The Deceived

Brett Battles

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The stench of rotting food and diesel fuel hung over the dock like it had been there forever. Even inside the small warehouse, the foulness overpowered everything. That was until the man in the light gray coveralls opened the door of the shipping container. Suddenly death was all Jonathan Quinn could smell.

Unflinching, he scanned the interior of the container. With the exception of a bloated body crumpled against the wall to the right, it was empty.

'Shut the door,' Quinn said.

'But Mr Albina wanted you to see what was –'

'I've seen it. Shut the door.'

The man – he'd said his name was Stafford – swung the door shut, locking the handle into place.

'Why is this still here?' Quinn asked.

Stafford took a few steps toward Quinn, then stopped. 'Look, I got a dock to run, okay? I got a ship out there that's only half unloaded.' He sucked in a tense, nervous breath. 'I got customs people all over the place, you know? It's like they knew something like this was coming in today.'

Quinn raised an eyebrow. 'Did you know it was coming in today?'

'Hell, no,' Stafford said, voice rising. 'Do you think I'd be here if I did? I'd've called in sick. Mr Albina's got people who should take care of this kind of crap.'

Quinn glanced at the man, then turned his attention back to the container. He began walking around it, scanning it up and down, taking it all in. After a slight hesitation, Stafford followed a few paces behind.

Quinn had seen thousands of shipping containers over the years: on boats, on trains, being pulled behind big rigs. They were large, bulky rectangular boxes that moved goods between countries and continents. They came in black and red and green and gray.

This one, with the exception of where the paint had chipped away and rust had started to take hold, was a faded dark blue. On each of the long sides, tall white letters spelled out BARON & BARON LTD. Quinn didn't recognize the name, but that wasn't surprising. At times it seemed as if there were nearly as many shipping companies scattered around the globe as there were containers.

When Quinn reached the point where he had begun his inspection, he stopped, his eyes still on the box.

'You're going to get rid of this, right?' Stafford asked. 'I mean . . . that's what Mr Albina told me. He said he was sending someone to get rid of it. That's you, right?'

'Manifest?' Quinn asked.

The man took a second to react, then nodded and picked up the clipboard he'd put on the ground when he'd opened the container's doors.

'What's supposed to be inside?' Quinn asked. With the trade imbalance the way it was, nothing came into the States empty anymore. Any container that did would be suspicious.

Stafford flipped through several pages, then stopped. 'Tennis shoes,' he said, looking up.

Quinn glanced over at the man. 'One pair?'

'That's really funny,' the man said, not laughing.

'Who found it?' Quinn asked.

Stafford seemed unsure what to say. When he did speak, his words didn't match the evasiveness in his eyes. 'One of the dockhands. Said he smelled something when the crane set it down on the pier.'

'From that ship out there?' Quinn asked, motioning toward the door that led outside. 'The *Riegle 3*?'

Stafford nodded his head. 'Yeah. It was one of the first ones off-loaded.'

'So this dockhand, he just brought the container in here and called you?'

'Yes.'

'You didn't call the police?'

'I run everything by Mr Albina. He said to wait for you.' When Quinn didn't reply right away, Stafford added, 'That's the way it happened, okay?'

Quinn continued to stare at the man for a moment, then he turned and started walking toward the exit.

'Hey! Where are you going?' Stafford asked.

'Home,' Quinn said without stopping.

'Wait. What am I supposed to do?'

Quinn paused a few feet from the door and looked back. Stafford was still standing near the container.

'Where did the crate come from? Who found it? And why did they let you know?' Quinn asked.

'I already told you that.' This time there was even less conviction in Stafford's words.

Quinn smiled, then shook his head. There was no reason to blame the man. It was obvious he was only saying what he'd been told to say. Still, Quinn didn't like being jerked around.

'Good luck with your problem.'

He pushed open the door and left.

'That was quick,' Nate said.

Quinn climbed into the passenger seat of his BMW M3. Nate, his apprentice, was sitting behind the wheel, a copy of *The Basics of Instrumental Flight* in his lap. Just a week earlier, Nate had begun small-aircraft flying lessons. It was just one of many outside training courses he'd be taking during his apprenticeship.

