

*The
American
Duke*

The American Duke

A REGENCY-ERA NOVEL

AUGUST JADE STERLING



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This book is dedicated to my parents, Marylou and Quinton, who lovingly taught me you can achieve anything you desire; to my sister Quinnette, who has been with me through each step of this process; to the truth that was hidden and never told or taught; and to the faculty, administrators, staff, workers, students, and alumni of Wilberforce University, Wilberforce, Ohio, U.S.A.

W H O ' S W H O

THE ROXBURYS

Sterling Adam Roxbury—British, the sixth Duke of Westmoure, lives in England

Avery Roxbury—British, lives in America, brother of the sixth Duke of Westmoure, Sterling Avery Roxbury; Anne's husband; father of Sterling Avery Roxbury, Meredith Anne Roxbury, and Elizabeth Beverly Roxbury; co-owner of the Avery Jacob Shipping Company,

Anne Roxbury—American, wife of Avery Roxbury, mother of Sar, Mer, and Beth

Sterling Avery Roxbury (Sar)—American, son of Anne and Avery Roxbury

Meredith Anne Roxbury (Mer)—American, the oldest daughter of Anne and Avery Roxbury

Elizabeth Beverly Roxbury (Beth)—American, the youngest child of Anne and Avery Roxbury

Charles Roxbury—British, brother of Avery Roxbury and Sterling Adam Roxbury, the sixth Duke of Westmoure

Frances—British, mother of Joycellyn

Joycellyn—British, daughter of Charles and Frances

Alexius Standerson—British, daughter of Caroline and Sebastian

Anthony Daggs, the Marquess of Dearne, Inspector Daggs of

Scotland Yard—British, one of the elite operatives who works for Berkley on an as needed basis

- Ashby (Ash) Wyndham, Earl of Danford—British, an aristocrat who served in the elite group of noblemen under the command of Berkley during the war
- Aurelia Rothingham, Duchess of Edgerton—British, wife of David, good friend of Caroline Standerson
- Basil Willingham—the future Duke of Brockton, nephew of the current Duke of Brockton
- Brian O’Keefe—British, accomplished actor
- Captain Coomes—British, sea captain, works for Westmoure Shipping Company
- Caroline Standerson, the Marchioness of Broadhurst—British, wife of Sebastian, daughter Alexius
- Charlotte Peach, Countess of Fatson—British, a member of the aristocracy
- Chief Red Cloud—American, second in charge of the Avery Jacob Shipping Company
- David Rothingham, Duke of Edgerton—British, an aristocrat who served in the elite group of noblemen under the command of Berkley during the war, married to Aurelia
- Diana Ryerton, Duchess of Northampton—British, wife of Marcus, good friend of Caroline Standerson
- Earl of Landingham—British, a member of the aristocracy
- Earl of Severson—British, a wealthy aristocrat
- Earl of Thornton—British, a wealthy aristocrat
- Easton Willingham, Brockton, The Duke of Brockton—British, an ally of the Crown
- Edward and Little Elizabeth—British, street orphans
- Ethan Quinn, the Marquess of Perth—British, head of the Foreign Office
- Evan Marston, Duke of Carrington—British, an aristocrat who served in the elite group of noblemen under the command of Berkley during the war, married to Georgina
- Evelyn Quinton, the Marchioness of Briarcliff—British, wife of Richard Quinton, Julien’s mother

- George Mason—British, works for Berkley in the Home Office
- Georgina Marston, Duchess of Carrington—British, wife of Evan, good friend of Caroline Standerson
- Grayson, the Duke of Grayson—British, Caroline's father
- Harold David Hearthstone, cousin of Duke of Westmoure—next in line for the title
- Hortense Hamilton, the Dowager Duchess of Horton—British, the most revered woman of the ton
- Jackson (Jack) Abbott—British, one of the elite operatives under Berkley's command
- Jacob Goldsmith—American, co-owner of the Avery Jacob Shipping Company
- Jonathan Simmons, the Earl of Carlyle—British, field surgeon and physician, an aristocrat who served in the elite group of noblemen under the command of Berkley during the war
- Julien Quinton, the honorable Earl of Sutton—British, son of Richard and Evelyn, one of the elite operatives under Berkley's command
- Lady Sarah Jersey—British, head patron at Almack's along with the other patronesses at the time, Lady Emily Cowper, Lady Anne Stewart, Marchioness of Londonderry, the Viscountess of Castlereagh, Lady Sefton, Countess de Lieven, Baroness Willoughby de Eresby, and Countess Esterhazy, arbiters of le bon ton
- Madame Burgoff—British, modiste extraordinaire to the ton
- Marcus Ryerton, Duke of Northampton—British, an aristocrat who served in the elite group of noblemen under the command of Berkley during the war, married to Diana
- Margaret Lambeth, Countess of Milford—British, a member of the aristocracy
- Mildred Cook—British, cook and integral part of the Westmoure household
- Miriam Wyndham, Countess of Danford—British, wife of Ashby, good friend of Caroline Standerson

