THE STRAITS OF TREACHERY

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CHAPTER ONE

Punto di Faro, Sicily, 4th September 1810

George Warne, Captain in His Majesty's 27th Regiment of Foot, stood on the beach flicking at strands of seaweed with his cane.

The morning sun was touching the lower slopes of the Calabrian mountains on the other side of the straits, beyond the semi-mythical twin terrors of Scylla and Charybdis. He watched a brace of merchantmen run with the westerly breeze towards the opening of the Straits of Messina, their sails filling as they cut through the indigo waves. They would not be troubled, today at least, by the rock and the whirlpool that had stiffened Odysseus's sinews and wrecked countless mariners, ancient and otherwise. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Venetians had all come to grief here.

As Warne knew, modern scientific observation had established that Charybdis was nothing more than a powerful current, sometimes simply made more hazardous by contrary winds. Scylla was just a rock, albeit a big one; indeed, he could see it – and the castle that sat atop it – with the naked eye. Nevertheless, occasionally, the odd

unlucky or incompetent Sicilian fisherman or Calabrian coaster fell foul of these timeless hazards, capsizing in the straits or being driven onto the lee shore. Even the Royal Navy had been known, much to its embarrassment, to get into trouble here.

The real object of Warne's interest was not Scylla or Charybdis or even the navy's occasional difficulties – amusing as it was to tease his naval friends about them – but the French forces on the far, Calabrian shore. Along the coast of Calabria, perched between the mountains and the sea, the French were crouching, waiting to jump across the straits. From where Warne stood on the beach at Punto di Faro, the easternmost point of Sicily, the nearest Frenchman was little more than a mile and three-quarters away.

All along the coast, from Scylla in the west, at about eleven o'clock from where he stood now, to his right, down past San Giovanni to Reggio and beyond, Warne could see the enemy's encampments, his artillery batteries, the thickets of masts above his landing craft. You could follow his infantry formations as they marched along the coastal roads. On a clear day, you could see the French headquarters, with Murat's splendid, tented pavilion in its midst. A couple of days ago Warne had seen three corpses swinging from a gibbet in the French camp. Deserters or spies, no doubt, poor buggers.

The French had been over there for four and a half years now, waiting for the moment to launch their invasion. But that opportunity had never come. The Straits of Messina might only be two miles wide, but it was a very long two miles when defended by strong currents and patrolled by the Royal Navy. And so it had proved.

But recently, the French had been in greater earnest. More troops had arrived. Coasters, landing craft, and fishing smacks had been gathering at Reggio, San Giovanni and other harbours along the coast in large numbers. All this pointed to preparations for an

invasion. Warne had no doubt, nor did any man in the British army here, that this was all Murat's doing: Murat the brave, the *beau sabreur*, the greatest cavalryman in Europe, the Emperor's brother-in-law, now King of Naples. At the Battle of Eylau, in the snow, he had led ten thousand horsemen in a charge against the Russians. It is said, Warne recalled with a smile, that he only used two words of command on the battlefield, 'Forward' and 'Charge'.

'Sir!' Warne was jolted from his reverie by his sergeant's friendly Irish brogue. 'Mr Hare to see you in the tower, sir.'

'Very good, Flynn. I'm coming.'

'Get on, Boney, leave it alone,' Warne shouted at his dog who was inquisitively sniffing a dead seabird on the grey, rough sand. As Warne turned to walk back up the beach towards the fort, the spaniel abandoned his trophy and trotted to his master.

Warne, his dog at his heels, skirted around the walls and ditch that defended the seaward side of the tower before passing through the gateway on the landward side. It was a round, squat, solid construction, not unlike the Martello towers which now formed a chain along the south coast of England. It was surrounded by a high wall enclosing several buildings. These were barracks for the men, a cookhouse, stabling, storage and a magazine. As he entered the fort, the sentry came smartly to attention. Warne strode across the courtyard, a couple of chickens flapping and clucking out of his path, and into the tower.

'Ah, George, there you are,' said Hare, looking at Warne. The two men were about the same height, an inch or two short of six foot, and broad-shouldered but George was slimmer, rangier. His hair was blonde, his fair English complexion deeply tanned by the Sicilian sun. His nose was prominent but straight in profile, not aquiline, and his blue eyes deep set, almost hooded, giving him a purposeful, determined look. 'Good morning.'

