

THE PACKAGE

**An International Thriller of Conspiracy,
Murder and Betrayal**

BRYAN QUINN

A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS



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About the Author

Bryan Quinn, a life-long student of history and comparative religion, earned a BA in American History & Politics from McGill University and a Computer Electronics Diploma from Herzing College which comes in handy when he needs to troubleshoot inevitable computer problems. Yet, despite his expertise with computer technology, he still relies on his wife to operate the coffee machine. Bryan lives with her in Canada, the last best place on Earth.

Bryan won an Honorable Mention Award in the worldwide 85th Annual Writer's Digest Short Story Competition in 2016.

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Prologue

Istanbul - Present Day

Leave now or wind up dead like the other two. Delivered hours earlier by his terrified friend, the grim warning continued to spook Marco Arrigoni as he scrambled to plot an escape route across a crumpled map of northern Turkey he had managed to smooth out to the edges of the wobbly kitchen table. It was supposed to be a day he wanted to remember, not one he wanted to forget, but remembering or forgetting this day paled in importance to surviving it, and there was no guarantee he would—all because he had pinched a holy relic from a sacred tomb he probably shouldn't have more than two weeks ago.

And now he found himself holed up in his apartment like a common fugitive, hiding from a vicious killer who hungered after the stolen relic he was safeguarding. Hungered after it badly enough to gun down two innocent men last night, one of whom had been his friend's lover. A definite sign the killer was close on his heels.

Or maybe he was a tad paranoid.

Perhaps. But paranoia didn't waste those two men last night, Marco reminded himself as he struggled to concentrate on the map.

If nothing else, he now understood how a fugitive must feel—an understanding he would gladly give away in charity if he could, generous soul that he was. Beyond that, Marco knew nothing more, and not knowing so unnerved him he couldn't stop himself from flinching at every ominous thump and creak while he studied the map in the confines of his tiny kitchen which seemed more alive than usual. Time was short—a private courier was expected to collect the packaged relic at any moment. Then he would skedaddle; hopefully before the shooting started.

Funny thing how the passing years had changed him. Back in the day, he had cut a broad swathe through his feral Bronx neighborhood cracking skulls and breaking bones, but twenty-plus years of shilling sermons on turning the other cheek had dulled his fighting edge. It was some guilty consolation to him. Guilty because he earned his daily bread preaching a philosophy of life totally at odds with his less-than-

THE PACKAGE

stoic behavior of the moment. But so what? Failing to walk the walk wasn't the end of the world. A desperate killer was stalking him after all. So his friend had warned. Reason enough to excuse this minor episode of backsliding and cut himself some slack. Besides, practicing what he preached wasn't his strong suit. Never had been. Especially the practicing part.

Done justifying his skittish behavior to himself, Marco tore his eyes away from the map and flicked a nervous glance at the clock suspended high on the opposite wall. He did a double-take and swallowed hard. Fear and anger soared in tandem. The blasted courier was late. The odds of the relic falling into the hands of the gunman shot higher.

His mind in turmoil, Marco sat gaping at the timepiece while the rotating second hand ratcheted up his sense of doom, when a horrible awareness rocked him.

If you're killed, the secret in the package will die with you.

Possibly forever.

His senses reeled.

That can't happen. Too much is at stake!

Not one to lose his head at the first sign of disaster, Marco showed anxiety the door and rallied himself. When you get out of this jam alive, you're going to buy that backstreet courier the biggest damn clock in the city and chain him to it. Let him then dare lose track of time again. In spite of his mood, a sly grin stole over his face.

Doubt if the courier will find it funny.

Tough.

As much as he wanted to flee, running from danger wasn't listed in the code that governed his conduct. (He had double-checked to make sure.) His conscience would plague him like an incurable itch if he did. Nah, he'd rather grapple with a psychotic cage fighter than tangle with his nag of a conscience. He had promised to deliver the package, so despite the potential threat to life and limb, deliver it he would.

