

DELIBERATE DECEPTION

An Alex Porter Novel

Joe Porrazzo

Sample Chapter

Flagstaff, Arizona
December 14, 2010
Tuesday, 1:45 p.m.

It would all be over in less than a minute.

Pat De Tota had no idea. Her killer, however, knew it was just a matter of time, and opportunity. Pat, frantic, plowed her way through the crowded sidewalk, her mind racing as she replayed the phone call she'd received just minutes before. *What had happened at her daughter's day care center?* A chill had run down her spine when she'd heard the agitated caller, whose voice she didn't recognize, tell her that she should 'come immediately.' She'd slammed the phone down, grabbed her purse, and glanced toward the rear of the travel agency where her boss and a coworker sat talking with clients. No, not enough time to explain now. Pat darted out the front door and turned left on the sidewalk toward the nearest crosswalk, barely noticing the tall, muscular man who stepped out of the alley.

Thankfully, Pat had driven her own car into town; call it a mother's intuition, but something had compelled her to avoid the bus this morning. She hated the city bus, it took longer, it was always crowded, and it smelled of stale body odor masked by cheap perfumes and colognes. It was, however, more convenient and cheaper, considering traffic, parking and the outrageous gas prices. Nevertheless, today she had her own car in the parking garage across the street.

A light drizzle began to fall as Pat reached the crowded street corner. The traffic light was green. "C'mon, c'mon," she said impatiently, making her way to the curb. The early afternoon downtown traffic zipped by as Pat impatiently inched forward. Suddenly, the curved handle of a black umbrella caught her right ankle, causing her to stumble awkwardly off the sidewalk and into the street.

Pat never even saw the twenty-ton city bus.

* * *

Glendale, Arizona

December 14, 2010

Tuesday, 6:50 p.m.

Tito Rojas looked down from his sixth-floor apartment terrace, scanning the street below. Despite the run-down and rough neighborhood, he liked the coziness of the low-income studio apartment, and it was a short walk to work.

A familiar feeling of fear and loneliness crept in as he sipped a bottle of Corona Light, morosely contemplating his life up to now. Another year had gone by without any decent job prospects. Tito wanted more than what his late-night short-order cook job at the 24-hour diner offered. He leaned forward and peered over the railing once more at the inviting black pavement below.

It is never too late to go back to school, he thought, not for the first time.

The vibrating cell phone in his pants pocket brought him out of his trance. "Hello?"

"Hi baby, have you eaten yet?"

Tito half-smiled. He and Paulina had been dating for two years, and she had a way of always brightening his mood. Temporarily anyway, then he would agonize that he had nothing to offer her in the way of a future. He glanced down at his small table, where a paper plate sat holding a half-eaten pepperoni Hot Pocket.

"Not really, baby. I'm not very hungry."

"Hey, hey, what's with this 'not very hungry' crap? It's your birthday, you big dummy. I'm two blocks away and I'm bringing you a surprise dinner, and I picked up your favorite ice cream cake to help cheer you up. I'll be right there."

Tito could hear the love and happiness in her tone. "Okay *Amorcito*, *gracias*, I'll see you soon." He put the cell back in his pocket. Maybe life wasn't that bad after all. Finishing his beer, he grabbed another from the well-used mini-fridge he kept out on the terrace.

Tito heard a noise behind him. As he turned toward the apartment, he felt a hand on his upper back. Seconds later, he was freefalling, arms and legs flailing helplessly. Six floors below, a car alarm on a Honda Civic blasted out an ear-splitting shriek into the quiet night as Tito crashed through its windshield.

* * *

Mesa, Arizona

December 15, 2010

Wednesday, 4:50 p.m.

For the tenth time in the last two minutes, Michael Bauer peered over his cubicle partition and up at the wall clock. He was usually the last one out of the office but today was a special day and he needed to sneak out a few minutes early.

"Hot date, Michael?" Peter Tully looked up from his desk, visibly amused by his

coworker's uncharacteristic clock-watching.

"Yeah, tonight's the night." Michael shut down his computer and locked his file drawer. He pulled a jewelry box out of his shirt pocket and opened it to show Peter.

"Holy crap!" Peter said. He mockingly shielded his eyes from the imaginary glare from the large diamond ring. "Did you rob a bank or something?"

Michael laughed. "No, but keep your voice down, will ya? I've been saving for over a year but had to keep it quiet. I couldn't take any chances that Brittany would find out, since she works downstairs." Michael snapped the box shut. "Gotta run, she's waiting in the lobby and thinks we're going across the street to O'Malley's for happy hour."

"It will definitely be a happy hour for her."

Michael scurried to the elevators and pushed the down button. As he waited, he clutched the jewelry box and silently rehearsed his marriage proposal. The blinking green down arrow and accompanying *ding* sped up his already racing heart. There was no turning back now.

