

TIMELESS DECEPTION

by Susanne Marie Knight

CHAPTER ONE

Oh, no. It can't be happening! Not again.

Sitting at one of the long wooden tables in the New York Public Library, Alaina Sawyer felt her stomach drop. Her view of the stacks of books resting solidly by her elbow misted over, to be replaced by...the unknown.

Good Lord, it *was* happening again. The nightmare visions were returning with a vengeance. She slammed her eyes shut and gripped the table's smooth edge in a last-ditch effort not to be dragged away. It wouldn't work, though; she'd had three other visions so she knew it wouldn't work. Being contrary or optimistic, she held on anyway. Maybe this once she wouldn't be hauled off someplace beyond space and time. Usually not one to beg, she'd beg now. Please? Pretty please?

Cooler air goosebumped Alaina's skin. A chilly breeze of fragrant flowers assaulted her nose—scents not normally associated with a library.

Drat! Obviously begging hadn't done one iota of good.

Inhaling, she bowed to the inevitable and took a peep at whatever was out there.

Oh, heavens, this time it was worse. A thousand times worse. She'd landed smack in the middle of...someplace else. A museum or a castle—someplace as far as she could get from a staid, public library. A fabulous ballroom, right out of the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," seared her eyesight. Expensive paintings lined the walls. Heavy draperies reached from high ceilings to polished parquet floors. If her very life depended on it, she couldn't move a muscle.

She gulped down hard. Wide-eyed, she stared at the other occupants of the room. A man and a woman, dressed to the hilt, waltzed past, oblivious to anything but themselves. As they swept by, the woman whispered to the man, "Soon, my darling."

Soon what? Before Alaina had a chance to give voice to her question, the scene before her faded. She was back in the library, at the table, as if she'd never left! Blinking, she patted at her heart, now beating to a frightening crescendo. What, in God's name, was going on?

"Alaina, are you all right? Jeez it, girl, you're the color of moldy bread!" Jack Morrison, a fellow doctoral student, slid down next to her and gently pulled one of her still-clenched hands into his.

Relaxing her grip, she took several steadying breaths. No need to be afraid now. She was back *here*, where she belonged. But where she had been for those few seconds was anybody's guess.

It all seemed so real. And although she hadn't seen the woman's face, she recognized her from the previous visions.

Alaina's mouth went dry. This...business was getting downright scary.

Jack still waited for her answer. Giving herself a minute to gather her wits, she shook her hair back from her face. *Remember, be cool, calm, and collected.* She had to pretend everything was fine. She had to get her emotions under control.

"I'm okay, Jack. Really."

As carefully as she could, she extracted her hand from his. Jack had a crush on her, although he'd bristle if he heard that term. Twenty-eight year old men don't have crushes, he'd insist. Maybe, but since she had a three year edge on him, sometimes his moonstruck behavior did seem childish.

Accepting her withdrawal, he sighed. "So what happened? You looked as though you'd seen a ghost."

Close. Two ghosts. How could she explain what happened when she didn't understand it herself? Obviously she hadn't left her chair. At least not physically. But she *had* traveled someplace, someplace very different from this low-key reading room. Over the last four days, she'd experienced three other visions. But this one was stronger, more real, more intense. She still hadn't seen the woman's face, but this time she'd heard her speak: *Soon, my darling.* Something was going to happen soon.

Alaina twirled a long lock of hair around her finger. She didn't like the sound of those words. Especially if "soon" had something to do with her.

Jack tapped on her shoulder. With an ego as healthy as his, he wouldn't believe that she'd forgotten all about him. "Well?"

Stuffing research papers back into her briefcase, she shrugged. "It's nothing, honest. I've just been working too hard. Y'know, studying for my doctorate is a drain, plus teaching full-time. Plus the volunteer work. Everything's taking a toll. I probably need a vacation."

Leaning closer, he smiled a slow sizzling smile. "Christmas recess is coming up. We could go someplace together."

She smiled back. Redheads could be devilishly attractive. "Right. I wonder what your latest girlfriend would say to that?"

Alaina stood, which threw him off balance. Why did men feel they had to put the make on women? Even Roger Farnsley, her next door neighbor, had started to look at her with a proprietary gleam in his eye.

That she always declined Roger and Jack's advances seemed to fan the flames of love—or lust. Whatever. She had no time for phony sentiments; she liked her life just the way it was.

Minus these annoying visions, of course.

