

CHAPTER 1

Now that I've found the way to fly, which direction should I go into the night? My wings aren't white or feathered; they're green, made of green silk, which shudders in the wind and bends when I move—first in a circle, then in a line, finally in a shape of my own invention. The black behind me doesn't worry me; neither do the stars ahead.

I smile at myself, at the foolishness of my imagination. People cannot fly, though before the Society, there were myths about those who could. I saw a painting of them once. White wings, blue sky, gold circles above their heads, eyes turned up in surprise as though they couldn't believe what the artist had painted them doing, couldn't believe that their feet didn't touch the ground.

Those stories weren't true. I know that. But tonight, it's easy to forget. The air train glides through the starry night so smoothly and my heart pounds so quickly that it feels as though I could soar into the sky at any moment.

"What are you smiling about?" Xander wonders as I smooth the folds of my green silk dress down neat.

"Everything," I tell him, and it's true. I've waited so long for this: for my Match Banquet. Where I'll see, for the first

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time, the face of the boy who will be my Match. It will be the first time I hear his name.

I can't wait. As quickly as the air train moves, it still isn't fast enough. It hushes through the night, its sound a background for the low rain of our parents' voices, the lightning-quick beats of my heart.

Perhaps Xander can hear my heart pounding, too, because he asks, "Are you nervous?" In the seat next to him, Xander's older brother begins to tell my mother the story of his Match Banquet. It won't be long now until Xander and I have our own stories to tell.

"No," I say. But Xander's my best friend. He knows me too well.

"You lie," he teases. "You *are* nervous."

"Aren't you?"

"Not me. I'm ready." He says it without hesitation, and I believe him. Xander is the kind of person who is sure about what he wants.

"It doesn't matter if you're nervous, Cassia," he says, gentle now. "Almost ninety-three percent of those attending their Match Banquet exhibit some signs of nervousness."

"Did you memorize *all* of the official Matching material?"

"Almost," Xander says, grinning. He holds his hands out as if to say, *What did you expect?*

The gesture makes me laugh, and besides, I memorized

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all of the material, too. It's easy to do when you read it so many times, when the decision is so important. "So you're in the minority," I say. "The seven percent who don't show any nerves at all."

"Of course," he agrees.

"How could you tell *I* was nervous?"

"Because you keep opening and closing *that*." Xander points to the golden object in my hands. "I didn't know you had an artifact." A few treasures from the past float around among us. Though citizens of the Society are allowed one artifact each, they are hard to come by. Unless you had ancestors who took care to pass things along through the years.

"I didn't, until a few hours ago," I tell him. "Grandfather gave it to me for my birthday. It belonged to his mother."

"What's it called?" Xander asks.

"A compact," I say. I like the name very much. Compact means small. I am small. I also like the way it sounds when you say it: *com-pact*. Saying the word makes a sound like the one the artifact itself makes when it snaps shut.

"What do the initials and numbers mean?"

"I'm not sure." I run my finger across the letters *ACM* and the numbers *1940* carved across the golden surface. "But look," I tell him, popping the compact open to show him the inside: a little mirror, made of real glass, and a small hollow where the original owner once stored powder for her face, according to Grandfather. Now, I use it to hold the three

emergency tablets that everyone carries—one green, one blue, one red.

“That’s convenient,” Xander says. He stretches out his arms in front of him and I notice that he has an artifact, too—a pair of shiny platinum cuff links. “My father lent me these, but you can’t put anything in them. They’re completely useless.”

“They look nice, though.” My gaze travels up to Xander’s face, to his bright blue eyes and blond hair above his dark suit and white shirt. He’s always been handsome, even when we were little, but I’ve never seen him dressed up like this. Boys don’t have as much leeway in choosing clothes as girls do. One suit looks much like another. Still, they get to select the color of their shirts and cravats, and the quality of the material is much finer than the material used for plainclothes. “*You* look nice.” The girl who finds out that he’s her Match will be thrilled.

“Nice?” Xander says, lifting his eyebrows. “That’s all?”

“Xander,” his mother says next to him, amusement mingled with reproach in her voice.

“*You* look beautiful,” Xander tells me, and I flush a little even though I’ve known Xander all my life. I *feel* beautiful, in this dress: ice green, floating, full-skirted. The unaccustomed smoothness of silk against my skin makes me feel lithe and graceful.

