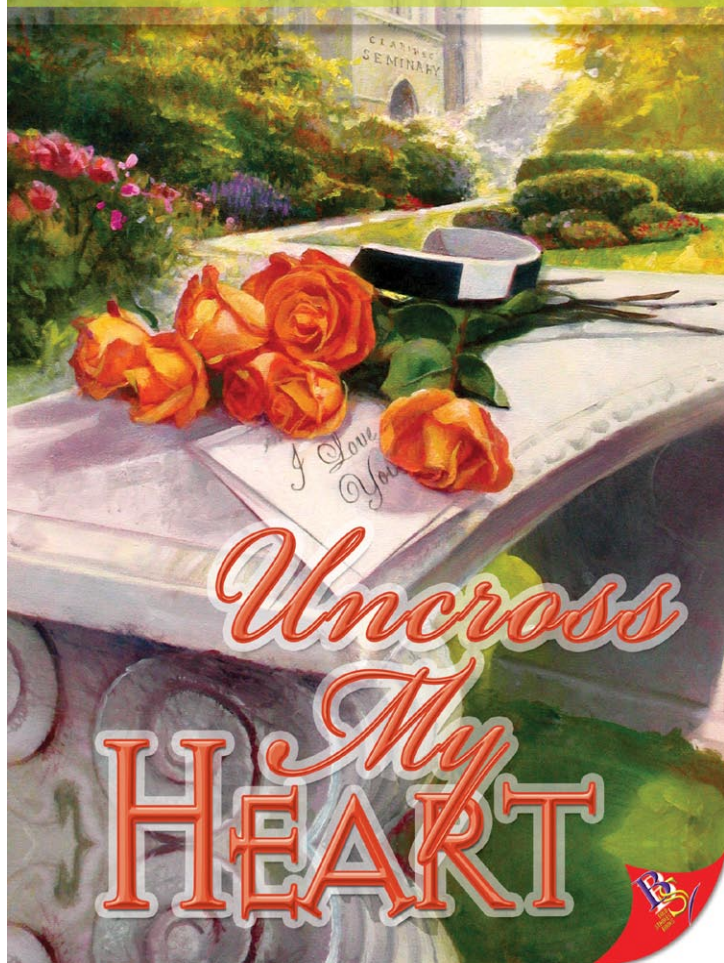
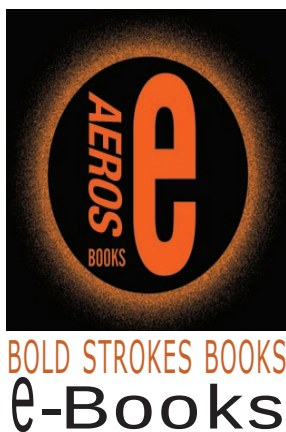


Andrews & Austin





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by
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Dedication

To Hillary Clinton: 21st-century women's warrior
who, in breaking new ground, refused to be broken.

PROLOGUE

I'm Dr. Alexandra Westbrooke, and for those of you who are *completely* lost, you're on the grassy commons of Chicago's Claridge Seminary and this course is Sexuality and the Church. Also known as two thousand years of heresy, hell, and holy hormones." I eyed the rumpled ecumenical students, who chuckled appreciatively.

Sally Jackson, a young blond student seated directly in front of me, shielded the sun's glare from her eyes and stage-whispered to her classmate, "She's hot."

Embarrassed, I realized she was talking about me and I recalled my image in the bathroom mirror this morning—short, dark hair with silver highlights, high cheekbones, and, just above my cleric's collar, a square jaw that hinted at some ancestral resolve. *Clean-cut, yes. Hot, hardly*, I thought with a wry smile as I began the lesson.

"Before we discuss the sacred and salacious, I ask you to contemplate the New Testament—a document that the followers of Christ assembled one hundred years after his death to piece together his life, in part from papyrus found sealed in urns preserved by the Essenes in the caves at Qumran. For those of you who were vertical and awake last semester...the Essenes?" Not expecting an answer, I continued. "Two B.C., religious sect, Judean Desert, Dead Sea Scrolls?" Ketch, my large burnt orange German shepherd, settled at my feet.

"To understand the enormity of their task in attempting to reconstruct the life of Jesus so long after his death, I ask you to reach into this urn and draw several 1960s newspaper headlines. Using only that information, tell me—who was Martin Luther King?"

A young man began. “African American Civil Rights—”

“Is that what the headline says?” I asked, and gave the students time to assemble and study the torn papers.

A curly-haired boy held up clippings. “MARTIN LUTHER KING ARRESTED IN STREET DEMONSTRATION. MONKEY LAUNCHED IN SPACE. I don’t know if one caused the other.” Laughter.

“Something that could serve as the basis for the Epistle of Martin Luther King, Sally?”

She stared at the headlines on the ground in front of her. “MARTIN LUTHER KING ASSASSINATED. COVERAGE OF KING’S DEATH SPARKS RIOTS. ELECTRICAL OUTAGE STRIKES NEW YORK CITY. TWO PEOPLE ARRESTED FOR PUBLIC SEX. HUNDREDS SLAUGHTERED DURING MEXICO’S OLYMPIC GAMES. PRESIDENT JOHNSON WILL NOT SEEK RE-ELECTION.”

I swept across the lawn and arrived at her side. “How about this? Martin Luther King’s assassination created riots in the street and caused the largest city in the United States to go dark. Frightened people, believing the end was near, engaged in acts of debauchery and slaughtered one another even unto the city of Mexico. The president of the United States so loved Martin Luther that he went into mourning and, bereft, refused to be president any longer.” Students chuckled. “A story woven together, but completely out of context. As you interpret the Bible, share the Bible, teach the Bible, I ask you to harken back to this class exercise.”

Sally twisted her blond tresses around one finger and whispered, “She so rocks.”

Roger Thurgood, a heavysset, pimple-faced young man with too-tight clothes, struggled to his feet, books tumbling from his lap, and said loud enough for all to hear, “She sucks.”

He clomped away from the gathering as heads turned to watch him. Whispers rippled through the crowd and I refocused their attention by acknowledging his departure.

“We have passionate reactions when our personal belief systems are poked and prodded. Those reactions mean we are thinking. We are stirring up things inside ourselves that have been hidden and silent for decades. And so,” I said, eyeing them, “What do I want from you?” The class moved nervously under my gaze.

“If you learn nothing else from me this semester, learn...context. Context!” My voice rang out a battle cry as I whirled on my heels,

Ketch at my side, and strode away from the slightly jolted ministers and priests-in-training.

“Let’s see what they make of that,” I said to Ketch as my long white robe whipped madly around me—I hoped, like the wings of an avenging angel.

CHAPTER ONE

I was grateful for my long, athletic legs that could outrun most forms of danger, but today they were taking me directly into the fire. My strides chewed up the distance across the commons, bringing me closer to the chancellor's office, where many a qualified professor had been struck down by unqualified ignorance.

Ketch jogged effortlessly at my side while Dennis panted and tried to keep up, his short legs, hefty body, and flushed Irish face signaling his heart was two steps from needing the paddles. I halted suddenly and stripped off my cassock, revealing a tailored shirt and pleated black slacks.

I tossed the beautifully brocaded vestment at him. "Stay here. I'll come back and tell you everything."

"Be careful with that. Last time I checked, a robe cost a couple of grand." He fell in beside me, his round face dripping sweat. "So what do you think?" he asked in an unpriestly show of nervousness over my fate.

"It's Roger Thurgood. God is speaking to him again."

Dennis shrugged. "Well, that's possible."

"No, it's not. No one wants to speak to Roger—not even God."

Dennis's head swung left to right like a mercenary employed to intercept someone who might try to take me down, and Ketch whined.

We cruised past the three-story stone library whose pale, slate gray slabs embraced all religions, then around the fountain with its enormous off-white Virgin Mary seated on a throne, water rolling over her marble lap. Faint strains of a Gregorian chant emanated from the

chapel, reminding me that religious diversity was one of the reasons I loved Claridge. Students learned the basics, found their moral high ground, then chose the denomination into which they would later be ordained. For me, Claridge was a great ecclesiastical sorority engaged in a continuum of pledge week, and ultimately someone would be pinned Presbyterian or Unitarian, priest or preacher.

We passed Spencer Whitt, professor emeritus, whose C-shaped spine mimed celibacy. Dennis muttered, “There’s a sour fruit for you—half a century without sex.”

“How do you know that?”

“He told me.”

“I marvel at the things people confide in you,” I said, silently attributing their trust in him to his round, boyish face more readily associated with donuts than do nuts. “Do you think God is happy when we abstain, Dennis O’Shane?” My supercilious tone mocked the question.

“Don’t start. You always do this when you’re nervous.” He placed an index finger inside his cleric’s collar as if it were choking him.

“Do you think God says, ‘It puts a smile on My omnipotent face that old Spence is horny and unsatisfied, and I gave him all that annoying plumbing that constantly wants to...jump up in a wild salute?’” I wagged my fingers at zipper level.

“Stop before we’re struck by lightning. Spencer’s upset because his brother is going to Disney World despite Spence’s public support of the Baptists’ boycott over gay night on Main Street.”

“Spencer should love Disney. Donald Duck has no genitals.”

“I don’t think Spencer is against genitals—just the misuse of them.”

“Misuse? What about disuse? What about rust?”

“Remind me again why you choose to serve a church that drives you insane?” Dennis pricked me.

Dennis knew without my repeating it that I viewed the church as one would a dysfunctional relative—antiquated, humorous, occasionally mean-spirited but, at the end of the day, related. I held out hope the church would change, as all things change. However, admittedly some days I simply grew tired of her and thought she should be locked up.

He baited me. “We need a celebrant for mass this Sunday.”

“I let my membership run out. Dues are too high.”

“Interesting way of saying you no longer celebrate mass, or perhaps that you no longer believe.”

“Why am I debating faith with a man who sits inside a black box and listens through a peephole to people’s secrets?”

“Confession. And you might try it.” A massive medieval stone building rose up in front of us, rugged granite squares, a meter across in places, looking battered and beautiful.

“I wish I had something interesting enough to confess. But alas, my life is boring. Wish me luck.”

“Please don’t get yourself fired. You’re the only humorous person here, and my primary diversion.”

“I’m the closest thing to anarchy this bastion of conservatism will most likely ever see. It’s my duty to disrupt the chancellor’s day.”

“Whatever he says you’ve done, just say it won’t happen again.” The fretful look on his face put a big grin on mine. I gave him a salute and bounded up the wide stone steps, through the heavy double doors, and then into the rotunda.

The two flights of marble stairs I dashed up were so worn they sloped in at the center. When I reached the large wooden doors marked Chancellor Hightower, I grabbed the baroque, polished door handle—brass leading to brass—and pulled. Eleonor Washington, a large-chested, medium-build black woman greeted me from behind the admin desk.

“Command performance,” I said in answer to her raised eyebrow.

“He’s not in a good mood. You’re lookin’ hot in that black outfit—like you’re about to scale the outside of a building and steal the diamonds. Tall and thin and ready for somethin’,” she teased, and made a little “mmm, mmm” sound just as Harold Hightower burst into the room—tall, a bit puffy around the gills, and at the moment an obviously unhappy man of God.

“Come in, Dr. Westbrooke.” He stepped back, allowing me to enter ahead of him, and over his shoulder told Eleonor we weren’t to be interrupted.

His office was as large as the apartment I’d rented while a student at Berkeley. One glass wall afforded a view of the seminary grounds, the fountain, and the paths that crisscrossed between commissary and classrooms. The furniture was masculine and beautifully polished but depressing in its sheer weight, as if once-proud giants of the forest had

sacrificed their majestic centers to do nothing more than suspend books full of thou-shalt-nots.

Hightower indicated the maroon leather tufted chair across from his desk and said, “Sit,” as if I were a Westminster poodle. He picked up a file, tilted his glasses, and stared into the folder like he was reading its contents for the first time, which I was certain he was not—he was a calculating man.

“Roger Thurgood.” He glanced at me over the top of his glasses for a reaction, and I realized he wasn’t such an unattractive man if he would smile occasionally. “His grandfather, a devout, Christian conservative, and the person who controls the largest trust contributing to this seminary”—he thrust out his chest, pontificating as if he were telling me something I didn’t already know—“called this morning to say his grandson walked out of your class because you said the Bible was”—Hightower looked down at the folder and read from it—“‘a bunch of random stories taken out of context.’”

“I put it more eloquently,” I said, twirling the large gold signet ring on my left hand and staring down at my Cole Haans.

“He also stated that he had thought today’s lesson was on ecclesiastical apparel—its origin and significance—or he would not have attended.”

I ran my hand through my hair, pushing it back even farther off my face to avoid simply yanking it out of my head over this ridiculous conversation. Hightower’s jaw twitched so I quickly defended myself.

“Adolphus Claridge himself once said, ‘An unpopular truth is the one that should be voiced first.’ In order of truths, I would say Roger’s need to understand Biblical context supersedes his need to understand how things hang...robewise.”

Hightower paced in the way one does when contemplating degrees of punishment, then whirled and opened a desk drawer, pulled out a second folder, and spun it directly across the desk at me as if it were a playing card.

“She’s a Claridge critic. You’re going to meet with her and make her understand the heart and soul of this fine seminary and convince her to stop writing garbage about this school.”

The penance. Hightower had obviously decided not to spar with me and to simply force me to do something to repay him for this troublesome board call. I flipped open the folder. The top page

listed her name as Vivienne Wilde and rank as political activist. Arrest record—multiple demonstrations.

“Is this one of those assignments where, if I’m captured, you deny ever knowing me?”

“I do that now,” Hightower said, and I suppressed a grin. His acerbic humor made me suspect that, deep down, he shared my views. But I would most likely never confirm that supposition, since the personal lives of seminarians were guarded. Image was everything.

“Her phone number is on the inside cover. Oh, and Dr. Westbrooke, you will also meet with Roger Thurgood III and put his nose back in joint.” I moaned faintly. “This institution doesn’t need financial problems to go along with bad press.” His tone dismissed me as thoroughly as if he’d said good-bye, and I walked out into the reception area where Eleonor waited.

“You survived.”

“Do you know anything about a Vivienne Wilde?”

“Every time he reads something by her or hears her on the radio, he goes—Wilde.” Eleonor’s full-bodied laugh made me laugh. Hightower shouted for her, and she pulled herself together and hurried into his office.

Minutes later I was downstairs where Dennis and Ketch had sagged onto the stone steps, killing time. Six feet hit the ground when they spotted me.

I slapped the file into Dennis’s palm and he flipped through it as we walked. “*And I have to meet with Roger Thurgood III.*”

“Careful with him. His compass is a little off. Last semester campus police picked him up for peeping in dorm windows, but Thurgood senior got him off.”

“The man who put the funds in fundamentalist.”

The parking lot appeared over the last grassy hill. I retrieved the file from Dennis as Ketch ran ahead of us and jumped into my black Mustang convertible. After following him, I put the car in gear and headed for the freeway that would take me away from the city and closer to home. A textbook lay on the passenger seat, and I pinned the Wilde folder down with it to keep it from blowing away, then bent back the cover to get her phone number.

In the rearview mirror, I caught sight of Ketch’s thick, silken hair blown back off his broad intelligent face and thought he appeared far

smarter than I. In fact, he was. I cooked for him, handled all the driving, and even did his nails. None of which would be happening if I were the smart one.

He suddenly vaulted between the seats, landed on the passenger side, and wriggled his butt around on the textbook and the folder, making himself comfortable.

“Hey, I have to return that folder.” The thought of handing Hightower his folder bearing the scent of anal glands put a big smile on my face. Ketch growled at my trying to readjust his seating. “Off. You’re dog, not God, despite the semipalindrome.”

Ketch cocked his head.

“A meaningful word when spelled forward or backward. Just think. You and God in the same three letters.”

As I merged onto the freeway, I dialed Vivienne’s office, always one to get unpleasant things off my list immediately. A secretary answered and identified herself as Joyce.

“Is she in?” I asked as the wind whipped around my head, making it hard to hear.

“No, I’m afraid she’s not. Who’s calling, please?” the well-trained lion at the gate demanded. I gave her my name. “And will she know what this is about?”

“No,” I said, enjoying the brevity.

She paused. “I believe she just walked in.” Joyce offered the polite lie and was off the line for a while. I took the next exit and pulled into a parking lot to quiet the wind.

“Hello.” The rich alto voice reverberated. “Dr. Westbrooke, I’m sorry to keep you waiting. I was actually here but I don’t take many calls.”

“Well, nice you admit it. I’m on the faculty at Claridge and would like you to come to campus as my guest and learn a bit more about the seminary.”

“Dr. Hightower must have put you up to this.”

“He did.”

“Nice you admit it,” she echoed me. “And the tour is to do what precisely?”

“Offer you a fuller appreciation of the positive aspects of Claridge. I’ll have to hunt some up between now and then.”

“But your true mission is to shut down my scurrilous scribbling.”
I remained silent. “You’re an academic, you say?”

“I am.”

“If I decide to come, I should speak with one of the clerics on campus—”

“I’m also an ordained priest.” I envisioned her pausing to suppress a smile. I filled the silence. “Next Monday at ten, would that work?”

“Let me check my schedule.” A clicking of computer keys. “Yes, Perfect. So do people call you Father?” The tone was slightly mocking.

“Only if I’ve slept with their mother.”

A pause. “See you Monday.” She sounded amused as she hung up.

CHAPTER TWO

The rock driveway scattered stones as we flew down its winding contours to the gray-and-white clapboard cottage at road's end. Ketch jumped over the top of the car door and was on the front porch before I had turned off the ignition. His enthusiasm at being home always made me smile.

I balanced books and papers in my left hand as I pulled the key out of the lock and pushed the door open with the toe of my shoe, revealing the irregular woodwork of the hundred-year-old farmhouse. An old oxen-harness mirror dangled from a large hook on the wall over a leather couch. The side table, consisting of a metal-strapped barrel, sat next to the large tartan-plaid doggie bed whose soft, circular surface lay next to the fireplace and was Ketch's first stop—or flop—after getting inside.

Given to me when my mother died, my grandmother's original homestead was my haven when I was young and now my home, with its wraparound screened porch, huge country kitchen with tall window-paned dish cabinets, wide wooden countertops, and an ancient but excellent gas stove. The old farm was beautiful in its simplicity, an elusive commodity these days. Having loved it as a child, I wasn't letting go now even though I had to drive an hour to and from my work.

I was about to exit through the squeaky screen door down the steps to the lopsided wooden horse gate to greet my two old trail horses when the phone rang. The voice on the line belonged to Sylvia Slaughter, the new neighbor to the north who'd recently moved from the city to the country, buying the Browns' farm after Mr. Brown died.

"I'm so glad you're home. Ralph is away on business and there's something loose in my kitchen. At first I thought it was a snake, which completely freaked me out. Now I don't know. I hate to ask, but..." Like any new country people, she and her husband were alarmed over things most folks out here had learned to handle decades ago. Sylvia's voice was calm, but her words sounded urgent. "Could you just come over and...if it's a rat or a possum I'll just die."

"Okay, give me a few minutes." I hung up and dashed to the bedroom, changed into a pair of faded jeans and a T-shirt, and threw on some ankle-high boots. Not certain what Sylvia would have available to assist in the search, I grabbed a flashlight, walking stick, and a towel. The first item was to find it, the second to fend it off, and the third to subdue it so we could get it out of the kitchen.

I left the lightly snoring Ketch to guard the unlocked door as I traipsed across the open field toward the back side of Sylvia's brick farmhouse. Having walked these fields for many years, I thought nothing of striding across twenty acres in the near dark.

She was standing on the porch with a drink in her hand, which she set on the porch rail as I climbed the two-by-six wooden steps, and she held the door for me, saying how grateful she was to see me.

Her curly auburn hair was a bit damp, as if she'd just showered, or perhaps she was in a nervous sweat over the animal intruder. She wore short-shorts and a yellow V-neck golf tee, despite the cool night air, and a lot of jewelry, broadcasting with her plunging neckline that she wasn't suited to a rural environment. Her presence made me long for Mrs. Brown, Brownie as we called her, a squat, heavyset woman who could beat a snake to death with a rolling pin.

"You're wonderful to come over. Brownies?" Sylvia extended a platter, startling me by producing a culinary version of my remembrance.

"Maybe we should look for your alien intruder first." She drew back and pointed toward the broom closet. "You're sure it's in this closet?"

"Something's moving around in there and my dog's in the bedroom. He's a city animal and more afraid than I am."

I opened the closet door and shined the light inside. Nothing. I poked at the clothes with my walking stick. Nothing. Sylvia peeked in gingerly. "I swear there was something in there."

Suddenly a big black blob flew out of the closet right between us. I jumped back, nearly losing my balance, and let out a yelp. She screamed and flung herself on me, clinging and jumping up and down.

“Ahh, ahh, ahh.” She screamed in rhythm with her feet leaving the ground. I tried to visually track the black creature as she bounced me along with her. I spotted it by the door—a bat.

Extracting myself from Sylvia, I crept up on its angular backside as it clung to the wall and gave it the gym-towel snap, knocking it to the floor, and before it could gather itself up, I tossed the towel over it. While it tried to claw its way out of the maze of terry cloth, I scooped it up and shook it loose out on the porch, where it flew away. I reentered to find Sylvia standing on top of a kitchen chair, her hands clasped tight up against her chest and her face contorted into a little-girl grimace.

“Done,” I said as she squealed her thank-yous, hopped down, and hugged me again.

Collecting my tools, I prepared to leave but she thrust the brownie plate in front of me again and begged me to stay a minute longer. Never one to pass up chocolate, I took a seat at the kitchen counter, noting Sylvia had torn out my favorite place in the old farmhouse—the built-in pie cabinet that faced a battered old kitchen table where I used to sit and talk to Brownie for hours. In its place, Sylvia and her husband had installed a granite countertop with black leather bar stools. Without asking, she poured me a tall glass of wine and pushed it in my direction.

“Priests drink wine, that much I know.”

The dry wine chasing the sweet brownies made a rather unpleasant combination, but I smiled and gave her baking an appreciative little toast.

She held her own glass up in the air. “Here’s to...not going bats.” Her voice held a tinge of sadness, and for a moment I thought I glimpsed a lonely woman most likely as locked away from her dreams as the poor creature we’d just freed. “So, what do priests do in their spare time other than save souls, read boring books, and chase their neighbors’ horrors away?”

The fascination with women priests was a constant topic at any gathering and barely allowed me to do much more in any new relationship than spend time brushing aside preconceived notions of priests as sanctimonious, saintly, or celibate. I concluded my dissertation

on “priests as ordinary people” about the time my wineglass reached empty and realized I was slightly high.

Sylvia was not without conversation on any topic and rattled on about her life and her husband, and frankly I had tuned out, until the moment I heard her say, “Tell me what you think about late at night when you’re in bed? We all think about things we don’t say. What does a priest dream about?”

“I’m generally too tired to dream and too dull to remember my dreams even if I had them.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said.

“Ah, it’s always an issue of nonbelief.”

Sylvia had inched her bar stool nearer and nearer in her chatting, shifting fashion. She put her hand with the giant amethyst-ridden finger on my arm, trapping it there, and leaned close to my face.

“You must tell me one secret before you go.” Her eyes gleamed like a teenage girl’s at a slumber party. When I didn’t answer immediately she quickly added, “No secrets? Not even something from your childhood?” I felt the mood going awry—the way children of dysfunctional families sense danger in a look or a laugh. “Then I need to give you one.”

Sylvia darted into my face and her lips landed on mine as she kissed me, stunning me and leaving a soft, pleasant sensation. She placed her index finger on my lips as if to seal the secret, letting her finger trail across my mouth as she whispered, “You have now kissed the woman next door. That can be your secret...until you find a better one.”

I was off the bar stool and standing at attention, my walking stick, flashlight, and towel carried like military issue as I retreated from her house. I thought I heard her chuckling from the porch as I marched back to my barnyard barracks, determined never to step foot in Sylvia’s home again and praying to God she told no one about this evening, and certainly not that I had kissed *her*, which was often how these stories got turned around. I wished I had someone to share this with—my surprise, my fears, my feelings—but there was no one to confide in, and so I guessed that alone made it a secret. No one to tell.

CHAPTER THREE

Saturday morning I lay in bed, Ketch sleeping at the foot, and stared at the farmhouse just in my line of sight across the acres leading to the Browns' farm, where Sylvia slept and where she had brushed my lips with hers. Nothing, until now, had unearthed the feelings I had long hidden, challenged my decision to end who I was and let the robes forever cover the rest. Sylvia had stirred something in me that threatened to awaken the dead. A longing I suppressed. An intimacy I avoided.

I contemplated all the religious men who'd flagellated their bodies for thinking of sex, covered their women in tentlike garb to stave off temptation, advocated sex only for procreation. Throughout history, the evils of sex, the preempting of sex, and the anguish over sex had been a male-dominated topic. And now, here I was making it mine—thinking I shouldn't have thought about Sylvia sexually, should never see her again so I wouldn't be tempted to think about her. And since we were certainly not going to procreate, sex with her was out of the question. Not to mention the fact that she was married, which was on the do-not-do Biblical Top Ten.

My father's face came into focus, his dark green suit with the shiny gold buttons bearing an eagle and gold braid on each shoulder and medals on his chest. And I heard him say, "Tradition, duty, honor." Ironically, war and religion relied on the same tenets.

My cell phone beeped, signaling I had voice mail. I stretched across the white comforter, pressing down its puffy, cloudlike surface, to grab the phone from the bedside table. The message was from Vivienne Wilde, saying we hadn't selected a meeting place.

“Let’s plan on finding each other across from that fountain—the one with the gigantic Mother of God. I have no idea what I’ll be wearing but I should be able to spot a woman priest. See you at ten.”

I smiled in spite of myself. Claridge’s honoring the Blessed Virgin by making her enormous and seating her in the fountain was a bit odd, if I stopped to think about it. I played the message several times, letting Vivienne Wilde’s voice seep into my skin like tanning oil on a blistering day, anointing my soul to keep it from burning. I started to erase her message, then kept it.

Suddenly, I realized I was going to be late for lunch with my father, and I jumped out of bed and hit the shower. Tardiness was unacceptable.



He stood steel-beam straight, his custom-made suit cut exactly like a military uniform. The only missing elements were the gold braid, row of medals, and the brass nameplate inscribed General Archibald McClellan Westbrooke. His civilian suit was so starched I was betting it could maintain its stiff position independent of human form. My father’s braided hat, a vestige of his long military career, was tucked under his left arm, and he extended his right hand as if hailing a cab, not his daughter.

I smiled at him and gave him a peck on the cheek and he patted my back lightly, and then, the emotional greetings over, we settled into our routine. Lunch at the Café Creole—red beans and rice, strongly brewed coffee, and our bimonthly update that quickly took on the tone of a military briefing.

My father dished out battle strategy at every meal as if we were currently under siege and he needed to pass along military survival techniques, his mind moving across the Egyptian desert with Field Marshall Montgomery in victory over the wily German Rommel at El Alamein, then jumping to the Battle of the Bulge and his anger at Eisenhower.

“Patton didn’t run out of gasoline—a dozen tankers were diverted away from him to the Communications Zone. Eisenhower gave fuel that might have helped him to Montgomery who, despite his 5th Army

credentials, was a whiner. Old Blood and Guts Patton was a military man's man."

Next to Patton, father revered George C. Scott because he played Patton, and nowadays, I wasn't sure my aging parent could tell the difference. When, after years in retirement, Father started carrying his military hat under his arm, I knew the past had gotten mixed up with the present, and I feared for his future.

He tied military tactics to religious strategy, clearly believing everything in life is how you prepare, attack, and regroup.

"Your friend Hightower is so progressive the others can't keep up. He outruns his supply line," he said, knowing I would understand the military shorthand for getting ahead of what kept you alive.

"He does seem to be running faster than his funding." I was constantly amazed that my father knew what was going on at the highest levels at Claridge, but not in his own closet. Perhaps he cared on my behalf, thinking it would please me. In fact, it troubled me that my father thought someone as consummately boring as Hightower was bright or ahead of his time.

"So tell me about your advancement. Are you making progress?" Father sipped his hot coffee and ate with a masculine daintiness born of military manners, lifting his spoon slowly and brandishing his butter knife like a tiny baton.

I told him I didn't think Hightower was stepping down anytime soon and, if he did, I was certainly not on the short list for chancellor.

"Why not? You're smart, dedicated, and provide just the right blend of progressive conservatism a school like that needs. You'll be a splendid fit. I'll be very proud to come to the ceremonies. There's always a military band and of course a twenty-one-gun salute," he said, forgetting that we were discussing the seminary and not the military. For a moment I envisioned the traditional invocation in the chapel with a marching band and rifles fired through the roof and I smiled, thinking perhaps that's exactly what was called for...certainly shooting of some sort would ensue if I were ever made chancellor.

I stared at the strong, square face with the large jawline and resolute stare that seemed to look beyond me to something only he could see, something bigger on a distant shore that required focus, a quality he had less and less of without my mother. A catch in my chest

reminded me that a time would come when he wouldn't be sitting here on Saturday and I would never be able to pass this café without sadness. I let a few minutes of silence pass. "You haven't finished your meal."

He seemed startled. "I'm taking my time, as civilized diners are wont to do. You should try it some time." He recovered nicely, the old gleam back in his eyes as he glanced down at my empty bowl. "Apparently no chow at your place."

I grinned. "Guilty. Starving and no manners."

"Before I forget, there's a fellow named Emerson, formerly at Claridge—State Department involved in some funny business about his sexual preference. Know anything about him?"

"I never knew him personally. Why?"

"Military comrade asked me about him. Gays in positions of power always a dangerous thing."

"You know gay men who are stellar military. Your friend Jerry—"

"A drunken dalliance. He's dating a wonderful woman now and I think they're getting married."

I nodded pensively, thinking that Jerry was gay as a goose and that I could not imagine him dating a woman.

"Well," he pushed his chair back from the table and rose stiffly, "it was good to see you, dear." He sounded as if he were speaking to someone he knew only casually. "I've got to get back. I'm rereading *Great Battles of World War II*." With that, he was gone, a wooden soldier carved without knee joints, marching stiffly down the street toward his car, perhaps battles past and present raging in his head.

I sat down and my body relaxed so noticeably even I wondered why I had been tense. The waiter cleared away lunch debris and offered me more coffee. I decided to stay for a cup and unwind. Flipping open a book I'd brought with me but concealed during my lunch with my father, I intended to stay and bone up on the topic for which I was a panelist at an upcoming religious conference.

This old text had helped me sort things out about Christianity and Manichaeism when I was a seminary student. The two sects competed in a medieval membership drive, and the anti-sex Manichaeans drove the Christian church fathers to a more rigid celibacy stance. I glanced down at a passage about St. Augustine, a fallen Manichaean, who led

the way—so obsessed with his concubine that he concluded sex was an evil siren that must be ridded from everyone’s life. I closed the book. *So we are haunted by the sexual demons of the saints.*

A familiar-looking woman made eye contact from across the room and suddenly ran toward me. “Westie, is that you?” Jude Baker was overweight, with a stocky body, short-cropped hair, and no makeup, decked out in dyke-wear—flip-flops, cargo shorts, a black fanny pack, and a statement tee: Clinton Could Get You Pregnant But Bush Will Get You Killed.

“Jude?” I grinned at her. “Last I heard you’d moved to San Francisco.”

“I did and I’m back.” She gave me a big hug, then held on to me, pushing me back at arm’s length to stare. “You look good.”

I thanked her. I was almost convinced that “You look good” was the new “How have you been?” because almost everyone said it, and many people simply didn’t look all that good. She pulled up a chair and straddled it, hanging over the bentwood back, and I was sure the store owners were cringing in the background over antique-chair abuse.

“I’ve met someone,” Jude announced, as if after nearly four years of not having seen her, this would be my most urgent question.

“That’s great.”

“No, for you.” She laughed self-consciously. “I always said there’d be no one for you, but when I met this gal, I said she’s just weird enough to be perfect for you. Wanta meet her? We’re doing the bar scene tonight and—”

My shoulders and neck tightened up as I analyzed how loudly “her” sounded in this small café with its cold echo. “My life has changed. I teach now at Claridge Seminary and I—”

“How cool is that. Karma. She teaches at—”

“I’m seeing someone.” Not totally untrue. I was seeing a lot of people—as in viewing, not sleeping.

Over her shoulder I caught sight of a young curly-haired guy by the pastries. He held a camera at shoulder height as if about to raise it to his eye and then quickly lowered it, letting it dangle from the wrist strap. *Was he about to take my picture?* Below his khaki shorts at calf level an American eagle’s flag-draped wings flexed with his muscle spasms, evoking images that suddenly invaded my consciousness. A

military vehicle, a limo with a uniformed driver, the fear as I sat in the backseat. I pushed those images back and tried to focus on Jude, but the effort left me nervous and irritable.

“We could just have dinner, then,” Jude remarked, and I realized I wasn’t getting through to her. She didn’t understand that my life was full now—obligations, responsibilities, and no desire to relive the past, any part of it.

The tattooed man turned and left the café, and a distrustful little voice in my head whispered that my father had sent him to spy on me. *That’s insane and paranoid*, I thought.

“How’s your dad?” Jude asked, seemingly wiretapped into my head.

“Fine,” I said, then apologized for having to make a quick exit, explaining I had a class to teach as I gathered up my books. “Come to mass.” My invitation was too loud. Several patrons glanced my way and smiled benignly.

I left the restaurant upset for blatantly wrapping the church around me like a shawl to ward off unwanted advances. While I was far more liberal than anyone else on campus, I certainly didn’t want gay women knocking on my office door. As my father often said, military or missionary, one must avoid even the perception of sexual wrongdoing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Monday morning Roger Thurgood III entered my office looking like a very unhappy Chucky. His clothing never appeared quite right, bunched up around his sweat-crumpled middle where the waistband met the first button of his grimy white shirt, but it was the peanut-butter-smear lenses sitting thickly inside his plastic black frames that disturbed me most. I wanted to yank the glasses from his head and wash and dry them so I could see into his tunnel vision. His sloppy stance seemed to say he was annoyed at being told to show up here in my office and he wasn't the slightest bit contrite about the trouble he'd caused me by reporting me to Hightower.

"You trash everything I believe in." Roger glared at me, or I assumed from the fixed position of his head that he was glaring at me.

He didn't look like a young man who'd ever had a carefree weekend, or would know one if it hit him in his pocket pen protector, so I assumed he was referring to my Friday lecture and had seethed over it for the past forty-eight hours. I began by telling him I was sorry the lecture had upset him but that since he was most likely headed for ordination at some point in time, he might think about tackling difficult subjects head-on. Use conflicting religious viewpoints as a debate opportunity, rather than turn in the person to the Gestapo.

"It's not personal, Roger. It's my attempt—my duty—to give you a perspective other than the one you bring with you to seminary."

"The Bible is the Word of God."

"Literally, Roger? Every single word speaks to you as truth?"

Roger nodded solemnly, and I was familiar with the kind of

brainwashing that went into twenty-three years of convincing a young person like Roger that God had dictated the Bible to his scribes, who had precisely translated the chapters into several languages before they chose English, and had perfectly edited it over the centuries to give him “the Word,” the religious certainty he needed for his own sanity. How else could Roger explain the evils of the world, if not caused by the devil, and how else could he hope to escape them if not delivered by God? Without the devil, misfortune was random. Without omniscience, existence was frightening. Without the truth inscribed on vellum and bound in black leather, how would Roger ever know what to do with his narrow life?

“Roger, do you think God wants you to sell your daughter into slavery or put people to death for working on the Sabbath, as described in Exodus? Or declare them an abomination for eating shellfish, or stone them to death for cursing, as thoroughly outlined in Leviticus? If you believe the text literally, in its entirety, then you could never approach the altar of God because of the defect in your eyesight...due to the peanut butter.” I threw the peanut butter in to take the onus off a perceived attack on his vision.

He spun to leave, and I bolted from my chair and caught him by the shirtsleeve and hauled him back. “Okay, wait, let’s try this again.” He glared and I continued. “Please, Roger, have a seat.”

He sank in a desultory slump in the wooden swivel chair across from my desk.

“Talk to me,” I pleaded, in what most likely should have been my first approach to the problem rather than my second.

He was silent, seemingly trying to form his thoughts, then finally spewed out, “My grandfather’s a big shot at this place. He gives a lot of money, and people care if he’s pissed.” Using the word “pissed” wasn’t a good sign from a respect standpoint.

“I fully understand that ‘piss’ not only rolls downhill in third-world countries but also uphill to administrative offices in seminaries. But my job is to teach you something, not worry about which way piss is traveling. What question do you hope to have answered when you leave this school?” My mind suddenly jumped track, and I envisioned Sylvia’s face as we sat at her bar when she asked me about my secrets.

“What secret do you have to share, Roger?” And I realized that

wasn't exactly what I wanted to ask him, but Sylvia's image had made me blurt it out.

His lower jaw moved off center, two inches left of his upper jaw, as if he were casually stretching his facial muscles. "Question I most want answered? How do I get out of your class? Secret I want to share?" he hissed at me. "I will get you fired, trust me." Roger stood up and walked confidently out of my office.



"How did it go?" Dennis asked, striding along at my side, his black cassock billowing at the edges, making him look distinguished in addition to holy.

"Not well. Roger's a fundamentalist at heart and vengeful. He recommends firing for those who take positions that don't align with his own."

"He threatened you?"

"He's feeling threatened," I said.

"Why are you being so tolerant?"

"It won't last long. I'm just trying out the feeling."

"A lot of nuts getting their training wheels here." Dennis huffed.

"John the Baptist—smelling like an old gym sock, crunching down on a lunch of locusts, trying to lure people into a pond for a little baptizing—was 'nuts' to some in his day. For all we know, Roger could be a prophet-in-training."

"Don't twinkle those eyes at me. I think you delight in twisting theology for your own amusement," he admonished.

I peeled off at the fountain's intersection and headed for my meeting.

"Hey, wait up, will you?" He cut left and followed me.

"I have an appointment with Vivienne Wilde."

"You didn't tell me that."

"I don't tell you everything."

"What did she say when you invited her to come here?"

"She said, 'Pear-fct.'"

"Does she talk funny?"

"No, she just has an odd way of saying that word. Kind of arty or

British or something.” At Roger’s quizzical expression, I added, “She has a great voice. That’s all I can tell you about her.”

As I hurried toward the chapel, I left him behind. Anticipation of sparring with a woman of intellect on this crisp morning had my blood up. I’d read her article on the cranking out of fundamentalist crazies by seminaries that cared more about their profits than their prophets. I knew her stance on religion in general, that it was the last great traveling salvation show, akin to medicine wagons and magic acts involving bodies sawed in half.

I rehearsed answers to supposed questions. *It’s up to the student to find the religious training that speaks to him or her and then determine how it will fit into a life and a career. Many of our students never enter the church at all but become better businesspeople because of the underlying spiritual understanding they’ve gleaned from Claridge.*

I rounded the corner of the chapel prepared to educate or do battle, and there, directly ahead of me, seated on a marble bench, a woman in an electric orange leather jacket, her short hair framing her face, fed a large gray squirrel. Stopped in my tracks, I watched the light cascade down through the branches of the elegant old tree and create reddish highlights on her golden hair. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Perfectly manicured hands, the fingers artistic, in the act of lining up small nuts on the bench for the patient little rodent, who paused before selecting one. She laughed softly as the furry animal munched down on the treat.

I was transfixed, as if I’d been transported to another time, another dimension, a place outside my knowing. I felt at peace and slightly disoriented, as if I’d just left all care and worry and, in fact, couldn’t even remember what had been troubling me. The mid-1800s painting by Sandys flashed through my mind of the fearless Mary Magdalene—who cast out seven demons, was accused of being a prostitute, and guarded Jesus’s body after his death—her hair gorgeously sunlit like this woman’s at this divine moment.

The woman on the bench looked up as if to inquire of my stare, and when her eyes met mine I must have sighed. She was breathtaking. “You’ve tamed the forest creatures,” I said.

“Not my intent. Beauty is in the untamed.”

My heart jolted as I recognized the voice, and my head involuntarily tilted to match the angle of hers.

“Would you by any chance be Vivienne Wilde?” *Vivienne Wilde sounds great and looks spectacular? If I have to fight Hightower’s demon, it’s a blessing she looks like an angel.*

“Yes.” She seemed momentarily surprised, gave me a quick appraising glance, then stood up brusquely. Her demeanor changed as she dusted off her hands and offered one in a solid handshake. “Are you Dr. Westbrooke?”

