

The Sugar Inferno

Lyle Garford

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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Dedication

This one is for my first draft reviewer Margaret Penner. Her sage advice makes the final product better every time.

Chapter One
February 1798
London, England

His instincts honed from long practice, Evan swiveled his head without conscious thought to look in all directions as he stepped out of his lodgings and made for the waiting coach. He had served in enough dangerous, covert situations over his career to make being cautious as a matter of course well worth it.

The problem was wearing his full dress uniform as a Commander in the British Royal Navy in the open for all to see. His instincts were on edge, because for him doing so was far from the norm. Evan struggled to remember the last time he wore the uniform and could only remember doing so at his wedding over four years ago. While pulling on the unfamiliar clothes in his room he fought the irrational urge to tear them off, for with each piece of clothing he put on his sense of being exposed grew in magnitude. But he kept telling himself the uniform would actually help him to blend in and not stand out, for men in full uniform were everywhere in London and particularly so where he was going today.

As he made his way to the coach the other unfamiliar sensation he struggled with was the blast of frigid air biting him the second he walked outside, making him pull his heavy winter cloak as close as possible. A light skiff of snow fell overnight, enough to make the air seem crisp and the streets slippery with icy slush. Evan knew the temperature was probably hovering around the freezing mark and it could have been far colder than it was, but the thought was of little comfort. Having been stationed for well over fifteen years in the warmth of the Caribbean without having been back to England until now, he felt woefully unready for the chill of London in February.

The driver was holding the door to the coach open for him and as Evan approached he saw the man had one of the sleeves of his own heavy coat pinned to the shoulder. The two men locked eyes and Evan knew his driver had been staring with equal interest at him. One sleeve of Evan's cloak was pinned up too, because of having lost his left arm to a smuggler's gunshot in 1783. The driver saluted with his remaining arm at the same time and Evan nodded acknowledgement. Under other circumstances Evan would have taken a moment to probe the man's past, certain he was an invalid out of the Navy, but the light wind was far too biting to contemplate standing outside engaging in conversation.

"Whitehall, please. Admiralty House," said Evan, certain the man would be well aware of where his destination was.

"Aye, sir," said the driver, closing the door and climbing up to his bench to grasp the reins.

The inside of the coach wasn't much warmer, but it at least had the benefit of keeping the sting of the wind at bay. As the coach began to move Evan settled back into the cushions and tried staring out the window at the scenery, but was soon foiled by the warmth of his breath fogging the windows. Evan was staggered by how everything had changed so much in the years since he was last in London and seeing it all had not lost its novelty in the three days since he had returned. Clothing styles had changed significantly and he was forced to spend a larger sum than he wanted to update his wardrobe, but this wasn't all he found different. Everywhere he looked old, familiar buildings were gone and

new ones had appeared. Evan was stunned to find his once favorite inn and pub was now a warehouse.

With little else to do as the coach jostled through the streets Evan's mind drifted back, not for the first time, to the mysterious orders he had received from spymaster Captain Sir James Standish in Barbados. Evan knew him well, as Sir James had served as Evan's superior officer in charge of all covert activities Evan and his men undertook throughout the Caribbean for many years. Much had happened since the day Evan was given command of the Royal Navy Dockyard on the Caribbean island of Antigua in 1784 as cover for his covert activities and Sir James became his superior.

On many occasions over the years Sir James had cause to be deliberately cautious about what he communicated in letters, but this was different. The letter Evan received ordered him to take ship and sail for England right away to attend a meeting at Admiralty House. Nothing other than the date and time for the meeting was given. With not even a hint offered as to who would be present or what it was about meant something highly unusual and significant was happening. Evan had stewed on it every day since receiving the orders, but the possibilities of what was behind it all were endless. As his career as a spy for the Royal Navy and the Foreign Office progressed Evan had learned much about himself and he knew being active was when he was at his best. Fortunately, the inactivity and waiting was finally over.

Ten minutes later Evan alighted from the coach and eyed the two guards at the entrance to the courtyard of Admiralty House before turning to his driver. Evan looked closer and saw his driver was perhaps twenty years older than his own thirty-five years of age. He also saw the man's clothes appeared well worn and seemed a little frayed. Evan tipped him well and turned to go, but the driver forestalled him with eyes still wide from Evan's generosity.

"Sir? Would you like me to wait for you?"

"Hmm, I can't say how long I'm going to be here, you understand."

"I can wait, sir."

Evan stared at him for a long moment before offering the man a grim smile and replying.

"What ship?"

"*HMS Worcester*, sir," said the man, giving Evan a gap-toothed grin and a side nod to his missing arm. "Lost this back in '83 to the Frenchies."

Evan nodded. "I'll look for you when I finish. I may well be wrong, but I don't think this will be more than an hour or two at most."

Evan turned, went to the waiting guards, and announced himself. The one in charge nodded on hearing the name and looking carefully at the uniform Evan was wearing underneath the cloak.

"Sir, you are expected. The entrance is through the courtyard on your left."