Next to me, my mother and father each draw a breath as City Hall comes into view, lit up white and blue and sparkling with the special occasion lights that indicate a celebration is

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taking place. I can't see the marble stairs in front of the Hall yet, but I know that they will be polished and shining. All my life I have waited to walk up those clean marble steps and through the doors of the Hall, a building I have seen from a distance but never entered.

I want to open the compact and check in the mirror to make sure I look my best. But I don't want to seem vain, so I sneak a glance at my face in its surface instead.

The rounded lid of the compact distorts my features a little, but it's still me. My green eyes. My coppery-brown hair, which looks more golden in the compact than it does in real life. My straight small nose. My chin with a trace of a dimple like my grandfather's. All the outward characteristics that make me Cassia Maria Reyes, seventeen years old exactly.

I turn the compact over in my hands, looking at how perfectly the two sides fit together. My Match is already coming together just as neatly, beginning with the fact that I am here tonight. Since my birthday falls on the fifteenth, the day the Banquet is held each month, I'd always *hoped* that I might be Matched on my actual birthday—but I knew it might not happen. You can be called up for your Banquet anytime during the year after you turn seventeen. When the notification came across the port two weeks ago that I would, indeed, be Matched on the day of my birthday, I could almost hear the clean *snap* of the pieces fitting into place, exactly as I've dreamed for so long.

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Because although I haven't even had to wait a full day for my Match, in some ways I have waited all my life.

"Cassia," my mother says, smiling at me. I blink and look up, startled. My parents stand up, ready to disembark. Xander stands, too, and straightens his sleeves. I hear him take a deep breath, and I smile to myself. Maybe he is a little nervous after all.

"Here we go," he says to me. His smile is so kind and good; I'm glad we were called up the same month. We've shared so much of childhood, it seems we should share the end of it, too.

I smile back at him and give him the best greeting we have in the Society. "I wish you optimal results," I tell Xander.

"You too, Cassia," he says.

As we step off the air train and walk toward City Hall, my parents each link an arm through mine. I am surrounded, as I always have been, by their love.

It is only the three of us tonight. My brother, Bram, can't come to the Match Banquet because he is under seventeen, too young to attend. The first one you attend is always your own. I, however, will be able to attend Bram's banquet because I am the older sibling. I smile to myself, wondering what Bram's Match will be like. In seven years I will find out.

But tonight is *my* night.

It is easy to identify those of us being Matched; not only are we younger than all of the others, but we also float along

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in beautiful dresses and tailored suits while our parents and older siblings walk around in plainclothes, a background against which we bloom. The City Officials smile proudly at us, and my heart swells as we enter the Rotunda.

In addition to Xander, who waves good-bye to me as he crosses the room to his seating area, I see another girl I know named Lea. She picked the bright red dress. It is a good choice for her, because she is beautiful enough that standing out works in her favor. She looks worried, however, and she keeps twisting her artifact, a jeweled red bracelet. I am a little surprised to see Lea there. I would have picked her for a Single.

“Look at this china,” my father says as we find our place at the Banquet tables. “It reminds me of the Wedgwood pieces we found last year . . .”

My mother looks at me and rolls her eyes in amusement. Even at the Match Banquet, my father can't stop himself from noticing these things. My father spends months working in old neighborhoods that are being restored and turned into new Boroughs for public use. He sifts through the relics of a society that is not as far in the past as it seems. Right now, for example, he is working on a particularly interesting Restoration project: an old library. He sorts out the things the Society has marked as valuable from the things that are not.

But then I have to laugh because my mother can't help but comment on the flowers, since they fall in *her* area of expertise as an Arboretum worker. “Oh, Cassia! Look at the centerpieces. Lilies.” She squeezes my hand.

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“Please be seated,” an Official tells us from the podium. “Dinner is about to be served.”

It’s almost comical how quickly we all take our seats. Because we might admire the china and the flowers, and we might be here for our Matches, but we also can’t wait to taste the food.

“They say this dinner is always wasted on the Matchees,” a jovial-looking man sitting across from us says, smiling around our table. “So excited they can’t eat a bite.” And it’s true; one of the girls sitting farther down the table, wearing a pink dress, stares at her plate, touching nothing.

