

To Confess

TO CONFESS

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2018

Beefcake Publishing

CHAPTER I - St. Augustine

Everything was falling.

Her hands were buried in her coat. She kept her head down in an attempt to keep the snowflakes out of her eyes and let them fill the cracked tiles in the pavement instead. Winters in Grenville, Minnesota were always like this – cold, bitter and persistent, as if the ice were actively trying to pierce the hearts of everyone who dared to go outside at this time of year. Fewer and fewer did. It was a small town, which made winters look ghostly and barren if you ignored the people staring at the empty streets through their windows. She kept a good pace and held her hood up so she was more or less safe from the snowfall. At the same time, she wanted the cold to consume her. She wanted it to numb her mind like it had numbed her fingers and toes, at least until she knew what she was doing. Until she knew who the hell she could talk to about this. Until she knew how she could live the rest of her life with this in the back of her mind. Charlotte Baker had fucked up, after all, and now everything she knew was falling. The snow, the temperature and everything she had built for herself along with them.

At first she thought she could push it all down, repress the memories and move on. It would have been easy, because nobody knew and nobody would find out. But Charlotte wasn't herself anymore. After that night, she was jumpy, anxious and bordering on hopelessness, because every roof she saw, every woman who looked even a little like Vanessa, every fight between strangers on the street she witnessed, *everything* triggered something that replayed that night in her head. She was falling all over again and there was nothing Charlotte could do about it. Not this time.

Hours before, she had passed by the lake in the park on the outskirts of town and considered shoving her feet through the ice on the surface, sliding in, never tasting the cold air again. She knew she had to tell someone. Charlotte was no therapist, but she was aware of the fact that bottling up emotions and intense experiences wasn't a good thing. She was especially aware of it now that she often felt like she could explode, like she was going to suffocate in her own thoughts if she didn't have anyone to share them with. She was alone in an empty street in the middle of the day, in the middle of the snow, listing the people who could possibly take the news without turning her in to the police.

Parents... No. Jane... Charlotte couldn't do that to her best friend. Her other friends whom she didn't care much about weren't an option either, because Charlotte knew the feeling was mutual. Other family members?

Aunts, uncles... None of them were close enough to Charlotte. She was already running out of people, and the thought depressed her a little. Carl and her colleagues at work... No way. She didn't even like them, let alone be prepared to tell them a secret like this. The more she thought about it, the more desperate she grew, trying to think of someone, anyone who would listen and not judge. She came up empty.

Her legs were getting tired and her coat was nearly soaked with melted snow. She sighed and turned around, ready to go back to her apartment, when she glanced up and stopped at the sight of the church in front of her. St. Augustine's Catholic Church was fairly small and built out of brown bricks. Its highest point, a golden crucifix, was almost hidden away by the low white clouds. She knew this church well, but she hadn't been there since she was sixteen. She would go every Sunday with her parents, dressed in white knee-length skirts and blouses and attend the sermons, listen to the prayers, the songs and the silence until it all became a blur. One day, she decided she didn't want to go to church anymore. No matter how hard her parents tried, they never managed to make her set foot in the holy building again. But now she was reconsidering it. It wasn't like she had a sudden epiphany, or God was calling her or anything, no. She just knew there had to be a priest in a confessional somewhere inside the church, and she had definitely sinned. Maybe it was the best she could get right then: an anonymous confession with no consequences, except for a better state of mind, hopefully. It would have to do.

Charlotte took a deep breath and walked up the stairs to the imposing entrance, a large wooden door reaching much higher than it had to, closed with a lock in dark and oxidised metal. As she approached it, she noticed the door was unlocked, luckily, but it resisted when she pushed it open, as if God himself were telling her she shouldn't enter. God, however, was non-existent to her. She managed to fully open the door just fine and meet the scent of old books, wood polish and dust. Inside, the building was just as captivating – the room was surprisingly big for such a small church. Charlotte's shoes echoed on the grey tiles, taking nervous strides from the entrance to the aisle, eyes flickering from one row of dark wooden pews to another. She quickly looked around to see no one else in the room, and then the stained glass windows caught her eye and a flash of nostalgia hit her. Charlotte's childhood memories of going to church were usually associated with feelings of annoyance and dread, because of two reasons. First, she had to sit still for at least an hour and listen to the boring old priest recite a few lines of boring old

