

The Seven Sins

Book 1 of Ferri



by L.J. Canters

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ISBN: 978-9-403-840574

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Cover design by L.J. Canters

First Edition

DEDICATION

To all the authors who inspired me to find my own voice. To my sister, who was the first to know.

And to my mom—I miss you every day and I wish you were here to see this. I wish I could tell you everything.

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COMING SOON

CHAPTER 1

Prologue

It was the celebration of the century

The seven princes were all in attendance, dressed in their finest suits for the feast. Long tables were laden with food and drink, flanked by men, women and demons all in extravagant dresses of all shapes and colours. A cluster of mortals played music in the far corner; the lute, the theorbo, the tabor and the shawm all filled the throne room with their melodies.

Lust was leaning against the food table with a young, scarcely dressed lady between his legs. He whispered sinful things in her ear as his hand slid down her bare back.

Wrath was talking to a few members of the high council on the other side of the table—he clapped a heavy hand down onto the table with a laugh. His black shirt was rumpled in a perfect match to his hair.

Pride was leaning against his throne; it was black with icy blue lines engraved across its surface. He was looking silently, calculatingly over the crowd below.

Gluttony sat in the corner atop a dark, velvet plush sofa, tapping his finger along the armrest to the beat of the music. It was nothing out of the ordinary, until your eyes shifted lower: at Gluttony's feet were a dozen men and women, all eating, drinking, and groping at each other.

Greed was picking at his grapes as his eyes roamed over the crystal chandeliers, absently nodding at whatever the person next to him said.

Envy was sitting on his throne, a few feet away from where Pride was leaning, and he was watching the final, youngest brother dance intently.

Sloth was dancing with his new wife, a mortal woman called

Margarete. She wore a black wedding gown, her corset tied together with dark blue ribbons. The velvet dress was embroidered with Sloth's house crest in golden thread. Sloth wore a dark blue suit, collar loose, hair tied back with a velvet ribbon the same shade as hers.

They moved together like they had done this dance for years, not hours—her hand on his shoulder, his palm steady at her waist, her cheek brushing briefly against his jaw before she leaned back to smile at him, eyes full of love. Sloth smiled too, but his was slower. Relaxed. He looked like a man who had finally stopped searching for something he didn't even realize he'd been looking for.

The music swelled—an old tune played, and the enchanted echo crossed the garden courtyard. Flower petals stirred on the night breeze, catching in the folds of Margarete's gown as she twirled.

The black ring on her pinkie glowed faintly as their kiss deepened—just a brush of mouths, then a second, longer one, sealed with breath and the promise of something more waiting in the dark. When they parted, Margarete didn't look back.

The portal shimmered open in the air beside them—black smoke curling around the edges. Sloth took her hand, and without ceremony, without announcement, they stepped through. Leaving the remaining princes and attendants to enjoy the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 2

Lust was positioned in Europe this year. He leaned against a lantern, tired eyes skating down the list in his hand. Three hundred eighty-five thousand men and women had turned twenty-five across the world this year, and about twenty-one thousand five hundred sixty-nine of them were born in Europe. Lust had been at it since the early hours, and his list was almost done, his time was almost up—just a few minutes shy of midnight.

He played with the silver ring on his finger, making only part of the world slow down. Their rings were the only way the princes could test all the people who were born that day, giving them enough time to investigate them all. Lust raised his hand, the ring glinting on his finger, and raked it through his blonde locks.

He straightened up as his golden eyes focused on a woman across the road, leaving a bar with a young man. Pushing himself off the lantern, Lust followed the pair from the shadows. The man had his arm around the woman's waist, laughing at something she said. When the pair stopped and the man leaned down to kiss her, the prince saw his moment.

He sent a wave of lust towards the couple. The man started groping and kissing the woman hungrily, but she wasn't having any of it. The woman tried to push him away, but he just kissed her more passionately. Lust shot another wave at them—the girl didn't seem to be affected at all.

It became amusing when she kicked the man in the jewels and slapped his cheek. Lust broke the sin on the pair with a small smirk, then circled the girl's name on his paper. He looked up again, ready to go to the next one but wanting to see the man doubled over on the pavement one last time.

The man was still down, but the girl had found Lust in the shadows. He was sure she couldn't see much, probably just his gold eyes and matching hair that stuck out in the dark. She tilted her head, the man on the pavement next to her completely forgotten. Lust winked at her before retreating—it was time for the next one.

CHAPTER 3

I was making myself a cup of tea when I noticed a sealed letter on my dining table. I paused. It hadn't been there when I got home last night. I reached over and traced my fingers across the envelope. The paper felt smooth, yet worn, with a faint shimmer along the edges. There was no return address, no stamp—just my name, written in elegant, curling gold script that seemed to glow ever so slightly.

Ava St. James

Frowning, I retrieved the bat from the umbrella stand, my pulse quickening as I wrapped my fingers tightly around the handle. Every creak of the floor sounded louder than it should. I moved slowly through the flat, heart pounding, ears straining for any hint of movement. The windows were all shut, the latches still in place. I checked the front door—it was locked, just as I'd left it. But that letter hadn't been there before. Someone had been inside.

"Michael, if this is some sick joke, you better come out before I bash your head in." No answer came. "If it is someone else, I already called the police."

Still, silence met my words. I checked and double-checked the flat before returning to the table, where my tea had run cold. I sat down in front of the letter, my knees pulled up to my chin as I looked at the old envelope.

Everything was quiet, except for the rain trickling down on the iron bars of the terrace. I sucked in a breath and reached over—but just as my fingers grazed the envelope, my cell phone rang.

I jumped up, clutching my heart. "For fuck's sake!" I snatched the phone from the counter and picked it up. "Hey, Hanna."

"Are you okay? You sound weird."

"Yeah, no, I'm fine." I glanced at the envelope. "My phone wasn't on vibrate, so I got spooked."

"Okay." I could hear her muffled snicker through the phone. "Are we

still meeting up for breakfast?"

"Yeah, I'll be there in thirty minutes."

"I'll save you a seat," Hanna said before hanging up.

I leaned against the counter, staring at the strange envelope. I reached for it—then hesitated, pulling my hand back with a shake of my head. No, this was ridiculous. I had things to do. I turned away, trying to ignore the faint prickle at the back of my neck.



At breakfast, Hanna asked all about the guy she thought I went home with after the party. I told her all about his pushy behaviour and the blow to the family jewels, which she absolutely loved. I didn't tell my best friend about the man in the shadows, about his golden eyes and almost golden hair. She would probably think I had drunk too much and was hallucinating... If roles were reversed, I would think the same.

But I knew that he wasn't a hallucination. He probably just wore some crazy contact lenses. But still, something about the way he looked at me lingered in my mind.