A well-dressed servant met Evan inside a small outer alcove and took his coat. Once Evan finished straightening his uniform he was ushered further into an inner reception hall past a wonderful, grand staircase to his right and into yet another room. Evan surmised this was for dining, as a large table with several chairs around it filled the room. Pictures of warships at sea adorned the walls of the room while a fireplace set into one of them blazed with welcome warmth. Sir James Standish was seated at the table with another man Evan did not recognize, but they both rose from their seats to greet him.

"So very good to see you once again, Mr. Ross," said Sir James. "I am pleased to present you to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Earl George Spencer. My Lord, this is Commander Evan Ross."

Evan saluted before taking their proffered hands to shake.

"My Lord, I am honored to be here."

The First Lord stared hard without smiling at Evan for what seemed an eternity, but was in reality only a few seconds before he grunted noncommittally and spoke.

"I've heard about you. Read plenty of your reports, too. Well, we shall have company soon and we have things to discuss before they arrive. Why don't you fill him in, Sir James? Please take your seats while I arrange some refreshments for us."

As the First Lord walked over to a side door to pass orders to his servants Evan turned back to Sir James.

"Certainly. So, Commander, I expect you are most curious about all this. I'd apologize for the lack of detail in your orders, but the nature of the business before us today is so sensitive that putting anything about the subject of it in writing was deemed an unnecessary risk. This is also why we are meeting in the First Lord's residence today instead of in the Admiralty itself. The possibility of French spies or informers in the capital is also always a concern. The thought was meeting here could attract less notice and this would be good, for we will be joined by some very senior people shortly."

"I understand, Sir James. If I may, what is the subject of this meeting?"

Sir James smiled. "Our presence in Saint Domingue and, most importantly, what we are going to do about the island from this point on. What else would it be?"

Evan gave him a rueful smile in return. "Yes, I shouldn't be surprised. It has been commanding rather a lot of my time."

A servant had anticipated his master's order and he appeared with a large tray bearing a pot of tea and several cups as he followed right behind the First Lord. Earl Spencer lifted a hand to signal for silence until the man had served them. As the door closed behind the servant the First Lord turned to Evan.

"Sir James recommended we bring you here for this meeting, given the depth of your involvement with Saint Domingue. Your role here is to provide context and, if asked, your recommendations. Aside from this, there is one other matter that is for us alone. Sir James, over to you."

"I am retiring, Commander Ross. After over thirty five years at sea and having now served the Foreign Office for almost twenty years, I think I've done my share."

"Congratulations, Sir James," said Evan, letting a heartfelt smile appear on his face. "Your retirement is certainly well earned, but I will miss you and your sage advice. What are your plans? Are you returning to England?"

"Good Lord, no. After all the years I've been in Barbados I couldn't possibly contemplate spending winter in England. The arthritis slowing me down would be even worse if I was here. No, I have acquired an estate on the island and that is where I intend to spend my remaining days."

"I understand, sir. I confess the winter here has been a shock to the system."

"You'll be back in the Caribbean soon enough, Mr. Ross," said the First Lord. "We need to discuss—ah, I think our other guests have arrived. Please remain behind after the meeting, both of you, as we have other matters to deal with."

Moments later the three of them rose to greet a group of four men as the servant

ushered them into the room. The First Lord ordered more tea be brought before turning to do introductions all around as they all took places at the table.

Three of the men were in civilian clothing while the fourth wore the uniform of an obviously high ranking Army officer. The Army officer was introduced as General Thomas Maitland, whom Evan knew by reputation as having extensive experience in the Caribbean. Evan struggled to keep his face bland as the first of the civilians was introduced as William Pitt, currently Chancellor of the Exchequer and a former British Prime Minister. Seated beside him was Baron William Grenville, the current British Foreign Secretary.

The last to be introduced was Roger Bonds, presented as an assistant to Baron Grenville in the Foreign Office. Evan knew at once the man was anything but a mere assistant, as was obvious from the ugly scar running from the side of his forehead to his ear. Evan studied the cat like grace Bonds displayed which spoke of a man in peak condition, complemented by broad shoulders, and was absolutely certain this man had seen military service somewhere in his past. He also found himself glad the two of them were on the same side. The man sensed Evan's attention and the two of them locked eyes, but the First Lord cleared his throat and began speaking.

"Gentlemen, thank you all for attending. Well, the day has come to make a decision and we are the ones tasked with making it. I know we all have opinions on this, but we must find a way forward."

"Lord Spencer," said the Foreign Secretary. "As I've said before, we've made too great an investment to stop now. My thinking is unchanged."

Chancellor Pitt drummed his fingers on the table for a moment before speaking.

"My thinking isn't any different, either, Baron. But something does have to change here and it needs to be for the better."

"Hmm," said the First Lord. "Perhaps before we go further we should take a moment to bring these other gentlemen up to speed on how we got to this meeting today."

Chancellor Pitt shrugged while the Foreign Secretary waved a hand to proceed and the First Lord turned to the others at the table.