verses along with creepy songs, before having to go all the way to the front of the room to awkwardly receive the Holy Communion at the altar. Second, everything about this church, from the cold brick walls to the stone statues throwing everyone dead-eyed stares, made her feel like she wasn't welcome here. If this was really God's home, He should've done something about the interior to liven it up. There was however one thing about the building she couldn't help but love and she had done so ever since she was a child. The windows, nothing but fragments of glass in different colours, artistically welded together to form the shapes of one saint or another, held some sort of strange, ethereal beauty. These windows were the only bursts of colour in the room with brown-grey hues, and they made the dullness worth it. Yet, no matter how pretty they were, she felt that these glass figures were judging her just as much as the ugly statues were, their eyes burning into her sides as she walked past them to the far left of the room, following a sign that would lead her to the confessional. It was made in a sober style, dark, polished wood that formed one entrance for the priest, closed off with a thick red curtain, and another for the mortal sinner, a simple wooden door. Charlotte hesitated, reading the words on the sign next to the piece of furniture. It said a priest was available to hear confessions at this time. How did this work? Did he really spend hours inside of the wooden structure, waiting for lost souls to entertain him with their sins, or was she supposed to go find him somewhere?

Her questions were answered when the little door suddenly opened. An old man climbed out, faced her with a sombre, sympathetic look and walked on, out of her sight. The priest was inside. How didn't she hear them speak? Maybe the windows and her own discomfort were still distracting her, or the confessional was completely soundproof somehow. Maybe she would have to go inside to find out. Charlotte ventured into the contraption and the old little door creaked as she opened it. She cringed at the sound as well as her complete lack of knowledge about confession etiquette. She'd googled how it worked on her phone and it hadn't made her any more confident about the whole thing, but at least she kind of knew what to say. She just had to go for it and see how the person on the other side would react.

"Uh, bless me Father, for I have sinned," she tried, her voice shaking slightly, the nerves returning. "Yes. It has been – actually I've never confessed before, not since I was a child..." she continued, feeling like a fool, "This is still what I have to say to you, right? I mean, I read it on Wikipedia and I know it's not the most credible source..." She flinched

when she heard a laugh come from the other side. Out of all the possible reactions, this was one she didn't expect from a serious, devout man of the cloth. It succeeded in making her both slightly more at ease but also horribly uncomfortable at the same time. She dropped her gaze, rested her clammy hands on her jeans and already cursed herself for coming here voluntarily.

"Did you really?" the invisible priest asked. His voice sounded oddly young and it was laced with amusement. Was there even a priest inside of there, or was this some random kid tricking her? He just didn't sound like the type of person to belong here. Then again, all the priests Charlotte had ever known were old, overweight and dead serious. Just because he didn't fit the stereotype, didn't mean he wasn't legit.

"Yes. Is... is that a sin too?" she asked.

"Well, I don't think Jesus ever mentioned anything about Wikipedia, so I wouldn't worry about that too much," he answered. Charlotte nodded, feeling her heartbeat slow down a bit.

"So...?"

"So I just say it now?" she asked.

"Yes. Or, maybe... let's start with why you decided to come here and confess, since it's not a habit of yours," the priest said.

"It's not," she said. "I don't really ever go to church except for weddings and funerals. I never saw any reason in coming here, as an atheist... Okay, maybe I shouldn't have –"

"It's fine," he cut her off. "I'm sure you have a good reason for coming here."

The priest tried his hardest not to sound too curious, but he was, very much so. What drives an atheist to confess to a god they don't believe in? The only answer he came up with was desperation, but she didn't sound that desperate. A little nervous and worried, yes, but not desperate. He'd been doing this for long enough to be able to hear distinct emotions in the sound of someone's voice. And usually that was enough to satisfy him until the sinner told their story, but this time he stayed impatient.

