

The Deceived

Chapter One

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 Two

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.

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