Pulling on her heavy overcoat, she grabbed her briefcase. "I'm calling it a night, Jack. Too much Sophocles versus Euripides for a Friday night."

Never in a million years would she have foreseen she'd had enough of her chosen field—Greek and Roman literature. "See you in class on Monday." Thank heavens she could sleep in tomorrow.

As she walked through the library's doors into the frigid December weather, she buttoned her coat. Maybe a vacation was a good idea. Someplace free from stress, if there was such a place.

A chilling wind flipped back her hair, bringing an all-too-familiar fear. Her sixth sense screamed in warning: *Brace yourself. It's happening again.* In a split second, Alaina's safe, predictable world would vanish, and, drat everything in heaven and on earth, there was nothing she could do but go along for the ride.

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An eyeblink...or an eternity later, she found herself in a bedroom. An elaborate bedroom, with a ceiling about twenty feet high. A ball-and-prism chandelier hung down from the center, blazing brightly from countless candles. Real wax candles. Beautiful, but impractical. Imagine cleaning the wax drippings.

Moving over to a gaudy, brass mirror, she received a second shock. Good heavens, she was invisible! She glanced down at herself and spotted the black wool coat and her gloved hands; everything was in place just as she expected. But the mirror reflected nothing back. Was this an out of body experience? What did it all mean?

Huge cherry-pink tapestries set in gilded frames caught her eye. Ornate figures of nymphs and cupids cavorted everywhere: on the rugs, on the chairs' pink cushions, and over the alabaster fireplace. No doubt about it, the room belonged to a sensualist—a woman enamored with the French Rococo style of art.

Alaina shrugged. Not that there was anything wrong with Rococo. It was just too elaborate, too lush for her tastes, especially for a bedroom.

Voices drifted in through the paneled, double doors. Banishing her first thought—to hide, after all, she was invisible, wasn't she?—she watched two people enter. They were the same two from the last vision. The man ranged above average in height with a gangly type of build. He wore skin-tight, glaringly yellow trousers; a purple suit jacket, and a pointy shirt collar that reached up to his ears. The collar, or cravat as was its proper name, was clearly not designed to promote range of motion for the neck.

Alaina cataloged his attire as late eighteenth century/ early nineteenth century. And if she remembered her costume history, his apparel identified him as a dandy.

Hmm, this ought to be interesting. She sat down, unseen, on one of the pink chairs to watch the drama unfold.

The man paced in front of the fireplace and ran his fingers through his carefully styled dusky curls. "A—Are you certain you want to go ahead with this pl—plan, my dear? Dash it, it all sounds preposterous to me!" He stopped to look in the mirror and fixed a renegade curl. "Damme, there *must* be another way!"

A British accent. Nervous, too. Alaina turned her attention to the man's companion. The woman's back was directly in front of her, and although Alaina tried to maneuver around, she couldn't get a clear view of the woman's face. How odd.

Wearing a slinky peignoir trimmed with real fox fur, the woman lovingly fingered a cupid guarding the fireplace. She must've been the Rococo fanatic.

"There is no other way, Derek. Not if we want to be together. You know Saybrooke—he has spies constantly observing me. Surrounding me. I never have a moment to myself. We must be thankful we have this time today."

Her voice vibrated low and seductive, then a slight shudder traveled through the woman's slender frame. "If he ever found out..."

The man, Derek, pulled her to him. "I cannot bear one second away from you. My love! My life!"

As he noisily kissed the woman, Alaina rolled her eyes. Cripes! What kind of British soap opera had she fallen into? Obviously Saybrooke, poor man, was this deceitful woman's husband. Infidelity was, at best, a sordid affair. Mrs. Saybrooke had some sort of plot up her diaphanous sleeve, that much was certain. But what was it and how did it affect Alaina?

The lovers separated and the woman slashed her hand through the air. "Enough of this! I must tell you what I have found out. Madame Reena was difficult to convince, but she has finally agreed to help us—for a price. Indeed, her services run very high. But money is no object!"

Derek made a strangling sound. "No, it is not, my precious. However, what she proposes—"

"Madame Reena is already working on our problem. She says she has found a perfect substitute for me. We shall exchange places and no one will be the wiser."

The man fiddled with his high-necked collar but remained silent. There could be no doubt that Mrs. Saybrooke ran the show. He was just part of the chorus.

She weaved her arm through his. "Think of it, Derek. We will be able to take up our new life in society, unhampered by Saybrooke, that brat, and the disapproving dowager!"