We ended up in a make-up shop, both leaning forward in the mirror as we put on lipstick.

Hanna was taller than me; long slim and tanned legs. She had long brown hair that almost reached her bum, and her hazel eyes shot me a wink in the mirror. Her eyebrows were perfectly shaped, and so was her nose. The only thing that didn't fit in the perfect picture was a single crooked tooth. And although Hanna had self-esteem issues about it, it was barely noticeable—because even when she smiled, showing off her teeth, her face was so beautiful that nobody even noticed it.

Then there was me: the opposite of Hanna. I had sandy brown hair, and Hanna always said my turquoise eyes reminded her of the Mediterranean sea. My face was round, and a dimple popped in my cheek when I smiled. I was about ten centimetres shorter than Hanna—which didn't mean I was short. Hanna was tall and thin enough to be a model. I

had more curves, with wide hips, a heavy chest and a tummy I could never completely get rid of. But my legs were slim and lean, and with the right clothes they looked like they went on and on, just like Hanna's.

Our personalities were different, too. I think if we would have met now, in our twenties, we would have never become friends. But we've known each other since we were like ten years old, and so we accepted each other's differences. Loved each other because of them.

Hanna was well-liked and outgoing. She would go out all night, then work the next day without a lick of sleep. She would go on dates—or hook-ups, really, whenever she pleased.

I wasn't a recluse or anything, but I loved my quiet nights in my flat, reading or binge-watching a show on Netflix. I worked out or took judo lessons twice a week. I would go out with Hanna a few times a month, but never too late or too crazy. Yesterday was my birthday, so Hanna decided to throw me a birthday party. And the guy was sort of a blind-not-so-official- date. It was one of the first 'dates' I went on since my engagement ended.

And well yeah, that didn't end well.

We went to Hanna's flat to binge-watch the rest of *The Sandman* after shopping, since it was my day off. Then Hanna got dressed for her bartending job, and I walked her to the club on my way home.

The envelope was still lying on my dinner table when I got home. Without hesitation, I plucked the letter from the table and tore it open. The old, heavy paper inside reminded me of the Harry Potter movies, where they use a quill and parchment to write letters and do their homework. Who in the world made letters like this? But it wasn't a letter, not really—it was an invitation

The Court of Sins formally invites you to The Chosen Ball.

The grand fete will take place in the Throne Room in Ferri on the 20th of June at 00:00. The honour of your presence is requested.

Burn this letter in the light of a flame to assure us of your attendance.

I flipped the parchment around and back, but there was nothing more. No address, no dress code, nothing. What the fuck was going on? I didn't

recognise the handwriting or the seal that was used to close the envelope. It was an actual wax seal, gold and with a crest on it. It was rather remarkable. I placed my foot on the lever of the bin to throw away the letter but stopped just before my fingers let go. Something in me told me to hold on, to keep this mysterious letter.

With a sigh, I returned the letter to the table, on top of the ripped envelope. I went for a long hot shower, and once dressed in my favourite satin pyjamas, I flopped in front of the TV and put on some random show. The hours ticked by, and my head kept turning to stare at the letter behind me—until a few minutes before midnight, when I turned the TV off and picked up the letter again.

"This is mental," I muttered. I grabbed a lighter, held the flame close to it before I set the parchment on fire; the fire burned sleek and fast before the flame and the letter were both gone. With nothing left of the weird and unannounced invitation, I waited, listening to the clock tick behind me.

Nothing happened.

"No, I'm going crazy," I repeated—but when I turned to head to bed, I wasn't standing in my flat anymore. Instead, I found myself in a dark, silent room. Old-fashioned torches flickered on the walls, casting thick shadows, and the air was heavy with the scent of something old.

CHAPTER 4

Windows lined the dark room, but behind the glass stretched a deep, black night without a single shining star. Rows and rows of racks filled the room, crammed with dozens of dresses in all kinds of colours. A few torches flickered against the wall, basking the dresses in a gloomy light. I was still standing in my satin pyjamas, but I didn't feel cold—it was actually rather warm inside the room. I grabbed a poker next to the extinguished fireplace and clutched it in front of me.

“H-hello?” My voice shook. “Is someone here?”

It was silent for a moment before the sound of shuffling footsteps came closer. An older woman with silver hair hanging down to her lower back bustled in. She was small, her head only as tall as my shoulder, and she wore a black and silver dress that looked like something you'd see in the medieval ages.

“Ah, you've finally arrived.” The old woman didn't look at me, and her voice was hoarse as she continued. “We don't have a lot of time.”

“How did I get here? Where is here?” The old crone glanced up, and my grip on the poker tightened as her cat-like eyes fell on me. She wasn't human, that was for sure. Yellow slits replaced the irises. Fear coursed through me. “Stay away from me.”

“You can put that away, dearie. I won't be the most dangerous thing you'll meet tonight.” She spoke with a grin you would call evil.

I was surprised that my voice remained steady when I asked again, “Where am I?”

“You were invited to the Ball, and you accepted the invitation—correct?”

“Uhm—yeah.”

“So here you are. We should get you ready; you are already late.”

“But where am I?” I pressed.

“Everything will be revealed tonight,” she said as she shuffled to the

dresses.

What the hell was going on? Where was I? Why did the old crone have cat eyes, and why was she dressed like that? My heart was pounding, but still I lowered the poker in my hand. If she was going to attack me, she would have already done so. “How did I get here?”

“When you accepted the invitation—” She took a dress from the rack, then glanced at me sidelong before putting it back, muttering something inaudible. “It created a portal that brought you here.”

“But—”

“I can’t give you any more information. I’m not allowed, nor do I want to. But you have a choice, you can leave at any time.” She waved her hand, and a portal appeared next to me, through which I could see my empty, dark flat. But just like I couldn’t throw the letter away, I couldn’t take one step forward toward my familiar home. There was something pulling me back, something telling me to stay, to go to this ball.

The portal disappeared, taking my flat with it, and my head snapped towards the old crone. There was a smirk on her lips, but it wasn’t sweet or mischievous—she knew I wouldn’t leave, and she couldn’t wait to see what horrible things would happen next.

The woman thrust a dress at me. “Get dressed.”

I glanced down at the bundle of fabric now in my arms. “Uhm—where?”

“You don’t have enough room?” She raised an eyebrow. “Come on, we don’t have all night,” she snarled as she looked out the window. It was pitch black as before, nothing to see. Not even one star. But still she looked at the sky as if the entire universe was right there.

Taking advantage of the fact that she was looking away, I shed my pyjama top and stepped into the dress. It was strapless with a sweetheart neckline, and it wasn’t entirely black as I thought before. The bust was underlined with gold, and the top of the neckline was golden all around to the back.

