

*Nelson McCormack, New York City's richest citizen, is a man on top of the world, until the fateful night he finds a Mafia don's wallet in the gutter, never imagining he will find himself there one day against his will—and worse!*

## **NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED: A Noir Psychological Suspense Thriller**

By BRYAN QUINN

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AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED CONSPIRACY THRILLER  
*THE PACKAGE*

BRYAN QUINN



NO GOOD DEED  
GOES UNPUNISHED

A NOIR PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE THRILLER

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## About the Author

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

Bryan won an Honorable Mention Award in the worldwide 85<sup>th</sup> Annual Writer's Digest 4000 Word Short Story Competition in 2016.

NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED is Bryan's second novel. His first novel THE PACKAGE, an historical-contemporary conspiracy thriller, has garnered international acclaim.

Follow Bryan on Twitter: *@AuthorBryan*.

## Chapter One

Centi-billionaire Nelson McCormack, America's richest man at the relatively young age of forty-two and senior partner and majority shareholder at McCormack & McCormack, an uber-prosperous Wall Street investment firm, rode the walnut-paneled elevator in a state of anticipation to his twenty-first floor penthouse on Central Park West. The grandiosity of his home never failed to thrill him, the kind of luxurious lodging envious plebs only set foot in to clean or to cook.

He could easily afford a place on Park Avenue but *les parvenus vulgaires* had spoiled the exclusive cachet of that address ages ago. Besides, Central Park West was where old money resided and reproduced. The first part of this compact he enjoyed in spades. To his frustration—and his wife's—he was still working on the second part.

The rising compartment halted its ascent without a lurch and the door whisked open onto eleven thousand square feet of marble, mahogany and marquetry. His eyrie occupied the entire top floor of his co-op apartment building and lent him commanding views of Central Park. But the visual feast would have to wait, his magnificent home lay in darkness. Odd.

Denied his daily dose of architectural eye candy, Nelson's face fell, and he paused a beat before stepping onto the red and black marble floor of his palatial residence. *Lava floor* he called it. Because any visitor's gaze falling upon its fiery-like surface usually burned with envy. Crossing the threshold into his sanctuary, he caught the aroma of the evening meal, and the elevator door shushed behind him, shutting out the sole source of light.

Somebody forget to pay the electric bill?

No one was present to greet the master of this domain. It was futile to call out his wife's name, especially if she were on the other side of their cavernous home. Navigating in the gloom, he laid his weathered Finlay briefcase on the Chippendale side table, shrugged out of his wrinkled Burberry trench coat and hung it from memory in the double-wide closet. Per his routine, he visited his office and deposited his briefcase on the inlaid marquetry desk fashioned from

handcrafted mahogany. Thousands of lights sparkled beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows like so many diamonds. But he didn't linger to admire the urban view for he sensed a game was afoot.

He exited his office and crept along the marble hallway decorated with avant garde canvases and sculptures rendered by artists he couldn't tell from cartoons. His wife, Sharron, with the help of Nora, an interior designer, had curated the artwork to speak subtly to their membership in high society, but to his mind, the paintings and sculptures screamed, rather than whispered, their belonging to the One Percent. He didn't dare share this opinion with his wife. She hadn't polled him for it.

"Come out, come out wherever you are," he said in a rasp to heighten the tension of the game.

Nelson and Sharron were childless—not for any lack of effort—and so they weren't above acting silly when the mood suited them, like tonight. He slunk his way past the living room and rounded a corner towards a soft glow flickering from the dining room.

"I see light." Passing through the archway in a slight crouch, he waggled his fingers in the air.

"Gotcha!" Sharron said, grabbing him from behind.

Nelson wheeled around and gave his thirty-seven year-old wife a tight squeeze. "You're better at this game than me."

"Your clunky brogues don't help. A cowbell would be quieter," and they smothered their laughter in the fusion of their lips. Her fingers dragged his well-groomed cinnamon-colored hair while his hands roamed the smooth hills and valleys of her still firm figure. She pressed against him and purred.

Mid-kiss, Nelson opened his eyes and wondered about the burning candles on the dining room table, their lambent flames reaching for the bronzed coffered ceiling. He unlocked his lips from hers. "What's the occasion?"

She stroked his patterned Hermes silk tie, then raised her hooded emerald eyes to him. Her lustrous blonde hair, twirled atop her head, was styled the way he preferred it. "I had Renalda prepare your favorite dish for dinner: duck tartar with juniper, mustard, radish, beets, and wild black rice."

