

## Chapter 1

# Religion 180 Apocalyptic Cultures

### *Question Everything*

Curvy black lines, twisting and looping like a composition book's pattern, framed the words. As she waited for the first class to begin, Cadence traced over the tattooed mosaic, and in the needled chaos, spied the outlines of a heart, lightning bolt, and a key. She pondered secrets whispered from the skin, the desire for pictures permanently inked on flesh, and did so until a tall man in a tweed suit and bowtie redirected her thoughts.

"If you hold an opinion—is it entirely yours?" A cascade of forehead wrinkles gave the impression he was waiting for an answer, but he wasn't. He liked cranking the mental wheels into action and watching them grind painfully out from summer's sleep. As a professor of religion, he was an expert at shifting ideologies from their supposedly solid foundations.

"Has someone handed you an opinion or a belief you've wholeheartedly accepted without contemplation? Provided so, why'd this person want you to have it? Who enslaves you and why?" He adjusted his silver-rimmed spectacles. "We're all slaves, so how do we obtain the keys to unlock our freedom?"

The introduction jarred Cadence, and the familiar thrill of classes at Charlestowne College returned. As is the way of a good course, eyes widened, asses shifted in seats, and heads turned in search of comrades to navigate new territory.

"Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. It is

the opium of the people.’ Anyone know the origin of these words?”

The tattooed arm rose slowly like a roadside billboard coming into view. “Marx. Karl Marx.”

Dr. Sessions grinned. “We’ve been taught to believe that.”  
“It’s not true?” asked a guy in the back.

“I’m not going to tell you—at least, not right now.” Teasing them, he shifted to his syllabus, explaining his policies and announcing the assignment for next class—find the origins of Marx’s opium quotation.

Like a preacher closing a sermon, he gave his congregation something else to ponder before dismissing them: “You’ve all been given opinions—they’ve been handed to you since childhood. As adults, it’s time to assess why you’ve got them.”

With a mere two semesters in her experience, Cadence had learned enough to determine when to keep a class and when to drop. On the advice of Saida and Diana, friends from freshman year, she knew there was no way heaven or hell could drag her from this course.

Almost four months had separated her from Charleston, a mystical city where the heartbeat was concentrated on what locals affectionately called *the peninsula*. It was a place that visually inked its colors into the mind’s eye—from the pulsating pastels of its historic homes to the flowering wonders sprouting along narrow streets and behind wrought iron gates—a priceless portrait awaited every glance. Charleston was her own tattoo artist, and travelers who took the bridges elsewhere carried her indelible marks whether they wanted to or not.

Charlestowne College’s campus oozed the charm which made the city the toast of the South: strolling beneath grand

oaks, which cast a haphazard network of shadows along heringbone paths, up to piazzas where professors sipped iced tea from mason jars while genteelly debating politics, religion, and philosophy in oversized rocking chairs. Cadence had yet to sit on a porch and engage with esteemed scholars, but it remained a fantasy along with other scenarios she clung to. She was back to fulfill more dreams in the Holy City, a place which tested her so profoundly in her first nine months of her higher education. What began as a hassle of fulfilling class requirements turned into an addiction for learning.

Fresh from a class with a professor tossing out questions about religion, Cadence was on her way to her second class when a well-dressed man approached her at the corner.

“Good morning, Miss, would you like one of these?”

In his outstretched hand was a pocket-sized New Testament—a small, green reminder of Jesus’s powerful words shoved in a convenient package. As if the green was the same brand of contraband as in the prophet’s day, the Bible pusher looked nervously about before passing the book to Cadence. Apparently, the student body was already in need of salvation before another semester of sin was even well underway.

“Therein lies the keys to everlasting life. Let it keep you safe,” he whispered. “God protect and keep you.”

Taking it, Cadence thanked him. She wasn’t sure if his safety comment referred to the city under siege. While Cadence and her friends had enjoyed the summer in the comforts of their hometowns, a serial rapist had made the Lowcountry a very uncomfortable place. His victims, nine to date, were mostly college age, except for a few young women in their mid-twenties.

All attacks occurred at night. This criminal's *modus operandi* was to break-in and wait like a viper coiled in ambush. Closets were favorite hiding places, so he effectively managed to resurrect the monster-in-the-dark nightmare most people bury by adulthood. With school back in session and more coeds about, it was open season on the unsuspecting ones.

Although law enforcement was vigilant, this phantom left scant evidence. He continued wearing a mask and gloves but took great pleasure in leaving partial traces of himself in the women, although he reserved full ejaculation for one of his hands. The fingers of his latex covering held the semen that would have given investigators a full DNA profile, a clue he denied them again and again in the nine rapes they knew about. The victims recounted all the details they could despite their shock, and each recalled nonsensical mumblings, incantations delivered in a methodical tone but with sounds none understood. And while they all carried the psychological trauma inflicted by this psychopath, victims eight and nine carried even more—numerical marks he carved into their flesh before vanishing.

Some nervous parents had not allowed their children to return. Cadence's were quite concerned and debated letting her continue at Charlestowne. Ultimately, they relied on their faith and the common sense of their daughter to lock doors, walk with an escort, and avoid dark and strange places. Her father ordered a case of pepper spray, the key ring-canister kind, and made her promise to carry one at all times. Others were to be given to her friends. In the event something terrible did happen, he swore eye-for-an-eye justice would be served by means of a hunting knife, gun, and shovel. Cadence was surprised when she heard her father mention *castration* and *shooting* and *grave*.

Her mother armed her daughter not with concentrated spices in a container but with strength from spiritual verses she called up at any time of day or night.

As the first morning of class moved on, Cadence spotted a girl with an expression the now sophomore knew all too well. Clutching a crumpled piece of paper, the girl spun on an axis of confusion.

