

# **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 theology, 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 digital technology, he still relies on his wife to operate the coffee machine. Bryan lives with her on planet Earth.

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

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## **Facts**

The Byzantine Empire (330-1453) was the successor state of the Roman Empire. It ruled large swathes of territory, which ranged from present-day southern Spain to North Africa, from Italy to Turkey and from Egypt to Syria. A shadow of its former size, the empire fell in 1453 to Mehmet the Conqueror, sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) was the capital city of the Byzantine Empire.

The Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) defeated the Byzantine Empire in the Battle of Constantinople in 1453. The Ottomans subsumed all of the territories of the Byzantines with the exception of southern Spain and Italy. With the defeat of the Byzantines, the Ottomans went on to capture present-day Bulgaria, Hungary, Arabia, Iraq, western Iran, the Crimea and southern Russian territories. Istanbul was the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, which collapsed in the First World War and ceased to exist shortly thereafter.



## Lexicon

*Deep State* is a cabal of billionaire bankers that control the U.S. via the privately-held New York Federal Reserve Bank. This elite monied ruling class is supported and legitimized by its lackeys in Congress, the judiciary, the media, academia, think tanks, intelligence agencies, defense industries and the Pentagon. This cabal dictates U.S. foreign and domestic policy, regardless of which political party is in power, to its sole financial advantage.

*Fatwa* is a ruling on a point of Islamic law rendered by a qualified judge.

*Hamam* is the Turkish word for bath.

*Müezzin* is the Turkish word for the caller of the Muslim faithful to prayer five times a day.

*M'sheekha* is the Aramaic word for Messiah.

*Overton window* defines a range of opinions acceptable for public discussion by pundits and politicians.

*Sella* is a three-legged wooden Roman stool.

*Yeshua* is the Aramaic name of Jesus.





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- Mass Shooting Tracker website ([www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting](http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting)) for its data on U.S. mass shootings



## Beginnings Istanbul - Present Day

Leave *now* with the package or end up dead like the other two.

Delivered moments ago by his terrified friend, the grim warning haunted Marco Arrigoni as he scrambled to plot an escape route across a crumpled map of Turkey he had smoothed out to the edges of the kitchen table. So much for this day being one he wanted to remember rather than one he wished to forget. But remembering or forgetting today paled in importance to surviving it, and there was no guarantee he would—all because he had pinched from a sacred tomb a holy relic he probably shouldn't have.

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

Or maybe he was a tad paranoid.

Perhaps. But paranoia didn't waste those unlucky victims, 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 diddly-squat, 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 animated than usual. Time was short—he expected a private courier to collect the packaged relic at any moment. Then he would skedaddle, preferably before the shooting started.

Funny thing how the passing decades had tamed his wild side. 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. A guilty consolation to him. Guilty because he earned his daily bread preaching a philosophy of life totally at odds with his less-than-stoic behavior of the moment. 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 aplenty 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. A double-take, a hard swallow, then 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. Just then a horrible awareness rocked him.

If I'm killed, the secret of the relic will die with me.

His senses reeled.

The shooter can't win.

Too much is at stake!

Not one to panic at the first sign of disaster, Marco showed anxiety the door and rallied himself. When you get out of this jam alive, you're gonna 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. Bong! Bong! Bong!

Despite his dour mood, a sly grin stole over his kisser.  
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. (A double-check confirmed this.) If he did, his conscience would plague him like an incurable itch. 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 simply ached for it to be the last. It had better be. At forty-eight, "Dead Hero" wasn't an 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...Fingernails 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 latticed divider in the confessional to knock some sense into the heads of wayward congregants committed to perpetrating the same debaucheries again and again, and who then possessed the gall to wonder why the outcomes were no different from the last. The insanity of it all. Luckily for them, he feared prison more than he loathed the priesthood. Retirement couldn't come soon enough.

Marco's lapses of compassion aside, his fists 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 fists and his wits if he expected to outfox the hitman. Once more, consequences be damned, he'd trust in his weapons fashioned from flesh and bone to live beyond the end of the day. What else could an unarmed priest do?

Pray?

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. For the truth was alive in there, with a capital *T*. That much was certain. Unbidden, his hand whispered over the map to the packaged relic 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.

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. He rushed to the window to investigate....

Lined up bumper to bumper, cars crept past his building in horn-blaring protest. Farther down the road he spied 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."

Too preoccupied with the fix he was in to latch onto the illegally parked vehicle as a harbinger of something more than a mere case of self-centred behavior, 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 time permitted, he would’ve liked to 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 then let them flop onto the table, and another glimpse at the burning clock did little to cool his annoyance.

He grunted in frustration. To distract himself, he ranged through the rudimentary escape plan he had devised. He could find no hiccup in it. Must be perfect. Like him. Stealing a final look at the location he had circled on the map, he thought, Should be a quiet refuge 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 crib. And if it isn’t, well, I’ll discover that soon enough.

The escape route Marco would travel to reach the secluded Sümela Monastery in the northeast part of the country settled, he gathered the crumpled map, refolded it after several maddening attempts and finally 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 propping up the leaden sky like a giant umbrella. His gaze turned inward while his fingers probed the jagged scars on his knobby knuckles, the crude braille of a troubled past etched in his flesh, if not in his soul.

How did the shooter get wind of the relic? he asked himself and not for the first time today. Only three other people are aware of its existence. Two of them are trustworthy. They wouldn’t say a word. Would they? But the third. Could he have informed the gunman from jail...? But how?

He would give much for the answers to these questions. Even his vows? Worth considering. Too overwrought to think straight, he let the matter drop. The answers wouldn’t change his predicament anyway.

The horns blared on, but Marco’s gaze did not waver.

*Steely* you might call it. And you’d be right.

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

He hoped.

That was the plan. Such as i—

The doorbell went off, detonating the tense atmosphere in his 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, he welcomed a surge of relief.

It didn’t last.

An obvious question rattled his brain: What if it’s not him?

Marco froze and time with him. The living room seemed to shrink and fade away until nothing but the front door loomed before him. If he remained still, maybe the caller would 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.

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

The time for him to skedaddle had come.

He didn't know how wrong he was.

His ordeal wasn't over. It hadn't even begun.