Renalda, their live-in Filipina maid, could be heard rattling around in the kitchen beyond the swinging door separating the rooms. She was probably cleaning up.

“Must be special.”

Sharron returned him a coy smile.

“You want a glass of wine?” He detached himself and advanced on the well-dressed table.

“None for me, Nels.”

“Since when?” he asked, wiping the spout of the ’73 Chardonnay Chateau Montelena with a linen napkin. He didn’t wait for her answer. “Did Kim talk you into another crazy diet?” He replaced the bottle in the silver ice bucket.

Kim was Sharron’s best friend, and she had sampled every diet and exercise regimen on the planet. And then some.

“Wine isn’t healthy for babies.”

“You’re my baby, so you’re allowed to drink.” He sprouted a lascivious leer. “How else can I ravish you later?”

“I am...but our baby isn’t.”

He pulled a stunned expression and seized up for an instant. “Wait a minute. Are you telling me you’re pregnant, after all those miscarriages?”

“Close to six weeks.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“With my track record, I didn’t want to give you false hope, like all those other times.”

Candlelight danced in his eyes and his mind hummed with the pleasure of impending fatherhood. He tabled the crystal wine glass and pulled her into his arms again. “This calls for a celebration,” he said with gusto, his face inches from hers, his delight mixed with relief. The pressure’s off, he told himself. I’ve done my duty. I can stand down now.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Me, grin?”

“Out with it, Nels.”

“After countless innings, I finally scored a home run. I think I deserve a timeout.” He rubbed her nose with his.

Laughing, she carried the baseball metaphor further. “I guess you can give your bat a rest—for now.” Then a devilish look captured her. “But conserve your strength. You’re going to need it for future late-night feedings.”

“A job for a nanny.”

“Typical male!” She gave his chest a playful swat. Just then an idea lit her up. “We have to call our parents. They’ll be thrilled.”

He pursed his lips. Your mom can stop nagging us now about producing a grandchild. But he kept this irritation to himself. He didn’t wish to spoil their evening by dragging *her* into their celebration.

Maybe Sharron read what was behind his eyes for she stepped to the table laden with covered dishware and said: “Let’s eat first. The food’s getting cold. I had to practically flog Renalda into preparing this feast.”

“A slight exaggeration, Baby?” he said in defense of their maid. “Renalda never gives me a hard time. She’s paid to serve us.” And if she were younger, she could serve me in a whole different capacity.

“It’s a good thing I’m in charge of the help. They’d walk all over you if you were the boss.”

Nelson ignored her comment and patted his stomach absent the flesh of success despite his affluence. “It smells so good. I’m starved.” He helped Sharron into her high-backed chair swathed in burgundy and gold silk damask. He seated himself at the other end of the lengthy table and raised his crystal glass, candlelight glittering in it. “To our future progeny. May our child carry forth our good names and be a worthy heir to us,” he laid on thickly.

Sharron giggled. “When did we become bluebloods?”

“We have enough money to buy a royal title from a down-in-his-luck duke.”

“British royalty doesn’t have the prestige it used to. The current crop of commoners have cheapened the cachet of the Windsors.”

“An aristocracy of middling mediocrity. On second thou—”

“Where’s Renalda?” She gritted her teeth. “Ring the damn bell.”

Nelson rode her squall of erratic temper with calm and jingled a little silver bell. Renalda, a still handsome dark-haired, middle-aged



woman wearing a maid's modest black and white uniform, promptly appeared.

"We're hungry. Serve us," Sharron ordered.

Nelson sympathized. "Mrs. McCormack informed me you prepared my favorite dish."

"Mr. McCormack, it is my pleasure," she said in Filipina-accented English. It came out as: *Meester MeeCormack, it ees my pleasor.*

"I'm grateful to you."

"I pray for health of your little one."

Bowled over. "You're aware of this news already?" he asked while he reproached his wife with his eyes.

"I told *you* to keep it a secret."

Renalda ignored her mistress.

Nelson set aside his annoyance. "We've waited so long for this moment to arrive." He faced Sharron again. "And we'll spare no expense to ensure our child grows up in a safe and healthy environment."

"Enough with the useless chatter," Sharron said.

With deliberate movements, Renalda, a sly smile on her lips, served them dinner.

Between mouthfuls Nelson asked: "Did your doctor say it's okay for you to continue working?"

"My job isn't strenuous, Nels."

He conceded her point. "What about your power walks?"

"I need to stay in shape for the sake of the baby."

"I know, but I'm concerned for both of you. I'm surprised your doctor didn't confine you to bed."