Hare, like Warne, had been in Sicily since the 27th arrived on the island in 1806. He was a well-liked officer, highly thought of by his superiors. This morning, he looked every inch the British officer in his scarlet tunic with its buff facings at the collar and cuffs, his white breeches and well-polished boots.

'Shall we go up, sir?' suggested Warne.

The two men climbed the steep stairs to the open platform on top of the tower. They walked to the parapet and looked out at the view. Laid out before them were the narrow straits, studded with white sails, with the Mediterranean beyond and the mountains of mainland Italy rearing up behind. On a sunny, late summer morning, it was a spectacular sight.

'George, I've received orders that you are to report to the general at Messina. Sir John Stuart.'

'Do you know why, sir? I hope I'm not in trouble.'

'No. It's some kind of special task, I think, but beyond that I don't know anything.'

'When does he want to see me?'

'At two o'clock this afternoon, in the Citadel.'

A few minutes later Hare departed, down the stairs to the courtyard where he mounted his horse before clip-clopping out through the gateway. George remained on the gun platform gazing at the view, wondering what the general had in store for him. It was not often that a mere captain – and a junior one at that – was summoned to an interview with the commander-in-chief. It must be something important, he decided, rubbing his hand on the cool, rough stone of the parapet before turning towards the door and the stairs.

Three hours later, George was sitting astride his horse trotting along the new military road built by the British between Faro and Messina. It was now very hot; he was sweating profusely in his heavy

uniform. This was, Warne knew, the best stretch of road on the entire island, although this was no great compliment as many of them were scarcely better than rocky, potholed paths. He passed the two saltwater lakes at Ganzirri, famous for their fish and shellfish, then the villages of Sant' Agata and Grotto di Pace, hugging the coastal strip. On the landward side, to Warne's right as he trotted along, there were orange and olive groves and terraces of vines clinging to the lower slopes, above which prickly-pear bushes covered the hillside. On Warne's other side was the sea, with the Calabrian shore beyond. Drawn up on the beach were the local fishing boats – *speronari* – while the dark-tanned, bare-legged fishermen in their distinctive red caps repaired their nets or snoozed in the shade. Very sensible, thought Warne enviously, as he rode on towards Messina in the baking sun. He saluted as a party of artillerymen passed in the opposite direction with a limber and horses. Ammunition for the batteries at Faro, no doubt.

Ahead of him, he could see the city of Messina spread out as if on a canvas. To the left was the sickle-shaped spit of land that formed the harbour. At its near end was the fort of San Salvador, its circular bastion guarding the entrance to the harbour. At the other end of the sickle was the low, crouching mass of the Citadel, dominating the wide expanse of the harbour and glowering at the city. In there, somewhere, was General Stuart. Straight ahead was Messina's famous port, since ancient times regarded as the best, safest natural harbour in the Mediterranean. Today it bristled with masts, as vessels of every description, warships, merchantmen, coasters, fishing smacks, oared galleys and so on, came and went, moored and set sail. To the right was Messina herself, sitting in the bowl formed by the hills behind, the red-tiled roofs punctuated by the towers and spires of the city's many churches and monasteries. Warne had been in Messina, on and off, for four and a half years

so knew the city well and had grown fond of it. It might be dirty, smelly and half ruined but it had a decided charm.

Soon Warne was passing the monastery of San Salvadore de' Greci and the grand marble gates of San Francesco di Paola. As he got nearer to the city, the bustle of people, animals and vehicles became gradually busier: heavily laden mules, oxen carts, carriages, men on horseback, peasants on foot. Now, within sight of the city walls, he slowed his horse to a walk as he picked his way through the throng. Crossing the *fiumara* di Saddeo – a natural watercourse, dry in summer but often turned into a life-threatening torrent by winter rains or melting snow – he came to the Porta Reale, the gate in the northern flank of the city walls. On his left was the hulking Bastione Reale Basso, which commanded the point where the walls reached the shoreline. To his right the walls – which were about twenty feet high here and crowned with battlements – ran to the west, slightly uphill, away from the sea.

