

How It All Began

Alessa awoke in the middle of the night to find her nightgown bunched up around her chest and her uncle's fingers between her legs. Just seven years old, she was scared and confused by what her so-called protector was doing to her and pretended to still be asleep, hoping it would make him stop. Alessa didn't know if what he was doing was right or wrong; all she knew was that it filled her with dread. Ten minutes later, she felt as if she were going to explode right there in her uncle's bed from the terror welling up inside her. She pretended to be just waking up, and gathered the courage to look up at him with wide, terrified eyes.

"Just lie back and be quiet," he rasped. "I'll make you feel really good."

Then he placed his thick, wet mouth, still stinking of cigars, over hers and continued to explore her undeveloped body until he had finally entered her. Alessa was young, but knew instinctively that no one would believe her, if she reported what her uncle had just done to her.

Alessa was the youngest of four children and the only introvert in the group. While her family was loud and opinionated, she was quiet and timid. And because she was so different from the rest of them, she often found herself watching the chaos that ensued during family gatherings from the periphery, like an outsider who didn't belong. She wondered why God had placed her with them. She couldn't relate to her parents; nor did she share any of the qualities that characterized her siblings. In the constant arguing and heated debates that they had with each other, the seven-year-old found herself lost and forgotten.

Alessa lacked all of the right characteristics for becoming anything important in life. Shy and unexceptional, with rarely a smile to light up her solemn expression, she led people to believe she was a miserable little child. Her lank hair and large, serious brown eyes made her look homely. Her small frame was always draped in threadbare hand-me-downs that were always too big for her and never seemed to sit on her the way they did on her two older sisters. The youngest in the family, she stood in stark contrast to her siblings—Anna, the firstborn, and Rosabella—and Anthony, the brother who came between the two. All three flaunted thick black hair, beautiful brown eyes and radiant olive complexions. From the time she was very young, Alessa had known she was not like the rest of them. The sheer force of their outgoing personalities appealed to all and overshadowed her meek demeanor. Simply put, Alessa was forgettable.

Their maternal grandmother, who they called Grammy, lived with the family and since their

mother, Caterina, was the youngest of fourteen siblings, they always had people visiting. Being an insignificant part of such a large family was unbearable for the solitary seven-year-old. She would listen to them argue with each other over the most trivial matters, as they spent hours sitting around the kitchen table, drinking coffee and passing judgment on people they knew, bitterly criticizing the way they lived their lives or raised their children. As each of these evenings drew to a close, someone would invariably stomp out of the house either in a fit of silent rage or screaming at another family member. The constant friction was traumatic for the little girl, a fact that no one else in her family sensed or understood. Turmoil was what her family thrived on, whereas all she wanted was to be in the company of people who would make her feel she belonged.

Alessa found an ally in Grammy who, given the limited number of bedrooms in their house, shared one with her. The child loved sleeping with Grammy whose very presence instilled in her a sense of security amid the ominous darkness teeming with imaginary monsters that settled around her bed at night. Every evening, when it was time for bed, Alessa would snuggle up close, her small arm linked as tightly as a vice through her grandmother's. As Alessa lay beside her, Grammy would go through her rosary beads and murmur her evening prayers, assuring her granddaughter that monsters didn't exist.

Alessa's grandmother was a happy woman. Her cheerful face was framed by short, curly gray hair and her skin felt as soft and smooth as silk. The matriarch of the family, she was a gentle soul, loved and respected because of her kindness to others. She often invited neighbors and relatives to their home so she could provide them with a hot meal. Even though she wasn't a wealthy woman, she believed in sharing what God had provided her. She would knit for hours on end so she could gift afghans in the winter to people she knew. Alessa would squeeze in beside her grandmother, as she sat knitting on her rocking chair, and often find herself dozing off, lulled by the sound of her infinitely soothing voice. In her company, Alessa always felt tranquil and completely at peace.