"My doctor said we'll take my pregnancy one trimester at a time."

"Your doctor knows your medical history better than I do."

"She does, so drop it."

Parsing her statement for hidden meaning was unnecessary, so he changed subjects. "Imagine, Baby, we'll have one of our own to helm the family firm when I retire."

“What makes you think our child will follow in your footsteps? He or she might want to be an artist or a musician.”

Sharron’s response was so unexpected he couldn’t process it.

“A McCormack has always occupied my great-granddaddy’s chair.”

“Maybe so, but I hope there’s room in your great-granddaddy’s grave to roll over should your company tradition become a thing of the past.”

Nelson dropped the matter. There was nothing to be gained by arguing about a hypothetical. “How’s the duck?”

“A touch gamey.”

“Wild meat has a unique flavor.”

“I’m glad one of us is enjoying it.”

“It’s an acquired taste, Baby.” Memories of duck hunting with his father among the bulrushes of a pond in upstate New York flashed by.

“Why can’t you eat chicken like everyone else?”

“Because I’m special.”

“You’re *special* all right,” she said in her best Church Lady voice.

He laughed. “Good one!”

Pleased with herself, she asked: “What’s the plan for this evening?”

He played with his food before answering. “I’m feeling hopeful, so how does planning our baby’s bedroom decor sound to you?”

“Great idea.” She barely paused a breath when she said: “I’ll give Nora a call. She can brainstorm with us.”

Nelson did his best not to allow his disapproval to show itself. He put on his game face. “Isn’t it a bit late to call her?”

“The self-employed don’t keep regular hours, Nels. Not if they want our business.” She practically danced in her seat. “Hurry up and finish so we can start.”

So much for *our* celebration. He smothered his unhappiness. “Go ahead and get the ball rolling. I’ll join you when I’m done.”

“It’ll be a ton of fun.” Pushing herself away from the table, she suggested: “Let’s have dessert in the den.”

“I’ll inform Renalda.”

“Don’t be too long.” Then she disappeared.

He didn’t count on being consulted for his decorating ideas. But it would be expected of him to gush over Sharron’s and Nora’s design choices once they were decided. And to pay for them.

“The hoops a husband has to jump through for the sake of marital peace.”

When done eating, he rang the silver bell. Renalda materialized moments later.

“Yes, Mr. McCormack?”

“The boss wants dessert served in the den.”

A smile almost made it to her lips before she nodded her compliance.

Nelson looked to the archway then back at her. In a guarded voice he said: “I apologize for my wife’s behavior, Renalda. I appreciate all you do for us.”

“I no mind, Mr. McCormack. I use to it.”

“Her pregnancy is playing with her hormones,” he offered as an excuse. “I’ll mention to Mrs. McCormack to lighten up.”

She returned him a blank look.

Nelson clued in. “*Lighten up* means to take matters less seriously.”

A light went on in her eyes. “I understand now. You good man, Mr. McCormack”

“I hope so.” He finished with a wink and left.

He entered the den and found Sharron in animated conversation with whom he guessed must be Nora. She paid him no attention. He pulled his mobile from his rear pocket and sat opposite her. His thumb swiped the screen several times until it found the Dark Web app. He entered a long password and waited for the video to start. Cheering erupted from the phone and, in a panic, he hurriedly lowered the volume. He glanced over at his wife and her eyes were shooting daggers at him. He mouthed her a silent apology. A no-rules fight-to-the-death was in progress on the tiny screen. He settled back to watch the bare-knuckled mortal combat while Sharron enthused over Nora’s suggestions. It was going to be a long, lonely evening,

*NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED*

but the fights would keep him entertained, especially the gruesome finales. He was thankful to be a spectator. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to be one of the fighters in the ring, brawling to keep his head.

## Chapter Two

Meanwhile, worlds away, in a grittier part of town, Tommaso “Rommy” Romano, a loyal senior soldier in the Cabreezi gang, sat in his partner’s rolling car and gazed out the spotless windshield at graffiti-tagged buildings, abandoned businesses, and overgrown fenced-in lots, parading by like props in a post-apocalyptic movie. The urban blight stirred up treasured memories of his youth.

“I can’t believe how much this hood has changed since I was a kid,” he of thinning hair and red-veined nose said to Bronco, sitting alert behind the wheel, the outlines of his harsh features limned by the glow of the dashboard. “There was a time when such blight”—Rommy waved toward the street—“was a common sight throughout the Bronx.”

Bronco grunted, his attention focused on the dark road ahead.

