



Island of Deceit

Candice Poarch

Prologue

Dorsey McNair placed her fancy new Easter hat on her head and looked at herself in the mirror, hoping it would make her feel better. Nobody could say she didn't pull out all the stops for Easter Sunrise Service. She prided herself that she looked at least ten years younger than eighty-five, but she didn't pride herself in letting some young pup make a fool out of her.

At seventy-five Elliot Stone should know better. At least he told her he was seventy-five. He could have been younger or older. Some men didn't age well. But she was going to fix his bacon if she didn't get her money back. Every single penny of it. He wasn't going to get away with waltzing into her life to steal her money.

She'd shampooed, cut and permed lots of heads to make that money. Sometimes her

back had hurt so bad it felt as if it would crack in two. But did she take a sick day? No. She took a pain pill and kept on working.

Right now as she lifted her hand to powder her nose she felt every year of her age. Her face had darkened with age to a deep brown complexion. It was an old face with few wrinkles. There were more wrinkles on her neck. Even considering that, she'd held up well.

She'd never felt old before, not really. There was still too much to do. No, she'd never had time to feel old. Not until now.

Suddenly weak, Dorsey stumbled to the bed and sat down hard on the soft mattress. She needed that money. Her house was paid for, and she and Barbara had even had it renovated five years ago. But there were medical bills. Lots of them.

She'd never been a burden on anyone and she wasn't about to start now. She'd saved enough to take care of herself in her later years and she just couldn't let Elliot get away with stealing her life's savings.

Every year she contributed to the College Fund to give some child a boost in this tough world. When the Lord saw fit for her to leave this earth, what little was left over was earmarked for her granddaughter. Not that Barbara needed it. She'd done well for herself. But she certainly didn't want it to go to Elliot and his band of thieves.

Had she not gone to the bank to take out another CD she would never have known he'd cashed in several of her CD's. Nearly four hundred thousand dollars. That's the trouble with bank branches. He'd sent someone to a branch where the folks didn't know her. At her local small branch every last person knew her.

He'd worked fast, the scoundrel. How did he know how much money she had anyway? And how did he get ahold of her things? He must have broken into her house and taken her

certificates when she wasn't home.

She'd thought about it all night. She should have kept them in a bank lock box like Barbara told her. But she liked to have them in her house where she could put her hands on them.

She was going to deal with Elliot after church services. She'd pray on it. The Lord would find a way for her to work this through. He'd gotten her through many tough battles, and the deaths of her daughter and son-in-law. He'd let her live long enough to raise Barbara and to know that the girl would have a good life--and that she was self sufficient. She only wished that Barbara could find a good man like her own late husband. A woman needed somebody who cared.

But she had to look on the bright side. Barbara was ready to retire and had done well. The two of them planned to travel together before they moved back to her birthplace in Virginia--Paradise Island. She was finally going home.

Yes, indeed. The Lord had surely blessed her. She had no doubt that he'd get her through this, too.

An hour later Dorsey thought she might as well not have gone to church. She didn't hear a word of the preacher's sermon. After the service, she didn't linger to talk to friends. She drove directly to Elliot's house and punched the doorbell. No one responded.

Back at the car she slipped off her heels and slid her feet into flats before she left the car again and eased around the side of the house. If he could sneak into her house, she could sneak into his. Before she rounded the corner, she heard voices coming from the back yard. She plastered herself against the side of the building and listened.

She could distinguish four voices, two females and two males. One was distinctly

Elliot's.

She listened as they discussed moving to another location and setting up more "marks". They discussed how they needed more money before they could retire.

No kidding, she thought. But they willingly stole most of her retirement. And how many other people had they hoodwinked? Dorsey tightened her mouth into a thin line. Somebody had to stop them.

"Whatcha doing, lady?" a kid, no more than four asked, squinting at her. He held a huge ball in his hand. And he had the prettiest brown eyes. Dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved knit shirt and sneakers, he obviously hadn't been to church today. Even if folks only made it to church once or twice a year, most families attended Easter Sunday service.

