pounding.

“How long have you had this problem?”

I shrugged. “A few years, maybe more. It’s kind of normal now.”

The nurse looked concerned. “Is there any history of this in your family?”

I paused before answering. “Not exactly. But my sister gets nosebleeds sometimes.”

“Do you just have a sickly family?” Clarkson asked, a hint of disgust in his voice.

“No,” I replied, both wanting to defend myself and embarrassed to explain. “I live in Honduragua.”

He raised his eyebrows in understanding. “Ah.”

It was no secret how polluted the south was. The air was bad. The water was bad. There were so many deformed children, barren women, and young deaths. When the rebels came through, they would leave a trail of graffiti behind, demanding to know why the palace hadn’t fixed this. It was a miracle my entire family wasn’t as sick as I was. Or that I wasn’t worse.

I drew in a deep breath. What in the world was I doing here? I'd spent the weeks leading up to the Selection building this fairy tale in my head. But no amount of wishing or dreaming was going to make me worthy of a man such as Clarkson.

I turned away, not wanting him to see me cry. "Could you leave, please?"

There were a few seconds of silence, then I listened to his footsteps as he walked away. The instant they faded, I broke down.

"Hush, now, dearie, it's okay," the nurse said, comforting me. I was so heartbroken, I hugged her as tightly as I did my mother or siblings. "It's a lot of stress to go through a competition like this, and Prince Clarkson understands that. I'll have the doctor prescribe you something for your headaches, and that will help."

"I've been in love with him since I was seven years old. I whispered a happy birthday song to him every year into my pillow so my sister wouldn't laugh at me for remembering. When I started learning cursive, I practiced by writing our names together . . . and the first time he really speaks to me, he asks if I'm sickly." I paused, letting out a cry. "I'm not good enough."

The nurse didn't try to argue with me. She just let me cry.

I was so embarrassed. Clarkson would never see me as anything but the broken girl who sent him away. I was sure my chance at winning his heart had passed. What use could he have for me now?

CHAPTER 2

TURNED OUT CROQUET ONLY ALLOWS for a maximum of six players at a time, which suited me just fine. I sat and watched, trying to understand the rules in case I got a turn, though I had a feeling we would all get bored and end the game before everyone had a chance.

“Look at his arms.” Maureen sighed. She wasn’t speaking to me, but I glanced up all the same. Clarkson had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He looked really, *really* good.

“How do I get him to wrap those around me?” Keller joked. “It’s not like you can fake an injury in croquet.”

The girls around her laughed, and Clarkson glanced their way, a hint of a smile on his lips. It always came across like that: just a trace. Come to think of it, I’d never heard him laugh. Maybe the unexpected bubble of a single chuckle, but never anything where he was just so happy he exploded in laughter.

Still, the ghost of a smirk on his face was enough to paralyze me. I was fine with not seeing more.

The teams moved along the field, and I was painfully aware when the prince was standing near me. As one of the girls lined up a rather skillful shot, he darted his eyes over at me, not moving his head. I peeked up at him, and he turned his attention back to the game. Some girls cheered, and he stepped closer.

“There’s a refreshments table over there,” he said quietly, still not making eye contact. “Maybe you should get some water.”

“I’m fine.”

“Bravo, Clementine!” he yelled to a girl who’d successfully ruined another’s shot. “All the same. Dehydration can make headaches worse.

Might be good for you.”

His eyes came down to meet mine, and there was something there. Not love, maybe not even affection, but something a degree or two beyond basic concern.

Knowing I was hopeless when it came to refusing him, I stood and walked over to the table. I started to pour myself some water, but a maid took the pitcher from my hand.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “Still getting used to that.”

She smiled. “Not at all. Have some fruit. Very refreshing on a day like this.”

I stood by the table, eating grapes with a tiny fork. I’d need to tell Adele about that, too: utensils for fruit.

