

Chapter One

London
September, 1811

The rising wind carried with it the tolling of church bells. Every peal reverberated through Miss Amanda Tremayne like the dull thud of cannon fire. Half past ten—Harry was late.

The young woman stood on the shore of the Serpentine, oblivious to the curious stares of passersby, her eyes as glassy as the lake's surface. What if Harry had not gotten her note in time? What if his shipboard duties had delayed him? What if she had to do this without him?

The dank breeze lifted the hem of her cloak and chilled her; she wrapped her arms around herself and gazed up at the oppressive clouds scudding overhead. A storm was brewing, no doubt about that. Children pulled their toy boats from the water with obvious reluctance while their nannies hovered nearby. Equestrians turned their mounts for home. Coachmen pulled up the hoods of fashionable barouches to protect their occupants from the weather. Amanda grimaced and stamped her feet against the cold. Where was he? She couldn't wait much longer; she needed to get back. Heaven knew she was in enough trouble with her employer as it was.

Her eyes scanned the expanse of park around her with growing agitation, but nowhere did she spot Harry's tall, lanky form. Another gust knifed through her cloak and beneath her serviceable linsey-woolsey dress. Gooseflesh rose on her skin. She turned her back to the wind. If she were a ship, she would have lowered her sails and sought

safe harbor long ago. Her face was cold, and so were her hands and feet. Enough was enough.

“Blast you, Henry Augustus Morgan,” she muttered through chattering teeth. “You promised. I should keel-haul you.”

“Amanda?” The wind bore words with it. “Amanda, that had better be you. By God, why did you want to met me out-of-doors in weather like this? Have you gone completely around the bend?”

Amanda whirled to meet the source of the voice.

Lieutenant Harry Morgan approached her with long-legged strides, his tall fore-and-aft bicorne worn low on his forehead, his heavy officer’s cloak pulled closely around him. Months at sea had gilded his auburn hair and lined his face, but the most prominent lines this morning came from his downturned mouth and furrowed brow. Amanda would swear he was angry with her for meeting him out in inclement weather. Even after years at sea, Harry was still Harry—ever since childhood, he had blamed her for getting him into scrapes that were as much his fault as hers. Her own temper flared.

“If you’d been on time, I would not have stood here for the past half hour and risked getting pneumonia,” she snapped. “And if I weren’t freezing already, I vow I would box your ears. I told you the matter was urgent!”

The young officer seemed taken aback by her vehemence. “I’m sorry, Amanda—Captain Bennett was delayed at the Admiralty, and I couldn’t just brush and lope without his permission.” He squinted up at the roiling sky. “We’re in for a good blow any minute. We should get under cover.”

The church bells tolled the three-quarter hour. Amanda shook her head. “There’s no time, Harry. I’m supposed to be on an errand, and I’m late as it is. Please, just hear me out.” Her control slipped, and desperation tinged her words.

Harry’s honest hazel eyes widened. “Your grandmother has not taken ill?”

“No, Grandmama is fine. Harry, when I saw you last

you promised you would do anything in your power to help me. Did you mean that?"

"Of course I did." Affronted pride warred with suspicion on Harry's tanned face. "What is it, Amanda? I know that look—you're up to something."

Amanda bit her lip. Harry knew her well enough that he might see through her fabrication. No time to worry about that now. She took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I need you to take me to Admiral Locke's ball tomorrow night."

The young lieutenant's expression evolved from concern to confusion to consternation in quick succession. His brows arched skyward, and his eyes widened until the pupils were mere pinpricks in a sea of startled green and gold.

"You want me to what?" He drew away from her. "Is this a joke, Amanda? If it is, it's in very poor taste."

She glared at him, her jaw set at a stubborn angle. "This is no laughing matter. I need to get to that party, Harry. I will go alone if I must."

A gust of wind tried to unseat Harry's bicorne. He slapped it back onto his head, then steered Amanda beneath the sheltering branches of a nearby oak. "That's a little better. Now, care to tell me why is this party so important to you?"

"I need to speak with the First Lord." She cringed inwardly, hating herself for the lie.

Doubt creased Harry's forehead. "At a party? Why not just go to the Admiralty?"

