

CHAPTER ONE

Roberto Cavalli grinned as he watched Maria at the helm, her hands gripping the handles of the spoked wheel. A week ago, she had told him that her only experience of sailing had been a ferry across the lagoon to Venice and back. Now she was easing the spoked wheel as the pressure of the wind dropped, then pulling when the wind freshened. The boat surged forward, leaving a clean stern wave, spreading out, chasing the bow wave, but never quite catching it.

‘So how do you like her, Signorina Standen?’ he asked, knowing what the answer would be.

‘She is beautiful, so fast. We seem to have caught and overtaken every other vessel on the water.’

‘You can thank your father for that,’ he said, slapping Sir Anthony on the back. ‘This is the first boat I have built around a gaff sail, rather than a square rig. Where did you say they started using this form of rig, Sir Anthony?’

‘I understand that they adopted it in Sweden, around fifty years ago. The fishing boats I sailed on in the North Sea were gaff-rigged. I thought nothing of it because it was my first real sailing experience. But we ran rings around any square-rigger we met.’

‘Clearly those Swedes know a thing or two about sailing, that I hadn’t given them credit for. I hope I’ll get a lot more orders from the owners of the boats we are overtaking.’

‘I trust I’ll get a commission?’ Anthony laughed, exchanging a smile with his twenty-year-old daughter, her black hair streaming in the wind, her lithe figure flexing and blending with the movements of the wheel and the deck. ‘You have done a good job, Roberto. She is everything I asked for and more. I think the test sail is complete. Shall we head back to harbour now?’

The Suggested Assassin

‘Of course, I shall be happy to relieve you of the weight of the last payment, Sir Anthony.’

‘Ready about!’ Anthony called out, as he took the mainsheet in his hands, and Maria steered the bow through the wind.

‘Lee ho!’ she called, stepping around the wheel as the bow passed through the wind and the mainsail came across. Anthony released the sheets of the jib and staysail on the starboard side and crossed down the sloping deck to the port side, hauling in on the block and tackles of the two foresails, pulling them across to the new tack. He then tensioned the mainsheet of the big, four-cornered sail as it began filling with wind again. He tensioned the running stays to support the mast on the new tack, before easing the sails out as Maria adjusted the boat’s course towards the harbour of Ostia, at the mouth of the River Tiber.

‘Have you decided what to call her, Sir Anthony? The signwriter is eager to do his work.’

‘What do you think, Maria?’ Anthony called across the wind.

‘How about Maia?’ She replied. ‘The eldest of the Pleiades, daughter of Atlas, and mother of Hermes.’

‘It’s a nice name why not.’

‘Nice and short, that won’t cost too much in paint,’ Roberto added.

Half an hour later, with the wind dropping, they were gliding towards the harbour entrance. Anthony untied the long sculling oar from its brackets fixed into the starboard bulwarks. He took it and lashed it in place between the thole pins on the stern, then lowered the blade into the water. He began levering the blade through the water in a figure of eight movement, adjusting the angle of the blade on each stroke.

‘The gondoliers make it look so easy,’ Anthony muttered under his breath.

‘You’ll soon get the hang of it,’ Roberto smiled. ‘There, you’ve got her moving now, slow and steady. Use your

The Suggested Assassin

weight, not your muscles. That's better, Sir Anthony.' The wind had died, but as Anthony got the hang of stern sculling, they made steady progress towards the quayside. 'I suggest, Maria, that you lash the wheel amidships, then Sir Anthony can use the oar to turn Maia beam onto the quay as we come alongside. That leaves you free to jump ashore with the mooring lines.'

'What will you do, Roberto?' Maria asked as she lashed the wheel.

'Watch with interest. She's your boat now. I won't be with you after today, so you'd better get used to it.'

Maria opened a locker and took out two coiled ropes. She dropped one on the deck at the stern and took the other to the bow, where she uncoiled it. Then she leant over the side and passed an end through the fairlead and secured it on the deck-cleat. She took the other end and walked with it, placing it on the deck amidships. Then she did the same with the other rope from the stern before taking the remaining coils of both mooring ropes into her hands, standing ready to jump with them onto the quayside.

'Keep going, Sir Anthony. That gap between the galleon and the carrack is your berth in the boatyard, when you're not using her.' Roberto called out. Anthony kept sculling until he judged they had just enough carry to make the gap. As Maia's stern cleared the bow of the schooner, he swung the oar over and they turned into the gap. 'Stern rope first, Signorina.' Maria stepped off onto the quay and wrapped the stern line around a bollard. The rope tightened and groaned as it absorbed Maia's remaining momentum. She tied a bowline in the end and dropped it over the bollard. Walking forwards, she took the bow line from where she had left it, draped over the gunwale amidships. She secured that to another bollard on the quay, near Maia's bow. 'Well done, Signora! Good sculling, Sir Anthony! If you could accompany me to my office with your purse, Sir Anthony, we shall complete the paperwork, and then she's all yours. I'll send the signwriter over too.'