“Alexandra. Welcome to Claridge.” I felt light-headed as I took her hand, and my mind fanned through the various reasons why that might be, settling on my not having had enough protein for breakfast. “Would you like to finish feeding—”

“No, let’s take the tour.” Even in her orange spiked heels, she was still a bit shorter than I and hardly seemed to be the theological terrorist Hightower described. “So it’s Alexandra without the *i*? Unusual name.”

“My father wanted to name me MacArthur, thinking Mac a perfectly acceptable female name, but my mother intervened and the compromise was Alexandra, after Alexander the Great.”

“Maybe he thought you’d be a fighting priest.” For a moment I could envision an ancient battle in which warriors fought for someone as lovely as she.

“Very peace-loving, actually,” I reluctantly confessed.

“You weren’t while you were at Berkeley.” I cut my eyes at her as if to ask how she knew that. “I Google everyone I’m meeting. You were particularly interesting—early liberal leanings.”

“Youth ultimately learns its lesson.” I let the topic die, preferring to hone in on the tour and avoid any discussion of my past. Big stone walls framed us at odd angles around the campus, each a buttress for ancient artifacts—paintings and glassed cases filled with ecumenical writings dating back centuries. Vivienne kept up remarkably well despite the stiletto heels and her shorter stride. She took no notes, as I expected she might, and merely listened intently as we strolled in and out of buildings.

I ended the tour in the nave of a tiny historic chapel, used mostly as a museum. She leaned close to the glass case to observe the stone artifacts lying there.

“Are these pagan rune stones?” she asked, more knowledgeable than I would have expected.

“Christian rune stones that existed alongside pagan burials in Scandinavia in 650 A.D.”

She lingered behind for a moment, focused on the stones, as I walked ahead. She caught up with me down the aisle at the steps to the chancel, where I stopped at the foot of the Cross. Before us hung an emaciated Jesus, palms pierced against the wood, head wreathed in thorns, blood dripping down the full breasts.

“A woman?” she asked quietly.

“Female Christ crucified. The original once hung in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York.”

“It has special meaning for you.”

“If Christ is Father, and simultaneously Son and Holy Ghost, then God is most likely also simultaneously Woman.”

“If Christ is Father? I thought you accepted that as fact.” When I didn’t answer, she continued. “You’ve chosen to teach at a school that turns out fundamentalist ministers who believe men are chosen by God to do all the thinking for their households. Yet you value that part of Christ that is the feminine. How do you reconcile that?”

“We’re not a fundamentalist seminary, although fundamentalism is an option. We don’t encourage or discourage any spiritual pursuit. We also graduate students who go on to become Methodist and Presbyterian ministers and Episcopal and Catholic priests. We lead people to God by many paths.”

She looked at me as if she sought conviction of that belief.

“Let’s go over to my office and have a cup of coffee and you can bore in on me.” I tried to sound slightly teasing but Vivienne Wilde seemed serious now.

I shortened my strides, falling in beside her on the walkway. Students acknowledged me as they passed, one particular group of young boys shouting loudly to get my attention from fifty feet away. I waved at them and Vivienne smiled, causing me to lose pace with her for a second as I caught sight of the glow cast across her face. She had a beautiful mouth. Someone in her family could have done her a great service by reminding her to smile more often.

“Did you say something?” She seemed to pick up on my thoughts.

“No, but I could. When you smile, you look radiant. It’s a wonderful

and disarming quality. In fact, I can hardly believe a woman with that kind of smile could write such infamous articles about our seminary.”

“I do it while smiling.” Her broad grin reduced itself to just a hint of a smirk, and I realized this woman might not be easily won over.

We entered another stone building under an archway bearing the carved name McGuire Hall, with its narrow corridors and heavy plank doors that sealed off each perfectly square office with its double set of windows. As we reached Room 111, Sally, the blond student, slid to a stop in front of me.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. Dr. Westbrooke, would you help me understand some of the notations on my paper? Just talking it through would...drive it into my skull, I think.”

“Catch me after class tomorrow. We’ll do it then.”

“Great.” Sally beamed at me and scampered down the corridor. I turned the large brass doorknob at the same time I inserted the key into the giant *Alice in Wonderland* lock.

“Do all your students have a crush on you?” My head must have snapped round as I felt a nerve twang in my neck. “Power,” Vivienne remarked. “They can smell it even when they’re young.”

“Are you always this suspicious of people?”

“I read them. She has a crush on you.”

I stared for a moment too long, then moved to the coffeepot I kept at the ready on my bookshelf and punched the Brew button. Vivienne sat opposite my desk and crossed her legs. She had long, slender legs for a person of perhaps five feet five inches, and the red light on the coffeemaker seemed a silent alarm to stay focused. “So what questions haven’t we covered?”

“Claridge ousted Professor Elliot Emerson for being a gay man.”

I exhaled, my reaction completely unrelated to the topic and merely in response to her physical presence. *Why is the gay topic popping up in every conversation? First my father warning of gays in the church, then Jude appearing out of nowhere, now this woman asking why we ousted a gay professor.*

“I’m not a board member and wasn’t privy to the reasons for firing him.”

“I’m told he had many God-fearing friends here.” The way she enunciated “God-fearing” tinged the idea with lunacy. “How is it that

he was fired without a whimper and left in the dark of night?" Her face was steeling up.

"You would have to take that up with Dr. Hightower or with Elliot himself."

"Elliot Emerson committed suicide in Argentina."

"I'm very sorry. He was obviously troubled, maybe even so much so that he couldn't help himself, much less those who seek so much from their priests and ministers."

"So flawed people don't make good priests?"

"All people are flawed."

"Perhaps a flawed person, like Emerson, knew the truth and couldn't stand the pain and pressure, or the stupidity around him, and fighting it simply wore him out and he gave up."

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"He interned with me years ago. I admired him because he stood for who he was and didn't knuckle under."

A voice in my head said this was going in a bad direction. Mere words couldn't alter her belief that her friend had been ousted unfairly, and my trying seemed to anger her.

"I'm sorry he's no longer in your life," I said, and let a few moments of silence float on the frigid air.

Vivienne must have realized her tone was combative because she suddenly took a deep breath and started over, changing the subject, chatting about mundane things, inquiring about our student programs, and laughing easily. I liked this beautiful, intense woman poking into my business, despite her sidebar into the world of her friend Emerson.

"Could I offer you lunch?"

She smiled that incredible smile and said she had to be going. As she thanked me for the time I'd spent with her, she shook my hand. Her touch sent a shiver across my chest and I wished that we were friends. I wished I had her home number and I could call and simply ask what she was doing or even who she was verbally crucifying today. While I was lost in those thoughts, Vivienne Wilde disappeared out of my office and most certainly out of my world.



It was Wednesday morning and I was sitting in my office just after sunup reading the local news events on my laptop when the electronic headline leapt off the computer screen at me. Dateline Claridge: FUTURE CHANCELLOR SAYS SUICIDE NATURAL SELECTION FOR GAY PRIESTS. Byline: Vivienne Wilde. My heart raced and I felt dizzy just as the phone rang. Eleonor Washington's voice stage-whispered across the phone line.

"Girl, have you seen the paper? What the heck did you say to that woman? Hightower is about to shoot out through his own head, and he wants to see you before he does it."

I had no sooner hung up than my phone rang again. My father's voice boomed into my ear. "A very risky but calculated move guaranteed to gain you the support of the right wing."

"I was misquoted."

"Don't say you were misquoted—sounds namby-pamby. The brilliant part is the headline positioned you for the chancellorship without your having to say a word. It's actually right on the mark—right on the mark. Let me know what I can do to help." He hung up.

Take your medication, I thought.

On my way to Hightower's office, I fumed. *How dare that woman write something like that? Is she insane or just vicious?*

CHAPTER FIVE

You have managed to turn a splinter of annoyance into a gangplank the board will most certainly want to send you down." Hightower paced.

"I never said suicide was natural selection for gay priests. And there was no discussion about a chancellorship for anyone, much less myself."

"And yet, here it is." He slapped the offending morning edition down on his desktop.

"I'm sorry but—"

"Roger Thurgood Sr. contacted me this morning to say it's refreshing when a right-wing conservative is willing to take an unpopular stand against gays."

"Oh, nooo."

"And Thurgood is now a big supporter of yours and intends to intervene on your behalf with the board regarding this article, stating that you have the courage of your convictions."

"I don't want him intervening on my behalf. He stands for everything I do not."

"And now, like it or not, he stands for you. Fortunate for you, your press coverage has eclipsed his anger over his grandson's unhappiness with your class. You live under a lucky star, it would seem." He looked down at the work on his desk, letting me know our talk was over. I stood up quickly and headed for the door. "Oh, Dr. Westbrooke, obviously any assignment I might have given you regarding the press is withdrawn."

Lips clamped shut to avoid saying something acrimonious, I

stormed out of his office, apparently looking so threatening that Eleonor jumped up from her desk and followed me like a worried mother.

“Now, you settle yourself down. You’re going to bust an artery if you don’t just breathe.” She clamped a large black hand on my forearm with such force I stopped abruptly. “Breathe. Breathe. Breeeathe.”

“I never said those things. I treated her with respect and she sabotaged me and I am going to call her and have it out with her.”

“She’ll just print whatever you say while you’re ‘having it out with her,’ and from the look on your face, you don’t want that printed. I suggest if you’re going to talk to her at all, you do like these political candidates and have some third party set up the ground rules in advance—off the record, no microphones, no notes, and no follow-up articles.”

“You’re right. Okay. Thanks.”

Outside I made a point to slow down and keep breathing at an even slower pace. At a ninety-degree angle, a swift-moving form, obviously bent on intersecting me, picked up speed. Professor Gladys Irons, in a gray cape and skirt, black oxfords, and a strange cap that made her look like a Salvation Army reject, had me in her sights, and before I could find an avenue of flight, she had her arms around me.

“I am so proud of you. Proud. I knew the gumption was there. I’ve just been praying it would come out, and then like a valiant soldier you moved to the front of the line and you fired against the enemy and we will take up arms behind you.” The scratchy cape scrubbed my cheek, making it itch as she whispered into my ear. “The anti-gay salvo. We all wanted to say it, but no one had the courage. Then you said it. God punishes them.” And for a horrifying moment, I realized Gladys sounded like my father. Together, they could well be the proverbial army of God.

“He apparently does...putting them in the midst of straight people.” I pulled back from her, but not before she clasped my hand so firmly that I wondered what she did in her off hours, and then genuflected so quickly I was dragged to the ground with her.

“Let’s pray together.” Her eyes fluttered on the way to closing.

Dennis’s batlike cassock was never so welcome floating toward me, and I could see the mirth in his eyes as he said, “Dr. Westbrooke, did you fall? Let me help you.”

“We’re praying, Father O’Shane.” Gladys giggled slightly.

“Ah, prayer, the balm of heaven.” He clasped her hands, pulling her up off her knees and onto a nearby bench. “Oh, heavenly Father, Gladys and I pray”—he glanced at me to let me know I could move out of the circle of Gladys’s admiration—“for your continued love and guidance...”

I moved over by a large stand of trees out of Gladys’s line of sight and let Dennis’s voice lull me into a state of calm. Minutes later, I peeked out of my hiding place to hear Gladys gushing over Dennis’s attention. Pleased, no doubt, with her own godliness, she floated away across the commons. Dennis found me leaning up against a sturdy oak, the horrors of the last forty minutes nearly buckling me at the knee.

“Did you see it?” I asked, referring to the newspaper article, and he nodded. “Gladys will have it laminated into cafeteria place mats. Every right-winger will think I’m one of them.”

“You’ve got to talk to that woman.” He obviously referred to Vivienne Wilde.

“I intend to.”

“Let me set it up. Just like a debate. Ground rules. No notes, no microphones. A neutral location.”

“Have you been talking to Eleanor Washington?”

Like a good priest, he remained silent, refusing to betray the confessor, so I continued my tirade.

“You can’t set it up right now because I’m so mad I would stab her with a letter opener. What in hell possessed her to print that about me? It’s patently untrue and unfair.” I stormed off, furious with life in general and with my situation in particular. A priest couldn’t lash out even when lashing out was called for.



That night I sat on the porch of my farmhouse after tossing the horses some hay and drank half a bottle of red wine, pausing only to pet Ketch as I morosely contemplated what had been wrongly written. I kept the lights off so Sylvia wouldn’t know I was home. Though I was certain she’d only toyed with me in a drunken state, I didn’t need anything else pressworthy in my life. *What could possibly have been Vivienne’s motive? To spread lies, create a sensational story where there was none, get back at Hightower through me? Should I ring her*

and demand a retraction? I'd like to snatch her golden hair right off her pretty little head. I must have inadvertently pulled on Ketch's fur as I thought it because he let out a sharp squeak and quickly rose and moved away from me. I apologized profusely. All I seemed to be doing lately was denying or apologizing.

Rather than confront Vivienne in my current state, I uncharacteristically chose avoidance, preferring to focus on something else—packing for the convention in Berkeley.

I phoned my father just to hear his voice and he said he'd seen the newspaper and he was completely enraged, forgetting that he'd already called me about the article and had told me that he considered it a risky but brilliant strategy.

"Who in hell does this Wilde woman think she is? People have been assassinated for less. In fact, I think that's exactly what's needed here."

I realized the days in which my father could be counted on for solace and applicable solutions were certainly waning, if not over. I suspected he became bombastic and outlandish to either entertain himself or simply to hear the energy of his own voice and know he was still alive. I quickly changed the subject.

"Do you have a pen?" I asked.

"Yes, do you want to borrow it?" he replied, and I grinned, thinking he was teasing me as he did when I was a child.

"I want to give you my hotel number in Berkeley. Four, one, five..." I said, and listened as he scribbled.

"Four, one, nine—" He butchered the area code.

"*Five*." I corrected him.

"Five what?"

"The hotel is four, one, five—"

"Why would I need the number of a hotel?"

"Because that's where I'll be?"

"Are you there now?"

"No—"

"Then why do I need the number?"

Like most crazy people, he had a point. I told him to forget the hotel and simply call my cell phone, which set off another series of questions about my cell-phone number, and I finally told him to forget the entire topic—I would call *him*.

“So you’re headed for California—Jose’s Queerville. It’s a viper pit. In fact, the entire state is made up of degenerates. All driven by the entertainment industry—”

“I’m sorry, Father. I’ve got to go meet Dennis.”

“Thank God for Dennis. We all need ballast, my dear. Good-bye.”

He hung up and I fought a feeling of angry guilt, the sensation that made me want to shout obscenities at my father and then throw myself on the ground begging forgiveness for being impatient with the behavior of a man who didn’t know who or where he was much of the time. Perhaps it was time to talk to him about assisted living or a retirement village, but that seemed so demeaning to a man who had once commanded troops in battle.

I sulked. The truth was I had really liked Vivienne Wilde, wanted to be her friend, found her interesting and attractive, and she had tricked me, turned on me, used me. I was a good judge of character and somehow I had misjudged hers.

CHAPTER SIX

At dawn I phoned the teenage boy down the road and asked him to check on the horses while I was gone, then dropped Ketch off at the kennel and kissed his big furry mug good-bye, telling him I would be gone only two days. From there I drove to the airport, parked in the long-term parking garage, and took a shuttle to the terminal. After hours of standing in line, being searched and scanned, I was finally offered a seat on the plane, where like a captive monkey I drank from a small cup of water and packed my jaw with peanuts. Air travel required the patience of...a saint.

Several hours later, after a bumpy landing during which a woman whipped out her rosary and began saying her beads, I was in a cab on the way to my hotel.

The cabbie chatted away. "We're going right by Berkeley campus off Shattuck Street."

I leaned back, waiting for the elegant sprawl of the campus to come into view—the architecture an unlikely mixture of Spanish roofs and Roman columns.

"Too much traffic. I'll take Center Street. It'll be—"

"No, don't turn here." I sat up suddenly, my voice loud and reactionary. Center Street had been the vortex of my pain decades ago, and now a stranger's mention of it resurrected that memory.

He slammed on the brakes and looked at me in the rearview mirror. "You okay?"

"I need to get to my hotel." I didn't want more flashbacks of the day Jeannette and her husband stood there, lying to me. I needed to get to my room, unwind, shower, order up some food. *I need to center*

myself. The irony—I had to get away from Center Street to center myself. I twisted the gold signet ring around and around on my little finger, playing with it like a teething child seeking comfort from the constant ache.



The following morning I sat onstage in a large hotel ballroom flanked by three other theologians in what had been billed as a frank discussion of the sexuality of Jesus—a topic that simply nailed for me the American obsession with sex, when perfectly sane people wanted to spend an afternoon talking about the sex life, or lack thereof, of their deity. *If He died for our sins, isn't that enough? Does He have to account for His love life?*

The buxom woman moderator introduced the four of us. A learned professor of religious sociology from Harvard who looked like a large heron in his silver suit, his white hair flying back off the top of his head as if he'd been in a hundred-mile-an-hour straight-line wind. A short, overly energized Methodist minister from New York who looked pinched. And a gypsylike professor of feminist studies who kept eyeing me when she thought I wasn't looking. After an hour, I knew the Harvard-heron wanted understanding, the mini-Methodist wanted celibacy, the flamboyant feminist wanted sexual freedom, and I wanted out.

"Can we really say that Jesus was so human that he had relationships as we might?" The moderator tugged at her tight tweedy vest. "Dr. Bird?" Staring at the heronlike man and hearing him addressed as Dr. Bird amused me.

"Mary Magdalene was *assumed* to be Jesus's wife, according to the gnostic Gospel of Philip. But Jesus's kisses to Magdalene were platonic," Dr. Bird chirped.

"If I may." The gypsylike professor raised her hand. "Joseph, Jesus's father, was a good Jewish man respected in his community—"

"Adoptive father," the Methodist minister interjected in support of the Virgin Birth.

The gypsy professor couldn't contain herself. "Talmudic law required that a good Jewish father do five things for his son—circumcise

him, redeem him, teach him about the religious laws, teach him a trade, and obtain the appropriate wife for him. Jesus was circumcised, then an animal sacrifice offered up to ‘redeem him,’ religion and the trade of carpentry taught to him. Why would Joseph stop short of finding him a wife, when not to do so was forbidden? Further, Mishnaic injunction states, ‘An unmarried man may not be a teacher.’ Jesus was certainly a teacher.”

A young man in the audience stood up. “So when Vatican II wrote, ‘Priests through virginity or celibacy are consecrated to Christ in a new and exalted sense,’ it should have added, too bad Christ Himself couldn’t have remained celibate?”

I jumped into the fray. “Celibacy was not Christ’s message. It was the message of Greek philosophers a century before Christ. By the time Christ arrived, the Christian cult was competing to outdo the pagan cults by being bigger virgins than they were. After Christ died, church father Tertullian outlined the order of excellence in relation to sexual activity. At the top of the list were virgins, people born of virgins, which is a *very* short list.” The audience laughed. “Then married couples who engage in sex for procreation, and, of course, last are those who have sex and actually enjoy it.”

“On that note, let’s open the floor for questions.” The moderator let out a gust of wind, no doubt relieved to gain control again.

A steady stream of people snaked into the center aisle and lined up to take the microphone. A disheveled, sandy-haired fellow directed a question to Dr. Bird on the Greek variations of the word “love.” I noticed a familiar figure behind him. Unable to see clearly with the lights glaring overhead, I put on my glasses for better distance.

The woman spoke into the microphone. “Vivienne Wilde, with a question for Dr. Westbrooke.”

My heart flew into my throat. *How dare she stalk me after having sabotaged me in the press?*

“As an Episcopal priest, what do you personally believe about Jesus’s sexuality?”

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts and decide politically how to answer her question but be true to myself. “The Episcopal Church’s position is one of tolerance. While we do believe in the celibacy of Christ, we do not—”

“What do you *personally* believe?”

“She’s kind of putting you on the spot there, Dr. Westbrooke,” the minister from New York joked, which bought me a few seconds.

“It’s not important what I think personally about—”

“It is to me,” she said. I paused. The moderator made a guttural sound, as if to step in and perform a rescue operation, but I held up my hand.

“I’m honored, Ms. Wilde. If we believe that Christ took the form of a human, a male, like other men on earth, and I do, then we cannot lop off the sexual part of his being simply to satisfy our puritanical preferences.” I stopped at that. There was a beat before Vivienne Wilde smiled and thanked me and sat down.

I don’t recall what happened after that—more questions from others, mercifully not directed to me—and then it was over. While I felt stressed at having been cornered, I felt freer at having spoken my mind in an unguarded way, as if to tell Vivienne Wilde, do what you will with this information. I’m saying it in the presence of others so you can’t misconstrue and misquote.

We stood for a moment at the front of the room and thanked people for coming. Vivienne lingered not far from me, while Professor Gladys Irons, her gray-splashed, wiry hair sticking out as if in shock, rushed me like a linebacker.

“You were caught off guard. That liberal, crazy woman who writes terrible things about the school jumped you. Jesus was man, but not man in the carnal sense. But you looked wonderful.” Gladys eyed my outfit and drifted away, leaving me morose at being her personal poster child, thanks to Vivienne—*another reason to hate Vivienne*.

And like a spirit summoned in the night, she stood before me looking out of place with her golden hair and her perfectly lined orange-red lips framing her ungodly beautiful mouth. *Where in hell did that thought come from*, I wondered.

“Good answer,” she said.

“Glad you approve. Any reason in particular that you’re here?”

“Yes, I’m completing a follow-up work in my series called *The Untruths*, and I’m focused on religious beliefs. This conference provides background for that subject. And by the way, if you had given

me a straight answer the other day in your office, I would have put that in the paper instead.”

“I see. Short of an answer you want, you make one up?”

“You said Emerson’s suicide was an indication that he wasn’t cut out to be a priest.”

“That was a private conversation, not an official interview, and I didn’t say suicide was a natural-selection process for priests.” I was building up steam now that I had her in front of me. “Did you ever stop to think that what you printed might offend his family?” I started to leave, then whirled back to face her. “And I said nothing to you about wanting to be chancellor of Claridge.”

“But you do.”

“And you’re a psychic in your spare time?”

“I’m psychic enough to know you *could* be chancellor, if you would get out of your own way.”

“If you would get out of my way, I would greatly appreciate it.” I turned, determined this time to desert this annoying woman, but her high heels clattered behind me.

“Why have you sold your soul to them? You used to rail against the very institution to whom you’re now in bondage.”

What does she know? I faced her. “I want you to stop quoting me or Claridge in the press unless we’ve both agreed to what you’re going to say.” I glowered at her and for a moment thought I could see the innards of her brain clicking like castanets.

“Then you’ll have to talk to me and stop taking me on PC tours of the campus. You’ll have to spend time with me...to educate me on your viewpoint.”

“I have no desire to do that.”

“This isn’t about desire—at the moment,” she said. My heart slammed against the wall of my chest as if trying to escape and avoid capture. “It’s about one hour a week.”

I was angry and nervous over the physical reaction she produced in me, despite my desire to dislike her. *Keep my enemies close to me. If she gets too close, there’s an even greater chance she’ll use something I’ve said against me. She strikes me as a woman who won’t be ignored, and pushing her away might create worse press about Claridge.*

Her head tilted at an angle, and she stared at me. I was becoming dizzy under her gaze. “Hello?” she said in response to my silence.

“All right, but—” I felt pressured to accept, or maybe that was an excuse because I wanted to accept.

“Fridays at three at your place.”

“See you next Friday.” I felt hypnotized.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The rest of the conference was a blur. I couldn't stop thinking about our upcoming meeting—how I should prepare, what I should say, what I should never say, and what I should wear. When that last thought crossed my mind I laughed out loud. I hadn't worried about what to wear in years.

Gladys Irons took advantage of my internal conversation, sneaking up on my left side and beaming at me as if I were a bundled newborn, then whispered a personal favor. Dr. Bird was feeling ill and needed someone to take his place in the breakout session. Gladys took charge of me, towing my arm ahead of my body as she yanked me down a small hallway to a room of about thirty people and plunked me down in a chair at the head of the room next to the gypsy professor, who was already engaged in dialogue with a member of the audience, making me feel like I'd crashed a private event.

"Virgin Birth," Gladys stage-whispered. "That's what this is about." A previous question had apparently prompted the gypsy woman to launch into the dissection of Mary's virginity.

"Helvidius's argument for a woman's vagina being a good thing centered on his belief that Joseph had to have touched Mary in order to impregnate her. Incensed, church father Jerome promptly wrote *The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary* in 383 A.D. and claimed Mary's hymen was unruptured by the delivery of Jesus. Verification requiring the ultimate religious pilgrimage, I would posit." She clearly loved the ripple of laughter.

Gladys could not have looked more shocked and busied herself

with eyebrow raises and hand signals to me. When I proved too dense she stood. “I would like to ask the Reverend, Dr. Westbrooke to comment on the Virgin Birth, so central to Christian belief.”

Heads swiveled to stare as I mulled the fact that my co-panelist was historically correct. However, the church didn’t always share my personal beliefs, so there might be fallout from any ad hoc comments. And then there was Gladys, staring at me, begging me to rebut the profane gypsy.

“Masters and Johnson completed a study”—Gladys’s eyes widened at the mention of the two famous sex researchers—“that pointed to religion as a source of marital-sex problems. In fact, we know that sometimes couples don’t get married because of conflicting religious beliefs. I would submit that it’s not whether Mary was a virgin, but whether Mary as a complete human being, a dynamic woman, adds meaning to our lives. Would she have less meaning if she was not a virgin or, conversely, more meaning if she were? Virginity, like so many other data points on the religious road map, is just one more divisive factor keeping us from being fully integrated.”

I looked up to see Vivienne Wilde standing in the back of the room. She looked stellar, and for a moment I lost my train of thought.

“Are you saying, as an Episcopal priest, that you”—a middle-aged man spoke as he rose from his seat—“don’t believe in the Virgin Birth?” Gladys’s eyes bored a hole through me.

“I’m saying that it’s not relevant to our inexorable belief in Jesus Christ and his mother, Mary, whose sexuality rests with her...and is none of my personal business.”

Laughter and a tiny smattering of applause. No more questions came my way, and the small event broke up without much comment except from Gladys, who thanked me for stepping in. “Although I don’t think those would have been the views of Dr. Bird, they were interesting.” She said the word carefully, as if making up her mind right then whether to keep me on as her born-again ally. “A nice twist, I think.” She walked off satisfied, I assumed, that my answers reflected her beliefs.

Looking back to the far wall, I saw no sign of Vivienne Wilde and was hugely disappointed. I then questioned my own sanity. *I should be delighted she’s gone.* Suddenly tired, I wanted to pack and get away

from the madness of the conference. A hand on my arm turned me gently.

“Dinner and a drink sound good. Join me?” The gypsy theologian’s colorful silk shirt hung from her arms like the wide wings of a jungle bird. “Lyra Monahan.” She took my hand and, without thinking, I said yes to her invitation and asked whether she preferred the roof restaurant or the less formal one downstairs.

“I prefer getting the hell out of here.” She grinned. “I have a car. Come on, I know a great place.” In the distance I spotted Gladys bearing down on me again, and I was delighted to be outstripping her as Lyra and I headed for the door.

Within minutes we sailed out of the parking lot in her Saab and across town to a small side street with lots of quaint restaurants. We barely spoke during the drive, taking in air like suffocating fish.

“This work for you?” she asked as she pulled up in front of The Grapevine, its trailing tendrils cascading down and through the metal lattice that framed the outdoor eatery.

“Perfect,” I said, thinking about Vivienne Wilde and the way she said that word, and not really caring about food. In fact, lately I seemed to be almost out of my body, performing day-to-day activities like a specter inhabiting someone else’s humanity. I chalked the sensation up to being bored with just about every topic on the planet and more bored with its inhabitants. *How could I have ever thought I would make a good priest? I have little sympathy and certainly less love for the vast majority of the world I serve. But then that’s the key, isn’t it? Doing one’s duty whether one likes it or not? If people feel good about the space you take up on earth, you can feel good about yourself.*

I was slightly distressed to learn that Lyra was one of those spotlight diners. She asked the waiter questions, determined ingredients, customized what she wanted, and changed her choice of entrée several times, making herself the center of culinary attention ten times longer than necessary. I only hoped she didn’t eat as slowly as she ordered. When I pointed to a dish on the menu and ordered within seconds, she frowned. “You don’t worry about what goes into your food?”

“I only worry that I won’t get any.”

She laughed, somewhat shy now, and admitted to being a pain when it came to ordering. I liked her better for her candor. Midway

through her meal of hummus and tabouli and fresh pita bread, Lyra stopped long enough to grill me.

"Why in the world did you become a priest?" She was apparently unconcerned with invading my privacy when we barely knew one another.

Because it pleased my father. Because I was so brokenhearted there was nothing else to do. Because I wanted to fight the beast from within. "Perhaps to find out the truth about God," I said.

She studied me more closely. "And what truth did you learn?"

"That God created man in his own image and man re-created God in his—because mankind loves to be in fear of something."

"Yes, the God we've cast performs in the ultimate horror flick. Watches us unseen, hunts us down, judges us by his standards, and condemns us to eternal flames. Ahhh!"

"What happened to love?" I asked.

Her eyes softened. "We're more afraid of love than we are of God, so we've tried to make love evil and scary simply because we have no control over it. Love happens or it doesn't, but it's as biologically involuntary as...an erection." I blinked, amazed, and she laughed. "I've always envied men that. If they're ever in doubt about what they're feeling, they merely have to look south."

"Do you say these kinds of things to everyone at random?" I grinned at her.

"Just people I sense are kindred spirits. You have a very conservative background, being at Claridge and a priest, yet on the panel you leapt forward with liberal remarks. Who you appear to be provides great cover for what you have to say. Terrific. I mean, look at me." She stretched her arms wide, causing a waiter to dodge her. "What you see is what you get. Are you married?"

When I didn't answer she rattled off, "Divorced? Gay?"

I felt my face flush again. "You're delightfully odd."

She laughed at herself. "I suppose I am. Forget I asked the last question. I can see from the look on your face that you don't know what you are." We both laughed at her silliness. "I'm a lesbian."

Good grief, I'm in a gay vortex, I thought. I hadn't pegged her for gay and now she was outing herself over hors d'oeuvres.

"I've had affairs all my life. I try never to have them with students

but I can't say I've always succeeded. I live alone now with my cat the Virgin Mary—"

"You named your cat the Virgin—"

"She had a litter and I, to this day, can't figure out how, since she's never out of the house, so of course I fell back on Immaculate Conception." She laughed again, and this time I couldn't stop giggling and drank more wine when she offered it.

She invited me to join her for breakfast on campus but I declined, saying my plane would be leaving midmorning.

A pause ensued that seemed longer than the entire meal. "We have a mutual friend. Jude Baker." Her tone was one of admittance.

My mind flashed on the odd coincidence that I'd just seen Jude Baker in the café in Chicago after saying good-bye to my father, having not seen, or thought of, her in years. I was struck by the oddity of someone talking about her.

"I stayed with her on my way to New York and she told me about you. In fact, she tried to get you to go out with us."

I sank back in my chair, now understanding why this woman was so comfortable in my presence. She undoubtedly knew a great deal about me through Jude.

"So yes, I do have an advantage over you, Reverend Westbrooke."

"So it appears." I wasn't too happy about this turn of events. I didn't want people talking about me or my past or using the two to draw conclusions.

"She said you were a brilliant strategist when it came to winning religious battles and suggested that I see if I could get you to join C3—Change the Catholic Church." She explained how she planned to effect change as it related to women's rights and found it abhorrent that the church taught poverty-stricken families that it was a sin to use birth control. Without blinking she blamed the church for the spread of HIV because they told families they couldn't use condoms. "It's just so ridiculous that guys in dresses, living in a marble palace, on the backs of the very people they purport to care for, make those people's lives more difficult and dangerous in the name of God."

"Your name is being scratched off the pope's Christmas card list with a chisel as we speak," I said. *A great deal is wrong with organized religion, but if the church does nothing more than give people hope and*

a place to turn, that's more than they had to start with. Immediately after that fleeting thought, a conflicting one crossed my mind. Did I really believe the church helped or was I conditioned to believe it? Had even my private thoughts been brainwashed—my inner voice silenced? “A connection to a Higher Power, I think the world needs it,” I blurted, putting an end to my internal dialogue.

“Does the world need it or is the world taught that it *must* need it or go down in flames?” She echoed my doubts.

“We all need a connection to love.”

“On that I would agree.” She gave me a provocative smile and I felt the conversation becoming personal. “Jude said after the incident with Jeannette you gave up *everything*.”

“I’m surprised my rather mundane private life has kept Jude interested all these years but—”

“Truce. I’m like that. I’m behaving as if I’ve known you for twenty years and that today we need to get to the bottom of what’s bothering you. When in fact, I’m what’s bothering you.” She gave a raucous laugh.

“So you teach women’s religious studies.” I tried to break up the energy and shift her focus.

She explained that her academic interest focused on women in the early Christian era but that their beliefs and writings were hard to unearth, buried in paternalistic chronicling. As a result, women were marginalized to near extinction. Outside the classroom, she engaged in C3 to change modern-day women’s views.

“So you’re after the Catholics, the Mormons, and then the Baptists. I hope you save us Episcopalians for last.”

“You do yourselves in by chanting ‘for I am but a lowly worm—’ How demeaning is that?”

“Don’t throw out the entire Psalter when the poetry is so beautiful. ‘For the Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting, and his faithfulness endures from age to age.’” I defended the faith.

“You’re a romantic.”

“When we celebrate mass, we imitate all our European ancestors who for centuries stood in drafty, cold stone church buildings and chanted the very same words we say today. I find comfort in that continuity,” I said.

She smiled as one might at a naïve child. “Because there was

no PA system in those old European cathedrals and the only way the priests could keep their attention was to get them to memorize phrases and regurgitate them.”

Our sparring was wearing on me, and I didn’t find the conversation nearly as exciting as my debates with Vivienne. I made a lame excuse about needing to get to bed early for my upcoming flight. She let me pick up the check. We drove back across the bridge to our hotel and parked some distance from the entrance.

As we strolled across the parking lot she said, “I’ll tell Jude I finally met Westie. Here’s my number. Call me when you’re in San Francisco.”

“I enjoyed meeting you,” I said, thinking she was smart and interesting but not nearly as attractive as Vivienne Wilde, and when that thought crossed my mind it startled even me.

The breeze was balmy and caressed my skin, lulling me into sensual thoughts. Lyra must have sensed my energy shifting away from her because she suddenly stopped and looked me in the eye.

“Okay, you’re not going to call me, I can see that. You’re all wound up in your shorts trying to figure out who you are, so how about this? Give me your cell-phone number.” I rattled it off and she jotted it on the back of one of her own cards. “I’m going to call *you* the next time I’m in Chicago and take you to dinner.”

Her directness made me laugh. “Great.”

“Great,” she echoed, and gave me a quick hug. “By the way, did you read Benny Shanon’s study stating Moses was high on drugs when he got the Ten Commandments and saw the burning bush?” I rolled my eyes in response and she grinned. “Hey, better said by a Jewish theologian than a lesbian scholar—burning bush for me takes on a whole different meaning.” She winked before turning and heading for the lobby.

I glanced up at the sky to make sure lightning wasn’t about to strike us both.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Midweek, I was teaching *The Relevance of Ancient Religious Concepts in Modern Times*, a course required for seminary students, and I vied with BlackBerrys hidden beneath desktops for their attention. In fact, I was quite certain that hell for this millennial generation was an eternity without text messaging and Internet access.

“An Episcopal priest was followed to chapel by a cat,” I said, and the students smiled, accustomed to my irreverent style. “Every Sunday for twenty years the cat walked down the aisle, hopped onto the front pew, and curled up and awaited the sermon. When the priest died, his fellow clergy allowed the cat to continue to attend mass. They’d process down the aisle each Sunday, the cat walking behind them.

“The cat grew arthritic so the priests let him walk more slowly down the aisle and then placed him on a pillow in the pew. Then the cat became so elderly that the priests had to carry the feline down the aisle on the pillow and place him in the pew. One day the cat died. The clergy continued to carry the pillow down the aisle each Sunday in his honor. One hundred years later, a curious newcomer to the church, seeing the pillow being carried down the aisle, asked about its religious significance. The priest snorted in disdain. ‘It’s for the cat.’”

The students laughed.

“Over time, we forget the context, and perhaps even worse, we attack those who question. The best sign I’ve ever seen in a church read, ‘God asks that you give up your soul, not your brain.’

“Remember Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write as

individuals. Communities selected a prominent person's name as author of their collective works, created to guide their own people. Their writings are important and sociologically relevant, but are they the Word of God, or are they the words of a people who believed in their God and wanted to improve the lives of their community? And either way, does it matter?"

I saw a few students flinch at the idea that anything in the Bible might not matter.

"If we could magically write down every word our parents ever said to us, we would find amazing truths, conflicting information, and downright lies. 'Santa Claus comes down the chimney and leaves you gifts if you're good. Santa Claus is actually your father. You need to get a college education so you can support yourself. Marry rich. It's important to love everyone. We have to kill people when we're at war. Life is hard. Life is good.' Regardless of the conglomeration of information, we have a sense that our parents did their best to communicate what they believed to be true in order to help us. The Bible parents us. We will continue to analyze passages in the Bible for context."

Class had run long and Gladys Irons was standing in the back of the room. I wondered why. Students nervously rustled their papers and books, not wanting to be in class a minute longer than they'd signed up for.

Roger Thurgood III stood and nearly shouted to be heard. "Do you believe anything that Christ said?" His voice quivered in demonstration of his frustration with my thoughts.

"I believe, Roger, along with many other scholars, that only a handful of statements in the New Testament can be authenticated as the words of Christ. And of those, almost all are about love, none about hate or fear or warnings of dire things to come. We're out of time. See you next week." The class rose as a group and exited the room, Roger mercifully among them.

Gladys walked to the front of the room as I erased the whiteboard. "Are you available this afternoon to meet with *Christ Victorious*, a publication trying to make sure the right person gets in the White House?"

"Right person as in right wing?"

"This is your chance. They need fresh blood—"

I turned too suddenly and faced her, wanting this uptight woman to simply leave me alone. “Gladys, I’m not like you.”

“Oh, Alexandra, we’re past that now. It’s my fault. I didn’t appreciate what you bring to the Christian movement because of your odd presentation style, but that’s exactly why you’re able—”

“Gladys, I’m a liberal theologian. Ninety percent of the things you condemn, I don’t.”

“I think we’re rather in line with one another—”

“For starters, I don’t believe God punishes unbaptized babies, adulterers, or gay people.”

“Well, they don’t go to heaven.”

“I think we make our own heaven and hell for the most part, Gladys.”

“Oh, there’s a hell as surely as you are standing here before me. And I believe that murderers and rapists and hideous people who do not follow God’s law most certainly go into the eternal fire.”

“Or perhaps those people are already in an eternal fire, and when they die, the agony and pain felt by the person they raped or killed, and the agony and pain of every single human who suffered due to that person’s torture and death, are made a part of the soul of that murderer like a suit sewn to the skin that cannot be removed. And that oppressive hopelessness and pain is their ongoing hell until they can find their way out through forgiveness.”

“What kind of talk is that? You’re saying people can find their way out of hell?”

“Maybe.” I thrust my hands into the air as if I’d just scored a field goal. “They might have to reincarnate over time to find their way out.”

“Reincarnate?”

“Think about life and the afterlife in a less linear fashion, Gladys. Just go with me, for a moment. Free your mind. Do you think God selected thousands of people to be cavemen, die trying to discover fire, and that was their one shot at life?”

“Well, I don’t know about cavemen. I don’t spend time thinking about cave—”

“One guy got to be Russell Crowe and one got to be Cro-Magnon, and he froze to death, and that was his only shot at being a human. Luck of the draw. Too bad, cave guy. Makes no sense, does it? Neither

does the idea that if you love someone of the same gender, you go to hell.”

“Alexandra, the way you think.”

“You believe that if a woman loves—let’s say kisses, or sleeps with—another woman, she goes to hell?”

“I believe it is a very strong possibility, if she does it repeatedly and does not repent.”

“Oh, Gladys, Gladys, Gladys—”

“The Lord said it is an abomination and those who—”

Unable to contain myself, I grabbed Gladys’s thick head in my hands and said, “I’m going to share the secret my neighbor shared with me.” I kissed her squarely on the mouth. “See you in hell.” I said it cheerily.

Gladys yanked herself free of my grasp. Her eyeballs jumped out at me as if on miniature Slinkys, and she huffed loudly several times. With the back of her hand, she wiped her lips as if I’d pressed dog manure on them. “You are not fit to wear the robes of Christ.” She ran from my classroom, and I flung back my head and stared up at the ceiling. *Probably right*, I thought.



That night I sat cross-legged on the floor by the small fireplace in my farmhouse, talking morosely on the phone with Dennis, Ketch resting at my side.