"I've tried several times, but they won't let me into the building anymore. The guards at the door have standing orders to deny me entrance." This much was the truth. The memory resurfaced without warning, and tears of shame threatened the corners of Amanda's eyes. The red-coated marines had been apologetic but unrelenting when they escorted her out into the street. The hateful words of the sneering, self-important prig of a clerk who'd issued the command still echoed in her ears.

"I say," Harry protested. "They can't treat you like that—you're a lady."

Amanda made a little moue. "You forget that they don't consider me a lady. Since I can't get into the Admiralty, and I can't very well call on Lord Hardwicke at his home, this is my only option. The article in the *Morning Post* said the ball is to be a huge affair, and that many navy officers were invited. He is bound to be there. And I will certainly have more credibility if I'm with you."

"What about Admiral Locke? He was your father's commanding officer. Are you not worried that he might recognize you?"

She shook her head. "Admiral Locke has never met me. He won't know who I am, especially if I attend under an assumed name."

"To what end, Amanda?" Harry's tone was gentle. He took her gloved hand in his and squeezed it. "Your grandmother would never approve. This is foolish. Just let it go."

The young woman pulled away, her shoulders hunched. "I can't let it go—you know that. I will never accept what happened. And whether Grandmama approves or not, I am determined. I have to discover the truth."

Harry sighed. "What you're suggesting is dangerous, Amanda. Admiral Locke is one of London's most celebrated heroes; the cream of London society will be there. You can't think to accost the First Lord of the Admiralty at this party—you'll make a complete cake of yourself."

"I realize that, you nodcock." She frowned up at her friend. To hear Locke called a hero turned her stomach, but she could not reveal her purpose—not yet. "I promise to be discreet. I just want to ask him to reopen the investigation. Will you help me?"

Harry rolled his eyes with a hint of growing impatience. "Amanda, you have all the discretion of a first-rater firing a full broadside."

Amanda's cheeks grew hot. She took another deep breath and counted to five, unclenched her hands, and silently reminded herself that she needed Harry, no matter how much she wanted to slap him.

"You told me that you'd do anything to help Grandmama and me, especially now. Are you a man of your word?"

Harry started and drew himself up indignantly. "Of course."

"Then you know how much this means to me." Amanda spread her hands. "Please, Harry—I need you. If I don't succeed at the party, I will take Grandmama back to Dorset and put all of this behind us." She hated herself for spinning this web of lies, but she had to circumvent Harry's stalwart sense of honesty. He would never agree to help her if he knew the truth.

Harry wavered. He tugged at his black neckcloth. "What makes you think I can get an invitation?"

"Because you come from a family with a lengthy history of naval service, because your father is a viscount, because your captain is one of the most well-respected in the entire fleet, and because you're a promising young officer." She ticked off each item on a gloved finger.

Harry thought about that for several moments, then sighed. "This cork-brained scheme is one of your worst, Amanda," he groused. "Promise me at the very least that you won't cause a scandal."

Amanda rewarded him with her best, most dazzling smile. "I promise I won't do anything to hurt your career, Harry. I know how fond you are of that new lieutenant's uniform."

A telltale flush rose from the young man's collar. He threw up his hands. "All right, though I'm the biggest sapsquill in the world for going along with this. I'll pick you up at your lodgings, then. What times does this folderol start?"

"Nine o'clock." Exhilaration cascaded through her. "But do not come to our rooms; I will meet you down at the street."

Confusion creased Harry's brow. "Eh? Why? Afraid of what your grandmother will say?"

Amanda dropped her guilty gaze. "Partially. She doesn't know about the party." Or about her granddaughter's plans . . .

“But what worries me most,” she added, “is that Mrs. Jennings has the ears of an elephant, the tongue of an adder, and enough curiosity to kill a hundred cats. I mustn’t give her any reason to start asking questions about Grandmama and me. The last time our landlord found out who we were, he barely gave us time to gather our belongings before he threw us into the street. I can’t take any chances.”

Harry cast her one last, probing glance, then nodded. “Deuced queer, if you ask me, but I gave you my word.”

“Thank you, Harry!” Amanda threw decorum to the wind; she stood on tiptoes and placed a quick kiss on his weather-roughened cheek. “You are my very dearest friend.”