"I will be brief with a little history, which I expect maybe you all know at least some of the details. We were invited by the French royalist plantation owners to bring order to the chaos of Saint Domingue and we first attempted to do so in 1793. The force we landed at the time was insufficient for the job at hand and no, gentlemen, that is not a criticism. It was the best we could do back then. The reasons also all made sense at the time as well. Put a stop to the flood of money from the island to France, push the meddling Spaniards out of the way, and while we were at it hopefully add to our own coffers. Of course, as Prime Minister at the time Chancellor Pitt here saw the problem and we made the decision to send another 30, 000 troops in 1795 to wipe the frogs out of the Caribbean altogether and Saint Domingue in particular."

The First Lord paused to sip at his tea and grimaced as he continued.

"But then, from what I can see, yellow fever and a rather determined resistance from the slaves on the island are forcing us to make a difficult decision. I gather we also have issues with our coffers, but Chancellor Pitt can speak to that."

"Well, if the Army had done their bloody job we wouldn't be in this position," said Pitt. "I still can't believe a bunch of ragtag slaves continue to best us in the field."

General Maitland made no attempt to hide his scowl as he sat forward in an

aggressive stance.

"Chancellor, that is unfair and you know it. A soldier has no ability to fight while he's busy puking yellow vomit."

This time the Foreign Secretary rolled his eyes and put a hand to his forehead.

"God Almighty, gentlemen, we know this. The question is what are we going to do. As I said, I think we've made too great an investment to simply toss it all away."

The First Lord cleared his throat again, a little louder this time to signal his displeasure.

"So yes, we all know we are in a hard place and the question is obvious. Perhaps then we can move on to a more in depth assessment of the situation as it stands now, which is why Sir James and Commander Ross are here. Commander, as the one man here who has been physically closest and most directly involved with this mess, you were brought all the way here to give us your first hand thoughts on where we stand in Saint Domingue and this is perhaps a good point to have you do that. So you know, these gentlemen are aware of all aspects of your role. My Cabinet colleagues at the table have seen copies of more than a few of your reports and I daresay even General Maitland here has seen some."

Having seen the discord around the table and the direction the conversation was going Evan had already surmised it was a certainty he would be called upon for this exact purpose at some point. Having such an august audience for the thoughts of a lowly commander felt surreal, but Evan resolved to simply have at it.

"Of course, My Lord. There are many factors at play here, but were I to be pressed I don't think I could be very optimistic about our future there. I am a Navy officer and not schooled in land based military tactics, so I cannot speak to whether better military decisions could have been made. I will say I respect the men on the ground and I think they have done the best they could in difficult circumstances."

Evan saw Chancellor Pitt's face darken, but pressed on.

"Yes, illness has been a major factor, but our foes have proven far more resilient and determined than anyone, including myself, expected them to be. Having a seemingly endless supply of men to throw at our soldiers helps. No one knows for certain exactly how many runaway slaves are hiding in the mountains and serving in the black armies, but my men and I estimate it is in the many thousands and perhaps even well over a hundred thousand. These slaves on Saint Domingue have made the collective decision the island belongs to them as their home and, in my experience, people fighting to keep a home they think belongs to them alone have serious motivation. I expect you've all heard the reports of screaming hordes of blacks armed with little more than machetes rushing the walls of our forts. Well, they are true, because I've seen those hordes up close."

Evan looked around the table, but saw no one wanting to challenge him on anything he had said to this point so he continued.

"So, my assessment is there are three problems we face. Yellow fever is obviously one and I think we all know there is nothing to be done when it strikes. You either live or you die. The second problem is the thousands of foes we face and, more importantly, the leadership they have. I realize this could be hard to accept, but I'm going to be blunt here. Their leaders are not stupid and, in fact, they are extremely devious and highly intelligent."

Evan paused for another brief second in case they wanted to argue about this too,

but no one spoke so Evan took a deep breath and carried on.

"They may not have formal military tactics training, but they have seen how our army operates and learned fast. I have no doubt many hard lessons were learned by watching the French and Spanish before us. In particular, they have learned to strike hard and fast and then leave equally fast, especially when faced with a larger number of foes. They have many captured weapons and have learned quickly how to use these too. When you combine it all with the sheer number of motivated men at their command they are formidable. This is the reason our forces are basically confined to holding a thin strip of land along the coastline."

The First Lord rubbed his chin in thought before speaking.

"And the third problem, Commander?"

"The third, and to my mind, most challenging problem is Saint Domingue is a swamp, sir. There are so many different factions on all sides, all willing to align with each other if the situation warrants it, and all willing to stab each other in the back, if the situation warrants it, that plotting some way through it all is fraught with peril. God knows we've tried to build various alliances before, but they all fall apart because interests change in an eye blink on this island. I've been racking my brains for some new combination to try, but the allegiances change so fast the ink hasn't even dried on my plan before I have to throw it away."

"Factions, you say?" said General Maitland, sitting forward with interest.

"Elaborate, please."