“I wish I could have been there when you kissed her. I’ll bet you she hasn’t been kissed in decades. Of course, you shouldn’t have done it.” He paused. “What did kissing her feel like? She looks like she has rough lips.”

“It wasn’t that kind of kiss. It was a let-me-punch-your-ticket-to-hell kind of kiss.”

“You know she’ll go to Hightower.”

“No, she could never confess to anyone that she was kissed, which makes me feel like a sexual terrorist. I jumped her and she has no way to tell anyone about it. I need to apologize to her.” I took another sip from an old brandy snifter my grandmother only took down off the shelf for special occasions and wondered if she would have felt this particular evening qualified.

"Probably a good idea. How do you intend to phrase it?"

"Gladys, I'm sorry I...I don't know. It will just have to come to me."

"Dr. Westbrooke, you need to think about one of two things." His tone was teasing, but somehow I knew the mellow lilt was merely to cover the fact that he really meant what he was about to say. "Either button up your behavior, or get yourself to a seminary that is more liberal and will appreciate and embrace you. There are some, you know."

"I love Claridge."

"But priests can't be mashers."

"What should I do?"

"You might try praying for inner peace," he said kindly.



I hung up and took my brandy and stood for a moment on the back porch, gazing out at the field dotted with fireflies twinkling under a harvest moon. The horses came up to greet me, and I walked down the back steps and a few yards farther to the slatted wooden gate and lifted the latch, letting myself into their pasture.

They followed me in a slow processional southward, where a large stone altar rose out of the high grass. Field stones, really, ingeniously propped up like Stonehenge by my grandfather years ago to allow one of his sick horses to eat and drink without bending over. I sat my brandy on the ledge at shoulder height and placed my palms down on the jagged stone top and bowed my head. The horses came up on either side of me and stood quietly breathing warm air on my shoulders.

Something in these animals took me back in time to a place where I felt I had fought more tangible battles. A place where people had the decency to "run you through" rather than "run you ragged," where the horses and I had lived much closer to one another, their large spirits supporting and protecting me. These bizarre thoughts comforted rather than disturbed me—perhaps a sure sign of madness. Nonetheless, in times of joy or sorrow I often sought out the horses. Tonight they seemed to bow their heads with me in love and respect as I prayed.

"Dear God, I am not the best priest you have ever had in your following. I do more things wrong than right. But your love is infinite and for that I am eternally grateful. I know most people think I should

be sorry for what I say or do or believe. But deep down, I cannot believe that this religion we have is what you want. Guide me, Lord.” I held my brandy glass up as if it were a chalice and then drank as Ghostie nuzzled my neck.

CHAPTER NINE

I was wrong about Gladys's reticence to report being kissed. She'd fingered me without hesitation. When Hightower summoned me to his office the next day, I thought it was on a student matter and so I was caught off guard as he perspired and paced and then veritably shouted, "Did you kiss Gladys Irons?"

My career flashed before me along with the irony that in this theological kingdom I might be forgiven a lie, a slap, a curse, but a kiss was betrayal.

I refrained from answering Hightower's question by artfully rephrasing it. "If I were to kiss a woman, would you imagine that it would be Gladys Irons?"

His visage sagged and he broke eye contact. It was obvious he could not imagine it. I could see relief in the slack of his shoulders, and I wasn't proud of myself for having so easily escaped.

"Holy Mother of God, Alexandra, you've got to draw a ceasefire with Gladys Irons. You know she's the most vocal, tediously religious tenured professor on this campus, and I do not want to have to listen to her discuss your unsuitability as a professor. First you irritate Thurgood III and now Gladys. I am beginning to wonder if this is the right venue for you. Hmm?" His eyebrows elevated about an inch and froze there as he sought an answer from me, but I didn't know what to say. I was as tired of defending my actions as he was of experiencing them secondhand.

"You will make peace. Once and for all." He turned his back on me as if I had left the room. Seconds later I obliged him, going out into the lobby where Eleonor sat at her post.

“Girl, you’re startin’ to rival Vivienne Wilde for makin’ his hair stand on end, and he doesn’t have that much.”

“Eleonor, do you believe any two adults go to hell for consensual sex?”

“Honey, some of the consensual sex I’ve had was hell. No need to travel.”

I grinned at her. “You’re the smartest person on this campus.”



I walked across the commons toward the flat, low building housing the cafeteria. Off to the sides of this large, foul-smelling eatery, a row of larger rooms existed for students and faculty to reserve.

“It’s the best way,” Dennis said, shepherding me along as one would an errant child. We turned down the long cement walkway that would end at a single glass door smeared with remnants of finger foods. “You’ll go, talk to her, ask forgiveness, and it’s done. Otherwise, she’ll talk about you all over campus.”

“Kissing her was simply my frustrated alternative to driving a pencil through her head for being so maddeningly shut down. Imagine my having to apologize for kissing her to make a theological point. What century are we in?”

“So when do you see Vivienne Wilde? Not that I want to bring up the other woman in your complicated life.”

“Already saw her.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“She was at the conference in San Francisco and actually had the gall to ask me a question from the aisle.”

“It’s very strange that she was there. What did she ask?”

“If I *personally* believed Jesus was celibate.”

“What did you say?”

“I said probably not.”

“That’s the wrong answer, you know, in case you care. But of course, why would you care? You’re busy kissing Gladys Irons to make a theological point.” We halted in front of the cafeteria entrance. “Okay, you’re on your own now. Report back to Daddy after you’ve apologized.”

"I hate low ceilings," I said as I opened the outer door and thought about what it must be like to be in a bastion of liberal theologians. Almost like going to heaven. Instead, here I was in this eclectic mix of God-fearing sects all struggling to brainwash one another. *I never used to feel this way. What's changed?*

Moving down the interior hallway toward the first meeting room, I opened the door and immediately felt I could reach up and touch the big dirty-white tiles overhead, whose popcornlike topography surrounded fluorescent lighting. Gladys and her group were holding their prayer breakfast, and I quietly entered and stepped back against the wall.

Gladys spotted me and her shoulders noticeably jerked back as if the devil himself had entered the room and was about to stick a fork in her. She slammed her chin down to her neck like a nervous chicken and no doubt prayed to God I wouldn't attack her again.

People beside her stood in front of their folding chairs, arms in the air, swaying back and forth like fans in football bleachers executing the wave. I noted Dennis had fallen by the wayside, his encouragement running out at the door.

An older man was leading the prayer but others were chiming in, so it was hard to tell who was talking to God and who was simply interrupting with "Amen, brother. Tell it to Jesus. Washed in the blood."

I noticed immediately Roger Thurgood III was in the front row, looking pompously pious, and I wondered if I had some sort of homing device strapped to my ankle that drew me to Roger.

A young, trim man in a tight-fitting shiny blue suit leapt up and bounded to the podium. I recognized him as Bryan Bench, one of those students who never had an unhappy day because his happiness was manufactured, imported, and installed like parts from China. I suspected I could drive over Bryan with a four-wheeler and he would jump up clutching his Bible and shout, "Praise the Lord, it's a glorious day." *Nothing wrong with that, if only I felt he was sincere.* I mentally smacked myself for cynicism.

"Hold up the Good Book," Bryan shouted to everyone gathered before him, and I contemplated how the Good Book had relegated all other books to "Bad Books." "Today is a day to rejoice."

I had never heard the word "rejoice" given quite so many syllables.

It sounded something like “re-joy-us” and made me think maybe that was the idea—to put joy back in us. Maybe I was being too hard on Bryan and I should accept his hard-core religion as a lesson in diversity, so I settled into my straight-back chair and listened.

But my tolerance was short-lived as Bryan hissed out words in crazy crusader-speak that was just short of born-again rap. “Je-ya-sus saaay-uvs-us. His mother Maaay-reee ble-yus-sus usss!” I mentally snapped. *Why can't he say Jesus like a regular person? Does Bryan go to a restaurant and place his name on the waiting list saying, “My name isss Bryyyaaan Beyuuunch!”*

Words were my hot button. The current inability of anyone under thirty to differentiate vowel sounds drove me mad. Simple words like “mail” were pronounced “mel,” leaving people like me insane and confused when hearing them strung together, as in a tall dark mel was seen walking past a windmel carrying a postcard from today’s mel to Mel Blanchard, a melman. I called it mel-hell and everyone was headed there.

I must have wandered off in thought because the people around me were stirring out of their chair rows, chatting with one another. I moved quickly toward Gladys, who recoiled like a drunk snake, sidwinding away from me, but I blocked the aisle between the row of folding chairs, making it virtually impossible for her to escape. She was hanging on Bryan’s arm, telling him what a good job he’d done. I echoed her sentiment at the first opportunity and he beamed.

“Well, thank you. The Lord provides the Word, I am but a mouthpiece, and I have benefitted from you, Reverend.” He turned the compliment around, and it was that very skill and his big broad smile that would most likely make his future church the fount of everlasting funding. “What brings you here?”

“I came to apologize to Dr. Irons.” Gladys squirmed and Bryan got even cheerier.

“I bet there’s nothing you could ever do, Dr. Westbrooke, that Dr. Irons wouldn’t forgive.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said with a smile, and Gladys turned the color of a candy apple. “I’m sorry, Gladys,” I said, my eyes riveted on her.

She stammered and then, perhaps fearful I would blurt out what I was sorry about, said, “It’s fine. Apology accepted.”

“Well, then the Lord God is King.” Bryan re-joyed-us, apropos of nothing.

“Amen. Amen,” Gladys said.

“Amen,” I murmured, and walked out of the meeting room, bumping smack into Dennis, whose eyes darted over my shoulder to see what mood I’d left the congregation in.

“And she said?” His voice teased the air.

“Amen.”

“Ah yes, Amen.”

“I would rather go to hell than another of Gladys’s prayer breakfasts.”

“Then don’t kiss her again,” he said flatly.

Suddenly, as if I’d offended God and the heavens, the earth shook slightly, then abruptly, and shifted under our feet as if the underworld had joined in, grumbling and rearranging heavy statuary.

I heard the screams first as the dining-room plate glass broke into ten thousands shards, slid to the ground, and splattered around frightened people who tumbled out of the cafeteria and onto the commons. By now the swaying of the earth was slow and rhythmic and had thrown us to the ground, and I realized the New Madrid fault must have shifted and for a moment given Illinois empathy with California. The green grass momentarily rolled like waves beneath us as if the lawn had liquefied, making us all sod surfers.

Bryan Bench had outstripped the rest of the prayerful, landing on all fours about thirty yards ahead of me, clutching the ground with his hands, and then rolling onto his side whimpering, “Oh, God.” His big smiley face was now petrified, his knees grass-stained, and the crotch of his shiny pants dark from dampness.

Dennis and I crawled to the nearest student injured by flying glass and ordered others away from the building and into the center of the grounds, being careful to avoid statuary and benches in case they became marble bowling balls striking us.

In a few minutes the earth quieted and people righted themselves. Bryan was now crying overtly and I was amused that, despite constant conversations with God, Bryan wasn’t interested in a face-to-face meeting.

I noticed Gladys on the ground holding her ankle and rocking back and forth in obvious pain, and I asked if she could get up. She said

she couldn't put weight on her foot, so I sat down beside her. "I would bandage it, but all the first-aid supplies are inside and I can't go into the buildings yet in case there's an aftershock."

"I wouldn't ask you to." Her tone was kinder toward me.

"I'm completely worthless to you other than to keep you company. Sorry you're in pain."

"It's all fine. Really. Don't worry. Go help the others."

I was happy to take her up on that offer and left her in pretty much the same shape I'd found her.



The aftershocks occurred all day and those who could leave campus did so. Others were finally allowed back into their dorms after security made a brief safety check, and so there was nothing left for most of us to do but go home. Ketch whined and shook and stuck by my side as I headed to the car to drive us back to the farm. I turned on the car radio to listen to damage reports and interviews with frantic people who told reporters it was a reminder that we survived at the discretion of a Higher Power.

"It's okay, buddy." I patted my quivering shepherd. "Every once in a while, Mother Earth gets tired of her children crawling all over her so she stands up and shakes her skirts." Ketch wedged his head under my arm. *I wished I had someone to shelter me*, I thought. *Someone earthly.*

CHAPTER TEN

Friday morning my world was jolted again when I received a note from Vivienne Wilde saying she hoped the school hadn't suffered damage in the tremor and apologized for having to postpone her meeting with me until the following week, saying she'd forgotten she had to do a live radio show and wouldn't have time to get there. I was undeniably disappointed. I'd looked forward to...the way the sunlight played on her blond hair.

I punched the radio's tune-in button, seeing if I could find the station on which she was appearing. Exasperated when I couldn't locate it, I called her office and asked Joyce, who gave me the call letters. I tuned in just as she was being introduced.

"Our guest today is Dr. Vivienne Wilde—activist, author, and friend. Dr. Wilde, welcome, and tell us...well, beginning with all the uproar over your criticism of our local seminary, Claridge."

"Thank you for having me," she said, and I held my breath, wondering if Hightower was tuned in right now gritting his teeth and using my name in vain. "Claridge was merely a placeholder for...fill in the blank with any seminary these days. Most have money issues, and the criteria for entrance and, ultimately, graduation is merely will you pay the tuition?"

"But you did indicate the zealotry had gone too far when a theologian there said God punished—"

"A male professor at Claridge was fired and my inquiry was into the reason for that. I was told that perhaps he was too troubled to lead. In fact, he committed suicide."

"You have a book coming out." I wondered if ire had risen in

that face framed with the Magdalene hair and the host got the visual message to move on, or if they were truly friends and the host had merely let her off the hook.

"I do. It's volume one in a three-part series entitled *The Untruths*, and it sheds light on the social and political mores we grew up with and examines them in a more mature light."

"This one caught my eye. 'Sexual dysfunction is more prevalent in women. I thought that was called a headache.'" Polite titters of laughter from the host.

"One study states over forty percent of women experience sexual dysfunction as compared to thirty percent of men, and in both sexes it's a result of age, education, poor physical and mental health. But in women alone it correlates with poor-to-bad sexual experiences."

"So 'an untruth' is that sexual dysfunction is more about a man's inability to perform and less about a woman's desire to hang in there for the second act. Speaking of which, it's time to take a break so our sponsors don't go limp on us." She laughed heartily and the radio station went to commercial.

I listened enrapt to the rest of the radio broadcast, grateful religion and Claridge had been a very small part of a much bigger topic and also pleased that Vivienne had steered her host away from the headline she had so callously wrought after our first meeting. I wondered why she'd let me off so easily—she who wrote erroneous headlines and stalked me at the conference with tough questions.

Nonetheless I was grateful. I was feeling so ebullient over the interview and my non-role in it that I phoned her office the moment the show ended and asked Joyce to tell her I thought she did a great job and that I was still looking forward to our debate next Friday. Joyce rattled off directions to their offices, but I requested that our upcoming meeting take place on "neutral ground." Joyce laughed and agreed to relay the message.

Feeling inexplicably happy, I wanted to share my mood and sought out Dennis, catching up with him on a cross-campus walk.

"So now you've decided I'm to prepare you for a debate with her, which is really just a private meeting," he said.

"Nothing with her ever stays private, so if I'm quoted I want it to be an appropriate quote."

"You're not still assigned to her, though. Didn't Hightower take

you off all press matters?" He huffed as we walked, and I chose to believe it was due to his weight and not the topic.

I sighed, somewhat exasperated. "Not before I'd already contacted her and she'd requested these weekly meetings, and I'm not about to tell her I was just a pawn and now never mind."

He cocked his head and scrunched up his eyebrows, as if trying to figure me out. "What are you really doing?"

"What do you mean? I'm getting ready to protect our seminary."

He jutted his head forward and I hated his mimed responses.

"Yes or no?" I ordered.

He shifted gears sharply, playing along. "What will you say if she asks you if you believe Christ died on the cross?"

"I would say yes, He did, but many did in those days. It was a common form of capital punishment."

"Did someone come and roll the stone away from His tomb?"

"Does that matter to your faith? What if the stone had been a moat of crocodiles—does that make a difference? We are not worshipping the plot points."

"Do you worship Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior as the only begotten son of God, born and not made, true God of true God now and forever?" And now he wasn't prepping me, he was asking me. A pause thick with meaning filled the air, for in essence that was the key question.

"She won't ask that."

Dennis stared deep into my soul with his piercing dark eyes. "You might answer it for yourself, then...simply to be thoroughly rehearsed."



I floated through the following week, jumpy and nervous and completely unable to focus on anything but the upcoming Friday meeting with Vivienne. I chose a rustic lodge midway between my farm and the university. It had a nice set of small meeting rooms overlooking the deck that gave a clear view of the woods, and I picked up the tab personally for the room rate. I don't know why I felt getting Vivienne out in the woods was paramount to our understanding one another's views, but I did. I needed time to relax around her, be able to elaborate

on my thoughts without looking at my watch or being interrupted by a student.

I'd been nervously anticipating it all week and didn't really know why mere conjecture about how it might go turned my stomach upside down.

Just before I left campus Friday afternoon, Dennis strolled up to watch me pack the backseat of my Mustang with books and, of course, Ketch.

"Hope she's not allergic to dogs." His parental tone stopped my sudden arm movements and froze me midair.

"Didn't think of that, did we, Ketch? Well, if she is, we'll hand her a tissue."

"Why didn't you just reserve a room on campus?"

"Because 'reserved' here means one knock before dragging the folding chairs past you."

"So you want total privacy?"

"Yes. Why are you grilling me? What are you asking?"

"I'm asking if your interest in Vivienne Wilde is...personal." His distrust of my motives was surfacing again. "But of course if it were personal you wouldn't tell me, so I guess I'm merely saying, drive safely and don't let her corner you up."

I ignored him, too happy about life in general to dignify his remark. Ketch and I backed out of the parking lot and took off down the highway.

"Ketch, don't touch her, okay? Stick close to me. If she's allergic, I don't want to read about it."



Vivienne stepped out of a white BMW wearing a burnt orange silk shirt adorned with Egyptian symbols that pointed toward her open front, a pair of toffee-colored silk slacks, and sandals revealing pale painted toenails. We smiled and shook hands, and I took two steps back to look at her.

"You're brighter than the sun god Ra."

"Sorry to confuse you, but they were all out of the silk shirts with the thorns." Her cute smirk caused me to grin despite myself.

"I have a room reserved for us."

“Been a while since I’ve heard that.” Her tone was unmistakably sexual, and I looked at the pine trees to avoid any reaction that would encourage her and moved briskly in the direction of the doorway marked *Serenade*. Ketch fell in beside her as if they were old friends. *What a deserter*, I thought, glancing at him as he let his nose lightly touch her hand and she stroked his head.

“Pear-fct. First-class accommodation,” she remarked, ranking my thoughtfulness. And once up the wooden steps and inside, she twirled like a model taking in the room and said, “I love it” as she pointed toward the small stone fireplace. I couldn’t imagine why this woman made me smile but she did, and Ketch seemed to like her as well, so maybe we would find our common ecclesiastical ground and move on to friendship.

The wait staff had placed the fruit and cheese and drinks just where I’d requested them, giving it, admittedly, a more social than business atmosphere. I fixed a plate for us and set it down on a small coffee table between two overstuffed leather chairs that faced the porch rail visible through the plate glass. “So, shall we relax and stare at God’s scenery before deciding if He exists?” I needled her.

“God exists.” She fell into the chair and sipped her iced tea and nibbled her cheese and fruit. “But She has many forms.”

I ate, refusing to be drawn in to her gender-blender, perhaps heightened by my having shown her the female Christ. I felt awkward and rusty at conversation and she didn’t seem much better, like athletes unable to find our game or get into a rhythm.

“So what can I say that will get you to acknowledge that religious views beyond your own are acceptable training for students who prefer them?”

“Nothing. I don’t believe in perpetuating ignorance in a scholarly setting.”

I let time lapse, avoiding the trap of answering unasked questions. She arose and moved behind me, finding an opener and taking down glasses from the shelf, and a sensation like fingers lightly sliding over my shoulders and down my arms overtook me. I quivered as if I’d actually been touched.

“I listened to your radio broadcast. Your book sounds interesting. And I appreciated your not taking Claridge to task again when you had the opportunity.”

"There's no new twist to the story, it's old news." She shrugged, not letting me believe for a minute that she'd protected me or the seminary or would cease her attacks if something attackworthy surfaced.

"Do you have family?" I changed the subject to something friendlier.

"A brother and sister. My parents are both dead. They were wide-eyed liberals, with just a dash of conservatism that would pop up annoyingly when my sister and I brought dates home."

"So you're married," I said, unable to stop myself. She gave me a look that seemed to mock my question. "Sorry. I've been recently corrupted by a friend in San Francisco who grilled me like a tuna, and now I'm doing it to you."

"No." Her voice contained a lilt that bounced my heart around in my chest like a pinball. She looked right at me with those eyes that could sear holes in steel—an incredibly sensual being, a rare piece of art, an exotic animal whom everyone should have the opportunity to gaze on. I wanted to ask who was fortunate enough to roll over in the morning and be greeted by those luxurious eyes. *I am out of my mind. Completely out of my mind. Dennis is right to ask what I'm doing.*

"What made you decide to be a writer?" I frowned and crossed my legs in an attempt to change my mood and broached the topic that had brought us together in the first place.

"Easier than protest marches and it pays better. Why did you decide to go into the church?" Her eyes raked over me and I was flattered without reason.

My mind traveled back to the day I'd decided to complete my training and go to seminary. *I was alone. Desolate. Guilt-ridden. In search of something.* I took in air before speaking. "I felt I could give back."

"For what had been taken away?" Her eyes settled softly on mine and dared me to confess.

I held very still, wondering what she knew and how she knew, and the thought of her knowing made me uncomfortable.

"So why take up your pen against the religious underpinnings of our society or, in your off hours, the sexual readiness of the adult male?"

"I don't like the world as it is. Haven't from the time I was a child. My parents warned me against whining about injustice—saying if I

didn't like this world, blow it up and build a new one. I constantly look for a place to plant the fuse."

As if Ketch found those remarks irresistible, he stood up and in two deft steps climbed into her lap. His 110-pound frame swallowed her. From beneath the fur came a whoosh of air and then a weak giggle. I snatched him up by the collar and hauled him off her. She staggered to her feet, begging me to spare him, and I stared at the dirt on her slacks and impulsively batted at the not-yet-thoroughly dried flecks of mud from his coat and paws.

"I am so sorry. I have no idea what got into him."

"I would say the intelligence of my views overpowered him and he was converted on the spot."

"I'll pay for your dry-cleaning. He's never done anything this aggressive."

"Aggressive is good." She captured my hand in hers. "Stop, it's perfectly all right."

I smiled at the word said so close to my face. "I love the way you say 'perfect.'" Her expression changed for a telltale moment and her eyes became liquid, forming pools of...perfection.

"Well, thank you. Perhaps I'll use that word to calm you when we...debate." We both looked at each other as if meeting for the first time under different circumstances, her expression probing my soul.

I looked away to give myself time to remember that this woman was not trustworthy. She had unfairly used an interview with me, published an article that could have gotten me fired, and to top things off ambushed me at a conference, getting herself here with me today by near blackmail. And yet I felt a physical and emotional connection to her that was inexplicable. *And frankly inexcusable*, I chastised myself.

"Why did you write that article misquoting me?" I nearly whispered.

"You refused to—"

"I refused you nothing," I said, slightly hurt.

"—admit who you are."

My face grew hot. "If you want to debate religious tenets, I'm happy to—"

"Do that instead of march against the church and set robes on fire?" she said. "I understand. We lose our lust for battle as the stakes get higher."

“You seem to value warriors and battles.”

She seemed momentarily contrite, and then she too must have reminded herself why she was here—*To do me in? Get great press?*

“Our hour together is up and I know you have many things to do. Thank you for taking the time away from your work.” She patted Ketch, who walked her to the door.

Our hour is up? Does she think she’s my therapist?

At the last possible moment, she reached into her small, exotic leather bag and handed me a copy of a San Francisco newspaper article. “For someone who used to feel exactly as I do, you’ve given up the fight.”

I glanced down at the masthead from a right-wing religious periodical published in the Bay area bearing a decades-old date. LEFT-WING RADICALS MARCH AGAINST GOD. Under the picture of college students struggling against police in the street was an inset photo of me, tall and leaner, my hair long as I struggled with a police officer who had a tight grip on my arm. Seeing it, I could feel that grip as if he still clutched me.

My face flushed but no one was there to see it. Vivienne Wilde had left.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

So how did your afternoon in the woods go with Cruella?" Dennis asked, between chews of the cafeteria's just-short-of-lethal chili dog. "You didn't call me over the weekend to confide in me, so I assumed you lived through it."

"I think she's mistaken me for the entire church and is out to get me." I bit into a piece of pizza that could have served as road-surface material and quickly put it down, distracted by another bad lunch. "We've got to get out of the contract with this food vendor before he kills us all. I'm going to talk to Hightower." I tossed the pizza aside and felt my tooth to see if it was still in one piece.

"So what did you talk about?" Dennis stayed focused on Vivienne.

"She thinks I'm an inauthentic priest."

"That's interesting." He maintained a studied nonchalance and I eyed him for signs he agreed with her. He caught me looking at him. "I do not think you're inauthentic, just routinely misguided," he said wickedly.

"She had information on my early days at Berkeley. I don't know what she's trying to do."

"I think she's attracted to you," he said, clearly unconcerned, between bites. For a priest, Dennis was an odd and alternating mix of liberal and conservative views that often collided in the same sentence. I pushed my food tray aside and my stomach knotted. "Well, don't you?" He continued. "I think it's pretty obvious by the obsessive focus, the attacks on you...almost as if she's angry about the fact that she likes you."

"That's one of your stranger theories." But something inside me was leaping around in my chest, fluttering my heart, making my head buzz.

"Maybe." He chomped down on a second chili dog. "You ever been attracted to someone of the same sex?"

I glanced around to see who was nearby and refrained from telling him to lower his voice. "I don't know what you call attracted."

"Wanting to touch, kiss, sleep with—"

"Are you getting your thrills vicariously these days?"

"Who was she?"

"Stop it. You're acting like some Freudian pervert."

"A lot of very religious men were gay and there was nothing shameful about it," Dennis said.

"Have you checked with your pope on that?"

"I have a friend who works at the Vatican. You can't put that much testosterone around great gowns, terrific art, and a host of pretty boys and not expect them to get a little confused."

Eleonor breezed by with her red plastic food tray filled to its edges. "When you two are through throwing souls under the bus, Hightower wants to see you." Her nod was in my direction.

"Any reason why?" I asked.

"He's had his ass in a knot all day—shootin' off enough lightn' bolts to blow out a transformer."

I yanked my napkin off my lap and slapped it down on the table, thinking I was still hungry, and excused myself.

"Hey, you never told me who she was—the attraction. Clever the way you redirected our conversation but I want to know who."

"Gladys Irons." I gave him a cheesy grin.

"Better be careful, that's how rumors get started."



Hightower paced across his office, a newspaper in his right hand, slapping it into the palm of his left. I felt like a dog who'd peed on the carpet and was about to get smacked. "So obviously this was left off your curriculum vitae."

"I didn't think it relevant."

"Roger Thurgood III thought it extremely relevant."

I fell back in my chair, exhausted from this childishness. “Harry, does Roger run this school? Since when do we allow ourselves to be frightened or blackmailed by our own students? I like to write and teach. I like it less, however, when my students are behaving like World War Two Nazi children turning in their parents.”

He dismissed my remark with a little irritated wave, but wild thoughts were swirling around in my head. *How could she have done it to me again? How stupid could I possibly be? I walk into the lion’s den to be bitten twice?* And before I could edit myself I confided that Vivienne was at the root of my problems. “She must have given him the article because she gave me a copy in a recent meeting.”

“Why were you meeting with Vivienne Wilde?”

“You set me up, remember?”

“And then I unset you. I forbid you to see that woman again.” The words reverberated around me as if I were in a huge echo chamber that time traveled back twenty years ago to San Francisco and a jail cell. A young man signed the paperwork and freed me. Out on the street a military limo waited, the windows blackened. The young officer held the door and I got in beside my father, who never turned his head in my direction as he spoke. “I forbid you to see that woman again.” *Is the echo in my head or in the room with me now?* “She’s dangerous and she will ruin your career.” *Is Hightower speaking or my father?* My head swam. I felt faint.

Hightower’s face floated above mine. Then it was Eleonor’s pretty black face looking worried, coming in and out of focus. Words like “nurse,” “fainted,” “weak pulse” spun around in the air like tangible items. She must have rung Dennis because soon large, strong hands were lifting me up off the floor and I was leaning back on my old friend.

“You okay now?” he asked.

“Maybe you should get her over to the school nurse. Eleonor can go with you.” I could tell from Hightower’s tone that whatever had occurred was an embarrassment to him and he wanted me out of his office as quickly as possible and was willing to donate any staff to make it happen.

“I’m fine, really.” I teetered slightly as Dennis supported my arm and guided me to the elevator.

“Horizontal clerics are not nearly as useful to Claridge as vertical

ones. Pick a place and take two weeks off.” Dennis spoke as if I reported to him.

“Who died and left you in charge?”

“I also perform the duties of campus chaplain, in case you’ve forgotten,” he shouted after me as I walked to the parking lot, swaying slightly, and got into my Mustang, glad I’d let Ketch stay home today.

Dennis caught up with me and tried to snatch the keys away, but I fired up the engine and swung the car out of the lot as he waved his hands above his head for me to stop. I was unstoppable, headed for Vivienne Wilde’s office, seething over the fact that she had given that article to my nemesis.

The building stood over twenty stories, skinned in sexy, black glass, from which workers could see out but I couldn’t see them—*suits her soul*, I thought.

I entered the revolving door that whooshed 180 degrees and ejected me into a marble foyer that faced a bank of elevators, where a crowd of perhaps a dozen people were in various stages of boarding. Recognizing the back of Vivienne Wilde’s golden hair and the well-fitted suit jacket that showed off her nicely formed body, I fell in behind and got on the elevator with her and several other people. She didn’t see me until we all turned to face the doors.

“What are you doing here?” Her voice sounded oddly ebullient.

“I came to see you.” Others in the elevator took little notice, although an older woman smiled at us as if to say, “Isn’t that nice.”

Silence ensued. Still fuming from my Hightower beating, I added cheerily, “Curious why?”

“No, just glad to see you.”

The doors opened and all but the smiling woman got off on the eleventh floor. Before the doors closed again I said, “Why did you give Roger Thurgood the newspaper article?”

“Who is Roger Thurgood?”

I ignored the question, certain she was playing dumb. “Getting me fired seems to be a full-time job for you.”

The older woman frowned as the elevator jolted to a stop on fifteen. I pointed to the door, reminding her that this was an elevator, not a soap opera, and she should tune out now. She left, tossing us a worried look over her shoulder.

"You may find this hard to believe, but I am not personally responsible for the bad things that happen in your life."

"Really? Then why don't you stop contributing to them?"

The elevator doors opened on twenty and Vivienne marched ahead of me. We breezed past a reception area and down a long carpeted hallway with cubist furniture and into a corner office that was glass. See-through glass desk, Plexiglas chairs around a bottle-glass coffee table, and floor-to-ceiling glass windows. She hit a button on her phone and told Joyce that she was not to be disturbed. Swinging around to face me she said, "I'm all yours."

I exhaled abruptly in response, caught off guard, and momentarily felt that buzzing, off-balance sensation in my head.

"Well, speak, Reverend. How have I, a mere mortal, "ruined" your life and career?"

A voice in my head reminded me I'd like to strangle her while at the same time registered that she looked sensational standing there with one hand on her hip, leaning on the corner of her desk and addressing me with unabashed drama. She must have read that thought, because instead of arguing further she poured me a glass of wine from a small bar on the wall adjacent to her desk. I refused it.

"So how did he get the article if not from you or through you?"

"It's public record if anyone cares to look."

"For more than twenty years no one has. Even you must deem it interestingly odd that you and my student find it on virtually the same day."

She shrugged. "Things get in the air or on the Web. Why do two inventors claim an invention in the same week, across the world from one another and have never met?"

"Cosmic coincidence?"

"Or someone other than me trying to do you in."

"Which brings me back to why you would publish something so incorrect and so harmful about me. You have hurt me deeply and endangered my—"

"I apologize."

Her simple words ground my tirade to a halt.

"Tell me why—"

"Why?" she interrupted brusquely.

"Because I don't want to believe it's a character flaw and that you would do it viciously."

"Why do you even remotely care?"

"I don't know, I just do." I felt embarrassed and out of control, as if I had a crush on my teacher.

"So you can pray for me? You're wrong for this whole religious game, you know." The look came back. The soft, sensual eye contact that made me want to dive into her soul. Her words came out warm and slow. "You're a deconstructionist at heart and now suddenly you're in support of rigidity, spreading lies under the guise of duty and tradition. You fought for the truth. What in God's name happened to change you, Alex?"

Alex? My heart lodged in some narrow space in my chest. Perhaps it was the tone of her voice—so intimate—or the casual way she truncated my name, giving it a masculine strength, but my head was swimming and I felt I might pass out again. *Good God, is fainting like a Civil War matron going to be my new MO?* She saw that I was incapable of response.

"The old articles said you moved in like lightning. You were in the thick of it—the woman who went to jail protesting the church's stance on homosexuality."

"I'm leaving. Don't write about me again or...I'll sue you." *How dare she invade my life, my privacy, endanger my career? Who the hell does she think she is?*

"Does my knowing who you are make you that uncomfortable? Don't you think one of us should...know who you are?"

"I know exactly who I am." I shook my head slightly as if trying to regain consciousness and left her office, touching the wall with my fingertips for balance and the assurance that I was still in my body. I heard her voice behind me telling me to wait, but I was waiting for no one. I was getting the hell away from her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Moments later, I was driving and not really aware of where I was headed, my mind now possessed by Vivienne Wilde. Like human truth serum, she invaded my thoughts, my speech, my history, and demanded that I time travel to a place I had sworn never to revisit—a place where I’d fought alongside a woman older than I, who vowed to lift people up by bringing the church to its knees. A woman who on that flowering spring day was there when my father’s limo pulled up on Center Street, surprising even me, who had just recently spent twenty-four hours in jail and now sat alongside him as Jeannette and her husband came into view—standing solemnly on the corner as if they’d been told to wait there for us.

The limo slowed and then stopped in front of them. The driver got out and stiffly held the door for me. I was a physical and mental wreck as I stood before this woman I had known intimately, who now, strangely, appeared not even to know me by name.

“Tell her everything,” my father commanded. Jeannette looked at the cement. Her husband turned his head at a ninety-degree angle as if unable to bear the words.

I felt the buzz of my cell phone and my mind leapt back from Center Street to the present as I tried to retrieve the call while driving. Too late, I got the message and not the messenger. Eleonor’s chipper voice recording said a visitor on campus was trying to reach me and she’d left a number for me.

I phoned and a strong, low-pitched voice answered immediately, buoyant over having reached me—Lyra in town on business and

wondering if I would join her and Jude for an early dinner. She apologized for the late notice.

I was looking for an escape from my mental hauntings, so I agreed to meet them at a little chop house on the east side of town. *Maybe it will get my mind off Vivienne.* I made a mental note that when I had a few hours I needed to analyze why Vivienne had imprinted on me the way she had. It didn't seem to matter whether she insulted me, attacked me, or spoke nicely to me. I simply couldn't quit thinking about her, even when I was running from her. Not about her motives or her betrayal or her investigation of me but just thinking about *her*—wondering what she was doing, how she was doing, and who she was with.

I realized as I pulled into the parking space that I needed to sort out my feelings. *Perhaps it's just that she has a spark, a fire I don't have anymore.*

Lyra stood up from the table and waved when I entered the restaurant, and I walked back to the tiny dining alcove she and Jude occupied. Both hugged me, Lyra hanging on a bit longer and with greater intensity, and I felt momentarily relaxed and among friends.

She wore a flowing skirt and blouse that seemed to billow even when she was sitting still and was covered in enough bright flowers to make her look like camouflage at the parrot sanctuary. She immediately regurgitated her itinerary, saying she'd returned from a speaking engagement and was high on the success of the entire event. She felt strongly that she and C3 were having some sway with the Catholic clergy.

"That's what I love about Lyra," Jude said, addressing me as if Lyra weren't there, "she has one good meeting with fifty old hippies, and she thinks she's somehow changed two thousand years of oppression."

"One drop of water, over time, will wear away stone," Lyra said, and hoisted her glass.

I scanned the room, already bored with the banter when I saw her standing in the doorway, looking around in search of something. Then she caught sight of me and, after a beat, turned and left. I jumped up so quickly that I nearly upended my water glass and bolted for the door as my dinner partners shouted worried questions after me. I crossed the restaurant and hit the front door in seconds, jogging to her car as I saw the back of her jacket sinking into the plush leather seats of her Beemer.

"Wait, Vivienne." She turned toward me as I nearly landed on top of her car and planted both palms on the open window. "Are you following me?" I panted, and my voice sounded irritated even to me.

"Yes...I am."

She looked at me intensely for a few seconds, almost as if she was trying to figure out who I was, a total stranger she only thought she knew. Dozens of emotions crowded my brain as I sifted through them for the one that made sense. One minute I was running away from this woman and the next minute running to her.

"You mind telling me why?" Conversation came out in bursts and starts, my anger dissipated by her mere gaze, her physical presence completely destroying any rational thought.

"When you left my office, you seemed disoriented and upset."

"Like now," I said, trying to lighten my tone.

"I thought you might be so upset that you couldn't drive."

"So you were concerned about me."

She paused, as if that thought struck her as odd. "I generally don't chase after people who insult me in my office and then stalk off threatening to sue me. But I...didn't want your head-on collision on my conscience." Her eyes were penetrating and defiant, and she seemed to be angry with herself for having come this far, perhaps even feeling foolish. The last rays from a burnt orange sky glanced off the car's side mirror, creating sun flares all around her, and my words tumbled out in verbal surrender to her physical beauty.

"Would you come in and have dinner? These are just...people I barely know, actually."

"I've got some things to do—"

"If I'd known, I would never have accepted this invitation, but then if I hadn't, you wouldn't have known where to find me, or maybe you would have followed me home, which would have been better..." I made a note to do a better editing job before I spoke. "Maybe I'm not feeling as great as I thought. I'm babbling."

"Would you like to have dinner with me tomorrow night?" The invitation sounded abrupt, as if she was giving in to me, or to herself, or to something that was annoying her.

"Yes. That's what I'm saying. I'd love that." *What in hell am I doing? Dennis will have a field day with this.*

"My house at seven?"

“Great. Perfect. Where do you—”

“I have a card.” She reached in her bag and took out a business card and on the back side wrote her home address and phone number. The card smelled of perfume and the night air blew her fragrance toward me. Even the phone number felt incredibly intimate, and I stopped looking at the card in favor of her eyes. “You’d better get back to your friends.”

“I wish it were tomorrow night. Then this dinner would be over. I’m really not a very good dinner guest.”

“I’ll take my chances. I got Joyce to Google Roger Thurgood. She’s good at pretending to be someone else in order to get information out of people. Maybe she can help you find out where he got the article.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t you who sent it.” My tone was apologetic.

“Are you allergic to anything—nuts, alcohol?”

“No, I’m fine with those.” I felt disembodied, remote, absent, thinking of Roger Thurgood disliking me enough to want to do me in.

“See you tomorrow, Alex.” Her voice softened as I treasured the sound of my nickname. She pulled away from the curb and I waved good-bye before turning back to the restaurant. *This feeling is too good to...be good*, I thought.



“I was about to send out a search party. In fact, I did go to the door to see if you were okay,” Jude said as I rejoined them.

“A lot of people are checking on me lately.”

“Maybe you need it.” Lyra grinned, biting into something she’d ordered in my absence.

“Who was that woman?” Jude asked.

“A writer the seminary asked me to hook up with.”

“Nice hook.” Jude looked at me oddly.

I ignored her and focused on asking questions about Lyra’s trip, giving her too much attention in order to keep Jude from prying into my conversation with Vivienne.

Dinner went on far too long, and I was so fidgety I could barely stay in my seat as my mind floated down the freeway with Vivienne, wondering if she was going home and what home looked like. *This isn’t*

normal. Well, it might be normal for some people but not for me. I was jolted out of my reverie by a hand on my knee.

"You aren't eating much these days." Lyra rubbed my thigh. "Perhaps there's something else you would enjoy."

"Yeah," Jude said, oblivious to what was going on under the tablecloth. "Order dessert."

"I've got everything I need," I said, and Lyra took that as a personal endorsement of her romantic technique and got a firmer grip on my leg.

