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Opening Extract from...

Deadly Deceit

Written by Jean Harrod

Published by York Authors Coffee Shop

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Maps

Turks & Caico Islands & The Bahamas Political Map

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ISBN 978-0-9929971-4-4 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-0-9929971-5-1 (epub)

ISBN 978-0-9929971-6-8 (mobi)

Book layout and design by Clare Brayshaw

Prepared and printed by:

York Publishing Services Ltd

64 Hallfield Road

Layorthorpe

York YO31 7ZQ

Tel: 01904 431213

Website: www.yps-publishing.co.uk

DEADLY DECEIT

Written by Jean Harrod

(Extract, first two chapters)

Chapter 1

Bay of Cap-Haitien
North Coast of Haiti, Caribbean

The sloop slipped out of the bay on a strong swell in the dead of night. The sea was already rough. Too rough.

Nobody spoke, but in the dark, she could feel their fear. Soft crying and moaning echoed all around. And retching. Bile rose in her own throat as the smell of vomit filled her nostrils, making her want to heave.

A soft whimper made her gaze down at her baby, squirming in her arms. She pulled the shawl around her little one, and started softly singing...

Dodo titit
Si ou pa dodo
Krab la va manje ou . . .

She could feel pins and needles creeping into her toes. Uncrossing her legs, she stamped her feet. She wanted to stand up and move about, but she couldn't. They were squashed together in the bowels of the small boat. Eighty women and children. Maybe more.

She took deep breaths of the fresh air squeezing through the cracks of the hatchway, while the wind rattled around the edges of its ill-fitting wooden cover. At least she was sitting right under it. She'd watched the men in the village building the sloop by hand from old planks, while the women stitched together bits of fabric and nylon to make the sails. It was a rough vessel. Just like the one her papa used to fish from, until the sea had taken him, and brought her family nothing but grief.

She closed her eyes, and pictured him: big, round face, with smooth skin made even darker by working in the sun, curly black hair, and dark eyes that lit up whenever he saw her. He'd tell her stories of the sea whenever he came home. She'd loved that. Loved him.

She flinched as the sloop shuddered. It was travelling upwind into the waves, so she expected a rough crossing. She respected the sea, knew its ways. Even here, below deck, she could feel the swell getting higher. We should go back, and wait for better weather. But she knew they couldn't. The police might catch them, and scupper the boat. Then they would lose all their money. It had taken Pierre years of hard work to save up for their passage. He'd gone first. Now he'd sent for her, and the child he'd never seen.

They had to go on.

Everything will be all right when we reach Pierre, she told herself over and over. She pulled an envelope out of her pocket, drew out his photo and kissed it in the dark.

The baby moaned again. Was it hungry or sick? Or perhaps just sensing the fear all around? She offered her breast but the baby refused to latch on. "You're going to meet your Papa papa soon, child. Very soon." She finished the lullaby...

*Sleep little one
If you don't sleep
The crab will eat you . . .*

When the baby was asleep, she pulled the shawl tighter around her, and tied the ends in a knot around her waist to bind them even closer together. Never to be parted. Singing the lullaby again, more to comfort herself than the child, her mind returned to happier times, to her mother and father, and to her wedding to Pierre. She lost herself in those happy memories.

Later, tipping over sideways into the lap of the woman next to her, she sat up straight wondering where she was. She'd dozed off. Her stomach turned as she felt the sloop rolling up and down, side to side, on the rising waves.

She could hear men on deck shouting to each other. The wind still howled through the sails and rigging. The rickety vessel's wooden frame creaked and moaned, as if protesting about being out on the ocean on such a stormy night. Was it light yet? They seemed to have been travelling for hours.

When you see light in the sky, you'll be here, with me. That's what Pierre had written. Here, below deck, it was still pitch black. She wriggled her toes and rubbed her feet again.

The shouting became louder, more urgent. Her heart started pounding. She could hear many footsteps running around above her. She listened intently.