"Certainly, sir. The whites on Saint Domingue are divided into two basic classes, the grand blancs and the petit blancs. As one might expect, the grand blancs are the wealthy plantation owners. Most of these men are staunch former royalists, but their true loyalty is to themselves and the ability to make staggering sums of money from their plantations. They command a small, but well paid and trained crowd of thugs and overseers to look after their properties."

Evan paused to sip his tea before continuing. "The petits blancs are the tradesmen, the small business owners, government bureaucrats, and a number of fortune seekers and street scum of all stripes. This is a much larger group with a mixed bag of royalists, revolutionaries, and people loyal only to themselves. They will fight only when necessary, by and large. Naturally, the grand and petit blancs all want the plantation system to continue as is, with the exception of the revolutionaries who strangely somehow think they can both free the blacks from servitude and still make a mountain of money. The last group consists of a little more than two thousand, at best, French soldiers who have a wary coexistence with the blacks in areas we do not control. Most of these are stationed at Cap Le Francois in the north."

Evan paused to sip his tea once again while across the table Sir James nodded in silent agreement and encouragement.

"If this sounds like a complicated relationship, the situation with the blacks in Saint Domingue is worse. They can be divided into those with some degree of white blood in their veins, who are generally known as mulattoes or gens de couleur in French, and those who are pure black, brought straight there from Africa or are children born to pure black parents. The pure blacks are at the bottom of everything in the world of Saint Domingue, while those with a mix of parentage have the power. Within the mulattoes there are different people struggling for sole leadership and, despite a lot of tension, the

pure blacks on the island continue to support them."

"Mr. Ross?" said the General. "I've heard rumor the mulatto leaders are in favor of keeping slavery. Why would the blacks support them if this is so?"

"A good question, sir. The answer is likely they have to trust someone and they would prefer it to be men who at least look more like them than we do. This and the fact the mulatto leaders are competent at what they do."

"I see."

"There are two leaders most prominent on their side. One is a fellow whose name you will have seen in my reports. Toussaint L'Ouverture is a mulatto plantation owner, who was once a slave himself, but now keeps his own slaves. From what I've seen he is the most skilled of the black leaders. The strange part is Toussaint professes to want no slavery and he has proclaimed an end to it, but it continues in areas he controls. His rival is Andre Rigaud, another mulatto who wants to keep slavery and has no time for anyone thinking of ending the practice. My understanding is this man has little sympathy for white or black people either. He apparently thinks mulattoes should be ruling the world, let alone Saint Domingue."

Evan held up his hand to emphasize he had no explanation for the contradictions before he continued.

"So these men have proven adept at switching their allegiances when it suits them and at somehow convincing the pure blacks to support them, on Toussaint's side, and the mulattoes to do likewise in the case of Rigaud. The French Governor Sonthonax and his administration was also a problem until last year when Toussaint forced him out. With him gone the situation was a little simpler, but it is only a matter of time before France sends someone else to take charge. Our sources inside the French administration have told us France is most unhappy at the disruptions to the flow of money the revolutionaries desperately need. This makes me fear the newcomer, whoever it is, will be much worse and will be especially so if he brings more troops from France to back him up."

"And lets not forget the Spanish on the other side of the island, gentlemen," said Sir James. "They may be puppets of the French in theory, but we think there are many in the Spanish administration there who would love nothing better than to take control of the entire island and loosen the French grip on the place. And last of all we should not forget the Americans here. They aren't strong enough to engage in military action, but their traders are everywhere and would dearly love to steal business from anyone and everyone."

"Commander?" said Baron Grenville. "Let me see if I understand correctly. You are certain there are no other possibilities for a successful alliance which could serve our interests best?"

"There are always possibilities to try, Baron. Whether they will prove successful is another matter entirely. The simple problem is everyone involved in this situation, including us, wants to be in sole charge."

The Foreign Secretary's assistant leaned forward and spoke for the first time.

"Commander, if the people we are dealing with are too obstinate, why not simply install the right people in the right places to be happily on our side? There are ways to do it, you know."

Evan locked eyes with the man once again and gave a small shrug.

"Of course there are. As Sir James can attest, we've made several judicious

attempts to suborn key people with our gold. The problem is they are all too happy to take it and then ignore anything we or anyone else wants them to do. For example, Toussaint at one point was allied with the Spanish. As soon as he got the arms and gold he wanted from them he promptly switched allegiance to the French. The other option for dealing with someone too obstinate is to find some means to have them removed and to install someone more amenable. But the thing about this island is no one trusts anyone, meaning removing someone is easier said than done."

"Come, Commander. I think you know what I'm talking about here. Have you tried it?"

Evan glared at the man in exasperation.

"You are referring to the expedience of a knife in the back and, yes, I assure you the thought has crossed our minds. To date we have not, though. The difficulty is these men Toussaint and Rigaud are extremely well protected and they are both suspicious in the extreme we might try something exactly like that. The odds of anyone accomplishing the task and living long enough to enjoy their success is incredibly slim."

"Isn't risk a part of our business, sir?"