"What's that on your head?" he asked, frowning up at her.

Dorsey put her gloved fingers to her lips. "Quiet," she whispered. Didn't kids know about hats anymore? Had he been a boy from her neighborhood, Dorsey would have sat on the front porch with him and told him stories about church and hats and appropriate attire.

She listened for the Stones while the boy regarded her curiously. But the Stones had quit talking.

"Can I have that feather? I never seen purple strawberries. Are they real?"

"No." Hurriedly, Dorsey raced to the car as quickly as her legs would carry her, started the engine, and drove off.

She'd traveled a mile before reason began to reassert itself. She couldn't deal with these people alone. There were too many of them and they were obviously skilled thieves.

At the red light, she fumbled for the cell phone Barbara had given her. She should pull into a parking lot to use the phone, but this was an emergency. And she didn't want Elliot to

catch her in his neighborhood.

She didn't usually depend on other people to do things she could do for herself, but she realized she was in over her head. Elliot lived with an entire family of thieves.

Barbara's phone rang and rang until the answering service picked up. Impatiently, Dorsey listened to the long spiel until she could talk.

"Barbara, honey, I hate to bother you, but I'm in a scrape. Remember the man I told you I was dating? Elliot Stone? Well he's stolen nearly half a million dollars of my certificates. I've met Elliot's son, Andrew, and his sister, Minerva, but it sounded like Minerva is really his wife. There are four of them. Two women and two men. I don't know who the other female is and I didn't get a look at her, only heard her voice.

"Elliot's like you in that he doesn't like taking pictures. But I sneaked one at a church brunch. It's in one of my jewelry boxes. Not the real one with my good pieces, but the pretty Valentine's box you gave me filled with chocolates a couple of years ago. I keep it in my bedside drawer. The picture is on the bottom turned upside down with some heavy costume jewelry on top.

"Honey, maybe we can put our heads together to come up with a solution. I guess I'm going to have to go to the police. And they were talking about my family's golden bowl. He must have seen the picture I have or read the article in my scrap book. I need to get my money back and I need to save the bowl. I really don't want to be a burden...."

...

When Barbara Turner returned home that night, she listened to her messages. Fear and anger shot through her. She knew Dorsey. She'd try to handle this on her own.

She called her grandmother immediately but only got the answering machine. She dialed

frantically for the next hour. Dorsey never stayed out this late. Without bothering to pack a bag, Barbara caught a train from Grand Central Station to Philly.

But when she got home, it was too late. She found Dorsey dead at the bottom of the stairs.

Chapter 1

Barbara Turner had timed her walk along the beach perfectly. It was eight-thirty in the morning. Bundled up against the cold ocean breeze, Minerva Stone came outside for a breath of fresh air with Lambert Hughes.

In an isolated area off the marsh, Lambert's house had as lovely an ocean view as Barbara's. Only Barbara's shoreline was sandy.

Barbara felt like some lewd stalker peeping through trees and thick bushes. A wet leaf fell on her nose. Swiping it away, she glanced up. The limp brown leaves on the tree would fall with the next high wind.

She wiggled her toes. Mud squished beneath her feet and soaked through her shoes. Her next trip to Virginia Beach, she was getting herself a pair of Timberlines. Uncomfortable and cold, she glared at the couple through small but powerful binoculars.

Minerva urged Lambert to sit on the glider and that tramp plopped her butt right beside him. There wasn't an eighth of an inch of space between them. Using her foot, she pushed the glider to set it in motion. Dorsey had had one painted in blue and white when Barbara was a child.

Minerva smiled up at Lambert and sidled closer, brushing her ample breast against his arm. Barbara watched with growing alarm when the woman took his wrinkled hand in hers and stroked it. Innocent lovers. She let his hand go and rubbed the inside of his thigh.

