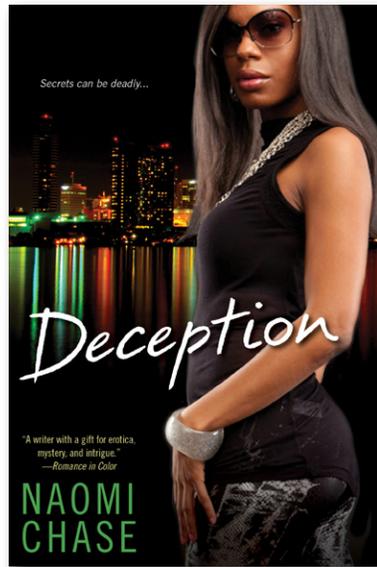


## An excerpt from **DECEPTION**

by Naomi Chase

Coming March 2012



### Chapter 1

*Houston, Texas  
November 4, 2011*

Tamia Luke's heart pounded violently as she watched the twelve jurors file into the jury box and reclaim their seats. She was so nervous she wanted to throw up. These men and women held her fate in their hands. Their verdict would determine whether she spent the rest of her life in prison, or walked out of this courtroom a free woman.

She searched their faces, hoping for something—*anything*—that would give her insight into the decision they had reached. But their expressions were unreadable, and none of them would make eye contact with her. Not even Juror Number Eight, an attractive, middle-aged black man who'd hardly been able to keep his eyes off her throughout the trial.

But today he seemed to go out of his way not to look at her.

Like the other jurors.

With mounting anxiety, Tamia leaned over and whispered to her attorney, "They won't look at me. Why won't they look at me?"

"Relax," Brandon murmured soothingly. "It doesn't mean anything."

Tamia hoped to God he was right. She'd spent the past five months behind bars, serving time for a crime she hadn't committed. She didn't know *what* she would do if the jury found her guilty of Isabel Archer's murder. It was unthinkable.

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When the judge emerged from his chambers, Tamia and Brandon rose from the defense table. Her insides were shivering, and her legs were so wobbly she thought she'd collapse to the floor. Without thinking she grabbed Brandon's hand and held tight, comforted when he squeezed her back.

As the judge silently read the folded note that contained the jury's verdict, an expectant hush swept over the packed courtroom. You could literally hear a pin drop.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," said the judge, "have you reached a verdict?"

The jury forewoman stood. "We have, Your Honor."

"What is your verdict?"

Tamia closed her eyes, her heart slamming against her ribcage as she braced herself for the woman's next words.

"We, the jury, find the defendant—"

Tamia held her breath.

"—not guilty."

Pandemonium erupted in the courtroom, loud cheers from Tamia's supporters dueling with shouts of protest from Isabel Archer's outraged relatives. The judge banged his gavel, calling for order. But it was the sight of Brandon's beaming face that gave Tamia permission to believe the verdict she'd just heard.

"WE WON!" she screamed, throwing her arms around Brandon's neck as he laughingly lifted her off the floor. As he spun her around, she caught a glimpse of Dominic Archer, seated behind the plaintiff's table across the aisle. He looked so stunned that Tamia might have felt sorry for him—if she didn't despise his conniving ass.

"Thank you, Brandon," she said earnestly as he set her back down on her feet. "Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for saving my life!"

"You're welcome," he told her. "I never doubted your innocence."

"I know. And that meant *everything* to me."

His expression softened. "You know I—"

"Congratulations," a new voice interrupted.

Tamia and Brandon turned to encounter a pretty, brown-skinned woman dressed in a navy Dolce & Gabbana skirt suit that hugged her slender figure. Her

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dark, lustrous hair seemed longer, flowing past her shoulders in a way that made Tamia more desperate than ever to get into her stylist's chair. Sporting months of nappy new growth and wearing a pantsuit that did nothing for her shape, she felt raggedy next to Cynthia Yarbrough—the scheming hussy who'd stolen Brandon from her.

She forced a smile. “Hey, Cynthia. You're looking well.”

“Thank you, Tamia.” Cynthia didn't insult her intelligence by returning the compliment. “Congratulations on your acquittal.”

“Thanks.” Tamia smiled gratefully at Brandon. “I couldn't have done it without this man's amazing legal prowess. I don't know if I can ever repay him, but I'm determined to try.”

Brandon chuckled. “You might feel differently after you receive my final bill.”

Tamia laughed, then leaned up and kissed his smooth, clean-shaven cheek. She didn't miss the way Cynthia's eyes narrowed with displeasure.

*Don't get it twisted, heffa, Tamia mused. He was my man first!*