- Miss Engles—British, deportment, all things British
- Morgan—British, the sixth Duke of Westmoure's (Sterling Adam Roxbury) man of affairs
- Mrs. Kiggins—British, housekeeper, companion, friend of Lady Hortense
- Mrs. Spencer—British, chatelain of the Westmoure's homes
- Oliver—British, majordomo of the Westmoure household
- Perkins—American, Sar's right-hand man
- Richard Quinton, the Marquess of Briarcliff—British, husband of Evelyn Quinton, Julien's father
- Royce Thortonshire, the honorable Marquess of Shone—British, one of the elite operatives under Berkley's command
- Samuels—British, soldier, attached to the Home Office, works for Berkley
- Sebastian Standerson, the Marquess of Broadhurst—British, the senior diplomat in the elite group of operatives under Berkley's command, married to Caroline, daughter Alexius
- Seymour—British, majordomo of the Broadhurst
- Smytherson—Valet to the Duke of Westmoure
- Sylvia Meacham, Viscountess of Truvo—British, a member of the aristocracy
- Thomas Berkley, the Duke of Hampton, a royal duke, moniker, the general—British, head of the Home Office, leader of the elite group of operatives, cousin of the king
- The Wolfhounds: Duchess, America, Baby, Bella, Oscar, Felix—British, trained at Whitehall

PROLOGUE

*Two Hundred and Fifty Miles off the Coast of America,
Captain's Cabin
1791*

The captain of the British ship *Standish* pronounced them man and wife. Avery looked into the deep-brown eyes of the honey-haired beauty standing before him, his wife. The kiss was a promise of their future, and Anne felt it to the tip of her soul.

*Eleven Years Later
London, England
August 15, 1802*

The London Daily

*Bill to Prohibit Transporting Slaves
Supported by the Duke of Westmoure*

The Duke of Westmoure announces he is supporting the movement to end the slave trade, and is introducing a bill in Parliament to prohibit British shipping companies from transporting slaves. Westmoure joins forces with Anand, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and Olaudah Equiano who have been leading the vigorous campaign to abolish slave trade for over a decade.

After visiting America and witnessing the massive number of slaves sold there from Africa and Ireland, their unconscionable treatment, and their transportation under inhumane conditions, the duke stated it is morally intolerable and reprehensible.

“We are responsible for this atrocity against mankind, and we are obligated to end it immediately. Satan’s highway to hell must be stopped.”

The duke owns Westmoure Shipping Company. His company has never transported human cargo. Westmoure Shipping Company, one of the largest in the world, may not depend upon the huge revenues generated from transporting slaves, but many other companies do. It is likely these owners will lobby strongly against this bill and prohibit its passage.

Five Years Later
March 26, 1807

The London Daily

The British Shipping Act Passes: Slave Trade Prohibited

Both houses of Parliament passed the bill prohibiting English vessels from transporting slaves. The initiative for change started moving forward quickly after the Duke of Westmoure announced he was supporting and working with the various committees and anti-slave transport leaders to abolish transportation of slaves. He campaigned endlessly for support and passage of this bill.

The Abolition of Slavery Act became law yesterday, March 25, and becomes effective May 1. Continued transportation of slaves is an act of piracy and a felony. Slave ships will not be allowed to trade at British ports. The Navy will patrol the seas off the coast of Africa and Ireland. Suspected British ships will be stopped, confiscated, and fined if they are transporting slaves.

The Duke of Westmoure stated, "This is just the beginning of the campaign to end the inhumanity of slave trade and slavery."

He will continue to work for full emancipation of all slaves throughout the world.