"As much as I'd like to stay," I looked at my watch for emphasis, "I've got to get home. Early morning tomorrow." Lyra was forced to let go of my thigh as I stood up. I gave her a brief and perfunctory hug, ditto for Jude, and escaped into the cool night air, pausing to stare at the spot where Vivienne's car had been parked.

She actually followed me all this way to see if I was okay. A little thrill ran through me, like the reverberation of bells trailing over my skin.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Breaking bread with parishioners is part of what a priest does—dines with those whom he blesses and who in turn bless him. When invited to a parishioner's home for dinner, I'd always been appropriately witty within limits and extremely courteous and caring. And for that alone I never enjoyed myself—too much image control. But several things I was not—nervous, ill at ease, or worried about what I wore.

So tonight, of all things, why am I nervous and digging through my closet for a chic, butter-soft charcoal leather jacket to wear over my black turtleneck and black slacks, and checking my makeup every fifteen minutes, for God's sake?

Her house was in a posh part of town—a two-story flat with broad cement steps on which someone could sit and watch the passersby. The windows overlooking the wide front porch were lit up, and the light slanted down on a white slat swing hanging from chains anchored in the ceiling. It was the kind of place where a young boy might steal a kiss from his teenage date and an irritated father might peer through the curtains and then flash the porch light and finally chase the sexual interloper away. For a moment I expected an older man to glower at me through the gauze drapes.

The door swung open. "Were you eventually going to ring the bell or, like a moth, are you just attracted to the porch light?"

"Hello." I pretended to be wiping my feet on the door mat, about to make a move for the doorbell. I followed her inside where the charm of early nineteen-hundreds architecture with its big parlor and

winding staircase took me back to a quieter time. The house smelled like cinnamon apples and I hoped that was dessert. Vivienne Wilde looked a bit like a Christmas delight—reflected in an orange-red glow that followed her around as if her hair had painted everything it swung by.

“You look lovely,” I said.

“And you look stately chic, as usual.”

I treasured her compliment as I trailed her down the expansive corridor lined with gilt-edged frames of elderly people, who, judging by the style of their wardrobes, were now long dead.

She answered my unasked question. “This house has been in the family for nearly a hundred years.”

“We have old family haunts in common. I live in my maternal grandmother’s farmhouse not too far from the city.”

“A farmhouse.” She whirled to face me as joyful as a child. “I would love to see that.”

“Name the day. I’d love to show it to you.” I allowed my brain to register that making this woman smile made me light up. All right, perhaps more than light up. A massive tingling sensation shot through my body evidencing, even to me, that I was undeniably attracted to her. I had not been uncontrollably attracted to anyone in a decade. I had averted, aborted, adroitly avoided attraction to anyone—but tonight my body told me that I had just lost the battle. This woman sent warmth cascading over me like sunlight.

The living room was a large, drafty parlor whose architectural saving grace was a gigantic fireplace with massive logs and a roaring blaze. I inquired as to who prepared the logs, certain it would take two grown men to drag them in. She laughed. “You don’t think I could?”

“If you could drag those logs in single-handedly, I wouldn’t be having dinner with you.”

“Do strong women scare you?” She laughed congenially.

“Clever women scare me and you are—”

“Smart, not clever.” She placed a hand firmly on my chest just below the shoulder, and my knees grew weak as she slipped her fingers up and around the nape of my neck and whipped the collar back to examine the label. “I love Armani. Here, let me have it.” She deftly removed my jacket, leaving me feeling vulnerable. *My jacket is my one remotely cool item.*

"You're going to be hot in that turtleneck by the fire...but don't take it off."

"Naked clergy scare you?" I teased back.

"Now that you mention it, I don't think I've ever seen one. Which is odd," she refused to let it drop, "since I've seen most everything."

I wondered if her remark was humor or truth. A short oriental man in a tight-fitting white jacket came into the room and without a word began preparing a buffet table—pulling it back from the wall, adding a cloth he'd carried neatly folded over his arm—and then disappeared momentarily into the hallway.

"I had the chef prepare something that would linger without poisoning us, and that way, we can sit, talk, eat, in whatever order pleases you."

The oriental fellow returned pushing a tea cart with dome-covered dishes and transferred them onto the table he'd prepared, all faster than hotel room service.

"Anything else, Ms. Wilde?"

"No, thank you, Niji." He gave her a nod just this side of a bow and left, closing the door behind him. "Family money. Lest you think I shagged my way to luxury," she said, using the amusing British slang for fornication. "Let's have a look, I'll bet you're hungry." She lifted a sterling lid and peered at the roast beef beneath. I told her it all looked great, took a small square of dark bread, and used a fat-handled knife sporting a baroquely engraved W to spread the brie. "I think you'll need something more substantial than that." She offered up a star-shaped cracker spread with pâté and held it to my lips.

I don't have a free hand. She can't possibly mean for me to bite into it while she's holding it.

"I'll bet it's been a long time since you've tried this." Her tone seemed to mean something entirely apart from pâté.

I bit slowly into the offering and her fingers brushed my lips. Her face revealed nothing as my body trembled, betraying my attempt to conceal that biting into anything she held between her fingers was unbearably erotic.

"Wonderful?" she asked, as if seeking praise for the repast rather than noticing my physical response to her touch. My eyes rose to meet hers, blue shimmering seas. "You have a beautiful mouth." She spoke almost absently as she turned away from me.

Priests place wafers into the mouths of total strangers, offering the body of Christ. Was she offering her body? Does she offer herself to everyone?

I followed her lead by picking up a gilt-edged dinner plate as she glanced over her shoulder. "Do you have everything you need?"

"Most days. This might not be one of them." My tone was teasing but my statement factual.

"Life is short. I believe in getting what you want," she said, but "the look" had vanished, disintegrated into politeness. I took a deep breath and collected myself, focused on getting the roast beef and vegetables onto the china and not the floor, and then trailed her to the couch in front of the fireplace. Placing my plate on the long coffee table, I tried to relax and complimented her on the house, asking her about its history as nonchalantly as if I'd never seen her searing glance. She responded to my questions in a friendly but detached fashion. And as I stared into her magnificent face, I knew my side of this inane conversation was simply verbal camouflage for the simmering fire within me that, given air, could consume us both. I shuddered from the intensity of my feelings.

"You can't be cold."

I wanted to say I wasn't cold at all, but had simply been on ice for some time waiting for the heat that would melt me, and now like a Southern summer it had arrived.

I summoned enough air to whisper, "No."

Niji came back in short order and took the dishes away, removed the food with lightning speed, and poured us an after-dinner liqueur. I took that opportunity to get off the couch and away from her, staring out of the massive arched window overlooking the lantern-lit back lawn. The door clicked and then Vivienne approached.

She didn't speak. We stood side by side staring into the semi-darkness. I felt oddly at peace and yet about to leap out of my own skin.

"Is there something going on between us?" I managed to say, unable to stand the physical suspense any longer, my body vibrating like the sustain of a violin note.

"Like what?" She didn't look at me and her voice was seductively calm.

"We seem to be enemies, yet it doesn't feel like that."

“What does it feel like?” Still she didn’t look at me.

“It feels like...I need to go. I’ve really enjoyed being here.”

She turned her beautiful profile to look at me and her eyes once again held a languid longing. The air stopped stirring, clocks stopped ticking, I no longer breathed, and the world ceased spinning, all other moments in my life having served merely to reach this one. As if a spell had been cast over me, I pushed aside the mental images of my life, my father, my career and cared only about this woman and this instant in time.

She put her lips to mine, sealing out duty and honor in favor of lust and the softest sensation, the most electrifying meeting of flesh I had ever known. Her lips were warm and throbbing, her small body up against me, passionate and provocative, and then she took over, pulling me closer, letting me know I had come to the altar but she would baptize me—wetness and warmth spreading throughout me, turning my soul inside out, to merge with hers.

“Take your clothes off.” She whispered the sterile command that jolted me back to my senses.

“And make love here in front of the fire?” I pulled back, stunned by how quickly she moved forward.

“We want each other. We’re two consenting adults. Why not?”

A million reasons embedded in my DNA. A million reasons emblazoned on my soul.

I put myself in check. “I’m sorry. I was completely out of line. I don’t know what came over me. Forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” She laughed softly. “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned?”

“Could I have my jacket?”

She hesitated and then located it for me, holding it against her chest, forcing me to stay a moment longer. Panic overtook me. I was in danger of leaning forward again and kissing her madly. I shut my eyes to wipe away any image of her and held out my hand for the jacket. She handed it to me without a word and I left, nearly running from the room.

Moments later, slumped over the wheel of my car, I rested my head on the steering wheel and practiced breathing rhythmically. I had ceased being an officiant at mass, surrendering the duty, honor, and privilege of a priest as self-inflicted punishment for my inability to

control my thoughts about women. And now, to make matters worse, I was unable to control my actions.

But I could never remember being this attracted to anyone in my life. Had kissing Gladys Irons suddenly switched on my desire to kiss another woman? Or being kissed by Sylvia? *Why did I go without kissing a woman for decades, then suddenly kiss every woman in sight? I must be going mad. Maybe I need counseling...or confession...or a vacation. Something. I have to stay away from Vivienne. My God, what in hell will she write about Claridge now?*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My Wednesday class was attentive, as they always were when the air was filled with a smattering of sex. Even the most tardy had been on time today since the lecture was billed as the sexual angst of the saints. I found myself preoccupied with sex these days and was desperately trying to channel it appropriately.

“St. Augustine was wild about his concubine.” I lost my thought for a moment when the word “wild” came out of my mouth and Vivienne’s golden locks flashed before my eyes. Two young men murmuring in the back row brought me into the present. “He had a son by his concubine and would have lived with her happily, but her societal status didn’t make that possible. In addition, his mother wanted him to settle down and marry someone respectable and cease living in sin. Bereft, he left his concubine forever but could not stop his sexual cravings and ended up having relations with other women as he waited for his young bride to come of age. His writings speak of his self-loathing and put forth the idea that sex is a horrible, disruptive, bestial thing.”

“So St. Augustine was a sex maniac?” a boy in the back asked, tongue in cheek, simultaneous with his hand shooting into the air to be recognized.

“St. Augustine was an ordinary man.” More laughter. “He was an intelligent, tortured, sexual being whom we have dubbed ‘saint.’ Saints are people. You are the stuff of which saints are made.” Laughter ensued again but then quieted. I let the silence hang in the air. “In fact, I will take that a step further. If we are made by God, in the image of God, then we are pieces of God—all of us. A Yorkshire terrier is not as large and powerful as a bullmastiff, but he is still a dog.”

“Are you saying God is a dog?” A young girl’s voice leapt two octaves.

“No.” The same boy in the back laughed. “She’s saying bullmastiffs made Yorkshire terriers in their own image.” More laughter this time, to relieve tension, and I smiled at their joking.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have ventured into canine salvation. What I do know is that saints and sinners are the same people. And perhaps, in our most basic essence, God and mankind are one and the same.” A chapel bell sounded and chairs scraped the floor, books slid across desks, and students rumbled out of the classroom. All except for the young girl whose voice had soared above the room. She hung around waiting, apparently, for the other students to leave.

“Could I talk to you privately?” she asked, and the worried look on her face convinced me to invite her to my office as I struggled to remember her name.

“Angela, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

I remembered her now—the student who was pregnant and recently had her baby amid speculation about the father. Who he was and where he was. I unlocked my office and offered her a chair.

“You think differently than most of the other professors.”

“Don’t let that trouble you. I think differently than most people on the planet.”

She managed a light laugh. “I’m a Roman Catholic.”

“Well, as you know, I’m an Episcopalian, which is Catholic lite.” I tried to put her at ease.

“My baby is very ill—”

“I’m so sorry—”

“And in case she doesn’t make it, I want her to be baptized.”

“I understand. We’ll see that she’s baptized, and if you need help with her care—”

“I just need her baptized Catholic.”

“I’m certain Father O’Shane will do that for you. Have you spoken to him?”

“I’m not married to the baby’s father, so the baby can’t be baptized by a Catholic priest.” She broke down in tears. “My baby could go to purgatory because she’s—”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Angela, your baby will be baptized. Father O’Shane and I are friends. I’ll talk to him.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you.” Her anguish and joy intermingled—the oil and water of man’s religion adding to her burden rather than relieving it. She had already scurried out of the room before I could say more.



“You can’t mean that,” I said as I paced around Dennis’s cramped office, so covered in papers and folders and old lunch cartons that it troubled me to linger. Dennis sat silently, looking as if he were merely waiting for my drama to subside so his rational mind might get its point across.

“She’s not married,” he whispered. “She just told you that.”

“Who cares?”

“The church cares. Have you forgotten we serve a church? At least I do.”

“That was a sanctimonious remark. Interesting that ‘the church’ wants everyone married while on earth but doesn’t really give a damn in the afterlife, telling us there are no husbands and wives. Odd how schizophrenic we’ve made God out to be.” I paced and fumed as Dennis watched. “What’s wrong with you? Just do the damned baptism. Please.”

“What’s wrong with *you*? How do you get off bending and tweaking and taunting the religious beliefs we signed on to support?” Dennis rose, for the first time seeming to be in a huff, and exited. Unable to summon the courage to throw me out, he’d obviously chosen to leave.

Before I could go after him, my cell phone rang and Eleanor ordered me to appear before Hightower. This time I had no idea what I’d done, and I was too upset over Dennis’s betrayal to really care.

I strode across the open courtyard, the wind whipping around me and autumn leaves beginning to coast to the ground like golden ships coming into harbor. It seemed to “blow the stink off me,” as Eleonor would say, and I was winded, but less angry, by the time I arrived at Hightower’s office door.

“What now?” I asked Eleonor.

"I don't know, but you're lookin' so good you *got* to be up to somethin' and I wish you would share." She grinned as she buzzed his office to tell him I had arrived. I opened his door upon hearing that I was to enter.

For once, Hightower wasn't pacing but was planted firmly in the middle of the room, a big smile on his face. "Dr. Westbrooke, I just wanted to call you over personally and tell you 'great job.'" My look of dismay made him chuckle. "True, doesn't happen often."

"What have I done to warrant this praise?"

"Vivienne Wilde contacted me. Yes." He punctuated his surprise. "Called me on the phone. Said she wanted me to know what a fine representative of the school I had in you. We talked for fifteen minutes and I think her siege on our seminary has ended. I don't know what you said or did, but it worked."

"Thank you."

"Well, well done. Despite the headaches you often provide me, when you set your mind to it, you do this institution proud." He shook my hand and I gave him a warm smile before exiting, believing that when things are moving in the right direction, I should never overstay my welcome.

"How did it go?" Eleonor asked.

"Okay. Do you know a Catholic priest who's friendly to Claridge and might baptize an illegitimate child?"

"Are you pregnant?"

"No. But thanks for asking."

I stormed off toward the McGuire Building, where my office was tucked away at the end of a long corridor. As I approached, I saw something low to the ground propped up against the locked door. As I got closer, golden orange roses came into view. I stopped a few yards from them as if they were explosives. A young girl swept past me. "Pretty flowers, Dr. Westbrooke."

Robbie Renthrow, a young seminary student, was right behind her and, emboldened by her presence, added, "Ooh, long stems, serious stuff."

I gave him a smirk and quickly unlocked my office door, scooping up the flowers to get them out of sight. I set them on my desk and marveled at the intense hue of each perfect petal, a veritable

blaze of orange—the color of roses and sunsets...and wild longing. Uncharacteristically, I went back and clicked the dead bolt on my door, leaving me alone with the fragrant blossoms. It had been a long time since someone sent me flowers.

I tentatively reached for the card and opened it, then sighed when I saw the large *W* on the cover. Inside only one line. *Will you call me? Viv.* The diminutive was suddenly so intimate. *Viv.* I smiled at nothing or perhaps at everything. She wasn't one to say, "Had a great time, enjoyed the moment, loved being with you." No, she was on to the next moment. *There can't be a next moment*, my mind snapped nervously at me.

The phone rang, nearly startling me out of my shoes. I picked up immediately and tried to modulate my voice to one of academic professionalism. "Dr. Westbrooke."

"I'm so glad you're there. I was trying to compose just the right voice-mail message and couldn't quite come up with something that would be appropriate for anyone to hear and yet convey my desires," Vivienne said.

"The flowers are really beautiful. They're the color of your hair." I said the last part involuntarily. Even I could hear that my voice was dreamy.

"Not by accident."

I chuckled at how openly she owned her actions.

"The color chosen to remind you of what you so unceremoniously deserted. Have dinner with me and, this time, don't run away." I made a sound to protest and she quickly cut me off. "Lunch, then."

"Viv—" I could barely breathe but I was determined not to fall under her spell again, which meant staying away from her, at least in private settings.

"Coffee, ten o'clock at Cavendar's, the deli near your campus, outside table in the open air, in full view of the world. You'll be perfectly safe." She was mocking me, but somehow she had tapped into my core. I didn't feel safe around her. I felt I might, well, do damned near anything.

"Viv?" Silence. "I do appreciate the roses."

"Appreciate is good. But did your heart beat faster when you saw them? That's the effect I was striving for." My heart was beating faster

right now and I swooned back in my chair, weak all over. She told me good-bye in a sultry fashion, leaving the endorphins in my body to sort out what to do next.

A timid knock interrupted my mental confusion, and I scrambled to my feet and unlocked the dead bolt to find Angela in the doorway. “My mother called and my baby is worse.”

“I’m so sorry, what does the doctor say?”

She held her hand up as if to say she couldn’t talk about that now. “Please, I can’t sleep at night knowing she is not baptized. Have you talked to Father O’Shane?”

“Angela, your baby isn’t going to purgatory because you didn’t marry her father. God loves every baby—”

“I know you want me to feel better, but that isn’t the way—”

“Angela, God will not send your innocent baby to purgatory.”

“Don’t lie to me, when you know that’s not true. No one will help me.” She ran from my office as I called after her.

“Damn it.” I rang Dennis’s office and cell phone but he didn’t answer. In between counseling sessions and grading papers, I tried again. He finally answered, speaking his own name by way of greeting.

“Get me a Catholic priest to baptize Angela Hernandez’s baby.”

“Look, I’ve thought about it. *You* can baptize the baby,” he said, not unkindly.

“In case your rosary is missing a bead, I’m not Catholic.”

“I’ll book the campus chapel for you—”

“The baby is apparently very ill and may not wait for the campus chapel roster to open up, but might instead merely need a priest who gives a shit to baptize her.”

“You get the girl and her family or friends or whatever and we do the baptism right away.”

“We?”

“You. But I’ll stand nearby in my robes looking priestly.”

I let out a long sharp sigh of exasperation. “This doesn’t mean I’m agreeing to officiate at any mass beyond this one.”

“Does it always have to be about you?” He goaded me into smiling.

“Only because I know how you are. So for the record, my officiating is a one-time, emergency-conditions deal.” My flippancy was cover for

the embarrassment of admission that I would no longer allow myself that privilege. “No regalia. I’m only wearing a stole.”

“You can wear bouffant hair and pumps for all I care, darling.”

“Humf.” I hung up and began hunting Angela’s number in the student directory.

Moments later Dennis phoned back to tell me that tomorrow morning, both he and the chapel were available if Angela was—which meant I couldn’t meet Vivienne. I paused before telling Dennis the time would work for me. *God is intent on keeping me out of trouble when I’m too weak to do it for myself.* I picked up the phone and dialed Vivienne’s office number and left the message that Thursday would no longer work for me.

I then located Angela’s number and called, intending to tell her that I would be the celebrant for her baby’s baptism tomorrow, along with Father O’Shane, which was stretching it a bit since he was only planning to be present. She answered the phone crying and, when I delivered the good news, said only that it no longer mattered. She’d arrived home to find her baby worse and believed she was dying. Her sobs prevented any longer discussion.

“Where do you live?” I demanded, and she rattled off an address that I scribbled on a pad. “I’ll be right there.” I unlocked the closet next to my desk, snatched a stole from a hanger, and slammed the door shut again. Scooping up the Book of Common Prayer and my keys, I locked my office door and ran to my car. I backed out of the parking lot so fast I nearly creamed a red Toyota pulling out across from me and waved my apologies.

Moments later, as I sped down the freeway toward a blue-collar area of town populated by migrant workers, I wondered what had convinced a girl like Angela to choose a school like Claridge.

I pulled up in front of a small clapboard house in need of major repair in a neighborhood full of tan-skinned men in white T-shirts leaning over the hoods of parked cars that spilled off the curb and into their front yards. All eyes turned as I got out, and a stocky man whistled in my direction. I ignored him and placed the ecclesiastic stole around my shoulders and knocked on the door. A tall, middle-aged Hispanic matron with sorrowful eyes and a troubled brow opened the door and stared at me for a long moment.

"I'm Alexandra Westbrooke from Claridge Seminary. Angela asked me to come and see her baby."

She stepped back and I entered. The house was dark and moldy, and I found my way to the baby's bedroom on my own. Angela hung over the crib, her hand on the baby's damp brow.

I placed my hand on Angela's head in the same way she touched the baby's, and I told her I was sorry. Foolish words, but I couldn't come up with something more meaningful.

"I will miss her too much," she said to the baby, her English only slightly broken in comparison to her heart.

"Do you want me to baptize her?"

She stared at me for a long time, perhaps deciding what sway a tall woman priest, not of her faith, would have with her God, but then finally nodded.

"What's the child's name?" I opened the Book of Common Prayer to the baptismal prayers.

"Maria Estrella."

The baby was gasping and gurgling now. I decided this was an emergency baptism—one without frills. "Maria Estrella, I do hereby baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," I said as I sprinkled her small, hot forehead with holy water I had carried in a vial in my pocket.

Afterward, I led Angela and the woman who had greeted me in saying the Lord's Prayer. And then I ended the brief ceremony with, "Maria Estrella, you are now sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Amen."

"Amen," the two women said in unison.

"Thank you," the older woman said solemnly. "Even though you are a woman, it still counts with God?"

"Mama." Angela's voice was slightly reprimanding.

"The baptism? Yes, of course. *Especially* since I am a woman. Christ protected and cared for women."

She nodded, seeming to contemplate that remark. A young, muscular Hispanic man entered the room and glanced at the baby. He put his arm around Angela and I thought perhaps he was the father.

"My brother, Ortiz," Angela said.

I extended my hand. "What does the doctor say about the baby?"

"There is no doctor." His voice was harsh.

"He stopped when we could no longer pay," Angela said, without malice.

"Did you ask for assistance?" I inquired, stunned at the matter-of-fact way they accepted the child would die for lack of funds.

"We do not need help." Her brother's voice was final.

"I know you don't, but the baby—"

"The baby is one of us."

"Angela, let me call a doctor friend and at least see if she can help."

Angela's eyes darted to her brother. His look clearly said no.

"It's too late." Her voice was devoid of emotion, as if the fatigue of caring for and about this sick child, and dealing with the apparent machismo of her brother, had distanced her from reality.

I bowed my head and said a silent prayer different than the one that came from my lips. The prayer in my head was *Let this man get out of the way*. I said out loud, "Heavenly Father, we thank you for the life of this child, Maria Estrella, entrusted to the care of her uncle Ortiz and her dear mother, Angela. Help Ortiz and Angela love and nurture Maria Estrella that she may grow up and do all that is intended for her before reaching your eternal kingdom. Help Ortiz find in his generous heart the ability to save her, for the sake of your dear son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Ortiz had tears of frustration in his eyes as he whirled and left the room.

I reached for my cell phone in the pocket bearing the holy water, thinking both had their place, and called Madeleine Montgomery, a pediatrician I had known for years—our friendship born at the bedside of Madeleine's dying mother.

Angela bundled the baby girl up, and she and her mother got into my car. As I drove them to the hospital, the baby made distressing sounds that forced me to wonder if we would get her there alive or if I would merely be delivering her small dead body.

"Do you drive children to the hospital as part of your work?" Angela's mother asked, seeming to want to drown out the choking sounds we were incapable of treating.

"I do whatever is needed," I said, picking up speed and swerving in and out of traffic.

"Then you are a saint," she said in a matter-of-fact way.

“That I’m definitely not.”

“My grandmother always said the saint is the one who looks most like God. Tonight, for me, that is you.”

Tears gathered in my eyes and I prayed, *God, please save this little girl.*

We pulled under the massive hospital ER portico and rushed inside with the baby, who was whisked out of our arms and into those of a waiting nurse, the kind of treatment no one gets unless they have a friend at the factory.

Mother and child now having been handed off to someone who might help, I headed back to the parking lot alone and confused.

After all these years, I was still troubled by moral issues of faith, and today had been full of them—Dennis’s remaining on the sidelines choosing the tenets of his faith over the needs of a poor family to feel their baby was safely baptized, the baby’s family letting male pride stop them from getting help for their dying child, and me choosing to baptize the baby first rather than get her immediately to the hospital—soul-saving taking precedence over life-saving. I questioned my own belief system that put covenants over common sense, and that questioning made my heart heavy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I was walking across the commons early Thursday morning when Harold Hightower intercepted me. From the way he glanced left and right and tried lamely at small talk, I could tell this wasn't a casual conversation, but one he'd been waiting to have and had now found an opportune time. He inquired about my health since I'd fainted in his office and tried to blend in remarks about the stress of working for a seminary.

"Are you trying to get to something, Harold?" I invoked a familiar tone I rarely took with him unless I no longer cared about the consequences.

"Two things, actually. One, we are putting together succession plans for me—"

"Why?"

"It's time." His tone sounded as if someone other than he held the stopwatch. "I've contributed a great deal but I have other things I want to do. You were mentioned, on a very *long* list, I might add, as leadership material. If you care about that sort of thing, now would be the time to be particularly careful in your associations. The conference, for example—which I hear went well—"

"It did, if ancient sex turns you on."

"Speaking of which, spending the evening with a known... lesbian, even when traveling, doesn't go unnoticed." He'd lowered his voice and glanced furtively as he spoke.

"What?"

"There's been a flurry of activity around you of late and we've finally gotten it to die down, and I simply don't want—"

"Who told you this?"

"It doesn't matter who—"

"It matters to me."

"I will not tell you—"

"I demand to know who is say—"

"Gladys Irons mentioned it...out of concern."

Several thoughts collided in my head. First, how quickly Hightower gave up his stooge, and I made a mental note never to confide in him. Secondly, Gladys had spied on me, ascertaining I was dining with Lyra Monahan at the San Francisco conference. *Why would she do that?*

"Gladys, to her credit, did not want me to tell you or cause you any trouble. She is only interested in your well-being. She has really taken a shine to you."

And there it is, I thought. Gladys has taken a shine to me. My fault. I kissed her. But I kissed her in a mocking fashion. However, for someone who apparently never gets kissed, how would she know mocking?

"Look, Gladys Irons is unhinged right now."

"What's unhinged her?"

"Possibilities, Harold. I opened a door she didn't know existed. Now a draft is blowing through her stuffy old framework and giving her goose bumps."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"She has feelings for me, Harold."

"Gladys Irons?"

"Yes."

"Oh, good Lord." Harold Hightower buckled over in a belly laugh that was so completely out of character I laughed along with him. "Oh, dear God. Only you could turn this around—"

"Why else would she be spying on me? Why would she care? She had to follow us to the restaurant, and why would she?"

"You have been forewarned. And that goes for any...with Gladys." He laughed again, perhaps envisioning her black orthopedic oxfords under my bed.

I stormed back toward my office wondering how I'd blundered into this mess. Formerly my life was quiet. Then my neighbor, Sylvia, came out of nowhere and kissed me, a kiss that seemed to change the atmosphere, attracting other women. Sylvia begot Jude who begot Lyra who begot Gladys. And then there was Vivienne, whom I had really

kissed. Kissing seemed to be at the root of my current conundrum. Women were drawn to kissing more than men. A kiss meant more to a woman. And now one particular kiss had changed me forever, its memory enslaved my mind and body.

I needed to work off the frustrating, unsettling feelings that buzzed around me like irritating flies. Bury myself in all the papers I'd put off writing. Stay locked inside.

I hurried down the long corridor to my office where my heart stopped as abruptly as my footsteps. Red roses sitting on the floor in front of my door. I scooped them up, unlocked and opened the door, and put the flowers on my desk, extracting the card from the plastic prong, wanting to know immediately if they were from Vivienne. On the card in large scribbled handwriting was the word "Surprise."

The door clicked behind me and the dead bolt turned, just as I did. Roger Thurgood III, his back to my door, his smile one that clearly said he'd planned this.

"From you?" I asked calmly.

"You wished they were from her, didn't you?"

"Who are you speaking of?"

"You know who." And I wondered if he'd opened the card on the orange roses Viv had sent, as they sat in my doorway, and that's how he knew.

"Roger, I want you to leave my office." I moved toward the door. He clenched the doorknob.

"Get back." He glanced frantically toward my desk, spotted a pair of scissors lying there, and reached for them without taking his eyes off me. He pointed them at me. "Just cut"—he smiled at the word—"the crap."

"Would you like coffee?" I asked, as if he were merely demonstrating a role he was about to play onstage, but my heart beat faster and my mind was on fire assessing how to get him out.

"I want answers."

I moved casually to the coffee machine and punched the button, taking two cups from the cabinet above the credenza, intentionally turning my back to him. *Frightened, confused people can sense fear and it empowers them. I will not show Roger any fear.* "I'll try to answer any questions you have, but I don't like being threatened."

"A threat implies that I might do something if you don't do

something. This isn't a threat. This is a promise, Dr. Westbrooke. I promise you that you will not get away with your perversion at this seminary."

"Freedom of expression, Roger. Where does that fit into your thinking?"

"I want you to resign from this sacred school. I know you're on a list"—he hissed out the words—"of people who might one day be chancellor. Well, you won't."

"I agree with you. I won't. But not because you don't want me to. Because *I* don't want to."

He sagged back against the door frame and chortled derisively. "Because you *can't*. Because you won't be working here."

"So do you just march me in at scissor point and I resign?" I poured coffee and carried a cup over to the desk's edge nearest him and placed it on the corner. "Cream or sugar?"

As my hand released the coffee cup, he darted at my retreating palm and stabbed it with the sharp blades. I leapt back, crying out. Blood spurted from my wound.

"There," he said triumphantly. "In Christ's honor, I return a tiny bit of the pain He felt when taunted by his abusers. You are one of His abusers, Dr. Westbrooke, and that is going to stop."

Bleeding profusely, I prayed he hadn't damaged a ligament that would permanently harm my hand. I grabbed a wad of Kleenex off my desk and balled it up in my palm to stop the blood. Roger had accomplished his task—I was afraid of him.

"This is a very old battle." His facial expression reflected his having been mentally transported somewhere else. "We were enemies long ago." He had obviously lost connection with the present day and was fighting a war from ages past.

I glanced toward the windows. The shades were slanted in a way that allowed light inside but no one could see in. He blocked the locked door and was closer to the phone than I. How would I get out of here without having my throat sliced?

"Where were we enemies, Roger? I don't remember."

"We fought in the castle." He spoke like a man whose body had been taken over by someone else or whose mind had merely deserted the flesh and was speaking from some faraway place.

"What castle, Roger?" I said softly.

“Shut up. I am sick and tired of your questioning. I will tell you everything you need to know. I am going to save you, Dr. Westbrooke. Before I kill you, I am going to save you. Because I do not want your hellish soul on my conscience.”

“Would you allow someone to come and be a witness—”

“You think I’m stupid, don’t you? You don’t want a witness to being saved for Christ. You want someone to save you from me.” He laughed at my ruse. “I am going to pray for your soul. Close your eyes. Close them.”

I hesitated, then closed my eyes, the rest of my senses on alert for the sound of any movement toward me. Roger began praying with a vengeance—loudly, then louder, then nearly shouting as he said, “God, most High Master of our universe. Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord and Savior. I, your humble servant, do ask that you cleanse the soul of this defiler who stands before you...”

As Roger prayed, I prayed as well—a different, more fervent plea to God, asking to be spared. For a split second I envisioned the Most High receiving our simulcast prayers, orchestrated in contrapoint.

Roger’s voice loud and demanding, “Save this defiler.”

Mine a mental psalm of pleading, *Help me. Don’t let him kill me.*

“Cleanse her soul.”

You are my refuge and my stronghold,

“In the name of the blood of the lamb,”

my God in whom I put my trust.

“heal her wickedness.”

Deliver me from the snare of the hunter.

“I make a sacrifice unto you for the sacrifice you made for me.”

Cover me with your pinions and give me refuge under your wings.

“Amen.”

Amen.

And now it was over. Roger obviously felt he’d performed an obligation to pray over the sheep before slaughtering it. He stepped forward and put his hand to my throat. I grabbed that same hand in mine. The scissors at my jugular, I pushed back against the wrist that held them, and blood dripped from my wound onto the cuff of his shirt.

He bent his head slightly to examine the stain and frowned as if

he was suddenly wondering how to explain the blood to his mother. His momentarily inclined head revealed the bookshelf behind him and the photo taken of my father when he was a young boy and of my grandfather. The image of the gray-haired patriarch fluttered around in my head as I tried to understand why at this moment I would be thinking about my grandfather. *Maybe you think about your ancestors as you're about to die.*

"You're smart. You could have been God's great angel." Roger's focus changed suddenly and he seemed about to strike.

"You're smart and could be your grandfather's pride and joy." I let my breath out involuntarily and felt just the slightest twitch of his wrist loosening, as if shifting the scene to his family had thrown him off guard. "He's not going to like what you're doing." I prayed that his grandfather was someone he cared about and not someone he hated, or my demise was imminent.

"You're not worthy to talk about my grandfather."

"He cares for you. When you were unhappy about class, your grandfather called. He wanted you happy. When articles were printed about me in the paper, he called again and congratulated me and told me I had the courage of my convictions. Your grandfather and I are friends. He likes me. He will be very unhappy if you kill me."

His breathing was full on my face—in-and-out panting like an animal that had been running for its life and had suddenly stopped and didn't know which way to turn.

"That's not true." His voice revealed doubt beneath the denial.

"Call him. Or ask Chancellor Hightower. Or..."

His hands fell away from me, his body now limp. He stumbled backward, dazed. "You're not going to tell him."

"I need to have my hand attended to. May I do that?" I had already grasped the phone and dialed campus police. When the cheery security guard answered I said, "This is Dr. Westbrooke. Get someone to my office here on campus immediately. It's an emergency."

Roger slumped into a chair, the bloody scissors on the floor beside him. He looked exhausted, almost sleepy, and I stood very still, not wanting to stir him up again. After the longest five minutes I could ever remember, I heard footsteps approaching down the hall and I dashed to the door, flipped the dead bolt, and let a young officer in.

"Hey, Dr. Westbrooke, what—" He stared at Roger.

"This student attacked me. He needs to be taken into custody here on campus."

"You all right? You're bleeding."

"I'll head for the ER."

"Who are you, kid?"

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light," Roger said, surrounded by his own darkness.

"Roger Thurgood III," I said. "Call Hightower and let him know. And lock my office, please, when you leave."

I picked up the red roses and marched down the hall, dropped the entire vase of flowers into the trash outside the door, and walked slowly to my car. *The darkest moment sheds the greatest light*, I reminded myself. I needed to find light.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The ER was a purgatory of the battered, burned, and broken, the suffering punctuated by the sobs of frightened children. My friend Dr. Montgomery was out of the country, so I was getting no special treatment. Three hours into my wait for a curtained cubicle to become vacant, I was still one of dozens of patients slouched against walls adorned with sacrificial saints. My palm throbbed and my brain was numb.

I was depressed and saddened that Roger, tortured by his inability to change my beliefs, was willing to torture me physically for having them. *He is the new humanity—unable to express his pain with pen or paint, he inflicts it on others with bullets or blades.* A tired nurse shouted last names, and patients progressed from check-in to waiting room to curtained treatment area like worshippers making stations of the cross. Finally she shouted my name and I joined the procession.

The young ER doc said the puncture wasn't as deep as the blood made it appear, and it didn't cut any ligaments. He put in several stitches, gave me antibiotics and antiseptic swabs and some pain pills for later that night if I needed them, and told me I could make a baseball out of gauze and hold it in the center of my hand to ease the pain.

Dennis met me in the lobby as I was preparing to leave, worried that I was okay, asking what the hell happened and passing along Hightower's concern and condolences.

"I told you to be careful with him, he's nuts. We called his grandfather, who admitted the kid's on serious meds for depression and a bipolar personality and God knows what else. No one told the school and he's studying to be a minister, for God's sake. Let me see your hand." Dennis picked up my hand as one might a dog's paw.

"This means you'll never play the violin again," he teased.

"I couldn't before." I echoed the old joke.

"I'm going to drive you home."

"No, I have a car and a good driving arm. I just want to get some sleep. Don't cancel my classes. I'm fine."

Dennis was still protesting when I pulled out of the parking lot and waved to him with my bandaged hand. I had the top down on the convertible and let the evening wind blow in my hair. The pain in my hand couldn't compare to the pain in my heart. My world seemed to be falling apart. So I wasn't a warm, fuzzy priest who held your hand after mass and thanked you for coming. But I was a priest who brought something to the table. *But is it something anyone needs or wants, or does it merely confuse them to the point they want to alter me like a suit?*

The drive to the farm seemed to take only minutes, demonstrating how lost I was in my own thoughts. Ketch was pacing around in the living room wondering, no doubt, if he'd have to befriend a neighbor to ever see another morsel of food. I poured dry dog chow into a bowl and apologized for less-than-fancy fare. He ignored the doggie buffet, sniffed my hand, put his head on my knee, and followed me out to throw hay to the horses, which I told him was extremely kind, since I knew a good meal was the most important thing in his life.

I came back inside and opened the fridge to try to find something that wasn't too hard to fix one-handed and finally gave up and slumped into a chair.

Through the front window, headlights flashed up the driveway and a car slowly pulled in. A BMW slowed to a stop and someone in the driver's seat fumbled with items beside them, and then the car door opened. My heart jumped around like a Ping-Pong ball as Vivienne Wilde got out, carrying a white cardboard box with a fancy ribbon around it. Her pale, neatly pressed green slacks and a matching pale green V-neck sweater reminded me that she was beautiful and I must look like the ghost of Christmas past. A quick glance at the oxen-yoke mirror, which revealed my disheveled hair and day-old shirt, confirmed my fear. Too late, she was on the porch. I opened the door before she could knock.

"Dennis called and told me what happened. Are you all right?" She was almost whispering.

I wasted no time wondering how Dennis knew where to reach her. Instead, I thought only of how I wanted to kiss her. I stood there like an idiot saying nothing and trying to fight the feeling.

“May I come in?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I brought you something to eat. You may have already eaten but I didn’t know.”

“No, I couldn’t...I didn’t have...”

She set the box on a table and put her arms around me, her cheek to my shoulder, and suddenly I didn’t hurt anymore. Everything in me was healed. She embodied the bliss I had preached and envisioned but never lived. Her presence was uniquely heaven. She didn’t attempt to be anything but close. I don’t know how long we stood there in silence—a coming home, a physical acknowledgment of pieces long separate that had finally found where they belonged. The cracks between the breaks now glued together with heartbeats and warm breaths and sweet secrets as yet unshared.

She led me to the couch and pulled me into her like a long-lost love, and the warmth of our snuggled bodies created indescribable bliss—babies in the womb, puppies intertwined in a basket, lovers who have found their soul mate—a wondrous feeling that made me know without doubt that God loved the world to have given us the ability to experience this sensation and that God must care about me.

“Tell me everything,” she said softly, and I began with the events that led up to Roger’s threat to kill me and then, with her coaxing, moved into a hypnotic regression of my past, filling in the details of my life with my father and my days in seminary and of the woman I had known, as the televangelists would say, in the Biblical sense.

“I was enrolled in religious studies, planning to teach. She was a political activist. My father figured out that she was behind my interest in the protest marches. He forbade me to ever see her again.”

“What happened to her?” Something in her voice made me believe she already suspected.

“My father called her husband and then we all met on a street corner.” I smiled at the way the pain could still be summoned after all these years. “Such a cataclysmic event in my life and it took place on a street corner.”

“What did your lover say?”

"She told everyone that the relationship was one-sided and I had forced myself on her when she was drunk." It was the first time I'd said those words out loud, and tears gathered at the corner of my eye.

"And after that—"

"I called her a fucking liar. I called her husband a born-again-idiot who couldn't satisfy his wife on any level, and I called my father a peeping Tom whose pathetically boring life had led him to peer into mine like some sexual Nazi. And then I went home and fell into a deep depression and didn't answer my phone or go outside for weeks. I thought I would die."

"I'm sorry." Vivienne looked genuinely sad.

"But finally I became bored with my own self-pity and took a long walk by the bay, where I happened to sit down on a bench next to, of all things, an Episcopal priest. He wasn't wearing a collar so I didn't know. We started talking about life, and when I told him about my protesting and the betrayal of my partner, he said, 'Sometimes the only way to fight for what you believe is to dive into the belly of the beast. You might think about continuing your battle from inside the church. Isn't that where the enemy is?' His blue eyes sparkled and for the first time I laughed, telling him I couldn't become a priest in order to attack the church. He said, 'The church is big enough to take care of herself. She will either win you over or you will make her a better woman.'

