

Chapter 1

Alex wrinkled her nose at the sharp chemical smell. “Eww!” groaned the girl next to her. Earthworms were laid out on the tables. They were almost a foot long!

“You’ll have to share,” said Ms. Brennan, the science teacher. “Everyone please pick a partner.”

Alex felt her neck begin to flush. She knew nobody would pick her.

But then the new boy, Dack, walked up to her. He was as tall as she was. “Miss Shaw?” he said with exaggerated politeness. “I’d be honored if you’d share a worm with me.”

Alex couldn’t help but smile.

The students took their places, talking loudly. Next to each worm was a small

knife. There was also a drawing of the worm's insides. It showed the body parts the students were supposed to find.

"Would you care to make the first cut, Miss Shaw?" Dack asked.

"Be my guest," said Alex.

Dack poked the knife into the worm. He began to cut. "It's slippery," he said. "Help me hold it, would you?"

She reached between his arms and grabbed each end. The worm felt like a noodle. A cold, stinky noodle.

"Nasty, huh?" said Dack. His face was close to hers. It was a nice face, with dark, shining eyes. She laughed nervously.

"I wanted to meet you," he said. "But I didn't think we would meet over worm guts. Very romantic, don't you think?"

"Very," said Alex. She wanted to say more, but her mind went blank.

He smiled and her heart flipped.

Then he spoiled everything. “Hey,” he said. “I heard that you guys have your own plane. Is it true?”

Anger bubbled up in her. “Yes! We have our own plane,” she said. “And I have five credit cards. And three tablets. And now I have something for you!”

She yanked the worm from his hands and threw it at his chest. It stuck to his T-shirt before dropping to the floor.

“Hey! What did I say?” Dack looked shocked and angry.

Alex marched from the classroom. “Alexandra!” Ms. Brennan’s voice was a warning.

“Excuse me, Ms. Brennan,” said Alex. “I’m about to throw up.”

She hid in a bathroom stall until the bell rang. Girls came and went, hurrying out the door to their next class. Alex sat. She wasn’t coming out until school was over. Of course

she'd get another pink slip. Two more and she'd be suspended. Her dad would be furious. So what? That would be great.

After the last bell, she waited. She wasn't going to let anyone see her leave.

The bathroom door swung open. She raised her feet. Quick steps came toward her.

Then she heard a voice she knew very well. "Alex, you come out of there right now," said Jerrilyn.

Alex opened the door. Jerrilyn, her bodyguard, stood with her hands on her hips. Her face was a dark thundercloud.

"You are never going to pull an idiot stunt like this again!" she said. "Is that understood, Miss Alex?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Alex.

They walked down the hallway. "When that bell rings," Jerrilyn said. "You go out in front where I can see you."

"Yes, ma'am."

A few kids turned from their lockers and stared. Alex looked down and wished the floor would swallow her up.

The black luxury sedan waited out front. Alex sank into the soft leather seat and slammed the door.

Jerrilyn turned up the air conditioner. Then she pulled smoothly away from the curb. “So tell me,” she said. “Why were you hiding in there?”

“Getting away from those stupid kids!” Alex cried. “They’re horrible—all of them! I hate this school!”

“Oh? They look all right to me,” Jerrilyn said. “What did they do that’s so horrible?”

“None of them are interested in me. They just like my money,” Alex said.

“Hmm. What it sounds like to me,” Jerrilyn said. “Is that you haven’t given those kids a chance.”

“Hey, Jerrilyn, you missed our turn,” Alex said.

“We’re stopping at Monroe,” Jerrilyn explained. “Your daddy’s giving a party tonight. He said you should buy yourself something new to wear.”

“I don’t want anything new,” Alex said. “And I’ll be late for ballet!”

“Not if you’re quick,” said Jerrilyn.

“Jerrilyn, Dad won’t even notice if I wear something old.”

“Don’t start,” Jerrilyn warned. “We’re going to Monroe. Then we’re going to ballet. That’s the plan.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alex sighed.

“Now cheer up,” said Jerrilyn. “Your daddy’s going to be home for you tonight. Hey, there’s nothing bad about that, is there?”

Alex knew her dad wouldn’t be there for her. He’d show her off in her nice new dress. He’d introduce her to strangers. Then he’d leave her alone.

The car swung onto the broad street and pulled up at Monroe. None of the shops on this street had large signs. These were some of the most expensive stores in L.A.

Jerrilyn gave the keys to the valet. As they walked inside, there was a whoosh of chilly air. Music blasted. Odd. This store's music was usually more subtle.

“Good afternoon,” said the woman who was standing just inside the door. “May I get you something to drink?”

Alex looked at the woman curiously. Usually the salespeople were very classy. This woman was nicely dressed. But something about her looked rough.

“No, thank you,” Jerrilyn said. “As a matter of fact, we're in a hurry.”

“Not a problem,” said the woman.

They were the only customers. A man stood smiling behind a black marble counter. Alex marched across the thick

carpet to a row of dresses. A bright green dress had caught her eye. The dress was a slender sheath of lime-colored silk. It would look perfect next to Jerrilyn's dark skin. The color would make Alex look sick.

"I'll take it," Alex said.

"Don't you want to try it on?" the woman asked. She glanced at Jerrilyn.

"You can't buy that without even seeing if it fits," Jerrilyn said. "Go on. You've got time. Leave your purse with me."

The woman led Alex to a row of dressing rooms. The man behind the counter was fiddling with some papers. In spite of the cool air, his face was strangely shiny with sweat.

The woman closed the dressing room curtain. Alex sat down. She started yanking off her sneakers and socks.

Then she froze. Had she heard someone cry out? The music was so loud she couldn't tell for sure.

She drew back the curtain a tiny bit. Someone was sprawled on the floor. It was Jerrilyn!

Oh no! What had just happened? Alex tried not to freak out.