The Sixth Duke of Westmoure's Private Study
March 27, 1807

His personal journal, the pages of his life and innermost thoughts were laid out before him—the two-edged sword, the past and the present. His ducal power had ruined his brother's life. Now, the ducal power must shape his brother's future. Somehow, the mistakes of the past had to be rectified and made to mesh seamlessly into the present. The dukedom's future depended upon Avery and his heir. Closing the journal, the duke shook his head, trying to erase the cobwebs of his memories, and started his weekly letter to his brother.

March 27, 1807

Avery,

Yes indeed, it's a wonderful day. The law officially passed. British ships can no longer transport slaves from any country, including Africa and Ireland. I hope this helps your cause. We can do nothing about the slave laws within America except exert diplomatic pressure. I have assurances from the ministers this will be done. We'll continue to work for full emancipation throughout all of Great Britain.

Pausing, he thought of the many letters between the two of them, threads binding them after years of estrangement. The haunting memories of those years dominated his actions. What a fool he'd been—time wasted, shame and remorse. For a while, even after the truth was known, he hadn't allowed himself to think about how much damage had been done or how much he'd missed his brother Avery's quick wit and

steady nature. During his trip to America, the two of them reconciled, but the pain lodged deep in his heart told him it wasn't enough. Would anything ever be enough? The duke sighed. Knowing how pleased the passage of the law would make Avery, he slipped the article from the *London Daily* into the envelope along with the letter.

As he continued to reflect, the sadness in his life caused his breath to catch—mistakes, deceit, and more mistakes. He still pictured the smug look on his brother Charles's face when he confronted him with the truth, the hate that burned in the woman he married, and his daughters who cared naught for anything but his tremendous wealth. Not one of them loved him, each other, or the responsibility and honor of the title. But the joys made all of this bearable: Joycelyn, his brother Avery, who found a way to forgive him, and the woman he loved above all others—the secret love of his life. Thinking of the future, he silently prayed he was creating ways to protect them and the dukedom long after he was no longer on this earth.

The first part of his plan was successful: the abolition of slave transportation—a gift for his brother Avery and his beloved wife, Anne—another way to make amends. His next step depended on the court's decision. Petitions were filed, and the court would hear the matter next term. *God, let me live long enough to ensure the future of the title and my family.*

Three Years Later
The Sixth Duke of Westmoure's Private Study
June 14, 1810

Avery,

*The court heard the petition. After much
debate and many long delays, everything has*

been recognized as legal and any hint of illegitimacy has been removed. I'm pleased everything will pass to you. I feel as though I know your son, my nephew, from your letters. Your son will make a fine duke one day . . .

*Eleven Years Later
The Sixth Duke of Westmoure's Bedchamber*

Dismissing his man of affairs, the duke started writing what he knew to be his last letter. It had to be right. The future of the family was at stake. He'd beg forgiveness on his eternal soul with his last breath if necessary, but it wasn't necessary. He'd been forgiven. Struggling with the pen and formation of the words, he hoped to express his love and expectations for the future.

November 10, 1821

Avery,

The pains are coming more frequently, and I tire quickly. The doctor says it is only a matter of time. I'm sorry I was such a fool and didn't listen to you thirty years ago. Our meeting in New York brought me much peace. Thank you for forgiving me.

I leave everything in your trusted care. Teach your son well, for everything will eventually pass to him. He will be a peer, and the title will continue in honorable hands. Teach your daughters everything about Westmoure's. Continue to include them in business matters when you are in England, even if this is not

what society thinks proper for young ladies of their station.

Take care of Joycellyn. She has brought light and sunshine into my life. Joycellyn is a glorious child, more like my favorite grandchild. Please watch over the love of my life, the woman I should have married years ago.

I wish I had met your wife Anne; I am pleased yours is a love match. She will find her way as a duchess and probably wreak havoc with the ton. I leave everything in your trusted hands.

*With affection,
Sterling*

It took a week to complete the letter. He read it again. Satisfied, he watched his man of affairs slip the letter into the envelope. With veined, shaky hands of old age, the duke sealed it and sent it to the carrier bound for America that afternoon. Now, everything was in order. He leaned back and closed his eyes for a long rest.