This time Evan scowled and couldn't keep a hard edge from creeping into his voice.

"Of course it bloody is, and I can assure you my men and I are not afraid of risk. We've employed such approaches plenty of times elsewhere. I just see little sense in sending a valuable man to his almost certain death without a guarantee the sacrifice would be worth it. What you need to understand is even if we succeeded in removing either of these black leaders there are others who would step into their shoes in a heartbeat and the possibility is strong they could be even worse."

"I agree with Commander Ross, gentlemen," said Sir James Standish. "A good example would be one of Toussaint's senior generals, who is a vicious brute named Jean Jacques Dessalines. Were we to dispose of Toussaint I wouldn't be surprised at all to find Dessalines immediately in charge. The difference between these two men is you can actually negotiate with Toussaint. Hard bargaining, but you can work on him, whereas Dessalines absolutely hates all white men and wouldn't even try to talk. Were it up to him, every white man on the island would be fed to the sharks."

"Commander," said Baron Grenville, although he glanced sharply at his assistant for a moment. "Mr. Bonds here means no offence, right? We've come to realize having men in the same line of business as you is useful and this is what he is doing for the Foreign Office. I just wanted his thoughts to be certain all options are being considered, hence his presence. Have you thought about employing someone other than one of your own men to do the job? Someone who couldn't be traced back to us? Or what about finding something someone doesn't want revealed and using it as leverage?"

Evan was about to reply, but Sir James broke into the conversation once again.

"Baron, we've looked at everything. Nothing has come to light we could use to gain leverage, as you suggest. As for using a cut out to do the job we stayed our hand on that approach because, as Commander Ross says, it is not clear we could feasibly arrange succession to be more favorable to us and the probability is too strong we may even be in a worse position than before. Better the devil you know, what?"

Sir James paused and looked at Evan. "Commander? Despite what I just said, I think you should tell them."

Evan sighed. "Sirs. What you may not know is I have been successful in infiltrating one of my men into Toussaint's inner circle of advisors. We've taken the long approach to this by attempting to influence Toussaint in a slow, but sure manner. If it is considered necessary, we can direct my agent to make an attempt such as we have been discussing."

"Hmm, thank you, Commander Ross," said the First Lord. "Gentlemen, I apologize for this, but I deemed it necessary to ensure we all had the necessary context before we considered the latest news I have just received. I think you will all understand when I tell you."

"News?" said Chancellor Pitt, his face darkening once again. "What news, Earl?" This time it was the First Lord who sighed.

"A packet ship came in direct from Saint Domingue and word reached me only late last night of its news. The black armies are on the move, gentlemen. Notice I am talking about two armies, not one, and the report is both are large in the extreme. One has focused on our forts defending Mirebalais while the other went for Jeremie in West Province. Our men beat back a major assault on Jeremie with heavy losses on both sides, but Mirebalais has been a bloodbath. The situation was still fluid when the report was written, but the way I read this, I think it likely our defenses have fallen and the road to Port-au-Prince is open."

"My God," said Evan.

"Shit," said Chancellor Pitt, hammering the table with a fist.

Baron Grenville groaned and put his face in his hands.

"Quite, gentlemen," said the First Lord. "I am assured every effort will be made to defend Port-au-Prince, but my understanding is it will be most difficult to defend a city of this size against a determined assault. I expect our forces will have to abandon even the coastal areas we hold and consolidate in our forts. Does this make sense, Commander Ross?"

"My Lord, it does. I fully expect the Army may fall back on Mole St. Nicholas in the north and Jeremie in the south."

"General? I know you've begun studying the situation. What do you think about defending Port-au-Prince?"

"Your understanding is correct, My Lord. We could certainly make them pay for it, street by street, but it would be madness to make a stand at all costs there."

"Good God, is there nothing we can do here?" said Baron Grenville. "The last thing we need is for the French to be emboldened in the Caribbean. It wasn't long ago we were in fear of losing Jamaica and I for one still think the bloody frogs were the ones agitating the slaves to rise up there. And, we don't want a fresh flow of money heading to France from Saint Domingue, now do we? Can we find more troops to send?"

Both Chancellor Pitt and General Maitland made to speak in response, but the General deferred to the Chancellor.

"Baron, I think we are in agreement we don't want to lose what we have gained to this point and God forbid we cede any advantage to the French. As much as I would like to send more men there I have to point out we cannot afford to do so. This campaign has cost us ten million pounds and we simply can't sustain that kind of enormous effort anymore. Yes, we've managed some trading gains, but there's not been near enough revenue to cover it. Perhaps the General has some miracle he can offer?"

General Maitland grimaced as he responded. The edge to his voice was harsh.

"I'm not in the business of providing miracles, gentlemen. I posed the question of more resources to the Secretary at War before I came here, as I knew he was not able to attend today, and his answer was no. Our forces are fully committed and there is nothing to spare. So yes, I have been ordered to take command in Saint Domingue and I have nothing other than what is already there to get the job done. The question, though, is what do you want me to do? Perhaps bear in mind the thousands of good men we have already lost there."

