

In the subterranean depths of his medieval church, a jaded priest stumbles upon irrefutable proof of an ancient conspiracy with the power to demolish the pillars of his faith, launching him on a collision course with a ruthless enemy who will stop at nothing to suppress the explosive truth of his epic discovery.

THE PACKAGE:
An International Thriller of Conspiracy,
Murder and Betrayal
by BRYAN QUINN

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BRYAN
QUINN

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Second Edition

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 silent murder of crows surveilled with fierce black eyes a sacred dwelling from atop the highest perch in town. The scribe held his emotions in check as he watched the retiring figure of his teacher depart 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 enemies, his teacher had left their meeting in high spirits. Unremarkable that. Because his teacher knew what his enemies did not. And now so did the scribe. But what he didn't grasp, nor could he, because he would be long dead before the event would ever come to pass, was that the secret shared by his teacher this evening would surface one future day and expose the carefully crafted lies concealing 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 the 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 supposed source of this unrest. But their schemes, like their hopes, would be in vain. For their 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 steady 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 screamed 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 onto 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 nerves 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, 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, 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 above. 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 released the curtain, 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 which 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, he warned himself.

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 wicked 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

hung 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 desperate plot unfolding in their midst. He scooted along 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—from nowhere 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.

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 concealing him. 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.

Racing around a street corner, he heard the tramp of marching feet carried on the quiet night air grow louder. His heart banged against his ribs, blood chilled in his veins. He skidded to a stop.

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 spoken, 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. He savored the sight of it. He caught his wind and offered up an unspoken prayer of gratitude. Done, he listened while he looked both ways before approaching his objective. The narrow street was devoid of life. Thanks to God. 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 owner 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 expelled 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 similar 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, he believed.

They sat opposite one another now, 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 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," he said, 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.

Chapter Two

Istanbul – Present Day

Alone in his mental space, the hum of the city sounded far away while Marco Arrigoni stared out the open window of his office located on a quiet leafy side street. Experiencing a bout of writer's block, he sought inspiration in the view from where he sat. Lack of original ideas seemed to be affecting him more and more these days. Burnout must be just around the corner.

He focused his eyes on the slender minarets of the Blue Mosque, named for the profusion of blue Iznik tiles that adorned the interior walls of this archetype of Ottoman sacred architecture. The cylindrical columns of stone crowned with cone-shaped caps poked high above the red-tiled rooftops, stark against the bowl of blue sky. Not unusual. Minarets were as common a site in his adopted homeland as steeples were back home in New York.

The stone-built minarets alternated between a pale beige and bluish-grey, depending on the position of the sun, or maybe it was the intensity of the sun. He wasn't sure which. They sure beat staring at his computer screen all day. Today they were bluish-gray.

For close to seventeen hundred years, the Golden Horn, the strategic peninsula where he toiled away week after week, had been the imperial seat of three empires: Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman. Then, in well less than a century, the drums of war gave way to the beat of commerce, and Istanbul metamorphosed from imperial capital to holiday mecca, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922.

Although he couldn't see them or hear them from his office window, and though he wasn't a gambling man (provided his raise came through next month, otherwise, all bets were off), he'd wager that at this very moment, with summer still in full swing, tourists in their multitudes were thronging the covered laneways of the Grand Bazaar—one of the oldest shrines to shopping in the world. Begun in 1456 by Mehmet the Conqueror and expanded in subsequent years, the Grand Bazaar housed close to four thousand shops. A shopping mecca second to none.

Marco, however, rarely paid tribute to Mammon in that cathedral of commerce. Shopping wasn't his thing. But if it were, he wasn't paid enough to relieve the ennui of life with shopping excursions. Most of the time he was too consumed with work far more spiritual than commercial in nature (at least that's what he told himself). Unavoidably so. He was the parish priest of Santi Giuseppe Church, a church which enjoyed a celebrated status among his flock. Legend had it, his church had been built over the tomb of a holy man sometime in the late tenth century when Istanbul was called Constantinople, the Second Rome, named for Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor. The local Catholics believed the holy man would protect them so long as his tomb remained undisturbed. Father Marco didn't put much stock in the legend. Like his faith, it was just so much folklore.

