

UNCROSS MY HEART

by
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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 rumbled 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 Eleanor 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.” Eleanor’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.