"I felt amazingly happy after that—like I understood what to do. I never learned who he was but he changed my life. I stopped marching against the church and joined it," I said, almost laughing at myself. "My father was exceedingly proud when I entered seminary and forgave me for the past. Next to having an army chaplain in our military family, an Episcopal priest would certainly do."

"And that was the end of women?"

"For a while, but no matter how I tried, whenever I felt an attraction it was for a woman."

"And so you punish yourself by not performing mass. Dennis told me."

"I took the vows—"

"And you think all those other priests are pure as the proverbial snow. You can't allow for humanness?"

"I have to do what I think is right." I played nervously with the ring on my little finger. She gently lifted my hand to examine the gold

and ran her forefinger across the embossed figure of a woman, sword in hand elevated above her head in battle.

“Who gave you this?”

“I bought it—the famous fighting queen. She defended her kingdom against the infidels but then fell in love with their barbarous chief.”

“Life imitates art.” Vivienne chuckled and I blushed under her teasing. She changed the subject suddenly. “The newspaper article. I wanted to prick you for not standing up, in the way that I’d read you used to.”

“Why did that matter to you?”

“Maybe I knew I would end up on this couch with you.”

“And you wanted to kiss a radical?” I teased back, and my words caught her by surprise. “I do still believe the church holds people down as much as it lifts them up.”

“But you don’t say that to anyone anymore. Maybe that’s why you’re under attack by students, administration, even yourself.”

“And by you?”

“The universe has a strange way of bringing its children back into alignment.”

“Ah, so the universe is taking me in hand?”

“Well, certainly not a punitive, judgmental, parental God. I like to think the universe is akin to the wind, blowing you here and there, sometimes softly and sometimes with great force. I believe I am a change agent for you, Alex—an opportunity, if you will only accept it.”

She turned my face toward hers and kissed me. This time as if she thought I might break, dealing with me in quite a different way than she had the night she ordered me to take off my clothes. This time as if she’d decided to begin anew and consider me untouched other than by her own hand.

“You’ve got to stop that,” I whispered, but her desire became more urgent, her efforts deboning my body until I couldn’t have stood if I’d tried.

“You’re long overdue for love, Alex, and I’m going to make love to you until you can’t move.”

I struggled within to push her away and gulped air as if drowning.

“That’s what you’re offering—to be my change agent?”

“I would be good for you.”

I marveled at her confidence but was frightened by this woman who saw herself as more powerful than the church. “A practicing Episcopal priest cannot be a practicing homosexual. I won’t give up my life’s work simply to be an experiment.”

“You think I see you as an experiment?”

“Yes. Your life is full and will continue to be, with or without me. My life would change forever if I become your lover—no going back.”

“So I’m merely a temptation in the desert. You have me in your head, and in your heart, but you won’t allow yourself to physically have me?”

“Celibacy is part of—”

“Denying the very sexuality God gave you.”

“I know it makes no sense to you—”

“Do you think God punished you for being a homosexual by turning your lover against you?” Her words slammed into my heart like a poisonous arrow. I looked away. Somewhere deep in my soul, I did believe that. In fact there was a time I believed it might have been a good thing, the impetus that sent me into my life’s work. *How can misery be a good thing?*

When I didn’t answer she said, “So that’s that. Alexandra Westbrooke, misguided martyr. You even have the stigmata on your palm.” She got up slowly and walked to the door and down the steps and got into her car. I stood watching until the dust from her spinning wheels settled back onto the road surface, and I was melancholy. In the abstract, I believed exactly as she did, yet when it came to the flesh I turned into a religious robot, spouting platitudes about duty and tradition, and now my palm ached.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I rang Viv's home phone early Friday morning after a sleepless night, due in part to my palm and in part to my heart. I wanted to tell her that I needed to talk to her, I didn't want her leaving angry. We could still see each other, lunch, be friends. But a strange woman's voice answered—a sleepy, sexy someone that I had awakened. I realized Vivienne must not be alone.

I quickly hung up. “Well, that's just damned near *perfect*,” I shouted to Ketch, mimicking Vivienne's pronunciation of the word. Ketch stopped eating his breakfast long enough to assess my mental condition.

I showered and dressed and, just before leaving, turned on a local TV station to check the weather and there she was—Vivienne Wilde—obviously pretaped and looking absolutely designer perfect, talking about her book and her upcoming signing at a local Borders. I sat down on the couch and stared at her, loving the camera angles that went in close, capturing her intelligence and beauty. *Someone else is apparently enjoying that, and not me. And if she can land in bed with someone so quickly, then she's either betraying an existing lover or has a roster of them waiting in line for the privilege. Either way, I made the right choice in not sleeping with her.*

Depressed, I dressed and headed for an early morning meeting with Hightower and the board of directors.

As I charged down the corridor of the McGuire Building, I spotted an invitation-sized envelope stuck to my door with a pushpin. I approached it slowly, as if it might contain plastic explosives, and Robbie Renthrow, whose academic path seemed to collide with my

corridor, whipped by, books in hand, then paused to watch me open the flowery piece of stationery.

“Wow, flowers, cards.” He whistled and winked at me before sliding on down the hallway. I made a mental note to check his denomination—Unitarian, I was betting.

I unlocked the door and this time bolted it behind me before examining the note. It read, *Coming back to town this week and would love a private evening with you. Lyra.*

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I said to no one as I tore the note into small pieces and tossed it in my trash can, embarrassed over the female attention. It had to be the vibrations I was emitting. *The universe must know I’m lusting after a woman, and now it’s sending me dozens of them as if they’re simply a commodity.*

Using a small mirror in the bookcase, I checked to see that I looked decent, then opened my desk drawer and took out the large cross made of black onyx and silver that my mother had worn years ago. I put it around my neck, letting it hang between my breasts. It always appeared official and pious and matched my black outfit. Feeling religiously buttressed, I slung a military-cut black jacket over my shoulders and marched out the door to brief the board of directors.

When I arrived at Hightower’s door, Eleonor redirected me to the opposite end of the hall where the board was already in session.

“Just knock, honey, but not too loud. You don’t want to startle that flock of rare birds.” She laughed at her own joke and her humor relaxed me a bit. I seldom if ever saw the board, certainly never all seven members at once.

Taking a deep breath, I strode to the end of the marble corridor and knocked on the large mahogany door. A few seconds passed and then the door opened, as if by magic, into a huge room with two-inch-thick navy blue carpet and a long, polished maroon board table. Around the table sat four of the board members, those who could gather on quick notice, I imagined. Hightower thanked me for coming and introduced me to each man as if we’d never met.

William Pendergast was a paunch-bellied man in pin stripes and with a white head of hair that extended down his cheek and up over his lip and fell off the end of his chin in an unending exhibition of robust hair growth. He nodded at me.

Vance Shepherd was a tall, dark-haired rail of a man who had a nervous tic that jiggled his right shoulder up and down as he spoke, and that particular part of his anatomy activated as he greeted me.

Hightower was seated at the right hand of Claridge's own money messiah, Roger Thurgood Sr., a man of about my height, twenty years older than I, whose clothing, glasses, wristwatch, and fountain pen signaled he had so much money that he'd long ago begun to use cash instead of manners to connect with people, as he made no attempt to smile, greet me, or offer any of the other formalities. He was no doubt deciding how to get his grandson out of this mess.

I was asked to be seated and to communicate what had happened in my office with "young Roger," as they dubbed him, a sign that he was being cast as a youthful innocent.

After I breezed through a quick and literal account of the event, Roger Thurgood Sr. asked me how my hand was doing. I said it was an unpleasant remembrance of the stigmata, which drew a chuckle, while my mind drifted back to Vivienne and how, when she'd said those words, they weren't funny but painful.

The telling complete, I listened as Hightower explained that they were trying to decide what to do about Roger, and obviously what I wanted done factored into that. Was I intending to file charges? Did I want him dismissed from the school? Did I want him to receive counseling? Did I think this would negatively impact his completion of seminary?

The meeting seemed to center not on Roger, or school policy, or what the board felt was appropriate, but merely on how far I was willing to go on behalf of my stabbed palm.

"The issue here rests with the medical doctors. His medication was obviously off," Vance Shepherd said as I watched his shoulder tic away, making me think his was as well.

"My attorneys are looking into that. So, Dr. Westbrooke, let's cut to it," Thurgood snapped, using an unfortunate turn of phrase. "You are tenured so we can't hurry that process along. What else can we do for you—to ease your pain and settle this matter quickly, assuring that you will withdraw any further charges, commentary, et cetera?"

"What are your plans for Roger?" I asked.

"The same plans I have always had—that he become a minister."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said, and Hightower coughed into his hand to get my attention and let me know I was about to nuke our funding.

"Because of *one* medical incident?" Thurgood bit into his words.

"Because a congregation has a right to know if they're being led by Edward Scissorhands," I said dryly, reminding myself of the way I used to take on dissenters in San Francisco.

"You see yourself as quite the humorist, don't you?" Thurgood said.

"I see myself as the only person in this room who isn't trying to cover up Roger's egregious, unlawful, and harmful behavior." A fire was igniting inside me that hadn't been fanned in decades—a glow that seemed to roar up from my belly and into my chest and expand as I spoke.

"May I suggest," Pendergast boomed, causing his white mustache to flutter in the verbal wind, "that Reverend Westbrooke tell us what she does think is appropriate." And for a moment I thought I was being addressed by the White Rabbit.

"As leader of this seminary, Dr. Hightower should have been privy to Roger's entire medical file when he applied for admission. I assume he was not." I gave Hightower a look that questioned if he knew of Roger's condition and his eyes gave him away. *He did know and most likely admitted Roger in exchange for Thurgood Sr.'s financial support. And one day, far away from this boardroom, Roger Thurgood III may have a church, and what suffering will he cause women then, thanks to these deals made by men?*

"My opinion is that Roger should be given a psychiatric exam and counseling. And, most likely, he should not be graduated as a ministerial student or be ordained in any denomination," I said.

"And what does that leave him?" Pendergast gratuitously asked, since he knew full well Thurgood could call any seminary, make a donation, and ensure his grandson's graduating.

"A life he can choose to devote to good works outside of leading a church, or perhaps he would be suited to a military career in weaponry," I said, to jab them.

"Anything else?" Thurgood asked, his voice a veritable storm.

"Yes. I'm curious. We have a student who threatened to kill me, and you are fighting to keep him. We had a professor whose only crime

was that he loved another adult male, and you dismissed him. Did anyone here stand up for Emerson as you're standing up for Roger?"

All eyes turned to Thurgood, whose eyes were locked on me. Finally he addressed me in a firm, edgy voice.

"That's a board matter, Dr. Westbrooke, and doesn't concern you. Please go back to your classes and continue the work you're doing. We'll mop up."

Before exiting, I took one last look around the room at the stony faces and was struck by the irony that these religious men would hide any truth and dim any light to support Thurgood, who financially supported their seminary, which spiritually supported their God...who was known as the truth and the light.



Dennis was waiting for me downstairs, his black cassock flapping about him like the wings of a distressed bat.

"What happened?" he asked.

"How did you get Vivienne's phone number?"

"I found it on your caller ID. I knew she'd want to know you were in the ER."

"Sorry, I forgot I'm not speaking to you." I stormed off.

"She has it for you. She said leave it to her to be interested in a closeted cleric. Why aren't you speaking to me?" he said, addressing two topics at once.

"'Interested.' What does that mean?"

"Nope, you first. Why aren't you speaking to me?"

"God, you're maddening." I stopped to glower into his face. "I'm not speaking to you because you're a—a—traditionalist." I spat the word at him as if it were evil, attributing my own shortcomings to him. "You can't even baptize a baby, for God's sake, without checking to see if the pope approves."

"The baby is doing pretty well, by the way. I followed up with Angela."

"Big of you, following up and all. But for God's sake, don't try to help the baby get into heaven. Listen to me, get into heaven. Ha. Like it's a rock concert and we all need tickets."

"She's really got you wound up."

“A lot of things have me wound up. Including being stabbed by a fucking student.”

“Yes, that was bad,” Dennis muttered in an understated way.

“Bad? Here’s what’s bad. The board thinks I’m the problem.”

“I can see how the board would think that. I mean, put yourself in their place.”

“No, you put yourself in their place, which should be easy because you’re just like them.”

“What did Vivienne Wilde say to you?”

“She wants to have a relationship with me. She wants to sleep with me. She wants to have sex with me. How does that grab your ecclesiastical shorts?” I shouted in a stage whisper.

“That’s pretty much what she told me. I think you should do it.” His voice was quiet.

I stopped short and let that response register, then shook my head like a dog in the sprinkler. “Has everyone gone mad?”

“Stop being a priest for a minute and be a person.” I heard him plaintively in the background.

“That was my advice to you when you wouldn’t baptize the baby. It didn’t work for you either.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The stress of the board meeting left me exhausted. Stress created a time warp for me, where thousands of bad things seemed to have taken place in ten seconds.

In a daze, I trudged across campus on this Friday morning to continue my series on sexuality and the church. My class was SRO, being the closest thing to a theological sex-education course available. I stood at the front of the room eyeing the clergy-to-be and wondered how many would be happy at the business of religion and how many would merely be good at it.

“If we track sexuality throughout the ages, we find that in the pre-Christian era, the control of sex, or creating rules for sex, generally followed a pattern of land ownership. In pagan times a matrilineal society existed, women ruled,” I said, and the class shifted in their seats.

“Matrilineal inheritance of land was simple. You knew who should inherit the land by watching which children came out of the woman’s body. The men’s ‘work-around’ to this inheritance problem was to take ownership of the women, and their children, in order to take ownership of the land. And when women contested that tactic, one could say men recrafted religious law to keep women in line. The Bible was continually redacted to make sure men were in control.”

“Is that what dykes believe or what Christians believe?” The voice rang out from the back of the room, and I was stunned to see Roger Thurgood III standing in my classroom as if no one had ever bothered to mention to him that stabbing me was a bad idea. He looked less psychotic and simply more arrogant, self-assured, and I had to assume

that his grandfather's "mop-up" simply meant putting everything back in place and upping his medication.

"It's what many scholars, male or female, know to be true. It isn't a political statement but an historical one." I pressed on, not waiting for his commentary, but it was difficult to keep track of my lesson plan. I felt unsafe, threatened. My hand, though less bandaged, was still wrapped, a reminder of what had occurred.

"In 313 Emperor Constantine granted the Christians freedom to worship, and over time Roman law found its way into the church. Soon the Council of Nicaea said if you attacked Christianity, you were attacking the Roman Empire. The Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate, was specifically translated from the Hebrew and Greek for the Roman upper class. The Bible was the basis of Roman law during the European Middle Ages as much as it was spiritual law." I kept my eye on Roger, who seemed to settle down a bit on hearing the words "Bible" and "law" in the same comforting sentence.

"With each redacted translation of the Biblical text, new phrases and concepts were attributed to Christ. A second-century document translated in the fifth century by Rufinus of Aquileja was rewritten to assure that Christ handed St. Peter the keys to the kingdom and forever made Rome's popes Peter's legal successors." Roger was sitting forward in his seat glaring at me, but since he wasn't Catholic, I assumed he'd decided to let the pope and St. Peter fend for themselves.

"Later in history, homosexuality as 'sin against nature' became popular, and the reference cited was often the Pauline Epistle to the Romans, in which God purportedly gave up on pagans who dishonored their bodies with unnatural acts." Roger made a little hand-pump gesture and got a laugh from the students around him who, I suspected, loved having a human Molotov cocktail in their midst and the excitement of never knowing when it might explode. "But 'unnatural' has been found by translators to mean not just homosexual, but everything from anal intercourse in marriage to coitus interruptus." I was aware that the last statement would evoke unavoidable snickering in a room with so many raging hormones.

A serious older woman raised her hand. "But the Bible is filled with passages about homosexuality being an abomination."

"*The New Testament & Homosexuality* establishes context for homosexuality in ancient times, citing evidence that many Biblical

passages were directed at older men who took advantage of young boys under their tutelage and a societal belief that semen should not be wasted.”

Another female student raised a respectful hand. “But what about Sodom and Gomorrah?”

“Biblical purists often mention Sodom and Gomorrah as proof God hates homosexuals. To refresh your memory, Lot’s home was stormed by men who demanded sex with the males inside. Lot offered the invaders his two virgin daughters instead, but the men refused, wanting sex exclusively with the males. Their homosexual lust purportedly sealed the doom of Sodom and called down God’s punishment. Believers who refer to this passage neglect to reflect on the possibility that offering up one’s virgin daughters for gang rape might have hacked off a Universal God as well, perhaps making Him rethink downtown Sodom as one of His premier real-estate holdings.”

I checked the clock. “Any questions?” When no one spoke, I added, “You might note there are virtually no passages about lesbianism in the Bible, women being of such little consequence they weren’t worth the ink.”

“I have a question. How did you hurt your hand?” Roger’s voice made a stab at sincerity, but he was clearly taunting me in front of the class to let me know he was still in control.

“A student who didn’t share my beliefs felt the only way to shut me down was to kill me. But nothing shuts me down.” A boy on the front row laughed raucously, obviously thinking it a morbid joke. “Roger, please stay after class.”

The bells chimed, signaling a class change, and I moved toward Roger with deliberate efficiency. With my good hand I grabbed his arm and propelled him to the front of the room, away from the door as the last student trailed out. The surprise of my attack threw him off balance and enabled me to steer him up against the whiteboard with a force I didn’t know I possessed. I whipped a letter opener out of my waistband where I had stashed it in a moment of doubt about my safety, knowing no one on this campus was prepared to defend me. I poked the rather blunt instrument at the zipper of his pants, which psychologically paralyzed him, causing him to freeze.

“I welcome you in my class. You may ask as many questions as you wish. But don’t come here to taunt me. I am completely out of

patience with you. Your tactics and your arrogance are bringing out a very unreligious side in me, and I fear I could...snap!" I jabbed him with the letter opener and he yelped. "Do you understand what you're dealing with here?"

He nodded, looking at me wide-eyed as if he thought I was dangerous. *I am dangerous*, I thought. I let go of him slowly, and he waited until he was completely free of me, then turned and ran.

I was aware that perhaps I'd merely fanned his fanatical flame and that he might come back and try to shoot me, but at this point, I didn't care. I was so disillusioned about the school and its leadership and my relationship or lack thereof with Vivienne, nothing seemed to matter. *Dear God, am I losing my mind? Help me, please.*

But even as I was saying that prayer, my internal steam powered me across campus as I nearly ran to the parking lot and jumped into my car and headed for Vivienne's house. I hadn't felt this kind of angry energy surge through me since my college days. *Why bother with her? She obviously has someone and doesn't need you.* But I simply couldn't leave things where they were with us. *You just want to see her, own it*, my inner voice demanded. *Fine, I want to see her.*

The friendly front porch beckoned, and I bounded up the steps and banged on the door. It seemed like several minutes before the latch turned and Vivienne stood there in a long, tailored sleep shirt that hit her just above the knees and no pants, barefoot and her hair awry, no makeup, and she looked exquisite.

"I didn't know you'd be asleep at this hour."

"Not getting much sleep at night."

"I rang earlier and someone answered—"

"That was me. You hung up."

"That was you?" I felt myself brightening. "You sound like that in the morning?"

"I guess so."

"That's a nice sound." I realized my voice was unintentionally low.

"Why are you here?" she asked in a more businesslike fashion.

"May I come in?"

"I don't think so." Her words stung and surprised me. I began backing down the steps slowly. "To be candid, I've got a problem. I'm

caught up in you and you're...unable to reciprocate. Seeing you just makes it more difficult, so I don't want to do that anymore."

"Exactly. That's why I'm here."

"To sleep with me?" She laughed gently. "Because that's where we left off."

"No—"

"Then why are you here? What's your point?"

"Can't we *talk*?"

"Phone me sometime." She started to close the door, and I bounded back up the steps and used my foot to prevent her from closing it, then yelled at the pain of being a doorstep.

"Please wait, listen to me." I pulled my foot out and hopped around on the porch.

"Your cleric collar's so tight it's a choke chain. You can't tell your father who you are and who you love—or your employer, or your church, or your God. Consequently, you live in hiding, Alex. Hiding even from yourself because you don't know how it feels to walk freely through this world uninhibited and unconstrained. I *do* know. I've spent my entire life making sure I stay free. We're polar opposites, and I can't let you drag me down with you."

"Drag you down? What do you want from me? My body, is that what this is about? You just want me to take off my clothes?"

"I want you to take off your cloak. I want you to quit hiding. If anyone knows what's real and what's not, you do. Why would you let archaic principles, established by men two thousand years ago to control their own lives, ruin yours? Think about it, Alex. If God hates homosexuals, why in hell did he make so fucking many of them?"

She slammed the door in my face and I knew it was over.



I drove away from her house and phoned Dennis because I had no one else. "Would you go get drunk with me?" I asked.

"It would be my pleasure," he said as pleasantly as if I'd asked him to escort me to the opera.

An hour later we met in a small Irish pub not far from campus, and two hours later I was smashed.

Dennis waited until I was knee-walking drunk to ask about Vivienne.

“She wants to sleep with me,” I said.

“Yes, I think we covered that. Actually, she probably wants to make love with you.”

“Yes, I imagine.”

“And do you desire the same?”

“Can I have another drink?”

“Only if you answer the question.”

“Yes, like St. Augustine and his concubine, I’m obsessed with Vivienne Wilde. I would climb mountains for her, slay dragons, wage religious wars.”

“As I recall, one of the bishops in your mother church in England recently said it would have to close its doors if forced to manage without its gay clergy.”

“Yes, well, the U.S. church said they’d close their doors if they had to manage *with* them.”

“But a few openly gay clergy function in the U.S.—Newark and Albuquerque, as I recall.”

“Do you think I could ever come out as a gay priest while my father is alive?”

“Ahhh, so you are living your life in the name of *your* father, not *the* Father.”

“Do I get another drink or not?” I asked, and Dennis waved to the waiter, who brought me another.

“Let’s get back to the part about lust and love. I adore that part.”

“You’re a very weird priest.” I grinned at him.

“I didn’t become a priest until I was in my forties, so I know a bit about true love. And here’s what I know. If it appears, grab it.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I had true love for twenty years and then...he died of AIDS.”

His revelation literally sobered me.

“Dennis, I’m so sorry.” It hadn’t occurred to me that Dennis had ever had a true love or even that he was gay. I merely saw him as a Catholic priest. “So you joined the priesthood after that.”

“I like helping people. I believe the church makes a difference.

And hey, I like being around men, what can I say,” he joked. “And you seriously get in the way of that, being my best friend and all.”

“Why didn’t we have this talk before?”

“Because we were busy hiding.”

“That’s what Viv said. She said I’m hiding.”

“Smart girl. Maybe you should go find her?”

“I will.” I tried to stand up.

“But tomorrow, when you’re sober. Or the day after, when you’re not hungover and looking like hell.” He waved for the waiter again. “And now, for our next act, we’re going to put coffee in you for several hours so you can drive home, because I’m not schlepping you out to the farm tonight and then retrieving you in the morning. Friendship has its limits.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I awoke Saturday morning feeling as if a small grenade had gone off in my head and an incessant ringing was taking place in my ears. Ketch howled, letting me know it was in his ears too—someone was ringing the doorbell. I staggered to the front porch to greet the driver of a white van, who was bearing a vase of roses. I signed for them as he tipped his hat, then opened the card as he hopped back in the truck and drove away. The note read, *Thinking of you. Hope you are well.* My heart was filled with amazing joy. It wasn't over. She sent me flowers. I headed for the phone and read the note again on the way. *I've missed seeing you... Gladys.*

Gladys? Omigod, not Viv but Gladys. Oh, good Lord. I paced and fretted. *She reports to Hightower that I'm having lesbian liaisons and then sends me roses. Why in the world did I ever lay lips on that woman? I've stoked a fire that's giving hell a run for its money. What am I going to say to Gladys? Just a casual thanks for the roses. Or act like I never got them. No, she can check that. Maybe say I kept them for a day and then took them to the local nursing home. That might turn her off. I need to turn her off.*

"That phrase 'Love is in the air.' Well, it's true, Ketch. It's like a virus. Even Gladys has caught it."

I grabbed the phone and dialed Viv's number by heart. I got her answering machine and left her a message. "Viv, this is Alex. Don't punch Erase. Let me take you to dinner. I want to start over. Can we talk?"

I hung up and Ketch stared at me.

"Come on, ride with me. I need someone to talk to."

Suddenly it dawned on me that today was the book signing. My heart leapt. I could find her. Instead of heading for campus, I checked my watch and drove across town to Borders.

"You're going to have to wait in the car for a minute," I warned Ketch.

The parking lot was packed and people were walking in, some with *The Untruths* already purchased and under their arms, apparently wanting an autograph. Across the store, toward the back, a line formed and I headed in that direction. People were queued up in front of a small table with a stack of books on it, and Vivienne Wilde, looking smashingly beautiful, greeted them and asked each person her name and how she would like the title page inscribed. Then for a brief moment she wrote something in the book and looked up with a big smile, handed the book to them, and thanked them for coming.

I waited in line thirty minutes, watching her every move. She stayed focused on the individual directly in front of her as if that person were the only one in the world, and it appeared her fans felt that singular focus and loved it.

As the tall older woman ahead of me moved on, I appeared in front of Vivienne and she looked up, registering surprise as I reached over and picked up a book from the stack beside her.

"Would you autograph this for me?"

She paused, looked into my eyes for a split second, then opened the book to the title page and asked, "How would you like me to make it out?"

"To Alex."

She bent over the book and I watched her inscribe it, the beautiful fingers of her right hand moving slowly as she shielded the words from me with her left, then fanned the ink dry, and closed the book on me. "Thank you for coming." Her eyes went to the person behind me, and I was moved aside by a young girl with horn-rimmed glasses.

I paid the young clerk with the nose-piercings and reluctantly exited the store and headed for my car. Claspings the book like a Bible, I climbed into the front seat, sank back in the leather, next to Ketch, and opened the book to the page she'd just signed.

It said, *Alex, I love you. Viv.*

I read it again and again and again as if they were new words no one else had ever heard. So what if they were on every Valentine

ever sent, on the lips of every lover who ever loved. These words were meant for me only. My entire being changed and I could hear nothing but *Alex, I love you, Viv. Alex, I love you, Viv. Alex, I love you, Viv.* I couldn't stop smiling.

I drove Ketch to campus with the top down, energized and emboldened, and told him I'd come to a decision. I was going to lead an authentic life if it killed me and harelipped the pope. "I'm also going to make love with Vivienne Wilde," I said, and glanced over at Ketch. He looked at me for a second, then hung his head out of the car. "You can refuse to hear it, if you want to," I shouted above the wind, "but I'm going to be happy."



Monday I parked in the lot nearest Hightower's office, and Ketch and I jogged across campus to meet him. Eleonor reminded me, as I arrived slightly winded, that I didn't have an appointment.

"But since you look like both your hair and ass are on fire, I'll ask if he'll see you." She eyed me suspiciously. "What's going on with you?" She wagged the phone in the air as she held me captive, refusing to buzz Hightower. "Wearin' a sexy shirt—"

"I've had this shirt for—"

"Face all rosy—"

"Do you mind?" I pointed at the phone, reminding her of her mission.

"Somebody's busted into your aura, girl, and from the looks of it, your heart could be next." She changed her tone as Hightower came on the line. "Dr. Westbrooke needs a minute with you for something important." She hung up. "You better make up something important or he'll bust my butt for the rest of the day."

Moments later, I was standing in Hightower's office as Ketch ate part of a breakfast muffin at Eleonor's desk.

"To what do I owe this visit?" he said, glancing down at my palm, no doubt to ascertain if my wound was healing, and therefore his school.

"I haven't been honest with you," I said.

"Roger didn't stab you, did he?"

"What? No, of course he did. My moral dilemma is about—"

"That woman Gladys saw you with?"

"No, it's about—"

"Please don't tell me Gladys has hit on you." He smiled for the first time.

"She did send me roses."

"What?" His shock was humorous, then quickly switched to annoyance. "What are you rambling on about, Dr. Westbrooke?"

"I'm a lesbian. And I intend to live and teach and preach as one."

Hightower couldn't have whipped his neck back farther if a snake had darted into his face. "What are you saying?"

"Just that."

"Well." Hightower moved around the room like a caged animal intent on finding a way out. "Well, well, well."

I didn't move. My courage, so strong on my arrival, was waning. I began silently chanting *carbon under pressure becomes diamonds* and had no idea where that came from. I was quite certain a silent prayer would be more appropriate, but right now I felt intense pressure and needed a sparkling outcome.

"Do you want this in the school newspaper or just the church bulletin on Sunday?" His tone was acrid. "What do you expect me to do with this information?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing's changed. I am exactly who I was ten minutes ago when I was completely acceptable to this institution."

"Gay priests do not exist. Gay seminary leaders do not work at Claridge. If you are *out*, Dr. Westbrooke, then you are out."

"I'm out but Roger Thurgood III, a dangerously troubled young man, is in?"

"You'd best decide by week's end if this conversation ever took place. I am willing to pretend it did not. Good day."

"I don't need until week's end. This conversation has indeed taken place," I said and walked out.

"What happened?" Eleonor asked, her tone worried as Ketch fell in behind me.

"I just told Hightower I'm a lesbian."

"He didn't know that?" she asked as if he were the idiot.

"And that I'm going to live my life openly and be who I am."

"You go, girl."

"That's kind of what *he* said."



Later that afternoon, I rang Vivienne but she didn't call me back. However, Lyra Monahan left a message saying she was in town. And Gladys left a message asking me to lunch. I slumped in my office chair, the blinds drawn, and waited for Viv to call. After several hours I rang her again. Still no answer. This time I left no message. Apparently I had mistaken her loving me with her wanting to see me.

I opened my e-mail and saw the message with the chancellor's electronic seal on it. The short paragraph said the administration would not be renewing my contract, which was up next year and, further, if I created any more bad publicity for the school, I would be terminated. A written confirmation of same would be mailed to me. *That was quick, and he didn't even have the courage to do it in person*, I thought.

"The price of an authentic life," I told Ketch. "I may get to be authentic on a park bench."

A knock at the door and Angela was standing with a baby on her hip. For a moment, I couldn't believe it was the same child we'd taken to the hospital. Certainly not entirely healthy, at least she didn't appear to be in any imminent danger.

"Hello." She picked up the baby's small hand and waved it at me as if the baby were speaking. "Maria Estrella and I wanted to come by and say hi."

"Well, hello," I said. The little girl reached out for me and I glanced at her mother, who said to please take her. I lifted her into my arms and rocked her. She didn't seem at all distressed by a stranger holding her.

"She's so used to nurses and doctors. Nothing bothers her."

"She looks much better."

"She is better and she's come by to say thank you. That night was the worst night of my life, and you came and you saved her life. We will always remember that."

"God saved her life. I just drove the car."

"But you cared enough to come, you baptized her, you called a doctor, you got her to the hospital. You saved her life."

"Well, Maria Estrella must have important work to do in this

world since she elected to stay,” I said. I wondered what would have happened if Dennis had gone to see Maria. Would he have baptized her and left? Would he have talked to Ortiz and learned that the baby was only lacking medical care due to money? Would he have known a doctor he could immediately call? *Perhaps God saw to it that Dennis had refused to go and that I was there.* I hugged Angela as we said our good-byes and for a moment I felt at peace. Maybe my work had purpose. Maybe my life had purpose. I looked up at the ceiling as if God resided there. “You always do it to me. Just when I think it’s all for nothing, You send someone.”



That afternoon I located Dennis coming out of the gym on campus and reported that I couldn’t get Viv to call me back. “But she loves me,” I assured him and myself.

He cut his eyes at me. “But won’t talk to you? Anything else happen?”

“I’ve been fired.”

He stopped suddenly, looking aghast as I told him about going to Hightower’s office. He began pacing and fuming over Hightower’s behavior.

“He’s a hypocrite.” Oddly, Dennis seemed to be taking this far more seriously than I.

“It will all work out. I’ll find another job.” I gulped down the last third of a Diet Dr Pepper.

“It’s not that. You’re good for this school. So many people aren’t, but you are.” He panted like a Pomeranian.

“Now you’re getting me upset. You’ve never said anything remotely that nice to me. In fact, most of the time you’re telling me I should resign and move on to a more liberal school.”

“I was keeping you on your toes.”

“Thanks. Why are you panting?”

“I’ve been working out.”

“Isn’t that supposed to make you *not* pant?”

“Once my body-fat ratio changes, yes.”

“A lot more than your body-fat ratio will be changing now that Hightower’s retiring.”

"He doesn't want to retire." Dennis looked around like a hero in a spy novel. "You've got to fight for your job."

"I haven't got a leg to stand on. Nothing I could say would change anything."

"You can win this. Go back to his office and stand up to him and—"

"And what? Tell him I was mistaken...I'm not gay?"

"You came forward and told him something honestly from your heart, and he fired you."

"Well, it's over."

"Same damned thing he did to Emerson."

"How do you know?"

"I knew Emerson. He was a great teacher. It's not, look—" Dennis stopped so suddenly I had to jump aside to keep from running over him. "I want you to go to his office and simply say you refuse to be fired—" My laughing broke up his words. "Listen to me. Tell him..." Dennis started circling like a dog pressing down grass, then flopped to the ground and ran his hands through his hair and cracked his knuckles repeatedly.

"What is wrong with you, are you having some kind of spell?"

"Tell him you know about the panties," he blurted.

"I know about the panties?"

"Both times."

I stared at him.

"That's all I can say. Promise me you'll do it."

"You have to tell me—"

"Just do it...but don't mention my name." He suddenly bolted to his feet. "I only wish I could be there," he said over his shoulder and I watched him disappear down the walkway, leaving me to contemplate the absurdity of our conversation.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I made the appointment for the next afternoon. Hightower wasn't ecstatic about seeing me again so soon but agreed, perhaps hoping I was there to hand deliver my early resignation.

Eleonor asked how I was doing as I breezed past her, much as someone would ask how the funeral went.

"You got yourself all glued together, girl? If you don't, don't be goin' in there, 'cause Mr. High Power got himself a 'tude today."

"I'm fine."

"Matter of speculation," she muttered as I entered Hightower's office and closed the door behind me.

He didn't bother to get up from his desk but merely looked up.

"Well, I assume you got the e-mail. I wouldn't feel too badly about it. I'm comfortable characterizing it as a function of budget cuts, really. We're trimming everywhere and I will, of course, give you a letter of recommendation when the time comes. We have some time before then, so let's try to make the most of it."

"I've decided I refuse to be fired." I selected the words from my memory bank exactly as Dennis had put them there.

"Refuse? I'm afraid that's not an option, Dr. Westbrooke, as indeed you are...fired."

"I am asking you to reconsider."

"If this is the only reason you're here, then I will have to cut this meeting short as I have other important matters." He rose to sweep me out of his sight but I stood planted.

"I know about the panties." I could feel my own heart beating at

the nonsensical nature of that statement and wondered if he knew I was bluffing.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Both times.”

“Well, very interesting, my dear Dr. Westbrooke. Then your source most likely told you there were no photos, no forms, no evidence, nothing. Everything expunged.” He paced and stared out the window across the campus as if reliving some moment I knew nothing about. After what seemed like a very long time, he whirled on me and glared. “So I drove around at night in women’s lingerie. So what? Do you think that makes me a pervert? No, thousands of men do it. A victimless crime. No one harmed. All hype. Arrests contrived to put money in the city-hall coffers.” He tapped his fingers on the desktop. “You, of all people, should understand that. You were arrested for protesting. And what if you’d been wearing men’s boxers at the time? Would that make you a pervert? Maybe you like boxer shorts. Maybe they make you feel sexy or excited, or maybe they’re soft.”

I carefully controlled my facial expression as I felt my eyebrows rise at the visual he conjured up, and I struggled to keep from glancing down at his crotch. I was aware I should say something but couldn’t get a word in and was fearful it might be the wrong word. My silence seemed to aggravate him, a condemnation. “Get out. I will be in touch.”

I turned and walked away. *Good Lord, driving around in women’s underwear. Why? And what size were those panties?* I had so many questions—*Silk or merely cotton briefs? How did Dennis know? Does this make me a blackmailer?* I never told him I would tell anyone. I never bartered with him. I simply said I *knew* about the panties. *I can’t let myself off that easily. I used my knowledge as a weapon. So I am a blackmailer. That alone would be reason to convert to Catholicism—several Hail Marys and the slate wiped clean.*

“Well?” Dennis was waiting at the bottom of the staircase.

“He drove around town in women’s underwear? How did you know about that?

“I picked them up for him.”

“Oh, Dennis, that’s—”

“He said they were for his sister, who was a shut-in. Then Emerson let the cat out of the bag because he knew someone on the police force who was there when Hightower was arrested.”

“So maybe Emerson was fired for more than being gay.”

“Maybe. Did he reinstate you?” he asked, switching subjects.

“Why does he do it?” I was more interested in his panty obsession than my job.

“Why does humanity do any of what it does? He wasn’t killing anyone or exposing himself or robbing a bank or doing drugs. He was just driving around in the wrong kind of underwear.”

“Oh, good grief.” Out of the corner of my eye I caught Gladys Irons coming at me like a heat-seeking missile, her hurt ankle obviously well, and before I could make a diversionary turn, she was on me, clasp my arm. Dennis started to say something on my behalf, as I shot him a furtive plea for help, but then suddenly he just gave me up, perhaps too worn out by the strangeness of today’s events to be up for a Gladys encounter.

“Call you later,” he said, and fled.

Gladys was moist, either from the brisk run to catch me or from some internal turmoil I did not want to contemplate. She asked how I was and why she hadn’t seen me and if my hand had healed and finally whispered that she hoped I’d received the flowers. I said that I had and thanked her as one would thank a pizza delivery person or a toll taker. She tucked her arm through mine.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened to you and me,” she whispered conspiratorially and I swallowed hard, not wanting to know what was coming next. “I think when two people have true feelings—not evil, anti-Christ thoughts, but true feelings—and they agree to be bound by the same rules as other people, then their relationship is acceptable unto God.”

“So you believe actively homosexual people can go to heaven?”

“Gay people? No. But you and I aren’t gay, Alexandra, if that’s what you’re worried about.” She gave me a little squeeze that struck terror in my heart. “We just have a special feeling for each other. A private feeling no one else has to know about.”

Alarm bells went off in my head. Horrible images of Gladys in bed with me praying in between each fallow orgasm. I shuttered involuntarily and my fight or flight mechanism kicked in. I had to save myself.

“I’ve just told Hightower I’m *gay*. I’ve just been fired for being gay. In fact, I think Hightower has several people watching me to see

who I've been having gay relationships with so he can fire them...or perhaps have them killed." I said the last few words just to make sure she would let go of me.

"Oh, my heavens."

"And I intend to tell everyone I'm gay—including my students."

Gladys staggered back from me as if she'd suddenly learned I was a leper. "Oh, Alexandra, you can't be serious."

"Serious beyond serious. Out, Gladys. I'm out, and everyone around me will be outed with me."

Gladys, perhaps fearful she might breathe my same air, scurried away taking her dark, orthopedic soul from my sight.

I sagged to a stop and let the air out of my body in a silent depressive moan as I passed the bench where I'd first seen Vivienne Wilde the day she arrived on campus and was feeding the squirrels.

The empty bench felt like a hole in my heart. Never could I remember feeling so lonely. I rang her cell phone and this time she picked up.

"Hello," I nearly shouted. "I need to see you."

"I'm not—"

"I've outed myself to Hightower and he's fired me."

"He can't—"

"I don't care about that. Will you drive to my farm on Saturday or I'll come pick you up?"

While she seemed to contemplate the disadvantage of seeing me again, my brain danced around trying to come up with something else to convince her to say yes. "What time do you want me there?"

"Any time, all the time. Come for breakfast, stay for lunch, and be there for dinner, and we would have time to do whatever it is we want to do."

"I'll be there midmorning, then."

"Yes. That will be just...the best." I hung up before she could change her mind and did a little hand pump in the air. A squirrel stared at me and I laughed out loud.



It was Friday noon in the campus cafeteria and I hadn't stopped smiling in twenty-four hours and hadn't slept all night. Now that I'd

invited her to my farm, what should her visit be like? What should I wear? What should we eat? What should we do? Would she stay over? And what would we do if she stayed over?

"You've got to help me plan it, Dennis." I couldn't eat, so I stared at him while he munched his lunch and tried to keep it from falling on his black cassock.