Lambert was ninety something for heaven's sake. Barbara watched with disgust as Minerva's hand worked its way closer to his groin.

Love between older couples was healthy and good, but this had nothing to do with love. Some massages were therapeutic-but not this one. Of course if one had a sense of humor, this

could be considered therapy of a sort.

Minerva was somewhere between sixty and sixty-five and wore every year on her face. Lambert was in surprisingly good health, but what would it do to him when he found out that Minerva didn't love him, that she was out to get his money? Would he be too charmed by Minerva to believe she'd con him? The problem with situations like this was the victim was so enchanted with the swindler, he wouldn't even believe he was victimized.

Barbara shook her head. To the unsuspecting, they appeared to be a couple in love, a couple who'd weathered the pleasures and storms of a lifetime together and were now enjoying their sunset years.

If he only knew, Barbara thought grimly. It was all an illusion, a pretense of caring and love that Minerva used to build trust. Barbara felt saddened, not that Minerva would get the opportunity to fleece him, but the emotional baggage she would leave behind was much worse. She'd give Lambert's life purpose beyond golf and existing. His kids didn't live close by. Minerva was someone to love, and who didn't want that emotional connection even if the only pleasure he got was petting and touching? When you didn't have it, it was one thing. But to have that illusion suddenly snatched away...

Suddenly Barbara felt sick. Her own life was as barren as Lambert's. Once she returned to New York, she'd have her friends and activities to keep her busy. Except there was no New York for Lambert. His lonely life was here.

But Barbara had woven her own illusions. Not only on the Stones, but on the island in general. She was known as the hot New York hairstylist and customers had come in droves. She had many more than she ever expected or wanted.

Most parents encouraged their girls to learn typing skills to fall back on in hard times, but Dorsey had insisted Barbara learn the hairdressing trade. While her friends worked retail during summer vacations, Barbara had used hairdressing for spending money and to help pay college tuition.

A beautician was a good cover. Everyone talked in hair salons. Most black women got their hair done. More than likely Dorsey had bragged to the Stones about Barbara working on Wall Street. But Barbara didn't think she'd mention the hairdressing.

The phone rang and Barbara jumped. Fumbling in her pocket she retrieved it before the sound carried to the house. A quick peek revealed Minerva hadn't heard it.

Barbara whispered a greeting.

“Where are you?” her friend, Liane Harding, asked. “In a conference or something?”

Barbara laughed. “I’m spying.” Liane had worked on Wall Street with Barbara.

“So what’s going on?”

“They finally found a mark. I was a little confused at first because Elliot usually does the cons, but this time he’s using his wife, Minerva.”

“Who did they set up?”

“My neighbor. His previous companion vanished a month ago. She was in her mid-twenties and people assume she left for a better job. And of course Minerva stepped right in to fill the void.”

“You think they did something to her?”

“What else? They’ve done it before. More than likely, they’ll be out of here by Christmas. The bastards.”

“Calm down, girl. They aren’t going to get away with it this time. You’ve got the old man’s back.”

“I hope it’s enough.” Barbara slid the small binoculars into her jacket pocket and turned, striding quickly down the beach along the Atlantic. After standing still long enough for her body temp to drop, the breeze grew uncomfortable and she pulled the collar tight against her neck, still talking to Liane.

“It seems such a coincidence they ended up there. Wouldn’t they have more sense than to go to a place Dorsey mentioned?”

“What better place? This is the last place I would think to look for them. The only reason we were moving here in the first place was because Dorsey wanted to.”

“Be careful, Barbara. It’s a small town. Don’t you think you can get the sheriff involved?”

“I’m not taking that chance. The police in Philly couldn’t help. I don’t see why it’ll be different here. Besides, if I tell the sheriff, I won’t be able to retrieve the money and distribute it to the people they stole from.”

“I worry about you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Famous last words. I have a meeting. Keep me updated and let me know if there’s

anything I can do.”