The family was poor and enjoyed few luxuries. One of Alessa's most memorable ones was the weeklong vacation she had taken with her grandmother in Atlantic City, New Jersey, as a five-year-old. At the [Chalfonte-Haddon Hall Hotel](#) where they stayed, the child had felt as though she were in heaven. Wearing the new bathing suit her grandmother had bought her, she had played on the beach, building sand castles and jumping the waves. She had loved eating in the elegant dining room where she could choose whatever delicacies she wanted from the dessert table. The waiters were nice to her and attentive to their every need. Grammy had let her order Shirley Temples that were served in tall glasses with crushed ice and topped with a cherry. The vacation in Atlantic City was Alessa's only good childhood memory. She would relive that week a million times in her mind, as she grew older and found less and less to look forward to.

When Alessa was six years old her grandmother died. Unable to imagine life without her, the child was devastated by her loss and felt there was no longer a place in her home that she could call safe. She felt bereft and abandoned without her ally, but soon found solace in a new one. It

was her Uncle Danny who held and comforted her through her bereavement. She felt special and deeply loved because of the kindness he showered upon her during those dark days following Grammy's death.

Everyone loved her Uncle Danny. He was extremely popular, a family icon, the man with all the money, and everyone sought his company. He often told stories about the mafia and most people secretly believed he worked for them. But eventually, Alessa realized, they were just stories concocted to make everyone live in awe of him. Uncle Danny's tales were so persuasive that most people who knew him ended up giving him far more respect than he deserved. He wielded a lot of clout and everyone around him automatically bowed to his demands.

Six long months after her grandmother had passed away and shortly after her Uncle Danny's live in girlfriend died tragically in a car accident, he moved in with Alessa's family.

"After all," Caterina told her husband, "we need the money. We can't keep this house going and raise the kids, if we don't get some help."

It was she, in fact, who had invited her brother to move in with them. Danny promptly accepted the offer and before they knew it, he had taken over one of the four bedrooms in their house and, along with it, Alessa's life.

When her uncle first moved in, the little girl was excited at the prospect of having him there. Uncle Danny loved her more than anyone else in the family did and was almost a substitute for her grandmother. He had an air of confidence about him that made Alessa feel utterly safe when she was by his side. He was generous and loving with her and made her feel special, like she was the only person on earth.

Grief-stricken and vulnerable and still fearful of the monsters that lurked in her imagination, she turned to Uncle Danny who found the perfect reason to console her. Shortly after he moved into her house, Alessa's uncle invited her to sleep in his bed. Just as she had done with her grandmother, the child would link her arm through his as she lay waiting to fall asleep. For the next several months, Alessa slept peacefully next to her protector, unafraid that the monsters of the night would attack her—until the night he raped her.

Alessa's parents knew that their youngest child had been sleeping in Danny's bed, but any concern they might have had over the situation was silenced when the income from their new tenant promptly alleviated their anxieties about how they would pay their bills. Caterina chose to believe her brother was in the mafia, a fact she took great pride in. She had a twisted view of reality and of the world in general. As far as she was concerned, the world revolved around this overgrown beast, her older brother. After all, he was paying her 750 dollars a month just to live in their house, a sum Alessa's whole family lived off. Her parents didn't go to work. Her father couldn't, because he had been disabled in combat during the war; and her mother just wouldn't, claiming she "needed" to stay home with the kids.

Until Uncle Danny moved in, the family had survived solely on welfare. In middle class circles, they were known as poor white trash. Alessa was the golden goose Caterina needed to indulge her unwillingness to work and keep her finances afloat. In a short period of time, the

child became the ultimate sacrificial lamb, the bargaining chip her family could use to retain their home, buy the things they needed, and maintain the lifestyle they could ill afford otherwise.

The first time Alessa's uncle raped her, she felt isolated and helpless. The abuse became more frequent thereafter. It did occur to the child that she should tell her mother about her uncle's behavior, but Danny enjoyed a certain standing both in her family and in the neighborhood where they lived and she was not confident about being taken seriously. By abusing her, he had stripped her of all confidence and she felt entirely defenseless, unable to resist his assaults, and at times, she felt like it was her who had caused the abuse.