Once through the gate and into the city, he turned his horse's head to the left to go along the seafront. Here, fanned by the breeze off the harbour, it would be cooler than in the city's crowded streets. Messina's Marina was a chaotic, busy place. All along the quay, which extended for over a mile, ships loaded and unloaded their cargoes, fishing boats disgorged their catches and a multitude of other vessels took on water, rations, loaded ballast, spare sails or just sat at their moorings. Men swarmed around the boats, nimbly negotiating flimsy gangplanks, jumping from ship to quayside, scrambling up rigging.

As Warne trotted along the Marina he contemplated for the umpteenth time the damage wrought by the terrible earthquake that had devastated the city in 1783. The seafront had been one of the wonders of Europe. The *Palazzata*, as it was known, had been a long, elegant facade of buildings, in the baroque style with

pilasters, pediments and balustrades, sheaved in marble, forming a gentle arc along the harbour. It had been brought crashing down on one terrifying day. Only now, nearly thirty years later, had the rebuilding started. There were still large gaps in the facade and many of the buildings had only one storey. One day, Warne reckoned, it would be a fine sight, but for now it was a building site. The rest of the city had suffered equally badly, but it was here on the waterfront that the damage was still most visible.

By now Warne was more than halfway along the Marina, well beyond the tip of the peninsula, which marked the entrance to the harbour itself. As he passed, he turned to admire the gigantic marble figure of Neptune, gleaming in the sunshine, his right hand raised as if in benediction, his trident clutched firmly in his left. The god of the sea stood on a plinth rising out of a fountain, his head crowned with seaweed as if he had just emerged from the deep. At its foot, in the frothing water, were four seahorses, with fine manes and muscular, fishy tails.

A few minutes later Warne crossed the wide expanse of open ground between the Citadel and the city itself. The Citadel was Messina's fortress, now serving as the British headquarters in Sicily. Built by the Spanish in the late seventeenth century, it had been intended as much to dominate the port and protect the unpopular Spanish viceroys from the populace as to guard the city against attack. It stood on the neck of the narrow spit of land that formed the outer shore of the harbour. It had been designed along the lines laid down by Vauban, Louis XIV's great military engineer: the low, powerful ramparts had five triangular bastions, which formed, in plan, a pentagon. The walls were about thirty feet high and solidly built. On top of each bastion was a wide platform on which were mounted heavy guns; more guns pointed out from embrasures cut in the walls between the bastions. In front of the

walls on the city side was a rampart of earth – a glacis – thrown up to afford further protection from any attacker's artillery. Above the gateway, the Union flag fluttered in the breeze.

The sentries snapped to attention as Warne walked his horse across the drawbridge and into the Citadel. Dismounting, he handed the reins to a waiting groom and strode across the wide, dusty courtyard, which formed the centre of the castle towards the low range of buildings housing the general and his staff. He walked in past another sentry. Inside, the stone-flagged room was deliciously cool after the midday heat. Awnings shaded the room from the burning Sicilian sun but even in the dim light he instantly recognised the tall, lithe figure of William Coker.

'Coker, what a surprise to see you. What brings you here?'

Coker, a captain in the 31st Foot, was one of Warne's closest friends in Sicily. They had climbed Etna together two years earlier and often went shooting in the hills above Messina with their dogs.

'I might ask the same question of you,' replied Coker, his suntanned face creasing into a smile. 'I'm here to see the general. It's very secret, you know.'

'I've come to see the general, too. I was ordered to attend only this morning. I wonder what he is about?'

'We'll find out soon enough,' replied Coker. He turned to the clerk who sat at a table towards the back of the room piled high with papers and leather-bound ledgers. 'Mr Rogers, we are here to see the general. Ordered for two o'clock.'

'General Stuart will see you shortly, sir. Please wait over there,' he said, pointing to a high-backed bench against the far wall. Rogers was an Irishman – although this was hardly unusual, Warne's own regiment, the 27th, was recruited exclusively in Ireland – who had been with the army in Sicily since the beginning. He had started as an assistant clerk at headquarters but had worked his way up to

his present senior position. Sitting as he did at the centre of things, he knew everyone and everything of any significance to the British army in Sicily. He may have been a clerk in name, but he was an important cog in the machine. Junior officers who called him anything other than 'Mister Rogers' did so at their peril.

