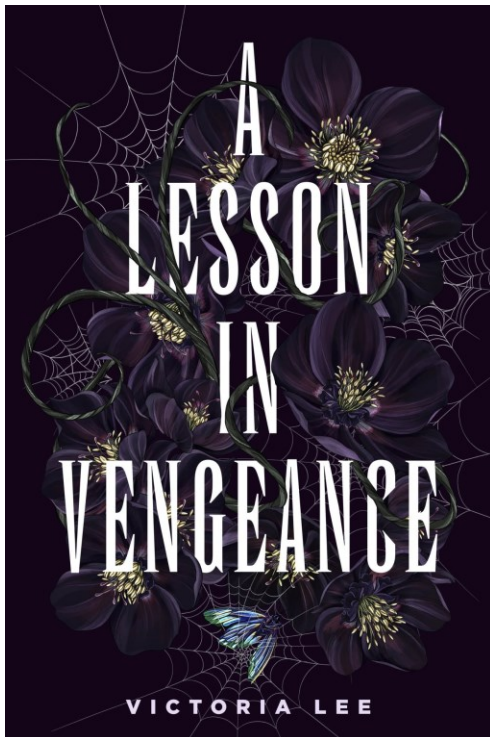


A LESSON IN VENGEANCE



Young Adult

By Victoria Lee

ISBN:978-0-593-30582-9

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Book Summary:

A young lesbian woman faces her occult past when she returns to college.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains alcohol use and abuse; drug use; alternate sexual identities; sexual activities; profanity; violence; controversial social and racial commentary; and suicidal ideation.

3 /5

Minor Restricted
BookLooks Review Rating

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24	Before last year, I had planned to write my thesis on the intersection of witchcraft and misogyny in literature.
26	The inhabitants of Boleyn House throw the same soiree at the start and finish of every semester- Moulin Rouge themed, girls with long cigarette holders sipping absinthe and checking glued-on lashes in the bathroom mirror- and I'd always attended before. ...She'd have a hip flask tucked into her beaded clutch. I'd lean out the fourth-story window and chain-smoke cigarettes- the only time I ever smoked.
28	The Boleyn girls have set up a makeshift bar in their kitchen, their faculty adviser conveniently absent- as all our faculty go conveniently absent whenever we throw parties; our parents don't pay this school to discipline us after all- and there are more varieties of expensive gin than I know how to parse. I pour myself a glass of what's closest, then a second glass when that one's gone. I don't even like gin. I doubt that any of the twenty girls who live in Boleyn House like gin; they just like how much this particular gin costs.
30	More or less, anyway; last year I saw one of the Boleyn initiates drinking tequila out of the Margery Skull's eye socket like it was a particularly macabre sippy cup. ...Even the girls I recognize from previous visits to the Boleyn crypt are drunk and laughing, liquor sloshing over the rims of their cups.
33	Time for another drink. I make my way back into the kitchen, where the gin has been replaced by an unfamiliar green drink that tastes bitter, like rotten herbs. I drink it anyway, because my mother's blood runs in my veins and, like Cecelia Morrow, it turns out I cannot face the real world without the taste of lies in my mouth and liquor in my blood. ...I lift my chin and hold her gaze, sharp beneath straight brows, somehow clear despite the empty absinthe glass she holds in hand.
34	I make a cup of tea instead, stand at the kitchen counter sipping it until some of that dizzy drunk feeling fades.
45	"Misogyny and characterizations of female emotionality in horror literature..."
52	But Ellis discusses bourbon like she knows things, her slow southern drawl as calm and confident as if she were as much an expert with whiskey's as she is with literature. She glances up. "Do you like old-fashioneds, Felicity?" Ellis has a little brown bottle in hand, squeezing a dark liquid from an eyedropper into each glass. "What's an old-fashioned? It sounds...old-fashioned." Ellis laughs. "Oh, you'll love this. Sit down." "Ellis is on a whiskey kick," Kajal informs me, arching her perfect brows. ..."Apparently the character in her new book likes whiskey. So of course that means Ellis has to like whiskey." ...She has a knife in one hand and an orange in the other, a twist of peel curling from under the blade. ...Ellis squeezes the peel over the nearest drink; a fine mist sprays the glass. "Once, Ellis slept outside in the Canadian winter for two weeks and bought heroin off a truck driver in an arcade bathroom," Clara says.