What confused Alessa even more was her uncle's assertion that whatever took place between them was a natural thing shared between two people who loved each other. After that first night, she had started sleeping in her own bed, but Uncle Danny would still wake her up in the middle of the night to quench his own sick desires. His six-foot-four-inch, two-hundred-and-seventy-five-pound body would crush her small frame so she could barely breathe in her tiny single bed.

About a year after he had started having his way with her, she woke up one night as he was thrusting his tongue into her vagina. She was still too young for pubic hair and Uncle Danny told her how much he liked her bald pussy. He was groaning and inserting his fingers inside her and grabbing at the small nipples on her completely flat chest. When he was sufficiently aroused, he shoved his penis in her face and ordered her to suck on it. When she hesitated, he grabbed the back of her head, forced her mouth open, pushed his penis between her small pink lips and repeated his order.

There were other occasions, when he would jam his thick fingers between her legs just to wake her up and have sex with her. He would be gentle, at first, but when his sexual excitement got the better of him, he would forget it was just a small child lying below him. He would ram himself further and further into her until he came. Her groin ached and she would feel as though his penis were encroaching right into spaces that lay beyond her ribcage. Her vagina was sore for days afterward, making it painful for her to urinate.

Sometimes, when the family was out, leaving the two of them alone at home, Uncle Danny would find her on the sofa watching television and tell her to unzip her pants. He would remove all of her clothing with slow deliberation and proceed to do whatever he was in the mood for that night. When there was no one else in the house, he would groan and talk loudly during sex. Breathing heavily into her ear, he would tell her how much he loved her wet pussy and that she was the love of his life. He would grunt with each thrust as he ravaged her insides, finding his peculiar form of gratification between the small legs of a child. By the time Alessa was nine years old, this had become a nightly ritual for her uncle.

Year after year, the child lived cocooned in her own misery, feeling like a freak in every way imaginable. She had gradually come to understand that what her uncle was doing to her was far from normal or natural, but few options lay before her. With each passing year, she despised him more and withdrew further into herself. That monstrous being had come to consume her thoughts and her life, terrorizing her just like the imaginary monsters of the night had once done.

After she turned twelve, Uncle Danny wanted more from her. One night, she woke up to his customary groping. It was the middle of summer and the house had no air conditioning, except for the window units in her parents' and uncle's rooms. The heat was stifling and a thin film of sweat covered her small body, clad in old, worn baby-doll pajamas that were frayed around the neck and along the hem of the shirt. The pajamas, which she had worn for the last four summers, were too small for her now and barely covered her body. At twelve, Alessa knew she was too old to be wearing baby-doll pajamas. But she also knew there were many other things she shouldn't be doing, including putting up with her uncle's sick demands.

Uncle Danny quickly stripped off her baby-doll pajamas and commanded her to turn over and lie flat on her belly. As she complied, he slipped into the bed behind her. Wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her up so that her weight rested on her knees, he slowly began to push his penis into her rectum. Little by little, he inched himself inside her until his penis was fully engulfed by her young, tender tissue.

This was the worst and most painful experience of all for Alessa. The other times had hurt too, especially in the beginning, but they were nothing compared to the pain she suffered at that moment. She felt mortified and humiliated. If she could have died there and then, she thought, it would have been a great release for her. She could smell her own feces and had to hold back the vomit that was threatening to gush forth from her mouth. The excruciating pain, as he ripped through her, was like fire scorching her insides. She was afraid he would tear her in half.

Through his harsh breathing, she heard him repeat, "This is good and tight." He kept telling her he loved her, until he came. Finally, he collapsed next to her on the tiny bed that barely had enough room for one person. She cried that night, until the tears wouldn't come anymore. And even when she finally fell asleep, there was no shelter from her pain. She dreamed of faceless men touching her, pawing her all over with their filthy hands. She couldn't escape the horrendous nightmare she was living through, not even in her sleep.