The dress was heavy, flowing all the way to the floor, and just like the old woman’s dress, it looked like it was pulled from history. I pushed off

my pyjama bottoms and tossed them aside, but not before I took out my phone and placed it in my bosom. When I looked back, I found golden sandals with heels waiting for me. They were the perfect fit.

“That’s better.” The woman gave a curt nod, then muttered: “You mortals dress worse every year.”

Mortals? I let my hands trail over the soft fabric of the dress. It was beautiful, and unlike anything I’d ever worn before.

“I would think that the seventies were much worse, but to each their fancy.” I couldn’t help but smile a little, even though I didn’t know where I was, or who the old woman was, or even what she was. In the corner of my eye, I saw the old woman scowl.

“Sit.” She pointed briskly to an old chair. “Since we don’t have the time, I’ll keep it simple,”

I pursed my lips at her, but did as I was told, lifting my dress to get myself seated properly.

The woman pulled on my hair—but there wasn’t a single mirror in the room, and the windows didn’t seem to have any reflection, so I couldn’t see what she was doing. She pulled and prodded until my scalp hurt.

Eventually, she released me and stepped back. “That should do it.”

“W-what now?” I asked as I stood up. A headache was already forming from her brutal attack.

The woman didn’t answer, instead waving her hand again so that another portal appeared in front of me. Before I had a chance to see what was on the other side, the old crone had pushed me through.



The portal behind me closed quickly; I could just see the smirk on the old crone’s lips before it disappeared. I turned back around to see where I had landed, and my breath caught in my throat.

I stood at the top of a grand staircase. The room was vast and windowless, carved from obsidian that caught the firelight like polished

glass. Gold veining streaked through the dark stone—unnatural, too perfect, like the walls themselves had been charmed into beauty. The floor gleamed with coins.

Heavy velvet drapes hung from the ceiling for no reason but excess. The scent of perfume clung to the air—something spiced and intoxicating, like desire left to rot.

Below, people were either half naked and groping at each other or trying to stuff silverware and golden coins in their pockets.

The piles of gold coins must be fake, right? My eyes roamed over the crowd below me. What kind of party was this?

Everyone was dressed impeccably: the men in dark, clean suits, and the women in long dresses—all from ages ago. Well, some of them were dressed impeccably; many were already half undressed, with shirts thrown over chairs, and dresses half-ripped by groping hands and trailing on the floor.

I took my phone out of my décolletage and peered down— “You won’t get any service here.”

I jumped at the sudden voice, then glanced to the side. A man who looked a few years older than me leaned against the wall. His brown hair was tucked behind his ear, just touching the tops of his shoulders, and his dark blue eyes scanned the room. He wore a more modern suit than all the others at the party, with dark-blue dress trousers and a light grey blazer on top. The top buttons of the man’s white shirt were undone, revealing the olive skin of his upper chest.

He was handsome—extremely handsome. “Where is here?”

“Hm,” the man hummed, pushing himself off from the wall to stand next to me—but his eyes didn’t move from the people below. “I guess you missed the introduction. I was told there would be a latecomer.”

“I can’t be the only one that was late.” I slipped my phone back in my bosom. “If everyone got the same invitation as me—”

“They did.”

My eyes roamed over the room. “They must have had doubts, then. Someone broke in to deliver a letter. An invitation with almost no

information that I needed to burn.” I added. “Then a ‘portal’ brought me into this creepy dark dress room with a mean, old woman—”

“Elviva,” the man said. “You better not let her hear you call her old and mean.” He tilted his head. “Well, she wouldn’t mind being called mean.”

“Are you going to explain any of this? Or do I need to try to pry someone off that sex couch over there?” I waved my hand toward a corner where seven people sat completely naked on a black velvet couch, riding, grinding, doing all sorts of things to each other.

A smile spread across the man’s face. “I like you,” he said. “I’ll tell the truth—at least, as much as I’m able to. You won’t remember anything but an amazing party anyways, if you don’t pass the seven phases. Believe it or not—you are in the Underworld. Ferri, as we call it.”

“I don’t believe it.” But deep down, I did. It was ridiculous, but there was just something about how this place felt.

“This ball is a test.”

“A test for what?”

“To find the one man or woman who can resist all sins.”

“Sins?” My eyes roamed over the crowd below. “Like the deadly sins?”

“Exactly that.” He smiled widely. “They are looking for someone who can resist all seven deadly sins.”

“How do they choose who to invite?”

“It’s not my job to tell you everything—but everyone here can at least resist one sin.” His eyes scanned the room before lingering back on me. “You can resist at least two, it seems.”

“Seven phases, seven sins. Each phase represents a sin.” I murmured to myself, but the man nodded anyway. “What happens if you can resist them all?”

A slow smile spread across his face. He wasn’t going to answer that one, I could tell.

“What about you? You don’t seem affected, and you know what’s going on. You’re not here just for the Ball.”

“I’ve been around for a couple of years.”

“Is everyone here so evasive?” I asked, but he just smirked at me. “Can I at least know your name?”

“You can call me Leon.”

“Is that your real name?”

“One of them.” He shot me a crooked grin. “What’s yours?”

“Ava.”

“Nice to meet you, Lady Ava.” He bowed, taking my hand in his and kissed the top of it. “I’ll let you to the festivities. Maybe we’ll meet again.”

The moment he let go of my hand, he disappeared in the shadows. Leon may have given me information, but he’d left me with more questions than before. I was in the Underworld—in Ferri—and the Ball wasn’t really a ball. It was a big test, and when you pass it, you won’t know what happens. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to pass at all, but still my feet made their way down the stairs.



A waiter appeared with flutes of champagne the moment my foot touched the stone floor. I took a glass from the tray, then I noticed he wasn’t quite human. His nails were long and sharp, reminding me of a sloth, and the irises from his eyes were red—like a demon. But before I could react, the demon-waiter simply walked away.

The Underworld. Demons... right. I took a deep breath to calm myself down. I wasn’t sure whether this was real or if I was having a crazy dream.

I passed a corner filled with half naked writhing bodies. I hadn’t noticed it before, but there was soft music playing in the background. I couldn’t spot any speakers, nor a band playing live.

A man with dark brown eyes looped his arms around my waist and pulled me tight to his chest. He was so close; I could see nothing but his eyes and a crooked nose that looked like it had been broken in the past. It

might get broken again if he doesn't let go.

"Let me go." I pressed my hands against his chest, but that only seemed to turn him on. I felt him twitch against my stomach. I drew back a balled fist, ready to pounce—but suddenly the man was pulled away.

"She said to let her go." A man with black spikes pushed the man back towards the half-naked crowd. "Go fuck someone who wants it."

"Thank you, but I could've handled it myself."