A bachelor, he was widely rumoured to have a local mistress who had given him a growing brood of children. The army grapevine had it that they lived in a wing of one of the more obscure royal palaces in Messina, although no one could provide any concrete evidence of this. These rumours had, of course, reached the generals' ears but as Rogers was both hard-working and prodigiously competent, they turned a deaf ear to the gossip. After, all, they reasoned, he's not married and whatever he does in his own time is hardly the army's business, so long as it does not impinge upon his work, which it didn't seem to. Let Rogers get on with his rogering, seemed to be the general view.

As Warne and Coker walked towards the bench, two other officers entered the room from the courtyard.

'Do you know either of them?' Warne whispered to Coker.

'No, but they're in the 44th. Newly arrived, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Yes,' said Warne. He could make out in the dim light the 44th's yellow facings on the two men's tunics. Having announced themselves to the clerk, they approached Warne and Coker.

'Kendall, 44th Foot,' said the taller of the two men, extending his hand. 'I don't believe we've met.'

'No, indeed not,' replied Coker, shaking the proffered hand. 'This is Captain Warne, 27th Foot.'

'And this is Captain Entwhistle, also of the 44th.'

'At your service,' said Warne, inclining his head slightly towards the two new arrivals. Kendall was pink-cheeked with a shock of blonde hair. Entwhistle was darker, shorter and thicker set, with long,

spare side whiskers, which only partly disguised a scar on his left cheek. They were about the same age as Warne and Coker. Both were smartly turned out, looking cool and unruffled, their gorgets and buttons brightly polished. They're probably quartered here, thought Warne, so no ride down the coast in the midday sun for them.

As the four officers were introducing each other the door on the far side of the room opened.

'Gentlemen, this way please. The general will see you now.' The voice belonged to a smartly turned-out staff officer in a dark blue uniform, white breeches and gleaming boots with spurs. They followed him through the door into an inner office. There were three desks heaped with papers. On the wall was a large map of Messina, the straits and the near parts of Calabria.

'Are you all ready?' he asked. 'Good. Let's go in, then.' He opened another door and the four young officers followed him, Warne bringing up the rear. On the far side of a large, high-ceilinged, whitewashed room was a long table, with an elaborate silver inkstand. Behind it sat General Sir John Stuart, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in Sicily, Knight of the Bath, Count of Maida, writing. As they stepped onto the red Turkish carpet, the general replaced his quill in the inkstand and looked up. The staff officer closed the door.

'Gentlemen. Thank you for coming at such short notice.' The general was wearing a scarlet tunic, its buttons arranged in two rows of pairs down the front, and a black stock at the neck, on which hung a gilded medallion on a blue ribbon. He had a gold-tasselled epaulette on each shoulder and a star on his left breast. He looked worn and tired; his grey hair no longer covered the dome of his head, but his eyes flicked alertly around the group standing in a line opposite him on the carpet.

'You have been chosen,' the general began, stiffly, 'for a special

duty, one which may, we hope, do much to disrupt the enemy's plans. As we all know, Prince Murat is preparing to invade the island and throw our forces into the sea. We see every day with our own eyes the preparations he is making. It can only be a matter of time before he launches his attack. We must strike at him before he strikes at us.' He paused, adjusting his stock. 'Captain Warne, you will recall the advantages gained by my great victory at Maida four years ago. Attack is the best form of defence. If we can strike at the enemy now, we may be able to disrupt his invasion plans and with the summer coming to an end, this may postpone Murat's ambitions until next year.'

Warne did remember Maida. How could he possibly forget it: the broiling heat, the blinding smoke and ear-splitting noise of the battle, the terror, the exhilaration, the bloodlust?

The general stood up behind his desk before continuing. 'I have asked General Cockburn to command the operation.' At this a man who had been sitting unnoticed at a desk at the back of the room got up and walked across the floor to Stuart's desk. He was about the same height as Stuart with an intelligent, rather quizzical look. His uniform was neat but plain, unadorned by stars, medallions and fussy rows of buttons.

'General Cockburn is newly arrived here and, as you all no doubt know, commands the southern division of our army. Please introduce yourselves to him.' Warne and his three fellow officers – indeed, the whole army – had heard of the general's narrow escape when his ship ran onto the rocks on the approach to Malta in heavy seas on his way to Sicily. He was lucky to be alive.