A glum silence descended on the table as everyone digested what they had heard. After several long moments it fell to the First Lord once again to keep the conversation moving forward.

"Well, the one bright spot I can offer is the Navy stands ready to do whatever we can in support of General Maitland. If the enemy gets close enough to the shore, we have enough resources in the area to make them pay for doing so. And we of course will provide aid in an evacuation if such becomes necessary."

"Sirs?" said Evan. "If I may, I don't think they will strike immediately for Port-au-Prince. As I said, this man Toussaint isn't stupid and these would be his forces that are on the march toward it. He knows exactly what our Navy can do with its cannons and he will want to rest his men if the fighting has been as brutal as I suspect. I think he will try to negotiate taking control of the city. It would fit with the pattern of past behavior. The idea is make gains to turn up the heat and hope we will despair."

The Foreign Secretary rubbed his chin in thought and turned to look at Chancellor Pitt.

"Parliament just voted against any pullout, Chancellor, but the direction matters seem to be heading in the exact opposite. What do you think, can we deal with this?"

Pitt grimaced. "If we don't want to get handed our political heads we need to find a way to gain some sort of win from this bloody mess. But I don't think this changes our interests here. Shall I elaborate?"

Pitt looked first at the Foreign Secretary and then at the First Lord. Both men shrugged to acknowledge he should proceed.

"Our original interests were to cut the flood of money from this damn place to the French. We wanted a return on our investment. We wanted to check French ambition elsewhere in the Caribbean. Keep the bloody Spanish on their side of the island and shut the door on the Americans stealing our business as much as we can. Gentlemen, I suggest none of what we've talked about today changes those as goals. If at all possible, we need to find a way to turn the tide and take control of this bloody place once and for all, without it costing us more in men and money."

"I agree Chancellor, and if anyone can achieve it for us, it is General Maitland," said the First Lord. "But realistically he will be challenged to do that. I think we should keep the objectives as exactly what you just stated and leave it to the General's discretion to do as he sees fit to accomplish them once he arrives and can assess the current situation. If it's necessary to evacuate Port-au-Prince, at least in the short term, for example, then we should not tie the General's hands."

The Foreign Secretary finally stirred in his seat and sat forward, elbows on the table to steeple his hands.

"Yes, I believe I like this. Let us not tie the General's hands. Once the General is

there to deal with it first hand perhaps some other way of achieving all of this will become clear. If we leave his mandate broad enough we can perhaps spin whatever the outcome is to suit our purposes. Would you not agree, Chancellor?"

"We do what we must. Yes, I concur. Above all, though, we must have some financial gain from this, General. The Treasury has been stretched to the maximum. My fear is not for today or even tomorrow, it is for the long term, because we are not done with the French. Not by a long stretch. We need resources to find some way to do that."

Evan was a veteran of many similar meetings with senior diplomats and military personnel over the years and because of his experience he told himself he shouldn't be surprised to find cold political calculations were central to the decision making process once again. But Evan knew he wasn't a politician and never would be. Nonetheless, it was discouraging to watch the simple, cynical decision being made to give a fine soldier such as General Maitland orders broad enough he would face being the scapegoat if it all went badly. The General locked eyes with Evan for a moment as he contemplated what he was being told and in this brief second Evan knew the General was well aware of what was happening. But the General gave no outward sign and his face remained carved in stone.

"Well then, it is decided," said the First Lord. "Commander Ross, your orders are to dedicate every second of your time to supporting the General in every way possible. We will discuss the ramifications stemming from this decision after this meeting."

"Of course, My Lord," said Evan, turning to lock eyes with the General once again. "General Maitland, my men and I will do whatever it takes to support you."

The General remained silent for a moment, but gave a brief nod to Evan before speaking.

"Gentlemen, is there anything else? If not, I have much to do before I leave and, under the circumstances, I think it best I depart as soon as possible."

"I can help with that too, General," said the First Lord. "I have a frigate taking on supplies in Portsmouth at the moment. It is scheduled to depart for Barbados in four days time. I believe the Admiral on station is planning to deploy it immediately to serve offshore of Saint Domingue, so if this works for you then there is nothing to get you to your destination sooner. Commander Ross will be taking ship on it too, but he will have to detour to Antigua before joining you in Saint Domingue."

"My Lord, this is most welcome and I accept your kind offer."

The First Lord gave details of the ship to the General and committed to warning the Captain he would have guests as he rose to signal the end of the meeting. Evan and Sir James remained behind as the others donned their coats and took their leave. When the door finally closed and the three of them were alone once again the First Lord sighed and shook his head.

"A difficult business, gentlemen. Well, we are not done just yet. Commander Ross, we must make some provision for your situation in light of this and, of course, deal with the consequences of Sir James leaving our service. So you know, I've already had a separate conversation with the Foreign Secretary about this and we are both of the same mind. This experiment to have a naval officer specialize in intelligence matters Nelson began so many years ago has proved—useful. Having Sir James lend his expertise to the diplomatic community has also been beneficial."