"No doubt." He nodded towards my clenched fist. "But better to get through this without a broken hand." He grinned, then held out his own hand. "I'm Andy."

"Ava." I shook his proffered hand. "So, you can resist lust and greed?"

"Yep." He popped the P with a grin. "Wrath, too. I just came from there."

"You arrived in another room?"

He nodded, glancing around us. "It's like this one, but smaller. The door, right there—" He pointed to a small door on the right. "—leads you to wrath. I'm guessing that one leads to the next sin." He tipped his head toward the other side, another door. "It seems like all the rooms are connected. They're slightly bent—" He came to stand next to me and pointed to the end of the room, showing me the slight curve of the wall that I hadn't noticed before. "I think," he whispered, "that if you pass the tests, you'll be led to the central room. A room that is surrounded by rooms like this."

"And what do you think will be in that room?"

"A prize?" he suggested, but I knew that wouldn't be it. Whoever threw this Ball wasn't going to all this trouble to hand over a prize. "Come on, let's see if you can resist wrath. It can get pretty ugly."

"Aren't you afraid I can't resist it? I am a black belt, you know." I said as we walked to the closed door.

Andy eyed my dress with a lopsided smile. "I think the dress will be at your disadvantage."

"Wanna bet?" I raised an eyebrow.

CHAPTER 5

The next room was wrath, all right.

There was no music in here, or maybe I couldn't hear it over the yelling— and there was a lot of yelling. There must be fifty people red-faced and screaming their throats dry, at least. But I didn't feel an ounce of anger, not a bit of hatred. I even started laughing as two grown men started fighting, if you could call it fighting. They circled each other, but neither lashed out— they just went in circles, and circles, and circles. Just past them were three women pulling on each other's hair and dresses.

"I guess we're three for three." I grinned at Andy. "Let's find a more fun room before one of them comes after us."

"Yeah," Andy's frown deepened as his gaze locked onto a nearby group locked in a savage brawl.

Blood sprayed, slicking the floor in dark puddles. Blades flashed— quick, desperate, unforgiving. Two men already lay motionless in a pool of crimson, eyes glassy, throats gaping open. The fight hadn't slowed. If anything, it had sharpened—knives drawn, teeth bared, every swing meant to maim. This looked more than just a test. They were killing each other.

"Let's go this way." He placed his hand on my back and led me through the next door. We relaxed as the door of wrath closed behind us.

"Ah, sloth," I said. The room was full of large velvet couches, and soft, white sheepskin cushions littered the ground. People were hanging around, literally hanging over the couches and cushions. Men and women bobbed their heads slowly to the music, while others sauntered up and down a long table piled with appetisers. At least nothing could go wrong here. I glanced over at Andy to see him frowning like he was concentrating. "Do you feel anything?"

"It's like a pull. I can resist it, but I feel it." He looked back at me. "I don't think I'll be able to resist all seven."

"Let's get something to eat." I smiled softly and reached for his hand, squeezing it as I tugged him toward the food. "What do you think will

happen when we can't resist one?"

He examined a mini sandwich in his hand for a long time before answering: "I think once I fall under the influence of a sin, I won't think about anything else."

"Why are you talking about just you?" I asked, tilting my head.

"I've met a lot of people this evening—most can resist two or three, tops. You're at four."

I tossed a grape back into a bowl, turning to face him as I crossed my arms and leaned my hip against the table. "So are you."

"Barely." He cast a long look at the inviting couches.

A large man with a blond buzz cut appeared in front of us. He spoke in a fast clip, in a language that sounded a lot like Russian.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." I glanced at Andy, who simply shrugged.

The Russian man continued to talk, but after a few minutes of Andy and I looking completely lost, he sauntered off to the room where we came from. Wrath.

"Let's just go to the next room." I grasped Andy's hand back in mine. He followed me to the next door, but I halted when my hand rested on the doorknob. "Or do you want to stay here?"

Andy looked around the room again, his eyes lingering on a couch in the corner in dark green colour. "No, no." He shook his head. "I'll come with you."

I squeezed his hand. "If you want to go back, just tell me."

He offered me a small smile. "Let's see the next room. Three left." "Three left." I opened the door.

* * *

The next room was different. It had a large dance floor packed with people and a table with a pyramid of wine glasses, with wine trickling

down each one. However, the wine never seemed to pour over — when it reached the bottom of the pyramid, it simply stopped. The dance floor resembled a moving rainbow, with people in dresses of all different colours floating around. Behind seven large thrones, floor-to-ceiling windows revealed an ebony sky.

“I didn’t know it was possible, but I feel underdressed.” I patted my dress down nervously.

Andy looked at me in disbelief. “Believe me, you’re not underdressed. There are three sins left. Envy, gluttony and pride. With envy, each woman is going to be desperately jealous of how you look tonight. With gluttony, men and women will want to eat you up.” He winked, and I blushed. “And pride—well, with pride you will see them all stick up their noses at you, too prideful to admit someone is prettier than them.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought,” I said, happy that my blush had receded.

“I was watching people in wrath, greed and lust for a while. I looked at how they reacted, how the sins changed them. And I’ve watched them watch you. You should be happy only one man came after you; if we would’ve been there any longer...”

“You’re crazy.” I shook my head. “Have you looked around? There are much prettier women here tonight, with much more gorgeous dresses.”

“I can drag you all the way back to the room you arrived in, just to prove my point.” He grinned widely.

I pursed my lips. “What sin do you think this room is?”

He hummed again. I could see him grinning in my peripheral vision. “I don’t know, I can’t feel anything. You?”

“No, but it doesn’t seem like anyone does here. Maybe it’s a clean room.”

“Whatever it is—” Andy stepped in front of me and bowed, holding out his hand. “—would you do me the honour of this dance?”

“I think I can spare a minute.” I smiled as I took his hand. The music seemed to well up as we reached the middle of the dance floor. We

danced for a while, Andy talked about his job as a pharmaceutical salesman in Dublin. I talked about my work as a vet and the volunteer work I did at the animal shelter.

Then suddenly, without another word, he stepped back. “I need to go.” “What?” I blinked.

“They must’ve delayed the effects of this sin. I can feel it now.” Another step back.

“What is it?”

“Gluttony.” He spoke through gritted teeth. “I don’t want to do something foolish. I think I’ll go back to sloth’s room.”

“Andy,” I reached out, but he took another step back. “Alright. I’m happy to have met you—maybe we can see each other again.”

“If we remember anything, I would love to.” He shot me a wink, but I could see he was having a hard time. Still, he took my hand and kissed it. “Be safe, Ava.”

Then Andy sprinted from the room.

CHAPTER 6

I looked around the room and saw that everyone was falling to the sin of gluttony. I was debating what to do, looking at the door Andy had disappeared through, when I heard a new voice.