Land! That's what they're shouting. *Land!*

She felt a surge of happiness.

Suddenly, she was jolted and catapulted forward as the old vessel smashed into something. It stood still for a moment as if dazed by the blow.

"The reef!" Voices were screaming.

She heard a loud crack, and felt the vessel roll and tip over to one side. Piercing cries rang out above as men were plunged into the sea. All around her, women and children started screaming as they tumbled on top of each other. Suddenly, a wall of water rushed through the cracked hull, sweeping her and the baby up through the hatch, and out into the sea.

The cold. The shock... .

Water rushed into her mouth and lungs. Spluttering, she felt herself being dragged under by the weight of her long skirt. With one arm in a vice-like grip around the baby, she scrabbled with the other through the water, kicking furiously, not knowing whether she was swimming to the top, or the bottom, of the ocean.

A moment later she surfaced, gasping for air, and sobbing with terror. *My baby!* She turned onto her back to get the child out clear of the water.

Light in the sky! She could see light breaking in the sky, as Pierre had promised.

Voices all around her shouted for help, then she heard: *"Requins!"*

Sharks? Hysterical, she screamed as something brushed past her. But it was just a piece of wood floating by. Grabbing it, she pulled her baby out of the shawl and lay it on the plank.

A man swam past, heading for shore.

"Help," she cried. *"Please, my baby!"*

He didn't even look her way.

Holding the baby in front of her, she kicked and pushed her way towards lights in the distance. It had to be shore. It looked so far away, yet the waves seemed calmer now. She must be inside the reef, and that gave her hope. She kept steady, pushing and kicking. Pushing and kicking. She could hardly breathe with the exhaustion, but she kept going. Pushing and kicking.

"Nearly there, child," she kept saying, to urge herself on. The baby didn't move or cry, as if sensing their fight for life.

Her toes brushed something. She froze, but it wasn't a shark.

The soft seabed! She put one foot down cautiously, then the other. Now, she was standing on wobbly legs, shoulder high in water. Sobbing with relief, she picked her baby up from the plank and waded towards the beach.

Scrambling out of the waves, she flopped onto soft sand, and rolled onto her back. Dizzy with exertion and shock, her heart was pumping so hard, she thought it would burst.

Someone was beside her now. Hands were pulling at her. Her baby started crying. She clutched it tight. But the hands wouldn't let go.

"No!" She struggled to sit up. A strong blow to the back of her head sent pain searing through her body. Her head spun. Another blow. Then another.

As she slipped into darkness, she heard her baby screaming as it was wrenched from her arms.

Chapter 2

Grand Turk

Turks and Caicos Islands

Caribbean

Michael Grant paced around the old lighthouse on the northern end of Grand Turk, overlooking the infamous north-west reef. He couldn't see much. The night was pitch black with cloud cover, but he could hear the Atlantic rollers pounding onto the reef in the distance, and feel the spray carried on the wind in his face.

The storm had raged all night. The noise of torrential rain battering the roof of his old house, and the wind rattling the plantation shutters, had driven him crazy. He'd tried to work in his study, sifting through the sequence of events over the last year – dates, times and conversations. It was important to get everything right, to forget nothing, but being cooped up in those conditions only added to his torment. When the storm eased, he'd slipped out of the house and driven up here.

Can't you just look away? Those words were whirling around in his head.

That's exactly what he had done. Looked away. But he couldn't get their screams out of his head. They haunted him, even during waking hours. If he had any guts, he'd waded out to sea and drown himself right now. That way it would be over quickly, and Jayne and the kids wouldn't have to live with the shame too.

He slumped down on the wet lighthouse steps and buried his head in his hands. Water seeped through his trousers, but he didn't care. He pulled a packet of cigarettes and lighter from his pocket. His hands shook as he lit up and inhaled tobacco deep into his lungs.

Why the hell had he applied for this job? What made him think *he* could succeed when so many had failed before him? These islands were *cursed*. And now he'd blown everything he'd worked so hard for over two decades.