This wasn't the first time Marco's take-it-to-the-mat sense of moral obligation had placed his life in jeopardy. He just yearned for it to be the last. It had better be. At forty-eight, "Dead Hero" wasn't an

THE PACKAGE

epitaph he hankered after, but it might come to that since he wasn't packing a weapon.

Except.

He flexed his scarred ball peen-knuckled hands and examined them as though seeing them for the very first time...Nails could stand a trim...Not solid enough to stop bullets but strong enough to break bones. Better than nothing, he conceded. Marco hadn't clobbered anyone since becoming a priest over two decades ago. But that's not to say the impulse had vanished altogether. Uh, uh. He had lost count of the number of times he felt like hurtling himself through the flimsy divider in the confessional to knock some sense into the heads of wayward congregants who persisted in committing the same debaucheries again and again and then possessed the gall to ask why the outcomes were no different than the last. The insanity of it all. Lucky for them he feared prison more than he loathed the priesthood. Retirement couldn't come soon enough.

Marco's lapses of compassion aside, his hands and hard-earned street smarts had rescued him from countless scrapes in his past. And then some. He possessed the scars to prove it. Scars or no, the wary voice in his head, the one that had kept him alive in the mean streets of his youth, reminded him he was going to need his hands and his smarts if he expected to outwit the killer. Once more, consequences be damned, he'd trust in his weapons fashioned from flesh and bone to live beyond the end of today. What else could an unarmed man do?

How about run?

He mentally shook himself and turned his restless attention to the bulky package positioned at the edge of the map. It drew him as a wave drawn to the shore. Unable to look away, he regarded it with awe, and his head buzzed. The truth was alive in there. That much was certain. Unbidden, his hand whispered across the map to the package and awarded it a gentle pat.

So many innocents slaughtered across so many centuries for the sake of some well-spun lies. Never again! he vowed. The message in this package will expose the biggest hoax ever foisted upon huma—

“Enough!” He glared at the window, and if looks could shatter, the glass would've burst.

THE PACKAGE

Shrill for the time of day, unusual since rush hour hadn't yet slipped its straining leash, the din of traffic flaring up from four stories below sprang him from his chair, sending it crashing across the linoleum floor into the fridge, and he stomped to the window to investigate....

Lined up bumper to bumper, cars crawled past his building in horn-blaring protest. Then he noticed further along the road a double-parked car, its taillights flashing.

"Way to go, buddy," he yelled into the noise. "Those flashers will speed things up real fast." He ducked in and slammed shut the window. "Takes just one selfish jerk to cause a stretch of chaos."

A might too preoccupied with the fix he was in to latch on to the illegally parked vehicle as a harbinger of something more than a mere case of bad manners, Marco spun away from the window, none the wiser.

"Damn natives have got nothing better to do than pound on their horns," he griped as he went to retrieve his chair. If he had the time, he'd pound on the drivers just to hear *them* wail.

He shoved the chair home with his foot and plunked himself down in it. Powerless to stop the manic traffic noise, he rubbed his hands through his wavy jet hair and let them flop onto the table, and another glimpse at the burning clock did little to cool his annoyance.

He grunted in frustration. Needing to distract himself, he ranged through the rudimentary plan he had devised from start to finish. He could find no hiccup in it. Must be perfect. He stole a final look at the map, thinking, Should be a quiet place to hunker down in until things blow over. No one will think of searching for me there. Any place is better, not to mention safer, than this apartment. And if it isn't, well, I'll find out soon enough.

The escape route Marco would travel to reach a secluded Greek monastery in the northeast part of the country memorized, he gathered the crumpled map, refolded it after several maddening attempts and rammed it into his back pocket for future retrieval.

A futile expectation he would later discover.

With nothing left to do, he stared out the filmy kitchen window at the Hagia Sophia, its massive brick-and-mortar dome seemingly

THE PACKAGE

propping up the leaden sky like a giant umbrella, while his fingers probed the jagged scars on his knuckles, the crude braille of a troubled past etched in his flesh, if not in his soul.

