

A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps. Proverbs 16:9 NKJV

Who knows what effect the choices we make can have. Decisions that seem personal and isolated can create waves of interconnected consequences; some impinging on people we know, and other on those we don't know. Sometimes small seemingly inconsequential action change world history, and even generations to come. One thing causing another, then another, making our careful planning futile, even naive.

Prologue

Palermo, Sicily

1676

Light coming through the window stung Mateo's eyes and made it hard for him to see. He closed them, trying to remember where he was. There seemed to be a dark void in his mind, fleeting images, but no sense of context or time. As he regained consciousness and his head began to clear, he became aware of a throbbing, burning sensation in his right shoulder. He tried to move, but his muscles were stiff, and waves of nausea swept up from his stomach. He decided to lie still and focus on his surroundings.

Movement through his blurred vision drew his attention as a graceful figure came into view. Initially just a black shape against the bright light. Then he recognised it was a petite woman as her slim frame was silhouetted by the sunlight coming through the open window. She started talking to him. A soft gentle voice but sounding very distant in his semi-consciousness state. He concentrated on the image and the voice before him but was not sure if he could stay awake.

As his surroundings came into focus and his ears adjusted, he gazed upon a beautiful vision. Her long dark hair was tied up in a single delicately braided tail running down her back. Big dark eyes looked back at him, surrounded by beautiful flawless ivory skin and a gentle smile.

'Is this a young woman or an angel?' Mateo thought. I

It occurred to him that he might be dead and in heaven. However, the pain from his shoulder convinced him he was still alive.

'Good to see you in the land of the living,' a voice said, but it was not the woman.

Her rosy lips were closed, and her eyes directed towards his shoulder where her hands did something to bandages. He tried to look at what she was doing, but she gave up quickly, as turning his neck caused shooting pains in his side. Instead, he looked beyond her to where the sound came from and to his delight a familiar face came into view.

'You are looking so much better, my son,' a smiling Father Aiello said, as he craned

over Mateo, 'the colour is returning to your face.'

This Benedictine monk had been his father confessor for many years and a friend of his family for as long as he could remember. He was happy to see him.

Mateo struggled to comprehend what was being said and what had happened to him. He let his eyelids drop momentarily and images of frantic fighting flashed through his mind. His heart pounded as he visualised swinging his sword repeatedly at the enemy, but they kept coming. More and more, pressing in around him, cries from his own men to fall back, then a burning pain in his shoulder and darkness.

'William brought you back to Sicily and sought me out, but your wound was already poisoning you and you had a bad fever. We thought we had lost you, but Abriana is a wonderful healer and has prayed by your bedside these last three days and nights.'

The old priest looked over to the young girl whose radiant face came back into Mateo's view. Abriana bent down and put her arm gently around Mateo's neck.

'Can you sit up a little?' she asked, manoeuvring a pillow behind his back. 'You need to drink this.' she gently said, holding a cup to his lips and easing warm fluid into his mouth.

It tasted mostly of honey with a bitter after-flavour. Mateo found it hard to swallow as if his dry throat was closed. Abriana rubbed gently under his chin, and he gratefully swallowed the soothing liquid, even while some dribbled down his thick beard.

'The honey should mask the bitterness of the herbs and give some energy,' she was saying, but he was not sure if she was talking to him or Father Aiello.

After the drink, she brought up an earthenware bowl and attempted to spoon something aromatic into his mouth. His senses were beginning to return, and he could smell the spices rising from the bowl. He sniffed, enjoying the sensation, and became curious about what it was. Seeing his reaction, Abriana paused, the spoon hovering in mid-air.

'It is mostly chicken broth, but with some herbs and spices that will help to cool your fever and purge the poison out of your body...turmeric, ginger, garlic and such like.' The spoon pressed up to his lips again. 'You need to eat.' easing the tasty broth into his mouth, 'it will build your strength up.'

Mateo did not need convincing, the flavours were wonderful, and he realised how hungry he was.

Once Abriana had emptied the cup and bowl into Mateo's mouth, she arose from beside him and without another word left the room. Mateo leaned back on the soft pillows feeling at ease. He watched her graceful movements and admired her trim figure. His heart beat strongly and although still weak, he could feel life returning to his body and a spark of desire for this young beauty. He slept peacefully, dreaming of this girl. He would have to get to know her.