“You said that just before we raided Squire Templeton’s prized orchard,” grumbled Harry, his face now quite red. “I couldn’t sit down for a week after that. And you said it again before the incident at the mill, and the fracas with Throckmorton at the pond—”

Amanda sobered. “You have always been my dearest friend, Harry. I would never say such a thing lightly. And I would not ask you to do this unless it were of the utmost importance.”

Harry muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, “Just don’t make me regret this.” He straightened and tugged at his jacket. “If we fail, it’ll mean far worse than a tanned hide—we’ll both be in the suds.”

“We won’t fail, Harry, I’m sure of it.”

Amanda gave him another quick hug, then took her leave and hastened back toward Oxford Street. Dear, dear Harry! With his help, she would spike the enemy’s guns and reveal him for what he truly was. She lowered her head against the first volley of raindrops that pelted down from the ominous bank of clouds overhead, and quickened her pace. She had to hurry; she had plans to make.

Captain Jack Everly did not need to look up at the leaden sky or smell the wet breeze to know that a storm

was imminent. His right leg throbbed with a deep, teeth-gritting ache; the wound was mostly healed, but his refusal to remain sedentary and damp, chill conditions aggravated the pain. He knew when it would rain even before clouds appeared in the sky. A supreme stroke of irony, this. His own body was now more reliable than any ship's glass.

He descended gingerly from the carriage and stared at the flight of steps before him. If he had been thinking at all this morning, he would have ignored his pride and brought his cane with him. Like it or not, there were days when he needed its support. But he could not put off the admiral's summons, nor would he. He was recovered and ready for command, and this was his opportunity to prove it—if he had to spend any more time ashore, he would go mad. He straightened his jacket, placed one hand on the hilt of his sword and, his face grim, made his way up the stairs to the town house door.

Once inside, Everly realized that the front steps were only the beginning. He handed his heavy cloak to a footman, removed his braided bicorne, and tried to ignore the graceful sweep of mahogany stairs that arched above him to the first floor. More bloody stairs. He grimaced, but erased the gesture when the admiral's butler appeared.

Parkin greeted him with a stiff bow. "Good morning, Captain Everly. A pleasure to see you again, sir, if I may say so."

"Thank you, Parkin. I believe the admiral is expecting me." Everly resisted the sudden urge to smile. In all his many visits to this house, he had never seen the butler's expression deviate from wooden correctness. The admiral ran a tight ship, and expected the utmost discipline from his subordinates. Everly wondered if poor Parkin's face had frozen in place over the course of the years.

"Indeed, sir. If you will follow me." Parkin headed for the staircase. Everly gritted his teeth and followed.

By the time they reached the admiral's study, Everly was cursing himself for leaving his cane behind. His leg ached with merciless intent; he could feel the skin around

his eyes and mouth draw tighter the more he tried to suppress the pain. He hoped his face was not as white as his waistcoat. Admiral Lord St. Vincent was no fool.

Parkin opened the paneled oak door and stepped aside. "Captain Sir Jonathan Everly," he announced in stentorian tones.

Hearing his name pronounced so formally made Everly hesitate on the threshold. He wasn't used to the title, even after six months. Every time he heard it, he wanted to look over his shoulder to see who "Sir Jonathan Everly" was, as if the name belonged to a complete stranger.

"Confound it, Parkin, stop shouting. I'm not half as deaf as you'd like to think me," came the irascible reply from the depths of the room. "Well, boy, don't stand there gawking like a green midshipman. Come in."

Despite his discomfort, Everly's mouth twitched into a half smile as he stepped into the admiral's study. His patron was the only man who could get away with calling him "boy." Everly's good humor, however, faded as he surveyed the room.

Admiral Lord St. Vincent, once known as Sir John Jervis, was an exacting man whom many credited with whipping His Majesty's Navy into fighting trim. At the age of seventy-six, "Old Jervie" still retained the fierce intelligence and acerbic wit that made him a legend in the British Navy. Although no longer in command of a ship, he maintained an orderly, regimented life, and his house reflected this sense of discipline. Today, though, Everly was astonished to see charts and papers strewn about the admiral's desk, weighted down by several books and a half-empty decanter of brandy. Despite the advanced hour of the morning, the heavy curtains remained closed. A low fire smoked in the hearth and did little to relieve the pervading gloom. The heavy, musty smells of old leather, books, and ashes formed an incipient sneeze at the back of Everly's throat.