“Thanks, Liane.” They disconnected and Barbara shoved the phone in her pocket.

After the Stones fled Philly, Barbara hired a private investigator to find them. It had taken him a month to find them. She hadn't expected them to be hiding out in Paradise Island, her grandmother's home.

Barbara lifted her face to the breeze. Although the Philly police hadn't taken her accusations seriously, she believed Elliot had pushed Dorsey down the stairs, killing her in the fall. Dorsey had left Elliot's address and Barbara had gone there with the police, but they'd already cleared out.

He must have caught Dorsey spying on him and knew she was going to cause trouble. Dorsey believed in confronting problems head on, and she wasn't afraid to face adversity. Suddenly raw and primitive grief overwhelmed Barbara. Dorsey was her only family and she missed her terribly.

Barbara closed her eyes, her heart aching with pain. Her grandmother had been filled with life, every day full of meaning. She didn't complain or bemoan her fate. She went out of her way to help others. The average person didn't have half of Dorsey's heart. Barbara wished she'd retired earlier so that she'd have had more time with Dorsey, but her grandmother wouldn't have stood for it. She'd urged Barbara to live her life.

The one thing Dorsey wanted had eluded her. She didn't make it back to her island.

Five women. The investigator had found five women Elliot had conned in the last two years: Ellen Marks, Mariam Jones, Thelma Louis, Ivy Russell, Ruby Taylor. All of their lives destroyed by one thieving family. All left devastated and heartbroken.

No, she couldn't work with the sheriff. She'd get their money and return it to them.

Mud kicked up from the marsh as Barbara increased her pace. Having been here since July, she understood why Dorsey eagerly waited for Barbara to retire so they could move to Paradise Island together and how devastated she must have been that much of her life's earnings had been stolen by con artists, changing the way she'd planned to live her life.

In reality life wouldn't have changed for Dorsey. Barbara had made and saved more than enough money to take care of them both for the rest of their lives. Dorsey knew that. But it was the principal of the thing. The fact that someone could come into her home and steal her life's earnings without a care. That was totally unacceptable.

Barbara sighed. Her life had changed dramatically in the last six months.

In Philly and Manhattan, Barbara's existence had been a constant barrage of sirens, honking horns, corner delis, cramped condos, and droves of people around all the time. At times, even she wanted to be alone. She found this place enchanting.

Here her grandmother's childhood home offered a breathtaking view of the Atlantic with two acres of land around her. The flow of the water was soothing to the soul, she thought as she listened to the lapping of the water and wondered what life had been like for Dorsey as a child. Dorsey had left a month after she graduated from high school. What was it about this island that made her desperately want to return after being away so long?

Barbara guessed it was "home." No matter where life took Dorsey, the place where she was born and raised was always considered home.

The muddy path became too slippery for Barbara to walk and she left the shore and headed to the country road.

It hadn't taken long for her to be enveloped into the community. The island matriarch, Naomi Claxton, had roped her into working on the Founder's Day committee and into the search for her family's golden bowl. Since the islanders didn't really know her true identity, Barbara wondered why she was chosen. You never could tell what was going on in Naomi's mind.

She couldn't refuse though. No one refused Naomi. But shouldn't the woman have chosen one of the islanders? With all that was on Barbara's plate, the last thing she wanted was to get mixed up with the infighting that went with the monthly committee meetings.

The wind increased and Barbara's hat flew off her head. Before she could retrieve it, a sheriff's car drove up beside her, and although it didn't roll over her hat, the driver positioned the vehicle so that it was on top of it. She sent an irritated glance at the pain-in-the-backside sheriff.

The object of the game was to stay as far from the law as she possibly could. She wasn't exactly using lawful means to retrieve her grandmother's money. Her brief sessions with the Philly PD had taught her that the only closure she'd likely get was by her own means.

How many times had Dorsey told her that?

Unfortunately, the sheriff was always turning up, even though she didn't want to see him.