The Suggested Assassin

‘I shan’t be long, Maria. Could you get the sail down and tidied away while I’m in the office? Then perhaps you could get the log burner going. I’ll check on the horses in the stable when I’ve finished with Roberto. There are a few more cases I want to bring over from the wagon, then we’ll start on dinner.’

‘Yes, Papa.’



It took Anthony several trips to carry the remaining stores from his wagon over to Maia.

‘Maria, give me a hand with these, would you?’

Maria’s head popped up through the companionway hatch. ‘What have you got there?’

‘I’ll show you once we’ve got them all aboard.’

Maria climbed on deck and hurried to the side, taking the long wooden case that Anthony handed to her. She put it on deck before taking a sack of onions and a leg of salt beef. Anthony then passed her a barrel of brandy and another small barrel before climbing aboard. Maria took the onions and beef and descended the companionway. Anthony followed her with the long wooden case. There was a warm glow coming from the iron galley stove. Maria stowed the provisions in the galley lockers, while Anthony carried the long case through into the saloon, and placed it on the table.

‘Father, I can’t work it out. What’s the cast-iron box around the stove chimney, there, screwed into the deck above?’

‘Ah, that was Roberto’s idea. Because I wanted a tight fit between the deck and the stove pipe, to avoid water dripping on us when we’re eating, he was concerned that if the stove pipe got too hot, it would char the deck. He suggested fitting that integral water tank. We can fill it through a brass deck-fitting that unscrews. The water absorbs most of the heat from the stove pipe, so we can take hot water from this tap,’ he said, pointing at a tap on the side of the tank. ‘I’m rather pleased with the stove.’

The Suggested Assassin

There's a sliding ventilator control on the fire box, at the bottom, so you can open it to increase the rate of burn, or you can close it to let the embers glow all night. Above that is the oven, with a hot plate on top. The hot plate has a fiddle around the edge, to stop pans falling off when there's a sea running. Anyway, let's get things stowed away.' He went forward into the saloon and lifted the hinged locker lids set into the floor to reveal the lead-lined, cool storage compartments in the bilge. Being beneath the waterline, the sea kept the lockers at an even, cool temperature, and the lead lining kept them dry. Beneath the lockers, lead ballast ran the full length of the keel. He had specified lead rather than iron despite the cost. Its higher density enabled full sail to be carried longer in a freshening wind than iron would and was a major factor in the boat's impressive speed.

Anthony stowed the barrel of brandy along with the barrels of beer and flagons of milk in the cool lockers. He noticed Maria had finished in the galley, so he lowered the locker lids one by one. Maria then joined him in the saloon and sat on the bench running along the port side. Maria gasped as he opened the long case and handed her one of six flintlock rifles. 'You want to see the world, and the world's a dangerous place, particularly the Mediterranean. Cannon would be a bit out of place on a sixty-foot yacht, so I had these rifles made by a gunsmith in Austria. A rifle is so much more accurate than a musket or cannon. Our main defence against the Barbary pirates will be our speed, but these may come in handy too.'

'Oh they're beautiful.' She ran her fingers along the barrel and the wooden stock. 'What's that?' She pointed at a small wooden case set in the long case.

'It's a mould for making lead projectiles. The gunsmith said that he's been experimenting with pointed-oblong projectiles, rather than the traditional musket balls. He says that with a rifled-barrel they improve the accuracy considerably. I have several boxes, ready made, in the case, and a block of lead for making more. The other barrel is

The Suggested Assassin

gunpowder. We should stow that in the lead-lined locker under the galley floor. There are some spare flints in the case, too.'

'Right, shall we put these away and get on with dinner?' Maria suggested, 'It's getting dark. I'll make a stew. Can you light the oil lamp?'



After dinner, Anthony got on with the washing up. He took the galley bucket from its recess in the worktop and attached a length of light rope to the rope handle. He went up on deck, lowered the bucket over the side and scooped up seawater. He carried it below, removed the light line and set the bucket into the worktop. He took a bar of soap and a brush from one of the galley drawers and started scrubbing the tin plates, spoons and iron pot clean, placing them on the elevated draining board, which was angled to drain down a channel back into the bucket. When he finished, he pushed the draining board aside, took the bucket back up on deck, and threw the dirty water overboard. Maria was just coming out of the heads as he replaced the galley bucket.

'Good night, Papa,' she said, kissing his cheek.

'Sleep well, love,' he replied.