While his boss had been inside, he'd also rolled down the windows to let the cool ocean breeze pass through the interior while he waited. His iPod was plugged into the stereo playing KT Tunstall low in the background – a live cover of the old Jackson 5 hit 'I Want You Back.'

'Turns out they didn't need us,' Quinn said.

'No body?' Nate asked, surprised.

'There was a body. I just decided it might be better if they take care of it themselves.'

Nate let out a short laugh. 'Right. Better for who? Them or us?'

Quinn allowed a smile to touch his lips. 'Let's go.'

Nate looked at Quinn for a moment longer, seeming to be expecting more. When that didn't happen, he tossed his book in the back and started the engine. 'Where to?'

Quinn glanced at his watch. It was 11 a.m. The drive back from Long Beach to his house in the Hollywood Hills would take them over an hour. 'Home. But I'm hungry. Let's stop someplace first.'

'How about Pink's?'

Quinn smiled. 'That'll work.'

They drove in silence for several minutes as Nate maneuvered the car through the city and onto the freeway.

Once they were up to cruising speed, Nate said, 'So what exactly happened?'

Quinn gazed out the window at nothing in particular. 'They didn't tell me all I needed to know.'

'So you just walked?'

'I had to,' Quinn said. He turned to his apprentice. 'We don't need to know everything. That's not our job. But to do it right, sometimes there are things we have to know.'

He started to tell Nate about his meeting with Stafford. When he reached the point where he questioned the man about the discovery of the body, his cell phone rang. He pulled it out, looked at the display, then frowned. He knew the call would come, but it didn't make him happy.

'This is Quinn.'

'I understand you're not interested in helping us

out.' The high pitch of his voice was unmistakable. Jorge Albina.

Based out of San Francisco, Albina was an expert at getting things in and out of the country. Money, people, guns, and apparently now bodies, too. His services didn't come cheap, but his success rate was one of the best in the business.

'We can pretend that's the reason if it helps,' Quinn said.

'It doesn't help if it's not the truth.'

'That's exactly where you and I agree.'

There was silence.

'Stafford told me you just left. No reason,' Albina said.

'He was mistaken.'

'That's not an answer.'

Quinn took a deep breath. 'Jorge, what's the most important part of my job?'

There was a hesitation. 'Whatever I say is going to be the wrong answer.'

'Not if you really thought about it,' Quinn said. 'But I'll tell you. Trust.'

'Trust,' Albina said as if he was trying out the word for the first time.

'Yes. See, you're trusting me with the knowledge of what happened, aren't you? You're trusting me to get rid of a problem so that it won't surface later, right? And you're trusting me that I'll never use what I've learned against you. Seems pretty important to me.'

'A little dramatic, don't you think?' Albina said, irritation creeping into his voice. 'You're a cleaner. Your job is simple. Just get rid of the body.'

The muscles around Quinn's mouth tensed. 'You know, you're right. It's the simplest job in the world. So I'm sure you can find someone else to help you from now on.'

'Wait,' Albina said. 'Okay. I'm sorry. I know what you do isn't easy. And I trust you, all right? I trust you.'

Quinn took a deep breath. 'I have to trust *you*, too. I don't need to know a lot. Sometimes I don't need to know more than where the problem is. But when I do ask a question, there's a reason. I have to think about who else might know about the situation, and if they need to be steered in a different direction. I have to concern myself with where potential problems might come from while I'm working. I won't take on a job if I don't trust the information I've been given.'

He could hear Albina take a long, low breath on the other end. 'So where was the issue?'

'I asked your man how the container got there, who discovered the body, and why they called him. He lied.'

Albina sighed. 'Look, two days ago I received a phone call, okay? I was told a package was on its way to me. Something for me personally. I was given the name of the ship, the *Riegle 3*, and the container number. My people were already scheduled to unload it, so controlling it wasn't difficult.'

'Who was the call from?' Quinn asked.

'I don't know. It was ID'd as a Hawaiian number, but that was a dead end. Who knows where it really came from?'