Just then *she* popped into his head. He pictured his friend in his mind's eye...Her smile. A fixation of shiny white teeth and glossy rouge lips, that smile...But her smile imparted friendship, not romance...So far as he could tell...Why do you torture yourself with thoughts of her? How many women fall in love with a priest? The answers wouldn't come to him. He blinked and her image dissolved, the neural equivalent of a puff of smoke before a gust of wind. Once again he was alone in his mind, staring off into the distance.

Inspiration not on offer in the vista before him, he turned away from the window with a tic of discontent. Best get back to the daily beans-and-wieners routine, he urged himself. Working at his desk in frustrated industry, papers and reference books piled without care on its cluttered surface, he reread the text on the computer screen for the fiftieth, hundredth time? He had lost track of how many times. He was cranking out the Sunday sermon, his most important weekly task, and it was giving him trouble. Composing each sentence on the page was excruciating, like excavating a fossil. And he knew this firsthand because he dabbled in archeology in his spare time.

His brow knit in concentration, Father Marco struggled to express in words a middle ground between faith and modern life, the theme of his sermon. His parishioners, blighted souls one and all in his opinion, were constantly wrestling with the conflicting demands

of the secular and spiritual realms. (Wallowing in the muck of sin was more precise, but who was he to judge?) Thus, they were in constant need of practical guidance to help them navigate the stormy shoals of modern life. Between him and the wall, a slap upside the head would be more effective, but then a priest has to conduct himself within acceptable social norms. Ever the optimist—or masochist, take your pick—he believed his sermon would deliver this essential navigation and, with the help of God, prevent his flock from running aground in the moral shallows. They needed all the divine help they could get. Deserved or otherwise.

So absorbed in his work, he didn't sense at first the faint motion of his padded seat. But as it grew in strength, he could no longer ignore it. His concentration broke, and his eyes drifted from the computer monitor, concern in them. Rumbling's too strong for a passing truck, he gauged. Icy fingers of alarm crept up his spine and his flesh crawled. In the next moment reality hit him.

Earthquake!

He dove beneath his desk with only his stomach-churning dread for company, and the rattling increased to a terrifying racket. While he huddled in terror on the bone-jarring floor, the acid taste of fear in his mouth, his thoughts vaulted back to memories of the last major earthquake that had stricken Istanbul.

When was that? he asked himself as he quivered on the floor...August 1999, he recalled after a rapid heartbeat or three, answering his own question.

That earthquake had been a powerful one. A 7.9. Thousands of people had died in it. The epicenter, which had been farther east, on the Asian side of the city, had caused significant damage to Istanbul's infrastructure. As items crashed to the ground around him, adding to his already considerable distress, he prayed for divine deliverance from such a fate.

Not ready to pass through the Pearly Gates just yet, my Lord.

His prayer (and the prayers of many others) must have been answered because, as if on cue, his office became eerily quiet and the floor ceased shuddering, the giant jackhammer pounding the earth stilled by a mighty hand. Car alarms wailed in the distance and dogs

bawled. Still wary, thinking what could have been, he poked his head out from beneath his desk, unsure if it was safe to leave his improvised shelter.

Now he knew how the bells on a Turkish belly dancer must feel. Actually, he knew exactly how they felt, but it was best if that peccadillo stayed within the confines of the confessional.

Still on his knees, he took stock of himself. Shaken and dishevelled, he was otherwise unscathed. He stood up, brushed off his black soutane, combed back his dense, charcoal hair with his fingers, and expressed an unspoken prayer of gratitude.

Exhilaration infused his central nervous system, like an athlete mounting the winner's podium. He had won. He had cheated death—unharmd! But not his office he noticed; his features tweaked in displeasure. A bookcase, which he had meant to level but hadn't gotten around to doing, was face down on the stone floor next to the desk, its contents strewn about, and framed items, which once graced the bare stone walls, now lay shattered on the floor. And a bust of Lincoln, his favorite president, lay in pieces, mixed in with the books and shards of glass, too small to glue back together. An edgy stillness hung over the room.

Then his eyes fell upon a framed picture of his mother and sister lying atop the debris. Somehow it had survived intact. He blew the dust off the glass and stared at the picture, forgetting himself for a moment in a memory of the past. He graced the picture with a kiss before placing it back on his desk.