Part 1 – Sicilian Inheritance



The Inquisition, Barbary pirates and a race across 17th century Sicily to rescue an innocent girl.

Chapter 1

Madrid 27 March 1693

‘Enough,’ shouted the Grand Inquisitor, rising unsteadily from behind his desk, carrying the latest report from Sicily, ‘I am fed up with the King receiving these complaints about this...’ he paused to look down at the sheet in his trembling hand, ‘...Beati Paoli.’

At seventy-nine, Diego Sarmiento de Valladares was one of the oldest Grand Inquisitor there had been, and he had held the post for nearly quarter of a century. He stared out of the window of his Madrid office at the setting sun turning the sky red: the colour matching his mood.

‘The King and his council have more pressing things to worry about in the Empire than this back water, whose location is its main positive feature.’

He walked back to his desk and slumped into his chair, clearly exhausted by the annoying correspondence of that day. He looked around at the few gathered in his office, his loyal secretary, friar Pedro, trusted right-hand-man, Monsignor Emmanuel Garcia, his old friend Cardinal Antonio, and a diminutive Dominican friar hovering near the door. They all remained silent while he vented.

‘These rebellious Sicilians need to learn obedience to the crown and respect for the church,’ Valladares continued, ‘secret societies with hooded assassins have thrived for too long and are clearly protected by the people who won’t give them up to our interrogators.’

‘I dare say God is punishing them, your Grace,’ Cardinal Antonio suggested quietly, while patiently waiting for his old friend to calm down. ‘The earthquake and Tsunami this January flattened much of Catania, damaged Messina, and Syracuse, with...how many reported dead?’ he asked, looking up at the secretary standing by the desk.

‘Fifty thousand, your eminence,’ the secretary replied.

‘See,’ Antonio gestured with his hand, ‘with the necessary rebuilding, we will need to find a reliable and inexpensive engineer, then squeeze extra funds from the population to pay for the work. Yet, this can usher in a renewal, a time of purification once these rebels have been purged.’ Cardinal Antonio felt pleased by the positive spin he had put on the situation.

‘And who do we have to purify Sicily?’ Valladares asked. His voice quieter and steadier now but his mood still clearly foul.

His Chief Inquisitor Garcia stood, approaching the desk he beckoned the silent friar forward.

‘Friar Diego here has served us well these last seven years, and before that was Chief Inquisitor in Sicily,’ Garcia said, ‘May I suggest we send him back with a fresh mandate.’

Friar Diego de Loisa bowed slowly to the Grand Inquisitor; he saw himself as a purifier!

Just over a month later, Friar Diego stood on the poop of a galley looking out towards Palermo, Sicily, his black cloak waving behind him in the firm offshore breeze. Already he could see the tower of the Castello al Mare silhouetted against the rising sun. The sails were being lowered and the sound of whips cracking from the rowing benches below increased, as the ship's captain began to manoeuvre the vessel into the port. He breathed deeply the salt air to mask the stench coming from the galley slaves below. He had little sympathy for them, all condemned criminals, captured Barbary pirates and heretics being righteously punished, as far as he was concerned. However, it had been ten days since they left Valencia, with stops in Mallorca and Sardinia where cargo, provisions, as well as fresh slaves, were loaded. Now the smell from rowing benches was nauseating.

There was much noise and activity around the decks, but he ignored it. His thin frame, gaunt face, and piercing eyes covered a troubled soul. Zealous to the extreme, he observed strictly each fast day and denied himself to prove his worthiness. His philandering mother had left him with a demoralised father, who had taken to drink and beatings, when he was young.

'I need to purge the devil you inherited from your mother from you,' his drunken father would scream, as he beat him with a cane. He shuddered with the memory.

His early entry into the church was a relief. The strictness of that education made him wear his piety as a badge of honour. His god was an intolerant one, demanding recompense from sinners. He felt he had to pay for his parents' failings and the insecurities that plagued him. He pulled his white capuce over his head to shelter him from the morning chill, but remained on deck, lost in thought.