“You’re not going anywhere, are you?”

A man stood next to me. He was tall, wearing black trousers and a white shirt. His reddish curls hung over his ears and forehead, and his bright blue eyes sparkled. He looked human, but I could feel power radiating from him.

“No,” I shook my head, glancing back at the door. “I–”

“Not everyone can handle the sins, sadly.”

“Figured that out already,” I muttered. “I think I’ll just go see what the next room is.” I stepped to the side, but the man stepped with me.

“This is the last room.”

“What about the other sins, envy and pride?”

“Gluttony is thinning out the crowd.” He tipped his head toward people going through another door I’ve yet to go through. “It’s easier to see who’s left when the people who can’t resist are gone.”

“Not many, it seems.” I could only see about a dozen people in the room. “What happens when there’s nobody left?” I looked back at the man; he held a cognac glass in one hand, filled with a thick golden liquid.

“Same as the last few years,” he said, his eyes trained on the door. “We wait for the next Ball.”

“You’re a demon.”

“Of sorts.” He turned to look at me. “Envy and Pride will arrive shortly. Then we’ll know.”

“Arrive? The seven sins are people?”

“Of sorts.”

“Demons, then.” The man just grinned at me, which was an answer in and of itself.

“In every room, was the sin itself there?”

“Very much so. They need to keep an eye on everyone as they test them.”

“That sounds... creepy.” I pursed my lips as I looked around the room. So, that meant that they didn’t intervene in Wrath’s room, letting them die. Music was still playing, which was good—otherwise the room would be eerily quiet with so few people.

The redhead chuckled and shrugged. “They can let the sin last for a few hours, so they will all arrive here soon enough.”

“Is it true that I’ll only remember a grand party after tonight?”

“You don’t think you can resist them all? You’ve been one of the strongest candidates I’ve seen.”

“What are the actual chances of someone resisting all the sins?” I folded my arms over my chest and raised an eyebrow.

He looked down at me, amused. “The women are surely different now than back in the day. But I’ll answer you honestly: the chances are slimming each year. Every year, they go look for men and women who can resist one sin, but that number has dwindled significantly compared to hundreds of years ago.”

“And why do they need to find someone who can resist them all?”

“That is only for the one who can resist it all to know.” He grinned.

“But—” I held out a finger. “—if I can’t resist them all, I won’t remember in the morning anyways.”

“You make a strong—” He stopped talking as the large double doors at the top of the staircase opened with a bang. Five men stood in the doorway; They were tall and broad, and they radiated power. It was the same power that the man next to me gave off.

“You’re one of them.” I gasped and slapped his arm—not even thinking what this sin, this demon, could do to me.

The corner of his mouth lifted up. “I know I’m not the first one to say

this tonight, Ava. But I like you.”

“So you’ve been eavesdropping, too?” I slapped his arm again. “I don’t care who or what you are, that’s just rude.” I gasped when I saw a woman behind him charging right at me. “Wrath or—”

“I’ve been looking at you all night. You stole that dress, and I need it now. Now!”

“—Envy, then.” I dodged her hand. She was literally trying to tear the dress off me. “This isn’t a nice look on you, miss.” I said politely, dodging her again. I could see the redhead leaning against a table, looking at us amused as he calmly ate his apple. She tried to take a swing at me, but I avoided it easily. “There are much prettier dresses in that room, right there.” I pointed towards the door where the people who couldn’t resist gluttony walked through.

“Really?” She sounded hopeful, but not quite believing.

“Oh, yes. I got my dress there and so did a lot of other women here tonight. Go see—you won’t be disappointed.”

The woman walked over to the door like she was hypnotised, already seeing pretty dresses in her head where there were none. Because my eyes followed the woman who walked out of the room, I saw the demon servers lead the other ‘victims’ of Envy through the door—and then there were ten.

I turned back to look at the redheaded sin, but he was gone. I looked around and found him with the others, six sins standing together on a platform across the room. They were whispering as they glanced around the near- empty room. I turned around when a few of them turned to look at me, instead grabbing a small bowl of blueberries. I tossed them one by one into my mouth.



When the fourth blueberry landed in my mouth, I knew that Pride had entered the room—not because I felt the sin, but because I felt his power. I turned around slowly; in one hand I had a blueberry, in the other the

bowl. My eyes fixed upon the last sin, and I missed as they ushered five other people out of the room. Only four remained, apart from me.

Pride was the tallest of them all. He had grey-silver eyes and dark brown, wavy hair that looked like he had just rolled out of bed. He wore dark slacks with a navy-blue shirt, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showing off his broad, muscular arms. He was walking to the others as if in slow motion, not looking at anyone else. I tore my eyes away and looked around the room to see who remained: three men, two women.

My eyes found the man I met earlier this night: Leon. I walked, stopping next to him with the bowl still in my hand. “We meet again.”

“That we do. I had a feeling I might see you here.” He winked.

“So, what now? All sins are here and there are still with five people.”

“You can see a few of them are struggling to resist a sin,” Leon said. I looked at the other five, scattered around the room. A man was digging his nails into his palm, the other was doing breathing exercises. “But the sins aren’t at full power just yet.”

“I wonder—” I faltered as my eyes found a pair of golden ones across the room. Rage flooded through me. “Leon, if you’ll excuse me.” I gave him a small smile and thrust the bowl of blueberries into his hands.

I would recognise those eyes anywhere—and seeing them now, it all clicked together. I had never seen a person with such eyes, nor a demon here tonight for that matter. I picked up my dress as I marched up to him, an amused smile curling his lips as he talked with one of the other sins.

I stopped in front of the golden-eyed man and slapped the smile right off his face. The smack of skin against skin echoed through the large room.

“How fucking dare you!” I seethed.

The golden-eyes demon rubbed his red cheek as his gaze took me in. “I remember you. I needed to test you, doll” he said calmly.

“He could have—” He could have raped me.

It was like he could read my mind, because he shook his head. “No, I was already pulling back my power when you knocked him to the

ground.”

“What?” The man next to him snickered. He had curly hair, like the first sin I’d met that night, but his was dark brown. I ignored him.

“How did you know it was me?” the golden-eyed man asked. “It could’ve been any of my brothers.”

Brothers? I glanced between them; they didn’t look much alike. Although if I would look closely, I could see they had at least one feature the same.

“Your eyes. Nobody has eyes like that.”

“You didn’t stay in the shadows?” The brother asked. I wondered what sin he was.

“Of course, I did,” he huffed.

“He did, but his eyes reflect the light like a freaking cat,” I snarled. I looked him up and down, disapprovingly. “Lust, I presume?”

“The one and only.” He bowed gracefully.