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53	I lift the glass and take a sip. The old-fashioned is surprisingly bitter, the heat of whiskey cut with something low and smoky. The sweetness, when it come, is an afterthought.
58	I decide it's the dichotomy of Ellis's twin identities: Ellis Haley the famous writer, the prodigy whose
70	I sipped my wine so I wouldn't speak. That was my third glass already; the alcohol had started to make me feel unpleasantly weightless, light-headed. Half the girls I knew at Dalloway drank, but all I could think about was my mother.
72	There on that rooftop, with the city alive around us, Alex slid her fingers along my cheek and stepped closer and kissed me. A breeze was picking up and my wineglass was shaking in my hand, but Alex was kissing me. Her lips tasted like chocolate.
88	I sliced the blade into my palm. White fire cut along my veins, dark blood welling up in its wake. Alex lurched back as I held out my arm, but she didn't leave the circle, didn't retreat- just watched wide-eyed as my blood splattered the crown of Margery Lemont's skull.
95	"My sister was sick like that, too. She tried...you know. To" - Hannah had lowered her voice to a stage whisper- "kill herself. She's better now, but I just...I figured, if you needed to talk-" "I didn't try to fucking kill myself."
96	So now I wasn't just a murderer; I was suicidal, too. ...Not the killing myself part-I'd never tried to kill myself- but...
102	"I don't know. I'd rather wait until after I've graduated. It seems like such a cliché, doesn't' it? Lesbians at a girls' school." "Hey now. I happen to like that cliché."
113	"She'd had... We'd both had a lot to drink. We'd been at the Boleyn end-of-semester party, you know? And we..."
166	Ellis unearths a flask of bourbon from my bag, and we drink that, too, choking down the bitter liquor and telling ourselves it doesn't taste like gasoline.
174	"It's a good thing Ellis didn't come," Kajal says, and Leonie neatly sidesteps an intoxicated girl who almost stumbles into her on her way to the drinks table. ..."I'm going to get a drink," I say, and shoulder my way past a knot of rowdy Claremont House students to peruse the libations on offer. Almost every bottle left contains tequila. ...The tequila sloshes over my fingers when I pour it into a cup. Cheap clear liquor, the kind that burns on the way down and on the way back up, but erases the memory of everything that happens in between. I start drinking, and once I start, I find it hard to stop. Just like your mother, a voice murmurs in the back of my mind. It should be enough to inspire sobriety, but thinking of my mother only makes me drink more.
175	"So forgiving," I murmur. Her hand has caught my dress, thumb pushing a button free at its collar. She looks nothing like Alex. Her hair is brown, not red. Her complexion is dark, not pale. But when I kiss her, I see Alex all the same.