Pausing, she then struck the palm of her hand with her other fist. "I will never forgive Saybrooke for subjecting me to that ordeal. I had no idea child-bearing was so painful, so...deforming." Her voice shook from the remembrance.

Here was another area where Alaina wasn't in sympathy with the woman. Children were life's true miracles. Her own biological clock ticking, Alaina wasn't certain the select club of motherhood would ever open its door to her. And that was a lack she keenly felt.

Derek went to soothe Mrs. Saybrooke but she avoided him. In a whinny tone, he protested, "But this, what does Reena call it—an enchanted sleep? This is madness! Let us run away together. We can travel. See the world. My friends in Rome say it is lovely this time of year."

Reaching out to take her hand, he kissed it reverently. "You can be mine then. Saybrooke will have to give you a divorce."

The woman pulled away. As she restlessly walked up and down the room's vast length, her face still remained out of Alaina's view.

Derek dropped his hands to his sides as if his courage failed him. "What Reena proposes is much too risky, even if it works. How can we trust her? She is only a peasant—she cannot be reliable."

"Madame Reena has the gift!" Mrs. Saybrooke placed her hands on his shoulders, perhaps to smooth away his fears. She purred, "Reena can do this—she can give us a new life together. Perhaps not in London, but here in England."

After soundly kissing him, the woman said matter-of-factly, "As for running away, leaving our homeland, we have discussed that before. We could never return, the censure of polite society would be too great. I would never be able to hold my head up proudly again. And to live the rest of my life in a foreign land..."

She shook her head. "That would be barbaric. I will never do it!"

The man remained mute.

"Is that how it is to be, then, Derek? So, I shall undergo this exchange by myself. It is the perfect escape for me. You need not accompany me, but I *must* leave. I cannot bear another day being the wife of that heartless beast!"

Mrs. Saybrooke threw herself down on a crimson divan and proceeded to sob her eyes out.

Good actress, Alaina thought. Good melodrama. Now comes the part in the script when the man kneels by her side and begs forgiveness.

As if on cue, Derek went to the woman's side, albeit clumsily, and offered reassurances of his love. "Never fear, my angel. I will journey with you to whatever demmed place the mystic Reena sends you. And gladly! You will be mine forever!"

Mrs. Saybrooke lifted her bowed head, propped herself up on her elbow and gave him a wavering smile.

Alaina gasped. She finally saw the woman's face. The tear-stained countenance of the woman now hugging the hapless Derek was the very same as her own! Mrs. Saybrooke and Alaina Sawyer could have been twins!

Without warning, inky darkness descended.

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A small group of strangers crowded around Alaina, now propped up against one of the library's marble lions on guard duty. Murmurs of concern hung in the air, contradicting the belief that New Yorkers were an unfriendly bunch.

Smiling weakly at the good Samaritans, she managed to utter, "Thank you, thanks for the help. I'm all right now."

She lied, of course. After this most recent vision, she didn't think she'd ever be all right again.

"Give her room to breathe." Jack broke through the throng and leaned over her. His broad and open face reflected his worry. "Alaina, you should go to the hospital. This is nothing to fool around with. Fainting is serious business."

Removing her woolen gloves, she rubbed her forehead. Fainting. If only that were all that bothered her. No, fainting couldn't explain how she'd stared point-blank at her own face, looking into the same identical dark chestnut eyes ringed with black.

She shuddered. If that didn't frighten a person, she didn't know what would.

Just she and Jack now remained hunkered down on the outside steps. She deeply exhaled, and her frosty breath disappeared into the night. "I appreciate your concern, Jack, but really, I'll be fine. Maybe I need that vacation a little sooner than winter break."

He dug his fingers into his red hair. Her stubbornness must have troubled him. "I dunno, Alaina. Are you sure you don't want to see a doctor?"

"No, a good relaxing bath and a glass of wine should cure what ails me."

An urgent desire to forget about the troublesome twosome, Derek and Mrs. Saybrooke, swept over Alaina. Maybe Monday she'd set up an appointment with a counselor or a psychiatrist. She needed help, no denying that. But not tonight. Tonight she'd pretend none of this happened.

Jack took her arm, and led her down the stairs onto the busy street. Although rush hour traffic had already passed, in addition to holiday lights, Fifth Avenue was still illuminated with wall-to-wall car headlights. Frenzied shoppers and excited sightseers bustled about to view elaborate stores displays and the nearby Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

Alaina was interested in none of those things. Her apartment and her bed called out to her like a sea siren to a lost sailor. Home. Thank heavens she could sleep late tomorrow.