“Hey, can I help you find something?”

The freshman looked more nervous at the fact that she was lost. “Um, yeah.” Holding up the schedule, she showed Cadence the classroom she sought.

“It’s there.” She pointed to the building behind them. “Top floor.” Glancing at the paper, Cadence smiled. “You have Professor Mirabilis for English. I had her last year.”

“Really? Is she good?”

“Tough, but I took two classes with her.” In the same way advice had been given to Cadence regarding her hardest class, she passed on the wisdom to the newcomer named Seleste and headed to her own next course.

History of Ancient Civilizations was a requirement intended to instill students with some sense from whence this world came. Because all sections had been full, Cadence grabbed what was left, so she here she was, along with her new classmates still waiting ten minutes after the hour when a disheveled man shuffled in. He shouted out the course’s title, admitted he didn’t have a syllabus ready, and launched into a rambling lecture. With barely time to put fingers to keyboards or pens to paper, students wheeled around the globe in a manner certainly fitting Dr. Spinner’s name. They moved speedily through Mesopotamia to MesoAmerica, from Peru to China, Greece to the

Mideast until notes resembled the logophonetic writing systems of these earliest empires.

History Horrible—Cadence could tell already, but just to make certain, she checked out some reviews on the “Evaluate my Educator” site. Just as she thought—confirmed terrible. *Unorganized, boring, and just plain awful*, read one comment, while another drew attention to a serious problem: *Subject Schizophrenic—all over the place. Can’t ever tell what period we’re studying. Seriously, I need a map and he needs meds*. Her eyes were drawn to one more opinion: *Would rather be subjected to the Spanish Inquisition than sit in the class*.

The last comment aptly reminded Cadence of her first-term music class. For fear her schedule would somehow be irrevocably harmed, she remained in Professor Brodsky’s class. He was cruel, and the kindest comment she could make about the experience in the hell of his course was meeting her current roommate, Reena.

Reena arrived as a sophomore with more baggage than she had as a freshman, but the heaviest bags were never seen because she carried those inside. Much of the weight resulted from her tempestuous relationship with Blaze, a guy she met in her first days in the city and the person she spent nearly every night with until the woman he’d given a promise ring to showed up during the final days of classes.

The scene was catastrophic, and luckily for Reena, the miles separating her from Charleston proved cathartic, as did some heavy therapy for her history of cutting. Somehow, Reena managed to salvage what was left of her heart after the Blaze debacle, and she returned to school fairly stable, other than the occasional mopey episode. With help from Reena, surviving a

course like Brodsky's armed Cadence with the confidence to tackle any class, but she had no intentions of repeating past miseries, so she found an open seat in another history course and promptly switched.

The one place Cadence was anxious to visit was c.a.t.'s, and when she opened the door, her eyes met the framed photo she took months ago, and her nostrils welcomed the smell of the coffeehouse's signature drink—the Lowcountry Latte. She barely crossed the threshold when the owner wrapped her arms around the returning student.

"Honey! It's so very good to see you," Catissa said. "I hoped you'd be by sooner than later. Let's get you some coffee."

Within minutes, Cadence held the coveted cup and was being led to the office where a wildly excited white boxer nearly knocked the girl to the floor. Kyd tried covering every inch of her face with his sloppy tongue, and she marveled out how much he'd grown. He towered over her as she sat on the floor and took in as much boxer affection as Catissa's adopted child would give.

"How was your summer?"

"All right. I got a job as a server at a local diner in my hometown. Helped out on my family's farm. Did some photography work."

"Have you made the arrangements with the court for the charity project yet?" Catissa asked, referring to the community service Cadence needed to fulfill before December, punishment for her underage drinking arrest last semester.

"It's on my list to do," Cadence said. "Have any suggestions for a place that could use me?"

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Catissa said, bending to pick up some paper on the floor. As she did, a silver key attached to a chain fell from her blouse.

“New necklace?” Cadence asked, having never known Cat to wear much jewelry.

Catissa held up the key, an antique-looking one, with two purple stones embedded in its eyes. “Old necklace, new reasons for wearing it.”

“Oh? What’s it open?”

“Nothing and everything. It’s a skeleton key, capable of opening many locks.”

“Creepy name for a key.”

“It has only essential parts, designed to bypass ‘wards,’ or obstructions in a lock with the amethyst stones—for protection.” She ran her finger along the smooth shaft where a serrated edge would be for normal key. “I’m hoping it’ll ‘ward’ off what’s threatening our community.”

“It’s an unusual piece,” Cadence said. “Where’d you get it?”

“It was my grandmother’s.” Catissa kissed the key and tucked it back in her shirt. “Where were we? Oh yes, the local homeless shelter needs help. For some, times are always tough, and for this community, it’s the place a lot of folks turn to.”

“Who I should talk to?”

As is the way with life-long residents, Catissa seemed to know everyone. “Ask for Natasha.”

Cadence sipped the sweetness in her first coffee of the term. “Mmmm. It’s just like I remember it. Maybe it’s better.”

“Distance making the taste buds grown fonder?” Catissa chuckled. “Speaking of distance, when will I see your rock star?”

The soothing expression on Cadence's face slid off instantly. "You won't. We broke up. Schilar's not coming back." Instinctually, her teeth grabbed her bottom lip to prevent the tears. Cadence already shed enough over the split with her musician boyfriend from freshman year. It took a few moments to gather herself, but Cadence managed to tell Catissa what happened.

When they parted in May, Cadence felt certain they'd be reunited in August, but by June, latent problems began to rise. He was on tour. Different cities every other night, cafés and clubs, bars and beaches became his summer residences, and she barely had time to talk to him between gigs. The ever-present lure of women looking to hook-up with the man in the spotlight only added to the tension and resulted in feelings she didn't want to experience and thoughts of infidelity she never wanted to entertain. But she did, and the more they talked from afar, the worse they became as a couple.