The admiral himself, his gold-braided uniform jacket creased and rumpled, stood behind his desk and scowled at the documents in his hand. Weariness lined the elderly

man's face and hunched his shoulders; veiled rage burned in his eyes.

Everly assumed a carefully neutral expression as he came to stand before the admiral's desk. He drew himself to attention. "Good morning, my lord," he ventured.

The older man harrumphed and tossed the stack of papers onto his desk. He clasped his hands behind his back and fixed Everly with a penetrating gaze. "I understand you've been to see the First Lord."

News traveled quickly. The captain started in spite of himself. "Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"The Earl of Hardwicke retains the opinion that I am not yet well enough for command." Everly's jaw flexed at the memory of that dismissive meeting.

"And I'll wager you would like me to convince him otherwise." St. Vincent paced to the window and peered out through the gap between the fringed velvet panels.

"I would, sir. I am recovered, and wish to reassume command of the *Hyperion*, or any other available ship, as soon as possible. I am anxious to be back at sea."

The admiral's narrowed eyes scanned the younger man up and down. "Out of the question," he pronounced.

A hot stab of anger lanced through Everly. He felt the tips of his ears begin to glow. "Might I inquire as to why not, sir?" Speaking became more difficult when he had to force his words through his teeth.

"Because any man with eyes in his head can see you're still in pain from that leg wound. You're pale as a ghost." St. Vincent seemed to relax; his expression eased. He sank into his cracked leather desk chair and waved a hand in his protégé's direction. "Sit down, Everly, sit down."

The captain lowered himself into an overstuffed wing chair, grateful to be off his feet but stung that the admiral had read him so easily. Neither the First Lord nor his own commanding officer believed him ready, and now his patron had added his voice to theirs. Admiral Lord St. Vincent was one of the most influential men in the Royal Navy; Everly *had* to convince his patron that he

was fit for duty. Time to try another tack. “Sir, I ask you to reconsider. Other captains have sustained similar wounds or worse, and been returned to their ships.”

“I know you feel out of place on land, Everly,” St. Vincent replied with a slight, tired smile, “but the navy needs its captains—especially promising men like yourself—in one piece. You were damn fortunate, boy, that you did not die at Lissa.”

Everly nodded once, loath to open that Pandora’s box of remembrance. The battle of Lissa seemed so long ago, yet only six months had passed since he led a small squadron of frigates to fend off Commodore Dubordieu’s superior forces. The battle had been a crucial victory for the Royal Navy; the French attempt to use Nelson’s own tactics against the British resulted in the death or capture of over one thousand French sailors, and the ultimate loss of French naval power in the Adriatic Sea.

But that was not the first thing that came to Everly’s mind. What he remembered most was chaos and agony and blazing heat and the screams of his men when the shell from a French 18-pounder plowed into the quarter-deck of the *Hyperion*. The explosion had sent him careening down to the deck below in a hail of shattered wood, breaking his right leg near the hip. A stray splinter had sliced his left cheek down to the bone. Given the horrific conditions at the hospital in Malta, Everly knew he had been fortunate to avoid gangrene, blood poisoning, and other potentially fatal complications. He had survived, but his senior lieutenant, one of his young midshipmen, and the ship’s master had not. He would bear the mental and physical scars of that battle for the rest of his life.

“I didn’t mean to bring up unpleasant memories, lad,” Admiral St. Vincent said gruffly. “You know as well as I the bitter brew that is a captain’s life.”

Everly clenched his teeth, disturbed that these powerful emotions still held such sway over him, even after all these months, and even more disturbed that his face displayed them so openly. But he wasn’t ready to strike his colors yet.

"I belong at sea, my lord, with my men," he insisted. "My duty lies with them."

The admiral's eyes glowed with renewed fury. He pounded the desktop with his fist and sent papers scattering. "Your duty is to England, sir, and the Admiralty decides how you will serve it best!"

Everly started to apologize, but St. Vincent waved him to silence.