*London
November 21, 1821*

The London Daily

The Sixth Duke of Westmoure Dies

The sixth Duke of Westmoure, Lord Sterling Adam Roxbury, has died at the age of seventy. The duke owned Westmoure Shipping Company. He was one of the forces behind the

initiative and passage of the British Shipping Act, which prohibits British ships from transporting slaves.

The title passes to his brother, Lord Avery David Roxbury, who lives in America.

*Whitehall
November 24, 1821*

“Sebastian, Julien, Royce, your assignment by special order of the Crown.”

Thomas Berkley assessed the men, three of his top operatives. This time their mission didn’t include marching armies, the roar of cannons, or orders to find and destroy. Underscoring the urgency of what needed to be done, he simply stated they were the escort for the new Duke of Westmoure.

Pushing back the fallen lock of black hair threaded with gray, he also tried to push back the harsh reality of the assignment. Instead of war, there would be intrigue, power ploys, and nonacceptance by society. This time duplicity and death would pit Englishmen against each other. Although the instruments of destruction on the playing field had changed, there were no easy assignments, and everything boiled down to the same common denominator: good versus evil, right versus wrong. In that regard, this mission was no different than any other.

Sebastian Standerson, the Marquess of Broadhurst, was older than the other two by seventeen years—the senior operator, the diplomat, the man of steel. “Sir, the Crown wants us to meet the new duke when his ship docks at Southampton, correct?” His guarded movements bespoke of one who spent too many years behind enemy lines.

“No. You’re to travel to the former colonies and bring the duke and his family to England.”

Julien Quinton, the Honorable Earl of Sutton, sat with long

legs stretched out before him. Only a fool would think he was relaxed and not listening intently to the conversation around him. But for his razor-sharp reflexes, all three would have met their end when French agents came upon them in the forest outside of Lyon just before Waterloo. The hiss escaping from his lips was the only indication he understood the magnitude of the undertaking.

Leaning with one shoulder against the wall and his legs crossed at the ankles, Royce Thortonshire, the future Duke of Aston, studied the room. Royce was the detail man. If asked, he'd recall every aspect of the room in precise order, including the ink pot on the desk. Coupled with sound thinking and clear logic, they made a formidable team.

"I assume we're proceeding with utmost caution."

"Yes."

The last time they'd been together their mission was to find and destroy. To this day, the government still avowed no involvement in the deaths of a British traitor and his French counterparts. Now they were needed again. The sixth Duke of Westmoure, a good friend of the Crown and their personal friend, had died. With his death came the responsibility of protecting the new duke. Berkley hoped they'd return unharmed and alive, but their mission guaranteed violence.

As the meeting progressed, Berkley noted the change in his men from merely curious to protective predator: an operative of the Crown, the mental shift from observer to participant.

"Any questions?" Berkley didn't expect an answer. "After the funeral, a ship will be waiting to take you to America. Jack will be awaiting your return at Southampton with everything you need. Sebastian, you'll ride with me to the service; we can discuss everything in detail. Royce, Julien, prepare for every eventuality. Travel to Ivy Hall together."

"We'll stay at Rushton." Julien nodded.

Berkley, the general, as he was called by everyone under

his command, continued. "This will be convenient for us." Rushton, the ancestral home of Julien's family, lay adjacent to Ivy Hall, the ducal residence of the Westmoures. "Be ready to leave at first light. I apologize for taking you away from your families during the holidays." The clipped orders of the general were to be obeyed without question.

On the other side of the office door a man silently slipped down the dimly lit corridor, making sure no one saw or heard him. At the designated place he left the sign for a meeting.

CHAPTER 1

The New Aristocrats

America
January 1822

Poppa, Poppa, what are we to do now? The silent words stuck around the lump in her throat. Tears slowly trickled down her cheeks. The hole in the ground in front of her held the box where her father lay. Time had stopped when Sar found their father's lifeless form in the garden. The gunshot between the eyes ensured that Poppa would never see again. Tiny specks of dried blood still clung to barren branches of the rose bushes. The cold of the January day had nothing to do with the numbness and pain surrounding her heart.

She was born in this little close-knit community in America near the Canadian border. Here, there were no strangers. Less than ten yards of lake divided the two countries and towns. Citizens of both countries traveled back and forth over

the footbridge as though crossing a street. They were friends, family. One helped the other . . . until two days ago.