The siren song of touring proved too powerful, and she quickly learned she was no competition for the pavement. Despite the milestones they traveled together in two semesters, the road won his heart, and in the process, hers was abandoned, a casualty on the asphalt of rock 'n roll.

Upstairs, Cadence found Catissa had painted over the graffiti-laden walls in this space of pondering. The consilium was a place to leave mental marks—poems, phrases, messages, musings. More than a few times, matters of the heart appeared in the room, and for this year, Catissa chose William Butler Yeats's "A Drinking Song" to set the stage for inspiration:

*Wine comes in at the mouth  
And love comes in at the eye;*

*That's all we shall know for truth  
Before we grow old and die.  
I lift the glass to my mouth,  
I look at you, and I sigh.*

“Catissa, I think it’s one of the best poems I’ve ever read.”

“Glad you like it. I think so, too.”

“The title’s kind of funny.”

“Oh, it’s apt. The speaker’s drinking in his subject with the eyes, along with those truths, especially the love at first sight one.”

Cadence turned to her. “D’you believe in love at first sight?”

Catissa peered at the wall then to Cadence. “I believe we are first intrigued by what we see from afar. When we get closer, we look beyond the surface to something deeper. But by that time, the other senses and the heart have a say in the pursuit. Love begins with eyes we’re willing to see with, but it ends with so much more.”

“Honestly, Catissa. You should teach a class.”

“I prefer being a professor of percolating coffee.” She laughed. “Too many politics over there for anyone’s good. Catissa glanced at her watch. “I need to get back downstairs. A certain four-legged boy has a date with the vet.”

“Is something wrong with Kyd?”

“Oh, nothing a little snip won’t cure.”

Cadence made a pouty face. “Poor guy.”

Following the coffee, Cadence swung over to the offices of the school newspaper. At the urging of her Freshman Seminar professor, Dr. Elders, Cadence became a photographer and reporter for *The Gator*. Being newspaper staff made life infinitely

more interesting, if not downright uncomfortable, especially as she saw the hanging body of a suicide victim, spent time in a strip club, and faced an anonymous group of saboteurs called The Harpies, who were seeking retribution for a sexual assault involving her suitemate, Penny.

When Penny awoke on a floor back in October, she couldn't remember what happened. She did know she partied with members of the half-rubber ball squad, and she held a particular attraction for the star pitcher named Ren. The night was going well until everything faded into blackness after shots of moonshine. Naked and alone, she looked up to see Ren in his bed. He mumbled something about a good time before Penny limped home. The pain between her legs made walking difficult, and at the time, she just wanted to feel clean, so she took a bath before Saida and Cadence convinced her to go to the emergency room for a rape test.

In the weeks following, rumors spread of Penny taking on several members of the squad. Tests revealed she had sex with a number of partners and been sodomized, but DNA evidence proved inconclusive. Because she couldn't recall the details of the encounter, the investigation stalled. Her friends watched the once curious and vibrant young woman devolve into a shell of her former self. Wracked with regret and paralyzed by depression, Penny barely survived first year semesters. She was put on academic probation for an abysmal GPA, although it was noted her subpar grades were due to extenuating circumstances.

The end to the semester of hell came when a campus judicial hearing was held. Character witnesses, loyally siding with Ren, spoke of *honor*, *integrity*, *misunderstandings*—hollow terms to Penny who listened silently to a very different version of events. But the most damaging word was *victim*. Each squad

member snatched the descriptor from Penny and turned it on the star player. During the proceeding, Ren admitted he was an alcoholic, a victim of his insatiable longing for drink and needed help to better his life. With weepy theatrics engineered by an attorney, his sob story of binging and booze was substantiated by his cohorts and a counselor, who reported on the progress Ren was making in therapy.

The more he spoke, the more his confessions stained her character. “I liked her. And I enjoyed her company. I thought we had something going,” he said, pausing to wipe his eyes. “I, I don’t know why it’s come to this. We were havin’ a good time. I’d never hurt a girl. I dunno know what went wrong with us.”

Penny almost threw up in her mouth, but she held it—and so much more—in. The judiciaries found Ren guilty of inappropriate conduct, especially in regard to underage drinking, but because the evidence of sexual assault was so scant, they did not convict on that accusation. Another blow came with the punishment: a ten-page research paper and probation. Nothing more. The final nail in the coffin of Penny’s character was hammered in by those whose heartstrings were played upon by someone used to throwing curveballs.

“Penny, I hate to say it, but your parents’ bank account didn’t win this one,” her counselor said after the ordeal.

“Why? Because we didn’t hire an attorney?” Penny asked, as they walked toward a waiting taxi.

“No. I mean because of financial contributions. They have a way of swaying decisions. The word comes down from the top. Verdicts are in the interest of those who will make substantial money come the school’s way.”

“How d’you know?”

“When you’ve been around a system long enough, you know the machinations. Those sports guys have die-hard followers, lots of alumni with deep pockets. This case was decided before you ever went to the hearing.”

Penny closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Somehow, I held out hope I’d get something from the hearing.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah—raped again.” Penny hugged her therapist goodbye and waved from the cab on her way to the airport.

Throughout the summer, Penny insisted she’d return to Charlestowne, but ultimately, the vision she held of the sacred place everyone else adored was blurred. She took to calling it “The Hell City.” A day before she was to move into the dorms, she called Saida to say she was never coming back.

Saida suspected the news was coming and while she’d certainly been sympathetic to Penny’s situation, the jilted roommate was beyond pissed off at the lateness of the decision. She now had no time to find someone she wanted to live with, which meant the school would play Roommate Russian Roulette.