His gaze turned inward. My wounds run deep. Woe to me. Time to grow a thicker skin. He became serious again.

How did the shooter hear of the relic? he asked himself and not for the first time today. Only three other people know about it. Two of them are trustworthy. They wouldn't say a word. But the third. Could he have informed the gunman from jail...? But how?

He would give much for the answers to these questions. Even your vows...? Let me get back to you. Too overwrought to think straight, he let the matter drop. The answers probably wouldn't change his predicament anyway.

The horns continued to blare but Marco's gaze did not waver.

Doing his best to ignore the shrill protest percolating up from the traffic-snarled street thirty-feet below, and suppressing his gut instinct to lay down some shoe leather and beat a path to safety, he sat tight and willed the courier to materialize. Only then would he put feet to pavement and disappear. And with no trail to follow, so might the unknown killer.

He hoped.

That was the plan. Such as i—

The door buzzer detonated the tense atmosphere in the apartment. Marco bolted upright in his chair.

Must be the courier. So he deigned to show up. About damn time.

Hurrying toward the front door, relief overcame him.

It didn't last.

An obvious question rattled his brain.

What if it's not him?

Marco froze and time with him, and the living room seemed to shrink and fade away until he was aware of nothing but the front door, looming before him. Perhaps if he remained still, the caller might give up and leave.

The buzzer detonated again, he jumped out of his skin.

Caught in the amber of indecision, Marco fixated on the door, knowing there was no going back once he opened it.

THE PACKAGE

His senses on full alert, he found his courage and reached for the deadbolt with utmost effort, like in a nightmare, and at that moment a shudder ripped through him—the fuse on the most explosive secret in history was about to be lit.

Marco didn't know how wrong he was.

Part I

The cultivation of percipient doubt is the greatest hindrance to the spread of falsehood

Chapter One

Roman Province of Judea – Early First Century CE

An ill wind crept through the hushed streets of Bethany, which lay dark and deserted beneath a cold, moonless sky, while a jury of crows with fierce black eyes surveilled a house from atop the highest building in town. The scribe held his emotions in check as he watched the retiring figure of his teacher pass through the doorway one last time without so much as a glance back. Despite having learned he had been sentenced to die in the cruelest of manners by his rivals, his teacher had departed their meeting in high spirits. Unremarkable that. Because his teacher knew what his enemies knew not. And so did the scribe. But what the scribe didn't know, nor could he possibly, because he would be long dead before the event would ever come to pass, was the secret shared by his teacher this evening would come to light one day far in the future and expose the carefully crafted lies surrounding his teacher's actual fate.

Out of respect for his teacher, the scribe waited for the door to his room to close before letting out a cavernous yawn. His drowsiness momentarily subdued, he laid aside his quill and writing palette with a sense of release. Seated cross-legged on the tiled floor in a dim pool of light cast by an oil lamp, he stretched his arms and aching fingers before him, listening to them crack. Bleary-eyed, he gazed with wonder upon the scroll lying before him. Done transcribing the message of his teacher, a message of peace preserved for prosperity on calfskin, he acknowledged the futility of his accomplishment. Three onerous years of preaching this message by his teacher throughout Judea had brought neither him nor his community any peace.

In its stead, the message had ushered in a period of social and political unrest in danger of descending into violence. Not an unusual state of affairs. Whenever the authority of an entrenched power felt threatened, reprisal was in the offing for the source of this threat. It would be no different for his teacher.

But the scribe was not worried. The enemies of his teacher could scheme and conspire all they wanted in hopes of putting an end to the

THE PACKAGE

supposed source of this unrest. But their schemes, like their hopes, would be in vain. For the Lord was the best of the planners.

He gingerly turned his head left and right to relieve the painful kinks in his neck and noticed the faint glow behind the curtained window on the opposite wall had faded to black. Night had fallen. When? He couldn't begin to guess. After many hours of transcribing, he was oblivious of time. But it must have been long ago because his limbs were heavy with fatigue and the house lay in deep silence. If not for the rhythm of his breathing, he heard no other sound in an atmosphere layered with tension.