He glanced around and nodded in satisfaction. Appears we lucked out. Hope the rest of the church did too. I can't afford any downtime. My damn sermon isn't going to write itself...Unless procrastination succumbs to desperation and I slip an old sermon past them. The mischievous idea brought a grin to his face, but it was quickly erased by concern for his church.

A weekday afternoon, the nave was most likely empty of parishioners making devotions. No surprise there. Nevertheless, Father Marco strode from his office with urgency in his step, the chance of injury, even death, still a possibility. He marched through the north transept into the crossing aware of the thump of his racing

heart, and the echo of his thick-soled shoes on the ancient flagstone floor worn smooth by centuries of use telegraphed his progress into the cavernous nave, the main body of the church.

He entered the nave in a state of apprehension while motes of dust floated on blades of sunlight which pierced the lancet stained-glass windows above, decorating the vast open space in a panorama of colorful stripes.

Holding his breath, he completed a quick survey of the church. Much to his delight, only the pews were dislodged and a few unlit candlesticks on the high altar table had toppled over. He permitted himself a long relieved sigh; the tightness in his chest relaxed. The church, based on his cursory inspection, seemed to have withstood the tremor undamaged.

Appears I'll have to finish my damn sermon after all.

He didn't see or hear any injured worshippers flailing or wailing about and his heart swelled with gratitude for small mercies. The sight of blood distressed him even though he had seen plenty of it in his former life. Hands clasped behind his back, he rocked on the balls of his feet and, in spite of his irreverence, soaked up the visual splendor of his church in solemn silence what thousands of other awestruck worshippers had likely done over the ages. The very grandeur of the space mocked whatever out-sized measure of self-importance he possessed.

Every architectural detail in sight proclaimed the power and glory of the Almighty. A gilded coffered-ceiling, framing ornamental rosettes in bold relief in its recessed panels, soared high above him, and successive rows of lofty yellow and white marble columns, ramrod at attention, flanked both sides of the nave from front to back, while faithfully-rendered biblical scenes, exploding with color and exuding a deep degree of spirituality, painted with adoration on the far walls left and right, carried his thoughts to another dimension. A visual symphony of form and function exceeded only by that of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome he felt compelled to ad—

Intruding upon his meditative state, almost beyond the range of earshot, he heard off to his left a groan. Now what? he thought with barely concealed irritation. He turned toward the direction of the

eerie sound, cocked an ear and deliberated whether the church itself was the source of it. He caught the moan again, in the right aisle, among the rows of columns.

Evil spirits? He stiffened and fingered the large crucifix dangling from his neck. I wonder if the crucifix can ward them off...He stole across the nave as if he were about to be pounced on and peered between the shadowy columns.

To his surprise—and relief—he spied the feet of his custodian beside a column, sticking up on the cold floor next to an overturned footstool. No evil spirits after all!

“Dimitri,” Father Marco cried out.

In a flurry, he dashed between the columns, nearly tripping on the hem of his soutane. He had forgotten about the cranky caretaker. Which was difficult to do most days. For good reason. Nonetheless, sickly guilt pinged his conscience.

Kneeling on the floor beside him, Father Marco said in Turkish, his voice raised, “Dimitri, my dear. Can you hear me...?”

He stirred and his eyelids fluttered.

DI-MEE-TR—”

“Don’t yell. I’m not deaf.”

“I wasn’t yel—”

“What happened?” Dimitri said as he brought his hand to his head.

“You don’t remember?”

“I’m just asking for the helluva it.”

Father Marco’s mouth flopped open, then it clamped shut for a beat. “An earthquake hit us. But not a bad one, thank God.”

A brief smile flickered at the corners of Dimitri’s mouth. Father Marco wondered at this. But not for long because Dimitri then said, “See what I have to suffer for this job.”

“No one—” he held his tongue, and not for the first time “—Never mind. Are you hurt?”

“I was meditating before you interrupted me,” he snapped. His eyes adopted a searching look as though he were taking a mental inventory of his body. “My head hurts.”

Father Marco was tempted to ask, “Can I knock some sense into it?” but let it pass and opted for “May I examine it?”

Dimitri moved his head in a sluggish manner which Father Marco guessed—correctly—was a gesture of consent. With a delicate touch, he examined Dimitri’s pumpkin-sized head and felt on the back of his skull a small knot beneath mousy hair.