"Just pick up some chicken breasts and vegetables and do a little stir-fry or something."

"She has a chef."

"She's not bringing him, is she?"

"No but—"

"I'm only kidding. You're a wreck."

I didn't deny it.

He put his pizza down and pushed the plate back and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin before reaching over and taking my hand. "Just be yourself. Wear what you always wear, say what you always say, do what you always do—"

"Last part, I think, is the problem. I don't always do this."

He frowned as if trying to get my gist and then grinned. "Oh, that. You're worried about the s—"

"Yes, that," I interjected to keep him from saying it out loud, then glanced around. "And you aren't going to be any good at giving me pointers on that—"

"And why not?" He looked miffed. "Anatomy aside, I think I know what you're up against."

"You don't, actually, since you've never been *up against* that particular anatomy."

"Not true. I was married when I was very young."

"What? Every time we talk about this you tell me something more startling. Next you'll be telling me that you once drove around town wearing women's underwear."

"Just the dress." He glanced down at his cassock and lowered his voice to a reassuring whisper. "It will all just happen."

"Well, if it doesn't happen she's never coming back, she told me so."

"That's pressure, for sure. Do you want it to happen?"

I tried to suppress a grin and made sounds as if to speak, but my voice squeaked and I ended up saying nothing. Dennis took over.

“I see no problem here, except with the food, which I think should be picked up in advance and heated. I’d love to stay here and play teenage girl with you, but I’ve got to go hear confession. As if this one hasn’t been enough.” He gave a little wave and left the lunchroom.

I glanced at the clock. In only twenty-one hours she would be standing in my living room. The very thought turned my body to Jello.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I tossed and turned all night, unable to regulate the rapid heart rate that had taken up residence in my chest. I flopped over on my right side and stared at the clock. It was two a.m.—twenty minutes later than the last time I checked.

I'm going to look like shit on the half-shell, I thought, exhausted but unable to sleep. I counted backward from a hundred, then asked myself what I was worried about. Frankly, that this is the beginning of the end for me. A non-practicing homosexual who's started practicing again is a church problem, particularly with someone like Vivienne, who isn't going to have a quiet, guarded relationship with anyone. So bringing her remotely near my life will mean changing my life drastically—perhaps never teaching in a seminary or even in a university. I'd have to teach someplace where they like for lesbians to announce themselves over the PA system. I don't care. I'll buy a PA system.

I flopped onto my left side, then onto my stomach, then rolled to the right side and onto my back, completing a 360 under the covers. *Will she be in these bed sheets tomorrow?* I needed to get up and wash them. I catapulted myself out of the sack and yanked the sheets off, dragging them across the floor as Ketch stared at me. As the washing machine innards rolled around brutalizing the bedding in the name of cleanliness, I curled up on the couch under a blanket and closed my eyes. Vivienne sitting next to me came into my consciousness. *Will we make love on this sofa?* I picked up a soft throw pillow and noticed a slight stain on it. I sniffed it.

“Ketch, you’ve been drooling on the pillows. What if she smelled that?” I jumped up and took the pillow to the laundry, then came back

and grabbed the blanket just to be safe and put it into the washer. I curled up on the sofa again and Ketch jumped up and lay beside me, and the last thing I remember was telling him to get down and to remind me to put all that stuff in the dryer.

Sunlight peeked through the curtains in what seemed like minutes later. Ketch yawned loudly, awakening me to the fact that I had a giant crick in my neck. Then it dawned on me that it was Saturday and she would be here midmorning. I leapt into action, staggering toward the shower, then remembered the dryer and went back to put the clothes in. I hardboiled an egg so I wouldn't dirty a skillet or the stove and pretty much wore myself out forgetting things and then going back for them.

Post-shower, I went to a lot of trouble to blow dry my hair so it looked, well, sexy. I put on a pair of khaki slacks and a sweatshirt that said Kiss a Seminarian, a clean, fairly new pair of tennis shoes, and makeup. I got fresh coffee ready and checked to make sure the sweet rolls I'd bought and left on the counter by the microwave were still fresh. That was brunch. I'd bought a variety of meats and cheeses for lunch and steaks for dinner, not certain how long she would stay, but hoping for the best.

Then I started pacing. Up and down the living room like a caged animal until Ketch, obviously thinking there must be something pleasurable to it, got up and joined me, and we both paced until he made me feel silly and I sat down. I was drained and it was still early.

The crunch of tires on gravel signaled her arrival and I jumped up, checked myself in the mirror one more time, and invited Ketch to walk with me to greet her. She smiled at me as she slowed and then parked, then swung the door open and slid out.

"This place is so beautiful in the morning light. Do you know how lucky you are?"

"Right now, I feel very lucky." I would have kissed her, but she didn't seem to need it or want it or even expect it, so I just stood there like a dummy.

"Will you walk me around before we go inside?"

"Sure. Do we need to get anything out of your car?"

"No. Just me."

"You're the most important thing." I didn't expect that she would arrive with a steamer trunk full of clothes and throw herself into my

arms, but I'd hoped for a little warmer greeting. *Maybe she has no intention of staying over.*

She picked stalks of fall growth as we strolled along the old stone path that led from the driveway south of the house and curved back toward the horse pasture, quizzing me about the flowers until I felt like the docent on a botanist's tour. When she saw the horses, her eyes lit up. "You didn't tell me."

"Well, you left somewhat unexpectedly, last time you were here."

She ignored my remark and petted the big black gelding.

"Fleetwood," I said of her newfound friend.

"Like Cadillac?"

"Like Mac."

She laughed. "Ah, a priest who likes Fleetwood Mac."

"Would you quit referring to me as 'a priest who'? I'm a person, that's all." As the big gray gelding muscled in, I introduced him as well. "This is Ghostie."

"As in?"

"Holy Ghost."

"Kind of hard to forget you're a priest."

"You're going to have to get over it or you won't accomplish your mission, which is to get my clothes off," I said, teasing her about her remark to me after we'd first kissed.

"I've given up on that. In fact, I don't think your clothes come off at all. For all I know, they're painted on."

I clamped my lips together, ducked my head, and moved forward, assuming this was the punishment I would have to endure for having hurt her ego. Dealing with my vacillation wasn't something a well-known author had to do, and the fact that she was drawn to do it must annoy her. Hormones were apparently all I had on my side when it came to her, and I was grateful even for that.

"Do you ride your horses?"

"On occasion. Fleetwood tolerates me. Ghostie would just as soon throw me and trounce me."

"Could we ride?"

"Now? Sure." I laughed at her spontaneity.

"Let's ride while the sun is exactly at this angle."

I led the way to the tiny enclosed shed where I kept two dusty

saddles for the horses, and their rather flea-bitten bridles. Seeing them now as I imagined she saw them, I was embarrassed that I hadn't cared for the tack better. Vivienne brushed away my apologies. I pointed to the smaller Western saddle that fit Ghostie and started to pick it up for her. She gathered up the bridle and hoisted the saddle down off the wooden pegs, telling me she could handle it. I insisted I should ride Ghostie.

"Does he buck?" she asked as we approached the two surprised animals, who hadn't seen saddles coming at them in over a year.

"No, he just kind of acts up."

"I do that myself on occasion," she said.

Ghostie stood like a perfect gentleman as she slid the nose and headgear on him and lifted the bit into his mouth. She patted him and talked to him while I hooked up Fleetwood. He looked almost about to smile when she put the blanket on, then slung the saddle up over his back, and I could barely get Fleetwood girthed up for watching Ghostie's incredible display of manners.

"You either have a way with horses or he's just delighted to make a fool of me."

She kissed his big cheek and he turned his head toward her, his eyes soft and sleepy. She walked him around a bit, retightened his girth, then climbed up. He let out a large sigh and stood by, waiting for her to tell him where to go. I laughed and shook my head as I climbed aboard Fleetwood.

We rode around the five-acre pasture, making tight circles and figure eights until I was sure Vivienne and Ghostie were doing okay together. Then I trotted Fleetwood and ultimately let him canter, while Ghostie trailed behind and Vivienne's laughter filled the air.

"I didn't tell him to do that," she complained.

"He's used to following Fleetwood. They're a team."

"Well, he'll have to follow me, I'm the leader today." She impressed me by turning him around and cantering him in the opposite direction. After fifteen minutes, we stopped beside one another, and for some reason this was the most beautiful moment I could remember having in...forever.

"I think we're wearing them out. Who taught you to ride?" I asked.

"I took lessons. Who taught you?"

“My mom, when I was very small.” I dismounted, patted Fleetwood on his big muzzle, and uncinched him, tossing the stirrup over the saddle horn and the girth over the seat, then walked the horses back up to the tack shed.

“And she died when?” Her question made me realize that in doing her research, she knew of my mother’s death.

“When I was about six. She had heart trouble from an early age. My dad raised me.” I helped her hang her saddle back on the rack, and then we walked the horses to the gate and let them in, removing their bridles and handing each one a cookie I carried in my pocket. We strolled back up to the tack shed, and I turned on a hose and we washed the bits, shook the water off, and hung them on a nail by the saddles. It was a rudimentary setup but it worked.

After that, we wiped our shoes on the scrubby door mat and went into the house through the back porch. Vivienne stopped short on entering and looked around.

“I love this place. It’s so homey.”

“Quite a few notches down from your home and no Japanese house boy, but I do love it. Otherwise, I’d never make the long drive each day.”

I went to the counter and punched the button on the coffee, noting the sweet rolls were looking a bit dry, so I opened the fridge and pulled out the tray of lunch meats and cheese, a large loaf of whole-grain bread, a cutting board to slice it on, and a knife. Vivienne reached around me into the side door of the fridge and got some mayo, pickles, and mustard, and the proximity of her body and her scent made me weak. I lost track of what I was doing and put the cheese and meat back in the fridge.

“We’re just going to have mayonnaise and bread?” Her expression communicated her amusement.

“No. What am I doing?”

“I don’t know. What *are* you doing?”

“I have no idea.” I laughed.

“Maybe you should relax.” She stood very close to me and placed her cool hand over my eyes, leaving it there for a moment. I sighed as she removed it.

I put my arms around her and my lips to hers, and she was warm and soft and so sensual I left my body entirely, floating around and into

her. When I finally broke the kiss, her eyes glistened and she looked at me and said softly, “You’re a wonderful kisser and that was an incredible kiss.”

“Well, I’ve been saving it for a decade.”

She kissed me again, only this time it was so richly erotic I leaned back against the counter to keep from fainting. She unbuttoned my shirt. As her fingers crossed over the edge and inside, my desire became embarrassingly transparent. She smiled up at me.

“Something on your mind?” Her eyes gleamed.

“My mind has completely left my body.”

“That’s wonderful news.” She kissed my chest just above my breast.

I took her by the hand to lead her to the sofa and she stopped me. “I thought we were having lunch.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You have to eat. Besides, you’re a woman who likes to move slowly, so let’s move slowly.” She held up a slice of something, ham maybe, putting it to my lips. I bit into it, not knowing or caring what it was and never taking my eyes off her. “Let’s go for a walk.” She grabbed me by the hand suddenly and pulled me out of the kitchen and down the back steps and out into the backyard.

“I feel like I’m dating an aerobics instructor.”

“Good, now at least we’re dating.” She walked past the shed and down a narrow path behind the horse pasture and into a small clearing that had been vacant for years. An acre perhaps someone owned and had moved away and forgotten. When I asked her how she knew about this place, she said she didn’t but merely followed the road.

I led her over to a spot up against a giant oak where I used to sit as a kid, eat my baloney sandwich, and stare up at the clouds. “Nothing to sit on.”

“How about the ground?” She pulled me down. “You came here when you were little because no one could see you and no one knew you were here.”

“I guess so.” I laughed. “Although my mother and my grandmother probably knew and just let me pretend I was alone.”

“It feels like you. What did you dream of?” She lay on her side, her head propped up on her elbow.

I lay facing her, propped up just as she was. “All the things kids dream about. Being grown up, being on my own...being in love.”

Vivienne put her lips on mine again, causing electrostatic waves to ripple through my body. She managed to move closer and never took her mouth from mine, and then suddenly she was on top of me as I lay on my back, her body heat melting me. Her hands ran through my hair, her mouth devoured mine, her hips pushed against me.

“We’ve got to take this to a more civilized location,” I whispered. She protested that she couldn’t, that she had liquefied.

“I’m not leaving the forest floor until I have you.” She fumbled with my belt buckle and I vaguely remember checking to see if anyone could see us, but we seemed to be alone. Her molten kisses produced seismic waves in my body, which undulated beneath her, not unlike the grassy commons experiencing the shift of the New Madrid fault. Vivienne Wilde was my own personal earthquake—shifting energy, permanently rearranging everything beneath my surface. She deftly unzipped my pants and slowly ran her fingers from my waist to the hairline above a spot that desperately sought her favor and, as she reached to enter, I rose to meet her, the wet collision mind shattering, mentally numbing, and emotionally electrifying. I shivered and she moaned, apparently pleased with her efforts.

“Please,” I whispered. “Inside—”

“I am—”

“The house. Inside the house. Come on.” I used every effort to roll her off me and regain my senses enough to pull us both off the ground. She giggled over my struggles with my falling pants, and after I secured them, I wrapped my arm around her waist and hauled her along with me.

We were staggering up the back steps laughing when I heard the crunch of tires on the driveway for the second time that day and was shocked into attention. I opened the back screen door, crossed the living room and peeked out the front window, and saw what could only be my father’s old black Lincoln Town Car with the tiny American flag tied to the antenna cruising into the driveway. I stiffened and said something incomprehensible as my mind churned.

“Who is it?” Vivienne whispered.

“My father.”

"You're kidding, of course."

"No, he rarely comes out here." He opened the heavy car door and slowly climbed out, then stopped and assessed the house front as if wondering if he was in the right place.

His heavy lace-up shoes slowly clomped up the steps and I used the time to pull myself together, checking my hair and looking for lipstick smears. *My eyes look way too dreamy*, I thought. I got to the door at the same time he did and opened it.

"Father, what are you doing out here this time of day?"

"Visiting my daughter, if she'll invite me in off the porch."

"Come in." I stepped back.

"Oh, I see you have company. You're covered in leaves. It must be windy out here."

"Father, this is Vivienne Wilde."

"Vivienne Wilde. Where do I know that name?" He took her hand and looked directly into her eyes.

"Hello, Mr. Westbrooke." It was as if he recognized her and she him, but of course I knew that wasn't possible.

"Please call me Archie." Vivienne said nothing, but merely nodded. He smiled in the overly ingratiating way men do when they haven't decided yet if a woman is eligible, or their type, or might in some manner make their life better. He sized her up so openly that I was almost embarrassed. Perhaps I did carry a disproportionate amount of his genetic material.

He suddenly announced that he thought he might stay awhile, and I was certain it was due to Vivienne, which infuriated me—ruining my time with her and now actually behaving as if he might like to spend time with her himself.

"Vivienne and I are actually working on...some business together—"

"I see. And I'm interrupting. What business are you two working on?"

"We're working on...a study...that, well, it has some implications for—" I stammered.

"Actually, we're just enjoying spending time together," Vivienne interjected.

"Hmm." He paused and I glanced at Vivienne, who gave me a

riveting look. “Good to have friends. Do you watch *Dancing with the Stars*? My favorite show. Such grace. Do you dance?”

“I know how to dance, yes,” Vivienne replied, her voice emotionless.

“Perhaps Alexandra will turn on some music and you and I could dance. Do that, will you, Alexandra?” Arriving only minutes ago and meeting a total stranger and suddenly asking her to dance apparently didn’t strike him as odd, and I wondered if he did these kinds of things intentionally or was a victim of his own dementia.

“I don’t have any music—”

“Of course you do. Just turn on the radio, dear.” He pointed to the bookshelf.

Robotically, I reached for the button. Father held out his arms as if to lead her in a waltz. My blood pressure rose, I was paralyzed. Vivienne’s eyes caught mine, hurt and disappointment evident in them.

“I’m afraid I’m not much in a dancing mood. Perhaps you and your daughter could continue your dance after I’m gone.” She literally ran out the door and down the steps as I chased her.

“Wait.”

“No, I won’t wait on you ever again. How dare you throw me to your father.”

“It wasn’t my intent—”

“It was unforgiveable.” She jumped in the car, backed out of the driveway, and drove away, fleeing from my mindless obedience to my father. She and I two magnets in a force field pulled farther and farther apart until no attraction is possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Did I say something wrong?" my father asked as I walked back up the steps. Something in his tone was faux innocent. "I know that name...Wilde."

"She's a writer and a public speaker." My tone was flat but civil as my heart pounded and my gut turned.

"The woman who attacked the school—that's her. What on earth was she doing here?"

"Seeing me." The defiance was just barely surfacing.

"What do you mean 'seeing'?" His tone was accusatory.

"As in—spending time with me."

"Oh, good God, not that again. I thought we got through that years ago—"

"Don't discuss this, Father. It's not your affair."

"And it's not going to be your affair either. You're a susceptible person because you have a difficult profession—"

"Please, don't do this again, stay out of my—"

"This woman could ruin your chances of advancement—"

"I don't want to hear it."

"But you *will* hear it."

"I won't and if you're going to—"

"You're a priest."

"I *know* what I am."

"Then act like one."

"Don't tell me how to act, for God's sake."

"Don't you think I could tell what was going on here? The air was full of it. Don't you think I know what that woman wanted with you?"

"I'm asking you to leave now." I had clamped my jaw shut and spoke through clenched teeth.

"I will not leave until we settle this."

"We are not settling anything about my personal life. Either you leave or I will."

"The floors of hell are lined with the heads of gay priests. Take care that you don't join them." His words slammed into my chest like a lead volley, killing any feelings I had left for him.

"You can only know about the floors of hell, Father, if you've been there."

Like giant scissors slicing through a ribbon, my words signaled a groundbreaking for both of us. My father, unable to bear it, executed an about-face and left—his heavy shoes hurriedly stumbling down the stairs. As I turned to go back inside, I felt as if a great dark hand had clutched my chest and stopped my breathing.

Then I heard the crash. I turned to discover he'd collapsed and fallen the remaining four feet to the ground. I rushed to his side and saw blood coming from his head where he'd hit it on the porch rail. As I took his pulse he struggled to pull his hand away and place it on his chest. *Heart attack*, I thought. *Good Lord, help us*.

I ran back inside and retrieved my cell phone and rang 911. We were a good twenty minutes from anyone who might help. The operator took the information far too slowly and assured me an ambulance had been deployed. I told her he was too heavy for me to lift, and she insisted they didn't want me to move him, but instructed me on having him cough deeply. Then she asked me to check his breathing and monitor his pulse and watch his color. If he started to go into shock or his heart stopped, they would instruct me over the phone about my next move. I asked him every few moments if he was okay and if I could make him more comfortable, all the while knowing I was the source of his discomfort.

Relief flooded over me as the ambulance pulled into the driveway, lights flashing, and paramedics jumped out and took over. Vital signs checked, oxygen hooked up, an IV started, they stabilized him before loading him into the back of the white truck.

I grabbed car keys and my wallet and locked the house in time to see the ambulance lumber off and pick up speed. Then I rang Madeleine Montgomery, the doctor who had saved Angela's baby. She answered

my call and assured me she'd page the hospital and find out who was on duty in cardiac and give them a heads-up that we were on the way. That was the extent of what I could do, other than pray, and I did the latter as I followed the white van bearing my father into the emergency entrance of the hospital and put my car in ER parking.

As they prepared to wheel him away for assessment I kissed him good-bye on the forehead and he clutched my hand, his speech slurred. "Don't kill me again." For a moment he didn't look like my father at all, but like an ancient ruler of some distant land reaching across time to connect with me. *Does he mean don't break his heart by getting involved with Vivienne, or don't let the hospital staff harm him, or does he really believe I killed him in a former lifetime?*

"It's not uncommon for them to be disoriented," the kindly nurse said as I stood at check-in filling in the details of his life—birth date, social security number, widowed or divorced, religious preference, insurance coverage. The list was endless. The woman behind the counter assured me that once they had his information in their system it would be easy, the next time, to get checked in—reminding me that, best case, my father could have an endless number of next times.

She pointed down a long corridor and instructed me to wait outside ICU. I took the elevator to the eleventh floor where the waiting room was empty and the temperature was as cold as if it had been set to cool fifty people at noon and now had only me to chill. I tried to read a magazine, then roamed and paced, staying close to intercept the doctor.

About an hour later, a tall, thin man in green surgical scrubs, with an overly haggard face for fortysomething, appeared and said, "Ms. Westbrooke? I'm Dr. Achison, the attending on your father's case. We don't know much. His heart rhythm is unstable and his blood pressure is elevated. He's not bleeding internally or showing signs of thrombosis—long way of saying we have him fairly stable at the moment but we don't know what's going on yet. So we're going to keep him in ICU."

I thanked him and told him I'd stay until the next round of tests came back. Energy drained from me as if someone had unplugged me from a generator. I was hungry but too nauseous to eat, tired but too wired to sleep, wanting Vivienne but too afraid to call. *I have totally, totally, totally screwed any chance with her.* The sadness of that realization

was unbearable, and I walked down one endless corridor and into the next, witnessing people in various stages of grief and fatigue. A man in gray sweatpants seated in a metal folding chair, slumped over, his head in his hands. A thin woman pacing and checking the clock, streaks in her makeup the result of dried rivulets of tears. *Prayers rising, in a cacophonous conversation with God.*

The sign above the door ahead of me denoted the chapel, and almost involuntarily I went inside. A small room, with all the requisite iconography, thick pale blue carpet, and a large cross elevated above an altar at the end of the room.

I knelt at the altar rail and prayed. *Dear God, what do you want from me? How miserable must I be to serve you? I have caused the woman I care so much about to hate me. I have caused my father such pain that he's now in grave danger. Please care for him, give him strength and heal him. And heal me, Lord. I am so confused. Heal me. Amen.*

I knelt there in the stillness with nothing left to say to God. *If God knows everything, then my conversation is redundant.* I rose from the altar rail and moved back into a third-row pew and stared ahead at the dais, waiting for an answer. A young woman wearing the black-and-white habit of a nun entered the chapel from a side door and sat down beside me. “Are you all right?” I nodded that I was. “Is there anything troubling you that we might pray about?”

I looked into the innocent face and something in me rebelled. What could she know of life, of temptation, of pain, of any damned thing—spewing out her pious-by-rote phrases? She had no idea I was a priest. She most likely would not approve if she did.

“Yes, actually, there is a question troubling me. What do you think God thinks of homosexuals?” I asked archly, almost to season her unfairly.

“God and His church love the sinner but hate the sin,” she said softly and kindly.

“Isn’t that the most sanctimonious, holier-than-thou pile of crap we could possibly say to our parishioners? Think about it. Do we really freaking know what God loves, since His presumed Word was translated into six different languages before we ever got it and there was no Office Depot to get ourselves a handy tape recorder to be sure we got it

right? I am personally going to stop passing out those platitudes to my parishioners or students or whoever in hell they are...”

She had already slid away from me on the pew and scampered out, leaving me muttering to myself about who I would and wouldn't proselytize. Having run out of rants, I stared at the stained-glass mosaic behind the wooden cross, letting the cranberry shards of glass reflect light that scattered like blood.

Another form replaced the first on the seat next to me, and I glanced over to see an immaculate white habit covering a tiny, somewhat withered body, the silver hair, gnarled hands, and dancing blue eyes the only visible sign of life peering out of the pressed and starched robes, an onyx cross hanging around her neck. She introduced herself in a charming accent as visiting from London where she'd served as a mother superior in the convent of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

“The young sister thought you might want to speak with someone else.”

I said nothing, afraid my emotions would tumble out in a torrent of tears and screams. She said nothing more but simply knelt and prayed. Something about her presence felt familiar and calmed me. After a minute or so I sighed out loud as she crossed herself, then sat back in the pew.

“You're sure there's nothing I can do to help you?” She paused, never taking her attention from the stained-glass Christ figure.

“What do we do if everything we've built our lives on is a lie? What if God doesn't know, or want to know, or care if we're Christian or Buddhist, much less if we're Episcopalian or Baptist? What if God doesn't care whether we're straight or gay? What if He's not even a He? What if Christ died for no reason other than man's insanity, and God is a derivation of the sun god Ra and—what do you do then? What do you do if heaven and hell are nowhere but inside you?”

“If you'd asked that as a child, what would your mother have said to you?”

I laughed for the first time. “You think I've so trashed the Father that you're completely relying on my mother?” I paused and listened for the sound of my mother's voice. Suddenly it came back to me so clearly. “All I can remember hearing her say was ‘Be happy, my darling.’ She said that all the time to me.”

“She sounds like a wonderful woman.” She was silent for a time. “You can be against religion, but don’t be against God.”

“I’m not against God, but I *am* thinking, after all these years, I might just be against *organized* religion.”

“Well, then you definitely need to become a Catholic. We’re not all that organized.” Her blue eyes twinkled, and for a second I thought she might not be of this world but perhaps an angel, someone sent from another dimension to help me.

“I was just wondering, Mother, if we know the truth, are we obligated to share it—to help people break free of the oppression of the church and embrace the love of God?”

“I would say we are obligated to be true to ourselves, to tell ourselves the truth. Only then do we have any truth to share with others.”

She patted my leg, giving me a little grin, and slid out of the pew and disappeared. I felt momentarily lighter, relieved, relaxed as if a burden had been lifted.

My mood broke as I realized I needed to get back to ICU. I said a prayer of thanks to God, then left the chapel, rounding the corner just in time to see Dr. Achison head my way. He said my father was resting. They were leaning toward high blood pressure and anxiety as a diagnosis and would be adjusting his medication, and I could visit him.

A darker side of me wondered if my father had intentionally brought this on himself. The more elevated side of me forced the darkness back and was merely grateful he was alive. I pushed the drape aside on ICU Unit 4 and found him lying under blankets with tubes down his nose and needles in his arm.

“Father,” I whispered. “You’re going to be okay. They’ll keep you here overnight and then put you in a room in the morning.” He grunted a reply. “I have to go back and feed the animals. But I’ll return in a few hours.”

This time he merely looked asleep so I patted his arm and left.

By the time I got out to the hospital parking lot, the sun was coming up and I phoned Dennis and headed for the farm, telling him of my father’s accident. He wanted the full download but I was too beat and despondent to oblige, promising to fill him in later.

I got home, quickly fed the horses, and got a few hours’ sleep.

Upon awakening, I prepared to drive back to the hospital to maintain my vigil. I didn't think my father really cared if I sat in a waiting room and checked on him or followed him to a room and watched him. It was simply something women in the Midwest did—we went to the hospital to guard the sick. I was doing that, I supposed, out of tradition and duty.

Just as I'd ruined my relationship with Vivienne out of the ingrained duty to obey my father. *When he told me to turn on the radio so he could dance with her, why in the world did I actually start to do it? Have I never progressed beyond age thirteen? What in hell is wrong with me? Why am I still worried what my father thinks about me or my work or my sex life?*

And then as if in response to my questioning the void, intense feelings overwhelmed me as if I were five years old again—isolation, loneliness, fear, the sense that I'd been ostracized and could never get back into the warming gaze of my father. Punishment was banishment that felt like it went on for eons. As an only child, I had no one to balance those feelings for me. My mother wasn't there to offer another perspective. The safety and comfort of my world rested with whether or not my father was happy with me.

The clarity with which I mapped that out surprised me in its simplicity. For someone of my education, it seemed incomprehensible that I hadn't figured this out before—that I had patterned my life on pleasing my father. The groundwork laid by ancient theologians regarding male superiority and deference to the gender had certainly prevailed, wedging itself into my DNA. My father's desires trumped mine even today.

Ketch nudged me as if to say my frozen stance, as I stared at the kitchen sink, was boring even to a dog. I dumped dog food in a bowl for him, then fell back into bed with my clothes on, intending to rest for a few minutes, realization seeming to have sapped all my energy. I chose not to focus on the corollary—if I'd lived to please my father, then I had never lived to please myself.

I slept for a couple of hours, then Ketch's whines woke me. His internal clock was often more reliable than my battery-powered one.

"We're not going to campus. It's Sunday," I muttered, then reached for the phone and rang ICU. A nurse said my father was doing better and would most likely be kept there the remainder of the day, moved

perhaps tomorrow morning. She said he was medicated and sleeping. I hung up and fell asleep again.

The next time I awoke it was noon and something strange had come over me. Perhaps it was just awaking at such an odd time, maybe it was the newfound thrill of having touched Vivienne's body—being intimate with someone after so many years of being intimate with no one. I finally cared deeply about someone again. *Actually it's more than that, isn't it? It's lust and it feels fabulous. St. Augustine was wrong to paint it as something ugly. Perhaps there's beauty in the fact that it can't be controlled.* I smiled at that thought.

Ketch whined again, this time at a tapping sound on the door, and I staggered first to the front of the house and then to the back to find Sylvia looking furtive, this time without brownies.

"You're never home at this hour. I just wanted to make sure you're all right?" She looked worried in the way women use worry when it opens doors for them. Worry was her excuse to come and visit me, and even I was smart enough to figure that out. Of course, in true Midwestern fashion, I pretended to be grateful over her insincere worry, because that's what mannerly people did.

"Thank you, I am. My father was hospitalized last night. He fell while visiting me—"

"I'm so sorry."

"He's going to be fine, I think."

"What about you?"

"I'm fine."

"You look like hell." She grinned rakishly, as if looking like hell might be a good thing.

"Thank you."

"Have you eaten?" She pushed her way past me into the house. "You look like you could use a nice soaking bath. You go do that and when you get out, I'll have your breakfast ready."

"No, really—"

"Yes, really. I would like to. I do it for my husband all the time. It's one of the skills I possess."

I listened to her tone and examined her expression to see if this was a trap, but she looked completely neighborly.

"Okay." I surrendered. "Let me show you where the eggs—"

"We keep ours in the fridge—silly city people that we are."

I smiled at her lightly mocking me and was grateful to have someone take over. I locked the bathroom door behind me, not taking a chance on her walking in.

Thirty minutes later, I was a new person. Hot water had pummeled my lower back, then a brisk towel-drying restored blood flow, and clean hair seemed to make my brain work better. I put on a pair of slacks, a white shirt, and a burnt orange crewneck sweater, wearing Vivienne's colors like a knight into battle. *Losing my mind*, I thought jovially. When I popped my head through the sweater, Sylvia was standing there.

"I'm stunned you own something that isn't black. You have a nice build." She teased me. "Eggs, bacon, toast...ready for you, madam."

"Thank you." I slipped past her to avoid being cornered in my closet.

"And you smell good."

I thanked her somewhat shyly. The food was delicious, probably because someone other than me had cooked it, which seemed to be the way with food. Sylvia watched me eat and smiled when I looked up at her. "This is great."

"I had an ulterior motive, you might have guessed, but you looked like you'd slept under a bridge, and I do have my standards."

My face grew hot. "Good, my shabby appearance has saved my soul." As the words came out they embarrassed me, and she reddened. "I'd like to rephrase that. Any soul would be blessed to have you care about it. Mine, it just so happens, is recently...taken."

"Really? The woman who was here—?"

"Yes."

"Very attractive."

"How could you tell?"

"Binoculars," she said seriously, and I broke into laughter. "Well. You look better. And now that I've done my good deed for the week, I'm going back home to get ready to go to dinner with my husband this evening."

I thanked her again before she left, only slightly less coquettish than when she'd arrived. As her pretty form receded from view across the pasture, I whistled to Ketch and gave him the last bite of toast.

"Have you noticed how many really gorgeous women God created?"

Ketch dropped to my feet and ignored me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Monday morning I rang Vivienne and got no answer. I was certain she had caller ID and was screening my call, so I grabbed my car keys and headed for town, pulling into a shopping area with a pay phone and dialing her number. It worked—she answered.

“Don’t hang up.” I realized most of my conversations with her began with those words. “You can’t give up on me now. You’re someone I never let myself dream I could have. Something I never knew existed. And you’ve admitted you love me, I have it in writing.”

“Loving you and being able to be with you are two different things, Alex.”

“Please, Viv.” But she had already hung up. My head clanged back against the wall next to the phone booth, and the person beside me stared at me.

I jumped back into the car and drove at high speed to her house, pulling into the driveway so fast and stopping so abruptly that my tires squealed, startling even me at the adolescence of my behavior.

I bounded up the porch steps and banged on her door. I could see her inside but she wouldn’t open it. I pounded on it louder and shouted for her to let me in. What the neighbors might think of a grown woman beating down another woman’s door must have crossed Viv’s mind, because she stepped out on the porch to silence me.

“I’m done, Alex.”

“You can’t be done, we haven’t even started.”

“And we never will. Between your Father in heaven and your father from hell—”

“We got into a fight after you left and he collapsed on the front steps. I thought he’d had a heart attack and I rushed him to the ER.”

She stopped her tirade. “I’m sorry. But I don’t see that his physical condition has any bearing on our issue. If anything, it just gives you more guilt to go with the inexhaustible load you already carry.”

“Is that all you think about me? A guilt-ridden person—”

“I think very highly of you, obviously. And I don’t want to continue this discussion and ruin that.”

“One disagreement would ruin that? If people are passionate about something, about each other, shouldn’t they fight it out? What do you want from me? Just tell me and I’ll—”

“I want nothing from you except for you to go away and leave me alone.”

“Oh, that’s so damned contained. You want nothing from me? I thought you wanted my love, my body, my soul in a relationship?”

“Not anymore.”

“Just like that? What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with *me*? You’re the one with the complexes. Let me tell you something, Alex. You’re eaten up with it. Whenever religious people have a book, they beat you to death with it—only you’ve done them all one better. You’re beating *yourself* to death with it. Well, you won’t beat me with it. My God is fucking smarter than to hate people for who they love. And I like my God better than yours.”

I reached under the collar of my shirt and pulled out the black onyx cross, yanked it from my neck, and threw it onto the ground. “Is this what you want? To know that I’ll give up *anything* for you?”

“Very dramatic and frankly beneath you.” She turned to go. “And by the way, if He died for your sins, you no longer have any. That must make you completely insane—nothing to be guilty over.” She slammed the door in my face.

I got in my car and just sat, staring up at her house, wondering if she was staring back at me from behind the blinds. This would be my last trip to her door, that much I knew.

I drove to the hospital to see my father. He had been moved to a room and was complaining that he needed his own pajamas, a toothbrush, shaving cream and razor, and a dozen other items from his house. I told him I’d go get them, wishing with all my might I hadn’t been an only child and had someone else to share these errands with.

We didn't discuss the fight that had landed him in the hospital. In fact, his tone was dispassionate and distant.

"What's the temperature outside?"

"About fifty today. Sunny."

"Hmm." He mused as if he thought he might be going outside for a stroll. "Are the Bears playing?"

"It's Monday. They played yesterday." I picked up the remote and scanned through the channels since the set didn't have a program guide. I finally found a replay of a ball game—not the Bears, but he seemed satisfied. I told him I would check in with him tomorrow. As I kissed his forehead he remarked, "Do me a favor, Alexandra. Say a mass for me, for my health."

"I'm not a celebrant at mass anymore, Father. You know that."

"Do it for me." His tone was flat, as if asking me to pick up bread at the store.

A dozen things popped into my head, among them that he was requesting this to torture me, to see if he could still command me as he had when I turned on the radio and turned off Vivienne. But I said only, "Sleep well and call if you need me."

I fumed all the way to the car. *It's as if he knows how it hurts my heart, all of it, and he just keeps pounding away at an old wound. He knows I haven't celebrated mass in years, and now he thinks he's killed my relationship again and so mass should return. How paranoid can I be? Of course he doesn't think that. The poor man is just asking for healing.*

I drove to my father's house and used the key I kept on my key chain for emergencies. It was a brick colonial two-story with each room clearly defined. Dining took place only in the dining room, people were entertained in the parlor, and breakfast was served in the breakfast nook. No wonder my mother had always loved her family farmhouse with its ramshackle rooms.

I retrieved all the requested items as quickly as possible from his house, which was disturbingly immaculate—military tidy with a housekeeper to boot. It didn't feel like anyone lived there. I looked around and for a moment tried to remember what it had looked like when I was little and my mother was alive. All I could see through the haze of time were lace doilies and cookie dough on the counter. And I could hear the radio playing the Andrews Sisters and my beautiful

mother singing like an angel when just the two of us were together, and shutting down, silent and guarded, when his critical eye fell on us. I could almost see her soft, fair face lit by the golden sunlight coming through the kitchen window, and a tear trickled down my cheek.

She must not have been very happy, I thought for perhaps the first time in my life. I'd never stopped to let the image of her overtake my activities. Never stopped to ask what her life was like. All I remembered were fragments of suppression and fear and duty and tradition. And then she was gone.

I shook my head to loosen the grip those thoughts had on my brain, closed the door, and locked it behind me—locking away all those memories that I could do nothing about now. Like dust trapped in a corner of the closet no one can reach, better to leave it than move all the luggage.

I stashed my father's items in the backseat of my car for a later delivery and drove straight to school to pick up my mail and check my phone messages and prepare for the next day's lecture. The mere act of striding across campus among the familiar buildings brought me comfort, and I breathed in and felt better. Sally, my effervescent student, spotted me and fell briefly in stride with me.

"I'm Sally Jackson from your Sexuality and the Church class."

"I know who you are, Sally."

"How's your dad? Father O'Shane put him on the campus prayer list."

"He's doing better, thank you."

"I was in your class when Roger Thurgood asked you if that's what dykes thought. Remember that?"

"How could I forget," I said flatly, and kept walking.

"I didn't like the way he talked to you. And I, uh...just wanted you to know that I really think you're...cool," she said quickly, and peeled off to her next class before I zeroed in too closely on her reddening cheeks.

"Thank you, Sally," I said to her departing back and climbed the short stack of steps up to the McGuire Building and headed to my office. I unlocked the door and cracked the blinds open so I could see the courtyard, then scooped up the mail. A letter from the chancellor's office was on top, which I opened immediately. It seemed the e-mail of my termination had been inadvertently sent because of a clerical error.

Hightower was apologetic and wanted me to know that no decision had been made either for or against my tenure with the school, but I would be notified in due time. *And now I too have a job based on serving in silence.*

I glanced up to see Dennis standing in the archway. “How you doing?” he asked wearily.

“I think I’m better off than you. What’s up?”

“They got him...Hightower.”

“What do you mean?”

“He got drunk and told someone he thought he could trust and it’s all out. The board stepped in and removed him an hour ago, rather than letting him retire gracefully at the end of the year.”

I tried to think of something profound to say but couldn’t. Cultural mores were what each country was built on. There might be a planet where a man could drive around wearing women’s underwear and it was fine, even expected and revered, but it wasn’t this planet.

“I’m sorry,” I said, seeing how hard Dennis was taking it.

“It’s just another nail in our collective coffin. It will hit the papers, ruin him further, and drag down seminaries and religion and God.”

“Religion demands a perfection mankind can never live up to. Like a beach ball held too long under water, our humanness pops up in astounding ways.”

“Your dad going to be okay?” He seemed to think there was nothing more to be said about Hightower’s fate.

“I think so.”

“Did you get together with Vivienne Wilde?”

“That’s over.”

“That’s what *she* said.”

“You’re talking to her? She won’t talk to me but she talks to you? Are you friends?”

“I’m a priest. People talk to priests.”

“I’m a priest.”

“No, you’re a beach ball.” He grinned at me and chuckled as I wadded up a piece of paper and threw it at him, hitting him in the chest as he tried to duck.

“What did she say?” I pressed him.

“She spoke to me in confidence.”

“Dennis.”

"I'm serious."

"Forget it. I don't care anyway." I went back to the papers on my desk.

"Ignoring her won't make the feelings go away."

"When I think of her, I can't think of anything else, and I *must* think of other things or I will simply go mad."

In the serious tone he used when giving priestly advice, Dennis said, "You're at Frost's fork in the road in the yellow wood. The roads diverge...and you can't take them both."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I ripped open a letter as I walked across campus Wednesday morning. It was another thank-you and update from Angela about baby Maria Estrella and how well she was doing. Written in Angela's careful cursive style, the last two sentences said, *Rev. Westbrooke, I have prayed God to do something very special for you since you did something special for me and my baby. Not that God would listen to me above you, but then I did not think you would ask for yourself.* I smiled at the simplicity of the thought and tucked the card away.

I climbed into the front seat of the car, and Ketch hopped in beside me. I'd bathed him last Saturday, and even though it was only midweek he was starting to emit that doggie smell.

"Let's get ourselves a really good cup of coffee and maybe a donut before class, whataya say?" Ketch licked his lips, no doubt already envisioning sugary bread bites coming his way.

We headed down a side street near the campus and past the shops bustling with a pre-lunch crowd. Suddenly Ketch began to whine. I ignored him, but the whining grew louder.