Clarkson looked my way a few times, seemingly double-checking that I was doing as he suggested. I couldn’t tell if it was the food or his attention that lifted my mood.

I never did take a chance playing the game.

It was three more days before Clarkson spoke to me again.

Dinner was dying down. The king had unceremoniously excused himself, and the queen had almost completely emptied a bottle of wine by herself. Some of the girls started to curtsy and leave, not wanting to watch the queen as she sloppily propped herself up on her arm. I was alone at my table, determined to finish every last bite of the chocolate cake.

“How are you today, Amberly?”

My head shot up. Clarkson had walked over without me noticing. I thanked God he caught me between bites. “Very well. And you?”

“Excellent, thank you.”

There was a brief silence as I waited for him to say more. Or was I supposed to talk? Were there rules about who spoke first?

“I was just noticing how long your hair is,” he commented.

“Oh.” I laughed a little as I looked down. My hair was nearly to my waist these days. Though it was a lot to groom, it gave me plenty of options for

pulling it up. That was key for farmwork. “Yes. Comes in handy for braiding, which is nice at home.”

“Do you think it’s maybe too long?”

“Umm. I don’t know, Your Highness.” I ran my fingers over it. My hair was clean and well taken care of. Did I somehow look messy without being aware of it? “What do you think?”

He tilted his head. “It’s a very pretty color. I think it might be nicer if it was shorter.” He shrugged and started to walk away. “Just a thought,” he called over his shoulder.

I sat there for a moment, considering. Then, abandoning my cake, I went to my room. My maids were there, waiting as always. “Martha, would you feel comfortable cutting my hair?”

“Of course, miss. An inch or so off the bottom will keep it healthy,” she replied, walking to the bathroom.

“No,” I countered. “I need it short.”

She paused. “How short?”

“Well . . . past my shoulders still, but maybe above the bottom of my shoulder blades?”

“That’s more than a foot, miss!”

“I know. But can you do it? And would you still be able to make it pretty?” I pulled at the thick strands, imagining them cut off.

“Of course, miss. But why would you do that?”

I crossed in front of her, heading into the bathroom. “I think it’s time for a change.”

My maids helped undo my dress and draped a towel over my shoulders. I closed my eyes as Martha began, not completely sure what I was doing. Clarkson thought I’d look nicer with shorter hair, and Martha would make sure it was long enough that I could still pull it back. I lost nothing in this.

I didn’t dare to take a glimpse until it was all done. I listened to the metallic bite of the scissors over and over. I could feel as her snips got more precise, as if she was making everything uniform. Not long after that she stopped.

“What do you think, miss?” she asked hesitantly.

I opened my eyes. At first I couldn’t even tell a difference. But I turned my head ever so slightly, and a piece of hair fell over my shoulder. I pulled a strand over the other side, and it was as if my face was encircled by a mahogany frame.

He was right.

“I love it, Martha!” I gasped, touching my hair all over.

“It makes you look much more mature,” Cindly added.

I nodded. “It does, doesn’t it?”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Emon cried, running to the jewelry box. She fished through several pieces, searching for something in particular. Finally, she came up with a necklace that had large glittering red stones. I hadn’t been brave enough to wear it yet.

I lifted my hair, expecting her to want me to try it on, but she had other ideas. Gently, she laid the necklace across my head. It was so ornate, it was very reminiscent of a crown.

My maids all sucked in a breath, but I stopped breathing completely.

I had spent so many years imagining Prince Clarkson as my husband, but never once had I considered him as the boy who could make me a princess. For the first time ever, I realized I wanted that, too. I wasn’t full of connections or dripping with wealth, but I sensed it was a role that I would not simply fill but excel at. I’d always believed I’d be a good match for Clarkson, but maybe I could be a good match for the monarchy, too.

I looked at myself in the mirror, and along with imagining *Schreave* tacked on the end of my name, I placed *princess* right before it. In that instant I wanted him, the crown—every last piece of this—like nothing before.