The doors opened and just as he was about to step into the elevator he realized in horror that the car was not there. He pulled his foot back quickly and peered down into the dark shaft. *That was close!*

Then he felt a hand on his back. Before he could grab the doorframe to save himself, he was plummeting down the elevator shaft toward the lobby, four floors down. The last thing he felt was the jewelry box slip from his hand.

* * *

Tucson, Arizona

December 16, 2010

Thursday, 1:55 p.m.

The man from Apartment 102 adjusted his Safeway grocery bags as he reached into his trouser pocket for the door key. As he passed the in-ground swimming pool, he glimpsed an object floating in the water. It was odd, as the pool was rarely used this time of year. Pulling the keys from his pocket, he let the grocery bags fall to the ground. Frozen dinners littered the pool area and cans of Red Bull rolled onto the deck and into the water. The man yelled for someone to call 9-1-1 as he knelt at the edge and reached down into the pool to help his next-door neighbor.

Tina Redding was floating face-down in the water, her body barely beneath the surface. Her auburn hair shimmered and swirled. He pulled her out and laid her gently on the pool's deck. Turning her over, he brushed back wet strands of hair from her face. She'd been dead for a while. Her normally beautiful features were masked in horror and the slightly bloated skin around her open eyes had turned a yellowish rust color. The neighbor was now on autopilot, trying desperately to revive Tina Redding as he clumsily mimicked CPR techniques he'd seen on television. The fact that he wasn't any good at it didn't matter. Tina's lips and nail beds were pale and bluish and her skin was now gray. He screamed for help once again, as he heard the

sirens in the distance. This was the closest he'd ever been to death. He gazed into Tina's dead eyes and a strange calmness washed over him. He decided he would ride with Tina to the hospital. There was nothing else he could do for her now, except to ensure she wasn't alone.

* * *

Tucson, Arizona

December 16, 2010

Thursday, 10:05 p.m.

Caleb Beede finished packing and turned on the KGUN1 ten o'clock news. He grabbed another donut from the Dunkin' Donuts box, ignoring the doctor's warnings about his high blood pressure and high cholesterol count. The way things had quickly spiraled out of control in the past few days, he didn't think he'd be around long enough to die from coronary heart disease. Beede waited for the news anchor to repeat the latest murder story, though no one else knew it was murder, yet. The authorities in Flagstaff, Glendale and Mesa, and now in Tucson, had no reason to link the four recent deaths, nor did they suspect foul play. So far, they were just a series of unfortunate tragedies. Only Beede knew the truth.

Correction, at least two other people knew as well. Steve Woods and Les Goodman had both lied to him. They wouldn't stop now until all five people were dead. He'd tried to warn some of them to keep their mouths shut, but it was still his screw-up that had got those people killed.

After recognizing the names of the first two victims on Wednesday morning's newscast, Beede had gone online and purchased a one-way airline ticket to São Paulo in Brazil. His work on the fake raffle was complete; he was now probably a target himself.

No, not probably...Beede knew his days were numbered when Les Goodman had appeared at his cubicle after the disastrous meeting with Woods.

"What the hell, Caleb," Goodman had said. "Why didn't you come to me immediately? You know bad news doesn't get better with time."

Beede had looked down at his notes on the five people who'd accessed the bogus webpage. "I thought I could handle it," he told Goodman, "but there is something I was afraid to tell Mr. Woods."

"What's that?"

"One of the five, a Dave Canton, he may be a threat." Beede didn't bother to add that he'd made contact with Canton. "He may have downloaded the page when he initially accessed it, but I haven't seen any electronic actions since."

"Great," said Les. "What if he sent it to someone?"

"No way, I would have noticed."

Les stared at him as if he were an unruly child. "You don't think he could have mailed it off to the authorities, if he didn't trust email?"

“Snail mail?” said Beede. “I didn’t consider that. You have to stop him—I can’t go to prison, I can’t.”

Shaking his head, Les Goodman had just walked away.

Beede checked his bedroom clock. He grabbed his airline ticket, passport and visa, and the USB flash drives he’d taken from work, containing the information he’d compiled on the victims. He shoved all of these items into a dark green carry-on bag. The incriminating evidence might be worth something later.

Beede needed to hurry if he was going to make the red-eye flight to Houston, although it would take less than an hour to get to Tucson International Airport and to get through security. Oblivious to the surveillance cameras hidden in two of the vents of his one-bedroom apartment, Beede, his heart racing, made his way to the front door.

As he opened it, and bent down to pick up his suitcase, a gloved hand grabbed his wrist and twisted him around, jamming his face into the doorframe. His chest hurt from the pressure being applied to his back. Beede tried to turn to the side so he could breathe. He felt sudden sharp pains in his chest. The agony was immense. Then, he felt the sharp stab of a needle in his neck. His heart pounded in his chest, and he realized that within minutes he’d suffer a lethal heart attack, likely induced by an untraceable drug. Hadn’t he seen something like this on a *CSI* episode? *This can’t be happening!*

Beede slumped to the floor. Before closing his eyes for the last time, he watched his green carry-on bag swing alongside his killer’s Saucony running shoes.