Maria made her way forward through the saloon, and down a narrow corridor past the fixings on the starboard side, to take the hammocks for her younger siblings, and the two cabins on the port side to accommodate either her twin brother Antonio or guests. She opened the door to the V-shaped fore-cabin, undressed and hung up her canvas breeches and smock in the hanging locker before climbing into the swinging cot, pivoted fore and aft. She pulled the blanket over her. She heard her father enter the heads. There was a brief pause, followed by a soft moan, and the sound of him relieving himself into the lead-lined wooden bucket. She heard the click of the locker being opened, and pictured her father taking out his tooth rag, applying the rock alum, and rubbing it around his teeth. He could be

The Suggested Assassin

quite vain, but it seemed to work. Few men of his age had so many teeth left. The teeth that he had lost had been knocked out, rather than succumbing to decay. He'd be using the quill now, to pick out the meat stuck between them. She heard a trickle of water again, then the sloshing noise before he spat into the sink bucket. God knows why he so gently lifted the sink bucket out of its cradle, before tipping it into the latrine bucket. Doesn't he know you can hear every single sound? There he goes, tiptoeing up the companionway and emptying the bucket overboard. She smiled at the joy of having a father, only wishing that he had entered her life three years earlier.



Anthony awoke at first light, got up and dressed. He left his cabin and opened the stove ventilator slats. He opened the burner door and knelt down to blow on the embers. There was soon a flame, so he chucked in another couple of logs, before closing the burner door again. He put a frying pan on top of the stove to heat before climbing the companionway up onto the deck. It was a fine morning, and he took a few deep lungfuls of air. He then set off towards the baker's shop in the town. As he returned, he could smell bacon frying.

'Good morning, Papa,' Maria called out, the boat rocking as Anthony climbed aboard.

'Did you sleep well, Maria?'

'Yes, Papa. Do we have to go home next week? It would be such fun to explore further afield. We could circumnavigate Sicily, perhaps.'

'Your mother is expecting us, and there will be lots of time for sailing. Perhaps we could sail down to the bay of Naples and explore Capri and the other islands there. Sicily is too far for now,' Anthony said, as he put the loaves on the saloon table. Maria cracked four eggs and added them to the pan. 'How many slices of bread do you want?' Anthony squeezed past Maria to fetch the bread-knife from

The Suggested Assassin

the galley drawer.

‘Two please, Papa,’ Maria replied, taking two plates from the locker over the work surface. She slid eggs and bacon onto each plate and put them on the table. Then she put the pan into the sink bucket, that she had already filled with seawater. ‘Thank you,’ she said, sliding onto the port-side bench opposite him, as he passed her two slices of buttered bread.

They ate in silence, and were both soaking up the last of the egg yolk and juices, with the last scraps of bread, when they heard raised voices on the quayside. They listened for a while, but couldn’t hear clearly. Anthony got up and climbed the companionway onto the deck. Maria followed him. They could see a smartly dressed man in a red silk jacket, blue breeches, and a tall black hat arguing with a seaman. The smart man had a neatly trimmed beard and long black hair. He could be anything between thirty and mid-forties in age, Anthony thought. He was talking excellent Italian, but with a French accent. Beside him was an even more smartly dressed woman, who seemed to be about Maria’s age. She was radiantly beautiful, with fair, smooth skin, and fine features. She wore her fine clothes well, with a nicely proportioned figure, but the contrast of beauty with his daughter was stark. The woman on the quayside reminded him of a feline: a domestic, pampered, but not overfed cat. Maria was a leopardess, stalking her next kill. The man caught Anthony’s gaze and turned back to the seaman.

‘Look over there, my man. There is a woman on that boat. What do you say to that, eh? It’s still afloat, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t care if it’s afloat or not afloat. I’m not having a woman on my boat, sir. It’s bad luck,’ the seaman waved his hands above his head. The smartly dressed man turned and walked over to Maia.

‘Excuse me, sir, could you explain to this fellow that it’s not bad luck to take a woman on a boat, please?’ he called up to Anthony.

The Suggested Assassin

'its pure superstition, of course, sir, but seamen are superstitious people. Now that I come to think about it, I've never been on a boat with a woman, other than a gondola, or a short ferry ride, until buying my boat with my daughter.'

'Well, I have to get to Tunis, and I'm not going without my wife. We were only married the week before last. Would you take us? You have your daughter anyway. I'm sure my wife won't bring any additional bad luck.'

'I'm sorry, sir, we have to get home. We've been away a week already.'

'I can pay well, sir.'

'How much will you pay, sir?' Maria called out.

'I would have paid this fellow forty ducats.'

'We could do it for fifty ducats, sir,' Maria replied.

'What are you saying? Your mother is expecting us. Ignore her, sir, we are not for hire.'

'A hundred ducats then, sir.'

'I'll help you with your bags, sir,' Maria said, jumping down onto the quayside. 'Mother won't be too worried, Papa. She's grown accustomed to your long absences.'