It had been seven years since he had last been in Sicily. Although he had left under a political cloud, being accused by the local nobility of excesses, he was returning with much more power. Now he carried letters of authority from King Charles of Spain himself, and the Sicilian gentry, who had shunned him before now needed his help. This thought filled him with confidence as they approached the wooden quay.

Despite the earliness of the hour, a welcome committee was already assembling on the shore to greet the new Chief Inquisitor. He could clearly recognise some fellow Dominican friars, by their white habits, huddled together in conversation. Further back it looked like the Archbishop of Palermo himself was being carried down in a sedan chair with a small entourage.

Archbishop Michael sat in his sedan chair and watched the galley docking. His stomach turned in disgust at having to greet this inquisitor whom he despised. However, he was a realist and these were dangerous times. He recognised that King Charles used the Inquisition as much to seal his authority as to purge heretics from challenging the church. The King's relationship with the Pope in Rome varied as the political tides ebbed and flowed. Yet continuous threats from the Ottoman Turks, attacks from Barbary pirates, and infighting between the princes in various parts of Europe, made for troubling times. The last thing he needed was to be at odds with the Inquisition. This way, having Diego kiss his ring in public would cement his authority over him. He was sure Diego would comment on his welcome in his report to the Inquisitor General and his sponsoring Cardinal. He may not like the Inquisition's methods, especially this "bloodthirsty hound" they had sent back to Palermo, but

he would play the game and then avoid Diego as much as possible. He sat impatiently, wanting to get this over with and retreat before the heat of the day and from the smell of the galley slaves.

Near where they would berth, Diego could see citizens waiting for him, clutching papers that Diego assumed would be accusations against their neighbours. So, it begins...

Chapter 2

Bernardo trudged back through the thick wooded land, up the hill towards the Abbey. The sun was already going down behind the Santa Martia del Bossco Abbey's dome as he made his way along familiar paths. He had managed to kill five hares. All bucks who had been so distracted boxing for the right to mate they had quickly ignored the bodies of previous victims, allowing Bernardo to shoot another. Apart from in spring, these long-eared, swift creatures were extremely hard to shoot, even with Bernardo's proficiency with his longbow.

As he approached the gate of the Abbey, the old retainer Angelo was waiting for him as always. Previously a servant of his late mother, now serving here at the Abbey, Angelo was fond of Bernardo, who he still regarded as the "young master". As he passed Angelo, he handed him one of the hares with only a nod exchanged between them. Then clutching his bow and the other hares he made for his usual bow hiding place in the stables. He also hid the hares under some straw to fetch later. As he heard singing from compline prayers in the chapel, he suddenly felt guilty that he would be late once again.

Hoping the Abbot had been particularly stingy about the number of candles being used tonight, he prayed he could creep into the chapel stalls unnoticed and that he had not already been missed. His regular hunting trips should have got him in much more trouble. However, the monks' pleasure in the extra meat the kitchen was "blessed" with, had everyone turning a blind eye.

He hurried along the cloisters towards the chapel trying to make as little noise as he could; confident that he would not be seen, as all the monks would be inside already. Slipping in a side door, he tried to hide at the back behind the black-habited Benedictine monks. As he was a full head taller than everyone in the Abbey, this was not easy.

As Compline ended, Bernardo slipped out quickly. That way he did not need to face Father Aiello, his mentor, or the disapproving eyes of the Abbot. He usually wanted to recover the Hares unseen and hang them in the kitchen to be "found" the next morning.

Even in the dark, he knew his way around the Abbey confines well. Despite his voluminous size, he was quick and agile, moving around silently. Although, he often felt guilty about sneaking about, even having a hunting bow and dagger, he loved to hunt. It was the only things left from his former life before the Abbey.

As Bernardo settled down to sleep that night, he hid the dagger under his mattress and set his rosary beside his bed. The dagger always reminded him of the summer that William the Archer visited the small farm manor house, he and his mother lived in. Precious memories, yet also painful. It was William that brought word that his father was dead. He was only nine years old at the time and could not understand why his father was away. He did not understand all that was said, especially as both his mother and William would not tell him where his father had been or what he was doing.

‘To protect him,’ they said!