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	<p>...But is it really such a strange possibility as to be impossible? This girl's hands are Alex's hands, her tongue Alex's tongue.</p> <p>...The kiss breaks, and the girl touches my lips, our breath shallow and hot between us. "Do you want to go upstairs?" she says.</p>
177	<p>I kept being lesbian a secret for years.</p> <p>..."Are you drunk?" Hannah asks, a question stupid enough to rival her first.</p> <p>..."You're drunk," she decides at last, and settles my arm around her shoulders even though I'm mostly steady on my feet.</p>
187	<p>The words blur together on my laptop screen and a painful beat pounds in my temple, despite all the pills I gulped down this morning.</p>
204	<p>Leonie's flask empties, then Ellis's, and it's twenty minutes until the feeling hits. But then the euphoria pours over me like cool water, and I'm alive, I'm alight, sliding my fingers through sugar and tasting it on my tongue, snow falling on our faces through a hole in the desecrated roof.</p> <p>This is better than any Boleyn party, I think, and let my fingers twin together with Ellis's, my other hand linked with Leonie's, Ellis's thumb rubbing heat against my knuckles and the air gone thick like syrup. I'm drunk enough now that the world has gone to watercolor- all shapes and motion without texture.</p>
205	<p>I've been drunk before, but it was never like this. Did I really have that much? I can't remember how many times the flask was passed into my hand, how many times its mouth met my lips.</p>
211	<p>The next night I find Kajal in her bedroom with a bottle of pills, neatly swallowing one tablet with a glass of water.</p>
256	<p>Heat rises in my cheeks, and when she hands me one of the drinks, our fingers brush.</p> <p>...I relate far more to the old Ellis than the new one, but I take a sip of my old fashioned anyway. I can tell intellectually that the sweetness is balanced perfectly by the bitters, that neither overwhelms the heat of the bourbon- that it's an objectively good drink- but I still hate it.</p>
258	<p>I get the sense she's trying to reassert some kind of dominance after Quinn called her out for the fake whiskey habit.</p>
259	<p>She stabs out the cigarette and gets to her feet, finishing off her cocktail in a few long swallows.</p> <p>It means I have to gulp down the rest of my old fashioned as well, and I waver a little when I stand. I tell myself that's fatigue; I'm not such a lightweight as to be thrown off balance by one drink.</p> <p>...If I were alone, I might wonder if the whole thing had been some bizarre drunken fever dream.</p>
260	<p>Maybe it isn't embarrassment; maybe she doesn't have nearly the alcohol tolerance she leads us to believe.</p>
262	<p>I find them in the common room, drinking a martini garnished with lemon peel, flicking through the pages of one of Godwin's books too quickly to actually read the words.</p> <p>..."Nothing. I'm bored. Do you want a martini?"</p> <p>Good lord, does anyone in this family do anything besides drink all the time?</p>

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	<p>...We retreat to the kitchen, where Quinn produces liquor bottles from a plastic grocery bag on the counter, they must have run by the store on their way back from New York. Quinn mixes a fresh drink and drops the lemon peel in with a flourish. When I take a sip, it's dryer than I'm used to, the taste of vermouth strong in the back of my throat.</p> <p>...it's a joke, of course- and a good thing, too, because the martini Quinn made is strong, and the second one they mix is stronger. We both end up sprawled on the common room rug, the room spinning overhead and little waves of heat coursing through my stomach.</p>
277	<p>Could she have dragged herself out of the water and away from the rocks, into the woods, still drunk?</p>
280	<p>And then she kisses me.</p> <p>The dizzy feeling doesn't abate. Instead of swaying on my feet, I cling to her with both hands, my head spinning and her tongue in my mouth. Ellis's body is hard and firm, and I can't stop touching it; she presses me back against the shut door as her open mouth skims my cheek. I arch closer as she peppers kisses along my jaw, my throat.</p> <p>"I've wanted you," she murmurs, and those three words are sudden heat; when she pulls back, my lipstick is smeared across her mouth, a scarlet streak cutting past her jaw. Her lips are parted and still damp.</p> <p>I need to kiss her again, but when I try she tilts way, then smiles. "I want to hear you say it."</p> <p>My breath cuts out of me in shallow half gasps. Both my hands twine in fists around the fabric of her shirt.</p> <p>"I want you too," I say.</p> <p>Ellis's smirk widens. This time when she kisses me, it's harder, more desperate. I'm desperate, too, shucking off her jacket and waistcoat, Ellis's fingers fumbling over the buttons on my shirt in turn.</p> <p>My hands find her waist, smoothing down toward her narrow hips. God. I can tell just from this, even with her body clothed in thick tweed and wool, that she's strong. Powerful.</p> <p>I need more. Ellis's forearms bump against mine as she unknits her tie and yanks it free. The drag of that fabric against her collar sends an unexpected shiver down my spine.</p> <p>Maybe any other day, or with any other woman, I would have been embarrassed. But there's something about this night- or about Ellis herself- that makes me feel confident. Sexy.</p> <p>Invincible.</p> <p>The rest of our clothes come off, and then we're moving, the backs of my legs hitting the edge of the mattress. Then we're on the bed, and Ellis is there, touching me.</p> <p>I wonder if my skin feels hot against hers. I'm burning up inside. "</p> <p>"Fuck," I gasp and Ellis laughs against my collarbones.</p> <p>"Oh dear," she murmurs.</p> <p>"Language, Felicity."</p> <p>I love the way my name sounds on her voice: husky and low, gravelly in a way that</p>