"I thought I saw you go before we got in the car. There's no place around here." I slowed to look for a tree. He barked twice. "Okay, okay. Hold it. I'll park." I whipped into an open space and he was over the top of the car and out of it before I could shout his name. I hurried after him and suddenly there she was, her golden hair with the orange glow blowing in the wind and Ketch with his paws up on her accepting a large hug. She looked over the top of his big furry body and made eye contact with me and my heart stopped.

Thank God my dog is smarter than I am. He'd spotted her at Cavendar's, the little deli near campus, the place we'd agreed to meet and then never had.

Ketch licked her face and she pulled back and laughed.

"How have you been?" I asked.

"Busy. How's your dad?"

"Okay. I'm completely unable to focus on anything because all I can think about is you. Viv, I have to see you."

"Here I am."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

"I want you to take your clothes off," I said flatly, and grinned at her, reminding her of her first contact with me. "We're two consenting adults, right?" She actually blushed and ducked her head, suppressing a chuckle. I moved closer to her. "I want to make love to you. And in my current state I would do it right here on the sidewalk."

"That sounds very interesting, Reverend. But when the lovemaking is over there's still your punitive church, God, and genetic father to contend with, and I'm not—"

"Wrong. I've put that aside. You are all I—"

"In a moment of lust. But later, we would both live with all those ghosts—holy and otherwise."

"What can I possibly do to convince you I've changed, or am willing to change, or in the process of changing?" I spun on one heel and did a complete 360 like an angsty teenager.

"That's a good question. I don't know," she said softly. "I guess it's a matter of trust. I don't trust that you can change at this point."

"Implying I'm an old dog? What can I do? Name it."

"I don't know," she repeated, and seemed to really be thinking about that idea, and I noticed the fellow wiping down the bar area watching us with a smirk.

"While you're thinking, could Ketch and I have coffee with you?"

She paused and I held my breath. "Okay, sure. Coffee would be fine."

I leapt ahead of her like some knight in shining armor and personally placed her order with the bartender, who gave me a wink, and I realized he was gay.

We sat down on the patio and her hand trailed across Ketch's fur and he fell at her feet. Her eyes trailed across my soul in the same way and I too fell. "You want me, I can see it," I breathed.

The silence was filled with traffic sounds and the buzz of conversations around us and several pigeons fluttering past, their wings whipping the air.

"Yes, I do want you in a very primal way. But you're dangerous. I realized that night with your father that you have the power to hurt me, which shows I care too much about you. I would have to want you in my soul, not just in my bed. And I guard my soul."

"Ironical that I, a woman in the business of saving souls, have found someone who guards hers from me."

My remarks seemed to make her more withdrawn and shy. "It would take some time for me to trust you."

"Come back to my farm with me. Take all the time you need."

"I just told you—"

"For dinner, that's all. I give you my word I won't touch you. If you want something more from me, you'll have to let me know. We'll start over. If anyone pulls up in the driveway while you're there, I'll simply kill them."

"Maybe—"

"Tomorrow night. Please." I gave her a teenage grin. "My place, six p.m....or earlier."

"And what do I bring?"

"You. Just you." I sighed.

She didn't answer but downed the last of her coffee and patted Ketch before giving me a long, hard look, no doubt assessing me for signs of change, then walked off. I watched her until she drove away.



I headed back to campus ebullient and praising my tracker dog, Ketch. "I owe you everything. You found her. I got to talk to her because of you. Good job, great job." Ketch didn't respond to my pats and hugs and thank yous, seemingly bored with my personal love life.

The day had never seemed so bright, so happy, so full of possibilities. I parked and leapt over the car door, along with Ketch, not even bothering to open it as Robbie, the Unitarian kid, walked by.

“Little spring in your step there, Rev, you must be high on life. Love will do that to you,” he said knowingly.

“And I assume you’re cognizant of that because you have a lady in your life?”

“I’m trying to, but she won’t go out with me.”

I was feeling happy enough that I was willing to take five minutes with a teenage boy and hear his woes.

“Why not? You’re smart and handsome and personable.”

“Thanks, but she ignores me.” As we walked together across campus he poured out his heart—telling me how beautiful she was, how he got paralyzed and tongue-tied whenever he saw her—and I could definitely relate. “Got any suggestions on how to approach her?”

“I think honesty and sincerity are the two things women like, and a sense of humor. Just say, Mary, I really—”

“Sally. Her name’s Sally.”

Suddenly the image of my student came into my head. “Sally Jackson? Blond?”

“Yeah, with curly hair and great build. So what do you think?”

Images of Sally intercepting me on campus flashed before me. I carefully phrased my reply. “I think a girl would be crazy not to go out with you, Robbie. Give it another try, and if it doesn’t work out, there are plenty of other fish in the sea.”

Suddenly Robbie spotted her up ahead and gave me a quick thanks as he ran to greet her. She stopped to talk to him but was looking over his left shoulder at me, and I felt she wanted to bolt and catch up with me. I headed in the opposite direction, pretending I hadn’t seen her. Robbie needed his shot at winning over his first draft pick, although somehow I felt Sally had already chosen her team.



I hurried to class on fire about life in general in a way I hadn’t been in ages. I literally beamed at my students as they came through the doorway, and I could see most of them were uncertain what my ebullience meant. Even Roger Thurgood, seated in the back row, didn’t concern me. I had tomorrow night with Viv to look forward to, and nothing could ruin my day.

As the class took their seats, I explained that this was their lucky day because I was going to be lecturing on the cultural differences in sexuality and they would not be required to take notes—only listen and think.

I held up a copy of *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* by Boswell as one of my references for the lecture and directed them to a reproduction of seventh-century art in which third-century Christian soldiers Saint Sergius and Saint Bacchus appear to be joined by Christ in holy matrimony. “They fought together, died together, and went to heaven together—or so the artwork tells us,” I said.

The boys in the class made eye contact with each other and smirked, but I pressed on. “That’s hard to believe, isn’t it? Particularly in light of our own military stance about gays—they compromise security, they weaken morale, don’t ask, don’t tell. And yet, there were warrior societies more ferocious due to their homosexual liaisons. Centuries earlier Plutarch said that the most warlike men—Boeotians, Spartans, Cretans—were commonly homosexual and often the biggest heroes. We have copies of marriage ceremonies between men—saints, warriors. A man could form a marriage with another man by officially declaring him a brother.”

Roger Thurgood was twisting like soap on a rope, knotting up and unwinding and most likely trying not to shout something.

“By 1150 A.D. or thereabouts,” I continued, “Dante’s writing placed homosexuals or sodomites at the top of the purgatory ladder and certainly at the beachhead of hell. The topic was hot again. Same-sex couples were falling out of favor. What happened? How did same-sex love become taboo?”

“The church stepped in.” A young man held up his hand as he spoke.

“In some instances, and in others the church performed the unions and even printed the ceremonies in their religious texts,” I replied. “So what happened?”

“People came to their senses and recognized it was wrong,” an older woman stated.

“Some people took that stance, and others didn’t care. What happened?” I reiterated, and moved through the room looking into their eyes as each student struggled to come up with an answer. “Time,”

I shouted. "Time is what happened. Remember, these warriors were fighting in the third century and Dante wrote in the twelfth century. Over centuries right becomes wrong and vice versa. In one century it's illicit to show your ankle. In another it's okay to wear a G-string on the beach. In one century you can have a hundred wives and in another only one. Which means right and wrong are subjective, cultural, and ever changing."

"The Bible is the source of right and wrong now and forever more." The thundering words came from Roger Thurgood III, who had contained himself as long as was possible.

"As Christians, we believe that. Muslims believe something else. Jews believe something else. Hindus believe something else. That makes many of us uncomfortable. Certainty is what we all seek."

"Would you hire a homosexual to teach your children?" Thurgood asked in a non sequitur he'd obviously been harboring for several minutes.

"I wouldn't hire anyone merely because of their sexual preference. I would hire them because of their skills, their integrity, and their trustworthiness." The room took on a hum as if the wiring were shorting out and if I touched the desk I might be electrocuted.

"Would you hire a homosexual teacher because you are one...of the sympathizers?"

"My former answer covers that, I think." I nodded my thanks as the bell rang and shouted over the hubbub that class would resume next week. They dispersed except for Sally, who hung back and waited for me.

"This class is too cool," she said.

"Thank you."

"You mind if I ask if you're seeing anyone. You know, dating?" she asked shyly.

"Sorry, you've exceeded your question quota." I smiled and exited, striding toward my office and counting how many more sessions were in this semester and what that might mean in the way of innuendo from Sally and harassment from Roger. *I should have stuck him through with the damned letter opener*, I thought.

I swung the door open to my office and Dennis fell in behind me, asking if I wanted to have lunch. I flipped on the lights and saw the giant scrawled words on the wall: *Rev. Dyke*.

Damn him, I thought, alarmed by the violation of my space and my psyche.

"His grandfather is interim chancellor, you know, so reporting him won't help," Dennis said quietly.

"I'm going to do more than that."

As Dennis complained and quizzed me, I locked my office and dialed the dean's office on my cell phone, asking his secretary to pull up Roger Thurgood's class schedule. According to the dean's assistant, Roger was in study hall. I thanked her, hung up, and demanded that Dennis go get Roger and tell him his grandfather wanted to see him.

"But he doesn't."

"He will," I said.

Twenty minutes later I blew past Eleonor and grabbed the door handle to the chancellor's office.

"Excuse me, apparently I've gone invisible," she exclaimed indignantly as I threw his door open and entered unannounced. His look of shock instantly changed to anger at my arrival without an appointment.

I explained that his grandson had gotten no counseling and was still in my class harassing me, and that I'd just come from my office where a slur about my sexuality had been painted across my wall.

"Do I need to call the police to feel this matter is being handled?" I shouted.

"The police? Dr. Westbrooke, are you in the habit of calling police over graffiti whose origins you can't trace? For all we know, the janitor could have done it. I'm sorry about the experience, and we'll send maintenance over to eradicate it and repaint. If you're feeling that unsafe, then perhaps you need a leave of absence. Anything else, Dr. Westbrooke?"

I stared at him in disbelief. *How could this man treat this issue so lightly and get away with it? Yes, Roger is a relative, but couldn't he at least appear shocked? A little shock might be called for in this case.* The thought must have been lurking in my subconscious, creating righteous indignation, because the words came out, startling even me. "I know about you and Hightower...and the panties."

Thurgood's expression never changed. He didn't flinch. But he did stop talking altogether.

"You got Hightower off. Twice. Obviously in exchange for the

school's viewing your grandson's behavior as youthful peccadilloes. Well, they're not. He was caught peeping into girls' dorms, he attacked me with a weapon, and he's harassing me."

At that moment, Dennis escorted Roger into the room, looking unkempt and out of breath.

Thurgood seemed to freeze, his mind crunching on the grave granola I'd just fed him. Finally, seeming to have come to a position on the matter, he said sternly, "You vandalized Dr. Westbrooke's office and you've been threatening her in class." His fervor was a result of my threats rather than any real indignation, but Roger didn't know that and he blinked, obviously unaccustomed to being spoken to in this tone by his grandfather. "You will report for counseling and you are suspended for an indefinite period. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

When Roger didn't answer, his grandfather waved him off. As the boy left the room, he turned to me. "Now, is that all, Dr. Westbrooke?" His voice sounded like a large metal door slamming shut.

"That's all," I replied, and left.

I should have been either incredibly vindicated or alternately concerned for my career, but I was unable to focus on either emotion because I was having dinner with Viv tomorrow. At the moment, despite everything else, that's what I cared about.

One last duty, I thought as I parked at the hospital clergy parking spaces and locked my car, then headed inside to see my father. I walked the long corridor to his private room with a box of his favorite chocolates in hand and an okay from the nurses' station to share them with him.

It was awkward. Nothing to say to each other, really. The things we needed to talk about were so incendiary that they could only contribute to his poor health or mine. And so we met to talk about nothing. He asked about the weather and the ball scores and when he could get out. I talked about class and students and Dennis. He seemed very lucid, and I was always surprised by the way he could slip in and out of reality like it was a pair of worn house slippers.

Finally he asked what I had planned for this weekend and I hesitated, knowing I could make up a partial truth or simply start the weekend with Saturday, skipping Thursday night and Friday morning. But this might fall into Viv's test to see if she could trust me, so I told him I had invited Viv out to the farm.

“Why on God’s earth?” His voice rose but not too much, as he was weak.

“Because...I’m a gay woman...and I’m attracted to her.”

“I don’t want to hear that again.”

“Not hearing it won’t change it. I can talk to you about my life or I can *not* talk to you about it, your choice.” I spoke quietly.

“I prefer the latter. And by the way, the woman in question attacked your seminary.”

“Perhaps our seminary deserved it.”

“Rubbish. Hightower is—”

“Gone. Fired. For driving around at night wearing nothing but women’s underwear.”

“What? You’ve got that wrong. Why would he do something like that? Obviously, blatant character assassination. Because of some perverted lie about Hightower, you’re seeing her?”

“I’m seeing Viv because...I really like her.”

“Go *like* someone else. How in hell would you know anyway?”

“Exactly. I’m so rusty at it, how the hell *would* I know? Best question of the day.”

We both sat silently watching the ball game. Grown men in striped suits, chewing, spitting, and yanking at their crotches, then performing rituals with their hands before batting. One man tugged on his cap, slapped his thigh and face, jumped up and down three times and looked right and then left before he took the pitch. I realized genuflecting and crossing oneself might be sensible by comparison.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I awoke in a state of electrified bliss, singing and talking to the animals and treating the most mundane task as if it were heaven in the making. Tonight was Thursday and Viv's visit. This time I was prepared. I had food, drink, a clean house, and an even cleaner dog. I'd laid out a nice outfit and left time to shower and change after work. No pressure, since this was a platonic, "prove-myself" evening. Actually, I was great at those. Giving platonic, charming evenings was my specialty.

At eight a.m., the phone rang. Joyce in Vivienne's office apologized, saying something had come up suddenly and Vivienne wanted me to know that she regretted having to break our dinner engagement. I gave the appropriate response—quite all right, hope it's nothing to do with a family illness, and thank you for calling. Then I sank into a heap on the bed and put my face in my hands. I stayed in that position so long that Ketch came over and punched them with his nose to see if I was still behind the fingers.

"Hi, Buddy." I patted his soft fur. "She cancelled. Sometimes when things are too hard, well, they're just not meant to be." He climbed up on the bed beside me and I didn't ask him to get down. We huddled together in the morning light, forlorn and forsaken.

When I could force myself to get up, I thought about going to the hospital to see my father. I envisioned making an effort at small talk, moving his eyeglasses closer so he could reach them on the table, going down the hallway to find more ice for his water, helping him change the TV channel, and finally plopping down into a chair beside his bed, noting the time and how long I had before I could politely leave.

I envisioned my father noticing that I was unhappy and inquiring into the problem and then determining it was my wanting to be with Vivienne and expressing his sympathy, but of course none of that would occur. *This is like living it twice. Get over it and get on with it. Go see him after class.*

I jumped into the shower, dressed, and drove to campus. I pulled into the parking lot not realizing I had made the trip, only vaguely remembering weaving in and out of lanes. My mind was out of my body and I was shocked to be in a parking space.

After gathering up my papers, I put the top up on the convertible, wanting to shroud myself from the world. I trudged across the commons and the wind picked up, blowing cold air around my shoulders and down my back.

I was only vaguely aware of being in class or teaching from my lecture notes. When the bell rang, I left hurriedly, unable to conduct a conversation. I headed back to my office to check my mail and, visible down the long corridor on the floor in front of my office, sat a vase of orange roses. My mind did backflips as I reached for them, unlocked the door, and put them on my desk. The note was written neatly, perhaps even in her own handwriting.

So sorry. I'll make it up to you. Viv.

Never had I experienced such incredible highs and lows. If my mind had been my heart, the spiking blood pressure would have blown my brains out. I read the note again and had no idea what it literally meant, but it made me happy. She might have stood me up but she was sorry. And she would do something with me, to me, for me that would make it up to me. What more could I ask?

I was so happy that I headed for the hospital nearly euphoric. The puke green walls trailing down to the gray medical floor seemed almost cheery, enlivened by my own joyful state. I breezed past the reception desk and into room 811, where my father was propped up in bed sipping juice through a bent straw. He cut his eyes to observe my entrance but didn't move his head or stop sucking.

I inquired about his health and what the doctors had said. He replied they seemed uncertain about what had caused his attack.

"Stress, perhaps," he said in a tone that transmitted mental images of him falling off my porch after having shouted that hell was lined with the heads of gay priests, so incendiary a statement that my face

flushed in anger at the remembrance. “Stress” was unmistakably my cue to apologize for having upset him, but I couldn’t. Apologizing about feelings I had for Vivienne seemed almost sacrilegious so I sat down and picked up the paper, pretending to read the sports page.

“Did you water the plants?” he asked of my visits to his house for various items he needed.

“I did.”

“You cancelled my dental appointment?”

“I did,” I said, and didn’t tell him he’d never had a dental appointment.

“Tell the doctor I am leaving here on Monday regardless of whether he approves or not.”

“I’ll tell him.” I smiled but he looked blankly ahead at the TV screen.

My cell phone rang and I answered. Vivienne’s voice asked, “Did you get my message?”

“The uh...message you left, among other things.”

“Yes. I take it you can’t talk.”

“No, I can. I’m just here in the hospital visiting my father.”

“Oh, I’ll call you la—”

“No, don’t hang up. The flowers are beautiful. I’m so glad you called and I can’t wait to see you. What happened that you had to cancel?”

“My brother was in an auto accident—”

“I’m so sorry. Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. He lives out of state and we were trying to determine if I should fly there. But he’s going to be all right.”

“I want to hear about your family and everything about you.”

A pause and then her voice held a smile. “Could I come see you Saturday night? Am I still invited?”

“Yes.” I glanced at my father and stepped out into the hallway. “You are so invited you have no idea how invited you are.”

She chuckled. “Good. I may even come early.”

“Ahh.” I let out a sigh. “I have all kinds of things I could say about that.”

“Really? Well, you can tell me in person. See you then.” She hung up and I blinked to get the hallway back in focus before returning to my father’s bedside.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"A friend."

"It was her," he accused with amazing clarity.

"Yes, it was Vivienne."

"You love her." He turned his head away and stared out the window. "I can hear it in your voice."

How could he hear it in my voice? He can't hear me when I ask him the time of day. He's tuned out half the time, so how has he tuned in to this? What do I say? There's nothing to say.

I kissed him on the top of his head. "I'm going to head on home, Father. I love you." He didn't respond. I'd made it almost out the door when he stopped me.

"You can be court-martialed for this. The end of a brilliant career. Is that what you want?"

When I turned to reply he was placidly watching television as if he thought I'd already gone. And so I left him.



I would have given up twenty-four hours of my life to get to Saturday night. My entire being was directed to Saturday night. Saturday night was a flame, a light, a beacon, and my soul was drawn to it and it was finally here. Having prepared twice for Vivienne's arrival, I was an expert at it now. And I moved through the house detailing it with confidence and ease. I felt so good about how ready I was that I even agreed to have coffee with Dennis, who claimed he was coming out my direction for a soccer game.

I met him halfway, having driven thirty minutes toward the city, and he puffed into the café in his soccer shorts and T-shirt, virtually too sweaty to hug.

"Do you smell as athletic as you look?"

"You decide." He threw his arm around my shoulder, positioning his armpit at nose level.

I pulled away in mock disgust. "Did you win?"

"God was on our side."

"Funny, that's what the other team said."

"No, they said, 'We have just suffered an ungodly loss.'"

He plopped down at a small table and a waiter took our order.

Dennis ordered French toast, bacon, juice, and an egg. I ordered toast and coffee.

"Let me guess, you're on a diet brought on by love?"

"Enough about me, let's talk about you," I said.

"You're far more interesting lately. Have you come to know her, in the Biblical sense?"

I felt myself blushing. "I will not satisfy your prurient mind."

"Are you satisfying anything of your own?"

"I'm determined to try."

He burst out laughing. "It appears you've reached your decision."

"My body, my mind, and my very soul seem to have taken over any logic my brain can supply and are directing all my actions."

"It's the best feeling in the world, isn't it? And since I don't have it myself, I play soccer."

"You could have it, you know."

"I could. But no one I've met is worth the effort...or the risk. My work is my love. When do you see her again?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight. Well, you're just killing time until the magic moment, and here I thought you really cared about seeing me."

"I do care about you, Dennis. I love you. You're the only kind soul in my life who listens to me and advises me."

"If I were a woman I'd go after you." He sighed softly. "Gotta run." He leapt from the chair, striking a Superman pose. "There are games to win and souls to save."

Several people watched, grinning as he took huge superhero strides out of the café. I finished my coffee and picked up the tab, which he'd forgotten in his dramatic moment. Then I stepped outside, looking around at the day and thinking perhaps it was the most glorious one I'd ever experienced.

I drove with the top down and the wind in my hair and the radio blaring, feeling nearly nineteen again and arriving in my own driveway at such high speed that dust sprayed the air and Ketch howled, no doubt fearful I would park the car right in the living room.

In my rearview mirror, a mirage appeared in the road behind me. She honked and waved and my heart nearly blew out of my chest. I got out and leaned back against my Mustang for support, wearing a silly

grin. She pulled up, slammed on the brakes, threw the car in park, and leapt from it as if she had amazing news.

“Viv.” I embraced her for the longest time, feeling her melt, surrendering any pressure that might signal she wanted me to let her go. When I unclasped her slightly only to get a tighter hold, she rested her head in the hollow of my neck and this woman, standing on the ground of my ancestors in an old farm in Illinois, became the world to me—the sun in my own personal solar system. The exotic aroma of her perfume made my heart beat faster, the smooth silkiness of her skin shortened the amount of air I could breathe in, and the proximity of her lips to mine made my knees tremble. In short, I could not think, or breathe, or move, and didn’t care if those capabilities ever returned—I wouldn’t need them. I would spend the remainder of my life braced up against my old Mustang holding Viv up against my body and breathing her breath, smelling her scent, loving the feeling of her body next to mine.

“Maybe we should go in,” she whispered.

“I was afraid you were going to ask me to take you on a tour of the farm again.”

I walked her up the steps, one arm around her waist, and got no farther than the couch before nearly tackling her. I’d locked Ketch out back to avoid his standard greeting of nearly mounting her—an act I now fully appreciated to the point of imitation. My arms surrounded her, and I kissed her with so much heat that my body quivered and I broke out in a sweat, having reached some internal boiling point beyond which my skin was literally forced to let off steam. *How have I survived without this feeling and how can this woman evoke it?*

“You’re so hot, are you all right?”

“I just need unfettered access to every inch of you,” I whispered, and leapt up, dragging her with me to the bedroom, both of us giggling as we tripped over our discarded shirts and shoes shed like the cocoons of butterflies as they struggle to become freer and more beautiful.

“A movable feast.” I sighed and pulled her down beside me on the bed, taking off the remainder of her clothes. Naked in the light, her body was magnificent—the narrow curvature of her waist sweeping up to the mountains of her breasts and back down into an orange-gold valley where the beginnings of a river ran. I moved quickly, not giving myself time to let my head get in the way of my body, which, driven by my soul, wanted to rid me of the inexorable ache that only she could

heal—a pain that only the pressure of her lips against every part of me could ease.

“I lied to you when I told you if you’d come out here, I wouldn’t touch you unless you wanted me to.”

“I want you to,” she whispered, and her naked flesh against mine reshaped my soul. Our forms became sweat-sealed and seamless, perfumes blended into an erotic scent that drove me mad as I moved across her skin in a hot sea of insatiable lust. And when finally we gave ourselves to one another in an explosive expression of intense longing, I knew, in that moment, I held heaven in my hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

To say I was in love was an understatement. She had robbed me of my sanity, replacing it with a strange, peaceful lust. I had no more questions about my life, only actions I would need to take to achieve my goal of Wilde bliss. I was going to be with her, that much I'd decided.

When we awoke early to a beautiful Sunday morning, she had to get up and leave before sunrise. Stretched out in my arms, she explained that her sister planned to come to her house this morning for some legal documents, which she would take to the hospital where their brother was recuperating. As soon as she'd handled that duty, she would return.

"It's nice that you have a sister, but not nice that she's meeting you on this particular morning."

"I know, darling, bad timing. But it's just the three of us now and we try to take care of each other."

"What do you talk about with your sister?"

"Everything."

"So you'll tell her about me?"

"Already have. She knows the entire saga."

"Omigosh. What has she said?"

"That you sound dense when it comes to emotional issues, like her husband."

"That sets me up nicely for family dinners."

"So you think you're invited to family dinners?" She rolled over on me and placed her sensational breasts against mine.

"I have news for you. If you keep that up, in about two more seconds, you won't be going anywhere."

"Hold my place," she teased, dipping into me as if I were a bite of dessert and then dashing out of bed, leaving me wanting.

I watched her shower, marveling that I would want to watch anyone shower, but then deciding it was because she was so beautiful—like a sculpture, a piece of art set in motion. As she transformed her tousled hair into controlled magnificence and put her makeup on like a theatrical performer, I realized by contrast I looked like a vagabond.

She slung her jacket on, grabbed her car keys, and headed for the door, giving me one last kiss that left me begging her to come back tonight and stay with me. She said she would try and I watched her walk slowly to the car, where I caught up with her and held her again and kissed her sweet neck.

"This leads to things," she whispered.

"A heavenly path."

She got in, rolled the window down, and sighed, smiling at me. Our eyes met and I had nothing more to say. She had shifted my world. I wanted only to know when I would see her next.

"Soon," she said to my unspoken question. As she drove down the driveway the phone rang in the house. I didn't move to answer it, not wanting to miss a moment of even seeing her leave. Ketch sat at my side and, when her car disappeared, fell to the ground, letting all tension out.

The phone rang again and I took my time getting to it, not really wanting anyone or anything to break the spell. When I finally picked it up, a voice on the other end of the line asked if I was Alexandra Westbrooke.

"This is the nursing station at the hospital. Your father's had a setback and we've moved him to critical care. The doctors are with him now and they've asked that you come as soon as possible."

"Yes, of course. What happened?"

"He seemed agitated and then his heart became arrhythmic."

"I'll be right there."

I thought about calling Vivienne or alerting Dennis, but then I quickly decided I'd better throw food down for Ketch and just go.

I pressed the gas pedal as close to the floorboard as I dared and

sped through the dawn thinking of the highs and lows of life. Vivienne, whom I adored, craved, loved, coming into my life and now perhaps the man I had the most complex relationship with leaving my life.

Tears floated near the edge of my eyelids. My last conversation with my father was about Vivienne's coming to see me. He had seemed confused and was watching TV. *Did I walk off as he was about to have an attack? Did I cause his heart trouble?* I said a silent prayer that his life be spared and, if that was not possible, that God care for him, love him, and give him peace.

Moments later, I pulled into the ER and parked in a doctors' and clergy space, jumped out of the car, and jogged through the automatic doors at the entrance and down the green corridor to the elevators. I tapped my foot nervously as I waited for the slow metal box to hoist me up to ICU and was out before the door was fully open, charging down to the nurses' station.

He was barely coherent, gray and pasty, but he reached for my hand and I took his, thinking he looked awful.

"Love you, Father."

He tried a weak smile. "Did you say my mass?"

My mind raced. No, I had not said his mass and it was Sunday morning. "This morning, Dad, at 11 a.m., I say your mass." I realized for the first time in my life, I had called him Dad.

I stepped out into the hallway and rang Dennis. He answered almost immediately, priests having to start Sunday morning at dawn. I explained what had happened and he asked how he could help.

"Who's giving the eleven a.m. mass?"

"I'll check and have them say a prayer—"

"I need to be the celebrant at that mass. Can you arrange that, Dennis, please?"

"I'm sure I can." His voice surprisingly held no shock.

"And would you phone Vivienne for me? I don't think I can talk to her right now."

"Sure." I hung up and went back inside the ICU cubicle where my father lay, looking as if he might be dying.

The nurse at his side barely spoke, occupied with checking his vitals and reading the monitors. Dr. Achison appeared and greeted me with a solemn expression, asking if I'd like to step out into hallway.

"Your father suffered a myocardial infarction of the right coronary artery. Nothing showed up in the earlier tests, so we were all caught off guard. We've tried to stabilize him and we're assessing the damage. It may require bypass to give him quality of life, but right now he couldn't withstand surgery." His tone was perfunctory, as if he were telling me the condition of the engine in the car and the cost to repair it.

"You don't think he's going to make it."

"You never know." His tone was brusque and uncaring, as if people asked him this boring question all the time and he'd distilled his personal emotions down to this single sound bite.

"He's asked me to conduct mass for him this morning, so I'll have to be gone for a while." I handed him a card with my cell phone on it and asked him to call me immediately if my father became worse.

"You're a priest." His voice indicated he was slightly amazed.

"I am."

"Then you've seen a lot of this."

"I teach at a seminary, so I don't see nearly as much as you."

His eyes momentarily unmasked, revealing a deep, weary sorrow, as if for an instant he could let his guard down, stash his ego, and connect with someone who might understand what it's like to be in a business where clients look to you for help as they linger and die. "I'll call you," he said, turned, and walked away.

I glanced back into the ICU cubicle but nothing had changed. My father's eyes were open and either focused on the ceiling tiles or the world to come.



Dennis was standing by when I entered the back of the chapel at ten thirty and went immediately to the closet where the vestments hung. I had stashed a few of mine there, tagged with my name, when I'd first arrived at Claridge. I glanced at the tiny mirror that revealed only my head and realized my hair looked rumpled and my face weary, but the spark in my eye, the fire in my expression were new to me. Even my long strides across campus these days seemed less about timely arrival and more about the joy of the journey.

"You look beat up and...good." Dennis too seemed to notice.

“Not exactly what I was striving for.”

“Are you doing the—”

“Just the sermon—more of a homily, actually. Would Mark cover the rest?” Thinking of the short, curly-haired priest new to Claridge, I was certain he would, if only to honor the ecclesiastic pecking order.

“This sermon is having an obligatory feel about it.” Dennis’s voice was a tiny bit chastising, and I paused in my mad rush to get ready.

“My father asked me to do it for him. He could be dying, so you’re right, it’s not born of passion but of duty and honor. And you’re right, I need to correct that.”

“You’ll do fine.”

I finished dressing and said a silent prayer that whatever I had to say today would help my father and have meaning to those who had taken the trouble to show up this morning.

The sound of the old pipe organ drew everyone to silence, giving us time to move around the side of the chapel and enter from the front in a processional. The altar boy held the large crucifix high overhead as the bells rang and people bowed at its passing. We processed through the nave, down the red-carpeted aisle, up the three chancel steps that separated the congregation from the clergy, past the high altar, and into our ornately carved seats. Eleven o’clock was the seminary’s more formal mass, and the beautiful chapel was built on an historic floor plan complete with a pulpit for the gospel and sermon and a lectern on the opposite side for a reading of the Old Testament and Epistle lessons.

In the smooth oak pews two hundred people, at least half of them students, sat silently awaiting the message and the blessing from God. And then it began, the chants and responses and prayers. The service was a modified high mass with color and drama but a spoken, rather than sung, liturgy.

“Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth...”

“Lord have mercy on us,” Mark intoned.

“Christ have mercy on us,” the congregation replied, the chanting repeated in triplicate.

I spotted her in the front row—Viv, looking exquisite—her dark suit magnificently tailored and her hair angelic. She tilted her head up toward me, and for a moment I saw her naked as she was last night,

lying in my arms and looking up at me, and I couldn't deflect a look of utter longing in her direction. She blushed and looked down at her lap.

"Let us bow our heads in prayer." Mark led the worshippers in the Lord's Prayer.

And finally, it was time for me to speak. I could see several students' quizzical expressions as I took the podium, welcomed everyone, and glanced at Vivienne one more time before I apologized to those who had come specifically to hear Mark preach.

"When I was a seminary student, I was a radical. I protested against the church, and my father was not happy about that. I thought I was in love with someone more radical than I. And my father was certainly not happy about that. I became a priest and my father got happier." Several polite titters rippled across the congregation.

"But then I began teaching here at Claridge, and those of you who've attended my classes know I take controversial positions on scripture, and my father...is not happy about that." Several adults were shifting in their seats, no doubt wanting to know where this talk was headed.

"So when my father asked me to conduct a mass in his honor today, I wondered why I should be the one to talk to God on his behalf when my father is by definition a better Christian than I. My father apparently believes that since I'm a priest, God listens to me more than God would listen to him. But the truth is that I'm a middleman. I'm the one who tells you what God wants, what God knows, what God believes, what God thinks about your behavior, and whether or not God loves you or is displeased with you. How do I know that?" I asked the question in mock shock. "How does anyone representing the church, representing any religion, know what God thinks, wants, believes, needs from you?"

"The truth is none of us know. We're just parroting what we were taught by other middlemen, what we learned in seminary or church school. We don't have a clue what God wants. We know what the church wants, we know what society wants, we might even get a call from your parents telling us what they want, but we do not know what God wants...of you."

People were staring at me intently, and I could not bring myself to look at Vivienne for fear I would lose my train of thought. "This is the age when we can skip the middleman if we desire. We can avoid the store and buy it on the Internet. We can dump our broker and be our

own day traders. We can forget getting an agent and put our video on YouTube. We can talk to God directly. How do we do that?"

My sermon was short but succinct. People didn't seem to be dozing or checking their watches but to be listening. *The most I could hope for.* And so I began to wrap up.

"If you ask God directly what to do, that's when you get the best answer. Granted, it's not as convenient as simply phoning your parish priest and asking what the church on behalf of God would say about this or that. But you may find that when you take on the responsibility of a direct relationship with God, you discover that God loves you just as you are and that the guilt and shame you've placed on yourself are lifted.

"From Psalm 91, A thousand shall fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you. There shall no evil happen to you. Neither shall any plague come near your dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In all your ways." I paused.

"My father may not be able to speak to God directly today as he is gravely ill, and so in his honor, I ask that you say a prayer for his healing and for his direct communication with his Maker, who created him a strong, honest warrior who is battle weary and deciding if he wants to go home."

I segued into the prayer of healing from the Book of Common Prayer, and the chanting rose loud and clear.

Finally I stood with my arms uplifted, my hands facing the congregation as if receiving into my slightly scarred palm the light from God, healing all pain, as I gave the benediction.

"May God bless you with peace, uphold you with grace, and send you into the world to love all those whom God has made. Amen."

The organ swelled and the majestic music swept us down the aisle as we followed in the wake of the cross. I stood in the vestibule to greet the congregation. The line was long and the people seemed happy and wished my father well and said they would continue to pray for him.

Vivienne waited until the very end and then approached, a different look in her eye, as if seeing me for the first time.

"I might have attended mass if you'd been my priest."

"It's the robes," I said, and she smiled. "I have to go to the hospital."

"I know. Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. It's depressing—"

"But I'd like to be with you."

"How about later? I'll call you."

"Okay." She started to embrace me and then seemed confused about the protocol and slowly walked away.

I thought Dennis had stayed behind to clean up the chapel, pick up the literature that was on the floor, so I was surprised to see that he'd intercepted Vivienne on the lawn, and after several minutes she hugged him good-bye. I envied him her touch. He waited until everyone was gone, then approached as I was in the back of the church removing my chasuble or priest-poncho, as I always called it.

"Well done."

"I'm a bit rusty."

"Couldn't tell. So...you certainly have the look. She does too."

"What look is that?"

"The one that says you're in love."

"What was your first clue, Father O'Shane—the circles under my eyes, my silly-assed grins, or my complete inability to focus?" I gave myself up to his teasing.

"I would say it's that angelic orange glow around you. Must be she's *literally* rubbing off on you." He became serious for a moment. "You're good in the pulpit, Alexandra. You can be in love, you know, and still live with her and just keep it all private."

"What happened to your 'two-roads-diverge' speech? Besides, wouldn't work. She's not a private person."

"She thinks you're a hell of a priest and this is your calling."

"She's what's calling me, Dennis. For the first time in my adult life, I'm in love. Her soul calls to mine, and I can't believe God would make me capable of this kind of love, give me Vivienne, and want me to reject her."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I left the chapel, accepting the accolades so generously handed me as I hurried toward my car and wondered where Vivienne had gone as I rang her cell. I was disappointed when she didn't answer.

I drove to the hospital and went to ICU, where my father was in the same position I'd left him. I took his hand and told him we'd celebrated mass in his honor and that everyone at Claridge was praying for him. He didn't move or speak, and the nurse said she'd call me if anything changed. I wondered what was going on in his head. Did he know the condition he was in...did he care? Was he already seeing the face of God, visions of his ancestors? Was he at peace?

I headed home and called Vivienne again. This time she answered and I asked if she would come out to the farm.

"I'm here," she said. As I tried to find out where "here" was, she added, "At your farm. I have dinner for us."

"You're kidding." I swooned. "How did you get in?"

"I drove out determined to find a way. I spotted your silly fake rock with the key in the bottom. You're bad at hiding things."

"Apparently."

"It's not your traditional fried chicken after the sermon, Reverend," she teased, but you won't go away hungry. I laughed at her slight Southern drawl and sped up, slowing only when I turned into the driveway.

It was a magical moment—the lights on in the old farmhouse, twinkling through the panes, and Viv visible through the window. I stopped and just sat for a moment to take in the warmth and beauty of that scene. Not since my childhood had I come home to this house

with the lights on and someone waiting for me. Pushing back tears as Vivienne stepped out on the porch, Ketch at her side, I thought if I could just have this for the rest of my life, nothing else would matter. I got out grinning and climbed the steps, gathering her up in my arms.

“You didn’t tell me how good you are in the pulpit.”

“You didn’t tell me how good you are in bed.” I kissed her until we both became light-headed and I lost my balance and staggered back laughing, for one glorious minute forgetting that my father was suffering and that my career was about to crater. I tried to coax her into the bedroom after we crossed the porch.

“If you think I’m letting this dinner get cold, you’re crazy.”

I laughed. “Sorry.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her as I ate, and soon I was thinking that perhaps simultaneously eating and staring into her eyes evoked a culinary eroticism I hadn’t contemplated. “What if I start thinking of fried chicken as foreplay,” I said between bites.

“Which part—the hot thighs...or the succulent breasts?”

I put my food down and lunged playfully at her, dragging her off to the bedroom as she squealed in protest.

Hours later, I rose on one elbow and watched her sleep. She looked glorious. I slipped quietly out of bed and took the handset with me so I could dial the hospital ICU. The nurse came to the phone immediately, I presumed because the doctor had told her who I was. She said they’d just checked on my father and he seemed to be doing better. They were cautiously optimistic he would remain stable. I wrapped around Viv, my body spooning into hers, my lips buried in her neck. She moaned and pushed back against me, and I sighed and fell asleep.



At dawn, I kissed her awake and watched with wonder the beauty of her face without makeup, still sleepy and yawning. I begged her to come back tonight and be with me again.

“Remember, my note said I’d make it up to you.”

“You have, believe me.”

“I’m taking the day off and cooking for you again. It leads to wonderful after-dinner events.”

“What about your work? I thought you said you’re going to be interviewed for your book.”

“Later in the week.”

I was ecstatic, I wanted to come home to her just after dark and see the lights in the window again. I wanted never to leave her in the first place. I kissed her with soft passion that made us both sigh.

“Do you know where everything is?” I asked as I kissed her.

“I know where everything is,” she answered, her voice suggestive.

“I mean the food in the cabinets.” I kissed her neck and down her shoulders.

“Uh-huh.”

“I have to leave now or I won’t leave.” I jumped back from her, threw on my clothes and a smattering of makeup, and literally bounded for the door. “You’re addictive.”

“Try to be.”

I glanced up at the house as I put the car in reverse. She was standing on the porch waving to me and my heart beat wildly. Then a crash. I’d backed into the railroad ties that framed the driveway and knocked over a trash can. I got out and righted it.

“Be careful,” she said.

“I’m like some crazy kid who can’t keep his mind on what he’s doing but only on who he’s doing.” I waved to the north of the house.

“What are you doing?”

“Saying hi to Sylvia, she has binoculars.”

Viv laughed and I tried backing up again, this time making it out of the driveway and, minutes later, onto the freeway. I turned up the radio and sang every song played, my mind doing backflips. I must not have heard my cell phone ring because Dennis greeted me as I headed for my office, telling me he’d tried to phone me all morning.

“You look—thoroughly used,” he said. “Thurgood asked me to hunt you down. He wants to visit with you in his office.”

I headed in that direction, Dennis at my heels, and the circumstance felt ironically like old times when I was being summoned to Hightower’s office.

“I haven’t seen his nephew lately, so I can’t imagine why he wants to see me.”

"I'll just hang here until you're finished. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about." His voice seemed to say just the opposite.