Few students expect the repeat experience of sleeping feet from a stranger in their sophomore year, but that’s exactly what Saida got the day before classes began when a freshman took up occupancy in her room. Like most newcomers, Lydia held a wide-eyed look of innocence as she decorated her side of their space. Above her bed, she hung a large, white piece of foam board featuring images cut from magazines: handsome men in tuxedos, a diamond ring, silver convertible, trendy handbags, a mansion on a cliff, a group of women laughing in loud silence.

“What’s that?” Saida asked on their first night together.

“It’s a vision board,” Lydia replied. “You’ve never heard of one?”

“No.” Saida wrinkled her brow at the mosaic.

“Well roomie, we’ll have to make you one. Maybe we can on Friday night.”

“I don’t think so.” Saida flipped the pages of her chemistry book. “I don’t need a board about my dreams.”

“What are your dreams?”

Saida looked blankly at Lydia. “They’re personal. But if I decide to share them with someone, I’ll let you know. You can make me a vision board.” The latest stranger in her life giggled, as Saida rolled her eyes.

On the other side of the wall where the collage of Lydia’s future hung, Reena tacked a single image above her bed—a gigantic iceberg. Jutting from the water like a mountain, its white mass cut a contrast against the indigo sea, except at its base where brilliant shades of aqua formed a ring as it met the ocean.

“Is that a statement on the climate or something?” Cadence asked Reena who was getting ready to meet former roommate Miranda for coffee.

“What, my iceberg?” Reena glanced at her picture. “It’s part of my therapy. Wanna guess what it means?”

Cadence studied the bobbing mass that didn’t move. “Um, d’you want to . . . go far away or freeze your problems? Oh wait, it means you’ve chilled out.”

Reena smirked. “No, silly. You can see only a small portion of an iceberg because most of it, 7/8ths, is below the water line.”

“That’s deep, Reena.”

“What’s the point of being shallow? Everything I throw myself into, I do it deeply, you know?” Reena grabbed her purse. “See you later.”

Alone, Cadence pondered the picture and hoped it symbolized a cooling of her roomie’s passions. Cadence would be happy if Reena’s feelings for the guy who led the double life went gone to arctic levels. It would be the best way of ensuring Reena was rid of Blaze who, like the Titanic’s captain, ran the luxury of her love into the frigid depths of darkness.

Unlike past mistakes Cadence made in thinking her professors would allow their pupils to ease into work, she knew results were expected from the beginning, so rather than give into the temptations of procrastination, she seized the moment and began to search for the answers to her religion professor’s challenge.

Luckily, she learned from Professor Mirabilis how to conduct reliable research, so Cadence easily found the answer to Dr. Sessions’s question, but she could hardly believe where the trail of knowledge was leading. She heard the terms *sadism* and *sadist* before but had no idea of their origins. The story of how they evolved reminded her of what she learned from Shakespeare: art merely mirrors human nature. In this case, the dictionary clearly reflected the twisted psyche of a delusionally brilliant man.

Writer, aristocrat, monster, criminal, adulterer, nihilist, blasphemer, pervert, degenerate, libertine, politician, pornographer, pioneer, convict, torturer, lunatic, atheist, rebel: the French philosopher Marquis de Sade wore many masks and used them all in challenging every aspect of French society.

In his novel *Juliette*, de Sade traces the success of a nymphomaniac murderer whose vices are continually rewarded. Raised in a convent, Juliette is seduced at a young age by a woman who influences the girl to see concepts like morality, God, and love, as meaningless. She enjoys her life with total disregard for the happiness of others, and in one scene with a king, explains the effects of his policies: “You fear the powerful eye of genius, that is why you encourage ignorance. This is the opium you feed your people, so that, drugged, they do not feel their hurts, inflicted by you.”

Cadence glanced at the little green book sitting next to the stack of academic ones. It was so small, a David to the Goliaths of reason and research. Did the tiny text give believers a hit of hope, a bump of need, a fix against the depressions and devastations? Were the Lord’s words an opiate, satiating addicts by numbing them from contemplating deeper reasons for life’s tragedies and tribulations? Was religion a lock confining true desires and liberty, its key fiercely guarded by those who profited best from selling salvation and damnation?

Absolute freedom—unfettered by established institutions like law or religion—was de Sade’s governing belief, along with achieving pleasure by inflicting pain. He exercised it liberally through his violently cruel sexual liaisons with prostitutes, his wife, sister-in-law, and manservant. Thousands of pages reflected his convictions and fantasies.

Rapt by the writing, Cadence kept reading. Each sentence flouted every wholesome lesson ever pressed upon her and then she reached a passage almost too profane for print: “I think that if here were a God, there would be less evil on this earth. I believe that if evil exists here below, then either it was willed by God or it was beyond His powers to prevent it. Now I cannot

bring myself to fear a God who is either spiteful or weak. I defy Him without fear and care not a fig for his thunderbolts.”

God wasn't the only power de Sade defied, for he continued his pornographic writings and was imprisoned in an insane asylum by Napoleon. For his remaining thirteen years, The Marquis enjoyed lovers, a library, and a literary life, all while locked up. Despite being a sociopath who exposed the evil lurking within all human beings, he died at seventy-four peacefully in his sleep after a day of sodomy with his thirteen-year-old mistress. Vice rewarded, indeed.

Cadence felt as if the pages would spontaneously combust from blasphemy along with herself for reading them, but she read on because the metaphysical conundrums de Sade presented were too mentally tempting not to explore.

Her classmates did not find de Sade as the sole architect of the phrase but contributed it to German philosopher Novalis who wrote, “Their so-called religion acts merely as an opiate: irritating, numbing, calming their pain out of weakness.” Professor Sessions noted the challenges in tracing words and ideas, as both have many incarnations across time spans, especially in regard to belief's mysteries.