I clutched the necklace, hidden between my breasts, tightly in my hand. “You have no idea what you did, do you?” I kicked him in the jewels for good measure, then turned around and stalked off.

“She’s feisty,” the other sin said in an amused voice. “Looks like a good fit for Wrath.”

“Tell me about it.” Lust groaned. I grinned all the way back to Leon, who looked both shocked and amused at what I had done.

“What was that about?”

“He had it coming.” I took the necklace from my dress and twirled the ring that was hanging on it between my fingers.

“You were married?” Leon glanced from the ring to me.

“Engaged.” I kissed the ring, before hiding it back in my dress. “Lust was the one who tested me. It was my first date since...”

“That’s... unfortunate.”

I laughed dryly. “That’s one way of putting it.” I grabbed the bowl of

blueberries from his hand and tossed one into my mouth.

“You caught the princes’ attention,” Leon whispered.

I glanced around the room. The seven sins were all sitting on the thrones situated before the large windows—and most of them were watching us.

Princes, I thought. More like the princes of hell.

“I guess kicking one of the brothers in the jewels will do that.”

“Well, yeah.” He smiled. “But they were watching before, too.”

I hummed as my eyes flitted over each throne, over each sinful prince. “So, Goldi Locks is Lust.” Leon snickered as he grabbed a berry from the bowl. “Pride is the big man in the middle.” I rolled my eyes—because of course Pride needs to be in the middle. He looked like an arrogant prat. “Who are the others? I talked to the one with the red curls. I don’t know the one next to Lust.”

“The one with the red curls is Sloth.” Leon tipped his head toward the first chair on the left.

“Really?” I asked in surprise. Sloth had put on a black jacket over his shirt. “I always thought—”

“The princes are their sins, yes. But there is much more to them. Sloth hates these parties, but he’s forced to come. He’d rather sit around with a book in his hand. Much like you,” Leon said.

I wanted to ask how he knew that, but he continued naming the princes.

“Next to Sloth is Gluttony.” That was the one who had been standing with Lust when I confronted him. “Then there is Wrath.” He had blonde hair like Lust, but his eyes were a deep green. He didn’t look like he would hurt a fly. Leon must’ve seen my expression, because he said. “Looks can be deceiving.” He paused for a second. “Then, of course, there is Pride.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t have his own room. Maybe they’re not big enough to fit his ego.” I smirked, and Leon’s lips twitched as he tried to hide his own grin.

He cleared his throat. “Next to him is Envy.” I looked at the Prince of Envy. He had short, dark brown hair with green eyes, lighter than

Wrath's. "Then Greed." He had dark red hair mixed with brown. His eyes a light brown. "And you already know the last one: Lust."

They were all wearing suits, each a different shade of dark, from black to blue. Their clothing perfectly suited them, the fabric fitted perfectly around their muscles. They were all muscular, but the broadest of them all was Wrath, while Pride was the tallest. Sloth looked the youngest, with his red curls falling over his eyes.

I wondered if I would remember any of this tomorrow, if I would remember the red curls or the golden eyes, the arrogance or Leon's laughter.

CHAPTER 7

Just as I tossed a blueberry into my mouth, the powers of the sins surged through me—present, potent, and useless. I felt them shimmer under my skin, but they couldn't touch me.

The remaining four mortals stumbled to the ground. I wanted to help them, but Leon stopped me with a hand on my arm. I looked at him, and he shook his head before nodding toward the thrones. But my eyes followed the remaining mortals—they were being helped to the next room by a few grey-skinned demons. I knew the princes were watching me. I felt it, like I felt the immensity of their scrutiny, their power. But I waited until the door closed behind the mortals.

I was the only one left. Did I resist all sins—or was there another surprise coming for me? I stopped myself from wiping my sweaty palms on my dress, instead breathing in deeply before turning to the princes on their thrones.

“Milady,” Leon held his arm out. His face was serious, not a trace of humour or mischief detectable. I wanted him to grin or crack a joke as we walked toward the platform, but I knew he wouldn't. Not in front of those princes, not after finding a mortal who would resist the seven sins.

Leon let go of my arm when we stepped onto the platform and bowed deep. “My lords, may I introduce you to Lady Ava St. James of Norwich.”

Wait, what?! He knew exactly who I was, where I lived. I tried to hide the surprise on my face, looking over at Leon as he straightened his back, his mouth lifting as he glanced at me. He lifted my hand to his lips.

“I have no doubt that I'll see you again soon, Lady Ava.” Then he disappeared in a cloud of black smoke, leaving me alone with the seven demon princes of Ferri.

I hadn't felt nervous or afraid all night—but suddenly being alone with seven princes of Hell was something different. So, I looked toward the one I had talked to the most: Sloth.

“I told you that you were a strong candidate.” He offered me a wink,

and I felt some of the tension unwind from my body.

“You’re not supposed to talk to the mortals.” My eyes shifted to Pride. His voice was low and deep, and he looked at Sloth disapprovingly. His eyes, silver-grey, had taken on a deeper hue.

Sloth rolled his eyes at me before turning to his brother. “Since you’re forcing me to go to this every year, I might as well talk to someone. Besides—” His lips quirked. “I only talked to Lady Ava, who it turns out is the one resisting us all. I think I’m quite a good judge of character.”

Gluttony added. “Lust spoke to her, too.”

“Barely,” Lust scoffed, his golden eyes on me. “Two sentences at most, she rather attacks me.”

“You had it coming.” I crossed my arms over my chest. I could sense Pride’s anger, but the others just looked amused. Except for Greed, whose eyes flickered between me and Pride. It was as if he was preparing to stop Pride if he became too angry.

Greed cleared his throat. “Lady Ava, why don’t you take a seat?”

Where? I thought to myself. Pride swept his hand lazily in a circular motion, and a chair appeared behind me—except it wasn’t a chair, not really. It was a throne, not as spectacular as the princes’ thrones, but a throne, nonetheless. It was a simple dark brown with no engravings. I adjusted my dress and sat down facing the princes.

“Lady Ava, you are the first in over a hundred-fifty years to resist all seven sins,” Greed said, leaning forward on his knees. “You are the one we are looking for.”

I could hear Pride snort, but I ignored him. “Why?”

“There has been a curse on this land for centuries. A mortal who can resist all sins is the key to break it.”

“But how would I, a mortal with no power, break an ancient curse?”

Pride muttered something under his breath, but Wrath was the one who answered: “We don’t know. But the curse goes as this...”

“Trapped in the world underground, only to be released to the one that is born to resist all sins on the 18th of June. With their own free will

to stay and marry, the curse will be broken. Free to roam once a year in search of the mortal who can resist it all. By blood, by marriage, it will be broken in all.”

I couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled up. “You are looking for a wife? Just so you could travel to the mortal world?”

