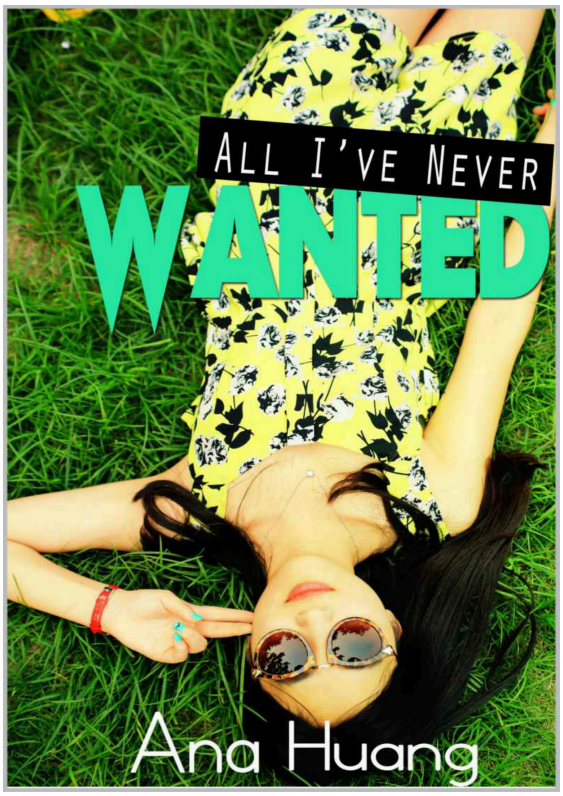


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CHAPTER 1

“Sweetie, are you feeling ok?”

I poked at the pile of scrambled eggs on my plate, wondering if I could fake being sick to delay my first day of senior year a little longer.

Maybe I could claim food poisoning from the takeout I ordered yesterday?

Nah. My mom would never buy it, and even if she did, I really didn’t want my favorite Chinese restaurant to be slapped with a lawsuit.

Hmm…what about the flu? Mono? Strep throat? Sudden amnesia? My mind raced through a million fake excuses as to why I wouldn’t be able to go to school today, but I had a sinking feeling my mom would see through all of them in a minute, and I’d just earn myself a nice grounding instead.

“…Maya? Maya!”

I jumped, my fork clattering against the plate. “What did you say?” I asked, trying to regain my bearings after being lost in my thoughts for the past ten minutes.

“Are you feeling ok?” my mom repeated. “You’ve barely touched your food.”

I looked down and realized she was right. The scrambled eggs and bacon—usually my favorite breakfast—were far from gone.

I took a deep breath, about to lie and say no, I didn’t feel ok and I’m not up for classes today, but unfortunately, my conscience kicked in at the last minute.

“I’m fine,” I said, pasting a smile on my face. “I’m just not really hungry.”

My mom arched her eyebrows and took a sip of her coffee. She’s like Lorelai from *Gilmore Girls*—a total coffee addict. She had at *least* eight cups a day, despite my insistence that so much caffeine was not good for anyone. You would think she’d know that, since she works in the health industry and all.

“Nervous?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

That’s one way to put it, although “nervous” didn’t seem like an adequate description for the Texas-sized pit of anxiety in my stomach.

“You’ll be fine, sweetie,” Mom said soothingly. “You were fine last year. Straight A’s! And you’re not even new anymore.”

That’s precisely the problem. I’m not new, which means after a year at Valesca Academy, I know how it works. Trust me, it’s not pretty. But more on that later.

“You’re right,” I agreed. I valiantly spooned some eggs into my mouth, my mom watching closely. They tasted like cardboard, which I knew was more me than her cooking. Nevertheless, I managed to eat about half before I couldn’t take it anymore.

If I had to go to school, I might as well just hurry and try to finish this day up as quickly as possible.

“Ok, I’m heading out,” I said, slinging my bag over my shoulder. “I’ll see you later.”

“Have a good day, honey. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

When I got outside, I was relieved to see that even though the sky was overcast, it wasn’t raining—yet. Hopefully the rain won’t start until I’m safe and warm inside Valesca’s walls, with safe being a relative term.

I guess now is a good time to back up and explain everything to you. My name is Maya Lindberg, and up until a year ago, I was happily living in San Francisco with my parents, doing all the things a normal teenager does and attending a normal high school that, while it had its clique problems, was paradise compared to Valesca.

Then, at the end of my sophomore year, my dad got promoted to his company's headquarters in New York. By the time we found out, it was too late for me to apply for any of the good schools in the city. Unluckily for me, his new boss knew the headmaster of Valesca Academy, located two hours from New York. He pulled some strings so I could apply for late admission, and not only was I accepted, I also received a hefty scholarship, which was how my family uprooted itself to settle into one of the richest towns in the U.S. I mean, the only school there was private and cost $100,000 a year to attend.