A mystery was exactly what Enna, a freshman hallmate, and her friends put Degue and Cadence onto thanks to a board of names, all purportedly sexual assault victims. A feather floating to the floor after a surprise collision on their hall last semester, clued Cadence onto the identity of at least one of The Harpies, and she wasted no time in asking Enna questions when they met.

Enna acted as if she didn't know what Cadence was talking about when the inquiry began, but she finally said, “I'm not

sure I want to tell you. Does that black guy you work with know my secret?"

"No, I didn't tell Degue. I haven't told anyone."

"I'm sure you can guess who the other two are?"

"Myla and Althea," Cadence said, referring to Enna's roommates.

Enna neither confirmed nor denied but glanced coolly around. "I have a campus source. Someone who knows about certain incidents. This person only gives first names, not last ones. They're all real, though."

"I know who the first one on the board is. My suitemate from last year."

"Yes, we knew about Penny. She's one of the more recent victims."

"How far back do the other names go?"

"At least seven years. But we've known about the names for only a year."

"Okay. Tell me about the moonshine. It's what you told us to follow when we met in that room."

"We've heard victims drank it."

Cadence thought for a moment. "I remember Penny saying she had some with the half-rubber team."

"But there's more to these cases than people drinking moonshine and passing out."

"Why would this source leak the names to you?"

Enna looked past her friend into the distance. "Disillusionment. This person's tired of seeing innocent people hurt and nothin' being done about it. It's why we tipped you off. We need more people—trusted ones—to help us figure it out."

"What about the police?"

"No," she replied, without further explanation.

Figuring out cases was exactly the practice students would get in Dr. Clavier's Investigative Reporting class, and the first face Cadence saw when she walked in was not a stranger's.

"Paparazzi!" An embrace which squeezed the breath out of her followed the greeting. Dakota was full of stories about his summer internship in New York, his drag show appearance in the Big Apple, and the new man in his life.

"Gurrllll, he is tall, dark, and heathen. A beautiful, bad boy to the bone, every pun intended!"

"Oh no, what'd you two do?"

The dramatic arch of Dakota's perfectly groomed eyebrows answered first. "Broadway shows, cabaret, museums and plays. We dined, wined, and had a fine time—with an emphasis on the 'f.'"

"And your internship?"

"Office bitch at your service." He flipped his hands over in offering. "Glorified espresso fetcher, errand granter, copy machine diva. I did work on some cool stuff. They want me to come back next summer. By the way, have you seen Isabella yet?" Dakota asked of their mutual friend from Mexico.

"No, you?"

"Rough summer for her. Spent a lot of time tryin' to chill the heat between her parents and brother."

"So they haven't come around to Roano?"

"Not even close. Poor thing. Absolutely stuck in the middle, but she met someone. I'll let her tell you all about him. Now, how about you, doll? Tell me about your break."

Cadence shrugged. "Nothin' to tell. No guy, no glamour."

"Well, sista. We've got some work to do."

Of all her friends from freshman year, Dakota was the biggest diva with an empowering energy capable of lifting anyone from the doldrums. Since the two survived a previous communications course, they were already on familiar ground in this one.

Cadence's course lineup was full of changes, and she made one more before the first day. She decided to switch a logic class for a special topics English course after reading a description on the inventor of the detective story and the master of macabre:

*From the catacombs to cadavers to the castles Edgar Allan Poe pondered during his stationing on Sullivan's Island, this course explores the maddening marks of this literary genius and Charleston's impact on his work.*

No one saw Dr. Ainsworth's face when he entered the windowless classroom, because he plunged his pupils into darkness with the flick of the light. They heard a chair pulled from under the desk then the scrape of a match brought the glow illuminating his face. He moved the flame to a candlestick on the desk and lit the wick before opening a leather-bound book.

As if they were sitting fireside at summer camp trading ghost stories, he read the tale of an old man, a beating heart, and a stalker crazed by the pale, blue, vulture eye. In seeking to destroy it, the narrator kills the man he purports to love, dismembers him, and buries the remains beneath the floorboards. The madman convinces the police all is well until "a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton" proves his unwinding. Plagued by the steadily increasing pulse, the narrator finally relents: "Villains! . . . dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

The professor closed the book. “Poe crawls into the sinister depths of the human mind and takes us along for the observing. This may be troublesome for you. If so, don’t venture into the catacombs, cellars, and crevices with me. It may be far too criminal for those of you with delicate psyches.” With a swift blow, he extinguished the candle, and the last they saw of the eerie educator was the lanky silhouette moving from the room.

Cadence expected to be behind in history since she transferred into a different section, but the professor canceled the first class due to illness. When he entered the lecture hall, he smiled sweetly, apologized for his absence, and opened a thick, black book. Its glossy cover shot reflections of the fluorescent lights across the audience.

“Few teachers understand that the aim of studying history can never be to learn historical dates and events by heart and recite them by rote; that what matters is not whether the child knows exactly when this or that battle was fought, when a general was born . . . . No, by the living God, this is very unimportant. To “learn” history means to seek and find the forces which are the causes leading to those effects which we subsequently perceive as historical events.”

Dr. Roseglass’s attention moved from the pages to the hundreds of eyes staring at him. “How many of you agree history is more than just names and dates?”

Most arms stretched toward the ceiling as if they were saluting a great truth some education revolutionary had finally realized. Years of matching dates and names in standardized bubbles resulted in mental emptiness—the unfortunate side effect of purging surface information to reach acceptable test

scores. In the war against historical identity ignorance, they were failing.

Dr. Roseglass marched on. “Listen to one student’s description of his history teacher: ‘Even today I think back with gentle emotion on this gray-haired man who, by the fire of his narratives, sometimes made us forget the present; who, as if by enchantment, carried us into past time and, out of the millennial veils of mist, molded dry historical memories into living reality.’” He looked to them again. “Comments?” A few hands went up, he pointed to one.