"I do. It's just hard to – to say it, you know? What happened. What I did. I needed to say it to someone and this was the only thing that came to mind. You've probably heard a lot of fucked-up things in here, so I thought you'd be able to take it."

The priest let a rather long silence fill the air before he answered, leaving Charlotte to shoot glances at the wooden walls surrounding her. They made her feel claustrophobic for the very first time in her life. In her quiet observation, she noticed a little horizontal shelf to the right of her,

a worn-out Bible resting on top of it. Maybe if she picked it up, the pages would fall right off its spine.

“Yes,” he said, contemplating her words. “It is my task, here, to listen to anyone’s sins, big or small, and forgive them in the name of our Lord. I can take it.”

“Good,” she chuckled nervously. “I don’t know if you’ve ever heard anything like this.”

“You become awfully aware of the cruelty of man, if you really listen.” Charlotte stopped breathing at that. She was stunned by the gravity of the statement, the sad wisdom that seemed to come from the man speaking it, and how it contrasted with his youthful voice and carefree-sounding laugh. When she recovered, the air left her mouth in a small sigh.

“Isn’t that discouraging?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Because God forgives them and then they have the chance to start anew.”

That was a very nice thought. It was a shame she didn’t believe in it.

“But that cruelty doesn’t go anywhere, does it?” she remarked.

“No. But neither does God’s forgiveness,” he said, slowly and confidently, sitting up straighter in his seat. This conversation woke up his mind. It had been a long time since it had felt awake.

“I see that differently,” she said. She lifted her gaze to the shuffling sound in front of her and saw nothing but a shadow through the screen that divided them.

“That’s okay. We’re not here because of how you see things. We’re here because of what you did.”

Charlotte’s heart rate spiked again. She couldn’t avoid this forever. She had chosen to confess, and she would have to, sooner or later. But it was still impossibly difficult.

“Just a question,” she began hesitantly. “If someone told you something they did, and it was really bad... extremely bad. Would you call the police?”

“I can’t,” he said immediately. “That’s a seal – the Seal of the Confessional – that I can’t break. I can’t discuss anything a penitent tells me with anyone else. That would be a betrayal of trust, which would lead me to your side of the confessional. So anything you confess... it concerns only you, me and God.”

She stayed silent, trailing a trembling hand along the red cover of the Bible. What he said did make her feel more at ease, but a confession this

heavy never came out easily. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe she really should take this to the grave, bury it deep down and forget it.

“All right,” the priest said after a full minute of listening to his own slow breaths. “I know this is hard. I understand. I admire you coming here to try, because this is obviously something that’s weighing you down. But we won’t get anywhere if you don’t say anything, so I suggest you start vaguely. Can you tell me some things you did related to your... your sin, actions most people would consider to be morally wrong?”

There were a lot of things Charlotte did that others would consider morally wrong, and only a few of those she would agree with. But those few were serious mistakes.

“I... hurt someone,” she settled on saying.

“Whom did you hurt?” he asked.

She had to stop thinking and force her vocal chords to work. One word came out.

“Vanessa.”

There was something in her voice that the priest heard very often: guilt.

“Okay,” he said calmly, itching to ask away. “And who is she to you?”

Charlotte froze again, swallowing hard. Maybe she should’ve thought this through. She didn’t know the man behind the screen at all. He didn’t seem like such a bad guy, so maybe she could tell him, but still... Religious people have a tendency to be less accepting and she didn’t know if she could handle a negative response at this moment. She could try to lie, but then the story wouldn’t make sense. He wouldn’t have a very high opinion of her by the end of her confession anyway, so it didn’t matter that much if she told him.

“Are you still there?”

“Yeah,” she said quickly, “sorry, I... Uh. What kind of priest are you?”

“Sorry? What kind, this is a Roman Catholic –”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” she said, “I meant – never mind. Uh.”

“Then what did you mean?” the priest asked, his head nearly touching the screen.

“She’s my ex,” she said. A short, painful silence followed.