He came out in a cold sweat just thinking about the time and effort he'd put in. Working all hours, always the last to leave, always helpful and loyal, pandering to the morons above him. Everything, so diligently planned and executed to propel himself up the career ladder, lay smashed to bits on the rocks.

A distant rumbling. He pricked up his ears. It sounded like an engine. A car? More like the roar of a motorbike. He stood up and ducked behind the lighthouse. Silly really because his Land Rover was in plain view. He peered back down Lighthouse Road. No sign of any headlights. He listened hard, but the only sound he could hear was the sea.

He sat back down on the steps and pulled his torch out of his pocket to check his watch. 4.30 am. He looked up at the sky. Light would soon be breaking on the eastern horizon. He sighed. Of course he should never have brought Jayne here too. He *knew* she'd soon be bored and start hankering after her old life in London, with the shops and restaurants. That was the trouble, he thought bitterly. His UK salary was never enough for the lifestyle she craved. Poor Jayne, none of this was her fault, he chided himself. She'd made an effort to settle here. Had even been content for a while, especially as their young son was with them. Of course she missed their daughter at boarding school in the UK, and tried not to show it. But it hadn't been long before she started making excuses to go back to the UK for one reason or another. Still, thank God she was over there at present with the children.

The irony was they were set up for life now. She could spend whatever she liked. He'd paid the school fees, the mortgage and all their debts. Except now the guilt and fear of discovery was paralysing. He couldn't work, couldn't sleep, couldn't eat.

He pulled a notebook out of his pocket and studied what he'd written with his torch. He'd tried several times to start this letter, to tell Jayne everything, to explain. But he'd never got past the second paragraph. How to explain something so terrible? He tore out his latest attempt and folded the piece of paper up into a small square.

A shuffling noise startled him up.

"Who's there?"

A harsh sound rang out.

He leapt to his feet, but it was only a donkey braying back at him in the dark. The animals wandered freely around the island around the island, a legacy of the days when their ancestors worked the salt mills.

He shook his head and looked down the road again. Still no headlights. He turned back to the sea. Of course his career would be over. He'd probably end up in prison. People in his position had to be made an example of. All the money would be confiscated. Then what would happen to Jayne and the kids?

He was even more nervous now poor old Clement Pearson was dead. He shivered. This had to stop. He was going to stop it, even if it meant his own ruin.

He flopped back against the wall of the old lighthouse with the sheer weight of his decision. The structure had stood since the 1850s, surviving storms, hurricanes and tidal waves. Its bright light beamed out to sea, warning ships of the hazard of the reef. Made of cast iron, it was permanent. Something that would never crumble. Something that would never break.

Not like him.

He threw the cigarette butt to the ground and stamped on it. Now, he was going to do what he should have done a while ago. Face the music. He wouldn't be frightened or intimidated. He'd go back to the office right now, and explain everything to London. It was the only way. He'd send a classified telegram for greater security, rather than an email.

Steeling himself, he got into the car and fired up the engine. Pulling out of the lighthouse car park, he started down the road back into town. With no street lights or other cars around, it was deathly quiet in the dark. He put his foot down and sped along. It was a bumpy ride as the tyres sloshed and bounced through water filled potholes. As he drove, his mind was rehearsing exactly what he was going to say.

Approaching the crossroads, he suddenly saw a truck hurtling along from another direction in the darkness. Why did it have no lights on?

He slammed his foot on the brakes. Nothing.

They were going to collide.

He pressed down on the horn in warning, but the truck wasn't stopping. Frantic, he pumped the brakes.

Nothing.

Yanking the handbrake on, he tried to swerve. Too late. He raised his arms to cover his face, but couldn't block out the sound of his own desperate cry, as the truck smashed into his door with tremendous force.

Semi-conscious in the silent aftermath, he tried to move. The steering wheel pinned him to the seat. He could smell petrol.

Then he heard the crackle of flames.