

**TRISH
REEB**

DANCE OF DECEPTION

EMERGENCY EXIT
LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL



AN ALEX T & CO. MYSTERY

DANCE OF DECEPTION

Sample

Alex wrapped her coat tighter around her body. She wanted nothing more than to hibernate in its silk lining and forget that her best friend... *Taryn, who did this to you?*

Alex, manage your emotions, her mother's voice echoed in her head.

Mentally, she shoved her emotions into a drawer—the place she stowed stuff she didn't want to deal with. She focused on her surroundings. With no windows to distinguish night from day, rain or shine, the office had all the ambiance of a cellar.

She'd only been inside it a handful of times in the ten years she worked at Lincoln High—always as an authority figure with the best interest of her students at heart. Now, she sat on the wrong side of the legal system. To wait for the verdict.

Alex cracked a knuckle. Another and another. The sound sliced through the silence in the room. Yet, the ritual soothed her like a meditation.

"Excuse me. Is that necessary?"

Alex jumped. She'd forgotten the woman cop. The molded plastic chair creaked as she shifted to look at her jailer.

The officer sat behind a beat up desk the size of a semi. It almost, but not quite, disguised her queen size girth.

"Sorry." Not really. Alex couldn't leave the task undone. She kept her eye on the cop as she cracked the knuckles on her other hand in rapid succession. Pop...crack...crunch....

Queenie cleared her throat.

Alex attempted a sheepish smile. She'd kicked the habit two decades ago. Today it returned with a vengeance. Would the relapse set the addiction back twenty years, like a recovering alcoholic who took that first drink? At least her mom wouldn't have to witness her fall from grace.

Taryn teathed her fingernails, but never enough to damage her meticulous manicure. *Why, Taryn? Why would anyone want to...?*

Alex stood and paced. She hugged her coat close to stop the shivers. In addition to her feet, her nose and butt felt like blocks of ice. They always absorbed the cold first.

Queenie pushed back the chair, swaggered across the room. She towered over Alex and rested one hand on the cuffs that dangled from a wide leather belt. "Sit down."

Alex needed to work off some of the tension as well as get her circulation moving. "You gonna cuff me?"

The cop smiled.

Accustomed to hanging around older, larger playmates as a child and now dealing with teenagers who stood two stories taller than her five foot two inches, Alex did not intimidate easily. She glanced at the handcuffs before looking at Queenie. "I need to stretch my legs."

"I don't think so. Lucky you're not in leg irons."

"You're joking."

Queenie glared. "It's my watch, and I want you seated." She waited until her charge sat before retreating.

Alex threw a scowl at her back.

The radiator began to clank, a sign the heat had kicked on. Desperate to latch onto something normal in a world gone awry, she welcomed the noise. More for the familiar, than the warmth. Her body might thaw, but the boost in temperature could not melt the coldness she felt to her core.

Alex brushed the dirt from the front of her coat. She opened it. The black shark on the light blue Lincoln High sweatshirt wore floor dust as did her black jeans. On Fridays, the designated day to show school spirit, she dressed casual. Thank goodness. Otherwise, she'd have worn dry clean only *Prada* or *Armani*.

Less than a quarter of the staff bothered to wear the blue and black school colors or insignia clothing to show their support. Even she, Lincoln High's unofficial cheer leader, doubted its capacity to keep the staff morale afloat. Or rescue the sinking school spirit.

After today what would it take to salvage the ship more and more staff members jumped every year?

A minute later, Alex asked Queenie, "What's he like?"

"Who?"

"The detective who'll be questioning me."

The policewoman shrugged. "Don't know. Never sat where you are."

"Thanks," she mumbled under her breath, "for your help." A little louder, "What's his name?"

"Detective Grant." Queenie resumed her reading.

If arrested, Alex would have to contact an attorney. And the only criminal lawyer she knew happened to be Jordan Whitfield, Taryn's squeeze. Though not too keen on that idea, she couldn't help wondering if he'd heard what had

happened to their girl. Was he, like her, having difficulty believing it? A thought reeled her insides. What if he'd played a part in this? She shook her head. Not possible. But who else could have, or would have, killed her?

She rifled through her purse for the phone and came up empty. Damn. Refrigerator confiscated it.

A knock sounded on the door. The chair scraped the floor as Queenie rose to answer it. Instead of the expected detective, a familiar voice asked for Alex.

"Can't see her now."

Alex sprang out of her chair and dashed to the door. "Ellery!"

Ellery Humbarger, her Rock of Gibraltar, had rushed to her side again. Today she needed his support more than ever before. Except for ten years ago in another lifetime.

"Honey, I'm here. I'll be in my—" The door slammed shut.

Alex yearned to lay her head on his burly chest, feel the softness of his sweater on her cheek, inhale the fresh musk of his soap. Closing her eyes, she tried to capture it. After several seconds, she gave up. She had an exceptional imagination, but it failed now as if she tried to write inside her head with a broken pencil lead.

"Back to your seat, or I'll have to cuff you."

Jolted away from her thoughts, Alex raised her arms. "Look, I forgot." She shoved her too accessible hands into coat pockets. "I won't be a bother."

"Honey, you already there."

Alex backpedaled to her chair. *No question, I'm in a shitload of trouble.* She couldn't think of one incident that paralleled her current predicament. But if pressed for the truth, she'd have to admit she'd do it all over again.

The bell sounded, announcing the start of Lincoln High's first hour. Eight o'clock. Ninety minutes had passed since her life took a u-turn.