Rommy sat in contemplative silence for several beats, savoring distant recollections in the rearview mirror of his mind. “We used to play a game when we were kids to keep ourselves amused while my parents shuttled us around town in the family minivan. It was real simple. The first one to spot a scrapshack earned a point. A piece of cake at the time.” He dragged out a sigh. “Nowadays, you have to search real hard for a building worthy of a wrecking ball. Whatever happened to urban decay?”

“Gentrification is what happened,” Bronco said, unaware of his mispronunciation.

“I don’t know what that prissy word means but I bet it involves screwing the working man and putting affordable housing out of his reach.”

“The American dream is a house of cards built on a foundation of unpayable debt.”

Stunned, Rommy faced him. “Aren’t you a fountain of knowledge this evening?”

“Don’t be fooled by the news spinners, Rommy. Lowlifes in the tens of thousands are overdosing every year because America passed its best before date decades ago. Hope and opportunity are slogans, not realities, for most people.”

Rommy stared at Bronco for an extended beat. “Yeah, but it’s good for business. Those lowlifes can’t flee their miserable circumstances, so they escape them temporarily with the right fix.”

Bronco shot him a rare grin.

Rommy changed subjects. “Ever wonder why they call this crib the ‘Big Apple?’”

Bronco’s face scrunched up. “What’s with you? You got a thing for city slogans? Yesterday, it was Chicago and its broad shoulders.”

While Rommy stewed, jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, the “prince of cool,” playing quietly on the radio, filled the tense space with syncopated rhythms as they cruised west along East 135th.

“It beats yacking about shoptalk twenty-four-seven,” he griped to the windshield. “And it’s ‘big shoulders.’”

Bronco gave a shrug as if to say, “Whatever.”

Undeterred, Rommy carried on with his spiel. “New York got its nickname from a horse racing reporter name John Fitz Gerald—and, no, he’s not related to the famous writer.” As if he’d know, Rommy sneered. “Anyway, while on the beat in New Orleans in 1920, Gerald supposedly overheard a couple of stable hands talking about an impending trip to the ‘big apple.’ Turns out they were referring to our fair city because in horse-racing circles it was considered big league. Gerald liked the phrase so much he included it from that point on in his sports columns.”

“You don’t say.”

Encouragement? Whatever it was, Rommy seized upon it. “The nickname was eventually embraced by jazz players for the same reason jockeys did: you weren’t in the big leagues until you performed in the Big Apple.”

Enthusiasm must then have taken hold of Bronco. “It sounds better than Big Swindle,” he said. “I mean, Big Apple is more inspiring than Big Swindle.”

“Or Big Deal.”

Bronco twerked an eyebrow at him. “Here’s the thing. A red apple beats the image of hordes of suckers failing to make it big in this town.”

“Yeah, the dreamers keep settling here to take a bite out of the apple.”

“Only to discover the remains of a core crawling with worms.”

“But this doesn’t stop them dreamers from fighting over the rotting remains.”

Bronco carried it further. “We got to fight our way into this world. We got to fight for our share in this world. Then we got to fight to protect our share.”

“We crawl and scrape for our slice of the apple, no matter how chewed up it is. Take that homeless dude over there,” Rommy said, pointing.

A hatted man garbed in what appeared to be several layers of frayed clothing had laid claim to a derelict storefront nook, a refuge from the elements. A dented shopping cart filled with his personal possessions was parked on the sidewalk. A layer of cardboard provided him a mattress of sorts.

“He’s seized his piece of the American Dream,” Rommy continued as they drove past. “A place to call his own for the night. And it’s rent-free.”

“Yeah,” Bronco agreed. “Some individuals can’t hack the nine-to-five circus. Juggling a job, paying bills, staying clean, so they drop out.”

“Sucks to be poor in this city.”

“Sucks to be poor, period.”

“Yeah.”

Talked out, they settled into companionable silence while the mean streets slid by.

Just then Bronco slammed the steering wheel and Rommy jumped three inches in the air.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing.”

“So, you almost broke the steering wheel because...it was in the way?”

Bronco stared straight ahead. “Nico’s in the way. He’s a bamboo shoot beneath my fingernail.”

But what he didn't say was Nico was a roadblock in his efforts to win the undivided respect of the don. If Nico was removed from the scene, Bronco's own bright light would catch the don's sole attention. So he imagined.

"If he weren't Cabreezi's spawn, I'd whack him."

Bronco shot him a predatory glare. "Dangerous talk. One word and you're on ice."

Ignoring the truth of his dispensability, Rommy said: "But you wouldn't."