“It’s the kind of passion I’d like all my teachers to have,” a student offered.

Another added, “Yeah, especially with history. It’s so boring.”

Their professor grimaced. “Boring? Boredom with our own stories ensures we’re bound to write the same ones again.”

“Who wrote that book?” someone asked.

Dr. Roseglass stepped to the front row and held up the cover for the inquiring student. He didn’t recognize the title or know exactly how to pronounce it, but the author’s name was infamous. “Adolf Hitler.”

The instant the two words infiltrated the hall, a chilling silence settled. “You’re reading from Hitler’s autobiography?” a student named Piper asked.

“I am. *Mein Kampf*, which means *My Struggle* or *My Battle*, was a publishing phenomenon. Ten million copies sold during his rise to power. And from 1936, the Nazi government gifted a copy to every German couple married.”

“You think that’s appropriate?” A guy some distance from the lecturer asked.

“The wedding gift?”

“No, reading it to us.”

“Isn’t it?” the professor asked.

“I’m Jewish, and I’m offended the book is still printed and you’re reading it.”

Dr. Roseglass climbed the steps toward the objector. “Does studying history mean we should ignore texts that challenge our beliefs and ideologies?”

“This is more than a challenging text. He used it to destroy my people.”

“Did he succeed?” He paused, hoping the obvious evidence would understand. “Your presence serves as proof the Final Solution wasn’t absolutely successful. Tell me, what would you have me read to understand the thoughts of a genocidal maniac?”

“I’m not sure. Anything but that.”

The teacher traced his steps back to the front. “Fear of the uncomfortable, unpleasant, offensive parts of history prevents us from arriving at a comprehensive understanding of it. I side with Winston Churchill, who wrote of the book: ‘Here was the new Koran of faith and war: turgid, verbose, shapeless, but pregnant with its message.’ And we would’ve been the wiser to read it.”

He held the book aloft, pointing out over the crowd. “And what did the pregnancy produce? A monster of murderous magnitudes. Think of the forces it took to stop what had been unleashed. The struggle for power is ancient, voracious, and we would do well to give our undivided attention to words we wish were never inked.”

Cadence was glad she switched into his section. With the first round of classes down, she also looked forward to repeating the history opening every semester—an epic party. On

Saturday night, they found the one they'd talk about for all time.

Cadence, Diana, and Saida ventured to a house party on one of the islands. On the way, the latter two discussed the bet they made in May. *The Great Handcuff Heist*, as they named the game, involved Diana seducing a security officer named Felix Harden. The wager was partially a test of Saida's keyring theory, which posited the number of keys a man has was directly proportional to his responsibilities. The more keys, the more difficult he was to score, so Diana had until Halloween to bed Officer Harden for a pair of thousand-dollar shoes. If she lost, Saida got something of equal value. It was on, but problems had already arisen since the target was now working day shift, which meant speaking with him clandestinely was more difficult. Ladies didn't exactly need escorts from the library in daylight as they did at night.

In regard to guys on Saida's bedding list, there were none slated—yet, and although possibilities abounded, she definitely wanted a challenge and was always on the lookout for one.

The partyhouse was an impressive place just off the river with a dock jutting yards out over the marsh. The moment they opened the car's doors, the salty air infused their blood with an energy denied during those summer months. They were greeted by Saida's classmate, Samson, who carried a large, silver loop like the kind used for hanging belts.

"Welcome to my party. 'Saida,' is it?" His question was met by her affirming grin. "Glad you made it."

"New fashion trend?" She pointed to the ring where hundreds of keys dangled at his side.

"Not quite. It's insurance. I'm the keymaster. If you want to play in my kingdom, you have to give up yours."

“I don’t give my keys to anyone,” Saida said.

“Then you and your friends can get back in your car and leave. It’s the rule. No exceptions. When you’re ready to go, your designated driver gets them.”

A line of impatient partiers was forming behind them, and Saida, having driven out for a night of fun, reluctantly removed the others except the one to her car and handed it over.

The cover charge of a key was worth it. A professional DJ spun tunes for a crowd circling like vultures about the kegs, which were like an oasis to coeds who crawled across the desert of summer to reach this relief. A never-ending flow of the golden stuff worked like nostalgic transfusions, reminders of indeed returning to America’s edge.

They danced bare patches on the grass and jumped so hard it was a wonder they didn’t register quakes on local seismographs. Every few songs, they’d stop to swallow the foamy goodness in red cups or the pungent fruitiness of Jell-O shots, which cooled skin shining with sweat against the oppressive August humidity. On occasion, they chatted about the summer that was no more.

“I spent mine at a camp for kids,” Diana said. “Teaching swimming lessons, arts and crafts. Stuff like that.”

“How very do-gooder of you.” Saida cut a smile.

“I got paid for it, so it wasn’t all bad. What? You have something against children?”

“No.” Saida pursed her lips. “Just don’t care for them. Spent my summer volunteering at a retirement home.”

Diana nearly spit out her drink. “You?”

“Don’t be so surprised. It was for a business class. I had to assess their budget, profit margins, expenses, all that. Anyway,

this old nurse there couldn't quite understand why I was bothering so much with numbers. Told me it was my job to find myself a man, so I could make babies."

"She didn't!" Cadence shook her head.

"Yes, she did. I listened to her traditional crap until my last day when I gave her a present for being such a positive mentor," she said, with a half-smile.

"What'd you give her?"

"A nice figurine. The image of the first woman."

"You gave her a statue of Eve?" Cadence asked.

"No, Lilith."

"You didn't!" Diana said, as Saida laughed.

"Okay, what am I missing?" Cadence asked.