Objectively speaking, Valesca wasn't bad. In fact, it was considered the best school in the country, and boasted enough Nobel, Pulitzer, and Oscar-winning alumni to fill a ballroom (like the one on school grounds, which was usually used for dances).

Unfortunately, it was also filled with the snobbiest, most superficial, and most materialistic people I've ever met in my entire life. What makes it all the more worse is the way they all cower before the Scions, who are a whole other story unto themselves.

The Scions is the nickname given to the four hottest guys in school: Zack Perry, Carlo Tevasco, Parker Remington, and their leader, Roman Fiori. Their families, some of the wealthiest in the world, actually founded the town and the school, which means everyone is terrified of them. They usually keep to themselves, unless they are terrorizing some poor kid who looked at them the wrong way.

No, I'm not joking. One wrong look at any of the Scions and you might as well kiss your social, and sometimes academic, life goodbye. The abuse wrought by the rest of the students on the offender is so notoriously horrible most are forced to transfer schools.

As for me? Well, I've never had a direct run-in with the Scions. It took me all of one class period when I started here last year to realize how things worked, and I had gone out of my way to avoid them. Astonishingly, it had worked. I've never been closer than fifty feet to them, which is definitely a good thing. I mean, it might seem cowardly to some, but I know the Scions had the school faculty eating out of the palms of their hands. I didn't want to risk doing something that might provoke their wrath, or there goes my teacher's recommendations and my dream of attending Stanford goodbye.

Avoiding them was actually quite easy, considering the Scions had their own classroom, where they came and went as they pleased; their own private nook in the dining area, and a mass of students surrounding them whenever they went. It was a wonder they learned anything at school.

Then again, they probably didn't. Why would they need to, when they were already set to take over their family's empires?

I took a deep breath as Valesca's perfectly manicured campus came into view. I could do this. Just one more year, and then I would be on my way to college, where I can pretend my experience here was just been a bad dream.

I was annoyed but unsurprised to see the crowd gathered on the flight of stairs that led to the entrance. Everyone was laughing and hugging after an oh-so-taxing summer apart at their parents' villas in the south of France (note the sarcasm) but they were all casting surreptitious glances at the four empty, prime parking spots in the parking lot.

Locate directly in front of the school and slightly separated from the rest of the lot, they were reserved for the Scions. On normal days, the Scions usually carpooled two and two, but on the first day, they each liked to make a grand entrance in their own overly priced sportsmobiles. During the other school days, of course, two of those spots would remain empty, since no one would *ever* dare park in one of them.

Already in a bad mood, I elbowed my way through the crowd, ignoring my peers' curious glances. Before I could get inside, however, I heard someone scream my name.

"Maya! Mayaaaaaaa! MAYA LINDBERG!"

The last utterance was yelled directly into my ear, and I flinched a bit, waiting for the ringing in my ears to stop before I turned to face the petite, pretty redhead.

"Hi, Venice," I said with a genuine smile.

"Hiiii!" She enveloped me in a crushing hug that had me staggering back a few steps. For someone so small and thin, she sure weighed a lot. "I missed you so much!"

"I missed you too," I laughed, listening patiently as Venice rambled on about her amazing summer eco-tour of Costa Rica.

Venice France (yes, that really is her name. Her parents, apparently blessed with a sick sense of humor, also named her younger sister Kyoto and her older brother Frankfurt; understandably, he goes by Frankie) is one of the few genuinely nice, down-to-earth people in this school. In fact, she might be the only one.

We became close last year when we both had the unfortunate luck of being stuck in fifth-period AP Calculus with Mr. White, who is as albino-complexioned as his name suggests and who is way too pen-happy with his detention pad. Venice is also the only person who is privy to my seething hatred of the Scions and everything they stand for: elitism, superficiality, tyranny.

Suddenly, the entire school, it seemed, erupted into deafening cheers and hoots.

Oh *shit.*

I was about to slip inside the school when Venice grabbed my arm. "Where are you going?" she hissed.

"The bathroom," I blurted. "I really gotta go."

"No you don't. You just don't want to see *them,"* she observed shrewdly.

"Well, if you know, why'd you ask?"

"Because I'm not going to let you slink away from them anymore!"

"I don't slink away," I protested. "I strategically miss them."

She ignored me and tugged on my arm, forcing me to walk down the steps with her until we were blocked by the crush of students. "I don't care what you call it, it's not healthy."