I don’t seem to have this problem, however. Though I don’t gorge myself, I can eat some of everything—the roasted vegetables, the savory meat, the crisp greens, and creamy cheese. The warm light bread. The meal seems like a dance, as though this is a ball as well as a banquet. The waiters slide the plates in front of us with graceful hands; the food, wearing herbs and garnishes, is as dressed up as we are. We lift the white napkins, the silver forks, the shining crystal goblets as if in time to music.

My father smiles happily as a server sets a piece of chocolate cake with fresh cream before him at the end of the meal. “*Wonderful*,” he whispers, so softly that only my mother and I can hear him.

My mother laughs a little at him, teasing him, and he reaches for her hand.

I understand his enthusiasm when I take a bite of the

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cake, which is rich but not overwhelming, deep and dark and flavorful. It is the best thing I have eaten since the traditional dinner at Winter Holiday, months ago. I wish Bram could have some cake, and for a minute I think about saving some of mine for him. But there is no way to take it back to him. It wouldn't fit in my compact. It would be bad form to hide it away in my mother's purse even if she would agree, and she won't. My mother doesn't break the rules.

I can't save it for later. It is now, or never.

I have just popped the last bite in my mouth when the announcer says, "We are ready to announce the Matches."

I swallow in surprise, and for a second, I feel an unexpected surge of anger: I didn't get to savor my last bite of cake.

"Lea Abbey."

Lea twists her bracelet furiously as she stands, waiting to see the face flash on the screen. She is careful to hold her hands low, though, so that the boy seeing her in another City Hall somewhere will only see the beautiful blond girl and not her worried hands, twisting and turning that bracelet.

It is strange how we hold on to the pieces of the past while we wait for our futures.

There is a system, of course, to the Matching. In City Halls across the country, all filled with people, the Matches are announced in alphabetical order according to the girls' last names. I feel slightly sorry for the boys, who have no idea when their names will be called, when they must stand for

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girls in other City Halls to receive them as Matches. Since my last name is Reyes, I will be somewhere at the end of the middle. The beginning of the end.

The screen flashes with the face of a boy, blond and handsome. He smiles as he sees Lea's face on the screen where he is, and she smiles, too. "Joseph Peterson," the announcer says. "Lea Abbey, you have been matched with Joseph Peterson."

The hostess presiding over the Banquet brings Lea a small silver box; the same thing happens to Joseph Peterson on the screen. When Lea sits down, she looks at the silver box longingly, as though she wishes she could open it right away. I don't blame her. Inside the box is a microcard with background information about her Match. We all receive them. Later, the boxes will be used to hold the rings for the Marriage Contract.

The screen flashes back to the default picture: a boy and a girl, smiling at each other, with glimmering lights and a white-coated Official in the background. Although the Society times the Matching to be as efficient as possible, there are still moments when the screen goes back to this picture, which means that we all wait while something happens somewhere else. It's so complicated—the Matching—and I am again reminded of the intricate steps of the dances they used to do long ago. This dance, however, is one that the Society alone can choreograph now.

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The picture shimmers away.

The announcer calls another name; another girl stands up.

Soon, more and more people at the Banquet have little silver boxes. Some people set them on the white tablecloths in front of them, but most hold the boxes carefully, unwilling to let their futures out of their hands so soon after receiving them.

I don't see any other girls wearing the green dress. I don't mind. I like the idea that, for one night, I don't look like everyone else.

I wait, holding my compact in one hand and my mother's hand in the other. Her palm feels sweaty. For the first time, I realize that she and my father are nervous, too.

"Cassia Maria Reyes."

It is my turn.

I stand up, letting go of my mother's hand, and turn toward the screen. I feel my heart pounding and I am tempted to twist my hands the way Lea did, but I hold perfectly still with my chin up and my eyes on the screen. I watch and wait, determined that the girl my Match will see on the screen in his City Hall somewhere out there in Society will be poised and calm and lovely, the very best image of Cassia Maria Reyes that I can present.

But nothing happens.

I stand and look at the screen, and, as the seconds go by, it is all I can do to stay still, all I can do to keep smiling.

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Whispers start around me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my mother move her hand as if to take mine again, but then she pulls it back.

A girl in a green dress stands waiting, her heart pounding.
Me.

The screen is dark, and it stays dark.

That can only mean one thing.