He remembered his companions had gone to their beds earlier than usual, the teacher's sermon on the mount having taken its physical toll on them. So would have he, but his conscience, obsessed with fulfilling his solemn duty, would not surrender to the irresistible need for sleep. And now his exhausted body ached for rest.

There will be time for slumber, he reassured himself. Not now. But soon. Very soon.

He puckered his cheeks, blew out the guttering flame in the oil lamp and crabbed over to his wool bedding. Alone in his room with only the oppressive darkness for company, he stretched out on his back, cupped his hands behind his head and stared holes in a ceiling he couldn't see, only imagine, his mind at work. My teacher's enemies have convened in secret and rendered their tainted verdict. Before long I, too, shall convene in secret. But it is history who shall render its impartial judgement! Hardly had he formed this intention when his inner voice whispered to him this moment was at hand.

That quickly, he rolled on to his side and pushed himself off his bedding, brimming with anticipation. The time for waiting was over. Nervous exhilaration rose in his breast and his skin tingled. Everything rested on the success of a secret meeting he had planned for tonight. Destiny was at hand. Though his cause was fraught with risk it was also freighted with reward, and the triumph of his cause would depend in significant part on his character and wits. But he also believed success was dependent on the will of his Lord.

Disoriented by the utter dark, he stood still and felt for the bedding with his bare foot and concentrated. Mindful now of his whereabouts,

THE PACKAGE

he picked his way to the opposite wall without kicking over the ink pot he had been using earlier and congratulated himself. He slid his hand along the smooth and cool surface of the plastered wall until it brushed against the curtain which screened the solitary window in his room. A cold draft snatched at him as he drew back a corner of the heavy fabric, a warning to him to dress warm tonight. He ignored the chilly air and surveyed the canvas of high velvet sky. The patch of the heavens he scoped from his location was thick with stars, moonless. Relief washed over him.

A good omen. My movements will be harder to detect beneath a cover of darkness, he told the night.

Gratified, he let the curtain fall, snuffing out the feeble starglow. He turned away from the window and eased his way back to his bedding to retrieve an object vital to tonight's meeting. He concealed the bulky object beneath his garments. Careful not to disturb his companions asleep in adjacent rooms, he clothed his sandals and cloud-stepped out of the two-story home.

A shock of frigid air greeted him outside and bid his lingering drowsiness farewell. He bunched his shoulders and drew his thick woolen robes close to himself. A crow cawed a cautioning note. He glanced up. Worry lines deepened on his face.

Evil is astir this night.

Alert now but still wary, he paused in the recessed doorway that fronted the unlit street prepared for danger. I seek protection with God from the accursed devil, he prayed, a prayer he never failed to invoke whenever he departed a dwelling. For only brigands roamed the streets at this hour, desiring to ply their evil deeds under the veil of night.

Unsettled by the malevolent charge in the atmosphere, he leaned forward and cast furtive glances up and down the murky street from the safety of the doorway. Long liberated from the noisy daytime parade of beast and man and from the pall of churned-up dust that hangs heavy in the air like a depthless fog, the street appeared to be empty, his eyes attentive to the slightest of movement in the shadows.

At length satisfied with his inspection, he straightened up and inhaled deeply. The air tasted fresh, perfumed with night-time odors and scents. Then he exhaled slowly. He repeated this breathing

exercise several times. Little by little, he felt his anxiety depart in plumes of frosted air.

Revitalized and his guard up, he scanned the street one last time. Still empty. He took one more sober pause and a sense of conviction stole over him. You can do it. But his nerves were telling him something else. He ignored them. There was more to life than succumbing to one's fears. Confident no one lurked in the darkness, with his staff in hand, he steeled himself and rushed into the deserted streets of the town with only the glint of stars to light his way. He was committed now.