He moved back a bit. He wasn’t repulsed, not even shocked, just a little surprised. He’d never had a penitent mention a non-heterosexual relationship in the confessional before, unless that was the thing they considered a sin. There had been plenty of the “*God doesn’t hate you*” type of reassurances to follow. One of the things he disliked about his own church was that these topics were still such a taboo.

“Oh. Okay,” he said.

“Okay?”

“Certainly. People love who they love, and no person can go against that. God made us that way,” he explained. “Tell me about her.”

“She’s... a really intense person. Really dark. Like, dark clothes, dark hair, but dark on the inside as well. I think that kind of drew me in... she’s an artist – she always used to draw me, always with charcoal. I suppose that’s one of the few things she liked, one of the only things that made her happy... I thought I made her happy too, but I don’t think I did.”

The priest heard a melancholy kind of nostalgia. A sad kind of love.

“And that’s why you broke up?” he guessed.

“Yeah,” Charlotte nodded, lost in her memories. “She ended it about a year and a half ago – said she didn’t feel anything for me anymore and I’d become a burden or something like that... Totally broke my heart,” she chuckled.

“I can imagine,” the priest said.

“And we’d been dating for like a year,” she added. “I was thinking of spending the rest of my life with her, even if she was kind of shut off. It was a real hard hit when that fell apart... I was in a very bad place for quite some time... and then I met Theo.”

“Okay, and who is he?” the priest asked.

“Well, he’s also an ex.”

“Oh, *now* it’s getting interesting,” he commented. She laughed a little. It was an ordinary laugh, but it tugged at something inside of him. He ignored it.

“He was reckless and stupid. He just didn’t give a fuck,” she told him.

“And I thought he was perfect, but in reality he was just the first person to show an interest in me at this party I went to and things developed from there. I really – I really should’ve known he was...”

Her voice faltered and an actual flicker of hurt shone through, which caught the priest’s attention.

“He was what?” he asked.

“Cheating,” she answered. “A co-worker told me because he found out somehow. It wasn’t... it wasn’t like I didn’t see that he’s completely the type to cheat without a care – he’s hot, arrogant, muscular and all those things – but it still hurt. A lot. Because he didn’t just cheat with, you know, someone I didn’t know... he cheated on me with Vanessa.”

“Oh... that’s – that’s tough,” the priest said, grimacing. “I can’t believe anyone would do that.”

He subconsciously leaned closer to the screen, wanting to know more than just a voice and half of a vague story. After all these years he really should've learned to keep his composure, but some bad habits never die out. The priest had always been bad at controlling his urges.

"What did you do?" he asked. Charlotte fiddled with a lock of her own blonde hair, searching for split ends to relieve some stress.

"I... went over to her apartment, because I just needed to know *why*. I knew Theo was just impossible to talk to, but I thought Vanessa could give me a reason or something, or just explain what happened. But when I went over, she—"

Charlotte cut herself off, angry at the lump in her throat that trapped the rest of her words inside. This was really a mistake. She didn't want to retell everything that happened that night, even if she already relived those moments far too often to be healthy. The priest wouldn't understand and he wouldn't be able to help if she told him, so she just shouldn't bother to try.

"Sorry, I – I don't think I can do this," she muttered. She stared down at her feet as if he would be able to see through her if he could see her face. The priest let a deliberate silence fill the confessional, contemplating what to do next and giving her some time as well. When she didn't try to talk again, he spoke.

"Well, I can't command you to say anything and it would be tedious to just sit here in silence for the rest of the day, so... find a way to tell someone. It doesn't have to be me, but it can be. I'm nearly always here. Maybe it would help if you gave it a rest and came back to talk more when you're ready?" he asked. He almost wanted to beg her to come back, because he'd been so bored lately and the confessions had been tame until this one came along. He was so tired of having to hear about Mr. Douglas' porn addiction, this woman who hated herself because of her sailor's mouth, et cetera, et cetera. To think that the priest once believed he could really help people change their lives for the better by listening to them in confession.

"Yeah, I might," she said. She sensed she should go, so she reluctantly got up.