“Hmmm,” he intoned with the gravity of an ER doctor.

“What?”

“It’s never been done before,” Marco said out loud, pretending to be in deep discussion with himself.

Dimitri became agitated. “What’s wrong?”

“I think we have to amputate,” he said in a serious tone.

“Amputate?” Alarm showed in Dimitri’s eyes. “Amputate what?”

“Your skull,” and he let go of the laughter he was suppressing.

Dimitri’s alarm flipped to anger. “Now that you’ve had your *fun*, help me to my feet.”

He managed to get Dimitri into a sitting position.

“Don’t be rough with me.”

Father Marco rolled his eyes heavenward.

Little by little, he helped Dimitri, a stout man, rise to a standing position, requiring no small amount of effort on both their part. Once on his feet, he swayed like a sailor after a night on the town—make that several towns.

“Take a seat,” Father Marco advised, indicating a pew, “while I go scrounge for something cold for that bump.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, Father,” he said, slumped in the pew.

“It’ll reduce the swelling.”

Dimitri palpated the bulge with his fingers. He winced. “The bump isn’t big.”

“It will also numb the pain,” Father Marco added as an inducement.

“It doesn’t hurt much.”

“It’s what’s best for you.”

“I said—” He stopped himself short, realizing who he was addressing. “If you must,” he relented.

“Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” Father Marco turned away. Touchy, touchy. What’s biting him? He never pretended to fathom his crankier-than-usual colleague in any depth though they had been working together going on twenty years. His custodian liked to keep to himself. You’d think the old grouch would show some appreciation for my concern, he grumbled as he made his way to the small kitchen. Maybe a kick in the pants would straighten him out. The notion of corporal punishment lightened his mood while he prepared the icepack on the counter.

He returned a few minutes later and presented Dimitri with an improvised icepack wrapped in paper towel. It was the best he could do under the circumstances.

Dimitri pulled a questioning look at him. “Yogurt?”

“Don’t worry. It’s frozen—and it’s fat-free.” Unlike that head of yours.

He backed down and mumbled, “Well, you did say it was fat-free.” He grabbed the frozen container and set it against the lump...“Thank you, Father.”

At an age when most men were well into retirement, Dimitri was one of those rare men who worked and stayed active. Why was anyone’s guess.

“Did the church suffer any damage?” Dimitri asked.

“It’s still in one piece as far as I can tell.”

“So now you’re a stone mason?”

Father Marco caught himself before replying. “I suggest you take the remainder of the day off, my dear,” he said, hoping his paternal tone masked his exasperation.

“Let me rest a bit. This wooziness is only temporary.”

“You shouldn’t push yourself.”

“I’ve been in a lot worse situations.”

“But you’re not a young man anymore.”

“I could still give you what for,” he said with a cocky air.

Weeks later, fate would give him his chance.

Father Marco allowed himself a grin. If only you knew. “No one said you couldn’t.”

“Made your diagnosis haven’t you?”

“You know it. And you should let a doctor inspect your head.” Preferably by one schooled in psychiatry.

“Let’s sit here a while longer,” he said to stall.

Father Marco joined him on the pew and they made small talk.

Dimitri finally gave in. “Think you can manage this place in my absence?”

“It’ll be difficult without you.”

Tone-deaf to Father Marco’s sarcasm he said, “Don’t let the church fall apart while I’m gone.”

“We’ll miss you.”

Dimitri rode a taxi home instead of a bus. Later that day, passengers on the bus celebrated their good fortune.

Father Marco spent the remainder of his day rearranging pews and putting his office back in order. When done, he sprawled out in his office chair, his energy spent. He hadn’t felt this drained since chasing frisky nuns around at the start of his ministry.

Aah, the advantage of youth. Age is gaining on me. No matter how much I exercise or how well I eat.

His eyes coasted over his messy desk and noticed a pile of folders he had stacked on it during the cleanup. His chin dropped to his chest and he heaved a weary sigh. You should put those files where they belong. They aren’t going to get there by themselves. Maybe the angels will do it for me. Dream on.