"Overconfidence killed the cat."

Rommy let his blunder pass. "We've been crewing together for what?"—he paused to calculate—"Seventeen, eighteen years? And in all this time you never tipped no one off to their blind date with doom."

"I'm going to have to change partners."

"What for?"

"Predictability."

"Predictable's beneficial," Rommy said to assuage him. "Beneficial for me. It keeps me out of trouble. Know what I mean?"

"I do, and it means you could be withholding vital info."

Rommy balanced on danger's edge. "Whoa, Bronco. Remember the time I shared with you news of Louie skimming the family?"

"Don't remind me of your no-good brother."

"He got his due because of me." And maybe you will too. Hot revenge smoldered in him.

"It couldn't have been easy to whack your own blood."

Rommy turned away. "Rules are rules," and he balled his brawny fists in his lap until they hurt.

"If you hadn't, you'd be garden compost too."

Rommy's thoughts zoomed back to the night his younger brother was fed feet first into a meat grinder, an inch at a time, while Bronco managed the controls. He suppressed the urge to shiver. Louie's screams still gave him occasional night terrors despite the passage of nearly three years. Sadists. Every one of them. But not him. Staying alive was important to him, no more, no less than the next fella. Sacrificing his own brother was his ticket to salvation.



“You did the right thing,” Bronco said as though getting a read on Rommy’s inner turmoil.

“I’m glad he was my only brother.”

Bronco snorted at his gallows humor, and he swung the car left off of Walton Avenue onto East 146th. Rommy joined in the laughter.

No use anguishing over spilt blood, he consoled himself.

“Did I ever tell you the don appreciated your loyalty to the family? He said you were a stand-up guy.”

No greater compliment could be paid to a fella.

“It was generous of the don to say so.” But the praise didn’t erase Rommy’s guilt for having helped convert his brother into chopped liver. Nothing would. “You know, to this day I still can’t figure out why Louie acted so stupid,” he lied.

“Stupid is as stupid does. Leave it at that.”

Rommy detected an unspoken warning in his partner’s words.

Silence descended once more and Chet Baker played on.

“Keep what I’m about to tell you to yourself,” Bronco said.

“I don’t tell nobody nothing. Not even Rosie.”

“The gooks have a contract out for Nico’s head.”

“Do you have to call them names?”

“Oh, that’s right. Your daughter married one of them.”

This was damn nearest to an apology Rommy would ever receive from his partner.

“What’d he do?” Rommy asked.

“Nico killed Johnny Thai’s brother a few months ago.”

“Over what?”

“Dissed him, I heard.”

“Figures.”

Bronco took umbrage with Rommy’s dismissive attitude. “*Respect* is what separates us from the animal kingdom.”

“I thought it was exercise, but what the hell do I know?”

Bronco threw him an odd look. “All to say the gooks may take care of my problem for me.”

“We can pray, can’t we?”

“I’m not a praying man. Praying didn’t help my mother, so I chucked it in.”

“Me neither. Lots of people fall off the holy wagon.”

“I didn’t fall. I jumped.”

His quip got a chuckle out of Rommy.

“Here we are,” Bronco announced, parking in the darkness beneath the smooth concrete belly of the Major Deegan Expressway which snaked away into the gloom.

“Where’s here?”

“We got to take us a little walk.”

They alighted from the car and the horn beeped twice, affirming the doors were locked. Bronco and Rommy strode with purpose in the gloom and traffic rumbled and roared above them.

“Did you know, in the 1920s, the Noe-Schultz gang relocated the headquarters of its growing bootlegging operation from the Bronx to East 149th in Manhattan?” This from Rommy.

“What are you now, a tour guide?”

Rommy ignored the jibe and plowed on with his tale. “I watch the History Channel. Anyway, Jack ‘Legs’ Diamond, the leader of New York’s Irish Mob, felt challenged by this bold move, so he launched a bootleg war against the Noe-Schultz gang.”

“Ancient history.”

“Noe died of infected wounds from an assassination attempt committed by a member of the Jewish Mob.”

“I’m not worried. We’re not a war with any rival family, so we’ll probably die of boredom.”

“New York has a fascinating history of crime. Maybe when we’re six feet under, historians will immortalize us like they did with Capone and Luciano.”

“Only if our descendants become historians.” Bronco laughed at his own wit.

Rommy gave up on his hope of being celebrated by historians. “Are we close?” He scanned left and right while his hand gripped a gun in his coat pocket. Bronco stared straight ahead, unconcerned with their surroundings. Both were packing but it wasn’t much consolation; other armed thugs prowled this part of the Bronx.