"In Jewish proverbs," Saida began, "Lilith was Adam's first wife. But she didn't want to assume the missionary position. She thought they were equal. So, she rebelled and abandoned him."

"I haven't heard of her."

"Cause she's been turned into a demon in history—a strangler of infants and seductress of men."

Diana took up the history: "Dr. Sessions teaches about her. What happened when you gave her Lilith?"

Saida's attention turned from the keymaster back to her friends. "First, I had to explain who it was, but I made sure we were within distance of a defibrillator, just in case."

"Oh, God!" Diana covered her mouth.

"Nope, she didn't drop dead, but through clenched teeth she said, 'thank you.'"

"Saida, you're really a piece of work."

She cackled. "I think so, too."

With the vibe of college-life conversation renewed, they didn't see most of the crowd part for a large, plastic pool the guys were dragging in. The host aimed a water hose while the others emerged carrying white buckets filled with one of the most iconic substances in Lowcountry life.

The DJ stopped spinning to tout any would-be woman to prove herself in the Pluff Mud Suckdown—a quirky play on the muck's famed sucking power. The brownish-gray mud forms the region's ecological mansion—the marshes. Home to millions of life forms, the mucky flats emit a scent, sweet to native nostrils, and repugnant to those from off. More than a few shoes have been sacrificed to the mud's vacuum and those unlucky enough to get stuck in it better pray for rescue before the tide sweeps in to offer a baptismal death.

Water helped loosen the mud, but it held a vice-like grip when two girls stepped into the pool. *Ding, Ding, Ding* signaled the start, and within seconds, nearly every inch of visible flesh was covered in the marsh's natural mask. The erotic effect of watching two warring women roll around in the mud riled baser instincts.

“Show us your tits!” This demand for debauchery came from a tie-and-shorts-wearing guy and commenced a chain reaction of other cat calls, which echoed like wolves howling on a plain.

“And some ass!”

“Strip! Strip! Strip!” became the testosterone-laced chant.

One of the wrestlers obliged. Against the dark mask covering most of her body, the unsullied whiteness of her breasts flashed a stark contrast, which was gone in an instant when her opponent tackled her. The topless one quickly ensured she wasn't the only flasher when she ripped off her opponent's shirt

and the boys surrounding them finally got to see what they were usually denied. The match lasted a few minutes longer before a string of lady couples took to the mud—each desperately trying to outdo the previous performers.

After a few more rounds, the volunteers seemed to taper off until Saida shot back the last of her drink, stepped out of her shoes and around the pool, but instead of meeting the female who awaited, Saida plowed past her to a figure on the other side. Staring him down, she took his drink, threw it aside, and grabbing him by the tie, led her opponent like a donkey to a trough. She did allow him to remove his shoes before planting her right foot into his chest and rolling backwards. Flipping over her, his back met the mud with a splat, and the spectators roared.

Saida had gone out of her skin and traded it for the sweetly robust scent of pluff mud.

The moment her head met the mud, her hair took on a darker shade, and the more she thrashed about in the muck, the more it clung to her curves. He didn't want to hurt her, but fearing a hounding by his buddies, he turned on the aggression, which produced the same effect in Saida.

Eventually, she maneuvered her way on top, pinning her opponent beneath her long enough for the winning bell to sound. She grinned down at him as she felt the genesis of his arousal. Emboldened by her power, she dropped her mouth inches from his. Her hair created a blind to make it seem as if her tongue was touching his tonsils. But her whispered words instantly melted the astonished grin from his face. The crowd roared, and for the moment, Saida savored the sound until she looked up to see a silent word spat down from a mouth she despised.

Above her, outfitted in a white dress like a virgin princess poised for sacrifice, stood Madison, fingering her mother's pearls. The tiny orbs shined like little moons over her deeply bronzed skin. Last year, through a string of anonymous messages targeting Penny's supposed promiscuity, Madison and her crony Malinda made life torturous for Saida and her former roommate. Now, she was smirking down at Saida who was rolling around like a swine in the mud. "Whore" slipped soundlessly from her lips again.

No precise measurement exists for the speed at which Saida moved, but one moment Madison was lovely in white, and a zeptosecond later, she was clothed in mud when Saida let loose months of pent-up rage on the one who brought more pain to a person at woe's limit. If Saida kept at it, Madison would be bald and certainly black and blue, once she washed off the gray.

Saida should have known Malinda wouldn't be far behind, and soon the devious duo were turning their ire on Saida. With a quick glance at one another, Diana and Cadence jumped in. Dianna jerked Malinda off Saida and sent her hurling over the side of the pool where gawkers scrambled out of the way lest they be covered in the sludge. Cadence grabbed Madison and when she did, her face felt the razor swipe of a French manicure. Madison backed in a corner and crouched like a cat ready to spring.

"You bitches want more of me? Come on!"

Saida looked to Diana then to Cadence. "Nope. I think we've had enough. Now everyone can see you're just as dark on the outside as you are on the inside."

Madison's eyes well over the dress which would never know white again. She sucked her tears back in, and her hands went to her neck. "My pearls! My grandmother's pearls! You

fuckin' bitch. You made me lose them!" Dropping to her knees, she slapped the surface. From the edge, Malinda patted the mud in a semblance of search.

Saida towered over Madison like an Amazonian. "Princess, maybe you shouldn't wear precious jewels out in public. You never know who you'll run into."

"You'll pay for this, bitch. Yours is coming."

"Mine? I got mine, and so did Penny, last year. Yours has been coming for far too long, and I doubt I'm done with you. Enjoy your semester, Madison. I hope it's positively slimy for you, bitch!"

Madison didn't stay to look for her necklace, but demanded Samson return the pearls immediately when found. She huffed off, flanked by her gang who received her gift of splatter each time her limbs flailed.