CHAPTER 2

The whispers rise soft around me like birds beating their wings under the dome of City Hall. “Your Match is here this evening,” the hostess says, smiling. The people around me smile as well, and their murmurs become louder. Our Society is so vast, our Cities so many, that the odds of your perfect Match being someone in your own City are minuscule. It’s been many years since such a thing happened here.

These thoughts tumble in my mind, and I close my eyes briefly as I realize what this means, not in abstract, but for me, the girl in the green dress. *I might know my Match*. He might be someone who goes to the same Second School that I do, someone I see every day, someone—

“Xander Thomas Carrow.”

At his table, Xander stands up. A sea of watching faces and white tablecloths, of glinting crystal glasses and shining silver boxes stretches between us.

I can’t believe it.

This is a dream. People turn their eyes on me and on the handsome boy in the dark suit and blue cravat. It doesn’t feel real until Xander smiles at me. I think, *I know that smile*, and suddenly I’m smiling, too, and the rush of applause and smell

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of the lilies fully convince me that this is actually happening. Dreams don't smell or sound as strong as this. I break protocol a bit to give Xander a tiny wave, and his smile widens.

The hostess says, "You may take your seats." She sounds glad that we are so happy; of course, we should be. We *are* each other's best Match, after all.

When she brings me the silver box, I hold it carefully. But I already know much of what is inside. Not only do Xander and I go to the same school, we also live on the same street; we've been best friends for as long as I can remember. I don't need the microcard to show me pictures of Xander as a child because I have plenty of them in my mind. I don't need to download a list of favorites to memorize because I already know them. Favorite color: green. Favorite leisure activity: swimming. Favorite recreation activity: games.

"*Congratulations, Cassia,*" my father whispers to me, his expression relieved. My mother says nothing, but she beams with delight and embraces me tightly. Behind her, another girl stands up, watching the screen.

The man sitting next to my father whispers, "What a piece of luck for your family. You don't have to trust her future to someone you know nothing about."

I'm surprised by the unhappy edge to his tone; the way his comment seems to be right on the verge of insubordination. His daughter, the nervous one wearing the pink dress, hears it, too; she looks uncomfortable and shifts slightly in her seat.

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I don't recognize her. She must go to one of the other Second Schools in our City.

I sneak another glance at Xander, but there are too many people in my way and I can't see him. Other girls take their turns standing up. The screen lights up for each of them. No one else has a dark screen. I am the only one.

Before we leave, the hostess of the Match Banquet asks Xander and me and our families to step aside and speak with her. "This is an unusual situation," she says, but she corrects herself immediately. "Not unusual. Excuse me. It is merely uncommon." She smiles at both of us. "Since you already know each other, things will proceed differently for you. You will know much of the initial information about each other." She gestures at our silver boxes. "There are a few new courtship guidelines included on your microcards, so you should familiarize yourselves with those when you have an opportunity."

"We'll read them tonight," Xander promises sincerely. I try to keep from rolling my eyes in amusement because he sounds exactly the way he does when a teacher gives him a learning assignment. He'll read the new guidelines and memorize them, as he read and memorized the official Matching material. And then I flush again, as a paragraph from that material flashes across my mind:

If you choose to be Matched, your Marriage Contract will take place when you are twenty-one. Studies have shown that

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the fertility of both men and women peaks at the age of twenty-four. The Matching System has been constructed to allow those who Match to have their children near this age—providing for the highest likelihood of healthy offspring.

Xander and I will share a Marriage Contract. *We will have children together.*

I don't have to spend the next few years learning everything about him because I already know him, almost as well as I know myself.

The tiny feeling of loss deep within my heart surprises me. My peers will spend the next few days swooning over pictures of their Matches, bragging about them during meal hour at school, waiting for more and more bits of information to be revealed. Anticipating their first meeting, their second meeting, and so on. That mystery does not exist for Xander and me. I won't wonder what he is like or daydream about our first meeting.

But then Xander looks at me and asks, "What are you thinking about?" and I answer, "That we are very lucky," and I mean it. There is still much to discover. Until now, I have only known Xander as a friend. Now he is my Match.

The hostess corrects me gently. "Not lucky, Cassia. There is no luck in the Society."

I nod. *Of course*. I should know better than to use such an archaic, inaccurate term. There's only probability now. How likely something is to occur, or how unlikely.

The hostess speaks again. "It has been a busy evening,

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and it's getting late. You can read the courtship guidelines later, another day. There's plenty of time."