"Maybe I should see you to your place? Make sure you get in okay?" Jack wasn't flirting; he was genuinely anxious.

Why oh why couldn't she think of him as boyfriend material? "That's sweet, but it's not necessary. How 'bout if you walk me to the subway?"

Growling, he obviously didn't think much of her peace offering. But he gamely maneuvered a path toward 42nd Street, through the horde of holiday revelers and up toward the subway station.

At the entrance, he bent down to place a soft kiss on her cheek. "Give me a call tomorrow, so I'll know you're okay."

After agreeing, she walked down the stairs. Jack really was very nice. Why *couldn't* she fall in love with him? Why couldn't she allow herself to have a relationship with him or with Roger Farnsley? Or with any man? Why did she always back away?

She slipped her subway token into the turnstile and headed down the ramp. Her head began to ache. Why worry about men and relationships when her very sanity was in doubt? People always complained about the holiday blues, but this was ridiculous.

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Nearly falling asleep in the white, frothy bath, Alaina blew some fragrant bubbles off her chest and reluctantly stood. She couldn't stay in the tub forever. And she also couldn't banish the unholy trio from her thoughts: the drippy Derek, the unfaithful wife, and the mystic Reena.

Towel-dry, Alaina slipped into her floor-length, silky robe and zipped it up, taking care to avoid snagging her dangling gold leaf earrings. For no reason at all, a heavy feeling of dread...alarm...*something* settled over her.

"Get a grip, kiddo. What are you worried about? It's party time. Christmas is almost here, Dad's flying up for a few days, and Vicki and the boys are coming to visit. Everything's fine. *Fine.*"

Her pep talk didn't work. "Darn, I need a drink."

Alaina poured a glass of peach wine and took a sip. The pinkish liquid filled her with a warm glow. Ahh! Feeling better, she swallowed more. Now fortified, she plopped down on her sectional couch and propped her feet up on the coffee table.

"I do need a short vacation. Where should I go?"

Without looking, she groped under the cushions, then pulled out some travel brochures she'd stashed away. "Let's see. Bermuda? Puerto Rico? Nassau?" Strangely enough, these exotic locales sounded insipid.

She poured more wine. An image of big, brown eyes bored into her mind. Her eyes...and yet not hers.

Flinging the pamphlets aside, Alaina stood. "What's wrong with me? Why am I having these visions? What do they mean?"

She downed the remaining liquid but the alcohol did little to solve her problem. Her hands to her temples, she tried to drive away the haunting images. They refused to be dismissed. Even her own bare feet proved ornery; her toes tripped over the fibers of the carpet, making her fall.

"I'm a mess." She sprawled out on the floor with her rose-colored robe bunched up at her knees. "How could I be drunk? I'm never drunk."

After refilling her glass, more wine burned her throat. "I'm never drunk and I never drink alone."

A voice of fast-vanishing reason broke through. *Kiddo, you're tipsier than a vibrating top and more alone than in solitary confinement. Face it. You're as drunk as a skunk.*

She giggled. "All right, so I am." She could drink if she wanted to. And she wanted to. Nothing wrong about that. Way past the legal age and everything. But, oddly enough, she felt compelled to overindulge. A steady drumming in her veins urged her into intoxication.

Well, why not? No one could've had a weirder day than she had. Tottering over to the coffee table, she jumped when the telephone rang.

"Drat!" Ignoring the phone just set her teeth on edge so she answered it. Less than cordial she snarled, "Who's this?"

A slightly wheezy voice answered her. "Evening, Alaina."

Good grief, it was Roger Farnsley—her amorous neighbor. Not in the mood for his shenanigans, she contorted her lips. But that was mean of her. So she'd had a bad day—to put it lightly. Why take it out on everyone else?

"Oh, hello, Roger. What's up?" And make it fast, she silently added. Her wine glass was almost empty.

"Alaina, Mother gave me two tickets to the opera for tomorrow and I—"

"Cripes!" Shaking hands caused pinkish liquid to seep through her robe, darken the material, and wet her thigh. "Sorry, Roger. I just spilled some wine." The thought of Mother Farnsley would make anyone's hand shake.