The First Lord paused a moment to reach behind him to a side table where some

envelopes were waiting on a tray. He shuffled through the envelopes as he turned back to speak again.

"My predecessors and I noticed you have served us well in this rather unorthodox arrangement over the years and have not once complained. Others have moved up the ladder of promotion because they are on open, active service while you have toiled in secret. But heaven knows we have found need for your services. Well, I don't know why we haven't done this sooner, but better late than never, *Captain Ross*."

The First Lord handed one of the envelopes to Evan as he finished speaking and he smiled for the first time that day. Evan stared at it for a moment in disbelief before reaching out to take it.

"If you don't waste any time you can make arrangements to get a new uniform before you depart, although they will likely charge an outrageous price for it. And yes, this commission means I desire you to assume the role Sir James has so capably performed for so long. Sir James and I are in agreement your workload will now be such you can no longer carry the added burden of running the day to day affairs of the Dockyard in Antigua, which means one of these two will have to take on the role."

The First Lord passed over the remaining two envelopes and Evan saw one bore the name of James Wilton, his second in command. The second envelope was for Timothy Cooke, the other Lieutenant that reported to Evan. A smile came to his face as he saw that both envelopes referred to his men as Commanders and, as Evan looked up, the First Lord nodded.

"Yes, the men serving with you deserve rewards too. It is up to you which of them will assume the overt role of running the Dockyard. Your men also need a third ship, which I have already arranged for. When you get to Barbados you will assume temporary command of *HMS Stalwart* and sail it to Antigua. It will require a refit and perhaps a few more men, but it will serve. This means you and your officers will each have your own ship. This last envelope has the orders you need to do all this."

Evan replied as he took the proffered envelope. "My Lord, I am at a loss for words. Thank you, on behalf of my officers and myself. We will do everything we can to reward your trust in us."

"Good, because I fully expect it."

"I will be staying on in London a little longer, so perhaps we can dine together tonight Comm—ah, Captain Ross?" said Sir James, laughing at himself. "Using your new title will take some getting used to. But we have much to discuss about the transition. And before I forget about this again, I trust the trading company I set up for you as cover for your ships is still serving you well?"

"It is, Sir James, and I would love to dine with you," said Evan, before turning to the First Lord. "Hmm, a question, if I may? Do you wish me to relocate to Barbados, My Lord?"

The First Lord looked at Sir James, who shrugged in response. The First Lord turned back to Evan.

"I think this is a matter for the two of you to sort out, Captain Ross. My only interest is in getting the job done. Aside from the obvious point your duties will continue in the Caribbean, where in the area you are while you do it is your business."

"Captain Ross?" said Sir James. "So you know, I plan to make myself available if you have need of advice at any time in the future. Deciding what kind of wine to drink

with my dinner may be the most important decision I'll be making in future, but I don't plan to abandon you entirely. And now, I'm sure the First Lord has much to do and we should take our leave."

Evan made arrangements to meet Sir James at his club later the same evening after the two men left the First Lord. The coach driver's face lit as Evan appeared outside the gate and signaled for him. Others appeared trying to solicit his business, but Evan waved them away, barely registering the disappointed looks on their faces.

He was completely focused on the surreal new reality of being Captain Evan Ross, with the strange feeling he was walking on air.

Two days later Evan left the warmth of the coach dropping him off in front of an entrance to a building in the Kensington area, not far from Hyde Park. A small walkway over a below ground level cellar led from the street to the arched doorway of what looked to be a well-maintained building giving no hint of what the interior might be like. Evan knocked and within a second of the door being opened he was enveloped in a long, crushing embrace from his sister Fran, before she finally relented and hustled him inside. After closing the door and taking his heavy coat she stepped back to look him up and down, before coming closer once again to give him another hug as the tears continued streaming down her face.

Evan knew he was holding back his own tears, because it was over twenty years since they last saw each other. Fran was only one year older than Evan, who was the youngest of the family. They were inseparable when they were young, because of the gap in ages between them and their two older brothers. Evan knew with his mother gone there was no woman Evan loved more than his sister, with the exception of his own wife Alice.

"My God, Evan," said Fran, finally stepping back to hold him at arms length. "You've grown so much, I hardly recognize you. You are not the young midshipman I remember any more."

"No, I am a Captain now, believe it or not," said Evan with a grin, as her mouth fell open in astonishment. "And you—my word, you are as beautiful as our mother was."

"A Captain? Evan, you have no idea how proud I am! But please, come in and let us sit near the fire. I'll make some tea and introduce you to your niece and nephew. It's about time you finally met them."

As they entered the sitting room Evan was grateful to see a fire was already burning on the grate in the fireplace. Sitting on chairs near the fire were two children who looked to be in their early teens and were obviously close in age. They both perked up and stared at the uncle they had never met with interest as he walked into the room.