Detecting the slight tremor of her mother's body ripped Mer's heart in two. The casket nestled in the cavity before her hammered home the reality of the tragedy. She leaned into her brother's arm, and her sister Beth leaned in to clutch his hand.

Sar stared down into the death pit as the winter sunlight bounced off the coffin in a shimmering rainbow of weak color. His chest tightened. Only concerns for his mother and sisters kept him from leaping into the cold depths to pound on the piece of wood and wail, "Wake up, wake up!" Sar shivered from the ice and rage around his heart. Whoever did this would pay.

The faces surrounding him appeared indistinguishable through his grief. All good men, he once thought. There had never been a murder in the community until the day before yesterday—murder, cold-blooded murder. In a blink, everything had changed. His guarded look scanned the crowd. For thirty years his father made this border town home. He'd met his mother within two months of arriving in America. *I saw her and fell in love with her that very moment.*

As the often-told story goes, they married three times—once in Canada to honor his father's British roots, once in America at the family church down the road, and on the high seas in international waters for the romantic adventure of it. Sar's copies of all three certificates sat in the lockbox in the desk drawer.

Mer tried to focus on the moment, but another fleeting look at her mother's trembling figure, and pain like she had never felt before seared her body. It was as though she was looking at everything through a haze; nothing was clear. She recalled Poppa laughing at breakfast. The next time she saw him he was laid out in the ice house. Try as she might, she remembered nothing in between. Her foot tapped softly on the frosty earth. Like a soothing balm, good memories rushed forth.

She was now twenty-two, but Poppa frequently reminded her she was still in diapers when he carried her into the shipping office for the first time—and she'd been there every day since. The family business was as much a part of her as breathing. As children, the ships became castles with princesses and princes, and set the stage for fights with pirates, round-the-world trips, and hidden treasure. Playing aboard the decks usually landed the three of them in hot water with a captain at least once a week, but the crews adored them. Whenever possible, they persuaded them to be pirates.

As Mer grew older, she discovered her uncanny ability to organize everything from shipping schedules to orders, filling the ships going from America and those coming into the ports in New York and Boston. Along the way, she was guided by her parents and her father's business partner, Jacob Goldsmith. One of her father's favorite litanies played in her head: *You must know your business from the ground up, inside and out.*

The puff of wind caught a strand of Mer's honey-colored hair; it hung in the air like a fluttering butterfly. Large, expressive brown eyes glossed from the sheen of tears. Every possible emotion had been wrenched from her soul, and she was empty. How were they going to move forward without Poppa? Her very essence ached.

With one last look at the newly turned grave and a nod to the minister, her brother led the family back to the house. Neighbors, friends, and acquaintances followed, expressing condolences and chatting in the hushed tones that always followed the awkwardness of death. Poppa loved a good party, and Mer wondered what he would think of this. Again, the front door opened, and three men stepped through the entry. Mer's gaze slowly took in the trio, and her eyes shifted back to the one with cinnamon-colored hair. Her heart stopped, and a flutter in her stomach occurred.

Who is he? Unconsciously, she started taking steps in his

direction. “Mer.” Mrs. Thornton, their nearest neighbor, gave her a hug.

Julien felt eyes boring into him. When he glanced up, it felt as though he was looking directly into the very essence of himself. Mentally shaking his head, he wondered why it felt like she belonged to him, this woman with honey-colored hair, huge expressive brown eyes, and a sadness that wrenched his soul. From their briefing in Whitehall, he knew this was one of the daughters. He wasn’t able to break his connection with those mournful eyes. It was as though an invisible thread was pulling him into her. The armor protecting his heart couldn’t withstand the onslaught, and he felt a strange sensation deep within. Too close, his inner self responded, too close. The invisible thread kept reeling him in.

On the other side of the room, Perkins quietly spoke to Sar as he cautiously glanced between Perkins and the men in the foyer. The scowl on Sar’s face spoke silent volumes. Mer watched the two of them while somehow trying to appear to be attentive to Mrs. Thornton. When the old lady paused for a breath, Mer thanked her for coming. She trusted that was the correct response, because she had no idea what had been said. Giving the old lady a hug, she escorted her to a seat near her daughter.

Perkins leaned in closer to Sar. “Sar, the men wished to speak . . . ahem”—Perkins cleared his throat—“to your father.”

“Didn’t you tell them this is a house in mourning?” “Yes, they said they knew.”