“Mortals are much more fun to play with than demons.” Lust leaned back in his chair as he spoke, his legs spread out in front of him.

My laughter evaporated. “I could kick you again,” I said, turning to the others. “Why on earth— or wherever we are.” I waved my hand to encompass where we were. “Would I agree to that? So you can all unleash your powers on humans and cause mayhem and destruction?”

“Remember who you are talking to, mortal,” Pride sneered.

“I don’t give a fuck about who you are.” I gripped the edges of my chair, leaning forward until my eyes locked with Pride’s.

“Lady Ava,” Sloth said in a calming voice. I tore my gaze from Pride’s furious face. “I’m guessing that in the years we’ve been away, stories have been told about us. But we’re not as people think we are.”

“Goldilocks just said he liked to play with mortals.” My head snapped toward Sloth.

“Goldilocks?” Lust muttered to Greed, touching his hair.

“Or did you mean you’re going to just fuck everyone there? Do you think you can even do that without your power?”

“What a mouth,” Lust said with a grin. “And yes, yes I can.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I scoffed before turning to the others. “Women aren’t quite the same as they were two-hundred years ago. We don’t just sit idly by.”

Sloth waved his hand, and this time a portal appeared next to me. I could see my flat through it. “Elviva must’ve told you. You have a choice, Lady Ava. You are free to go any time you please. But I hope you’ll stay, because some of us lost more than just not being able to travel to the mortal world.”

“You don’t have to decide now if you want to marry,” Envy said, and I

realised it was the first time I'd heard him speak. "If you agree to stay, you'll go to each of our houses for a month—then you can decide."

"That's seven months." I frowned. "What about my friends, my work?"

"We can alter time in Ferri. Seven months here would be like seven days there."

I nodded slowly as my thoughts spiralled through every possible excuse and threadbare lie I could concoct. I had enough holiday days saved up — I could cash them in. Disappear. I could tell my friends I was going somewhere remote. Off the grid again. They wouldn't question it. But this wasn't just a whim or a convenient escape. Something deep and instinctive inside me was pulling me to stay. It was like a tight tether around my ribs, pulling harder with every breath. I needed to know more about this place.

About them. About me.

"I can leave at any time?"

"Any time." Envy nodded.

I sat up straight on the dull throne. I took in a breath. "Alright, I'll stay. I don't know how many of you will like it." I smirked, my eyes focused on Pride. "But I'll stay."

"We have clothes and everything you need right here. But if you want to get some things from your home..." Sloth trailed off. I nodded in response. "Leon," he called out, and the man appeared next to him, black smoke disappearing behind him. "Can you escort Lady Ava to her flat..." He paused as Leon's face fell. "...to get her things and bring her back."

Leon perked up like a child on Christmas Eve. "It would be my honour." He bowed with a grin, then came to stand next to me with an outstretched arm. "Lady Ava."

I smiled. Him being here was a comfort, I had to admit—so I took his arm, and we stepped through the portal.

* * *

“Nice flat,” Leon said as I started to fill my bag.

“Thanks.” I glanced over my shoulder. Leon was leaning in my bedroom doorway, but his eyes were fixed on the living room. “What are you?” I blurted out.

He turned to look at me, amused. “Excuse me?”

“Are you human, demon, a little bit of both?” I turned around, forgetting the packing for a moment. “When I first met you, I thought you were human.”

“Have your first impressions ever been wrong?”

“Like one percent of the time.” A corner of my lips lifted up. “Mostly, it’s dead-on.”

“You are right now, too. I was human.”

“Was?”

“I came to Ferri about...” He frowned, as if counting the years. “I think it must be about a hundred and twenty years ago.”

“You don’t look a year over a hundred and ten.”

“Why, thank you.” He grinned as he bowed.

“But how? Why?”

“I was invited to the ball, like you. I could resist six sins.”

“Six.” I whispered. “But still, you’re here. You remember.”

“I don’t know how. I came back the day after, and I could only remember a party. But night after night, memories started to come back. Two years later, I remembered exactly what happened. My twin brother was with me at the Ball, but he had no recollection of it. I had spoken to Envy that night. I know they aren’t supposed to, but he did anyway. It was because of him that I knew they came to the mortal world every year, on the 18th of June. And I wanted to go back. I wanted to go back so badly. Especially after my brother died. Five years after the party, I was following a young girl that night who would turn twenty-five on the 18th of June, and I saw him in the shadows. Envy.”

“You asked him to take you with him?”

“I did. I was so happy when he recognised me. He took me with him. Pride was furious, saying this wasn’t the way they worked, that this wasn’t going to break the curse.”

“You’re in love with him—with Envy.” My eyes widened. I could hear it in Leon’s voice when he spoke about Envy, clear as day.

“I am. And I think deep down, he loves me too. But Pride didn’t want to ruin their chances of meeting the right person to break the curse, so he tied me to Sloth. They made me immortal, and Sloth gave me this—” He held out his hand, showing me a black ring. “I can appear and disappear anywhere in Ferri.”

“Except to Envy.”

He swallowed thickly, letting his head fall. I walked over to him and pulled him into a hug. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

He was frozen for a moment before his arms circled around me, pulling me flush against him. I felt his shoulders shaking, my shoulder getting wet from his tears, and I squeezed harder. We stood there for a long time, holding on to each other.

“Thank you.” He kissed my cheek. “I haven’t talked to anyone about this, ever.”

“You can always come talk to me.” I squeezed his hands.

“Same goes for you, Lady Ava. Anytime, anywhere, anything you need, I’ll be there.”

I smiled. “Let’s start with you calling me Ava. What’s with the ‘Lady’, anyway?”

“It’s a sign of respect. You’re the one who could resist them all.”

“Still, if it’s just us—call me Ava.”

“I can do that.” He smiled. “Let’s get you packed up, Ava. Before the princes think you’ve decided to stay here.”

CHAPTER 8

Leon and I returned from my flat, and Sloth informed me that I was going to stay at his house for the first month—which I was happy about, because I'd at least had a conversation with him, and Leon would be there. I couldn't help but look between him and Envy, trying to see if they would steal a glance. But Leon kept his eyes on me or Sloth, and Envy leaned back in his throne, picking at his nails.

Leon held my bags while Sloth linked our arms. Then the three of us stepped through the portal together.

My breath hitched as the world around me was imbued with a pink sort of light. Searching for the source, I glanced upwards. The sun hung high in the sky, a dusty red colour, and the clouds were a mixture of grey and pink. I always thought about the Underworld as bleak and burned out, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Sloth's castle sat in a large forest. The trees were over four meters high, bursting with green leaves. Vines climbed the castle walls, reaching for the sun. This place looked more like a land of fairies than the Underworld.