'Man or woman?'

'Man.'

'But you didn't recognize the voice,' Quinn said.

'No. I didn't.'

Quinn contemplated for a moment. This explanation made a hell of a lot more sense than what he'd been told at the warehouse. But Albina was a smoother operator than Stafford, better at lying, so Quinn wasn't ready to trust the information yet.

'Is your decision not to help a final one?' Albina asked.

'Who's the dead guy?' Quinn asked. 'One of your people?'

He had seen the body for only a few moments, and even then it had been bloated and discolored.

'Is that really something you need to know?' Albina said.

'It is now.'

Albina was silent for several seconds. 'Not one of mine,' he finally said. 'The man on the phone told me the dead guy's name was Steven Markoff. I've never heard of him.'

Quinn tensed, his eyes frozen on the road ahead, but his voice remained neutral. 'Markoff?'

'Yeah. He spelled it for me. M-A-R-K-O-F-F. You know him?'

'Name's not familiar.'

'Whoever the hell he is, I just need to get rid of him.' Albina hesitated a moment. 'It's my fault Stafford lied to you. My orders. I just didn't want to get dragged into this more than necessary.' Another pause. 'I need your help.'

Quinn knew Albina was holding something back. Only now it didn't matter.

'Quinn?' Albina asked.

'If I do this, you need to follow my instructions exactly,' Quinn said. 'No questions, no deviations.'

'Of course.'

Quinn tapped Nate on the shoulder, then pointed to the next exit. Immediately Nate began moving the BMW to the right.

'First you need to get the container away from the port,' Quinn said. 'You can get it past the customs people, right?'

'I can do that.'

'The trailer you put it on should be untraceable. You won't be getting it back. And make sure the truck you use doesn't have any tracking devices. If it does, I'll know it, and you won't hear back from me. If everything goes right, I'll leave the truck someplace where you can pick it up when I'm done.'

'Okay. No problem.'

'There's a truck stop along the I-15 east of L.A., toward Corona,' Quinn said, then gave him the name of the exit. 'Have your driver park the rig there and leave the keys under the seat. You should have someone follow him in a car so they can leave together. But that's it. No one else, understand? If I pick up even a hint that I'm being followed by anyone, the deal's off.'

'Done.'

'Call me once they've left the port.'

Quinn hung up without waiting for a response.

'So,' Nate said, 'does this mean we're back on?'

Chapter 2

They made a few stops on the way out of town, picking up some items they'd need.

'Park over there,' Quinn said when they reached the truck stop. He pointed toward a group of big rigs parked just behind a row of cars. Albina had called only five minutes before to tell him the container had just left the port, so he knew it hadn't arrived yet. Still, he did a quick scan of the trucks to be sure Jorge wasn't playing any games. The container wasn't there.

After they parked, Quinn got out and had Nate pop the trunk. The storage space was covered by a dark gray carpet Quinn had installed himself. On the left side, on top of the carpet, were the items they'd purchased on the way.

Quinn ignored those and lifted up a section of the carpet on the right. Underneath was what anyone would expect, the metal bottom of the trunk. The only exception was a small black square mounted at the junction where the floor met the rear of the car.

Quinn placed the pad of his left thumb on the square. A moment later, the base of the trunk hinged

up an inch, exposing a custom-built compartment below. He reached into the gap and released the catch, freeing the panel to open all the way.

The space below held his standard kit, things he might need at a moment's notice. There were several cases, most made of hard plastic, and a few simple leather pouches. He ran his fingers over the cases until he found the one he wanted. After pulling it out, he grabbed one of the leather pouches, then shut the panel and put the carpet back into place.

He walked up to the open driver's window. 'You watch from here,' he told his apprentice.

'Got it,' Nate said.

Quinn opened the leather pouch and removed one set of communication gear. He inserted the earpiece into his right ear, its small size making it all but invisible, then attached the tiny transmitter inside his collar.

'Let me know if you spot anything I should know about,' he said, handing Nate the bag with a second set of radio gear still inside.