'Gentlemen,' Cockburn began in a light Irish accent, having acknowledged each officer as he introduced himself. 'I am honoured to be entrusted with this important operation by Sir John. I am sure that you will all do whatever you can to ensure its success. My chief staff officer, Colonel Airey, will explain the plan

to you in detail but I propose an attack at night on the enemy's flotilla of landing craft. The object will be to destroy as many of them as we can, thus disrupting the invasion plans.'

A few minutes later, Warne, Coker and the two officers from the 44th were back in the next-door room looking at the large map on the wall as Colonel Airey outlined the operation. George Airey was a man of barely medium height but his high forehead, striking, dark eyes and impeccable turnout gave him a presence which belied his lack of inches. Now in his late forties, his dark, swept-back hair was flecked with grey. The four of them, he explained, would each command a detachment of soldiers, which would be rowed across the straits at night in galleys to where the enemy's flotillas of landing craft were moored. Each raiding party would be allocated a local guide with knowledge of the anchorage. Once there, the men would disembark before casting off, smashing or setting alight as many of the landing craft as possible. Then they would re-embark to return home. 'It'll be plain sailing, gentlemen,' said Airey, breezily.

That, at least, was the plan. But Warne had taken part in several operations across the straits in the four years he had been in Sicily and he was all too aware of how difficult they were. Any force, however small, had to contend with powerful, unpredictable winds and currents before it even got to the enemy. And all this at night, into the bargain. Warne shifted his weight from foot to foot and glanced uneasily at Coker.

'. . . you will be given charges of sulphur, nitre and charcoal, with oily rags, steel and flints to set the boats on fire,' Airey was saying. 'Captain Kendall,' he said, pointing with a stick at the map, 'you will land here, at Scylla.' The other three were allocated targets south, down the Calabrian coast towards Reggio. Entwhistle was to attack at San Giovanni and Coker at Catona. Warne had the southernmost, near Reggio itself.

'Finally, gentlemen, I should warn you that secrecy is vital. If any word of this operation gets to the French, you and your men will be walking into a hornets' nest. I don't need to remind you that Messina is crawling with French spies; any rumour of an attack will be carried straight over there to Murat,' Airey prodded his stick at the boot of Italy on the map, 'before you know it.'

'Sir,' asked Warne, 'we can rely on the loyalty of our own men but what about the crews of the galleys?'

'They won't be told of the targets or the nature of the operation until the last moment,' replied the colonel. 'After that, we'll just have to trust them. They, too, don't forget, will be on the receiving end of the enemy's fire, so it's very much in their interests not to betray the secret. The same applies to the guides, who are all men we know well and have employed in the past. That's all, gentlemen. You will receive my written orders in the morning. Good luck.'

As Warne opened the door into the box, the orchestra was tuning up in the pit below.

'Good evening, George,' said Major Thring. 'How good of you to come. Allow me to present my sister, Emma.'

A young woman in a light blue silk gown stepped forward. Warne noticed at once her lively grey eyes, which seemed to flash even in the operatic penumbra of the theatre. She reminded him, instantly and strikingly, of a Reynolds print he had once seen of a bacchante, lively, adventurous, and touched with a dash of devil-may-care. She'd take the bachelor bastions of British Messina by storm, that was for sure.

'A great pleasure, Miss Thring,' said Warne. 'I have heard much of you from your brother.'

'Oh dear, Robert, I hope you have not been boring Mr Warne with tales of home.'

'Quite the contrary, Miss Thring, I assure you. I gather you speak Italian and French?'

'Too badly, I am afraid.'

'You know Colonel Airey, I think,' said Thring. The colonel was still in the same dark blue uniform he had been wearing when he briefed Warne and his fellow officers earlier in the day.

'Indeed. Good evening, Colonel.'

'Good evening, Mr Warne,' he said, inclining his head gravely.

Once the four of them were seated, Warne looked around the opera house. It was a small theatre, with no more than a dozen boxes, a few rows of stalls and the usual area in front of the stage where people stood to watch the performance. The audience was often rowdy, quick to boo its disapproval and equally quick to shout, clap and whistle its approval. At the moment, they were talking quietly, awaiting the start of the opera. In the candlelight, the little opera house glowed.