"Wow," I said, breathless. "You call this a house? It has towers."

Sloth grinned as he walked up the steps, guiding me to the castle, my arm still in his.

"It's very early in the morning," said Sloth once we had reached the large double front doors. A large crest had been carved into the wood. "Leon will show you to your room. Get some sleep — there'll be breakfast ready when you wake up."

Sloth opened the door and slipped inside before I could respond. He was already gone by the time Leon and I followed. The hallway was dark, just a few torches lighting a pathway up the stairs. I couldn't see much, but Leon walked me up to my room.

"Goodnight, L -" He stopped himself with a smile, then kissed my hand. "Ava. Goodnight, Ava."

"Goodnight, Leon." I smiled, then he closed the door behind him. I

wanted to explore my new room, but fatigue hit me hard. I flopped onto the bed, still in my heavy dress, and fell asleep the second my head found the pillow.



The pink glow of the sun was still there when I woke up, but brighter. The folds of my dress lay strewn across the bed, rumpled from sleep.

I finally took in the room that Sloth had arranged for me. It was a large space, with a seating area near a big window. On the other side was an enormous wardrobe that reminded me of the one from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The room itself was almost as big as my one-bedroom flat.

I rolled out of bed; I had no other choice with this large dress. I found a bathroom behind the door on the other side of the room—a private bathroom! It didn’t have a shower, but a rather large tub with golden clawed feet keeping it up. The whole bathroom was a combination of white and gold, old and new elements. I wondered if Leon helped decorate it.

When I went to hang up my clothes, I found that the wardrobe was already full of long dresses in every colour, linen trousers, a few shirts, and a pair of knee-high leather boots. I pursed my lips as I hung my own clothes, consisting of jeans and trousers, next to them. It’s not like I didn’t have any dresses or skirts — I did! But I preferred jeans — they were easier to move around in and offered a bit of protection against the wind. I only really wore dresses when it was hot outside, but the dresses I wore were nothing like the big, puffy ones in the wardrobe.

I returned to the bathroom and turned on the bathtub faucet. I turned around for just a second, placing my clothes on the chair, and when I turned back, the tub was already full, bubbles foamed over the surface.

“What the fuck,” I whispered, frowning at the full tub. “Come on, Ava.” I ran my hands through my hair, fingers snagging on knots. “You are in hell. You are in Ferri, surrounded by demons and princes of sins and who knows what else. Get a grip. A fast-filling tub is nothing compared to that.”

I shook my head before unzipping my dress. I hung it over the back of the chair, my fingers grazing over its fabric. It really was beautiful, but not at all practical. I sunk into the tub until my shoulders were submerged. My body unwound instantly. It was the perfect temperature, and a soft chamomile scent filled the room.



I didn't know how long I was in there, but when I stepped out, my fingertips were wrinkled.

I got dressed in ripped, high-waist baggy jeans and a black cropped sweater that just covered my stomach. I tugged on my worn down All Stars and wandered back out of the bathroom, combing my hair. Just as I closed the bathroom door behind me, someone knocked on the door.

"Good morning," I said apprehensively, as I opened the door. Leon stood in front of me, holding a platter of food.

"Good morning." He grinned. "I got you breakfast."

I looked over my shoulder, then back. "I literally just got out of the bathroom, how—"

"The castle tells me." He was still grinning.

"The castle tells you?" I shook my head, stepping aside. "Never mind. Come in."

He bounced on his heels once before striding in, making straight for the sitting area. He placed the platter on the table, then turned to leave—stopping only when I grabbed his wrist.

"Can you keep me company?"

"It would be my pleasure." Leon winked and sat down next to me.

We ate in silence for a bit, and only when the fruits were almost gone, did I turn to him.

"So, what now?"

"You can explore Sloth's house. Nothing is off limits, so make the

most of it. I'm sure you won't get an all-access pass with his brothers." Leon paused to toss a grape in his mouth. "He wants to have lunch with you, but he has a few meetings this morning, so he'll meet you later."

"Meetings? What for?"

"This and that." He waved one hand through the air.

"Leon—if this is going to work, then I need to know the truth."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You're right. Sloth has gone to a meeting at Wrath's with the rest of his brothers. There is a group of demons who want to overthrow them."

"Is that even possible?"

Leon's face was serious as he squeezed a green grape between his fingers. "Demons have tried and failed over the past few decades. But about fifty years ago, a group got very close."

"What happened?"

"They got help from mortal witches."

"W-witches?" I stuttered. "They're real?"

"Hm," Leon hummed, nodding. "You have your average witches, who can make potions or cast minor spells. Anyone can become a witch with the right books. But the powerful ones, they are born with it. The demons convinced those witches to help them somehow. They made them amulets to enhance their powers."

"But they lost. The amulets weren't strong enough." I said.

"No, they were." I frowned in confusion. "They almost won, until Pride went undercover and snuck into their camp."

"Pride?" I asked in surprise.

"He let his power surge through the group, and they turned on each other. There weren't enough amulets for all the demons, so the ones who weren't protected attacked. They all wanted to rule over Ferri. They killed one another until there were none left."

"Pride did that? I didn't know his power could drive people to murder." I shivered at the thought. "And they want me to stay there for a

month? He's practically a mass murderer."

"You can look at it like that." Leon turned an apple in his hand before tossing it back on the platter. He tilted his head until he looked at me. "Or you can see it like a man who wanted to protect his home and his family. None of the princes are innocent."

"Or he just wants to stay in power. If he really cared about his family, he wouldn't keep you and Envy apart."

"There is more to it than you think, Ava."

I huffed, crossing one ankle over the other on the coffee table. "Do you ever think about going back?" I rested my head on the back of the couch, looking at his bright hazel eyes. "About forgetting Envy, falling in love again?"

He cast his eyes down. "I think about it all the time, about leaving it all behind. I almost left the night of the Ball."

"Why didn't you?"

"Two things: you, and Envy. Envy slipped into Sloth's room and stole a moment of my time without anyone finding out." Colour decorated his olive skin. "I met you right after, and I knew that you were something special. I knew you were going to be strong enough to resist all the sins, that you are my chance at happiness, for Envy's, for Sloth's. That's selfish, I know."

I grasped his hand in mine. "I get it. Believe me, I do." I clasped my other hand around the ring on my necklace. "I can't promise that I'll be the one who breaks the curse, Leon. I wish I could. But I promise I'll do anything in my power to see you happy."

Leon wrapped me in a hug as tears rolled down my cheeks. "You just met me—why would you do that for me?" He whispered against my hair.

"Everyone deserves to be loved—and I like you." I chuckled. "You're my only friend in here, no matter how little I know you."

"You're my friend too." He squeezed me a little tighter.

