



# Seven Deadly Sinners

## Wrath

Rosa Li

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/sevendeadlysinsners>

This version was published on 2014-02-23



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*This novel is for my sister, who first inspired me to write fiction...*

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# Chapter One

Las Vegas, NV

Wild West Inn

June

A small neon sign at the side of the road advertised cheap lodgings. Veronica Reed pulled her father's battered Volkswagon into the small inn at the edge of the city. After setting the parking brake, she sat staring out into the desert night as though in a trance.

She had left her entire life behind. Packed some things, gotten behind the wheel and just driven off.

Three months ago, she had been on top of the world. She pulled straight A's again that semester and was accepted into a top-notch university. She was elected drama club president at her high school. She loved performing, thought it was the most important thing in the world.

That spring, she got the lead in the school musical. On opening night, she was both nervous and excited. Her parents walked in. She expected a hug and kiss. Instead of congratulating her or wishing her good luck, they started apologizing instead. She barely heard what they were saying. Something about a dinner party with business associates, how the boss would be there, and they couldn't get out of it.

She wanted to say it was ok, that there were two performances after tonight, that she understood.

But she saw only red. And she only heard what she wanted to hear. Work was more important than her.

She threw a tantrum. An only child, she craved constant attention.

Over the years she had developed a quick temper and it took over now, as it usually did. It usually worked, but not this time.

Her parents just stood there looking sad and helpless and shook their heads.

In the car, she didn't speak to either of them. Let them feel bad for deserting her on the most important night of her life, she thought. She sat in the back, petulant and unforgiving. When they dropped her off, she slammed the door, tears in her eyes.

She ran to the auditorium, and felt safe as soon as she was encircled by her friends and the other cast members. They adored her. She was popular, the star of the show.

Once on-stage, she forgot everything else. Everything painful and ugly melted into an imaginary dream world full of hope and promise. She immersed herself in the storyline, grew lost in the character she was playing.

The applause was deafening. They whistled and shouted "Encore!" Never mind that it was the parents of the students, and that they were clapping for their children.

After the show, she received flowers and hugs. Perfect strangers congratulated her on a job well done. She never felt happier in her life.

A woman rushed up to her then. "Veronica!" she shouted above the heads of the students, trying desperately to be heard above the din.

It was Ms. Dunn, the director of the show. Probably wanted to congratulate her as well, Veronica thought smugly to herself.

Ms. Dunn made her way through the crowd somehow, then started hugging Veronica. She hugged her too tightly, wouldn't let go.

Something was wrong. Veronica barely made out her muffled words. "I'm so sorry, my dear. So very sorry...phone call... an accident on the freeway...parents taken to the hospital...I'll drive you..."

She was stunned. Disbelief clouded her mind. It was a joke, she decided. A practical joke played on her by the Teen Queens, a name she and her friends had given to their nasty rival group. They banded together and constantly tried to humiliate her at school.

She was silent in the car on the way to the hospital, remembering the last words she had said to her parents.

They were too late. In the hallway, the doctor calmly explained to Ms. Dunn that they did everything they could

Then Ms. Dunn wouldn't stop holding her. And people, swarms of people later showed up, kept talking at her, speaking legalese. Police, lawyers, relatives. She screamed at them over and over again until they eventually just melted away, a giant blur of smudged faces and fractured voices calling her name melding into a phantasmagoric nightmarish fantasy she must have created in her mind, she finally decided.

Her parents had been on their way, she found out later. Her father had called his boss to cancel, then sped down the highway so they wouldn't miss seeing her on Opening Night.

And she had sped away down another highway toward Vegas, to start a new life, away from the bad memories. Away from the guilt, the pain, the empty feeling the accident left in her.

She sighed now and looked at the desert expanse in front of her, a dilapidated building in its midst sporting a collapsing staircase and a Vacancy sign that buzzed on and off, a few of the letters unable to light up.

She wasn't sleeping in the car again tonight, she decided, then stepped from the car in one swift motion, her duffel bag in tow.

She moved toward the building as though with a purpose. Gotta start somewhere, she thought to herself.

A portly man with a cowboy hat and a fat cigar turned away from the television set behind him when she entered and perused her up

and down.

“Why howdy there, little lady. Welcome to the Wild West Inn.” The man affected a western drawl that sounded absolutely ridiculous, rolling the cigar about and speaking out of the side of his mouth. “The name’s John. What can I do for?”

Veronica set her suitcase down on the floor and tried not to stare at his gummy, protruding teeth. “Can I get a room for the night?” she asked.

“Why, sure you can. Anything for you, pretty lady.” He stared at the top of her dress as he flipped through his appointment book, pointed at an empty slot for her name with a dirty fingernail and stared at Veronica while she signed her name.

The man didn’t bother to remove his cigar as he spoke. “Fifty dollars. Gotta pay in advance.”

She reached into her pocket for a crumpled bill, smoothed out the wrinkles and handed it to him.

Feeling uncomfortable, she pulled her jacket around her shoulders more tightly

He handed her the keys and turned back to his television set.

Veronica made her way up a flight of rickety stairs and down a badly-lit corridor. One section of the hotel was blocked off. Paint cans, step ladders and tools lay around haphazardly. She ignored the make-shift construction site and found her room.

She took a deep breath, turned the key and pushed the door open.

The room was dank and smelly. As she stepped inside, she felt something scurry underfoot. The single light bulb that hung from the ceiling flickered, trying to make up its mind whether to light up the room or plunge it into darkness.

She dumped her bag on the dirty floor and sat on the edge of the yellow-stained bed with rusty springs sticking out.

Slowly she pulled her night-clothes from her duffel bag, moving as though she were in a dream. The dry heat clung to her like a thick film. It felt like an unwanted friend. She sighed, feeling as though a giant weight were on her shoulders.

She got up and bleakly stared at her reflection in the cracked mirror above the dresser. Her lips sat at the bottom of her face in a bleak expression. Her hair was mussed, her mascara was smudged, and she was already starting to perspire.

After a quick shower, Veronica spent the night listening to the sound of creaking bed springs and loud moans from across the hall. It was the only other occupancy in the motel. The air was warm, humid, and she felt sticky all over. Before long, she was too aroused to fall asleep.

In the morning, she rose early and checked out of her room. The air was even more humid outside.

The parking lot was almost deserted. She was confronted by an empty parking space where she'd parked her car. The tiny green Volkswagon with the rest of her belongings was not there.

Someone had stolen her car.