In the box opposite was a man in a fine, red embroidered coat, with an extravagant white stock, his thick, dark hair gathered neatly in a bow. Warne recognised him as the Count of Pelorito; they had recently been introduced at a reception. Sitting next to him was a strikingly beautiful woman, her hair piled up on her head, in a cream silk gown. Suspended above her tantalising cleavage, Warne could see an enormous single diamond, glowing yellow in the candlelight. They made a handsome couple.

'Who is that with the count?' Warne asked the colonel. Colonel Airey, following Warne's gaze, leant across.

'That's his mistress, Madame Signotti,' he whispered. 'The count has been most helpful to us in raising the Sicilian Volunteers for the defence of the island. He is a great favourite of the King, who, I am told, rather likes Madame Signotti.'

'His Majesty is a man of excellent taste,' replied George.

'Yes. The count cordially hates the French who have pillaged his estates on the mainland. As a result, unlike many of his fellow countrymen, he will do whatever he can to make their life difficult.'

At that moment the conductor, a stout man in a black coat, waddled into the orchestra pit. The buzz of conversation stilled as he turned to face the audience. He bowed elaborately before turning back to the lectern and raising his baton.

La Serva Padrona was a short, lively opera, a standard in the repertoire here in Messina. Warne had seen it twice before in the four years he had been in Sicily. Written in the early eighteenth century by the Italian composer Giovanni Pergolesi, it comprised an overture and two separate *intermezzi*. Considering, Warne thought, that Pergolesi had died at the tender age of twenty-six, this piece was a remarkably precocious achievement. As the overture skipped joyously along, he looked down into the orchestra pit. Unusually for an opera, the orchestra consisted only of a string quartet; no trumpets and drums tonight. Looking up, he stole a glance across at Emma: she was already wrapped in concentration, staring at the ceiling. As the final chords of the overture faded away, the curtain rose to reveal the bulky figure of Uberto dressing to go out. His fine, dark bass voice filled the theatre as the fat conductor marked time with his baton.

'I greatly enjoyed that,' said Emma as the little open carriage carrying her and the three men pulled away from the opera house. She had covered her shoulders with a woollen shawl against the cooler night air but it was a relief to be out of the hot, stuffy atmosphere of the opera house.

'Me too,' said George. 'I'd never been to an opera before I came to Sicily as it hasn't reached Herefordshire yet, but I took to it from the first. Some of my friends in the regiment tease me for liking it; they call it "Italian warbling" or "foreign shrieking", but I think they are the ones missing out.'

'I've always liked it,' said Colonel Airey as the carriage started to descend the hill. 'When I was in London I used to go whenever I could. Indeed, I saw Herr Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* when it was first sung in London four years ago. I was very lucky. What did you think of the evening, Robert?' he asked.

'Oh, I liked it well enough. I think I prefer a good play, but it's fine once in a while.'

Ten minutes later they were sitting at a gate-legged table in Colonel Airey's quarters in the Citadel. The colonel's servant was fussing around the candlelit room, putting supper on the table. There were some thick, juicy tranches of swordfish, with dark welts where they had been cooked on a griddle, and a plate of sweet, ripe tomatoes dressed with olive oil. Airey poured four glasses of white wine.

'This is the kind of thing we've grown accustomed to eating out here, Miss Thring,' he said. 'It's probably not what you're used to at home, but the fish was caught out in the straits this morning, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Yes, sir,' said the servant, 'I bought half a small fish from a fishing boat at the quayside this morning.'

'They must be very big,' said Emma, 'if this is half a small one.'

'They are,' replied her brother. 'I've seen ones six foot long. It's most interesting watching the men catching the swordfish. Sometimes you can watch them fishing through a glass from the ramparts here.'

As they ate, the talk turned to the news from England. Emma, it transpired, had arrived in Sicily only the previous day having stopped at Gibraltar and Malta on the voyage out. She had sailed in an East Indiaman to Gibraltar, before transferring to a ship bound for Alexandria for the remainder of the voyage. She enthused about the sights of Valletta – 'The Knights are so romantic and the Grand Harbour so pretty' – and had enjoyed a boat trip to Gozo but had been less keen on Gibraltar: 'rather dull', she thought.

'Why did you decide to come out to the Mediterranean, Miss Thring?' asked George.