The interior of the truck stop was a familiar one – restaurant, gift shop, restrooms. Quinn wandered around looking at the postcards, the T-shirts, and the discount CDs as he checked out the other people inside. No one registered as a threat.

He bought a cup of coffee, found a stool near the window, and sat watching the action outside as trucks came and went. It was another forty-five minutes before a black Peterbilt semi arrived pulling a trailer that carried the familiar Baron & Baron, Ltd. shipping container. Following right behind it was a dark green Toyota Land Cruiser.

Quinn watched the driver park the truck, climb out of the cab, and walk over to the waiting SUV. His door was barely closed when the Toyota sped off back down the road.

'Follow them,' Quinn said quietly, so as not to draw the attention of anyone nearby. 'Make sure they get back on the freeway. Then do an area check. See if anyone else might be hanging around waiting for us.'

'No problem,' Nate said over the radio.

Quinn watched his BMW pull out of the lot and disappear down the road. Cars and trucks continued to pull in and out while Nate was gone, but none paid any attention to the waiting truck.

Twenty minutes later, Nate returned. 'All clear,' he said.

Quinn exited the restaurant and walked across the asphalt to where the semi was parked. Learning to drive trucks had been just another part of his own training when he'd been an apprentice. As a cleaner, he had to be ready to use anything at his disposal.

Quinn's old mentor, Durrie, had enrolled Quinn in a three-month-long truck-driving class. Quinn had complained at the time, but in the years since, he'd realized it had turned out to be a very useful skill. Nate would be going through the same training the following year.

Quinn removed a thin rectangular metal box from the case he was still carrying, then flipped a switch near the top. He could feel a slight vibration as the detector came to life in his palm. Taking his time, he worked his way around the truck. The

detector remained silent, picking up no evidence of any tracking devices. True to his word, Albina had left the truck clean.

Quinn returned the scanner to its case, then walked around to the rear of the container. A part of him wanted to make sure Albina hadn't pulled a bait-and-switch and put something else in the box, but the real reason for the check was that Quinn needed to confirm for himself that the dead man inside was indeed who Jorge had said he was.

He did a quick scan to make sure no one was near, then opened the door.

Again the stench. Bad, but not as bad as it had been in the confines of the warehouse. He climbed inside and pulled the door closed behind him.

He pinched his nose closed with one hand, forcing himself to breathe through his mouth. With the other hand, he pulled a small flashlight out of his pocket and turned it on.

The corpse was in pretty much the same place it had been when he'd seen it last – still against the wall, halfway back on the right side. He walked over and gently used his foot to roll the body onto its back.

For a couple of seconds, he all but forgot where he was. He stared down at the bloated face. Even with the disfigurement and the low light, there was no mistaking the features. It was Markoff.

'Everything all right?' Nate asked over the radio.

Quinn blinked. *No*, he thought. *Everything isn't all right.*

'Time to go,' Quinn said.

* * *

Quinn drove the rig east through San Bernardino and over the Cajon Pass toward Las Vegas. He exited a few miles later at Highway 395 and headed north into the Mojave Desert. Nate followed a half-mile behind in the BMW, watching for tails.

The desert had once been hundreds of square miles of nothing but sagebrush and dirt. Both were still there, but over the years the occasional town had popped up, creating pockets of forced green in the endless brown landscape. It was by no means a full-scale human invasion. There were parts where you could drive for nearly fifty miles without seeing anything more man-made than the distant high-power lines or some out-of-date billboards or the occasional abandoned car rusted to a deep brown and half buried in the sand by a flash flood.

There were roads, though. Dirt ones, branching off from the highway and winding miles into the nothingness. Some were well worn by traffic, perhaps indicating a home in the distance. Others looked as though they'd been abandoned for dozens of years.

It was easy to lose things out here, things that wouldn't be found for a long time. And if you did the job right, things that would never be found.

Because he rarely took work so close to home, Quinn seldom had a need to come out this way. Of course, that didn't mean he was unfamiliar with the terrain. One always had to be prepared.