"Never mind, boy, never mind," the earl muttered. "Damn dirty business has me out of temper." He rose from his seat and resumed his restless pacing. "You'll be returned to command soon enough, but there is something you must do first."

"My lord?" Perplexed by his patron's words, as well as by his uncharacteristic moodiness, Everly leaned forward in his seat. "Would this have anything to do with why you asked me to your house rather than your office at the Admiralty, and why you keep looking out the window as if expecting someone else to arrive?"

"Clever man." St. Vincent smiled and passed a weary hand over his brow. "Awake on all suits. That's just what we need."

The mantel clock had just wheezed the three-quarter hour when the door to the study creaked open on its massive hinges. Parkin reappeared and stood just over the threshold. "The Earl of Carlisle and the Honorable Grayson MacAllister," he announced.

Everly mused that Parkin would have made an excellent ship's master; his voice could be heard from the farthest reaches of the quarterdeck even in the worst gale. He pushed himself to his feet as the new arrivals entered the room. Parkin secured the door behind them.

"About bloody time, man," the admiral blustered. "You're late. Dawdling over your sherry, were you?"

The taller of the two gentlemen smiled slightly and inclined his head in greeting. "I thought it better if my driver took a more circuitous route and brought us in by your stables, out of sight. I apologize if my sense of discretion inconvenienced you, Admiral."

St. Vincent harrumphed, his pale cheeks tinged with

red. "Dirty business," he muttered again. "Well, let's get on with this. Carlisle, may I present Captain Sir Jonathan Everly, late of the frigate *Hyperion*. Everly, this is the Earl of Carlisle, one of Castlereagh's spymasters."

Lord Carlisle quirked an eyebrow. "You flatter me, Admiral," he drawled. He turned and extended a hand to Everly. "Captain. I've heard a great deal about you. You're quite a hero. London was all abuzz after your exploits in the Adriatic."

Everly shook the proffered hand and was surprised by the firm, calloused grip. He returned the earl's polite nod. "Not a hero, my lord. We all must do our duty in time of war."

Everly guessed the Earl of Carlisle's age to be within two or three years on either side of his own thirty. To the casual eye, Carlisle appeared every inch the Corinthian: tall and handsome in a rugged way, his sable hair cropped in the fashionable "Brutus" style, his clothes of such precise cut that Weston had to be responsible for their make, his well-made top boots with nary a scuff or scratch on their glossy surface. He gave every impression of being nothing more than a bored society blade. Everly wasn't fooled.

Much of Carlisle's demeanor reminded the captain of a hunting cat. He had walked into the room with the stealthy grace of a leopard—indolent, yet prepared to spring at a moment's notice. His body was that of an athlete, his slate gray eyes those of a predator—watchful, calculating, evaluating eyes that stripped Everly of all pretense and assessed his worth in the span of several heartbeats. Hairs rose on the back of Everly's neck, and he matched Carlisle's gaze with his best disciplinary stare.

"Do I meet your expectations, my lord?" he asked softly, in a tone that bordered on belligerent.

Some of the intensity left Carlisle's face, and he smiled. "You exceed them, Captain. May I introduce my associated, the Honorable Grayson MacAllister. He will be working with you on this assignment."

"Scotchmen," St. Vincent growled. "You would have to bring one of *them* into my home, Carlisle."

Everly ignored his patron's prejudice and shook the younger man's hand. Unlike his superior, MacAllister was slightly built, with a shock of pale blond hair. He regarded the captain with serious sea green eyes.

"This is an honor, sir." He spoke without a trace of an accent, and smiled enigmatically at Everly's surprise.

"Mr. MacAllister has worked for me for a number of years," Carlisle explained. "For all his apparent youth he is an experienced agent, and adept at assuming any role required of him."

"A Scotchman is a Scotchman," the admiral stated, scowling. "I don't approve, Carlisle."

Carlisle shot the older man a warning look. "I'm not interested in your approval, St. Vincent. We have a job to do, one which requires my most talented men. If you wish to challenge my authority, I suggest you take it up with Lord Castlereagh."

St. Vincent glared back. "No time for that. Sit down, all of you, and let us get on to business." He lowered himself into his seat.

Everly did the same. Carlisle and MacAllister pulled lyre-backed chairs close to the admiral's desk.