The next two hours were a blur of conversation and reminiscence for Evan and his sister. Evan was unsurprised to hear his oldest brother John had major health issues and was not expected to live for many more years. When their parents passed away John, as the eldest, had inherited the minor family title, in keeping with the norm. What hadn't been normal was his blatant attempt to rob the rest of his siblings of their inheritance because his dissolute lifestyle demanded large sums of money to spend on gambling, women, and drink. Fortunately, he hadn't succeeded, but the dispute left bad feelings all around. Their older brother Francis would inherit some day if he survived being posted to India with the Horse Guards.

Having a chance for Evan to visit with his sister was welcome coincidence. Her

husband Hugh, an officer with the 1st Foot, was stationed with the family in Gibraltar until recently. A promotion brought about an immediate transfer to Lower Canada, but Fran and the children weren't able to join him on the same ship. Arrangements for a merchant ship they could use to reunite them took longer than expected, which had meant Fran had to rent rooms in London. Fran was enormously grateful for a little time to visit family and friends in London and, most of all, to do some needed and welcome shopping for goods either impossible to get or prohibitively expensive in distant posts like Gibraltar or Canada.

Over dinner Evan regaled his niece and nephew with judiciously edited stories of his exploits in the Caribbean. The weather being consistently warm and pleasant all year round seemed a foreign concept to both of them, but his description of the fearsome wrath of a hurricane had everyone's eyes wide. Evan could see his nephew was hanging on every word of his experiences and he was certain the young man would follow his father's steps into some branch of the British military. His niece had a faraway look in her eyes as Evan talked of the crystal clear waters and beautiful beaches of the Caribbean.

The evening finally drew to a close as Evan looked at his watch and saw it was late. His sister knew he was making ready to leave and once again the tears came. She went with him to the door and they held each other in a long embrace before Evan finally pulled away and shrugged on his heavy coat.

"My God, Evan, when will we see each other again? Please tell me it won't be another twenty years."

Evan could only shake his head. "I wish I could, Fran. It is the times we live in, I suppose. This war with the French seems endless and I fear there is more to come. Such is our fates and we must face our destiny with courage. I will continue to write, of course."

Fran wiped the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief. "Hugh told me he thinks we will be posted to Montreal. I am having trouble imagining what it will be like to live in a city where the French outnumber us by so much, let alone how we will raise the children there. But you are right, of course. We do what we must. So please keep writing me, dear brother, and go now, before I start weeping like a little girl again. Remember us and remember I love you!"

"I love you, too," said Evan, embracing her one last time before walking out the door. And this time he didn't hold back the tears from flooding down his face as he stepped into the cold once again.

Two days later Evan found himself standing on the quarterdeck of the frigate the First Lord had ordered to carry both himself and the General to Barbados. As he watched the frenetic, but orderly bustle about him he thought back to his arrival the day before. Evan had coaxed down from London and taken a room in The George Inn right outside the entrance to the massive Royal Navy Dockyards in Portsmouth. He marveled at the scale of the Dockyard facilities, as by comparison the Dockyard he managed in Antigua was miniscule. This place was a hive of constant activity and he knew there must be hundreds of workers dedicated to keeping the Royal Navy afloat.

The Inn was packed with officers both coming and going from Portsmouth. Many had brought wives and even children to stay with them while they awaited readiness of their ships. Evan had arranged to meet General Maitland at the Inn, whose Army uniform

made him stand out like a peacock in flock of sparrows. They shared a laugh together as both men ordered the roast beef dinner, knowing it unlikely they would enjoy a proper English meal like this again any time soon.

Both men also knew if they were going to work closely together they would need to know each other well, which meant the real purpose of the dinner meeting was to take each other's measure. Evan was pleased to find the General was direct and outspoken, but he also possessed a keen mind and bore a deep concern for the welfare of his men. The General never said as much, but seemed satisfied Evan was someone he could work with. As both men relaxed with each other the evening progressed pleasantly enough and by the end of it they had polished off a bottle of wine. Both men were amused to find glasses of French cognac could be had if no one wanted to ask questions about the source and with much laughter they both ordered some. As they finally paid their bills and shook hands Evan knew they were both satisfied they could work with each other.

The frigate came alive with shouts of the officers who seemed to be everywhere, bringing Evan's focus back to the present. The ship began to move as the top men aloft freed the sails and more sailors along the port side let loose the lines tethering them to the shore. As the gap between the ship and the dock slowly widened the General came over to stand beside Evan, out of the way of the sailors and officers still bustling about. The two men stood in silence as the frigate was brought about into the Solent to depart with the tide. Both pulled their heavy cloaks closer as the cold breeze out on the open water bit hard. The General finally sighed and broke the silence.

"What do you think, Captain Ross? When will we see England again?"

Evan was silent for a moment as he stared at the grey skies and the stark brick buildings of the Dockyard covering a huge area along the waterfront of Portsmouth Harbour.

"It's been almost twenty years since I was last here, General. The strange part is England will always feel like and be my true home, but the reality is it isn't my home anymore. And who knows, it may be another twenty years or more before I'm back here again. Then again, perhaps it is my destiny never to return."