“You’ll see.”

Bronco stopped at a steel door and pressed a buzzer.

“What?” a hollow tin-can voice asked over the intercom. That’s it. One word.

“Bronco,” he growled.

A metallic *click* resounded and Bronco pulled the handle. “After you.”

Rommy peered into the dark void, then back at Bronco. “What is this place?”

“Patience,” he said with a rare mischievous smile, and he urged him on with a toss of his head. Rommy’s throat bobbed before he plunged into the murk, and his bulky partner clomped behind him. Out of nowhere yellow light and the roar of a blood-thirsty crowd burst into the unlit corridor up ahead.

The knot in Rommy’s gut loosened. A huge doorman in a black suit, shirt, and tie placed his frying pan-sized hand on Rommy’s chest to prevent him from joining the rowdy crowd inside. When Bronco entered the scene and said: “He’s with me,” the doorman removed his outsized appendage.

Surrounding a small sunken ring, delirious men crammed onto steep bleachers cheered on two bloodied fighters exchanging bare-knuckled blows in a battle for survival. A burly valet escorted Rommy and Bronco to a private ring-side booth.

“What is this?” Rommy shouted at Bronco.

“Human cockfighting,” he yelled back, his thumb extended.

Caught up with the baying crowd, they abandoned themselves to the frenzied slugfest.

There were no timed rounds. The opponents fought until one of them could no longer stand. But the brutal tournament didn’t end with a simple knockdown.

Shaking his head later in the parking lot, “Unfrigginbelievable,” Rommy said to Bronco on their way back to the car.

“Quite the show, heh?”

Rommy remained too astonished to reply. He had seen his share of inhumanity in his life but he had never witnessed a beheading, let

alone multiple beheadings in one setting. Three matches had been fought. At the end of each, a sword on a velvet cushion borne by a masked bikini-clad female was presented to the winner who sealed his victory by beheading the loser with the sword. If this wasn't carnage enough, the victor paraded the bloody head around the ring for the pay-per-view audience watching on the Dark Web.

"With the popularity of MMA fighting and the money it generates, Don Cabreezi upped the ante and created this fight fest for fans who crave it savage. Each fight earns him tens of millions of dollars from a worldwide audience," Bronco said.

"Who're the fighters?"

"Desperate young men seeking to escape the dungholes of Asia, Africa and Latin America. They're easy targets. We fill their heads with dreams of living here, the land of the free and the home of the brave and other such drivel."

"Human trafficking."

"It's a growing concern. Our grunts are skilled at producing refugees, and we're skilled at finding them refuge. Short term of course."

"Of course," Rommy said, no sarcasm in his tone. Is there no bottom to this hell?

"The next phase of this venture is a female edition. It'll top the male cockfights."

"No doubt."

His comment went unacknowledged, for Bronco was too busy shadowboxing. "Women are dirtier fighters than men." Despite being a hefty guy, he moved like a dancer in his snakeskin boots.

"I wouldn't know."

He lowered his fists. "You will soon." He swatted Rommy on the back, almost knocking him off his feet.

"Those fights"—Rommy motioned rearward with his head—"explain the headless bodies in the news."

"Got to dump them somewhere."

"How do you keep this operation under the radar?"

"*Omertà*."

The Mafia code of silence. The implication was not lost on Rommy.

Bronco carried on, “The spectators are made men and the goombahs disposing the bodies aren’t connected to the fights, so they’re none the wiser.”

“And nobody’s filing reports for missing illegals,” Rommy finished for him.

“You catch on quick.”

Rommy offered a modest shrug. “Comes with the territory.”

“The don’s a genius.”

Rommy weighed other choice words to describe Cabreezi but sharing them with Bronco would probably earn him a place in the ring. The don could do no wrong in Bronco’s eyes. He was Cabreezi’s boy, like a second son.

“He has a flair for business.”

“I’m in the mood for pizza,” Bronco announced.

How can he be hungry after what we just witnessed? Nothing phases this mook. “Sure, Bronco. Beheadings stimulate my appetite.”

“Me too,” he said. “We’ll get extra pepperoni.”

## Chapter Three

In the beehive of the Central Park Precinct, Senior Detective Terrell Ambrose, he of gray steel-wool hair and bulbous face, bent to retrieve the police bulletin from the printer tray. Scrolling through digital text on a screen wasn't real to him. He was old school. He appreciated the tactile sensation of holding a piece of paper and perusing words printed in black and white. "Tree killer," whispered those behind his back too timid to tell him so to his face. Bulletin in hand, he read while he trundled back to his desk. Swear words traveled to the tip of his tongue and stopped there. Over thirty-two years on the force and he still hadn't seen the entire range of people's inhumanity to their fellow citizens. When he believed he had, a perp short one rocker on his mental rocking chair committed a crime to top all others. Until the next time.