“Then why did they ask to speak to my father?”

“Before I could say anything, they demanded to see the master of the house, and said they’d wait. This is strange.”

“It’s probably a business matter. Send them away . . . another day, next week maybe, but not now, Perkins.”

“They claim it is most urgent. Something isn’t quite right. They’re most adamant and demanding.”

“Urgent or not, today is not the day. Send them away!”

“I don’t think that’s possible. They are willing to wait . . . to wait however long is necessary.”

“Then they can wait until hell freezes over.”

Sar’s glimpse at the men made him wonder if he had a choice. The predatory stance and determined look of the three gentlemen with broad shoulders and heights towering over six feet filled the large entryway, overpowering the space. Their elegantly tailored jackets, waistcoats, and highly polished Hessian boots were a beacon proclaiming their presence. Sar noticed one surveying the room looking for the person who would silently announce, *I am lord and master of all here*. Hell probably couldn’t move them.

“Damnation, Perkins. Show them to the library; I’ll join them shortly.”

The gentlemen carried themselves in a manner that let everyone know they were not commoners. Instinctively, everyone moved aside as they were led to the quiet sanctuary. Sar headed to the library with a heavy heart and steps as grave as a man taking his last walk to the guillotine.

“Perkins, we won’t be long.”

With a nod, Perkins closed the library door.

Could she get to the room next to the library undetected, or should she stay and accept the condolences of the mourners? An unknown force was compelling Mer to go. Something pushed her to the stranger, an inner awareness of something illusive, a sense of some type of danger.

Another hand touched her elbow, and she looked into the water-filled eyes of the minister’s wife. Mer inwardly sighed. The library would have to wait.

“My lord.” Sar glanced at the man in the finely tailored black jacket. “You have our deepest condolences. We didn’t realize the news had already reached you. Hopefully, we’ll be able to leave sooner than anticipated. Would it be possible

to speak with the master of the house, Lord Avery David Roxbury?”

Just hearing his father’s name was like a fist being plowed into his stomach. “What manner of game is this?” he was about to shout, when the gentleman pulled out a miniature at least thirty-five years old. Instead, one word was softly spoken: “Dad.” At the same time, the three gentlemen took note of the man standing before them. He was much too young to be Avery David Roxbury. The next in line to inherit was the youngest brother Avery, age fifty-eight. The man standing before them was no more than thirty.

“You’re not Avery David Roxbury.” The definitive statement rather than a question dangled in the air.

Sar shook his head. “No.”

The man compared him to the miniature. Except for wavy hair, everything else was identically the same—the son. Once again, he asked, “Your name?”

Sar’s grief and anger resonated beneath his apparent cool façade. *What is this madness?*

Glancing at the miniature of his father clutched in the stranger’s hand, and taking a deep breath to gain some self-control, he hurled his own question at the stranger. “Why do you wish to know?”

“We’re on the king’s business; it’s imperative we speak to Lord Avery David Roxbury immediately. He would be expecting us.”

“Speak to him . . . immediately . . . expect you?” Sar railed. “Look around you! Does this not speak of a house in mourning?”

“Excuse me, my lord, is this not the house of Lord Avery David Roxbury?”

“Just who do you think you are speaking to?” He reacted to their intrusion and words as though a knife sliced through his heart. “His Majesty’s business or not, this is America. The

former colonies are free of English rule. I'm not a lord, nor was my father. What do you want?"

Unperturbed, the questioning from the man continued. "Your name?"

Exasperated, the answer came forth with barely an ounce of control. "Sterling Avery Roxbury, the one and only son of Avery David Roxbury, who was laid to rest a mere hour ago and murdered two days ago. Now, if you gentlemen will *please* excuse me." He turned to leave.

"And, your mother?"

With icy-cold eyes he stared at the gentlemen. "Beside herself with grief after thirty years of marriage."

"Do you have proof of that marriage?"

The audacity of these strangers to enter his house and insult his parents and himself by insinuating he bore the shame of being born outside of a legal marriage blinded all rational thought. A bastard was nothing—a non-person—socially ostracized and damned. "How dare you!"

An explosion of rage, frustration, and anger poured from him. With the need to pound the British gentleman within an inch of his life for his insulting implication, Sar lunged at him and gripped the lapels of his jacket. Contempt and grief flowed from him as he tried to lift the man from his seat. He couldn't. Strong vice-like hands on either side of him restrained his arms, forcing him to release the lapels.