About twenty miles before Randsburg, there was a little-used dirt road that led off to the southeast. Quinn made sure the only other car in sight was

his own BMW, then turned the rig down the road, slowing to navigate the uneven terrain.

It took thirty minutes to reach a suitable spot. The road first went past several hills before dipping into the deep ravine. Not far beyond where Quinn stopped, the road seemed to disappear, as though its destination had been washed away by one of the spring storms, giving it no reason to continue.

By the time he got out of the cab, Nate had caught up to him in the BMW. Quinn motioned for his apprentice to park behind the truck. He then walked around to the container's doors.

In the distance, the sun was approaching the horizon. Night was less than an hour away.

Quinn reached up, hesitated for only a second, then flung both doors open all the way. He almost didn't notice the smell this time.

Behind him, he heard the door to the BMW open and shut, then footsteps approaching the truck.

'Coveralls, gloves, and plastic sheeting,' Quinn called out without looking around.

'What about the gasoline?'

'Not yet.'

As Nate returned to the car, Quinn climbed inside and walked over to the body. He couldn't imagine what had led to Markoff being entombed in a shipping container. Sure, Markoff had once been CIA, but he'd taken an early retirement the previous winter, bored stiff by the desk job at Langley he'd taken only months before.

So what happened? Quinn silently asked his dead friend.

The only answer was the sound of Nate's footsteps outside the back door.

'Here,' his apprentice called out.

Quinn turned toward the back. Nate was standing on the ground, only the upper third of his body showing above the lip of the container. In one hand he held up a pair of coveralls and gloves.

Quinn looked down at Markoff one more time, then headed toward the opening to get changed.

They worked quickly and efficiently. Nate, more times than not, seemed to anticipate Quinn's next request, helping to keep conversation to a minimum.

Dealing with Markoff was first. They wrapped his body in the sheeting, then placed him across the hood of the BMW, securing him in place with several lengths of rope. Next, Nate donned a breathing mask, and used a portable paint sprayer to douse the interior of the container with gasoline.

'Quinn?' Nate called out. He'd finished half of the inside, but had stopped and was staring at the wall. 'Did you see this?'

Quinn pulled on his mask and joined his apprentice. After his eyes began to adjust to the dimness inside the box, small marks began to appear on the wall.

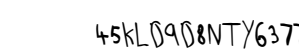
'Grab some paper and a pen,' Quinn said.

While Nate was gone, Quinn knelt down to get a better look. He adjusted his face mask, but the stink of gasoline and death still seeped in around the edges. He forced himself to ignore it, focusing his concentration on the marks on the wall.

They were crude, like something a child would have written. *Or maybe by someone writing in the dark,* he thought. *Someone already weak, about to die.*

As Nate climbed back in, Quinn pulled out his flashlight and turned it on. The beam exposed walls dripping with gasoline. He pointed the light at the marks on the wall.

Numbers. Letters. Seventeen of them. Repeated twice.



'Looks like a VIN number,' Nate said, meaning a vehicle identification number.

'It's not.'

Though the sequence had been written twice, there was something different about the second time around. At the very end, separated by a small space, were an additional two characters.



They were only there the one time. Perhaps they were part of the long sequence and they had just been forgotten the first time through, or perhaps they were something else entirely.

Quinn handed the flashlight to Nate, then took the pen and paper and wrote down the sequence. He included the last two characters, though kept them apart from the others, just like they had been on the wall. The one thing he wasn't sure about was whether it was the letter *L* or the numeral *1*. Either way, none of it meant anything to him.

'Is that blood?' Nate asked.

Quinn nodded. Markoff must have used the only ink he had available.

'Okay,' he said, rising back to his feet. 'Finish up. We don't have much time.'

As soon as Quinn was out of the container, Nate sprayed the rest of the inside with the fuel, giving the message a double douse. Before he started on the outside, they unhooked the semi from the trailer, and Quinn drove it back to the point where the road climbed out of the ravine, parking it.

By the time Nate finished the exterior, there were about three quarts left of the five gallons of gas they'd brought. He unhooked the paint reservoir that contained the remaining fuel and placed it on the ground, then tossed the rest of the paint sprayer and the empty gas cans into the back of the shipping container.