"All right," he said with a sigh. "Until next time, then. I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

"Oh," Charlotte said, taken aback. She closed her coat tighter in preparation for the miniblizzard she knew was waiting for her outside.

“You’re supposed to say ‘thanks be to God’ now,” the priest added, smirking at the wood surrounding him. “In case you forgot to read that on Wikipedia.”

“I did forget to read that,” she admitted, a peculiar smile forming on her lips. “Thanks be to God. And thanks be to you, too.”

When Charlotte left St. Augustine’s Church, her footsteps squeezing the snow to watery mud, she felt both relieved and burdened. On the one hand, she’d realised that she could actually talk to someone about what happened, kind of. She was glad she wouldn’t have to carry the guilt of her own actions with her for the rest of her life, because people like the priest would listen and hopefully lessen the weight. But on the other hand, talking about the past had revived some repressed emotions and memories, as if they hadn’t tortured her enough already, and now, the silence of the empty street she was in demanded her to relive them completely. There was one in particular that had been floating around in the back of her mind ever since Charlotte gave the priest a description of Vanessa Ramírez. All that was really in the air was ice and exhaust fumes, but all she could smell was the scent of Vanessa’s Ocean Breeze shower gel, mixed with the toxic stench of the paintings that were drying in the corner of her bedroom. Charlotte was there again too, on her bed, a good two years ago.

Charlotte huffed in irritation, plucking bits of dust off the sweaty white sheets draped across her thighs. She didn’t get one word of affection, not even a smile. All she got was a tense silence while Vanessa readjusted herself on the chair next to the bed, her fingers and chin stained with charcoal marks. There were magazines, sketches and paint supplies littered on the floor surrounding the bed, as well as a little pile of broken glass lying in a puddle of dirty water. Everything looked just as messy and miserable as it always did, except for the glass – those bits and pieces were a new addition. Things had escalated the night before and what was still a glass of water then, had fallen and ended up shattered to pieces. Both of them were too stubborn to clean it up. Vanessa kept at it, her mouth shut tight while she drew the girl on the bed in front of her. Her dark curls covered her eyes as she leaned closer to the paper. But Charlotte’s aloofness was faltering.

“Babe?”

The lone word floated in the quiet, along with the sound of charcoal brushing against paper.

“Nessa, stop it.”

“What’s wrong?” she said with a snide edge to her voice, finally looking up to meet Charlotte’s eyes. Vanessa’s were adorned with eyeliner, dark circles and a permanent, soulless glare.

“You know what’s wrong,” Charlotte retorted, “I’ve told you multiple times.”

“But I never listen and I never learn,” Vanessa mocked her with an obviously fake smile. “Look, honey, I would listen to you if you had valid issues. I just don’t see why it’s such a crime if I want to see my friends some more.”

“You barely fucking see *me*, that’s my problem! All I gotta listen to is how you’re gonna go out with Jay and then see Sara and Hugo too, every single fucking day, but when it comes down to making time for your own fucking girlfriend, that’s suddenly too much to ask?” Charlotte snapped, throwing the sheet away in frustration. Vanessa almost growled at the risk of her fucking up the drawing by moving too much.

“Stay still, for fuck’s sake,” she sneered. She worked with faster, stronger strokes of grey now, which made the portrait look harsher and tougher. “And how dare you say that when you’re pretty much married to Jane.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened and she had to take a deep breath to stop her upcoming outburst. Jane was her best friend, a chatty, giggly woman with soft brown skin and equally brown, extremely curly hair. Her beauty was so obvious she was actually offered a modelling career a few years ago, but she declined to focus on her law studies instead. Charlotte loved her, admired her and yes, she was jealous of her and her long-term relationship. But she didn’t see her best friend nearly as much as she wanted to, so Vanessa’s remark was completely unnecessary.

“Are you saying I’m cheating?” Charlotte asked. She pulled the loose black strap of her top back over her shoulder and lifted her gaze to Vanessa’s again. “Cause if anyone’s cheating, it’s you.”