The man he had just tried to beat didn't seem overly perturbed. His eyes bore into Sar with steadfast intent. "Again, do you have proof of the marriage?"

Sar struggled with his thoughts and looked his adversary in the eye: definitely steel and determination. "Yes, and what business is it of yours? What do you want?"

Through his fog of anger and grief, his father's warning sprang to life. *One day you might need proof your mother and I are married. The British government may need legal proof.* His

father never explained why. During the last six years, his father repeated that warning frequently. Sar assumed it concerned the shipping company. Maybe after his father's death, in order to collect certain claims, his mother needed to provide evidence of proof of a legal marriage. *But they hadn't known of his death*, the voice in his head reminded him. He quickly dismissed the thought of a long-lost relative leaving a fortune and bitterly laughed to himself. This was the only family. His father was alone until he met his mother.

Sar looked intently at the gentlemen, puzzled by what they wanted and confused about this strange coincidence—the British government arriving on this day of all days demanding proof of his parents' marriage.

"Answers to my questions first, then we'll talk."

"For God's sake, man, my father was just buried."

"Proof of the marriage, now." Sebastian pushed for the information. With the murder of Avery Roxbury, everyone was in danger. The sooner they were on their way to England, the sooner he could begin to level the playing field.

Hesitantly, Sar went to the desk drawer that held the lock box and the papers he promised to protect with his life. The old lock wouldn't give. Maybe it was a sign not to open the box; maybe it was Pandora's Box filled with untold mystery, pain, and sorrow. Maybe, maybe, maybe, but he knew the box had to be opened. Finally forcing the lock, he opened the creaky lid and spread the contents on the desk. There for all to see were exact copies of three separate marriage certificates: one from the Canadian church, one signed by the captain of the British ship attesting to the marriage in international water on the high seas, and one from the church down the road.

Everything was exactly as Sebastian was told to expect. Regardless, his man would be dispatched to review the churches' marriage registries in the morning.

"Your Grace."

“Your Grace?” Sar never got further.

“Our condolences again,” Sebastian continued. “We thought you knew of the passing of the sixth Duke of Westmoure.”

“And?” Sar replied dryly with one eyebrow arched. “The sixth Duke of Westmoure . . . ah, Westmoure Shipping. You’ll have to see our agents in New York.” His single thought was to get them out of his father’s library. The memories and the lingering scent of his pungent cigar smoke still filled the room. This was his father’s special haven, and these strangers were an invasion of those memories. He wanted it left exactly as it was—a shrine in honor of his father.

Sar’s mind suddenly caught up with the present moment. *Your Grace?* Why were these men using the title of an English aristocrat? Turning towards the gentleman who just spoke, he willed himself to focus.

“You don’t know about the sixth Duke of Westmoure? Perhaps your father mentioned him. You carry his name.”

“No.” The tone of finality of the answer echoed throughout the still room. “Gentlemen, this is not the day to discuss business. Even if Westmoure’s is one of the largest shipping companies in the world, we can discuss your matter next week.” As he moved to summons Perkins, Sebastian rose to his feet and bowed.

“Your Grace, you are now the eighth Duke of Westmoure. You’ve inherited the title, lands, and wealth of one of the most honored families in all of Christendom. We apologize for intruding on you this day. The title passed to your father in November, making him the seventh Duke of Westmoure. We were sent by the Crown to escort him and his family to England. There is much to discuss, but we agree, today is not the day. Mayhap tomorrow, if you would be so kind? We’ll need your family and attorneys present. Again, you have our condolences.”

As Sebastian delivered his velvet-cloaked order, he

assimilated the new facts. His mind quickly reached the obvious: murder due to the succession to the title, and a spy and murderer lurking within Whitehall.

Sar's grief-filled, anguished mind tried to sensibly assimilate what he had learned. And, just like that, with the utterance of a few words, the family's life was turned upside down again. First a gunshot and now words.

Mer extricated herself from the sobs of the reverend's wife and secretly made her way to the room adjacent to the library. She was too late. Leaning against the wall, all she heard was Sar requesting that the gentlemen spend the night. Tomorrow they'd explain their business. Mer quietly tip-toed out of the room.