"Well, we haven't seen each other all week, Alaina, and Mother said—"

Alaina could imagine what Mother said. "No, thanks, Roger, I'll pass. I plan to stay in tomorrow and get some rest." Right now she'd *kill* to get some rest.

"I could come over. I could come over now."

She rolled her eyes. "That's not a good idea. I had a rough day. I..." Picking up the wine bottle, she made a face. "Drat, the bottle's empty." She licked its rim to catch the last drops.

"I'm coming over, Alaina. You don't sound like yourself."

She withheld an hysterical laugh. Of course she didn't sound like herself. She didn't look like herself, either. She looked like Derek's paramour!

Dropping the phone from her ear, she tapped her foot. After a minute, she resumed conversation. "I appreciate the thought, Roger, but I'm fine. I don't need you to come over."

"But—"

"Tell you what. Come tomorrow instead, okay? Around one o'clock." Anything to get rid of him.

"How about earlier? Say eleven?"

He always had to push. No wonder she shied away from relationships. "No! Not before one." Why did her nerves feel stretched to the limit? Why was she acting this way?

She welcomed the pause on the line. Maybe he'd get the hint and hang up.

"You know, Alaina, if you moved in with me, we could be together all the time. Mother says—"

She had to suppress a primal scream. Something was making her blood pressure skyrocket. The man drove her crazy. She didn't need this. Not from Roger—not from anybody. "I can't say it any plainer. I don't want to move in with you. Don't be ridiculous. We hardly know each other." Why couldn't he leave her alone?

His next statement caused her heart to go into arrhythmia.

"Alaina, let's get married."

Married—to Roger! God forbid. Steel bands slowly tightened around her chest. Trapped—she'd be trapped.

That thought also sobered her up. "No way. I'll get married when—"

A vision interrupted her. Her casual, well worn living room dissolved into a chaotic jumble, like television static. Then the scene coalesced. Seated at an immense desk was a dark, handsome man with hair of midnight black.

Wow. Alaina blinked, then blinked again. This man radiated pure, unadulterated sex appeal—from the heavy lock of hair hanging over his high forehead; below to his blazing blue eyes; over to his slightly flared nostrils; across his firm, sensual lips; and down to the tip of his angular, strong jaw. Even his corded neck was a symbol of male virility. He would've made any woman drool.

Dressed similarly to Derek in style but not in garish color, the man's generous mouth twisted in a scowl. He held a letter in his large hand, and didn't seem pleased with its contents, to put it mildly. A savage pulse beat at his temple. He crumpled the paper, then threw it into a fireplace.

Alaina shivered. She sure wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that man's anger.

Before she had a chance to feast upon his magnificent face again, the scene faded. Back in her own living room, she stood shell-shocked, and closed her gaping mouth.

"Alaina? Alaina?"

She stared at the telephone in her hand. At Roger's prompting, she finished her sentence. "I'll get married when...when I feel like it."

She'd never feel like it, but curiously enough, remembering that dark-headed man made her insides tingle. Who was he and what part did he play in this bizarre drama her mind created for her?

Throbbing pain blinded her sight. Time to call it a day. "Listen, Roger, I've got to go. See you tomorrow."

Tomorrow she'd put an end to his late-night phone calls. He was being too possessive and if there was one thing she was certain of, she never wanted to belong to anyone. Besides, Roger was just her neighbor—nothing more.

That mouth-watering, dark-haired man intruded on her thoughts again. Sweet, like forbidden candy.

She smiled. Well, maybe she'd make an exception about belonging to someone, but of course that man, whomever he was, was only in her visions. He wasn't real. Being with him was impossible.

Reaching for another bottle of wine, she suddenly changed her mind about drinking more and headed for the bedroom. Every nerve and every cell in her body demanded that she lie down. Sensations of sleep washed over her. Why was it hard to remain standing? She didn't have a choice about not staying awake. It was as if she wasn't in control of her actions anymore; someone else was in the driver's seat. Her bed beckoned and there was no way she could resist.

Each step she took had a surreal quality to it. Drifting into the bedroom, she lowered herself on top of the covers, unable to even draw them aside. As she dropped onto the fluffy pillow, her head seemed to spin. With all the alcohol she consumed, that wasn't too unusual. At first the revolutions were slow, then they increased to a breakneck speed. An eerie voice intruded. The low drone grew louder to become a horrendous chant.

The last thing Alaina remembered before blacking out were the words, "T'will happen soon...soon. *Tonight!*"