* * *

Tucson, Arizona
December 17, 2010
Friday, 2:30 p.m.

Dave Canton chose a name in his contact list as he surveyed his living room. It looked like a tornado had just passed through. The windows were open and a light breeze made the thin blinds flutter.

Those bastards!

The long-distance number rang six times. It was three hours later in Massachusetts; maybe he was gone for the day.

“Prater Law Office, this is Betty Ann, how may I help you?”

Dave cleared his throat.

“Joe Prater, please.”

“May I tell him who is calling?”

“Dave Canton.”

“Thank you, I’ll see if Mr. Prater is available to take your call.”

The elevator music had barely begun when Prater came on the line.

“Dave?”

Canton grinned. It had been five years since he had heard that voice. “Yeah, Joe, it’s me.”

“How the hell are you? Are you still living in Phoenix?”

“No, I’m in Tucson now. It’s a little cooler here. And I like the VA hospital better, which is good, seeing as how I practically live there.” Canton knew he was rambling and should get to the point. “Listen, Joe, I need your help.”

“You got it. What’s going on?”

Canton hesitated. “I can’t tell you on the phone.”

“Want me to fly out?”

No hesitation at all. *Army Rangers for life.*

“No. Listen, Joe, I really don’t know why I called. I don’t need a lawyer, at least not yet.”

“I don’t like the sound of this, Dave.”

Canton peered out his living room window but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Cars moved along the avenue, pedestrians walked by, just your average day.

“Joe, someone ransacked my house, and I have a feeling they’ll be back.”

A moment of silence as Joe processed Dave’s words. “Are you okay? What did they take? I’m coming out.”

“No!” Canton didn’t mean to raise his voice. He knew his friend would help, and he could trust Joe completely. “I’m fine, and as far as I can tell nothing is missing. Listen, I need you there, do you still have the same email address?”

“Yes.”

“I may have seen something I wasn’t supposed to. That’s all I can say for now. I’m going to send you an email with some of the information, but I don’t want to get the authorities involved yet.”

Canton could picture Prater processing the words, and more feelings of guilt hit. It must feel like déjà vu, as Joe had helped a friend through a harrowing experience just months before.

“Could this get you hurt, or killed?” Joe asked.

Canton heard Joe’s tension. “Yeah, maybe, I mean...it’s possible.”

“Then call the cops.”

“Joe, I’m freakin’ Special Ops, remember? I can take care of myself.”

“Of course I remember. You saved my life, you stubborn bastard.”

Canton managed a dry laugh. “I’m emailing you some information...if anything happens to me, get the authorities involved, okay? And tell my ex, the rest of my Army pension is hers.”

“Dave, slow down. Tell me what the hell’s going on!”

“I don’t know, yet. I know I sound like a little school girl with all the melodrama, but I have to check out some things first, before I can prove anything. Joe, you’re one of only two people I can trust.”

“Copy that, Sergeant ‘Can Do’ Canton,” Joe sighed, “but we do this by the numbers. If I don’t hear from you within forty-eight hours, the rules of engagement change.”

Fair enough, pal. “Hooah,” he said.

As he hung up the phone, Canton felt a familiar pain viciously attack his right shoulder. Over twelve years in Phoenix, the dry desert heat of Southern Arizona had slightly helped ease his military disability. Now in Tucson, the old Army wound made life a living hell, most days. He cursed the military doctors who'd failed to get all of the shrapnel out. But, the VA doctor had changed his meds, and the new ones seemed to be helping more with the chronic pain.

Canton flipped open his laptop and hastily tapped out a few brief lines before adding Joe Prater's and another buddy's email addresses from his contact list. His hand hovered over the send button. He knew this email would only serve to confuse his two friends. In any case, he had to be careful with his accusations but at least it would give them some information in order to put the pieces together should something happen. *And something was going to happen*, he could feel it.

Canton had hesitated before deciding to call and get Joe involved in this, but the break-in had changed his perspective, and now he feared for his safety. It had to be related to what he'd seen online. *What else could it be? They must be looking for the page I downloaded and printed, but how could they know I did that?* He clicked the send button and let out a full breath. His ears perked up at an unidentifiable sound. He waited, listened...nothing. He removed a revolver from his desk drawer and put it in his back waistband.

Canton knew he could handle any threats on his life. If only his aches and pains would give him a break. He headed to the kitchen for his medication. As he walked through the doorway, a strong and distinct odor of gas engulfed him. He had just enough time to think, *Oh shit*, before the explosion sent him flying backward into the living room. Canton lost consciousness as he careened head-first into the brick fireplace.