'Well, strange as it may seem, I missed my dear brother whom I hadn't seen for more than four years, and he kept telling me in his letters how nice it is here. Also, with most of the Continent closed to English travellers, opportunities to go abroad have been very limited. Mother was not keen on the idea, but Father said that the voyage is much safer now that the French navy is blockaded in its ports. So when my parents discovered that some friends of theirs, the Reverend and Mrs Allen, were going to Sicily and were happy that I accompany them, that decided it. I am hoping that dear Robert will get some leave while I am here so that we can travel around the island a little. I would love to see Etna and I am interested in visiting the Greek and Roman temples. I have read Mr Brydone's book, which has filled my head with all manner of ideas of things to do while I'm here. Taormina is very pretty, he says.'

'He's right, it is. The Greek theatre there should not be missed. I would be delighted to show you round the sights of Messina, Miss Thring,' offered George, 'although I may be busy for the next couple of days.'

'That would be a great pleasure, Mr Warne,' she replied.

An hour and a half later the party had broken up: Robert Thring had taken his sister back to his lodgings in the city and Airey had gone to bed. George Warne was standing on the ramparts gazing out over the straits, smoking a cigar. To his left the sentry turned smartly, his boots clicking on the paving stones, before pacing slowly back towards the next bastion. The moon was partly obscured by drifting clouds. There was little to see: only the odd light on the far side and one ship, picked out by its lanterns and by the lights in a stern cabin, making its way towards Faro.

Inevitably, George's thoughts turned to the raid. In two days'

time he and his men would be waiting, here in the Citadel, to embark, their nerves tightening by the minute. The men would be cleaning their muskets and sharpening their bayonets, chuntering away in their Irish voices, joking and swearing, anything to relieve the nerves. He would be trying to disguise his fears, to remain calm and composed. That was the leader's job. If he couldn't be cool and confident, how could he expect the men to be? It's all going to take place over there, George thought, staring into the darkness over the straits. Who knows what lies in store for me, for the men, for us all?

He also thought about Emma as he stared out into the night. She was bright and intelligent, unlike some of the girls who came out to Sicily from England looking for husbands. Only last month, an officer in his own regiment had got engaged to a girl who'd arrived from England barely a fortnight before. The general opinion in the mess was that he'd live to regret it. Marriage is not for me, thought George, not yet anyway. He thought briefly of Carlotta, the pretty, dark, lithe, young widow from the city into whose bed he had slipped with increasing regularity over the last year or so. But Emma Thring was very pretty too, it could not be denied, and a lively character.

Less appealing was the worry that had been nagging at George rather too much in recent months: his lack of money. Or, to be more specific, his gambling debts. Before he arrived in Sicily, he had never played cards for money but, gradually, over the years the habit had crept up on him. Now he probably played two or three times a month, more in the winter, and his losses had started to grow. Sometimes he won – and won well – but the wins never seemed wholly to offset the steady drain of losses. He owed about a hundred pounds to other men in the card school – some of them brother officers – and another eighty pounds or so to a local money lender. This equated, as he was only too aware, to a year's

salary for an infantry captain such as himself. At the moment his creditors seemed happy to wait for their money, but they might soon become restive. What he would do then was anyone's guess. He blew a final plume of smoke into the night air, ground the cigar under his heel and made his way towards the stairs.

Meanwhile, the Thrings' carriage was making its way slowly through the darkened streets towards Robert's lodgings in a side street off the strada Ferdinanda.

'I hope you enjoyed your first taste of our society here,' said Thring.

'Yes, I did. I thought the opera was charming and the colonel provided a very good supper,' she replied.

'Good. I enjoyed myself, too. What did you think of Mr Warne?' Thring asked his sister.

'He is a very pleasant man and a kind one, too, I'd say, as well as rather dashing,' she replied.

'Yes, he's popular in the regiment and his men would follow him to the Gates of Hell,' said Thring. 'He's also well liked in local society, I understand. He's learnt Italian since he's been here – something not many British officers bother to do, I regret to say, beyond a few words of command – which helps him mix with the locals.'

'So far I find it difficult to understand the Sicilian dialect,' said Emma, 'but I may grow accustomed to it. My Italian was learnt at home from books, and from reading Dante. Mr Warne, I think, speaks as the Sicilians do. Perhaps he could teach me, too.'

'Perhaps he could,' replied her brother, as the carriage pulled up outside his house. 'Here we are, my dear.' He stepped out of the carriage and helped his sister down onto the pavement.