'Done,' Nate said.

Quinn nodded, then climbed behind the wheel of the BMW. He eased the vehicle back down the wash, putting a good one hundred and fifty feet between the car and the container.

'All right,' he said.

Nate acknowledged the go-ahead by lighting a couple of pieces of dried sagebrush on fire. Through the receiver in his ear, Quinn could hear a whoosh as his apprentice flung one of the branches deep inside the container.

A torrent of flames began swirling through Markoff's former tomb, and once Nate lit the outside, the entire box became engulfed in a roiling inferno.

Their timing was good. Any later and their makeshift bonfire might have been seen for miles in the desert night. But the sun was just touching the western skyline, so even though day was passing, the darkness had yet to descend in full force. In fact, the fading daylight did double duty, hiding the temporary illumination while masking the smoke against the dimming sky.

The scent of the remaining gasoline in the container he carried preceded Nate as he rejoined Quinn. Without being told, he hopped up on the trunk.

'I'll ride here,' he said.

Quinn slowly drove the BMW farther into the wilderness, away from the road. A couple miles later, they found another dry riverbed. At some point, the two empty waterways probably met, but it wouldn't be an issue. Not here, where it might not rain significantly for years.

As soon as they'd stopped, Nate retrieved two shovels from the trunk.

Even baked by the desert sun, the sand in the wash was soft and easy to dig up. The darkness of the desert night had finally descended, so they worked by the headlights of the BMW. In less than fifteen minutes, they dug a body-length hole three feet deep. Perhaps in a year or two, the spring rains might root up what was left of Markoff, but by then there would only be bones. Still, the thought bothered Quinn. He contemplated digging the hole deeper, but he pushed the idea out of his mind and kept to his script.

They slipped Markoff into the hole, unrolling him from the plastic as they did.

'You want me to check his pockets?' Nate asked.

Quinn stared down at the body. 'No. I'll do it.'

He leaned down and searched each pocket with his gloved hands. No wallet. No money. No receipts or papers that might have given a clue to where Markoff had been. Just a photo. It was folded and worn, and had been hidden in the collar of the dead man's shirt. Quinn almost missed it because the paper had gone soft. But the image on it was still clear. A woman.

There was a red smear along the bottom. More blood. Markoff had evidently pulled it out at one point to try and look at it. But in the darkness, it was doubtful he would have seen her image.

'Shit,' Quinn said to himself.

He looked at it a moment longer, then unzipped the front of his coveralls and slipped the photo into his shirt pocket.

Nate doused the body with most of the remaining fuel. When he was done, he removed a small box of wooden matches. As he was about to strike one, Quinn reached out and stopped him.

'Let me.'

Nate glanced at his boss, surprised, then nodded and handed over the box.

Quinn removed one of the sticks, but didn't strike it. Instead, he looked down at his old friend's body lying in the hole. He felt like he should say something, anything. But he didn't know what. Then, as he swiped the match against the side of the box, he said, without thinking, 'I'm sorry.'

After they burned and buried the body, they removed their coveralls and gloves, adding them to

the pile of plastic sheeting in a smaller hole thirty feet away. They used the rest of the fuel to set the pile on fire. Once that was complete, the only thing left to do was to drop the truck someplace where Albina's people could get it.

'Who's the woman?' Nate said as he drove them back toward the semi.

'What?' Quinn asked. He'd been lost in thought.

'The picture. Do you know the woman?'

Nate pointed toward Quinn's hand. Held tightly between his thumb and his forefinger was the picture that had been in Markoff's collar. It surprised Quinn because he didn't remember pulling it back out.

The woman in the picture was smiling into the camera, her light brown hair flowing to the side, caught in the wind. A hand was on her shoulder close to her neck, a spot only someone very close would touch. Markoff's hand. Though not in the picture, the Del Coronado Hotel in San Diego would have been just off to the right.

It had been a Saturday, just after lunch. Nearly a year earlier.

The woman's name was Jenny Fuentes.

The person who'd taken the picture was Quinn.