"Heads up," a passing colleague cautioned him in the corridor.

Ambrose ignored the collegial warning. Back at his desk he glanced up from the paper at his partner Camila Sandanos, she of long black hair and smooth complexion.

"From your expression, I'm guessing nothing good?" she said.

He nodded in way that suggested grim news was coming. "Three more non-Caucasian headless bodies discovered overnight."

"Not again," her face said. "Which precinct?"

"Not ours, thank God." He laid the printout on his desk facing his partner's and folded his beefy but still muscular frame into the government-issued office chair. "The 34th drew the short stick this time."

"Lucky them—and us. Our case backlog can't handle anymore murders. How many headless victims in total now?"

"I stopped counting when the Feds took over."

"You know what's strange?"

"No."

"Decapitated corpses showing up in threes at a time."

"So."

"So, this tells me there's a fight club operating in this city."

Ambrose assumed a contemplative pose. "Could be. Every coroner report mentions the injuries to the hands and faces of the victims are consistent with hand-to-hand combat."

"And what's even more peculiar, they're non-Caucasians."

"Some enterprising white supremacists are running a private fight-to-the-death competition?"

"It wouldn't surprise me what with the significant uptick in white extremism." This earned her a grim nod from Ambrose. "Let's suppose we're on the money. How do we explain the absence of leaks about this underground fight club?"

The senior detective reclined and focused on the ceiling. Maybe the answer was written in the stained white tiles. Sounds of the office intruded into the conversational void. A possible answer came to him and he lowered his gaze. "Secret membership?"

"I was thinking along those same lines."

"But if it's secret, how does one join?"

She picked up a pen and spun it with her index finger over her thumb, like the Maverick character in *Top Gun*. "Invitation only?"

"People trusted to keep their mouths shut." He envied her dexterity with the pen. He had tried her trick many times but couldn't get the hang of it.

"An exclusive club of like-minded barbarians."

"Do we have any such clubs in our fair city?" Ambrose posed the question in a knowing way.

"The Italian Mafia. The Russian Mafia. The Irish Mafia. The list's as long as it's notorious."

"Any rumors circulating?"

"None of our informants is singing a tune worth listening to."

"And the Feds aren't a gusher of info either," Ambrose complained.

The pen stilled. "*Naturelemente*. They covet the glory for themselves."

"They haven't ruled out a serial killer committing these beheadings."

"A dubious theory," she said. "Unless the serial killer has a partner or two."

“I’m of the same mind.”

“The Feds have their work cut out for them.”

“No pun intended?” he asked.

“Sometimes an expression cuts both ways.”

He pantomimed an explosion. “Anyway, this case is out of our jurisdiction, so let’s not waste any more time busting our heads over it.” He slid the bulletin aside and leaned on his forearms. “Bring me up to speed on the Cabreezi surveillance.”

“Our watchers reported no unusual visitors overnight.”

“You think he’s aware we’re casing his building?”

“If I were in his Guccis, I would assume so and take prophylactic measures.”

Detective Ambrose had it in for Cabreezi like Agent Eliot Ness had it in for Al Capone. Several years back, one of Cabreezi’s soldiers had shot and killed his long-term partner. Although the soldier went to prison for life, Ambrose held Cabreezi responsible for the death of his friend and colleague. He vowed from that day forward he’d clip Cabreezi’s wings and lock him up in a steel cage. Exacting revenge was the solitary obstacle standing between him and his long overdue retirement party.

“Pro-fi-what?”

“Prophylactic,” Sandanos repeated. “It means preventive.”

“Birth control?”

She bobbed her head, trying not to chuckle. “Sort of. In Cabreezi’s case it’s a matter of dodging *in flagrante delicto*.”

“If this means catching him with his pants down, I’m all for it.”

Camila tossed out a laugh. “Luckily for him adultery isn’t a crime, otherwise, he would’ve been in prison long ago.”

“Let’s slip a word to his wife and maybe she’ll can him for us.”

“She’s aware of his philandering. It’s on the tapes.”

“I must have skipped that part,” and he pulled on his bottom eyelid. “Then why doesn’t she throw the bum out?”

Sandanos shot him a “Are you crazy?” look.

“What I’d say wrong?”