It was then that William had given his mother the bejewelled dagger that belonged to his father, the jewels had long since been picked off by his mother to provide for them.

Images of William and that summer he spent with them, filled his dreams. He pictured William kneeling to show him how to string the little practice bow he had made for him.

‘Now draw the bow string back like this, while looking along its length at the target...’ William encouraged.

He was so proud when his arrow managed to connect with the bale of hay they had set up as a target. Then he remembered the awe he felt when William, demonstrating, let loose one of the arrows from his long bow. The speed as it flew towards the target and sound as it imbedded itself deep into the hay bale, enthralled him.

‘What was my father like?’ he asked William, as they retrieved the practice arrows.

‘Your father was a great knight and an honourable man whom I was privileged to serve for many years.’ William explained quietly, kneeling down to look Bernardo in the eye.

‘We grew up together, hunting in these very hills,’ he said with a smile, ‘and later fought side by side in the many conflicts that raged around our neighbouring states, just like his father before him.’

William reached out and gently clasped his large hands around Bernardo’s shoulders.

‘Remember he loved you and your mother very much. It grieved him to not spend more time with you, but the struggles we dealt with here in Sicily endangered you too, and he wanted to keep you safe. He had no idea things would go on as long as they did.’ William’s gaze dropped to the ground as he concluded, clearly distressed. Then when his mother became ill, just a few months later, his questions seemed irrelevant.

Vividly he remembered his mother calling him, and cheerfully running into her open arms. The images changed to his mother’s drained, sweating face as the fever took hold. Then to her growing weaker and weaker, but still trying to smile for him. Finally, images of Father Aiello’s grave face entered his dream, as he left his mother’s room and put his arm around him, telling him to be strong. He woke up with a start.

As on so many occasions before, he took hold of his rosary beads and started to recite the Latin prayers he knew by heart, until his spirit calmed enough for him to return to sleep.

It had been almost seven years since his mother had died and Father Aiello had convinced the Abbot to take Bernardo into the Abbey. He had known Father Aiello all of his

life, having been baptised by him as a baby and been his pupil, even before they moved from Palermo to the Sicani hills where his family's lands were located.

'You will be of age soon, my son, to choose to join the church or seek a different path,' Father Aiello said, as their daily lesson started. 'While acting as your guardian, providing you with a home and education, the Abbey has been blessed by the income from your estates. If you choose to join the Order, you will be obliged to hand ownership of your lands to the church. However, it is your decision.'

While they looked after this orphan, his land and manor, located just beyond the woods, below Mount Genuardo which the Abbey was perched on, was rented out to provide income for the Abbey.

'How do you know your destiny, Father?' Bernardo asked, truly perplexed by the options before him. 'How can we know what the right thing to do is?'

'God has a plan for our lives, my son, you must discern what that plan is and then follow it,' Aiello encouraged Bernardo's inquisitive mind, enjoying his sharp intellect. 'God has gifted mankind with the privilege of choice, and it will be from your heart that choice will come. Will you choose to serve, to live for others, or place yourself before the welfare of those around you? How does Christ guide us?'

So, the lesson began.

Aiello had passed on his love of Holy Scripture and the rule of St Benedict; however, he was mostly an academic. Apart from educating Bernardo, he had spent the last eight years writing a commentary on New Testament scripture; arriving at the Abbey at the same time Bernardo and his mother moved to the area.

'What else would I do?' Bernardo almost pleaded, 'you have prepared me to be a Coenobite and I love our studies but know little else.'

Bernardo's life in the Abbey had been one of routine as dictated by the regular prayers in the chapel, his studies with Father Aiello and his many chores around the Abbey. With the additional regular hunting trips, he had grown strong, and had become a proficient hunter, expelling much of his adolescent aggressive energies during his bow practice. Yet it had limited his experience of the outside world.

'Yes, my son, you have much to learn still about the world,' Aiello continued thoughtfully, 'perhaps we have cloistered you too much, however...' he tailed off, clearly thinking of things far off, 'at least you have been safe here.'

Over the weeks, they would return to this subject repeatedly, until Bernardo declared he wanted to join the church. After that, his clerical training had been stepped up. When completed, he would be ordained and inducted into the Order.