Still too beat to move, he resisted the urge to rise. Minutes ticked by; his eyelids grew heavy. Better move or you’ll fall asleep, he prodded himself. Hands on the armrests, he pushed himself to his feet, gathered the files in one arm and trudged to the stairs that led to the archives.

The air grew cooler with each step he descended on the stone stairwell into the depths of the medieval church and it revived him. Upon reaching the landing, he strode along a narrow, weakly-lit passageway tailed by his shadow on the rough stone walls, his footsteps ringing out in the subterranean space. He stopped before a secure metal door and keyed himself into the archive with his free hand. A rush of cold, musty air grabbed at him. He groped for the light switch on the wall to his left and flicked it on. While he stood

transfixed in the doorway, gripped by a scene of mayhem that stretched to the far wall beyond, he felt a curtain of despair zip across his face. Filing cabinets and shelving units lay toppled over, their contents vomited onto the stone floor.

He groaned inwardly, overcome by the chaos. Now I have to clean up this kuffing mess, pronouncing the gerund of a popular profanity backwards. I'll never finish my sermon on time.

Snapping out of his funk, he picked his way to the center of the archive and unburdened himself of the folders he was carrying. The groined vault room being quite large, the naked overhead bulb laboured mightily but failed to illuminate the entire storage space, surrendering to the shadows in the far corners.

In the feeble light, at the rear of the archive, he noticed a lone filing cabinet leaning at an odd angle. It nabbed his attention. What gives? His curiosity aroused, he crossed the floor to investigate, but halted abruptly several feet away from the cabinet; it had sunken into the floor.

Ho-lee Mother! The floor isn't built on solid rock. He puzzled over this for a few beats...Too late to sue the builders, I bet, and he grinned at his own humor.

Out of an abundance of caution, he approached the cabinet on cat feet, testing the floor with each footstep. Assured the floor was firm, he tried to shove the cabinet onto solid ground. It wouldn't budge, not even an inch.

Dammit. Now I'll have to empty it. Like I don't have more important things to do with my kuffing time.

With an air of resignation, he got down to the unenviable task of clearing out the cabinet's drawers of their precious contents, mostly birth and baptismal records and marriage and death certificates, the milestones of people's lives chronicled for posterity on reams of paper and parchment. He spent precious minutes stacking items in neat piles, cursing all the while under his breath. All but the bottom drawer were emptied.

I should be able to budge it now. Here goes...

He gave the metal cabinet a good shove, and it screeched in protest against the friction with the floor as it escaped the hole's maw

which had attempted to scarf down more than it could chew. He sniffed at the musty air, then stooped to peer into the gaping cavity. Nothing was discernible in the gloom.

I wonder what's hiding down there. Buried treasure? he kidded himself. Well, you won't discover anything without better lighting.

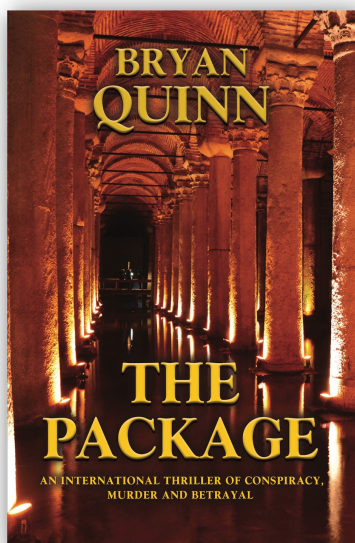
Possessed with visions of treasure and the opportunity to wrest it from the pit, he ignored the disorder around him and went to fetch a flashlight from Dimitri's storeroom.

With flashlight in hand, he returned to the archive room, chockfull of excitement and with a spark of adventure in his eyes. He knelt before the void and shined the powerful beam of light into the darkness. Dust floated on the conical beam of light which illuminated large chunks of rock on the floor of the cave directly below him. Deciding they were unworthy of further scrutiny, he swung the light beam to his left but failed to discover anything of special interest over there. His initial excitement began to wane. He played the flashlight in the opposite direction, ever hopeful that something of value would be captured in its beam...Nothing...Wait a sec. He ducked deeper into the cave.

"What the hell!"

Without warning, he reeled backwards, almost dropping the flashlight into the hole. Bug-eyed with fright, Father Marco frantically crossed himself, more out of reflex than conviction.

"The legend is true," he murmured aloud. "By God."



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