She's right. That's what the Society has given us: time. We live longer and better than any other citizens in the history of the world. And it's thanks in large part to the Matching System, which produces physically and emotionally healthy offspring.

And I'm a part of it all.

My parents and the Carrows can't stop exclaiming over how wonderful this all is, and as we walk down the steps of City Hall together, Xander leans over and says, "You'd think they'd arranged everything themselves."

"I can't believe it," I say, and I feel opulent and a little giddy. I can't believe that this is me, wearing a beautiful green dress, holding gold in one hand and silver in the other, walking next to my best friend. My Match.

"I can," Xander says, teasing me. "In fact, I knew all along. That's why *I* wasn't nervous."

I tease him back. "I knew, too. That's why *I was*."

We're laughing so much that when the air train pulls up neither of us notice for a moment, and then there *is* a brief moment of awkwardness as Xander holds out his hand to help me climb aboard. "Here," he says, his voice serious. For a moment, I don't know what to do. There is something new in touching each other now, and my hands are full.

Then Xander wraps his hand around mine, pulling me onto the train with him.

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“Thank you,” I say as the doors close behind us.

“Any time,” he says. He does not let go of my hand; the little silver box I hold creates a barrier between us even as another one breaks. We have not held hands like this since we were children. In doing that tonight, we move across the invisible divide that separates friendship from something more. I feel a tingle along my arm; to be touched, by my Match, is a luxury that the other Matchees at Banquets tonight do not share.

The air train carries us away from the sparkling, icy-white lights of City Hall toward the softer yellow porch lights and streetlights of the Boroughs. As the streets flash past on our way home to Mapletree Borough, I glance over at Xander. The gold of the lights outside is similar to the color of his hair, and his face is handsome and confident and good. And familiar, for the most part. If you’ve always known how to look at someone, it’s strange when that directive changes. Xander has always been someone I could not have, and I have been the same for him.

Now everything is different.

My ten-year-old brother, Bram, waits for us on the front porch. When we tell him about the Banquet, he can’t believe the news. “You’re Matched with *Xander*? I already know the person you’re going to marry? That’s so strange.”

“You’re the one who’s strange.” I tease him, and he dodges me as I pretend to grab him. “Who knows. Maybe your Match lives right on this street, too. Maybe it’s—”

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Bram covers his ears. "Don't say it. Don't say it—"

"Serena," I say, and he turns away, pretending that he didn't hear me. Serena lives next door. She and Bram torment each other incessantly.

"Cassia," my mother says disapprovingly, glancing around to make sure that no one heard. We are not supposed to disparage other members of our street and our community. Mapletree Borough is known for being tight-knit and exemplary in this way. *No thanks to Bram*, I think to myself.

"I'm teasing, Mama." I know she can't stay mad at me. Not on the night of my Match Banquet, when she has been reminded of how quickly I am growing up.

"Come inside," my father says. "It's almost curfew. We can talk about everything tomorrow."

"Was there cake?" Bram asks as my father opens the door. They all look back at me, waiting.

I don't move. I don't want to go inside yet.

If I do, that means that this night is coming to an end, and I don't want that. I don't want to take off the dress and go back to my plainclothes; I don't want to return to the usual days, which are good, but nothing special like this. "I'll come in soon. Just a few minutes more."

"Don't be long," my father says gently. He doesn't want me to break curfew. It is the City's curfew, not his, and I understand.

"I won't," I promise.

I sit down on the steps of my house, careful, of course, of

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my borrowed dress. I glance down at the folds of the beautiful material. It does not belong to me, but this evening does, this time that is dark and bright and full of both the unexpected and the familiar. I look out into the new spring night and turn my face to the stars.

I don't linger outside for long because tomorrow, Saturday, is a busy day. I'll need to report to my trial work position at the sorting center early in the morning. After that I'll have my Saturday night free-rec hours, one of the few times I get to spend with my friends outside of Second School.

And Xander will be there.

Back in my bedroom, I shake the tablets out of the little hollow in the base of the compact. Then I count—one, two, three; blue, green, red—as I slide the tablets back into their usual metal cylinder.

I know what the blue and green tablets do. I don't know anyone who knows for certain what the red tablet does. There have been rumors about it for years.

I climb into bed and push away thoughts of the red tablet. For the first time in my life, I'm allowed to dream of Xander.