“Oh, good, yeah, ‘cause you’re the little sweetheart who can do nothing wrong and I’m the bitch here, right? *No*. We’re both bitches,” Vanessa said. “So tell me what’s wrong or shut up.”

Charlotte looked down at the sheets, speckled with flecks of black nail polish she had managed to pick off her fingers. She hated this. She hated feeling like her worries didn’t matter, because it implied that she herself didn’t matter. She hated that Vanessa had stopped making her feel like she did. There was a time when she really felt at ease with her, watching her draw or paint for hours and talking about television, the new bar in the city, celebrities and their scandals, nothing, life. But the more time

they spent together, the more disturbing parts of Vanessa started coming to light. She was romantic in every sense of the word – at first it was little gifts and gentle touches and whispered words of affection, but soon enough she mentally isolated herself, became distant and rude, and spoke to Charlotte only about art, death and sex. For such a passionate soul, she was awfully cold – the kind of cold that presented itself as scorching hot intimacy, desire, bloodlust, but burned out to black ash, only to be stepped upon and forgotten.

“I just want you to show that you care about me,” Charlotte finally said. “I – I just... I just need more than this.”

Vanessa stopped drawing and met her eyes, an understanding look in her own. She put her charcoal and paper aside and got up, careful not to step in the wet spot on the floor where the glass had shattered. She walked up to Charlotte and crouched down until they were at an equal height. Vanessa leaned in and reached for a loose strand of Charlotte’s hair. Charlotte bridged the gap, yearning for the slightest feeling of comfort again. She was satisfied when she found Vanessa’s mouth, even if the woman tasted like the cigarettes Charlotte’s father smoked behind her mother’s back and smelled like sweat and chemicals. Even if Vanessa pulled back not a second later to neaten up Charlotte’s hair and then get up again, back to her drawing.

“So,” she said after a silence, sketching her girlfriend’s locks with messy strokes of grey. “You think the sex is bad?”

Charlotte blinked. “Are you serious?”

“Sure,” Vanessa said, not even sparing her a glance.

“It’s not about sex,” she replied. “It’s not – it’s – do you even care about me? Because we don’t do anything else than – sometimes it feels like we’re not even a couple.”

“Not a couple? We’re doing coupley things, aren’t we? I’m drawing you, for fuck’s sake, some people would kill for that,” Vanessa said. “It’s romantic. Isn’t that what you want? This is romantic.”

“We’re fighting,” Charlotte said.

“Well, you’re the one making up problems here,” she retorted.

This wasn’t new. Vanessa had a way of always blaming everyone else for whatever crime she was accused of. It took a while before Charlotte recognised that she wasn’t right in doing so.

“Oh, so just ‘cause you can’t see things from my point of view, it means it’s automatically wrong and fake?” she said.

“I didn’t say that!” Vanessa exclaimed, putting her sheet of paper down. “Don’t twist my words. And stop fucking complaining, Jesus Christ. You’re so fucking needy.”

Charlotte was tired of hearing those ugly words coming from a person she couldn’t help but find beautiful. She fell in love with the splendour she saw, but Vanessa didn’t seem to love her back – only the image of her. They were very different people and Charlotte didn’t see that, at first.

“Fuck off then,” Charlotte muttered. She threw the sheets away completely and rose from the bed, ready to leave.

“No, hey, stay!” Vanessa yelled, getting up herself to keep Charlotte from going. She had to finish this drawing before the model in question could throw her tantrum.

“Who’s needy now?” Charlotte asked.

Vanessa glared at her again. She didn’t need Charlotte, or even want her – she just needed a muse to feed her creativity for a while, until she got bored and moved on. She felt like that time would come soon, if Charlotte kept acting up like this.

“I don’t need you,” Vanessa said.

She said harsh words fairly often and that was something Charlotte even liked at first, that raw honesty that seemed so rare. She should be used to it by now, but no. This was still a hard hit. When she had swallowed her tears, she knew she had to leave.

“Then you’re gonna have to draw from memory,” she said.

The glass stung her feet on her way out.