That terrible night, it finally dawned on her that the monsters she had always feared lived under her bed had never existed. The only real monster had a name: Uncle Danny, the ogre who had stripped her of her innocence and left nothing, but an empty shell. Her childhood, her very life, had been stolen from her. She no longer knew who she was; nor did she dare to contemplate her future. She had learned that life was flawed and just making it through each day would take all her strength and challenge her powers of endurance. Her rough childhood, robbed of its innocence, would arm her with the resilience to hold onto her sanity later in life.

Despite her moments of dark despair, Alessa had faith that she would eventually rise above the sordidness of her life and come through. Her belief in herself had been instilled early in life by her beloved grandmother who had chosen her name for her, imagining that she had seen something unique and exciting in the newborn. Alessa meant "defender of mankind". That is how her grandmother had visualized her when she looked into the baby's eyes and probed her soul. Despite Caterina's attempts to undermine her youngest child at every opportunity, Alessa's grandmother had been firm in her belief that one day, her favorite grandchild would be strong and resilient, an inspiration for many; but, most importantly, she would be a force to reckon with.

Chapter One

Caterina's foul temperament probably had as much to do with nurture as nature. Alessa's mother had stopped going to school after fourth grade so that she could work to help her parents pay their bills. Not only did the decision deprive her of an education, it also robbed her of all ambition and drive. Caterina had only one asset to fall back on: her good looks. And she was content to get by on them. Her body was lean, with curves that many women envied, and her legs were long and shapely. Her smile was inviting and she had jet-black hair, with a touch of curl, that fell in all the right places. Her deep olive complexion gave her an exotic look that men adored. There was no denying that she was a beautiful woman and since she was dirt poor and had nothing else to fall back on, she had no qualms about using that beauty to get everything she desired.

Caterina's lack of education had not stood in the way of mastering the art of manipulation. She could muster sympathy from a complete stranger in the street. She cried the blues about how poor they were and how her four kids needed to eat. Yet, no matter how much she complained, Caterina always looked great. She didn't wear expensive clothes, but her outfits were always new, perfectly accessorized with matching jewelry, sunglasses, shoes and purses. And she never left the house without her makeup in place.

As an adolescent, Alessa would always face the brunt of her mother's criticism, directed primarily at her lack of looks. Caterina often nagged her daughter, insisting that she wouldn't look quite so homely, if she just wore some makeup and fixed her hair. It never occurred to Alessa to retort that she and her siblings had always been less privileged than their mother, when it came to matching outfits, manicured nails and decent haircuts. The children rarely received new clothes and continued to use the same underwear, until the elastic on their panties and bras wore out. None of the children even owned their own toothbrush; they shared one between the four of them. But it hardly mattered, because Caterina didn't provide them with toothpaste anyway. Only Caterina's bathroom boasted of such luxury. Naturally, the children's teeth were in poor condition. Alessa did the best she could with the little she had to work with, often sneaking up to her mother's bathroom to steal a squirt of toothpaste or deodorant before school.

Caterina disciplined her children by hitting them with a wooden spoon. She would bolt off in a huff to find it, so she could come back and beat the hell out of them for some misdemeanor or bad behavior. On one occasion, when she was beating her son, Anthony, the wooden spoon split into two. Unfazed, Caterina moved on to a metal spoon as the weapon of choice. As she struck

one of her children with the spoon, she would scold him or her for whatever infraction the child had been guilty of and always ended her last three thrashings with, "I'll show you!"

Alessa's life during these years was a hollow one. The advantages of beauty, dignity, self-confidence and an appealing personality eluded her. What she lacked in looks and charisma, she made up for in maturity and in the ability to withdraw into her own mind. She had a vivid imagination and lived through the stories she heard other children narrate at school that spoke of the abundance of love they enjoyed at home and the fun they had with their own families. Alessa's classmates all had lives that were very different from hers. Through them and their description of their lives at home, she would build a beautiful imaginary world for herself.