"I assume one of you will explain what all this is about," Everly said. The tension in the room almost made him forget the pain in his leg. He regarded each man in turn, his patron last of all. "To what 'assignment' do you refer, my lord?"

St. Vincent frowned and grumbled something unintelligible. He waved a hand in Carlisle's direction. "Tell him."

The earl nodded. "There is no delicate way to explain, Captain, so I will be blunt." He sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "There is a traitor in the Admiralty."

Everly's eyes went wide and he stared at Carlisle as if the man had suddenly produced a French flag and started singing "La Marseillaise."

"A traitor," he repeated. The very concept was unthinkable. Unconscionable.

“Important orders have gone astray or vanished. Supply ships have been ambushed and their cargos taken. Our fleet movements in the Mediterranean are anticipated with frightening accuracy. The clues point to the same source.”

A red haze misted Everly’s vision. “Who would dare—” he choked.

“We don’t know, but whoever it is must be well-placed.” St. Vincent’s face was haggard. “Damned blackguard.”

“Ordinarily this would be a matter for my agents,” Carlisle continued. “But the navy is uncommonly close-knit; a stranger introduced into the Admiralty would be suspect. We cannot conduct an effective investigation. That is why we come to you, Captain.”

St. Vincent shifted in his chair. “We want this traitor flushed out as quickly as possible, Everly.”

“With all due respect, my lord, why did you select me for this mission? I am no spy.” Everly’s leg began to throb anew.

“True,” Carlisle interjected, “but you are uncommonly resourceful. You are a decorated officer, well known to the Admiralty staff. I am certain the traitor would not suspect you.”

A spy? Everly blinked. The word conjured up images of cloaked figures skulking in alleyways, exchanging illicit information. The very concept was foreign to him. He was a naval officer—what did he know of intelligence work?

“There is more, Captain.” Carlisle exchanged a meaningful glance with his young associate. “The information we have gathered so far indicates that this traitor is not working alone.”

“A conspiracy?” Everly demanded. “Outrageous. This muddle gets worse by the moment.”

St. Vincent nodded. “Indeed it does. D’you know Rear Admiral William Locke?”

A yawning pit opened at the bottom of Everly’s stomach. “I know of him, my lord. The papers call him ‘The Lion of the Mediterranean.’”

The admiral snorted and reached for the brandy bottle. "You know I don't hold with such accolades, boy." He poured himself a glass of the amber liquid.

"Yes, my lord," Everly agreed. The press had a nauseating habit of awarding epithets to war heroes. His own was "Fair-Haired Jack," a title he loathed.

"Over the past eighteen months," continued the admiral, "Locke has not only paid off his creditors but he's grown wealthy as a Cit. Prize money might account for some of this, but it still smacks of hugger-muggery. Add that to the fact that until recently he was acting commander of the Mediterranean fleet, and our problems there occurred shortly after he took up his post—you can draw your own conclusions."

"Do we have any proof?" Everly asked.

Carlisle shook his head. "Nothing tangible, but then we haven't been able to investigate without arousing suspicion. That is where you fit into this puzzle."

Everly shifted in his seat. "Go on; I'm listening."

"Admiral Locke is hosting a ball at his town house tomorrow evening. We wish you to attend." Carlisle fixed Everly with piercing eyes. "Your goal is to find any evidence of Locke's involvement in this conspiracy."

Was the man mad? A muscle twitched at Everly's temple. He abhorred social gatherings, and now Carlisle wanted him not only to attend what was sure to be the biggest crush of the Little Season, but to play a role he wasn't sure he could handle. He struggled to form a reply. "What sort of evidence are you looking for?"

The earl shrugged. "At this point, we'd settle for anything. Follow him; see if he speaks to anyone suspicious. Eavesdrop on his conversations. If you have the chance, search his study. A wall safe or other hiding place would be the ideal place to conceal incriminating documents."

"If he keeps such documents," St. Vincent added over the rim of his glass.

Every aspect of this assignment went against Everly's principles. They expected him to eavesdrop, to spy, to rifle through a fellow officer's possessions? Worse yet, they wanted him to mingle with the *haut ton*, to exchange

witticisms and *on-dits* with fashionable fribbles. He was a frigate captain, not a society fop who delighted in dancing and gossip.