"Better hold on to that fancy hat or you'll lose it," Sheriff Harper Porterfield said, opening his door to retrieve her hat as if she were incapable.

That man, Barbara thought in exasperation.

“Honey, that wind’s strong enough to blow you away,” Harper said.

“Is that right, Sheriff?”

“Harper. Just Harper,” he said.

Oh, he had such sense of humor, did he? Though Barbara didn’t take any crap about her weight, that little breeze wouldn’t bulge a baby, much less her at size eighteen. The sheriff took his time to give her the once-over, and by the time his eyes lingered on her face she felt unusually hot and her breasts tightened with awareness.

When he shifted his gaze to retrieve her hat, she felt as if the laser that had beamed on her had released its heat. With her hat in his hand, he stood up to his full height. Barbara looked way up, to at least six-three or four. She was only five-five.

It wasn’t so much that he was large, and he certainly wasn’t pumped up on steroids bulky, but with his solid muscular build and the authority with which he wore it, he presented an imposing presence. The black hair around his temple was sprinkled with gray, but it only enhanced his sex appeal.

Barbara felt a tingling of awareness in her stomach. She reached for her hat, but Harper held it out of her grasp and leaned against the car, his arms folded over his amazing chest. Her hat dangled from his long fingers. “Is there a problem?” she asked.

“I’ll say. Breakfast at the B and B is getting better and better. Have you sampled the new menu yet, Barbara? Heard Gabrielle added a couple of items. Thought I’d give them a try.” He hit her hat against his hand. “How about joining me?”

As irritating as the man could be, she couldn’t deny the attraction between them. Barbara would love to join him--under other circumstances. Harper was one fine looking man who’d attracted her from the beginning. She didn’t know what he saw in her, but she had no choice but to decline.

“I’m sorry, sheriff, but I have early appointments. Besides, I’m already in a relationship.” She nearly gagged. Just the thought of being in the same room with Andrew Stone made her skin crawl.

Harper scoffed. “That boy?” Harper moved closer, invading her space. “He wouldn’t begin to know how to treat a woman like you. You need a real man, honey.”

That was putting it mildly, but sacrifices for the cause must be made. “And you would?” Barbara asked, feeling mischievous. She shouldn’t be flirting. Harper needed no

encouragement.

“You can count on it.” He sent her a look that said he knew exactly how to handle things. Suddenly Barbara was grateful for the wind. She needed cooling off.

Um-um-um. The way he was looking at her, she could have melted in a puddle at his feet. And that was saying a lot for a woman immune to silliness.

Those melted-chocolate eyes impaled her. Barbara looked away. She was here for justice, not to be distracted by the handsome sheriff.

“Ms. Turner, I don’t know why you’re dating that boy, and I’m not going to stalk you. But I have to say, you’re a fine looking woman.”

Barbara closed her eyes briefly. Why did he say things that turned her inside out? Why couldn’t he have come along a year or two ago--five years ago or even ten? Why did he have to wait until it was too late?

“Have a nice day, Sheriff,” she mumbled. “I have to get my walk in before I go into the hair salon.”

It was several seconds before Barbara heard a car door slam and the car inch closer.

“You know I’m beginning to wonder about you. You aren’t afraid of the law are you? Or are you hiding out? Rob a bank, Barbara?”

He was hitting too close to the truth for comfort. Maybe she hadn’t robbed a bank, but she planned to rob the Stones. “Of course not,” she replied smoothly.

“You’re not putting your customers under a spell and robbing them blind when their heads are tucked under the dryer, are you?” He was so corny, but he could get away with it.

“Heard any complaints, sheriff?”

“They’re under your spell. How would they know to complain?”

Barbara laughed.

“One day you’ll let me have my way.”

Barbara stumbled. Just the thought sent a pleasing ripple through her.

“I’m already under your spell,” he said. “Be careful, you hear? Have a good day.”

Harper pulled ahead and turned a corner before Barbara realized he still had her hat.