“His wife is from the old country—devout Catholic—so divorce is out of the question.”



Ambrose's chest heaved. "I don't understand why women suffer in silence. If I so much as gave another woman the once-over, Shanice would castrate me."

"The city should hire her to neuter the tomcats in this precinct."

"She'd be glad to be of service."

"So where were we?"

"We were discussing the matrimonial harmony of the Cabreezis."

Ambrose waved his hand to continue.

"The don maintains his wife in style. Nice clothes, nice vacations, nice homes. For some women these things are sufficient recompense."

"More akin to an unholy compromise."

"Separate bedrooms keeps it civil."

"They also ensure a decent night's sleep."

Sandanos questioned him with her eyes.

"My snoring kept Shanice awake for years," he explained. "Earplugs helped. But once the kids moved out, she exiled me to a distant bedroom."

"Poor Shanice."

"Why do women get all the sympathy?"

"Because men deserve all the grief. What could be better?"

"I hope I'm around when you're married so I can counsel your husband in the techniques of marital self-defense."

"Not a chance!"

Ambrose swallowed a mouthful of black coffee and changed course. "I suppose we should tackle our caseload."

"Got to keep the taxpayers happy."

"Not to mention *Hizzoner* who's pinning his re-election on lowering major crime," he muttered.

"Don't look now but here comes the lieutenant," Sandanos whispered.

Ambrose resisted the urge to peek behind him. "Time for our morning pep talk."

"Ever wonder whose side she's on?"

"The one who rips the smallest chunk out of her behind."

Sandanos coughed to stifle her snickering.

“Good morning, *detectives*,” their superior officer said, stopping at the end of their desks. They identified the ice in her tone.

“Morning, Lieutenant,” they said in unison like cooperative schoolkids, fake smiles planted on their lips.

“I know you know what I’m about to say but I’ll say it anyway.” But not before she scowled at them. “I got chewed out again by the captain who was chewed out by the police commissioner who was chewed out by the mayor. So now it’s your turn,” she said, flicking her eyes from one to the other.

“Hold on there, Lieutenant,” Ambrose said, raising his palm to forestall her. “If you chew off any more of my butt, there won’t be any cushion left.”

Sandanos couldn’t help burst out laughing, and, much to their amazement, so did the lieutenant.

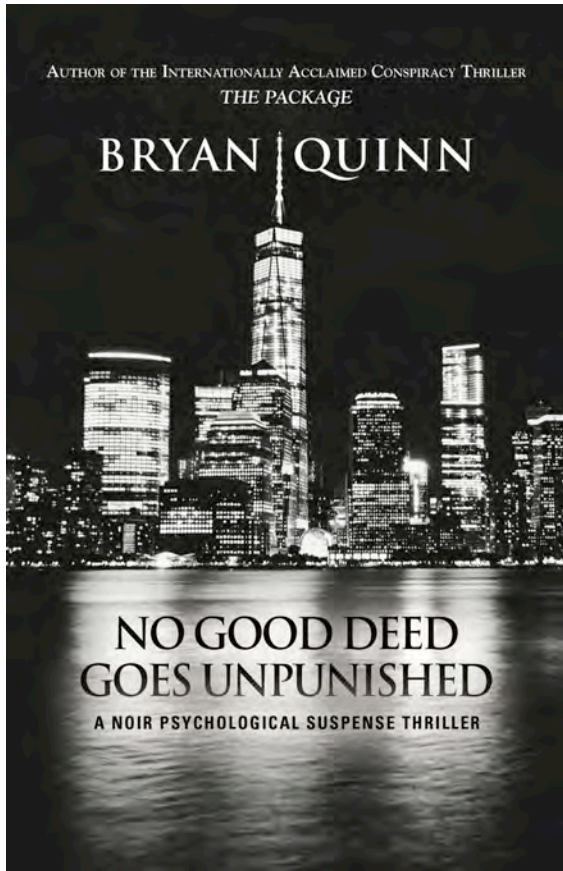
“Score one for you, Ambrose,” the lieutenant said through her tittering. When it had subsided, she added: “Do your best,” and walked off.

The coast clear, Sandanos and Ambrose exchanged a high-five. “Your wisecrack spared our *derrieres* for another day,” she said.

“Laughter is a tonic for whatever ails us.”

“Let’s get to work before the lieutenant nails us.”

“Yeah, let’s.”



*Nelson McCormack, New York City's richest citizen, is a man on top of the world, until the fateful night he finds a Mafia don's wallet in the gutter, never imagining he will find himself there one day against his will—and worse!*

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