Everyone watched her leave while Saida, Cadence, and Diana stood in the sucking ground. Not an inch of them resembled their natural color, and their laughing fit wasn't enough to shake the mud.

"Dirty ladies, y'all ready for a shower?" Samson handed the trio the last shots of Jell-O.

Squeezing the cherry gelatin into her mouth, Saida's eyes didn't move from him. "What d'you have in mind?"

He led them to a cinder block room tucked beside the garage, where a flip of the switch revealed an outdoor shower.

"There's robes and towels in there. I can throw your clothes in the wash." He turned to go.

"Aren't you getting in with us?" Saida asked.

"No. I have keys to return." He shut the door.

Diana laughed. "Guess that one's not so charmed by your wiles, Saida."

“All in time, Diana. All in time. Besides, I like a good challenge, don’t you?”

Each stepped in—clothes and all to shed the skin they’d willingly allowed themselves to be tattooed with. None thought it was possible pluff mud could make it into crevices they didn’t even know they had. It would take many showers before all of it was gone and for days, they would continue to scrape the dried earth from places it settled. Following their mud therapy, Saida emerged from the match with one more reminder of triumph—a pearl necklace compliments of her archrival. She wrapped the trophy around her wrist.

Snuggled in Samson’s robes, they settled into lounge chairs around the fire pit. When he joined them, his key collection had dwindled significantly.

“So, Samson, when my clothes are dry, I’ll be getting my keys back.” Saida reached for her red cup.

“No, you won’t You can call a cab, find a sober driver, or crash here. I’ll set you up with some pillows and blankets. You can go home in the morning.”

“Not how it’s going to work. I want my keys.”

“Should’ve thought about that before you decided to drink at my party. You’re too drunk to drive. Don’t question it. Just stay here.”

“Saida, he’s right,” Cadence said. “Let’s just stay. It’s not worth it.”

“I’m with Cadence,” Diana added.

Finally, their impaired would-be driver accepted it was best to stay until morning. With their cups replenished, they talked of the year to come: of the sadist stalking women in the dark, of the “what ifs” in pondered scenarios.

“So, keymaster,” Saida said, “what’s the story with your control issues?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Are you not aware the ring you lugged around was filled with some important metal? That’s a lot of responsibility to carry.” Saida winked at Diana who smirked at their inside joke.

“I’ve carried worse.”

“Like what?” Saida fingered the belt of her robe.

Lifting the sleeve of his T-shirt revealed the name *Chase* surrounded by the skeleton of a fish. “The weight of my best friend’s casket probably tops the list.”

For all his life, he was Samson’s brother by fate because their mothers were also as close as two people could be, without being family. Before the boys’ first year of college, they spent it living the summer as lifeguards and anticipating the university adventures to come. Two weeks prior to leaving for college, a party to end all summers was thrown.

There was an exchange student. She was exotic, intriguing, and both had been spinning fantasies about her for weeks. They wanted her, and under sober circumstances what wouldn’t have been an issue, became a heated competition fueled by the bitterness of bourbon and the pain change brings. For the first time in their lives, separation was coming. Samson’s charm won the girl’s affections, and while the two disappeared in a room upstairs, their friends relentlessly teased Chase because he always lost out to Samson.

In the way alcohol fuels courage but destroys common sense, Chase let ridiculousness rule. He was getting no female action while his best friend was making out with the wonder

from another land. The more he thought about it, the more depressed he became until having enough, he banged on the door where Samson was until he opened it.

“What is it, man? I’m busy.”

“Samson give me, me the k-k-keys, keys to your car.”

“You’re out of your mind. I’m not giving you my keys.”

Samson began to shut the door, but Chase jammed it with his foot.

“Naw, no. I just want a place to chill. Somewhere those assholes downstairs won’t fuck with me. I’m not feeling so good.”

“Sammmsoooooonnnn,” a voice called from beneath the sheets.”

“Come on man, she’s waitin’ for you. I got nobody tonight. I just wanna a place to pass out. Promise, I’m not going anywhere.”

Chase did pass out—behind the wheel of Samson’s car, hurling through a tunnel of oaks at eighty miles an hour.

The vehicle drifted from the road, struck a culvert, and flipped into the trees. Thrown from the car, Chase was found beneath it.

After the accident, the friendship between the mothers faded. Although Chase’s didn’t blame Samson for her son’s death, inside he felt what she wasn’t willing to outwardly say. Guilt and regret eat from within, a cancerous combination devouring seemingly unbreakable connections. Everyone broke.

Samson left for college a few days later and lasted only weeks before he withdrew, but returning home proved too painful, and he languished in the misery of memories. His parents made the decision to move and chose Charleston as a place for rebirth. It seemed to work, as he was now entering his junior year.

Leaning back, he raised his cup to the heavens and whispered thoughts to ears he hoped would hear.

“What d’you see up there?” Cadence asked.

“Something peaceful, something promised.” Samson chest heaved with a breath. “Something Chase already knows about.”

“You believe that?” Saida asked.

He looked at her as if he were searching for a soul. “I do. I believe it because I need to believe it. Everyone has needs. Belief is the way we satisfy them.”

The story of loss ushered in quiet, and those around the fire settled a little more gratefully into their skin. With the embers before them fading, the stars above grew brighter, but even with the light, they could only see so far into the spheres separating earth from the greater unknown. Their eyes continued searching for answers to questions they never let escape their lips. Peering into the night goddess’s canvas, the gazers became more blind as Hecate tattooed the sky in darker shades of velvet. As is the way of night, contemplation worked like hypnosis, and lids began to slide toward earth. Surrendering to somnolence, they traded weighty thoughts for freeing dreams, the kind where mortals shed their coils and indulge in the sweet sleep college rarely allows.

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