But in reality, Alessa could never be carefree like the other kids her age. She had forgotten what it was to be a child. She had stopped believing in Santa Claus. Her reality was harsh and dark. From a very early age, she knew how different she was from the others and could never feel comfortable in her own skin.

The years of rape and abuse at the hands of her Uncle Danny had inadvertently taught her how to be a survivor. Deep in her soul, she knew that she would, one day, escape the nightmare she was living through, before it consumed her. She was determined that some day, she would have all the things she dreamed of, including real love and a family.

Shortly after her uncle sodomized her the first time, Alessa set herself the goal of escaping from his clutches. She summoned up the nerve to confide in her mother and tell her what had been happening. Terrified of Caterina's reaction, however, she practiced the conversation in her head for weeks before she actually gathered the courage to speak to her. Then, when she felt the moment was just right, she approached her mother who was in the kitchen, cooking dinner for the family. Waves of nausea rose from Alessa's stomach into the back of her throat. She could feel her heart pounding inside her chest as she approached her mother slowly.

Caterina saw her daughter standing idly in the kitchen and snapped, "What's wrong with you?"

"Mom," Alessa blurted out, "Uncle Danny has been doing things to me."

"What are you talking about? What kinds of things?" her mother asked angrily.

"He has been coming into my bedroom at night and doing things to me."

"What the fuck are you trying to say, girl?" Caterina's voice rose in indignation. "Everyone knows that Uncle Danny loves you. You don't complain when he brings you candy and things that you want, do you? Now, all of a sudden, he's doing things to you, is he? Don't you have the sense to realize that he is just being affectionate, because he loves you so much? Even your brother and sisters are jealous of how much attention he pays to you."

Caterina was screaming now and Alessa could feel herself begin to shut down. She was terrified that her mother would report everything back to Uncle Danny. She began to back out of the kitchen, sorry that she had made the mistake of confiding in her mother. Caterina hadn't even bothered to sit her down and question her in depth on this matter. Clearly, she did not care to understand or even acknowledge what her youngest child had just told her.

Instead, she went on, “Your Uncle Danny adores you. So when you hurl such accusations at him, you sound like a dirty little pig with a filthy little mind! You’re rotten to the core! Go to your room right now before I get the spoon out and give you a good beating! That would straighten you out. And don’t you go repeating this shit to people or they’ll think something is wrong with *you*. You sound like a stupid little idiot by spewing out that stuff about Uncle Danny. He is good to us and helps out around here. We would never have been able to keep this house, if it weren’t for him. Do you want to live on the streets? That’s what we’d be doing, if he weren’t here, helping us! *That’s* what family is for. Now get out of my sight before I get really mad!”

It suited Caterina to live in denial. Accustomed to manipulating every situation in her life to get what she wanted, she preferred to ignore reality, even if it were staring her in the face, so long as it did not fit into her scheme of things. Certainly, she wouldn’t allow herself to recognize the implications of what her daughter was telling her about her own brother, because that would mean having to do something about it, namely, ordering him out of the home. That would mean 750 dollars less every month. There was no way Caterina was going to give up easy income. The alternative would be to go out and get an actual job to support her family. She much preferred to pretend that Alessa was fabricating malicious tales and continue to collect her rent check.

Alessa turned and went back to her room, where she threw herself on the bed and cried. She was shocked and hurt that her mother not only refused to believe her, but seemed not to care about the situation at all. Instead, she had done her best to demoralize her daughter and threatened her with a beating. Alone in her misery, Alessa couldn’t think of a single soul who might help her. She had no one to lean on, no one to talk to; she only had herself. She was determined to get away from this nightmare, get away from her uncle, away from all the pain and anguish he was causing her. She wanted to have nothing to do with the mother who had rejected her with such scorn. As soon as she was old enough, she would leave this house and never look back. She was desperate to believe she could escape this darkness and that there would be more to her life than this rotten place she called home.