How different his neighborhood appeared at night. Details had vanished and colors had transmuted to shades of black as he slipped by darkened homes and shuttered shops, their owners sleeping the sleep of the overworked, unaware of the plot unfolding in their midst. He scooted along the dirt lanes like a whisper of air, forming the briefest of acquaintances with the darkest of shadows as he forged toward the clandestine meeting site with unexaggerated caution, his eyes constantly sweeping his environment for danger and his ears alert for the sound of pursuers. And despite his best efforts to be noiseless, his footfalls, muffled by sackcloth tied around each leather-shod foot, made soft thumps against the ground in the narrow passageways.

So dark and so still, he observed. Like a graveya—the anguished braying of a tormented donkey shredded the tranquility of the night, setting off a chorus of bays from watchdogs in stone-walled yards surrounding him. Startled by the sudden commotion, he froze and terror stabbed at his entrails. He tensed and glanced around. An urge to quit this place, to abandon his duty, seized him. If not for his faith and his self-discipline, he might have succumbed to fear. But there was no turning back. Too much was at stake. Instead of retreating, he darted next to a stone building and squatted, unsure if he had been seen or heard.

With nothing to do but wait, he rubbed his cold hands together, damp with anxiety, and a bead of sweat trickled down his back despite the cold.

Cursed dogs might draw a Roman foot patrol to this area. That is all I need.

THE PACKAGE

Waiting was no easier for him than for anyone else, but patience, a virtue he possessed in large measure, was his ally this night. On edge, he listened while his apprehension mounted.

Households awakened. Angry shouts for quiet rang out in the dark and, but for the odd mutter, the four-legged friends of man, their guard duty loyally performed, called it a night and turned in. With quiet restored, he snuck a peek around the corner of the home. His vision by now adapted to the darkness, the vicinity seemed safe, as best he could tell, and he heard nothing. Emboldened by the silence, but still on edge, he grabbed his staff, jumped to his feet and dashed off.

Cautious, though it was the depth of night, he kept his identity shielded with the cowl of his woolen robe as he snaked his way through the winding streets. He could not be found in this neighborhood in possession of what he carried beneath his layers of clothing. His teacher's enemies would kill him for it. Invisible and propulsive, the fear of capture drove him to fulfil his duty while there was still time.

Rounding a street corner as he raced through the town, the tramp of marching feet carried on the quiet night air drew closer to him. His heart banged against his chest wall, blood chilled in his veins.

Roman foot patrol, his ears reported. "Cursed dogs!" he hissed.

Where to hide? No place for concealment. In the gathering peril, an inspired ruse lit up his mind. Quick-thinking is the ally of the frightened. He began tapping his staff on the ground in a steady cadence and repeating in a measured voice, "Alms. Alms for the blind and the poor. Alms."

The footsteps grew closer until they were almost upon him.

"Halt!" someone in authority ordered.

The scribe ceased begging and came to a standstill as did the foot patrol.

"Who goes there?" the one in charge challenged.

"Samir the blind beggar, centurion." He gave the speaker a lofty title to inflame his pride.

"It is past curfew."

"I have no reckoning of day or night, good sir."

The lead soldier approached him and whipped off his hood. He stood still, peering without attention at his unlit surroundings. The soldier then raised his hand and made to strike him, but he did not recoil, continuing to study his environment with an unfocused gaze. He seemed to have passed some kind of test for the leader said, "Go about your business, you fool. A thief's dagger will skewer your flesh before this night is through."

A sharp order was spoken, and the stamp of many feet faded away into the gloaming behind him. He let out a long slow breath.

Calm restored to him, he replaced his hood and set off again. Guided only by his memory, it came as a surprise when he found himself across the street from the secret meeting place, an unremarkable one-story, stone-built home similar in construction to its neighbors, and he savored the sight of it. He stopped to catch his wind and offer up an unspoken prayer of gratitude. Done, he listened while he studied both ways before approaching his objective. The narrow street was devoid of life. He could not be seen here for its owner was a senior member of the Sanhedrin as well as a secret follower of his teacher's way. There was no telling what the High Priest would do to the owner if his double life was discovered. The scribe advanced on the stout iron-strapped door in the thrall of anxiety and tapped out a series of knocks, a signal to the proprietor of his safe arrival.