St. Vincent must have sensed Everly's hesitation. He downed the rest of his brandy and set the glass down on the desk with a thud. "These are your orders. If you want another command, you'll accept them."

"With all due respect, my lord, that's blackmail," fumed Everly. He stared back at the three men who regarded him with expectant eyes.

The accusation did not deter St. Vincent. "So it is. Make your decision now, boy. Help us ferret out this traitor, or never hold another command."

His patron had never been one to mince words, but hearing his options stated so baldly raised Everly's hackles even further.

Carlisle spared a disgusted glance in St. Vincent's direction, then favored Everly with a persuasive smile. "The admiral has told us of your intelligence and resourcefulness, Captain. The mere fact that you hold the rank of post-captain at your age marks you as a man of exceptional talent. You're the only one who can help us. If we don't discover the identity of this traitor soon, it will mean more damaging information falling into French hands, and the loss of more English lives."

Everly balled his hands into fists and rested them on his knees. Was he up for such a monumental task, physically and mentally? He wasn't sure, but if this was what he needed to do to win back his command, he would make the attempt.

"I'll do it." His assent sounded strained.

Relief swept the room in an invisible tide. St. Vincent rose and poured Everly a snifter of brandy; as an afterthought, he filled glasses for Carlisle and MacAllister, as well.

"Good. It's settled, then. Confusion to our enemies," he said, raising his glass in a toast.

Everly took too large a swallow, and the heady liquor clawed its way down his throat. He stifled a cough.

Carlisle set his glass aside. "I will arrange for you to

receive an invitation to the ball, Captain. The rest is up to you.”

“And what if I don’t discover anything?” Everly stared into the amber depths of his drink.

The dark-haired earl assumed a pose of studied nonchalance. “If you find nothing tomorrow night, continue your surveillance. Attempt to gain Locke’s confidence. After all, you are both well-respected officers who sailed adjacent waters. Do your utmost to find out how much he knows, and who else is involved.”

“And then?”

“Then we go after the leader of this treasonous cabal.”

Everly took another, more careful swallow of brandy. “How am I supposed to report what I find?”

“You may send word to me any time of the day or night by way of the admiral. Do not attempt to get in touch with me directly, for that might jeopardize the entire operation. I will also make Mr. MacAllister’s services available to you. This is a dangerous business, Captain; consider him your secondary line of defense, someone to watch your back. Place him on your staff as a groom or footman—someone who can come and go without attracting too much attention. He will know where to find me, should you need to report anything urgent. He will follow your orders, but remember that he answers to me.”

A “secondary line of defense” indeed, thought Everly with a wry twist of his lips. Well, at least Carlisle was diplomatic about it. He assessed the young Scotsman with a hard eye. True he might require assistance on this assignment. MacAllister also might have orders to keep watch on Everly, to make sure he did his job. Now Everly wasn’t sure if he could trust his initial judgment of the man’s character.

The others were waiting for his response. Everly cleared his throat. “I believe I could fit another groom into the stables. Are you any good with horses, MacAllister?”

MacAllister shook his head with a rueful grin. “Hopeless. My brother’s the horseman of the family, Captain.

More than likely I'd get kicked or bitten on a regular basis. If you wish me to fit in, I daresay I'd be better off in the house."

Everly felt an answering smile tug at the corner of his mouth, though his suspicion was enough to quash it. "Very well, we'll see how you do in livery. Present yourself to Hobbes, my butler, first thing tomorrow morning."

"Of course, sir."

Carlisle nodded his approval and returned his attention to Everly. "Remember, Captain, anything you observe may be of value. I wish to be apprised of everything you see or hear."

It rankled to be given orders by a civilian, but Everly swallowed his indignation. "I shall not fail."

This seemed to satisfy the earl. "Excellent. I will make sure that you receive your invitation to the ball before nightfall."

"Hmph. Better have your man shine up the brass on your dress uniform," St. Vincent said. "Mustn't disgrace the Royal Navy."

Everly would have rather faced down a full French broadside than attend a society function, but instead he managed to quip, "Quite so, sir. It should prove to be a very interesting evening."