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	<p>makes me shiver. ...Ellis performs her work with slow, determined care with which I imagine she writes her books, leaving me breathless and blinking up at her she leans down to kiss me again. "Not fair," I say- accuse, really- and Ellis smirks into the kiss, reaching for my wrist to slip my hand down the waistband of her underwear instead. She's flush-cheeked and breathless once she's finished, lifting her head to meet my gaze. This time when she kisses me, it's languorous and warm. Then she shifts to kiss my throat, my sternum...and lower. ...I don't even have the ability to speak. When you read about sex in books, it's always described like a magical event, something sacred enacted through the profane: two souls joining on the metaphysical plane while two bodies entwine below. I had never understood that before now. But with Ellis it's different than it was with the girls I've been with before- even Alex. ...After, I'm left limp and feverish, staring at the ceiling as Ellis shifts back up the length of the bed to settle her body next to mine. She trails a finger along my cheek, toward the corner of my mouth. "There," Ellis says, as if she's accomplished a task. She kisses the place her finger just touched.</p>
283	<p>"No one has ever understood me like you do," she told me after that first night we had together, tangled up in the sheets and awakening before dawn.</p>
291	<p>Sixteen. The age was laden with implication: sweet sixteen celebrations, cars, makeup, drinking at parties, and kissing lips I'd never remember.</p>
293	<p>"It's not entirely propaganda. Margery girls always succeed." "Because they're rich, not because they're Margery. They're rich and they're white."</p>
301	<p>I steal Kaja's bike and ride it into town and rent a car at the same place as last time with the false ID my mother gave me as a misguided sixteenth birthday present;...</p>
306	<p>Alex was on her fifth cigarette- the fifth cigarette to go with her fifth drink- her dress disheveled and her cheeks sunset red as she spun little Hannah Stratford around in a circle.</p>
307	<p>She drew closer, and closer again, until my heart pounded not from the alcohol but because I was briefly certain she was going to kiss me and force me out of the closet right then and there- ...She was drunk, the words coming out slurred and uneven. She was drunk; she didn't mean it. ...I could smell the liquor on her breath from a foot away.</p>
335	<p>"She was drunk."</p>
349	<p>"...I'm not the one who's crazy! I'm not the one who spends every hour of every goddamn day with her head in a wine bottle. I'm not devouring Xanax and ripping up priceless artwork and then telling everyone I'm perfectly happy."</p>
361	<p>The whole thing is a subdued affair, Ellis's casket plain and unadorned, not a spot of whiskey to be found (except in Leonie's hip flask , which she passes down our</p>

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	pew while the preacher lectures on about innocence and forgiveness through faith). Ellis would have loathed it.
362	A murmur in my ear: Meet me in the bathroom. I want to fuck you. ...I pick out one of Ellis's joints and light it with a struck match, inhale, exhale slow.
365	Maybe I'll go to Paris. I'll meet a French girl with blond hair and a quick smile, one who will stay up all night naked in my bed.
369	Her hair tangles about her ears; she's kept it short lately, sensible. I step behind her and kiss the nape of her neck. My hands find her hips. ...I think about drowning, about euphoria, the red orchids I planted on Ellis's grave. I think how falling would be worse. And here, heart beating fast and the taste of ink on my tongue, the city opening wide below us like a waiting mouth-

Profanity	Count
Bitch	4
Fuck	30
Goddamn	9
Shit	12