Hurry, he willed, the tension a palpable sensation in the dark.

Nerve-wrenching moments later the door opened without a sound and beyond it stretched a black emptiness. He plunged through the entrance with the silent words "in the name of God" on his lips and was swallowed up by the dark void. The door closed silently behind him.

Solid as it was he knew the wooden planked door offered scant protection from enemies determined as those who had his teacher in their sights. Nonetheless, he breathed a heavy sigh and the burden of worry that weighed on him sprang from him like a boulder from a catapult. His success up to this point was worthy of celebration but he was not in a triumphant mood. For he was preoccupied with a far-reaching decision he had to make. A decision that would safeguard the truth about his teacher's ultimate fate.

He swept back the cowl of his robe in a fluid hand movement and stood in silence for several heartbeats to gather himself. The warmth of the room thawed the ice in his veins and the air, laced with the elusive traces of—cinnamon? nutmeg?—delighted his nose. Temporarily blind but alert, he heard the rustle of garments and the slap of sandaled feet on the tiled floor pass by him in the dark and come to a halt several cubits away. Clicks and clacks of metal on flint made him start. Sparks flashed to his right. A wick made of sheep's wool dipped in a clay pot filled with olive oil sputtered then flamed in its niche. Shadows, brought to life once more, swayed on the uneven stone walls. The soft, flickering light cheered him, the darkness driven to the corners of the snug room.

An expression of relief on his face, the host, clothed in a long-sleeved, ankle-length garment padded across the softly lit room towards him with arms outstretched, clasped his cold hands—his eyes widened briefly—and extended to him the traditional greeting: “Peace unto you, brother. Praise to God the Almighty who guided you safely to me.”

Squeezing his host's warm hands, “Unto you peace, as well, brother,” the scribe replied in kind, his lips parting in a shy smile. “Thanks to the Almighty for His protection,” he added.

“There is a dreadful chill in the air this night,” the host said, making polite conversation.

“In more ways than one,” the esteemed visitor replied, and the host seemed to wonder at his remark.

A *sella* was offered him. Thanking his host, the scribe raked his fingers through his shoulder-length, dark, curly hair and, with care, lowered his sturdy frame to the seat, unsure of its ability to support his weight. Seated, and his eyes by now adapted to the weak light, he inspected the spartan room, taking in the sparse furnishings and bare stone walls. A man of immense wealth and yet he lives modestly. He nodded his approval. Good. For this humble abode might one day be taken from him, if he accepts my plea for help. Loss is the essence of sacrifice. But the reward for sacrifice is greater than the loss, if not in this life, then surely in the next.

THE PACKAGE

They sat opposite one another, their faces half-hidden in shadow. Finished wandering, his eyes came to rest on his host, who sat expectantly on his sella, palming his knees. Curly salt-and-pepper hair crowned his head and from beneath silvery, caterpillar-like brows, a pair of keen black eyes peered back at him, likely wondering why this hasty meeting had been called.

He held the other's gaze in the faint light. "I feared my secret message might not have reached you earlier today."

"And I was worried you would not make it here. But God did not forsake us," the host replied.

Without warning, the scribe shot forward and spoke with urgency, "Brother, the die is cast. The life of our dear teacher is at stake!" He couldn't help but notice the visible effect of his words on his companion.

The host went rigid on his sella, firm resolution on his face. "God willing, I shall do everything in my power to save him from his fate, O scribe of the M'sheekha," no false courage in his tone.

The scribe sat back in silence and smiled his pleasure at the host's brave and spontaneous response. It will require more than your resolve, Most Beloved, to save our teacher's life. Much more than you could imagine. And you will soon discover just how much.

THE PACKAGE