Eleonor was at her post—less fun these days as she tried to gauge the temperature of her interim boss.

"What's up?" I asked, feeling less jovial and confident. Hightower was the devil I knew. Thurgood was a new devil.

"I have no idea. If you find out what's up you let *me* know, will ya?"

I knocked lightly and he shouted for me to enter. He was pacing when I opened the door. He glanced up but kept moving so I walked into the room slowly, not knowing where to light. We greeted one another and, pleasantries over, he asked me to sit down while he continued to pace.

"There's been too much scandal in this school. We've done damage control but it seems there's more." His words sounded dire, but his body language and his tone were somehow calm and perhaps even happy. I knew why moments later when he handed me the card from the roses Vivienne had sent me and the transcription of a phone message left on my office phone.

"So you snoop into the faculty's offices?" I glanced at the card.

"This was brought to me." He was behaving as if this was a serious but sorrowful event. However, I suspected he was inwardly euphoric over topping me. I'd accused him of harboring the late-night panty purveyor, but he had the goods on a lesbian priest. Checkmate. "I have no idea where it came from or how the person got it," he said, and both of us knew he was lying. "But it's obviously 'out there' for others to have read or seen."

"Whoever got it entered my office and took it."

"That's hardly the point. The point is that you're a practicing lesbian. I think your bishop would take issue with that, and as interim head of Claridge I certainly must. We will not be renewing your contract, Dr. Westbrooke. I'm sorry it's come to this. Rest assured we won't discuss any of these matters, and I leave it to you to pick the timing of your resignation."

My resignation? And so he wanted me to do myself in and save him the embarrassment.

“But don’t take too long before sending us your letter.”

I turned and walked from his office without a word.

“You’re too good for this place, honey,” Eleonor said solemnly as I walked past, revealing that she had known what was about to happen before I ever walked in.

By the time I’d hit the ground floor I knew Thurgood III had supplied those personal notes to his grandfather, most likely having gotten them when he waited for me in my office.

Dennis could apparently tell from my posture that I was angry. “The kid rifled my office and took a note and a phone message Viv left me.”

“Then this can’t be good.” He handed me a slip of paper. “Eleonor gave it to me earlier to give to you.” The note said the Chicago Episcopal Diocese requested a meeting with me at my very earliest convenience.

“I think I’m about to be fired twice...or maybe this makes three times. I’m starting to lose track.”

I drove directly to the Chicago archdiocese. If I was getting the axe from them as well, I wanted all blows struck and done with.



A young, obviously gay aide greeted me in the foyer and asked if I had an appointment. I told him I didn’t, but I was certain someone wanted to see me. He indicated he would let the bishop know I was here. I paced nervously, looking at the oil paintings in the corridor while I waited for my executioner. I hadn’t rehearsed anything, hadn’t even contemplated what the meeting might be like. I’d simply chosen to show up in good faith.

Moments later, the same aide led me into a huge, expensively decorated, extremely masculine study. One of the bishop’s vicars greeted me and said His Eminence was of course unavailable, but he would be happy to help me.

Short and trim, his red-and-white cassock finely fitted, he sat, offering me a chair at an angle beside him. His face was smooth, without the worry lines that come with having to determine where his

next meal was coming from or how to feed his children. His demeanor unassuming, he asked what he could do for me. I told him who I was and that I'd received a phone message asking for a conversation at my earliest convenience.

His mind kicked into gear immediately and he thanked me for coming, saying my presence was entirely unnecessary since they simply wanted to chat briefly, which we could have done by phone. I assumed that wasn't all they wanted to do, but it was a polite way of trying to put me at ease.

Then he asked how my life and studies were going at Claridge and if I enjoyed my work and the students and what I thought I had learned there, revealing he knew far more about the school than I imagined and had obviously boned up on my background. I chatted with him like an old friend and after a while ceased to wait for the other shoe to drop, since he appeared to be transparent in his thoughts. I could understand how his communications style had elevated him to a key position on the archbishop's staff—kind of a mafia don with manners.

After nearly an hour, he whispered, "The archbishop personally supports you in your life's mission, but we wonder if being so open about personal matters is good for the school and the church."

"No one would have known who I love if the grandson of the interim chancellor hadn't rifled my office and obtained personal items. However, I always believe that when I become afraid about my life, God sees to it that I am forced into openly facing those fears. God has outed me. Therefore, I must believe I can be more effective if I am openly lesbian."

"It is true that you have been relieved of your position at Claridge?"

"Word travels fast."

He crossed and uncrossed his legs. "Since God made every essence of us, being true to ourselves is being true to God. It sounds as if you're on the right path. Do not be discouraged, whatever happens. It is all an evolution."

"You are personally very kind. But the Anglican church as a whole defends discriminatory acts against their homosexual clergy."

"Sometimes we are harshest on our own family, and then that attitude spills over into punishing the rest of the world—although not all people within these walls ascribe to my views."

“The church could split, and the irony is that we are so small already.”

“But God remains,” he said.

I took his hand and held it for a moment. “You’re a kind man. I hope you have someone who loves you, the way I have someone.” His eyes grew even kinder as I exited the room.

Sometimes even I forget that the church is just people, I thought.



That night I returned home to the warm glow of lamplight and Vivienne. She was the most calming drug I could ever imagine, creating peace in me where there had been little, and joy in me where there had been none. I could believe that Viv was a piece of God more than anyone else. She not only lit up the dark corners of the old farmhouse, allowing me to enter the light, but she lit up the darkness inside me.

“So the diocese is going to ignore the fact that you’re a gay priest?” She stopped making the Waldorf salad and stood still for the answer.

“Unless I do something too outrageous,” I said, loving to be in the kitchen with her.

“Like?”

I pulled her in and kissed her. “I can’t think of anything outrageous. In fact, the world doesn’t seem to contain too many outrageous acts for me if they’re all from the heart and born of love.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Thursday, I was at home, having taken a day off to grade papers and write the letter I knew I had to turn over to Thurgood stating I wanted to resign. Unable to frame the words in a way I could find acceptable, I was irritable and fretful. Finally I grabbed the paper, crumpled it, and tossed it into the wastebasket. *Fire me. I'm not doing it for you.*

I jumped when the phone rang, as if in response.

"My God, he's dead," Dennis said the moment I answered.

My mind flew to my father. He couldn't be dead. He'd gotten steadily better and was now in a private room awaiting a decision about his future care. He could converse and watch TV again. "Who are you talking about?" I asked, breathless.

"Thurgood. Dropped dead in the bathroom of his home from a stroke."

"Oh, good Lord. Did he have heart trouble?"

"Apparently."

"Who will run Claridge?"

"I don't know. The big question is did he arrange for his family to continue to support the school, and who will replace him on the board."

I was silent, thinking about the hand of fate and how occasionally it bends the road to change the path.



The funeral was held on a Sunday at the cathedral in Chicago with all the pomp and circumstance befitting the richest man on campus. We were all in attendance and the archbishop himself conducted the mass.

In the sermon that followed, Roger Thurgood was touted so extensively that I felt like he was someone else, someone I'd never met. But then, maybe we are different personae for different people. Maybe the kind, intelligent, thoughtful, and generous man talked about as he lay dead had just never shown up for me, but only for others.

The bishop, a tall, silver-haired, distinguished man, concluded his sermon with, "And just at that moment when someone says, 'He's gone,' there are others on a distant seashore, watching his coming and other voices ready to take up the glad shout, 'Here he comes.'"

I bowed my head and said a prayer, asking God to be good to Roger Thurgood Sr., for he was only trying to do his work in the way he knew how.

As I raised my head, Gladys's waggling fingers caught my eye, letting me know she'd spotted me, and I realized that in a moment of anger, I'd kissed her, becoming a catalyst for more emotion than she'd most likely experienced in decades...perhaps in her entire life. That alone struck fear in me. I could attest to passions once unearthed being never again buried.

I stared up at the stained glass to avoid seeing Gladys and conducted my own private conversation with God about Vivienne. *There's no question, Lord. I believe she is a gift from you.*



The following Monday I was summoned again to the chancellor's office, and this time I had no idea who I would meet. Eleonor was no longer at her post and a young female secretary, attractive in a military kind of way, held the chancellor's door open for me. Nothing seemed to have changed inside the chancellor's office other than the fact that the personal photos that had rested on Thurgood's credenza were now gone.

The backside of the tall, tufted executive chair faced me, so the person seated in it, apparently too short to be seen over its high back,

was hidden from view. For a moment I envisioned Roger Thurgood III whirling around with a large aha and announcing he was in charge.

I cleared my throat slightly to let the person know I was in the room, and the chair swiveled slowly to face me. A trim, well-dressed woman in her late seventies, with wire-frame glasses propped down on her nose, glanced up at me and waved the secretary off. Her eyes piercing me, the elegant woman asked, “Are you a liberal, moderate, or fundamentalist Christian?”

Accustomed to being summarily grilled in this room, I found her skipping the introductions only slightly odd.

“There are days I think I’m post-Christian and perhaps even more spiritualist.”

“And if I asked you about adultery and what God thinks of it?”

“I don’t presume to know what God thinks. God is within all of us, so if we are quiet and listen to our hearts we will know what’s right.”

“And if I resort to abortion, what is my judgment?”

“We have to forgive ourselves and then God forgives us.”

She changed subjects, and for a split second I thought she was trying to avoid any emotional connection. “Tell me about the trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

“We, ourselves, are a trinity. Body, mind, and spirit—separate and yet one.” I was becoming annoyed, viewing this as a personal hazing, an attempt to needle me before she fired me. A change of regime is always an opportunity to sweep out the corners. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know your name.”

She ignored me. “And if you were chancellor...?”

I fixed her with what I hoped was a penetrating stare. “The earth would split down the middle and men would fall screaming into its cavernous center, for I have a female lover.”

She smiled slightly. “Well, then the rumors are true in regard to that issue. I am commissioned by the Thurgood Trust to ascertain the caliber of the seminary staff and assure that another strong chancellor is named.”

“I’m sorry about the interim chancellor’s death.”

“I doubt that,” she said sharply, pinning my lie to my conscience like a butterfly to a sample board. “So, is she...the one?” Her voice was mocking and I knew she was referring to Vivienne.

"Is that a theological question or are you just an HR nightmare?"

My response seemed to infuriate her and her tone changed quickly. "Dr. Westbrooke, the now-deceased chancellor didn't really care for you."

"I certainly didn't want him to die. However, you're right. I didn't care for him. Nor do I care for his grandson. Are we through?"

She nodded and I left hurriedly to head back to my office and simply pack up. *Better to go of my own accord, before I'm thrown out. Besides, enough is enough.*



Dennis was waiting, as he always did when I went to the ivory tower. "How'd it go?"

"I've managed to offend the Trust Nazi and I'm done. I'm getting the hell out."

"Don't do that."

"It's best for everyone," I said, and broke away from him.

It only took an hour for me to find a grocery store with some empty boxes and another two hours to put the majority of my belongings in them and lug them out to my car. Sally bumped into me on the third trip to the car and swept the box from my arms.

"Are you moving?"

"Just a little housecleaning," I said, not wanting to upset her or any of the other students until things were final.

"You're not quitting?" She grabbed me by the arm, which for a student was an extremely personal gesture.

"I wouldn't say I'm quitting."

"Good, because I want you to know that you're my...my...role model. I mean, you speak up and you don't buy into everything you're told to buy into and you...well...I feel better about who I am because of you."

"That's very nice, Sally. Thank you." I was afraid if I stood still a minute longer she might hug me or kiss me, so I quickly patted her hand, using the gesture to remove it from my arm, and hurried to finish the rest of my packing. I could feel her eyes bore into my back and sensed she was kicking herself for not saying what she'd really wanted

to say, and I was grateful she hadn't. I had enough trouble on my hands without a young woman confessing her crush.



"I told you she has a crush on you the first time I saw her." Viv continued her exploration of my body with her soft lips as we lay nude together on the bed in the predawn light, a large down comforter scrunched up all around us. Periodically we pushed it to the floor as our body heat roared, and then retrieved it as we cooled momentarily to talk.

"I think she's just discovering women. Maybe hasn't even had one."

"Well, she's not having this one." Viv kissed me sensually over and over, and I felt myself slipping back into that amorphous state in which the physical sensation was so radiant that I could no longer pinpoint the area from which it exuded. I was merely a ball of yearning, a tingling, buzzing sensation without form, an entity tied to her—*Perhaps tongue-tied*, I thought with a grin.

"I'm old enough to be her mother," I managed to whisper.

"That's not what *she's* thinking."

"You hungry?" I pushed away from her to look into her gorgeous eyes.

Viv made a sound as if I'd just offered up myself and she was pleased to accept.

I lifted her face and pulled her toward me. "I'm fixing breakfast before you kill us both."



I wiped down the old antique table that sat in one corner of the back porch and put our breakfast on it. I'd made pancakes, which I placed on turquoise pottery, and poured her iced tea from a small pitcher. My turn to cook and serve the goddess, and I was delighted to do it. She stretched catlike and smiled a warm smile at my scurrying around.

"How can you start your morning with a cold drink?" I asked.

"Because I'm a hot-blooded woman."

I kissed her and caught the syrup on the edge of her lip. “Sweet, but not nearly as sweet as other nectar I’ve tasted.”

The phone rang and a crisp young woman’s voice asked if I could attend the board meeting this afternoon. I was aware that the board meeting was held monthly, at best, and usually on the first Thursday of the month, so this was apparently a special session to officially let me go.

“Well, I think this is it, darling,” I said to Viv as I hung up. “I am about to get the proverbial axe.”

“More time for me to have you to myself. However, I can’t believe they would do that to you—the only intelligent life form in that ecclesiastical maze of morons.”

“You only began thinking that after you slept with me.”

“True.” She shrugged and I laughed.



The board was in session when I entered the room, directed to do so by a young man obviously tapped to be doorman for the occasion. All the elderly faces looked appropriately grieved and somber, and the session opened with a prayer for the soul of Roger Thurgood Sr.

The vibrations in the room weren’t exactly friendly toward me, but somewhat fearful, for reasons I couldn’t ascertain. Unless they were picking up on my having had more sex in twenty-four hours than all of them had most likely had in a year.

The interim-interim chairman, a short pudgy man introduced as Mr. Rockwell, called the meeting to order and asked that the treasury report be read. Despite the elaborate dissecting of funding, it was apparent that there was only one key donor family, the Thurgood Trust.

The chairman introduced me, saying I needed no introduction and therefore making me wonder why there was one. He then laid out the opportunities for the university and, in addition, the problems. Among the latter were image and reputation. The axe loomed above me as I envisioned that the next words would be about my negative contribution in those two arenas.

“At the urging of the Thurgood family, we are considering you, Dr. Westbrooke, for the chancellorship of this fine institution.” Pendergast looked down at the floor, pressing his long white beard tightly against

his chest, obviously unable to even look at me. Vance Shepherd's Tourette's shoulder bounced up and down as if in medical protest.

My mind froze. "I'm quite confused by this. You're aware that my contract is not being renewed."

Several board members exchanged glances as if I'd resurrected something they'd hoped would remain buried. "We have no knowledge of contractual issues and frankly, for purposes of this discussion, the past is the past. It's the future we are most interested in."

"Future" seemed to be an igniting word that blasted them out of their worry, and Pendergast said, "The future is where we will make a difference."

An older man in the back said, "The future is everything for this school." And everyone nodded and signaled agreement over a phrase that seemed infantile in its vision. *Of course the future is everything*, I thought.

"And so that brings us to why you're here. We want to congratulate you on making the short list, and we want to make certain that if made chancellor you will abide by the oath of chancellor and—" Mr. Rockwell intoned.

"Do you have a copy?" I asked.

"A copy?" he parroted.

"Of the oath," I probed.

"Well, no...the gist of it is that you..." He stumbled and hemmed and hawed.

"I think he's petered out," Pendergast joked, then realized perhaps he'd chosen an inappropriate euphemism.

"What we're saying is..." Vance Shepherd jumped in. "You would have to *remain* chaste as so many before you have done to put the church and God first."

"You mean turn my back on my sexuality? Or make love in the closet and lie about it so we can all feel pious?" I said the words pensively and quietly. "I think not. But thank you for considering me." I got up and walked out of the room to a chorus of male voices asking me to please come back and finish the conversation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I lay curled up in Vivienne's arms. "Can you imagine giving this up for the praise of old farts?"

"Something bigger than the board is going on. You know they don't want you to be chancellor. They'd rather have a guy who's driving around town in the wrong underwear or even name Ketch before they'd appoint a gay woman." On cue, Ketch whined.

"You see, even he doesn't want the position," I said. Ketch got up and trotted into the living room. Since that was generally a sign of visitors, I jumped up and followed him. Out the front window, I saw a black Town Car pulling into the driveway.

"What is it?" Viv called.

I ran back to the bedroom. "A limo." I jumped into my jeans and a seminary sweatshirt, checking my hair briefly in the mirror. Viv was pulling on her sweats.

"Find out who it is before you just open the door and let them in," Viv said with some suspicion.

When I got back to the living room, the woman who had grilled me in the chancellor's office was climbing the steps. *Thank God she's not a man or I'd think they'd sent her to assassinate me.*

I opened the door before she could knock and greeted her with a quizzical smile.

"May I come in? I'm Margaret Thurgood, Roger Thurgood's sister."

My mind flashed back to her interviewing me and my telling her how I disliked her brother and her nephew.

"Come in. Could I get you some coffee or tea?" I asked as Vivienne

came out of the bedroom looking spectacular. I introduced them and they shook hands. Margaret took a seat on the couch after I brushed off the dog hair. “Sorry,” I said as I let Ketch outside. “He pretty much has the run of my life.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt your evening, but the decisions I have to make have immediate consequences. I’m the controlling interest in the family trust. So, in short, the seminary gets its money only if I say so.”

“Please don’t judge the seminary on recent events. Many wonderful things have come out of—”

“I have no interest in the seminary personally or religiously, for that matter. I find the entire institution archaic and dreary. Nonetheless, places like that seem to thrive, and my role in all this is to determine how. I heard the board had a special little party for you today.”

“They wanted a celibate chancellor.”

“Yes, well, it’s hard to look as gloomy as some of our past chancellors unless you aren’t getting any.” Both Viv and I laughed.

“You’re the seminary’s nemesis,” Margaret said to me, then suddenly looked at Vivienne. “I like you quite a lot. Heard you on the radio.” Viv thanked her.

“So, Alexandra, if you were I and could change the academic structure of the seminary, how would you do that?”

“I would teach nothing as truth, but all things as possibilities.”

“You *are* disruptive.” She laughed slightly and in that instant I felt a connection. A kindred soul had surfaced, and I relaxed. “My teachings would make no sense in the context of a seminary. The power of thought—quantum theory, feminist studies, things that would ball up the traditionalists’ shorts. Curriculum that won’t be popular for centuries and today would be asking to be attacked by parents, peers, and press.”

“A bit radical even for me. What do you think of all this?” Margaret addressed Viv, and for a second I thought she gave her a physical once-over, like sizing up a racehorse she might be interested in purchasing.

“I think light has truly arrived at the seminary.” Viv grinned. Margaret Thurgood’s gaze stayed just a moment too long on Viv for my liking before she spun to rivet me with it.

“I want you to become the chancellor of Claridge, Alexandra.”

“I can’t,” I said, stunned.

“I want you to do this as a personal favor,” she said to me, then

turned to Viv. This time I felt a twinge of jealousy, as the look seemed sensual. “You’re lucky you’ve found each other. I make do with young friends who are merely entertaining and like money.”

Suddenly it was over. Without waiting for my answer, or perhaps assuming she’d gotten it, she told us good-bye, climbed into her carriage and rode away. I was dumbstruck.

“What do you think?” Viv asked.

“She’s insane. I’m not chancellor material.”

“Unfortunately, darling, you are. And it will be your biggest battle yet.”

“You don’t even believe—”

“Alex, it’s not the church that holds us back. It’s ourselves. You of all people should be able to get that across, don’t you think?”

“What will we do about your house?” I asked, and Viv laughed.

“So it all boils down to real estate?”

“Well, we both have inherited family homes. You don’t just dump those.”

“You’re making an assumption that we’re living together,” she said.

“You don’t think I’m letting you go home?” I kissed her. “I’ll do anything...including burn your clothes.”

“How about a city house for entertaining, so people like Margaret don’t have to sit on dog hair, and a country house for those of us who happen to thrive on hair seats.”

“Okay.” I let my breath out as if that had solved something monumental and then pulled her down on the bed, stripping off her sweatpants. “Chancellor is nice, but I prefer this position.”



Nervous, worried, and upset, I couldn’t fall asleep. Stressful meetings, finding the lover I had never dared dream of, and having an opportunity to be chancellor all in the same month, week, hour, was a ten on my personal Richter. I lay awake trying not to move and awaken Viv. I shifted slightly to be able to punch the light on the side of the clock that would allow me to see the time. It was after one a.m. and now I fretted that I would look like hell in the morning.

After yet another flop onto my stomach, and then back, I felt Viv

fling an arm over me, kiss me, then yank me out of bed. “Come on, throw on your jeans.”

“What are we doing?”

“Something other than toss and fret and sweat. We’ll go for a ride.”

I yanked on my jeans and tennis shoes and threw on a T-shirt. “What’s open at this time of night?”

I followed her out the back door to the pasture. “Come on.” And with that she grabbed halters and bridles and headed out toward the horses, who walked toward her in the moonlight.

“What are we doing? I don’t ride that well even in the daylight.”

“Good. This will give you something else to think about.” She put the bridle on both horses as I watched, not believing what she was doing, then pushed on Mac, angling his body up against the fence, and ordered me to use it to climb on. There was no way. Mac stepped deftly aside each time, so Viv pushed Ghostie against the fence. I hoisted myself up and she surprised me by getting on in front of me. “He’s big enough to handle us both, and we’ll just walk him.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and put my cheek on her small back and was ready to ride off into the moonlight. She turned Ghostie away from the house and took him through the pasture at a lazy walk. Mac trudged along at our side to be with his friend.

“I feel as if you and I have ridden this way before. Centuries ago. Isn’t that odd?” I said.

“We probably did. It’s all connected, darling.”

The moonlight was spectacular, and all my anxiety passed through my body, dissipated through this massive animal, and disappeared into the ground. “This is God, Alex. This is where God lives. In these gentle animals, in our love, in us.”



An hour later I was back in bed, curled around Viv again, only this time without a horse under us. I slept better than I’d slept in my entire life and awoke feeling like my world was about to change.

As the sun rose, Viv insisted she had to stop acting like a lovesick teenager long enough to go to her office and get some work done. She’d told her coworkers she was taking a week off to be with her

lover—a truth so bold that I blinked when she confessed it. I asked if she thought there might be a verbal line drawn, at which point sharing was unnecessary. She said they were dying to have her return so they could quiz her.

“Now I can tell them my secret love is a priest,” she teased. At my alarmed expression she said, “Face it, dear, you’re out.”

I kissed her good-bye and headed over to see my father. He was recuperating now in an intermediary rehab facility and would, I hoped, be back in his home with in-home care soon. I wanted to tell him that I’d been asked to be chancellor, something he’d always said would happen. I could imagine the surprise and pride on his face, and the idea of witnessing his reaction made me happy I was going to see him today.

The corridors in the facility were filled with bulletin boards and photos of the recuperating—mostly older people demeaned, I thought, by the forced fun of unnatural poses, childish games, and non-events. I never wanted to live long enough to have someone put me in a finger-painting class.

I rounded the corner to room 272 where my father, wearing his own robe and sipping tea, was watching television. He greeted me with a smile and I gave him a resounding kiss on the cheek, then told him I was so glad he was alive and well. After reciting the weather, which seemed to be a preoccupation for the elderly even though they wouldn’t experience it firsthand, I launched into the meeting with Margaret Thurgood and her request. “She wants me to become”—I paused to let him get the full impact—“chancellor.”

“Margaret Thurgood is an idiot,” he said, and as a first response, it stung. “She is only in charge of the trust because all the sensible men are dead. I’ve known of that family for years.”

“Well, idiot or not, she’s asked me to take the highest position the seminary offers, Father, something you always said you wanted.”

“That was long ago. You’re not suited to it. Particularly in light of the path you’ve taken lately. It could only come to a bad end.”

“Well, obviously, I’m not the conservative choice for a seminary chancellor.” He said nothing. *Does he know what he’s saying to me? Are these just more ramblings from a disconnected mind? Why do I care if he’s pleased? Why can he still hurt me with his assessment of me?* I sat contemplating these questions as he continued to watch a

mindless game show on TV. The nurse came in and offered to help him urinate into a plastic urinal so he wouldn't have to get up. I turned my head away out of respect. What irony, a man who had to have help peeing into a plastic beaker had such a psychological grip on me. Anger welled up inside me and I wanted to shout at him that he was mean-spirited and uncaring, but then I might give him a heart attack.

After twenty minutes of silence, I stood up and said good-bye. He barely noticed as I walked to the door, and it was as if an invisible hand stopped me and turned me around. I walked back to his bedside, took the remote and flipped off the TV, then stepped into his line of vision and spoke quietly.

"Father, the woman I was seeing when I was at Berkeley years ago. I loved her then and I let you control me and destroy that because I didn't have the courage of my convictions. I've always wanted to ask you...did you pay her or just threaten her to get her to betray me?"

He looked at me with more clarity than I could remember in years and said, "I saved your career."

I thought about that for a moment, all anger long flushed through my system, and merely nodded. *Of course, to a military man, that would be everything. In his mind, what more could he do for me?*

As I walked to the parking lot, it became clear that I had to talk to her, the woman of my youth, the woman whose image was the icon of sin. The woman my father had chased away. I knew exactly in what city she lived. I'd made it a point to know.

I went back to my farm. Viv was still at work and I dug around in my desk until I found her Dallas phone number. I had Googled it off and on over the years to see if she was still there. I went outside on the back porch overlooking the farm and rang her number, my heart pounding.

The woman's voice on the other end of the line sounded weaker than I remembered.

"Jeannette, this is Alexandra Westbrooke." For a moment I didn't think she would speak, but would simply hang up.

"Well, how are you?" she finally asked in a friendly but dispassionate tone, as one might inquire of a near stranger.

"I'm fine," I said, as she asked me all the perfunctory questions about my life.

"I heard you became a priest," she said. "That's wonderful."

“Odd, don’t you think, in light of what you and I did together at Berkeley?”

“Oh, the marches. Yes, my son couldn’t believe his mom was a wild protestor.” The word “Wilde” popped into my head and I saw Viv’s face.

After ten minutes of banal conversation, I finally worked up to my reason for calling.

“Jeannette, I have a question I’ve always wanted to ask. I know it’s been years, but when my father stepped in and—”

“Oh, Alexandra, don’t ask me anything hard. It’s been such a long time—”

“I know. But you and I were together—”

“We were wonderful friends—”

“We were more than friends. We slept together.” Silence like the blanket thrown over a cage to quiet a squawking bird.

“We were just young and it was a crazy time and—”

“What did my father say to you to get you to deny what we had—”

“Your father was just like my Jake. He’s so protective of his sons. He’d do anything—”

“Please tell me what he said.”

“He said nothing, Alexandra. There was nothing to say because nothing really happened.” Her denial was so complete that I was certain she believed it. *Nothing really happened.* And although I knew it was long past dawn, I thought I heard a cock crow from a distant farm.

“It was so long ago, it’s like a dream to me,” she continued. “My life is so full now with my kids and my first grandbaby. In fact, I’m on the way to meet my daughter-in-law to shop for the baby shower.” That was my cue, and I thanked her and told her good-bye.

I had carried the image of this event, of this woman, branded on my soul for decades. The love, the anger, the hate, the remorse, the longing. And now it was washed away like footprints in the sand. It meant so much to me and, seemingly, only me. My father saw it as a career point and Jeannette seemed not to see it at all. What had happened? Time. Time had changed it all, just as I told my students. What was horrific, heart-rending, unacceptable was now not even worth a serious discussion. I had opened the luggage I’d carried with me for years and years, only to find it completely empty.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Three weeks later I awoke to the morning of my installation as chancellor of Claridge. It was a small version of what the president of the United States must feel, being one minute a rather ordinary citizen and the next the most honored leader.

“Did you sleep?” Viv asked, kissing me.

“Little bit. I was nervous.”

“You’ll be great.” She slid her beautiful hand down my legs, making me moan.

“I was thinking about my conversation with Jeannette. The woman at Berkeley years ago.”

“You called her, why?” Viv stared at me, a little jealousy visible in her eyes.

“She was frozen in time for me. She represented the most frightening, embarrassing, painful, and heartbreaking moment of my young life.”

“Wow, how can I ever top that?”

“You know you have, in the most wonderful way. But she was my betrayal. She denied ever having any affection for me.”

“What did she tell you when you asked her about that?” Viv laid her head on my chest.

“She couldn’t remember it and had to go to a baby shower.”

Viv’s laugh was low and sexy. “Must not have been as good for her.” At my hurt look she patted me. “I’m teasing. Goes to show you, though, doesn’t it? Most guilt, angst, fear—it’s all in our heads.”

“What about sex?”

“That too...and some other thrilling places.”

"Do you think I'm the first chancellor to make love hours before being installed?"

"Oh, honey, a few have done it on site." She laughed at my shocked look and bounded off the bed, demanding that we hit the shower and greet this important day.

A short time later, I stood before her in a beautiful vestment, my hair and makeup in place, seeming even to me like I might know what the hell I was doing.

"How do I look?"

"Very sexy."

"Robes aren't supposed to be sexy."

"Well, on you they are." She hugged me and her fingers caught in the rope braiding around my middle. "Except for this fashion nightmare you tie around your waist—what is it?"

"A cincture. Symbolizing purity and chastity."

"Well, darling, you can hang that up." Her dry delivery made me laugh. "And the robes, so they don't wrinkle before we get there."

I disrobed, kissing her. Then suddenly I slid my gold signet ring off and slipped it on her ring finger, where it appeared to have been made for her. Her shocked expression thrilled me. "Because of you I have the courage to love openly and to become chancellor. You're the fighting queen more than I." Tears welled up in her eyes and she put her arms around me and kissed me, nearly melting me and rendering me mindless as I began unfastening the tiny French buttons that lined the front of her black suit jacket.

"We have to go, darling, or you'll be late," she whispered as I put my lips on her beautiful neck and kissed my way down to her breasts, then moaned as she fended me off. "Come on. I'll drive, you fret." She took the keys from me, and we hugged Ketch good-bye and got in the car.

"Omigod, when I come back, I'll be chancellor."

"Don't you know there are some people on campus having a conniption over that?"

"Try not to sound so gleeful," I said.

"What will be your first official act?"

"Hiring Eleonor back. She makes me laugh, and God knows I'll need that."

We pulled into the parking lot, and I could see across the commons

various groups of people welcoming me and others marching with protest signs. A media truck was parked in the center of the parking lot, and I was grateful we were in Viv's BMW and not my easily recognizable Mustang. I redirected her around to the admin building and the private spaces reserved for the chancellor and board.

"It's a circus," I whispered.

"Of course. You're rocking the establishment. Doesn't it feel good? Think back to your Berkeley days, when you prayed for crowds like this."

"I was younger then."

"And the sex wasn't as good," she said, ranking herself.

"No, darling, the sex wasn't nearly as good."

We slipped into the back of the chapel and I kissed Viv good-bye as I entered to change into my liturgical garb. "Okay, no making faces at me, and sit where you can see the crowd reaction so you can tell me later."

"Do you have your notes?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I love you, Reverend darling, and you'll be smashing. Here." She took the black onyx cross my mother had worn, that I had thrown down in her front lawn, and put it in my hand. "Your mom marvels, I'm sure, at everything you've accomplished. But don't wear it. A cross is a burden and He carried it so you don't have to."

Tears welled up as Viv kissed me again and left quickly. I placed my hand on the big red Bible sitting on the countertop and said a prayer. *God, make me the best that I can be. Make me a positive influence on all that come in contact with me. Make me an agent of change. And... thank you sooooo much for Vivienne.* I smiled as I prayed.

Dennis came barreling through the door and hugged me.

"Can you even believe this? Only weeks ago voted most unlikely to succeed as chancellor. It's meant to be. It's God's will. There's no other explanation for why a...a—"

"Careful, I'm the future chancellor."

"But you're not yet...a horny woman of wild ideals—"

"Dennis."

He burst out laughing. "I'm just so happy for you."

"You have to help me, you know."

"I will. I will."

“How do I look?”

“Chancellorish. I’m going to the front of the chapel to greet and seat.”

As Dennis left, Margaret Thurgood entered, wearing a suit that looked like it cost my entire year’s salary.

“Well, well, well. How do you feel?” she asked.

“Nervous.”

“This is the easy part. After this come the waves of controversy and hatred and whatever else mankind can muster in the wake of human progress.”

“I feel better already.” I grinned. “Will you ever come for dinner? Viv has a house in town.”

“I might.”

“Good.”

“Well, what do you religious types say . . . God bless?” She shrugged endearingly.

“We say thank you, Margaret, for giving everyone a chance to feel better about themselves.”

I held out my hand and she took it. We stayed that way for a moment.

“I’m allergic to fish,” she said. My mind flashed on the symbol Christians often put on the back of their cars. At my confused expression, she added, “In case I come to dinner.”

“I’ll remember that,” I said, and she went out into the chapel.



The installation ceremony was a mix of religion and business. After prayers, hymns, introductions, and explanations, I was introduced and took a moment at the pulpit to just breathe and scan the crowd. Finally, I gave them a big, relaxed smile, determined that the furrowed faces of religion would not be seen in this administration.

“I am the least likely person on this earth to be chancellor. Already there is a rumor on the board that they will try to overthrow me. I am a polarizing element, a threat to the norm, the most controversial person you can think of—with the exception of, perhaps, Jesus. A man who stood up for women in a time when women were nothing. A man who talked about a father, and a son, and a ghost. How controversial

was Moses? Took a trip to a mountain and had a conversation with fire, basically. How controversial is Mary and the Virgin Birth? I'm not telling you what to believe about Jesus, Mary, or Moses. But I am saying that the church was built around controversial people and topics. I am just another tiny variation of controversy. I am here to challenge your tolerance, your love, and your staying power. You will hear that I'm a practicing lesbian. Well, I'm at an age where I no longer practice. I've pretty much got it down." For the first time there were titters of laughter.

"I would like to ask my significant other to stand, please. Vivienne Wilde. She's lovely and talented and somewhat of a celebrity. She gave this school quite a challenge for a while, until I converted her." More laughter.

"When I was offered this job, I almost rejected it because I worried that I wasn't worthy because my lifestyle is different. I decided to take the position of chancellor because, by doing so, I stand for what I personally believe God stands for. Love. If there's one thing I think God would have me do, it is love. And I have chosen to do that by speaking, teaching, leading this school, and by sharing my love with you...and with her.

"This will not be an easy road for any of us, but we are breaking new ground in the religious community of the world by working together. I don't know at this juncture if the entire Anglican Church will ever support my beliefs, but I will always support yours, as your chancellor."

I spoke for only ten minutes, and at the end of that the crowd slowly stood—at first a few and then others, until the room was on its feet and the applause rang in my ears. I could see Viv's smiling face as she blew a kiss at me, and Margaret's face as she assessed the room, determining where her enemies lay and how successful we were. I had no doubt that she was formidable in battle, and I was glad she was on my side.

I asked Viv to stand with me at the door, one arm around her as I shook hands and hugged people and many hugged her. I felt whole. Sally came up to embrace me, then stepped back as if to size both of us up.

"Très cool. This is the best. I'm telling my parents," she said.

Don't on my account, I thought, but maintained equanimity.

Gladys Irons waited till the very end before approaching me and eying Vivienne, perhaps with some jealousy, I thought, but then quickly dismissed the idea.

“What kind of school is this going to be?” Gladys whimpered, having apparently overheard Sally’s comments. “You don’t realize that we’ll be overrun with lesbians enrolling and gay ministers.”

“I don’t think so, Gladys.”

“I do. I am putting you on warning, Alexandra. As much as I care for you, I’m going to speak my mind—I’m going to protest if that starts occurring. I’ll go directly to Margaret Thurgood personally.”

“You have to do what your mind, soul, and body tell you is right, Gladys. I understand.” I refused to let her upset my day.

“My body is telling me it would like to take you home and rip your robes off,” Viv said, I believed intentionally loud enough for Gladys to hear. Gladys’s irises became pinpoints in a sea of white eyeball, and she covered her mouth to stifle an involuntary gasp and fled.

“Now that’s the kind of remark that will make my job really hard,” I said.

“Hard is good,” she teased as the church bells rang and the congregation clustered in the courtyard of the chapel, chatting with one another. We looked out over the balmy sky above the large stone buildings and sensed that spring was coming for us, and for the church, and that God would bless us all.

POSTSCRIPT

Dear reader, if you've enjoyed the Richfield & Rivers series and *Mistress of the Runes*, along with *Uncross My Heart*, you might note the latter is a keystone in a body of work that began with Callie and Teague (Richfield & Rivers), progressed to Liz and Brice (*Mistress of the Runes*), and culminated with Viv and Alexandra (*Uncross My Heart*).

As the Mistress herself points out, we reincarnate and life itself is a circle—we're here to work on archetypes and issues at many levels, and we do it with people we have known throughout the ages.

Teague (Richfield & Rivers) is simultaneously Brice (*Mistress*) and Alexandra (*Uncross My Heart*)—a trinity of a single being—working on the same issue, which in her case is commitment. At the most carnal level of her being, in Richfield & Rivers, Teague worries about commitment because she'll have to give up other women. In *Mistress*, her slightly more evolved self (Brice) won't commit because she's had four relationships that didn't work out. In *Uncross My Heart*, her higher self (Alexandra) won't commit because she fears her father—both earthly and heavenly.

Callie, Liz, and Viv are the same person working at different levels of consciousness on the issue of spirituality. Callie, in her most nascent efforts, seeks something tangible—the astrology chart—to connect with the other world, while Liz in *Mistress* needs only the intangible—"a knowing" she believes we all have if we will only listen to it. And finally Viv in *Uncross My Heart* takes the great leap to say that our connection to God is through the deity in ourselves.

In the realm of archetypes, the weary warrior plays out in Teague's

character. She was a cop fighting crime and gave it up to become a screenwriter, but continued to battle entertainment moguls. As Brice she's an executive fighting the corporations yet has flashbacks of having been a warrior centuries before. And finally as Alexandra, she's a priest fighting the church and her own sexuality.

Callie's archetype is enlightened teacher. In the Richfield & Rivers series she is "given" to Teague to teach her to be less jaded and more open to the cosmos. As Liz in *Mistress* she teaches Brice to set herself free and embrace her sexuality. And finally as Viv in *Uncross My Heart* she challenges Alexandra to accept her own enlightenment and divest herself of religious and sexual repression.

Secondary characters play across the time and space of all the books, as evidenced by Alexandra's father in *Uncross My Heart* who meets Viv and immediately wants to dance with her and later, in a non-lucid moment, begs Alexandra not to "kill me again." Alexandra wonders if he's asking her not to break his heart by having another affair with a woman. In fact, he is the king in *Mistress of the Runes* who was beheaded by a warrior (under Brice's command) who stole his queen (Vivienne). The king is back as Alexandra's father, dominating her in a different way by denying her a relationship with any woman.

And bit players perform at multiple levels as well. The blue-eyed ethereal Callie in the Richfield & Rivers series is a portent of messengers to come, including the Mistress herself—an amalgam of the blue-eyed shopkeeper who encouraged Brice to buy the antique horse and begin her journey, the docent in *Mistress* who said there are plenty of battles yet to fight, and the blue-eyed Indian woman who said of Brice's land purchase, "The land outlives us, so who owns who?" This blue-eyed messenger is also the mysterious priest on the park bench in *Uncross My Heart* who encourages Alexandra to join the church and fight from within. And again, the messenger is the blue-eyed mother superior who tells Alexandra that before she can share the truth with others, she must know it for herself.

Subtle connective tissue binds the three series, such as the Richfield & Rivers death stones, the rune stones in *Mistress*, and the stone buildings and tablets of the church in *Uncross My Heart*. The basset hound Elmo in the Richfield & Rivers series is Teague's best friend, the Icelandic mare Rune in *Mistress* is Brice's mirror on relationships, and Ketch in *Uncross My Heart* is Alexandra's "shepherd."

While we never intended any of these elements to be overtly evident to readers, we do think they provide another layer, particularly for those interested in reincarnation and parallel lives.

ANDREWS & AUSTIN

About the Authors

Andrews & Austin's strong characters step off the page with style and humor, the same attributes the authors strive to achieve as they lead exciting lives on their horse ranch, running their entertainment network, and other related ventures. When they're not writing, they're riding.

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