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Matched

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Ally Condie

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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

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

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

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.

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

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.

"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

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

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.

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.

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.